

## Chapter 5

# The Research Habits of Graduate Students and Faculty: Is There a Need for Reference Sources?

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### ABSTRACT

*The work of faculty and graduate students is information intensive. These researchers make heavy use of particular types of resources to support their research, teaching, scholarly communication, and current awareness. They less frequently use traditional types of reference sources, however, raising questions of why that might be and what should be done about it. This chapter examines the research practices of graduate students and faculty to understand their information needs, their information seeking strategies and the information sources they use. It also looks more specifically at researchers' uneven use of reference sources and discusses reasons why these practices exist. An argument is made that changes must be made to the types of reference sources available to researchers, and that academic librarians must change the way they promote these resources to their constituents.*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores whether and how traditional reference resources serve the needs of researchers, and what types of products researchers might want in the future. A reference source has been

defined as: "A book designed to be consulted when authoritative information is needed, rather than read cover to cover. Reference books often consist of a series of signed or unsigned 'entries' listed alphabetically under headwords or headings, or in some other arrangement (classified, numeric, etc.)" (Reitz, 2004, p. 600).

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To explore how faculty and graduate students make use of reference materials now and in the future, we must first understand how they work, what information resources they use, how they identify those sources, how they search for information, and what they do with the information they find. Then we can begin to extrapolate how researchers use today's reference sources, which include a mix of traditional print resources, digitized print sources, and born digital sources. A better understanding of the research practices of graduate students and faculty will enable librarians, publishers, and content producers to develop new ideas about the design, discoverability, structure, and marketing of reference sources.

## **BACKGROUND**

Both graduate students and faculty members are scholars in that they ingest, produce, and disseminate scholarship through research and teaching. Graduate students are often faculty members-in-training; thus these two user groups share many common characteristics in their information needs, seeking, and use. But there are also distinctions between the two user groups regarding their knowledge and expertise in their subject areas, and their familiarity with information sources in those areas. A direct comparison of the research habits of these two user groups is made somewhat difficult by the fact that researchers have not consistently asked the same research questions of each group, and that some research has focused exclusively on scholars in a particular academic discipline where other research has grouped sample populations across multiple disciplines. To be sure, differences exist across academic fields in terms of epistemology, scholarly communication patterns, and, to a lesser degree, the habits and preferences of the researchers. However, those differences are less relevant for the focus of this chapter; thus, the findings discussed here emphasize the similarities among researchers of different disciplines. A

good amount of research about graduate students and faculty exists, and from that, we can begin to understand their research habits and their use of reference sources.

## **Information Needs**

As a user group, graduate students undergo a transformation as they progress through their academic programs (Barrett, 2005; Chu & Law, 2008). Students early in a Master's program more closely resemble undergraduates in their need for information, their knowledge of resources, and their information seeking strategies. Generally speaking, they are taking courses and beginning to develop their own research paths. Their information needs at this point include materials needed for classes, and perhaps, if they have a teaching responsibility, materials to support their teaching. As they advance in their programs, their information needs change and begin to mirror the characteristics of faculty. Graduate students at this senior level express a need for information related to research, either their own research or faculty-sponsored research, information to support preparing presentations and publications, and information to support current awareness (Gabridge, Gaskell, & Stout, 2008).

Faculty information needs are inextricably linked to their work as scholars. Consistent over time and across disciplines, the primary information needs of faculty are: 1) to stay current in their fields, 2) to support their research production and scholarly communication, and 3) to support their teaching (Anderson, 2006; Bennett & Buhler, 2010; Borgman, Millwood, Finley, Champeny, Gilliland, & Leazer, 2005; Flaxbart, 2001; King, Tenopir, Choemprayong, & Wu, 2009). Even as Information Technology has changed dramatically, these fundamental areas of information need for faculty have largely stayed the same.

To meet these three categories of information needs, faculty browse current journals and web sites in their discipline (Beaubian & Buhler, 2010;

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