

**Opinions and Experiences of University Faculty Regarding Library  
Research Instruction: Results of a Web-based Survey at the University  
of Southern Colorado**

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# **Opinions and Experiences of University Faculty Regarding Library Research Instruction: Results of a Web-based Survey at the University of Southern Colorado**

## **Summary**

In March 2000, all 188 University of Southern Colorado (USC) non-library faculty members were surveyed to determine their needs and opinions regarding library research instruction. Forty-four (23.40 percent) of the faculty responded to questions concerning their past experiences with library research instruction, the frequency with which they use various library and Internet resources, the types of library research instruction they currently use with their students, and their level of support for proposed new programs. Results showed an overwhelming interest on the part of respondents for an online library research skills tutorial. The survey also revealed the need for professional development opportunities for faculty. A higher proportion of respondents with ten years or less of teaching experience than those with more than 10 years of experience indicated they had received formal library instruction from a librarian. However, no direct correlation could be shown between years of teaching experience and respondents' perceived value of library research instruction. Nor did a correlation exist to show that respondents with less years of teaching experience were more likely to ask a librarian to provide formal library instruction to their students. In fact, respondents with more than 20 years of teaching experience provided most types of library instruction more often than less experienced respondents. Overall, USC faculty rated their students'

abilities to conduct library research very low. However, they had slightly more confidence in their students' abilities to find, evaluate, and use information they found on the Internet over information from traditional print sources.

## **Introduction**

The position of Library Instruction Coordinator at USC was established in 1999. Prior to that, the Reference and Assistant Reference Librarians coordinated library instruction in addition to their reference duties. In order to facilitate the planning process for this new position, the new instruction librarian, Rhonda Gonzales, wanted current information about the needs and wants of the faculty regarding library research instruction, which prompted her to conduct a study of USC faculty members' experiences with and levels of support for various types of library instruction.

At the University of Southern Colorado Library, library research instruction takes place in several different ways. It happens informally at the reference and periodicals desks. It happens in the form of classes taught by library faculty. Most of these classes are "one-shot" sessions of between 50 and 90 minutes in length. Most are course related. In addition, many faculty members take the responsibility for teaching their students to conduct library research. All general education courses at USC are supposed to include a library component; however, there is no mandate that this library component must include a formal library instruction session. Thus some students who are enrolled in more than one general education course at the same time may attend multiple library sessions in the same semester, while other students may miss out completely.

A review of the literature that deals with research relating to faculty attitudes towards library research instruction revealed a relatively small number of surveys<sup>1</sup>. Thomas and Ensor (1984) reported that the frequency with which a faculty member used the library related positively to the decision to have a librarian offer library instruction to their classes. Cannon (1994) also found that the frequency with which faculty members conducted library research impacted their attitudes towards the need for library research instruction. Thomas and Ensor (1984) reported that the manner in which faculty members learned about libraries influenced their decision to offer formal instruction to students. Maynard's (1987) survey indicated, "of the professors who answered that they do not offer library instruction, 81.8 percent learned library skills on their own as students". Thomas (1994) published a follow up to her previous study, which found faculty member's attitudes had not changed significantly. The second study found that younger faculty members were less likely to feel that the curriculum was too full to include library instruction and that the lower the faculty member's rank, the more likely he or she was to have received library research instruction as part of a course. Maynard (1987) found that more full professors than assistant professors indicated they had learned library research skills on their own. In addition, Thomas (1994 p.217) reported "although 40.0 percent of full professors assumed that students learn library skills on their own, this proportion drops slightly with each rank to only 33.1 percent for lecturers." While these findings indicate that younger faculty members are both more likely to have received formal library instruction and are also more likely to think their students need formal library research instruction, it is not clear that their attitudes are the direct result of their own

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<sup>1</sup> Cannon, 1994, includes a fairly comprehensive list of articles on this topic.

experiences. In fact, Hardesty (1990) developed an attitude scale that would accurately describe the library-related educational attitudes of undergraduate faculty members. He concluded that "local conditions, more so than previous experiences, influence the faculty member's attitudes toward the library (Hardesty, 1990, chap.3)." Finally, Cannon (1994) demonstrated a correlation between the faculty member's academic discipline and his/her attitude towards library research instruction. Clearly more research is needed to determine which factors are most important in determining faculty members' attitudes towards library research instruction.

