Closing the Gap

Determining the Library Help-Seeking Preferences of Adult Learners in a Graduate Social Work Program

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Manuscript based on conference presentation. Presented at Library Research Roundtable Forum's Research to Understand Users, ALA Annual Conference, June 25, 2011, New Orleans.

This study surveyed adult learners in a graduate social work program to determine their library help-seeking preferences and reasons behind their reluctance to seek help from a librarian. It also investigates the preferred method of seeking library help (online, face-to-face, etc) and whether age and location (students enrolled in the off campus/distance programs) had an impact on these preferences. Findings indicate that librarians are approached last for research help (the first being either their friends/classmates or instructors), that age does have some impact on library helpseeking, and that distance adult learners still preferred to seek librarian help face-to face if this option was available.

dult learners are becoming increasingly prevalent in academic institutions. This trend is reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2011) which indicated a steady increase in actual and projected numbers through 2019 of the total enrollment (both full time and part time) of students aged 25 years and older.1 Additionally, an earlier 2007 report prepared for the United States Department of Labor on the status of adult learners in higher education specifically mentioned the importance of understanding the "unique needs" of adult learners.2 The report outlined the

barriers that adult learners face such as family, time constraints and costs that traditionally aged students do not face.³ With this in mind, adult learners are probably in greater need of assistance from academic support centers, including libraries, than their traditionally aged counterparts.

In an attempt to address such concerns and to make sure that adult learners do not fall through the cracks, the author initiated a study to determine the library help-seeking preferences of adult learners in the Master of Social Work (MSW) program at Marywood University. The graduate program has the largest enrollment of adult learners at Marywood. By adult learners, the author is looking at students 25 years old and above, which is also recognized as the appropriate classification for the graduate adult learner in two other studies.4 (The author therefore identifies the traditional masters student's age to be 22-24 years old).

Help-seeking is basic to most library interactions. Understanding such preferences and behaviors would provide valuable insight into the adult learner's use or non-use of the library and its various resources and services. This study follows another study the author conducted in Fall 2008 that sought to determine library use and needs of

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traditional and nontraditional MSW students at Marywood.5

BACKGROUND

Located in Scranton, Pennsylvania, Marywood University is a Catholic institution that, at the time of the study, served almost 1,600 full-time and part-time graduate students, and ranked third among Pennsylvania independent colleges for full-time graduate enrollment (43 percent). Also at the time of this study, the School of Social work's MSW program had a total of 323 traditional (weekday), Saturday, and satellite/distance students, with a majority of students being enrolled in the nontraditional options (277 students). The specific breakdown of student enrollment in the nontraditional programs is as follows:

- Saturday program in Scranton (85 students)
- Satellite campus in Reading (35 students)
- Satellite campus in Allentown (75 students)
- Satellite campus in Bloomsburg (82 students)

These high nontraditional enrollment numbers (compared to the traditional numbers) provided the ideal backdrop for this study. Determining when, how, and from whom adult learners seek research assistance, and whether age and location have any impact on their help-seeking behaviors, will provide librarians at Marywood as well as at other academic institutions an understanding of how best to help them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is much in the education literature about the adult learner, whose reentry into academia is invariably accompanied by a variety of emotional and personal uncertainties. The bulk of this literature focused on identifying these uncertainties and the learning style of the mature student, with more recent articles addressing the new e-learning environment and its impact on adult education. The issue of the adult learner is also present in the library literature. Studies there explored the adult learner's library needs, particularly in the face of new library technologies and distance education.

Out of this body of literature, Cooke (2010) specifically combined educational theory with library practice by discussing the concept of the "andragogical librarian" as a means to better serve this increasing group of academic library users. By using adragogy (the theory of teaching to adults, as opposed to pedagogy) in library instruction, Cooke believes that adult learners will be empowered and their library needs met. Cooke's recent reexamination of the value of this popular adult learning theory speaks to the importance of implementing self-direction, relevance, immediacy, and engagement (which are tenets of adragogy) in current library instruction practice. Since adult learners are highly motivated to learn without the luxury of time, they require instruction that would meet their needs "on the spot."

