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Where Students Start and What They Do When They Get Stuck: A Qualitative Inquiry into Academic Information-Seeking and Help-Seeking Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates two questions key to academic library resources and services: Which sources are students most likely to use to begin their academic work? Whom do students tend to consult for research assistance? In-depth interviews conducted with 15 undergraduate and graduate students were thematically analyzed through a three-step process. The findings indicate that students are most likely to consult faculty and peers for assistance and are largely unaware of librarians' roles, while they tend to begin research using library databases and do not necessarily start with Google. In addition, student use of small study groups as learning networks and reliance upon alternate sites to conduct research emerged as unanticipated themes.

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INTRODUCTION

The reasons why students use or do not use library resources and services have long been of major interest to academic librarians. This interest has been expressed in a variety of ways, from approaching undergraduate library use quantitatively and attempting to link library visits or use of resources with measurable indicators of student success (Oakleaf, 2010), to adopting qualitative or ethnographic methods to understand why students use or do not use different aspects of a library in their academic work (Duke & Asher, 2012). While it is necessary to investigate these questions about library use with a range of methods that are applied to different settings, the answers to *why* students do or do not use libraries are highly contextual, contingent upon time, place, and need, and as such are best answered using qualitative approaches that can account for users' unique perspectives.

By closely analyzing 15 interviews conducted with undergraduate and graduate students, the authors investigated students' first steps in academic information-seeking as well as their help-seeking activities. Sustained and careful investigation of transcripts revealed students' practices, thoughts, and attitudes about their academic work, and led the authors to a greater understanding of how students choose to utilize or not utilize the library. This study's findings confirm some common

understandings about how students begin their research and where they seek assistance, yet they also reveal some results that go against the grain of what previous works have found regarding student research habits. One desired outcome of this qualitative study was gathering student input to support informed decisions about our library resources and services. Although these findings are specific to Long Island University Brooklyn, they contribute to a larger body of knowledge and may be useful to librarians at similar institutions for planning and decision-making activities.

METHOD

This study is based upon a large-scale ethnographic research project conducted at a mid-sized private university in the northeastern United States, which used a mixed-methods design consisting of unobtrusive observations, a survey, and in-depth interviews to explore undergraduate and graduate research processes and study behaviors. The project's principal investigator was Dean of Libraries Valeda Dent, who had previously conducted ethnographic research projects and had extensive experience in qualitative methods. The primary component of this project was interviews conducted with students from a variety of academic levels and majors. These interviews took place in spring and summer 2013, with one librarian leading the semi-structured interview process and one librarian or staff member recording the interview. Each interview ranged from 40 min to 1 h in length, and students received an Amazon gift card for \$25 in exchange for their voluntary participation. The interviews addressed a variety of topics, including technology use for

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academic purposes and preferences for study space, but focused most heavily on student use or non-use of library resources and student practices in beginning a research assignment. The coding of these interviews by a team of four librarians, including one of the authors of the study at hand, began in spring 2014 and concluded in spring 2016. [Appendix A](#) contains a list of the individuals who contributed to the project through data collection and analysis.

The 15 interviewees were recruited from a survey distributed via email to all students, and were selected for their representativeness of various levels of study, years of study, and majors at the university. Considered as a whole, the interviewees are reflective of the greater student body. While this is a small number of participants to draw conclusions from, it is a number appropriate to this type of qualitative analysis, which seeks to derive detailed textual insights from small sample sizes. It should be noted that the research habits of undergraduate and graduate students are likely to differ due to additional research experience, the development of disciplinary expertise, and other factors. For the purposes of this study the students were considered together, in order to identify commonalities among academic library users across their various levels of study.

Beginning with an initial reading of 15 interviews conducted at the Long Island University Brooklyn library, the authors developed a list of areas of interest to focus upon and potential research questions to explore. After this first reading, the codebook used in the initial coding of interviews by a different research team was shared, and codes and keywords regarding the initial areas of interest and potential research questions were searched for within each transcript to identify passages of main interest. In this way the study began with the holistic reading of the dataset (15 interview transcripts) to generate potential areas of interest and research questions, and then moved to a targeted thematic analysis of transcripts using codes and keyword searches to investigate answers to the research questions. Based on a preliminary analysis of the interview transcripts, the authors developed two research questions:

1. What sources do students consult for research assistance? When and why do they seek help from librarians?
2. What steps do students take when they begin a research assignment?