The objective in conducting this survey was twofold: to obtain information that could be used to inform planning for the library instruction program at USC and to determine which factors impacted USC faculty members' attitudes towards library research instruction. Respondents were asked questions regarding their years of teaching experience, their own experiences with library research instruction as students, the importance of library research instruction in their fields, and the frequency with which they use various library resources in order to establish correlations between these factors and attitudes towards library research instruction.

## **Method**

Because the trend at USC has been towards email communication, a Web-based survey (Appendix A) was developed and disseminated. The survey is available online at <http://library.uscolo.edu/bi/lrisurvey.html>. The survey was based, with Anita Cannon's permission, on her survey as published in *RQ* (1994). Section one of the survey asked for personal characteristics of respondents such as number of years teaching, department,

average age of students taught, importance of library use in the field, frequency of library use, and manner in which respondent learned to do library research. Section two focused on how respondents viewed their students' abilities to conduct library research and whether or not they felt their students needed formal library research instruction. The final section asked respondents what forms of library instruction they currently use and which they would support in the future. One week before the surveys were distributed electronically, an email message was sent to all the department chairs on campus explaining the importance of this survey and asking for their cooperation. Each faculty member, excluding library faculty, received a brief message explaining the survey and including a link from the email message to the online survey. There were several faculty members who did not have email addresses and, for them, a printed copy of the survey was mailed along with a cover letter via intercampus mail.

### **Results and Limitations of the Study**

Of 188 surveys distributed, only 44 responses were received for a 23.40 percent response rate. This lack of response on the part of USC faculty proved to be a limitation of this study. Some sources suggest that a rate of approximately 25 percent is not unusual for this type of survey<sup>2</sup>, however this low response rate made it difficult to repeat the findings of the Cannon survey, which had a response rate of 41 percent. Also, since the USC sample was smaller than that at York University to begin with, the small number of responses meant that in many cases only one or two faculty members from a given department responded. This severely limited the amount of statistical analysis that could

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<sup>2</sup> See Matz, 1999, p.10 and Cannon, 1994, p.526.

be performed on the data and made it impossible to obtain similar data to the Cannon study's findings that were correlated by department.

The results of this survey do, however, illustrate some interesting findings. Previous studies have identified several factors which influence faculty members' attitudes towards library instruction. These include frequency of library use, past personal experience with library instruction, age or rank, and academic discipline. In this study, frequency of library use also seemed to play a role. A higher proportion of respondents who currently ask a librarian to give instruction to their classes than those who don't indicated they use library resources often. Past experience with library instruction, age, and discipline did not seem to be a factor in whether respondents asked a librarian to give instruction to their classes. Even though a higher percentage of respondents with ten years or less of teaching experience than those in the higher experience level categories indicated they had received formal library instruction from a librarian, no direct correlation could be shown between years of teaching experience and respondents' perceived value of library research instruction. Nor did a correlation exist to show that respondents with less years of teaching experience were more likely to ask a librarian to provide formal library instruction to their students. In fact, respondents with more than 20 years of teaching experience provided most types of library instruction more often than less experienced respondents. Overall, USC faculty rated their students' abilities to conduct library research very low.

The results to Question 12, "How valuable would library research instruction be for your students?" may be difficult to interpret because the range of possible responses was weighted towards the positive through oversight of the survey creator. Choices

included extremely valuable, very valuable, valuable, not applicable, no opinion. “No opinion” should have been “not valuable”. No respondents chose “no opinion”.