Carvello (2000) actually took up this debate ten years earlier when she employed the active learning methods of a librarian-taught course directed at adult learners to reference work.¹⁰ She recommends that when helping adult learners at the reference desk, the librarian needs to provide these students with time-saving tips, skills that would help them gain immediate success and "self-sufficient" tools such as web-based tutorials and/or handouts.¹¹

However, even if reference librarians understand the adult learner's needs during a reference interview, other studies also reveal that the challenge for academic librarians is to encourage these students to seek librarian help as a first stop in their research quest, and not as a last resort. Ezzo and Perez (2000) wrote that it is difficult to get adult students to "actually seek assistance,"12 while Gibbs, et al. (2012) determined from their survey of graduate and professional students at Georgetown University that a majority of these students did not ask for help "from anyone at all." 13 This is because they prided themselves in being self-sufficient or they perceived that librarians lacked the "subject expertise" they needed. 14 The good news is that students from the School of Continuing Studies (adult learners with full time jobs and who have been out of school for many years) responded overwhelmingly to the survey, suggesting "an appetite for library resources and services."15

Similarly, Pillai (2010) in her study to determine the best way to promote effective academic help seeking, found that the students she surveyed at De Montfort University (of which 13 percent were 24–30 year olds) did not ask for help because they were uncertain when it was appropriate to seek help, how to do so and where to find it.¹⁶

With library help-seeking in mind, several other studies sought to determine which type of reference service (digital vs. traditional face-to-face) is preferred by students.¹⁷ A recent study by Magi (2012) attempted to ascertain the reason behind students' continued preference of "individual, face-to-face research consultations in a technology-rich world" at the University of Vermont. She concluded that students (both undergraduates and graduates) surveyed found face-to-face interactions immediate, quick, and efficient. A one-on-one demo utilizes "visual cues" that help students remember "by seeing." Another benefit students mentioned was that face-to-face consultations allow students to be part of a collaborative effort in seeking information.

Magi's finding that face-to-face consultations allow for immediate gratification echoes Carvello's and Cooke's assertions with regards to helping adult learners. This study attempts to take library help-seeking a step further by addressing the following concerns:

- At what point would adult learners seek librarian help if they do seek help?
- Who do they prefer to seek help from if not from a librarian?
- What method do they prefer using when seeking such help?
- Does age (younger adult learners versus older adult learners) and location (on-campus versus off campus) impact their library help-seeking behaviors?

METHOD

A survey was conducted in spring 2010 to determine the library help-seeking preferences and behaviors of adult learners in Marywood University's MSW program. The study employed the professional version of Survey Monkey which allowed for unlimited responses and the analysis of results using available filter options that are able to pair a specific question to a particular demographic. All responses remained anonymous. The aim of the survey was to obtain responses from as many adult MSW students as possible, whether they received librarian help via their course management system or not.

The survey was administered both online and in print. (A large majority of the surveys were completed in print format which was expected). The study enlisted the help of the Office of Instructional Technology (OIT) to create an email group of all enrolled MSW students at the time, a total of 323 students. Students accessed the online survey via this email group. Print copies of the survey were also distributed to students in selected classes either by the instructor (by prior arrangement) or by a librarian, and returned to the researcher in the provided envelope. This selection was based on location proximity to the main campus for easier logistics. Students, therefore, had the option to complete the survey online or in print but not both. To avoid duplication of print and online completed surveys, students were instructed to complete the survey in only one format. An email notification was sent to MSW instructors to encourage their students to consider taking the survey. There were no other solicitations or incentives.

The survey instrument was comprised of rating scales, multiple-choice and open-ended questions. (see Appendix). Both the instrument and method were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board as well as peer-reviewed by three other academic librarians.

