



Evidence Summary

Students Use Library Resources but are Unlikely to Consult with Librarians during the Early Research Process

A Review of:

Thomas, S., Tewell, E., & Wilson, G. (2017). Where students start and what they do when they get stuck: A qualitative inquiry into academic information-seeking and help-seeking practices. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 43(3), 224-231. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2017.02.016>

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Abstract

Objective – To investigate where students start their research, what resources they use, and when they may consult with a librarian.

Design – Ethnographic, semi-structured interviews.

Setting – A mid-sized, private university located in the northeastern United States of America.

Subjects – 15 students; 7 undergraduate students and 8 graduate students.

Methods – Researchers gathered data as part of a larger ethnographic study conducted at

the university. Interview participants were selected from among respondents to an email survey sent to all university students. Interview participants were purposefully selected to represent the student population with regards to their status (undergraduate or graduate), progress through their programs, and their majors. The semi-structured interviews focused primarily on how students approached the beginning stages of research and the types of resources used.

The authors read each interview transcript to identify possible research questions, then re-read transcripts to identify codes and potential themes related to the selected research questions. Finally, they analyzed the transcripts to determine where essential

themes and keywords appeared, while highlighting relevant passages and finalizing themes.

Main Results – Students were more likely to seek research help from faculty members and their peers than from librarians. Graduate student interviewees were more likely to report consulting with librarians than undergraduate students. Interview themes suggest that students may not consult with librarians because they do not perceive librarians as having the subject knowledge or “insider” status (p. 227) of their professors and peers. Few students articulated an understanding of the expertise librarians could bring to a research project.

When starting a research project, students were more likely to report beginning with library databases than they were Google or other open web sources. While many students also shared that they used multiple different resources in their initial stages, most also reported that they ultimately narrowed their search focus to a specific database. Students also discussed struggling with their database searching.

Conclusion – The authors suggest that future research should focus on understanding the types of resources that faculty members recommend to their students, which could inform how librarians approach their work with students. Additional research related to how faculty members and students perceive librarians may also clarify the role these groups expect librarians to fill during the research process. Although results cannot be generalized to all student populations, the authors call for librarians to further explore assumptions about how students begin their research and the work academic librarians do to support students’ natural behaviours and preferences.

Commentary

Academic reference and instruction librarians have a strong interest in understanding the decisions students make about conducting research. The current study adds to a line of

research that explores the types of resources, both human and informational, that students consult during their research processes. While the study’s findings largely confirm previous research demonstrating that students are unlikely to consult with librarians, and that students use a range of information sources to begin their work, the emergent themes shed additional light on how a particular student population works through early stages of research.

Appraising the study design and evidence using Letts et al.’s (2007) critical review instrument suggests the study’s strengths lie in using the qualitative data collection and analysis approach to discover key components of students’ early research process. Relying on questions and themes that emerge from the data allowed the authors to explore students’ ordinary experiences. The team-based approach to identifying questions, codes, and themes increases the evidence’s reliability. The article provides a relatively clear trail through the coding and decision making process; however, it is somewhat unclear whether codes were entirely derived from the initial codebook that was shared with the researchers or if new codes emerged during the current study’s data analysis. Relying on data from a larger study also means that the authors had little control over data collection and design, including whether the selected student sample led to saturation in their themes. While the article notes limitations regarding the generalizability of findings, there is no discussion of whether using data collected in a different context may have an influence on the results. Given that findings of a small qualitative study may not be generalizable to other populations, including the interview protocol within the article could help other librarians confirm the study’s findings with their own students.

Academic librarians whose responsibilities include student research support may be most interested in exploring how they can gain “insider” status with student and faculty researchers. The current study suggests that while students regularly rely on library resources, students see their peers and their

professors as more useful sources of help because these groups understand either the assignment or the subject of interest. Librarians must demonstrate a similar niche within the research process, where students start to assume librarians also innately understand research or subject-specific needs. This can be a challenge when, for example, librarians begin research consultations with an extensive reference interview that students may perceive as extra questions that other students or faculty members do not need to ask in order to be helpful. Librarians may consider how to reframe this approach to

questioning as their value-added expertise in an inquiry-based research process.

References

- Letts, L., Wilkins, S., Law, M., Stewart, D., Bosch, J., & Westmorland, M. (2007) Critical review form – qualitative studies (version 2.0). In *Region of Peel*. Retrieved from http://www.peelregion.ca/health/librariy/eidmtools/qualreview_version2_0.pdf