### **The Experience Factor**

The respondents to the survey represented seventeen of the nineteen departments on campus. Only two departments, Art and Engineering Technology, were not represented. Representation ranged from 1 to 6 responses and the departments with the largest representation were English with 6 responses and Nursing with 5 responses. Because of the low number of respondents, no departmental differences in attitude or experience could be determined.

Of the 44 respondents, 42 reported the number of years they had been teaching. Nine respondents had over 20 years of teaching experience, 13 had 11 to 20 years of experience, and 20 had 10 years or less of teaching experience. Table 1 shows the breakdown of how respondents in these three categories answered various survey questions.

All the respondents indicated that library research is of importance in their fields. However, Table 1 shows that those respondents with 10 or less years of teaching experience found library research less important. Six of them reported that library research is merely “somewhat important” compared to 1 of those with 11 to 20 years and 0 of those with more than 20 years of teaching experience.

Respondents were asked how often they used various resources in their own research. A large number of respondents indicated that Internet Web sites play a key role in research. Table 2 illustrates that 29 (65.9 percent) of the respondents reported using



Web sites more than two times per month. Indicative of the explosive growth of the Internet and its impact on research methods is the fact that 50.0 percent of respondents to the USC survey reported using Web sites “very often”, which was defined as more than twice per week, compared with only 35.3 percent of respondents who answered a similar question at the University of Wyoming in 1995. Amstutz (1995) reported 20.7 percent of respondents indicated they never used the Internet for research, while none of the USC respondents indicated they never use the Internet. It is not clear what USC survey respondents considered as Web sites, however it does seem that faculty use of the Internet has increased.

Faculty members were also asked how they learned to conduct library research. They were instructed to check as many answers as applied to them. Table 1 includes the responses to this question. There is evidence of an inverse relationship between years of teaching experience and whether or not the faculty member received library instruction from a librarian. Only 1 respondent (11.1 percent) with more than 20 years of teaching experience indicated he had received library instruction from any librarian, while 6 out of 13 respondents (46.2 percent) with 11 to 20 years of teaching experience and 12 of 20 respondents (60.0 percent) with 10 years or less experience indicated they had received instruction from a librarian. A high number of respondents from each of the three categories indicated they learned to do library instruction on their own.

These results support the conclusions of other surveys, which indicate that younger faculty members are more likely than their more experienced peers to have received formal library research instruction as college students (Thomas 1994 and Maynard 1987). However, while other studies have also found an inverse relationship

between years of teaching experience and respondents' attitudes towards library instruction, this survey did not. In fact the opposite proved true in this case. For example, 7 of 9 respondents (77.8 percent) with 20+ years of experience indicated that they give library assignments designed to teach search strategy compared to only 7 of 20 respondents (35 percent) with 10 years or less experience. Additionally, of these 9 respondents, 8 give library assignments designed to develop critical thinking skills using library research, 8 lecture about library resources, and 5 ask a librarian to give instruction to their classes. Less experienced respondents used only one type of library instruction more often than respondents with 20+ years experience. Six out of twenty (30 percent) reported using Web based instruction or online tutorials compared to only 1 out of 9 (11.1 percent) respondents in the upper category.

While response rates were too low to prove a positive correlation between years of teaching and the likelihood that respondents would think library research was valuable for their students, results did show that respondents in the 20+ category thought instruction was extremely valuable for their first and second year students. Excluding those respondents who indicated this question did not apply to them, 4 out of 5 respondents with 20+ years experience ranked instruction extremely valuable for freshman and sophomore students while only 11 out of 16 respondents with 10 or less years experience thought the same (Table 1).

### **Students' Abilities**

The majority of respondents indicated they taught primarily 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students. This was true regardless of the respondent's number of years teaching (Table 1).

This is not surprising, given USC's standing as a regional university with a limited number of graduate programs.

Questions eight, nine, and ten asked faculty members to rate their 1<sup>st</sup> and 2nd year students', 3rd and 4th year students', and graduate students' abilities to find and retrieve, evaluate, and effectively use information they found both in the library and using the Internet. As one would expect, their confidence in their student's abilities rose as the students matured (Table 3).