FINDINGS

The survey obtained a total response rate of almost 37 percent with 119 out of the 323 students completing the survey. From the demographic data collected, almost 69 percent of the respondents or 82 were considered "adult learners" or were at least twenty-five years old. Respondents reporting to be in the 23–29 age group were filtered by number of years since they earned their undergraduate degree, thus counting only those respondents who would be at least twenty-five years old. Henceforth, this age group is referred to as 25–29 year olds. (In retrospect, a better gauge would have been to create a 25–29 age range when designing the survey instrument as the act of filtering mentioned above could possibly have excluded some adult learners from the study.)

Demographics

Over half of the respondents reported being thirty-years old or older (figure 1). The majority of respondents were in the

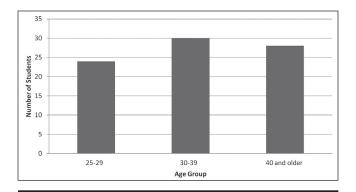


Figure 1. Distribution by Age Group

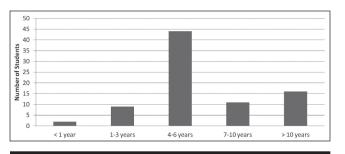


Figure 2. Years Since Earning Undergraduate Degree

30–39 age group (30 students) closely followed by those 40 and older (28 students). When location was taken into consideration, it appears that there is representation from all age groups in both the traditional and nontraditional programs, with the nontraditional Scranton Saturday program (located on the main campus) having the highest enrollment of all locations (31 students). Additionally, a majority of students surveyed reported earning their undergraduate degree within the past 4–6 years (44 students), with 16 students reporting having earned their first degree in the past 10 years or more. Only two students reported having earned the degree less than one year ago (figure 2).

Help-Seeking Preferences

For preferred method of seeking library assistance, data was collected by age group as well as by program location. Findings filtered by program location would help determine whether distance (on-campus versus off-campus) had an impact on satellite students' tendency to seek help from the library. Respondents were asked to rate their preferences on a scale of 1–5 with "1" being "strongly agree" and "5" being "strongly disagree."

FINDINGS BY AGE GROUP

Preferences for Help Seeking Methods

Adult learners across all age groups chose "Email" as their most preferred method of seeking library help (figure 3).

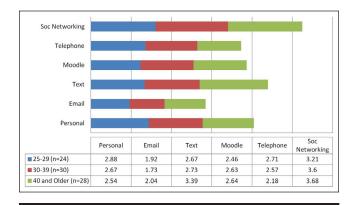


Figure 3. Help Seeking Preferences by Age (preferences are on a scale of 1–5 with "1" being "strongly agree" and "5" being "strongly disagree")

All age groups also indicated a positive inclination for seeking help in person with a librarian, although the 25–29 age group preferred this method least compared with the older age groups. On the other hand, those in the 40-and-older age group indicated a stronger disinclination for texting when compared to their younger cohorts. However, it is encouraging that none of the respondents reported a strong dislike of seeking help via their Moodle course page, social networking, or texting if given these options.

Will Not Seek Librarian Help Because . . .

Respondents across all age groups overwhelmingly reported that they had no reason to seek help from a librarian because they 'can figure it out" by themselves (figure 4). Also, respondents in the 40-and-older age group appear more likely to be "uncomfortable" about asking for help than their younger cohorts. The few respondents who chose to add a comment under "Other" mentioned not being on campus, distance, and not knowing if a librarian was available late at night as their reasons for not seeking help.

Will Only Seek Librarian Help If . . .

Respondents overwhelmingly reported that they would only seek help from a librarian if they urgently needed help, regardless of age or location (figure 5). Although the numbers are relatively small, results show that familiarity and a previous contact with a librarian appear to influence the help preferences of adult learners in the 40-and-older age group, more so than the other age groups.

