

Does Telling Them to Ask for Help Work?

Investigating Library Help-Seeking Behaviors in College Undergraduates

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The article seeks to answer the research question: are students who attend a library instruction session in which they are encouraged to ask for help at the library more likely to do so than students who do not attend such a session, or students who attend a session but are not encouraged to ask for help. The researcher designed a survey, the results of which did not show a statistically significant relationship between students who were encouraged by a librarian to ask for help, and students who did. The survey did, however, show a statistically significant, strong positive relationship between students who were encouraged or required by faculty to ask for assistance and students who did so. Implications of these results for library-based strategies to increase the proportion of students who obtain research help are discussed.

One of the defining characteristics of the academic library is the desire on the part of both the organization and the people who staff it to help students find, access, evaluate, and use information. We have known for a remarkably long time that students do not make as much use as they might of the help that is available to them at their college or university's library, and considerable research has been done on the reasons why, mostly collocated under

the heading "library anxiety."¹ Yet very little is known about what strategies are effective at overcoming library anxiety. The research reported in this article attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of a very simple strategy: librarians, in the course of providing information literacy instruction, encouraging students to ask for help at the library.

Encouraging, even exhorting students to come to the library when they need help is such an obvious tactic and is practiced—with varying degrees of earnestness—on a daily basis in library instruction classrooms around the country. But does it work? Is it sufficient, or are there additional strategies and tactics that instruction librarians could and should be employing to ensure that every student who needs a librarian's help does, in fact, get that help?²

As a small step toward answering these questions, the researcher designed a survey-based study to address a considerably more specific research question: Are students who have attended a library session where they were explicitly encouraged to ask a librarian for help more likely to ask a librarian for help than students who have not attended a library session or who have attended a library session but were not explicitly encouraged to ask a librarian for help?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on help-seeking behaviors outside of library science is deep and well-established. Social workers and especially psychologists have long studied patterns of help-seeking, reasons why people seek help, what barriers prevent people from finding and making use of help that is available to them, and how effectively people can navigate existing structures for obtaining help.³

In the field of higher education in general, Clegg, Bradley, and Smith document the barriers to students seeking help for nonlibrary and nonacademic issues in their undergraduate years and note that these barriers exist for “nontraditional” students as well as traditional, 18–22-year-old students.⁴ Grayson, Miller, and Clarke establish that the phenomenon of students failing to seek help for academic and life issues, even when such help is available through their university, is not limited to the United States but also occurs in the British higher education system.⁵ These are but two notable examples; for an excellent review of the literature of help-seeking behaviors in higher education, see Mary Pillai’s recent study, which discusses the relocation of a learning and study-support center to the library building.⁶

In academic libraries, students’ unwillingness to ask librarians or library staff for help is by no means new. In 2002, Ruppel and Fagan documented an extensive history of patrons not asking for help. Citing studies from 1972 and 1977, they note that “clearly, for three decades, patrons have often chosen not to ask for help because they are or expect to be dissatisfied, embarrassed, or do not believe librarians are ready or willing to help them.”⁷ Carol Kuhlthau’s research on the information search process does not date quite as far back, but clearly establishes the trend in the mid- to late-1980s.⁸ At the time of this writing, then, we can state with some confidence that this has been a known issue for nearly forty years.

What we cannot state with any confidence, however, is whether there is any empirical evidence that a particular intervention or strategy is effective in improving the situation and encouraging users of academic libraries—especially students—to consult librarians or library staff when they need research help. Writing for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Barbara Fister links students’ unwillingness to ask for help to the well-documented concept of library anxiety.⁹ Judith Siess, in a reflection on Fister’s piece, compiles commentary and suggestions from other librarians on how to address library anxiety and encourage students to seek help from librarians and library staff, but both articles are essentially opinion—expert opinion, to be sure—and not evidence-based.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Mary Whisner uses an analogy with drivers who won’t stop and ask for directions to elicit some suggestions for how to make it easier for students to ask for help, or to help those who don’t ask.¹¹ While her suggestions are clearly informed by a wealth of professional experience, she cites no research evidence to establish their effectiveness.

