

Summary Report of HEDS/NITLE Research Practices Survey
Boatwright Library
University of Richmond
compiled by Lucretia McCulley

Preface:

In the spring of 2009, the HEDS/NITLE Research Practices Survey was distributed to all undergraduate students at the University of Richmond. The distribution period consisted of the last two weeks of March 2009. The 15-minute survey explores the experiences and opinions of college students concerning academic research. Its purposes are to 1) study students' research habits 2) use these findings to improve the ways we help students develop their research skills and 3) determine what changes occur in research abilities as students progress through their academic careers.

Approximately 473 students completed the survey. These numbers resulted in a 15% response rate. It is important to note that after consulting with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, this is a very low response rate and that a good response rate would have been about 21-22%. The office also advised that if we wanted to use the results beyond our internal use, we would need a rate in the 40-50% range. However, I think there is some information that we can possibly use and discuss to plan further investigations or assessments.

The distribution of class years was fairly evenly distributed within the 473 students (98 – Freshmen; 114 – Sophomores; 122 – Juniors; 139 – Seniors). 63.6% were female students and 36.4% were male students. 45% of these students indicated that they use the library at least once a week or more and that their most frequent reason for using the library is to do a variety of academic work (studying, doing homework, group projects, etc.) (64.9%). 72.5% of the students had received instruction in the last year from a professor or a librarian on how to use library and internet resources.

In terms of using library and online sources, 71.2% had used library books; 90.1% had used Google; and 90.7% had used online journals. In seeking advice from others on research assignments, professors are the most popular choice in seeking assistance **often** (32.6% of students seek advice from a faculty member; 26% - friends; 6.9% from a parent; 6.6% - Help Screens; 5.7% - Writing Center; 5.1% from a librarian.) Over the course of the past academic year, 39.6% had talked with a librarian at least once or twice about research.

76% of students are required by instructors almost always or often to use a specific citation style. When pacing a research assignment, 65.9% of students "do a little right away, most toward the end."

The survey consists of four sections 1) Your Experiences with Research (*reported above*) 2) Your Attitudes and Beliefs About Research 3) Your Familiarity with Research Terms and Strategies 4) Your Approach to Evaluating Sources. In this brief summary, it is impossible to reflect the details of each question within the survey, so I have chosen to highlight questions and answers that may prompt further study, discussion and reflection. Please note that the library chose Section 3 as one of our SACS outcomes for

2008-2009, so I have addressed those results first in the section below.

Section 3: Research Terms and Strategies

As part of the library's SACS Plan for 2008-2009, we identified Section 3 as our primary assessment report for the survey. Section 3 included questions about appropriate research terms and strategies that undergraduate students should be familiar with in conducting library research. For the purposes of the SACS evaluation, our target was stated that 80% of all students taking the survey will answer at least 7 out of 11 questions correctly. After receiving the results, it was noted that there were actually 13 questions (one question had three parts) and that perhaps we should expand our report to include questions that were answered correctly below the 80% target. After consulting the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, I have decided to report these findings in the following breakdown:

- 1) Questions that were answered correctly above 80%
- 2) Questions that were answered correctly between 50% - 80% of all students
- 3) Questions that were answered correctly below 50%.

Questions Answered Correctly by 80% of all students

4 questions were answered correctly by 80% or more of all students. These included:
Identifying the issue number of a journal citation (94.6%)
Identifying a book citation (87.6%)
Understanding characteristics of primary sources (82.9%)
Understanding when a citation is not required (83.3%).

Questions Answered Correctly between 50% - 80% of all students

3 questions were answered correctly by at least 60% of all students. These included:
A question about choosing the most comprehensive list of relevant scholarly articles (60.6%)
Definition of a peer-reviewed journal (68.6%)
Definition of a citation in a scholarly article (66.7%).

Questions Answered Correctly below 50%

6 questions were answered correctly by 50% or fewer of all students completing the survey and they are described briefly below.

Understanding Boolean operators: 37.9%
How to truncate a search term: 20.3%
How to use subject headings in an online catalog: 43.6%
Distinguishing between academic journals and popular magazines: 39.8%
Recognizing a journal article citation: 46.6%
Recognizing an essay/chapter in a book citation: 39.5%

Section 4: Evaluating Sources

The last section of the survey focused on students' approach to evaluating sources. Five questions were included in the section and included queries about determining whether or not a source is scholarly and choosing appropriate sources for a research paper.

The first question presented a list of source characteristics for scholarly material. Out of 8 characteristics, over 70% of student respondents chose the correct answer for six characteristics. Students had the most difficult time with deciding if an article in *Time*, *Newsweek* or *U.S. News and World Report* was considered scholarly. 31% indicated that the above sources are scholarly; 34.5% stated they were non-scholarly; 27.5% stated that it could not be determined.

56.1% of students answered a question correctly that asked them to identify a source from a list that is *least* likely to be appropriate for their paper. Another question asked what is the best way to determine whether to use a particular source and 40% stated that whether the source is likely to be scholarly as the correct answer.

Section 2: Attitudes and Beliefs About Research

In terms of how challenging are the different components of research, nearly 50% find that narrowing your topic, developing a list of sources to investigate and revising a search strategy as "somewhat easy". Nearly 45% found developing a thesis statement as very difficult or somewhat difficult. 78% found documenting sources as somewhat easy or very easy.

Another set of questions focused on identifying and retrieving sources and the following results show students' opinions in terms of "somewhat easy" or "very easy".

Using a library catalog – 82% find somewhat or very easy
Using an electronic database – 80% find somewhat or very easy
Using a print index – 46.8% find somewhat or very easy
Using a search engine – 95% find somewhat or very easy
Physically locating items in the library – 71% find somewhat or very easy
Interlibrary Loan – 38% find somewhat or very easy

One question asked "how challenging is it for you to use sources" and 88% found determining whether or not a source is appropriate as somewhat easy or very easy. 80% found *knowing when* to document a source as easy or very easy and 78% stated that *knowing how* to document a source as easy or somewhat easy.

Around 28% of students enjoyed research quite a bit or very much. 61% of students agreed or strongly agreed that a course in research skills would be useful. Nearly 70% of students believe that some people are just naturally better at research.