Frequency of Seeking Help

There is a marked difference between the younger adult learners in the 25–29 age group and their older counterparts regarding how often they seek help. A majority of the adult

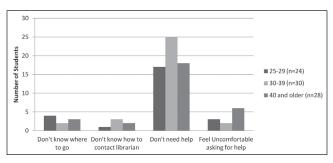


Figure 4. Seeking Librarian Help by Age

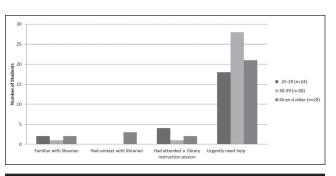


Figure 5. Will Seek Help from a Librarian if . . . (distribution by age)

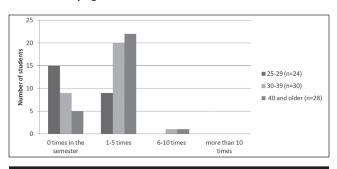


Figure 6. Frequency of Seeking Help during the Semester by Age

learners in the younger age group reported not seeking help from a librarian at all during the semester (figure 6). Only nine (out of a total of 24 students) indicated that they sought help "1–5 times." Conversely, a majority of the adult learners in the older age groups reported that they sought help from a librarian "1–5 times" during the semester.

Students Prefer to Seek Help From . . .

From the findings, age does appear to have a slight impact on where these adult learners go first for research help. Adult learners in the 25–29 age group prefer to seek help from friends/classmates first and from their instructors second (figure 7). (This represents average rankings). Conversely, adult learners in the 30–39 age group prefer to seek help from their instructors first, followed by their friends/classmates. Those

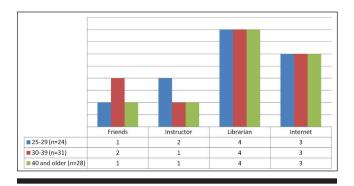


Figure 7. Who Students Prefer to Seek Help From (choice rankings by age; preferences are ranked as "1" for First Choice, "2" for Second Choice, "3" for Third Choice and "4" for Fourth Choice)

in the 40-and-older age group preferred to seek research help equally from their friends/classmates and from their instructors first. A troubling finding which confirms both anecdotal and earlier studies is that a majority of adult learners across all age groups prefer to seek help from a librarian last. They also prefer to go to the Internet for help instead of going to a librarian, even for their second and third choices.

FINDINGS BY LOCATION

Preferences for Help Seeking Methods

A majority of satellite program respondents, despite the distance from the main campus, indicated a positive inclination for face-to-face help. The only exception is with respondents from the Allentown campus who were more neutral in this regard (figure 8). Unsurprisingly, respondents from the traditional on-campus program in Scranton reported the strongest preference for in-person assistance, although this variation is slight. Respondents across all locations (with the exception of Allentown) also showed a positive inclination for seeking help through their Moodle course page if available, whether a librarian is embedded in it or not. Seeking help via email however is the first choice for all respondents.

Seeking Librarian Help

Several respondents from the satellite programs reported not knowing where to go to seek librarian help (figure 9). A welcome finding is that all respondents from the traditional on-campus Scranton program knew where to go to seek help. A few respondents across all locations (except Bloomsburg) indicated that they did not know how to contact a librarian with almost the same number indicating that they feel uncomfortable approaching a librarian for help. A majority of these students were from the Scranton/Saturday program, which coincidentally also had the highest number of students who were in the 40-and-older age group (as findings above show). With the exception of Reading (where there were equal numbers for

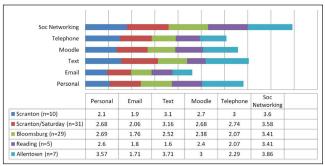


Figure 8. Help Seeking Preferences by Location (preferences are on a scale of 1–5 with "1" being "strongly agree" and "5" being "strongly disagree")

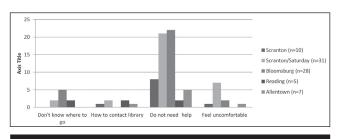


Figure 9. Seeking Librarian Help by Location

not knowing where to go, how to contact the library and feeling uncomfortable), an overwhelming majority of respondents from all locations indicated that they did not need any help.

Will Only Seek Help If . . .

