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Distance Students' Attitude Toward Library Help Seeking

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ABSTRACT

Distance students' attitude toward seeking library help was examined in a medium sized university. A web-based survey was conducted for indentifying library help seeking attitudes among distance students. A 30-mile radius of the campus was used to arbitrarily distinguish between near campus and far campus groups. The study concluded that distance students who visit library and seek help more frequently are more likely have higher self-efficacy on learning. Among all types of library help sources, Libguides were the most used. Near campus students preferred face-to-face consultation more than virtual service, and they also tend to seek help from peers. However, far campus students were more likely seek help with a distance librarian. Email continued to be the most common way of distributing and receiving library information. Social network tools for information seeking were not appreciated as had been anticipated. Implications of the findings for providing effective reference service are discussed. There is not one reference service model that fits all. A library should determine the best reference service that meets the changes of their communities and library's function over time.

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INTRODUCTION

People encounter various difficulties in their everyday lives. One way to resolve those difficulties is to seek help. Ames and Lau (1982) defined help seeking as "an achievement behavior involving the search for and employment of a strategy to obtain success" (p. 414). Help seeking behavior occurs when one faces challenges or difficulties. Help seeking behavioral processes include deciding to ask for help, identifying potential helper(s), formulating and expressing questions, and evaluating help seeking episode (Aleven, Stahl, Schworm, Fischer, & Wallace, 2003; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; Ryan & Pintrich, 1998).

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (2010) defines distance education as "a formal education process in which the majority of the instruction (interaction between students and instructors and among students) in a course occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place" (p. 1). Literature review retrieved a considerable number of surveys that focus on distance students' perception of using the academic library. Dew (2001) examined distance graduate program students at the University of Iowa. He found that 71% of the students ranked web or email

reference service as the most valuable service. McLean and Dew (2004) expanded the survey population to undergraduate students, and they observed that the values of reference service continued to be rated highly among graduates. However, undergraduates considered full-text database accessing more important to them. Eighty percent of distance students at the University of Illinois claimed that email was their preferred method seeking help from the library (Hensley & Miller, 2010). McLean and Dew (2004) also found that distance students reported higher instances of formal help seeking than traditional students. In other words, students in online courses would seek help from multiple electronic sources and become more proactive participants in a classroom. In addition, Kitsantas and Chow (2007) discovered that self-efficacy, defined as perceptions of one's capability and confidence for performing a task or complete a project, is highly correlated with help seeking behaviors. According to previous research (Newman & Goldin, 1990; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996), students with high self-efficacy beliefs about their learning capability tend to seek help more frequently because they are less likely to interpret their need for help due to lack of ability.

Although more and more online degrees and courses are offered to students, distance students who live on campus or near to campus prefer to seek help from visiting the library in person. In this study, we explore library help seeking attitudes of distance education students, with a particular focus on the stage of identifying helper(s). How frequently do students seek help from the library? What is the relationship between frequency of library visits and learning self-efficacy among distance students? What are their preferred ways of communication with

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the library when asking questions? Who is their targeted helper(s)? Does physical location affect their choice of seeking library assistance? The findings will provide insight on distance students' attitude toward the library's reference service. It will aid librarians in developing library marketing strategies and tactics in order to promote awareness of library services and resources to distance students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research showed evidence that personal and contextual factors influence a person's decision on whether and how to proceed for help (DePaulo, Nadler, & Fisher, 1983; Karabenick, 1998; Spacapan & Oskamp, 1992). In academic settings, instrumental help seeking is considered to be an active, multifarious social-cognitive activity (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981). It is an essential, positive, and important academic self-regulation strategy that benefits learning. Motivated learners are more likely to seek help when needed (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991) and a student's achievement goals are also related to help seeking (Kitsantas, 2002; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997; Tanaka, Murakami, Okuno, & Yamauchi, 2001). Studies showed that factors such as the helper's knowledge and competence, attitude (i.e., willingness to help, impression of help seeker), approachability, and relationship affect a help seeker's choice for a helper (Ryan & Pintrich, 1998). In the classroom, teachers and peers are often chosen as targeted helpers (Ryan, Patrick, & Shim, 2005).

