



Evidence Summary

Librarian Expertise is Under-Utilized by Students and Faculty in Online Courses

A Review of:

Steele, J.E. (2021). The role of the academic librarian in online courses: A case study. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 47(5), 102384. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2021.102384>

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Abstract

Objective – To examine the role of academic librarians in online courses in a university setting.

Design – Survey questionnaire.

Setting – A multi-campus university in the southern United States.

Subjects – Students, faculty, and librarians who had taken, taught, or assisted in fully online courses.

Methods – Email addresses for potential survey participants were provided by the university office of institutional research. The researchers tailored survey questions weto specific subject groups. The surveys took roughly 15 minutes to complete and were open for 1 week following the original email. Surveys included 12 – 16 questions, depending on the version, and included questions relating to the use of librarians in online courses, the type of assistance they provided, and how assistance was provided (e.g., in person, email, live chat). Question types included yes/no, check-all-that-apply, and open-ended-answer.

Main Results – Of the student responders, 23.24% reported asking a librarian for help with research or an assignment. This help included finding resources (34.48%), database searching (28.57%), and searching the library catalog (20.69%). Help was given over email (28.03%), live chat (31.82%), and in person (17.42%), which was reported to be most helpful by several students. Only 10.61% reported using video-conferencing software such as Zoom.

Only 5.88% of faculty reported including a librarian for synchronous instruction in online courses, while 19.12% made use of asynchronous tutorials created by a librarian. The majority of respondents (93.1%) had not worked with an embedded librarian in their courses, and many reported not knowing that it was an option. Instead, faculty perceived librarians to be an outside resource.

Both faculty members and students reported a desire for more video tutorials from librarians. Several faculty mentioned wanting a library module that could serve as an introduction to the library, library resources, and basic instruction topics such as citation styles.

Conclusion – While some students and faculty have worked with librarians in online courses and welcomed their involvement, there is room for improvement in library outreach, including how the library communicates with and supports this growing population.

Commentary

Boynton and Greenhalgh's (2004) guide to questionnaire research appraisal was consulted for this analysis. A survey questionnaire was the appropriate method to capture the information needed, and this survey used a combination of statements with tick boxes and open-ended questions, which allowed participants to give concrete answers when necessary and voice their opinions and experiences further on given topics. The questions were clearly written and directed to each subject group, for example, "The online course(s) I have completed have been ..." for students versus "The online course(s) I have taught have been..." for faculty.

There were a number of issues with the presentation of data. First, it was not clear how many respondents there were from each group or what the response rate was. While one could infer that there were 370 student respondents based on the responses to an early question in the student survey, there is no way to definitively tell. When presenting the results of a survey, the number of participants and the response rate should be included to help the reader determine whether there was an appropriate sample size.

Appropriate sample size was a second problem, in that librarians were included in the study design as potential survey respondents but were not discussed in the results section. While the significantly lower number of librarian respondents was mentioned as a limitation of the study, the data still should be reported as results and the response rate reported. The views of the librarians who did respond to the survey could have added further meaning to the responses of students and faculty.

The survey results make clear that faculty did not realize librarians could be an embedded resource for their classes. An interesting question could have been whether they were contacted in the past by a librarian who offered to help with classes. It would also be interesting to know how students knew to contact a librarian for help, as they were not explicitly asked whether they knew about the library from a course or another experience.

Despite the issues mentioned, academic librarians can use this research to determine the needs of their students and faculty regarding online courses. This type of survey could be adapted by any library to gauge interest in and need for embedded library instruction. Faculty outreach to increase awareness of library resources, both in-person and online, could improve engagement. Outreach to online students

can also allow for better understanding of available library resources. As more schools are embracing online classes, librarians will have to adapt their methods and may find new opportunities to directly support these classes.

References

Boynton, P. M., & Greenhalgh, T. (2004). Selecting, designing, and developing your questionnaire. *BMJ*, 328(7451), 1312–1315. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.328.7451.1312>