Familiarity, previous contact, or having attended a library session would induce Bloomsburg students to seek help, more so then their satellite counterparts. However, the majority of respondents across all locations responded seeking help only when "urgently" needed. (figure 10).

Frequency of Seeking Help

Only respondents from the traditional Scranton program indicated seeking help from a librarian more than six times (figure 11). A majority of respondents from across all campus locations reported having sought librarian help between one and five times during the semester. However, a relatively high number of respondents from the satellite locations also reported not seeking help at all.

Students Prefer to Seek Help From . . .

Respondents across all campus programs indicated that they would seek help from a librarian last (figure 12). Also respondents across all campus programs indicated seeking help from their instructor as their first choice.

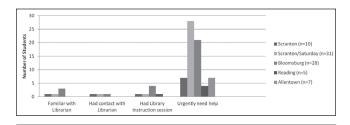


Figure 10. Will Only Seek Help If . . .

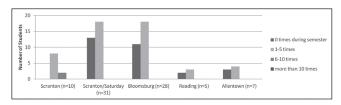


Figure 11. Frequency of Seeking Help by Location

DISCUSSION

A main aim of this study was to determine whether adult learners enrolled in Marywood's graduate social work program were indeed reluctant to seek help from a librarian, and if so, why. From the findings, it appeared that these adult learners were not so much reluctant as they were confident that they did not need librarian help in the first place, despite anecdotal evidence from Social Work faculty to the contrary—that students do need help finding appropriate sources for their research assignments. In fact, this study found that the adult learners surveyed would overwhelmingly approach librarians last for research help, regardless of age or program location. And they would only do so if they "urgently" needed help. From personal experience helping these students, as well as from discussions with fellow librarians, this author recognizes how, after trying various options without success, many of these students, at the point of frustration, will turn to the librarians for help, as they have done so in the past. Although this is not a total surprise (both Ezzo & Perez and Gibbs had similarly findings as indicated in the Literature Review section), this study further determined that distance adult learners had similar preferences with their traditional counterparts. Additionally, age does have some impact on the adult learner's help-seeking behavior.

But what are some of the factors that would deter these adult learners from seeking help from a librarian? Since a majority prefer to seek help from their instructors first, it is possible that these adult learners, as Gibbs determined in her study, regarded librarians as lacking the 'subject expertise" they needed. Additionally, a large number of adult learners particularly the 25–29 years-olds, also preferred seeking help from their classmates/friends. This finding is especially telling, because it points to a level of familiarity and comfort with the person they are seeking help from. Obviously, the librarian does not fall into this category. A few of the adult learners across all age groups and program locations did indicate that

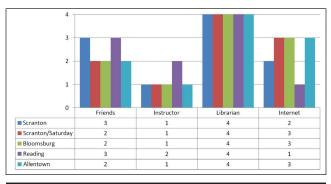


Figure 12. Who Students Prefer to Seek Help From (choice rankings by location; preferences are ranked as "1" for First Choice, "2" for Second Choice, "3" for Third Choice and "4" for Fourth Choice)

they felt "uncomfortable" seeking help from a librarian. But these numbers are very small.

Besides comfort level, a few adult learners in the satellite locations reported not knowing where to go or how to contact the library. This echoes Pillai's findings (see Literature Review section). But again, these numbers are relatively small compared to those who indicated that they did not seek librarian help because they could "figure it out" for themselves. And since most of the adult learners surveyed, regardless of age and location, asked for librarian help at least "1–5 times" during the semester, it is some comfort that they eventually do find their way to the librarian, even though it may be as a last resort.

The most preferred method of seeking help, however, is via email for all adult learners in this study. No respondent expressed a strong dislike for newer methods of seeking help if available (Moodle, texting, social networking). And given the unpopularity of seeking help from a librarian, it is somewhat surprising that another popular preference for these adult learners and especially for those in the satellite locations is "in-person help with a librarian," if available. In fact, preference for in-person help among satellite respondents did not fare too badly compared with the other methods of seeking help. This finding resonates not only with Magi's study but also with Cooke's and Carvello's (see Literature Review section). Magi found that graduate students (and undergraduates) she surveyed expressed a high preference for "faceto-face research consultations," because this approach was "immediate," "quick," and more "collaborative" while Cooke and Carvello stressed the importance of instant gratification and meeting immediate needs when helping adult learners at the reference desk.