Respondents who taught 1st and 2nd year students had more confidence in their students' abilities to find and retrieve information on the Internet than using traditional library resources. Of 26 respondents who teach freshmen and sophomores, 18 (72.0 percent) rated their students' abilities to find and retrieve information from the Internet as satisfactory or better. Only 9 of 25 (36.0 percent) rated student's abilities to find and retrieve information using traditional library resources as satisfactory or better. Respondents also showed more confidence in their students' abilities to use information effectively when they found the information on the Internet. For example, 14 (51.9 percent) of the 27 respondents who indicated this question applied to them, rated their 1st and 2nd year students' abilities to effectively use information found on the Internet as satisfactory or better, while only 9 out of 26 (34.6 percent) rated student use of information from traditional library sources as satisfactory or better (Table 3).

Faculty members' confidence levels increased somewhat for 3rd and 4th year students. Thirty-three of 36 respondents (91.7 percent) to whom this question applied rated their juniors' and seniors' abilities to find and retrieve Internet information as satisfactory or better, while only 28 out of 36 (77.8 percent) thought their students' had

satisfactory or better skills in finding and retrieving information through traditional library research (Table 3). This raises the interesting question of whether faculty members feel that information found on the Internet is somehow different or inherently better than information from print sources.

Although respondents indicate that students' abilities improve with years of experience at the University, still professors' overall confidence in their students' abilities is alarmingly low. Question 11 asked professors to indicate which factors they think contribute to students' lack of skills. The responses to this question were evenly distributed indicating that faculty members do not perceive one factor to be predominantly responsible. Thirty respondents (68.2 percent) indicated lack of motivation as a contributing factor (Table 4).

### **Current Instruction Methods**

Question thirteen asked respondents to identify types of library research instruction they currently incorporate into their courses. A high percentage of faculty respondents indicated they use the Internet often for research and respondents also expressed confidence in their students' usage of the Internet for research. Do these faculty members also provide formal instruction for students in using the Internet for research? Twenty-one respondents, just under half, indicated that they currently incorporate an "assignment(s) designed to introduce students to Internet resources." Overall, 38.64 percent of respondents reported having a librarian give some kind of instruction to their classes, only somewhat lower than the 44 percent reported by Cannon (1994).

Table 5 compares the survey responses of faculty who have asked a librarian to instruct their students with those who have not. Past personal experience with library instruction did not seem to play a role in whether or not respondents collaborated with a librarian. Approximately 48.0 percent of both groups report having received library instruction from a librarian. A slightly higher proportion of those respondents who ask a librarian to provide instruction for their classes reported using various library resources often.

Clearly, many of those faculty members who responded to the survey are teaching library research skills. Question 14 asked the 25 respondents who hadn't requested formal library research instruction what factors affected their decision. Their responses were similar to those of York University faculty in the Cannon study. Table 6 compares these responses. Nine out of 25 (36.00 percent) USC respondents who had not requested librarian instruction reported not knowing it was available. Also, 7 out of 25 (28.00 percent) indicated they prefer to teach library research themselves (Table 6). When asked if they would like to have a librarian give library research instruction to their classes if they had not done so previously, 14 of the 25 respondents (56.00 percent) responded affirmatively, while 7 (28.00 percent) said no. Cannon reported 54.5 percent of respondents to this same question indicated they would like to have a librarian provide instruction.

Respondents who had requested formal library research instruction from a librarian were asked if the instruction was useful for their students. Of the 19 respondents to whom this question applied, 13 (68.4 percent) indicated the instruction was “very useful” and 4 (21.1 percent) chose “somewhat useful”. This results in 89.5 percent of

library instruction users who felt a librarian's instruction was useful for their students (Table 5). This number correlates closely with the 90 percent who answered this question in the Cannon survey (1994, p.532).

