Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Undergraduate Students Seek Librarian Assistance Only After They Have Searched Independently Without Success

Vinyard, M., Mullally, C., & Colvin, J.B. (2017). Why do students seek help in an age of DIY? Using a qualitative approach to look beyond statistics. Reference & User Services Quarterly, 56(4), 257-267. http://dx.doi.org/10.5860/rusq.56.4.257

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:
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Abstract

Objective – To explore how undergraduate students look for information and the reasons these students seek assistance from a librarian.

Design – Qualitative research.

Setting – A university in Southern California.

Subjects – 10 students were interviewed: 1 freshman, 1 sophomore, 5 juniors, and 3 seniors.

Methods – Students who met with a librarian for longer than 20 minutes were invited to participate in the study, and interviews were conducted within six weeks of this interaction. Semi-structured interviews were scheduled for one hour blocks and were audio-recorded and transcribed afterward. Interview data was analyzed using applied thematic analysis. The researchers used NVivo to assist with the process of coding data.

Main Results – Once all transcripts were coded, the researchers identified the following six themes related to how students look for information and the reasons they asked for

assistance: how students research, personal perceptions of research skills, assumptions (students' misperceptions about library services), motivation for asking for help, path to the librarian (how students contacted librarians and their reason for selecting a particular librarian), and experience working with a librarian.

Conclusion – Overall, the research results demonstrate that students prefer to conduct research independently but will consult a librarian if they are not able to find what they need, if they find the research question especially challenging, or if they have spent an unreasonable amount of time conducting research. In-class library instruction, along with professor referrals are the most effective methods for encouraging students to seek out library assistance.

Commentary

As noted by the authors, much of the published literature that examines students' help-seeking behavior focuses on the reasons that students do not seek out assistance from librarians. Among the few published articles that explore the reasons students confer with librarians when they have research questions, the authors cite one qualitative study in particular and build upon this research. The current study uses a different qualitative method as well as an expanded inquiry into students' independent research approaches and motivation for seeking out a librarian.

The study was evaluated using the Critical Review Form for Qualitative Studies Checklist, Version 2.0 (Lets et al., 2007). Based upon the literature review and lack of evidence available related to the authors' specific interests, the researchers provided a clear justification for this study. The study design, qualitative research with semi-structured interviews, was appropriate for the researchers' questions, as they were interested in the "lived experience" of the students' research habits and were able to follow-up with additional questions when there were topics that they wanted to explore deeper or for which they wanted to gain a better understanding. The interview questions

were included in the article's appendix, which makes for a study that could be easily replicated.

The students who participated in this research had previously sought out assistance from a reference librarian, which may be indicative of a lack of anxiety or hesitancy in seeking help or approaching librarians. For a broader perspective, the authors could replicate this study by including students who have not previously interacted with a librarian. Regarding the qualitative research data analysis process, the researchers did not mention that they did member checks to ensure completeness and credibility of the data. Member checks, which involve sharing the research findings with the study participants, are a way to improve the accuracy and validity of the data and make sure that the researcher has properly interpreted the participants' statements.

Although the authors used a different qualitative approach than that described in other published literature on the topic, many of the study's conclusions seem to confirm what other researchers have concluded. While the evidence presented may not be new, it does validate what some academic librarians already know about the research skills and attitudes of undergraduates.

The study findings are relevant to all academic librarians, especially those working with undergraduate students. The evidence suggests that librarians should strategically market reference services to students; they might consider partnering with other campus entities to build trust with students as well as get the word out about library services. Marketing could also serve to dispel students' assumptions and misconceptions about the library, especially among those with the do-it-yourself mindset. Furthermore, the data provides support for continued relationship building with faculty and library classroom instruction. Librarians can use this opportunity to provide information to students about the ease and accessibility of meeting with a librarian, perhaps highlighting specific reasons why the meeting would be beneficial, such as

saving time, developing research skills, getting to know the librarians so that students can feel comfortable asking for assistance in the future.

References

Letts, L., Wilkins, S., Law, M., Stewart, D., Bosch, J., & Westmorland, M. (2007). Critical Review Form – Qualitative Studies (Version 2.0). Retrieved from http://www.peelregion.ca/health/library/eidmtools/qualreview_version2_0.pdf