So how do we change "last resort" status to top choice? With the above findings in mind, there are possible solutions to the librarian's conundrum of being the least favorite person to seek help from among adult learners surveyed. Given that these students consider their instructors/faculty to be the ones to turn to for research help, librarians should pro-actively seek collaborative relationships with instructors and faculty, even more so than before. As a result of these relationships

(such as the embedded librarian service or the scheduling of more than one library instruction session during the semester), the instructor or faculty member is emphasizing the importance of the library and the librarian in the successful completion of the course. More librarian led events specifically for instructors and faculty (such as a brown bag series in the library or inviting instructors and faculty to discuss their course needs with librarians) would increase faculty/librarian interactions and thus build positive and potentially lasting relationships with them. Librarians at Marywood had held faculty sessions during National Library Week celebrations and the annual Library Open House during the Fall semester but this was met by limited success. Perhaps a more organized and consistent promotion of events with small rewards (such as a raffle) would prove more successful.

With regard to winning over the help-seeking advantage of friends and classmates, librarians need to project an 'image" that is approachable, in addition to being involved with the students' course via their instructor. As with instructors and faculty, special events (such as a promotional drawing) should be dedicated for these adult learners, particularly in the satellite locations. These students expressed a preference for in-person help if available. Librarians should make an effort to see that such a service is possible. Undoubtedly, library administration needs to address logistics and staffing issues. However, faced with the data from this study, a good case could be argued at least for a trial in-person help service at the satellite locations. When these adult learners do seek help from a librarian at the "reference desk," whether in-person or online, librarians need to provide students with handouts, guides, or videos, no matter how brief, in addition to reference assistance. Studies²⁰ have shown that these tools will help students better retain the information they are given. Perhaps a combination of online tutorials, webinars, and conferencing coupled with a more aggressive approach to the embedded librarian service (reaching out to non-participating faculty, improving communications with students, using other social networking tools) and other innovative outreach activities would improve the librarian-student relationship to a point where these adult learners would not hesitate to contact the librarian for help. Additionally, follow-ups to reference transactions would be ideal and could help foster positive and collaborative student-librarian relationships.

CONCLUSION

Outreach has played an important role in academic libraries. The desire to attract students to the library and for them to use library resources and services has been a constant battle. And although outreach has become the term used to solve the academic library's many public relations and marketing challenges, what does it really mean to a specific academic library environment or user population? In the above discussion, it is apparent that the proposed solutions for encouraging librarian help seeking among adult learners lie in outreach efforts.

But it is only through the data collected from this study that we were able to pinpoint areas that needed most attention and where our outreach efforts would be most effective.

This study allowed us to gain a sense of why adult learners do not seek help from a librarian, when they would seek help from a librarian and from whom they prefer to seek help first, if needed. The findings affirmed our worst fears regarding the librarian's standing among these adult learners. Distance and age did not really have as much of an impact on the help-seeking behavior of these students as familiarity with "help-givers" (friends/classmates), perceived knowledge of the help-givers (instructors), and last-minute urgency to obtain information or help (librarians). Armed with this information, librarians now have an understanding of what needs to be done to improve relations between these adult learners and librarians.

By taking advantage of a readily available survey tool, we are able to close the gap that existed between merely providing library services we think students want and providing library services that really matter.

AFTERWORD

Since the study in spring 2010, the author, who was the liaison to the Social Work department at the time, attempted to make some headway with outreach efforts by meeting with the program director and determining how best to increase library presence for students in the nontraditional programs. One recommendation was to have a librarian be involved with new student orientations and another was to further promote the Personal Librarian service through embedment in Moodle courseware. This author left Marywood in Spring 2011 and although the existing Personal Librarian service via Moodle was taken up by another librarian at that time, no new outreach efforts had been implemented.