Karen Sobel has published the only study so far that attempts to evaluate the relationship between factors that may

influence students to ask librarians for help.¹² She found that among the factors over which librarians have some control, “librarian mentioned it during a class visit to the library” was the most frequently cited reason why students sought help at the reference desk. The relationship between students who were encouraged to ask for help and those who did was statistically significant at the $p = 0.005$ level. However, her study had two important limitations: First, the sample population was limited to first-year students in their first two to three weeks of college. Students at this stage in their undergraduate careers are still finding their footing both on campus and academically, so they may not be a reliable population from which to generalize trends about undergraduate behavior as a whole. Second, and more importantly, “librarian mentioned it during a class visit to the library” was cited by only 8.4 percent of students as a reason why they asked for help, and nearly twice as many (16.5 percent) cited “required by professor/TA” as a reason why they asked for help.¹³ While the recommendation by a librarian might have been the second most-cited reason, after a recommendation by the faculty, it still accounts for a very small percentage of students. Therefore, even though this previous study duplicates some aspects of the research being reported here, it has important limitations, and her conclusion that library instruction is an effective method of promoting reference services seems not to be strongly supported by the evidence, given the very small percentage of students who claimed to be influenced by librarians.

While there may not be evidence to indicate which strategies are more or less effective at encouraging users to ask for help, we do have evidence on aspects of library use that are related to help-seeking behaviors. In particular, evidence from recent studies indicates that academic library users prefer face-to-face reference service over various forms of virtual reference, including synchronous chat, social networks, and e-mail. In 2008, for example, Granfield and Robertson documented that both users who come to the reference desk and users who consult virtual reference services ranked the in-person reference desk as their highest-rated preference for obtaining help. In a follow-up focus group, participants who used virtual reference services “see the reference desk as the premier reference service offered by their libraries and . . . see the face-to-face personal encounter with a staff member as desirable.”¹⁴

Even more recently, Ismail echoed Granfield and Robertson’s conclusions, demonstrating that traditional-aged undergraduates (frequently presumed to be the most desirous of virtual reference interaction) preferred not to ask librarians for assistance via instant messaging, course management systems, or social networks (Facebook or MySpace). These students had only a slight positive preference for e-mail.¹⁵ Similarly, Nicholas Taylor has demonstrated that more than 90 percent of the students at his small liberal arts college preferred face-to-face reference as their first choice for research help, and in a study of first-year undergraduates at a large state university, Karen Sobel found that more than two-thirds (69 percent) preferred face-to-face help over phone, e-mail, and synchronous chat.¹⁶

Taylor also established that a large majority (almost 70

percent) of students stated that they were “comfortable” asking a librarian for assistance.¹⁷ It is worth noting, however, that students’ stated degree of comfort with a behavior does not necessarily mean that they actually engage in that behavior; documenting that students are comfortable asking librarians for assistance does not mean that they actually do. And finally, thanks to the extensive ethnographic research being conducted by Project Information Literacy at the University of Washington’s iSchool, we now have very recent and thorough evidence that librarians are among the *least* frequently consulted resources that undergraduate students—at all kinds of institutions of higher education—use when doing course-related research. In Head and Eisenberg’s 2009 report, librarians were ranked next-to-last by students, after instructors, classmates, friends, and many other potential sources of information.¹⁸ This is not a trend that is limited to the twenty-first-century Internet age, either; ten years earlier, in a 1999 study, Barbara Valentine found that “only one third of the students mentioned asking a librarian or other library staff person for help in the library,” and that students tend to seek help from more personal sources, including friends, family, and other students in their classes.¹⁹

The lack of published research on effective strategies for encouraging library users, especially those in academic libraries, to consult with librarians or library staff for help in the research process was one of the major inspirations for the study currently being presented. Until librarians know more about which strategies and interventions are effective, we are in danger of wasting time and resources on approaches that won’t work, or worse, doing nothing and continuing our gradual slide into irrelevance.

METHODS

To determine whether encouraging students to ask for help resulted in students actually asking for help, the researcher designed a survey that was administered to students at Saint Mary’s College, a small Catholic women’s liberal arts college in northern Indiana. For the purposes of this research, it is important to specify that Saint Mary’s College does not, at the time of this writing, have a required course in the general education program where information literacy instruction occurs, so students learn to use the library and gain information literacy skills in a somewhat haphazard fashion. Many students encounter library instruction in their early years at the college, but because of the vagaries of the curriculum, some make it to their junior or senior years without any library instruction, and occasionally without any assignments requiring library research.