### **Future Library Research Instruction**

Questions 18 and 19 asked faculty members about their opinions on and level of interest/support for various types of library research instruction. When asked who they thought should be responsible for library research instruction, USC faculty responded very similarly to York University faculty (Cannon 1994). Table 5 gives USC faculty responses. Predictably, respondents who have asked a librarian to instruct their students indicated a higher level of support for collaboration than their colleagues who had not requested instruction from a librarian. Twelve of the nineteen (63.2 percent) thought both librarians and teaching faculty in collaboration should be responsible for library instruction compared to 12 of 25 (48.0 percent) who had not asked a librarian to provide instruction. Worth exploring is the question of why almost half of these faculty members profess support for collaboration, but yet have not taken steps to initiate it. Library faculty should take the initiative to contact faculty members who do not routinely request instruction. Clearly survey respondents are supportive of librarian/teaching faculty collaboration.

The Cannon (1994) survey brings out an interesting correlation between the number of faculty who currently ask a librarian to give course related or subject specific instruction to their classes and the number of faculty who think that would be a "great" idea. At USC, only 11 respondents (25.0 percent) indicated they currently incorporate a

course-related or subject-specific class given by a librarian into their syllabus. However, 34 (77.3 percent) respondents indicated they would support this type of instruction.

Table 7 provides a breakdown of the responses of faculty to a question regarding proposed types of library instruction. An overwhelming percentage of faculty members indicated interest in or a willingness to support a Web-based library research instruction tutorial. In addition, 30 respondents (68.2 percent) indicated support for library instruction opportunities for faculty.

## **Conclusions**

1. While there is evidence of an inverse relationship between years of teaching experience and whether or not the faculty member received library instruction from a librarian, the majority of USC faculty learned to do library research on their own. Of the 44 respondents, 39 (88.6 percent) learned on their own, while only 21 (47.7) learned library research from a librarian.
2. The fact that faculty members received library research instruction from a librarian did not relate positively to the faculty members' decision to ask a librarian to give instruction to their students.
3. A higher proportion of faculty respondents who ask a librarian to give instruction to their students than those who don't indicate they use library resources often.
4. Overall, faculty members are not confident in their students' research skills. They show slightly more confidence in their students' abilities to find and retrieve information when it comes from the Internet.

5. Faculty members who make use of the current library research instruction programs are satisfied with the program. Of the many faculty members who are not utilizing the library's instruction programs, many are not aware of the programs available and others see no value in them.

6. The interest many respondents expressed in instruction for faculty makes it apparent that USC librarians need to provide professional development opportunities for faculty members; both to help them keep abreast of changes in research methods and sources, and to assist them in teaching library research and Internet research skills to their students.

7. Respondents showed an overwhelming (86.4 percent) interest in a Web-based library research skills tutorial that they could use with their students.

### **Changes Instituted as a Result of the Survey Findings**

Because 56.0 percent of those respondents who had not requested formal instruction from a librarian for their classes also expressed an interest in doing so, USC librarians should increase efforts to advertise instructional offerings. They should contact departments directly. However, this could result in an overwhelming number of requests for classes when librarians are already stretched thin. This fact combined with the reported interest in online tutorials clearly indicated to USC librarians that they should explore the idea of creating or adapting an online research skills tutorial that faculty could integrate into their courses. The Instruction Librarian took advantage of an Instructional Technology grant received by the University to design and implement a Web-based



tutorial, InfoTrail <http://library.uscolo.edu/infotrail/infotrail.html>. Beginning in the Spring 2002 semester, many English 101 students began using this new tool.

USC librarians also plan to prepare instructional tutorials or workshops especially for faculty to help faculty members feel more comfortable with the library's ever changing resources.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The findings of the USC survey show that proportionally more faculty members in the lowest teaching experience category reported receiving instruction from a librarian than faculty members in higher teaching experience categories. However, past experiences did not influence these faculty members to request formal library instruction for their students. More research should be done to determine what factors cause faculty members to request library research instruction for their students.

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