For the past few decades, the academic library has been devoted to marketing itself as not only a house of collection, but also a facility that provides services for finding information. Samuel Swett Green (1876), in the article of "Personal Relations between Librarians and Readers", mentioned that librarians should be able to answer patrons' inquiry, and assist patrons to find books in the library. Reference service handles inquiries and assists a library's clientele use its collections and external resources to effectively meet their information needs. In the era of overwhelming information, reference service becomes more sophisticated than ever. High quality reference service helps users find obscure data and cut through information effectively. Traditional reference service is offered through phone and in person. With the development of technologies, e-mail, text message, chatting and virtual classrooms have been widely used in academic reference services. The various service delivery forms make reference service more approachable to patrons, especially to distance students who may not be able to come to the library very often. However, it has been reported that students are reluctant to ask for help even if the help is available (Swope & Katzer, 1972). This is considered as a phenomenon known as library anxiety (Fister, 2002; Mellon, 1986). The cause of library anxiety is associated with many factors. For instance, students are unsure whether librarians understand and are able to answer their questions, whether librarians are available and willing to help when needed, whether the librarian is the right person to ask for their course work, and whether librarians will judge their capability negatively (Ruppel & Fagan, 2002).

BACKGROUND

Jacksonville State University (JSU) is a medium sized, comprehensive university serving northeast Alabama. Distance education at JSU is experiencing rapid growth through online distance education courses distributed via the Internet. The university library has been steadily growing its electronic collections over the past few years. The library also provides document delivery, e-reserve, Interlibrary Loan, and reference assistance. Reference service is offered on-site, through toll-free telephone, and online (i.e. instant messaging, and email). Library tutorials and subject guides are accessible on the library's website. Furthermore, the library is working to incorporate resources, such as links to full text articles, e-journals, databases, reference assistance, and subject guides into the Blackboard course management system. A

distance education librarian's primary responsibility is to coordinate library resources and services by addressing the information needs of the distance learning community. The distance education librarian sends out brief distance service instruction emails to online students with the intention of promoting library services and encouraging library help seeking.

METHODS

Survey items were selected based on a literature review of other relevant studies, and were customized to fit the actual function settings of the library. Sample questions included: How would you prefer to contact a librarian? What types of assistance have you used this semester? A 3-item self-efficacy for online learning scale was selected and modified from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1993).

The survey was emailed to students enrolled in one or more distance education courses for the Fall term of 2012 three weeks prior to finals week, and it was left open for four weeks. Six point three percent of students (N = 220) completed the survey. Half the students (N = 110) lived within 30 miles radius of the campus. Seventy-six percent of participants (N = 166) were female, 59% (N = 130) were undergraduate students, and 69% (N = 150) were full time students. The majority of respondents (N = 66) reported being in the 21–29 age range.

A 30-mile radius of the campus was used to arbitrarily distinguish between near campus group (NG) and far campus groups (FG). The statistical software Package SPSS 18.0 for Windows was utilized to perform the descriptive and cross tabulation analysis. Means and Standard Deviation of student's learning self-efficacy were reported and percentile of sub-categories of each asked research questions was presented in a figure.

RESULTS

ONLINE LIBRARY VISITS

Data revealed that the majority of distance students use the online library 1–3 times a semester (NG = 30%, FG = 27%), and only a few students visit the library on a daily basis (NG = 3%, FG = 2%). Twenty nine percent of the students in each group reported that they never went to the online library during the semester (see Fig. 1). Students who visit the library more frequently also reported higher self-efficacy on their learning. Students who reported that they never visited the library had low learning self-efficacy ($M = 3.72$). Students, who indicated that they visit the library 1–3 times a semester, a month, or a week, reported a similar level of learning self-efficacy ranging from $M = 4.04$ to 4.13. It was no surprise that students who visit the library on a daily basis report a high learning self-efficacy ($M = 4.53$) (see Table 1).

HELP-SEEKING PREFERENCE

Reference service has not been used very often among distance students (see Fig. 2). A large number of students, sixth-three students (57%) in the near campus group and fifty-three students (54%) in the far campus group claimed that they had not used any library assistance. The second largest group of students commented that they would have sought help if they knew it had been offered. (NG = 21%, FG = 27%). Approximately 20% of distance students used library assistance, such as library tutorials, Libguides, webinars, and face-to-face consultations. Libguides were the most common library assistance tool that students use, while face-to-face consultation was used more by the near campus group (NG = 9%, FG = 5%).

The top three preferred ways of seeking help in the near campus group were in person (75%), email (69%), and online (Ask-a-Librarian) form (25%). The top three methods among the far campus group were

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