The two essential questions on the survey were “have you ever asked a librarian at Saint Mary’s College for help with library research (in person, by phone, by e-mail, via online chat, etc.)?” and, if the student answered “yes” to a question asking if she had attended a library instruction session, “did any of the librarian(s) who met with your class(es) encourage you to ask for help at the library?” The hypothesis was that

there would be a statistically significant relationship between students who answered “yes” to both questions, thereby offering evidence that encouraging students to ask for help actually works, and results in greater numbers of students asking for—and getting—help from librarians.

The question about whether the student had ever asked a librarian for help was deliberately placed first on the survey, followed by the questions about whether a librarian had encouraged her to ask for help, in an attempt to get the least biased survey responses possible. It was felt that if the questions were reversed, respondents might perceive that they *should* have asked for help, and thus be more likely to claim erroneously that they had.

In addition to these two essential questions, the survey also contained several open-ended questions designed to help the library staff improve their service to students, two questions about students’ class years (sophomore, junior, etc.) and the number of research assignments they had completed, and most importantly, a question asking whether a faculty member had ever encouraged or required the student to ask a librarian for help with a research project. (A copy of the text of the survey is included in the appendix.)

The survey was administered to all current sophomores, juniors, and seniors at the college during the first two weeks of October, 2010. First-year students were excluded from the sample because it was decided that they had not been in college long enough to have completed a significant number of research assignments (if any). The total survey population was 1,199, and 384 valid responses were received, a response rate of 32 percent. As an incentive to participate, students who completed the survey were offered the opportunity to enter into a drawing for several gift cards to a popular coffee shop.

The research design, survey, and consent form were approved by the Saint Mary’s College Institutional Review Board for research with human subjects, and the survey was administered online, with the invaluable assistance of the college’s office of Institutional Research. Institutional Research staff implemented the survey with an online survey tool (Snap, www.snapsurveys.com), handled the drawing for the gift cards, and maintained confidentiality of all records. The identities of survey participants and drawing winners were concealed from the researcher at all stages of the research process.

The online survey tool used by Institutional Research is linked to the college’s enrollment records, so it ensured that every non-first-year student was contacted via e-mail at her official college e-mail account, regarding the survey. In addition, the tool assigns each student a unique URL for the link to the survey, so it can track which students have completed the survey and which have not. Several reminders were sent to students who had not yet completed the survey. While it is impossible to know whether the students who responded were broadly representative of the student body as a whole, or whether the responses included disproportionate numbers of students who had already had positive experiences with the library, the thoroughness of the distribution and the high response rate encourage confidence in the reliability of the survey results.

At the conclusion of the survey, Institutional Research staff removed students' identifying information (e-mail addresses, which were used to administer the drawing) from the data and provided a preliminary statistical analysis using SPSS.

RESULTS

The survey results for the four essential questions on the survey are presented in table 1. As indicated in the table, a large majority of respondents (70 percent) had, at some point, asked a librarian for help, and an overwhelming majority of those who had attended library instruction sessions (97 percent) had been encouraged by a librarian to ask for help. A smaller, but still large, majority of respondents (83 percent) had been encouraged by faculty to ask for help. These strongly positive responses indicate a healthy library instruction and reference program.

When the responses to "Did a librarian encourage you to ask for help?" were cross-tabulated with the responses to "have you ever asked a librarian for help?" (see table 2) to determine whether a relationship existed between the responses to the two questions, there was not a statistically significant relationship at the level of $p \leq 0.05$. However, as table 2 shows, two of the squares in the table had fewer than 5 responses, which may have impaired the ability of the results to demonstrate statistical significance. It is possible that, with a larger sample size and more "no" responses to both questions, a statistically significant relationship could be established.

A similar cross-tabulation also was performed between "Did a faculty member encourage you to ask for help?" and "have you ever asked a librarian for help?" (see table 3). Unlike the previous cross-tabulation (which is, in fact, the central research question of the present study), the relationship between these two questions is statistically significant at the level of $p \leq 0.001$. It would appear, therefore, that students who are encouraged by a faculty member to ask a librarian for help with research are significantly more likely to do so than those who are not.

Finally, the responses to the question that asked how many research assignments a student had completed were cross-tabulated with the responses to the question regarding asking for help (see table 4). This comparison produced an interesting result: students who had not completed any research assignments were, unsurprisingly, less likely to have asked for help; students who had completed one to three research assignments were as likely to have asked for help as might otherwise have been expected; and students who had completed four or more research assignments were considerably more likely to have asked for help than might be expected. These relationships were statistically significant at the level of $p \leq 0.001$.

