

Chapter 4

An Overview of Trends in Undergraduate Research Practices

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ABSTRACT

The resources undergraduates use for research have changed significantly over the past two decades as the Internet has become the predominant conduit for information. Access to academic resources has never been easier; undergraduate papers now include more citations, but more non-traditional, non-academic sources are being cited. Libraries' initial reactions to the ascendancy of the Internet ranged from mild concern to alarm, but soon libraries were themselves using the Internet as both an access point for academic resources and as a tool for information literacy. Studies also suggest that students' motivations and research methodology have remained consistent. The key to libraries' success is understanding the motivations that shape students' research practices and tying information literacy to the curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

"Since the mid-1990s, the academic library has lost its control as the sole information resource provider on the college campus, and now competes with a multiplicity of resources available over the Internet." (Davis, 2003, p. 40).

Academic librarians are uniquely positioned to witness and appreciate cultural change. Every year we welcome a new class of freshman, add hundreds or thousands of new items to our collections, and update our technologies. We understand that successive generations have different cultural touchstones; we've come to grips with the notion that ours date us. The fact that undergraduates' research practices differ from those of a decade

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ago is not a shock. Our own research habits have changed: colleges and universities are full of faculty and librarians who turn to Wikipedia for reference assistance.

Even if change is understood, the rate of change is mind-boggling. When the phrase “Information literacy” was first coined in the early 1970s, few could have imagined the profound changes that would follow. In 2005, Thomas Mann was still explaining the idiosyncrasies of subject headings to researchers in his well-respected “Oxford Guide to Library Research.”

*One student, for example, became frustrated in looking for material under “Moonshining” because it is not entered under that heading. In a standard library catalog, works on this subject are filed under **Distilling, illicit**. Another researcher wanted books on “Corporate philanthropy;” before asking for help she hadn’t found anything because she was looking under “Philanthropy” rather than under the proper heading **Corporations – Charitable contributions** (Mann, 2005, p. 18-19).*

This kind of research process is meaningless to today’s undergraduates.

No disrespect is meant to Mann, of course, or catalogers, or librarians who still teach the use of subject headings. Many of the techniques Mann describes are still relevant, even in a digital research environment, and the metadata librarians have created is powering new search technologies. Mann also argues persuasively for the physical library, pointing out that the information available for free on the Internet is necessarily limited by copyright and commercial restrictions. It is still true that “If you wish to be a good researcher you have to be aware of the trade-offs between virtual and real libraries” (Mann, 2005, p. xiii). As we shall see, being a good researcher is not high on most undergraduates’ list of motivations.

Today’s undergraduates and students at all levels have more information available to them, deliverable more quickly, than any students in history. The Internet, the preferred conduit for this information, is the largest user-customizable multimedia research tool ever created. Students can access library resources provided by their library, government sites, commercial sites, and myriad free resources 24 hours a day. Books, articles, videos, music, speeches, lectures, and scholarly discussions – all are retrievable, ideally, in a few clicks. The research potential of the Internet is profound. The Internet is the home of digital collections: libraries’ digital collections, Google Books, the Haithi Trust, and the Internet Archive. Some of the best reference resources are freely available on the Internet: the Statistical Abstract of the United States, Wikipedia, the Internet Movie Database, AllMusic.com. Undergraduates may not be correct in believing that virtually everything is available through the Internet, but a great deal of it is, and certainly enough to write a 3-7 page paper. The Internet is a treasure trove of information, a natural research destination for a lifestyle that is always wired and thrives on constant communication.

This chapter is an overview of broader trends in undergraduate research practices, focusing on resources and methodology. Research practices and the larger topic of information literacy is a perennial hot topic. In 2009 alone, Johnson, Sproles, and Detmering listed 510 publications on library instruction and information literacy in their annual bibliography on information literacy. (Johnson, 2010, p.677) This chapter will focus on selected studies, primarily large-scale, from the past decade or so. Most focus on undergraduate behavior, but a few cover K-12 students: future undergraduates. After a review of undergraduate research trends, we will discuss how libraries are reacting to changing research practices.

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