



*Evidence Summary*

**Undergraduate Students' Research and Information Skills Continue to Change in their Second Year**

**A Review of:**

Hulseberg, A., & Twait, M. (2016). Sophomores speaking: An exploratory study of student research practices. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 23(2), 130-150.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10691316.2014.981907>

**Reviewed by:**

Kimberly Miller  
Learning Technologies Librarian  
Albert S. Cook Library  
Towson University  
Towson, Maryland, United States of America  
Email: [kimberlymiller@towson.edu](mailto:kimberlymiller@towson.edu)

**Received:** 30 Nov. 2016

**Accepted:** 17 Jan. 2017

© 2017 Miller. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons-Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike License 4.0 International (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed, not used for commercial purposes, and, if transformed, the resulting work is redistributed under the same or similar license to this one.

---

**Abstract**

**Objective** – To understand sophomore undergraduate students' research practices.

**Design** – Mixed methods online survey and participant interviews.

**Setting** – A small liberal arts college in the Midwestern United States of America.

**Subjects** – The sample consisted of 660 second-year students; 139 students responded to the survey (21% response rate). In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 of the 139 survey respondents.

**Methods** – A 13-item survey was emailed to sophomore students during October 2012. To analyze the results, the authors and a library student intern developed a coding scheme to apply to open-ended survey questions.

Survey respondents could also volunteer for in-depth interviews. A total of 50 survey respondents volunteered, and 14 were invited for in-depth interviews between December 2012 and January 2013. The interview protocol included open-ended questions about students' research experiences. Students were also asked to identify and discuss one recent research project. Interviews were audio and video recorded; data from one interview was lost due to technology failure, resulting in data analysis of 13 interviews. Interview transcripts

were coded by an anthropology doctoral student, the study authors, and a library student assistant.

**Main Results** – The survey found that students completed fewer research projects and used fewer library resources as sophomores than they did as first-year students. For example, only 4.9% (n=7) of students reported completing zero research assignments in their first year, compared with 34.5% (n=48) in their second year. When asked if there were library resources or skills they wanted to know about sooner in their academic career, students' top reply was "Nothing" (34.5%, n=48), followed by "Navigating the physical space" (15.8%, n=22), "Librarians/staff & reference desk" (11.5%, n=16), and "Effective searching & evaluating sources" (10.8%, n=15). Male and female students' responses differed, with male students less likely overall to express interest in library resources. While 42.4% (n=59) of students replied that they would consult with a librarian for help with their research projects, this option ranked third after professors (83.5%, n=116) and peers (70.5%, n=98). Again, responses varied by gender, with female students (49.5%, n=49) more likely than male students (26.3%, n=10) to contact a librarian about a research project.

Most interview participants replied that searching online, including library resources, was their research starting point. Students most often selected research topics, based on their interest, from a professor-approved list. Students identified "relevant content, familiarity . . . , and credibility" (p. 138) as important source evaluation characteristics. The majority of students also used library information sources in their research, including databases, research guides, and the catalogue. Students most often mentioned struggling with "finding sources/identifying keywords" (n=6) and "finding known items" (n=6). Unlike survey respondents, interview participants unanimously reported consulting with a librarian. Most students (n=11) received library instruction as first-year students, and some suggested that this instruction helped them feel comfortable asking for help. Finally,

most students felt that their research habits improved from their first year to their second year, specifically with regards to "their research technique, improved confidence . . . and an expanded source horizon" (p. 143).

**Conclusion** – The authors recommend continuing strong information literacy support to first-year students, as well as working with faculty members and other campus partners to promote reference services to sophomores. When compared to previous research, the current study reports a higher percentage of students seeking librarian assistance; however, because some students also reported confusion about when and how to ask for help, further analysis could explore how reference librarians capitalize on peer and faculty "referral networks" (p. 145). Finding that students face significant challenges early in the research process was consistent with previous research, and future study might reveal more about this specific phenomenon in sophomores. Interviews should also be extended to include students who are non-library users. Finally, the authors suggest that the findings provide no evidence of a "sophomore information literacy slump" (p. 146).

### Commentary

Demonstrating how academic library work aligns with wider institutional priorities requires that librarians explore how their services connect to students' academic experiences. Professional documents, like the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015), also encourage librarians to support students' long-term information literacy development. In order to make strategic decisions about library instruction programs and reference services in this environment, librarians need insight into students' research experiences and expectations. This study contributes to our understanding of how students develop research skills over time.

As a case study, the authors acknowledge that findings may have limited external validity, and discuss how their results compare to

previous research. Components of the study's design, including its use of mixed methods and potential for replication, emerge as strengths when evaluated with Glynn's (2006) critical appraisal checklist. Including survey and interview instruments within the article allows librarians to repeat the investigation on their own campuses. A rich picture of sophomore students' information behaviour emerges because of the two data collection methods. Quantitative results demonstrate patterns in students' behaviours (e.g., how often they complete research papers or the types of resources consulted), while the qualitative themes add depth to understanding thoughts, feelings, and intentions behind these behaviours.

However, because the survey was deployed during October, the data may not represent the entire sophomore experience. Likewise, interviewing students during December and January does not account for the Spring semester. This means study findings cannot reflect research experiences that occurred during the second half of students' sophomore year. Since all interviewees reported consulting with a librarian, it is also unclear whether the interview data accurately reflects students who do not use reference services. If students who previously benefitted from a library consultation are predisposed to volunteer for an interview about conducting research, it is worth investigating how they compare to the rest of the population on other study variables. The authors acknowledge these limitations and provide recommendations for improving upon them in future research.

While the findings suggest that students experience growth from their first to second year on-campus, there is room to expand the library's reach. Outreach and instruction librarians should continue investigating how referrals from faculty members and peers

influence whether students seek out library services. Librarians should explore and strengthen partnerships with other student support offices, as well as faculty members in academic departments. For example, the study authors created an outreach opportunity when they shared their research results directly with faculty members. Librarians may look for similar opportunities to discuss student research experiences within their local academic communities. Interview responses also suggest that first-year library instruction connects students to library services into their sophomore year. As we learn more about the association between academic library use and student learning (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016), librarians are trying to keep students connected to our services that correlate with academic success. This study lends support to the role strategic instruction initiatives and cultivating referrals play in this endeavor.

## References

- Association of College and Research Libraries. (2016). *Value of academic libraries statement*. Retrieved from <http://www.acrl.org/value/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Value-of-Academic-Libraries-Statement-FINAL.pdf>
- Association of College and Research Libraries. (2015). *Framework for information literacy for higher education*. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>
- Glynn, L. (2006). A critical appraisal tool for library and information research. *Library Hi Tech*, 24(3), 387-399. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/07378830610692154>