In addition to the above research questions, the authors took note of additional themes that directly informed their understandings of student help-seeking and research processes. The initial reading of interview transcripts and the development of research questions were followed by the authors' own deductive analyses, which entailed three primary steps: first, identifying where certain codes and keywords appeared in each transcript; second, identifying passages and quotes within the transcripts relevant to the research questions; and third, developing and refining themes based on examinations of the dataset. In between each step the authors met to discuss findings and clarify questions that arose.

The close reading of in-depth interviews through coding and deductive analysis was chosen in order to more deeply investigate and interpret the complex nature of students' research and help-seeking practices. [Biddix, Chung, and Park \(2011\)](#), in regards to [Head and Eisenberg's \(2009\)](#) study of student information seeking in the digital age, note that students' complete research processes can arise only through interviewing students in focus groups and one-on-one:

Students referred to the site [Wikipedia] as a "preresearch tool" or a "step .05" that preceded scholarly databases and helped students funnel or refine their topics. This finding arose only during interviews, and given that many studies on student use of the Internet are survey-based, suggests that researchers need to reconsider how they frame questions regarding search strategies. (2011, p. 176).

The iterative, deductive process of identifying passages of interest and discerning findings based on the data was a time consuming process, but necessary in order to fully understand interviewee comments

and the contexts that processes of help-seeking and research take place within. Due to the relatively small sample size, the authors determined that a qualitative analysis software program such as NVivo was unnecessary, and the hand-coding and close reading of transcripts revealed a number of themes that were useful in posing answers to the research questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because the larger ethnographic research project was initially conceived of by the Dean of Libraries, the authors reviewed the library science literature after the analysis of transcripts had been completed, concomitantly with the development of answering the research questions. The literature that investigates the initial steps students take when beginning a research assignment was reviewed first. Where do they begin? Second, the authors sought literature regarding the help-seeking behaviors of students. When and why do they seek help from librarians? The authors focused the review particularly upon studies that utilized student interviews or mixed methods that included interviews.

Many library science studies that investigate how students begin a research project have found that some students do, in fact, begin with library resources. [Colón-Aguirre and Fleming-May](#) interviewed 21 undergraduates, finding that 16 of 21 interviewees had used the library's electronic resources, with 6 "avid" users who began their searches with library materials and 10 "occasional" users who eventually did so, if not at the start (2012, p. 394). In their *Project Information Literacy Progress Report*, [Head and Eisenberg \(2009\)](#) conducted a large survey and follow-up interviews and found that when conducting course-related research, a majority of students used library resources. In an earlier study that incorporated student discussion groups, content analysis of research assignment handouts, and student surveys, [Head](#) concluded that "a majority of students began their research by consulting course readings or the library's website for online access to scholarly journals" (2007, p. 3). Forty percent of respondents said their first step was to consult course textbooks or other course readings, while 23% began by accessing academic journals through the library's database subscriptions. Only one in ten students reported using the Internet first when conducting research ([Head, 2007](#), pp. 3–4). [Biddix et al. \(2011\)](#) found through in-depth interviews that even students who begin on the Internet ultimately utilize subscription databases and library books more often than survey results suggest. In their article about Wikipedia use, [Head and Eisenberg \(2010\)](#) found via student focus groups and surveys that college students use Wikipedia for background information but ultimately combine it with other information resources. Seventy percent of respondents use Wikipedia near the beginning or at the very beginning of the research process, and only 2% of respondents reported using Wikipedia near or at the end ([Head & Eisenberg, 2010](#), p. 5). A notable exception to this consensus is [Mizrachi's \(2010\)](#) study of UCLA students. In it, 16 of 29 (55%) of students who were interviewed about their research activities reported beginning their research on the Internet, often Google or Wikipedia.

When seeking help on their research projects, students turn to their professors and peers, and only sometimes to librarians. Nearly every published study of help-seeking behaviors reached this conclusion. [Beisler and Medaille \(2016\)](#), whose methodology included student drawings, written answers, and interviews with nine undergraduates, found that students asked for help from peers and family members but rarely from librarians. Surveying a large group of graduate social work students, [Ismail](#) discovered that even graduate students consult librarians last for research help; students of all age groups begin by asking friends, classmates, and professors (2013, pp. 167–168). [Pellegrino \(2012\)](#) found via a survey that students were reluctant to seek help from librarians even when encouraged by librarians, as no significant relationship was determined between students who were encouraged by a librarian to ask for help and students who did so. [Pellegrino](#) made

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