The current Social Work liaison did indicate continued collaborations with program faculty (such as the creation of an assignment on how to write a literature review and traveling to satellite locations for library instruction sessions at their request) and the creation of Research Guides using Lib-Guides. These guides contain specific research tips including video tutorials.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

The above study has raised questions that need further research. For instance, Marywood librarians may want to assess if their Research Guides (LibGuides) are an effective go-to resource and outreach tool for adult learners. Do these students find this resource helpful? Would the helpfulness of this resource increase the tendency for students to seek assistance from a librarian?

Other academic librarians who have introduced outreach efforts for their adult student learners and/or faculty may want to determine how successful these are with regard to

encouraging both students and faculty to seek librarian assistance. Also, it would be beneficial to determine what the help seeking preferences of distance online adult learners are. Are these any different from adult learners in a non-digital environment?

As more academic libraries face a myriad of challenges when providing relevant services to adult learners, it is imperative that we share with each other what strategies work and what do not, particularly as the demand for library services for adult learners are on the rise.

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APPENDIX. LIBRARY HELP-SEEKING SURVEY

1. Survey Agreement							
☐ I approve ☐ I not not approve (PLEASE EXIT/RETU	JRN SURVE	y at this	POINT)				
2. User/Preferences Survey	es Survey Earch help from a librarian via: Strong Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree tes such as Facebook from a librarian because (choose all that apply): tere to go w to contact the library w to yenself and do not need help able asking a librarian for help ecify) p from a librarian if: the the librarian contact with a particular librarian librarian contact with a particular librarian librari						
1. I prefer to seek research help from a librar	rian via:						
	Strong	Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly	Disagree
Personal meeting						, and 3,	
Email							
Texting/online chat							
Moodle course page							
Telephone							
Social Networking sites such as Facebook							
☐ I don't know where to go ☐ I don't know how to contact the library ☐ I can figure it out by myself and do not ☐ I feel uncomfortable asking a librarian ☐ Other (please specify)	need help	I that apply	7):				
3. I will only seek help from a librarian if: ☐ I am familiar with the librarian ☐ I have been in contact with a particular ☐ I have been introduced to a librarian do ☐ I urgently need help with my research/s ☐ Other (please specify)	uring a libra	ry session i	in class				
 4. I usually seek help from a librarian or the □ 0 times during the semester □ 1–5 times per semester □ 6–10 times per semester 	library:						

5. Rank the following according to your preferences. When I do need research help with course work, I would seek help from:

	First	Second	Third	Last
a fellow classmate or friend				
my instructor/professor				
a librarian/library staff				
internet				

☐ more than 10 times per semester

3. Demographics

1.	I am: □ a Scranton program student □ a Scranton Saturday program student □ a Bloomsburg/satellite program student □ a Reading/satellite program student □ an Allentown/satellite program student
2.	I am: ☐ a Full-Time student ☐ a Part-Time student
3.	I am: ☐ a returning student (was a Marywood student in the previous semester) ☐ an incoming or new student
4.	I have: ☐ attended a library instruction session given by a librarian ☐ not attended a library instruction session given by a librarian
5.	I am: □ 18–22 years old □ 23–29 years old □ 30–39 years old □ 40 and over years old
6.	I earned my undergraduate degree: ☐ less than one year ago ☐ 1–3 years ago ☐ 4–6 years ago ☐ 7–10 years ago ☐ more than 10 years ago ☐ Other (please specify)

7. Rate your comfort level with regards to using the computer for the following:

	Very Comfortable	Comfortable	Somewhat Comfortable	Not Comfortable
Word processing				
Internet searching				
Mail				
Researching library resources				
Texting				
Social Networking (such as Facebook, MySpace, etc)				

4. For participants of electronic survey:

If you wish NOT to submit the survey at this point, please EXIT the survey.