What makes these results interesting is not that students who had completed more research assignments were more likely to have asked for help; that is a perfectly logical and expected result. Rather, what is intriguing is that the increased likelihood to ask for assistance only appears after the student

Table 1. Survey Responses to Four Essential Questions

Question	Yes	No
Have you ever asked a librarian at Saint Mary's College for help with library research (in person, by phone, by e-mail, via online chat, etc.)?	270 (70%)	114 (30%)
Have you ever attended a library instruction session?	310 (81%)	74 (19%)
Did any of the librarian(s) who met with your class(es) encourage you to ask for help at the library?	302 (97%)	8 (3%)
Has a faculty member ever encouraged or required you to ask a librarian for help with a research project or assignment?	315 (83%)	65 (17%)

Table 2. Cross-tabulation between "encouraged by a librarian to ask for help" and "asked for help"

		Did a librarian encourage you to ask for help?	
		Yes	No
Have you ever asked a librarian for help?	Yes	216 (214.3)	4 (5.7)
	No	86 (87.7)	4 (2.3)

Numbers in parentheses are expected counts.

Chi square = 1.752, with $df = 1$. Chi square must be > 3.841 for $p \leq 0.05$ with $df = 1$.

Table 3. Cross-tabulation between "encouraged by faculty to ask for help" and "asked for help"

		Did a faculty member encourage you to ask for help?	
		Yes	No
Have you ever asked a librarian for help?	Yes	234 (220.5)	32 (45.5)
	No	81 (94.5)	33 (19.5)

Numbers in parentheses are expected counts.

Chi square = 16.107, with $df = 1$. Chi square must be > 10.83 for $p \leq 0.001$ with $df = 1$.

completes her first few research assignments. It is almost as if students have to attempt several research projects on their own, as a kind of rite of passage, before discovering—whether intentionally or not—librarians' ability to offer useful help.

DISCUSSION

The central hypothesis of the research reported here was that students who had been encouraged by a librarian during a library instruction session to ask for help at the library as they

Table 4. Cross-tabulation between “Number of Research Assignments” and “Asked for Help”

		How many research assignments have you completed?		
		None	1–3	4 or More
Have you ever asked a librarian for help?	Yes	7 (18.3)	140 (141.3)	123 (110.4)
	No	19 (7.7)	61 (59.7)	34 (46.6)

Numbers in parentheses are expected counts. Chi square = 28.343, with df = 2. Chi square must be >13.82 for $p \leq 0.001$ with df = 2.

were doing their research would be more likely to do so than students who hadn't: in other words, that encouraging students to ask for help works. The results of the survey did not support that hypothesis within the bounds of statistical significance. The results did show, however, that the opposite effect does not occur: students were not less likely to ask for help if they had been encouraged to do so. At the very least, then, encouraging students to ask for help doesn't do any harm. It is not, however, a sufficient strategy to address the problem of students not getting the help they need to do academic research.

If, on the one hand, librarians have little influence with undergraduate students, the teaching faculty, on the other hand, have a great deal of influence. The very strong relationship between students who were encouraged by faculty to seek help, and those who actually did so, underscores Project Information Literacy's conclusions that the teaching faculty, unsurprisingly, have far more influence with undergraduates than librarians.²⁰ The strong statistical significance of this relationship also correlates with what Karen Sobel found to be the most common reason why students sought help at the library: their instructors required it.²¹

Where does this leave librarians, then? If simply encouraging students to ask for help is insufficient, what other strategies might we employ to ensure that every student who needs it can benefit from our assistance and guidance? The evidence presented here suggests that a far more effective way to influence students' behavior is via the teaching faculty. Although the results of the survey showed that a large majority of our students had in fact been encouraged by faculty to ask for help at the library, it may nevertheless be useful and effective for librarians to communicate more explicitly with faculty. They need to hear that students listen to *them*, and not necessarily to librarians, when it comes to strategies for academic research.

Qualitative Data

In addition to the essential, quantitative questions discussed above, the survey also contained two free-response questions, designed to elicit information to help the librarians and staff at Saint Mary's College improve their service to students. The

answers to these questions also offer suggestions for additional strategies to reach students, beyond pleading with the teaching faculty to send their students to us for help.

The second of these two questions, “What would make it easier for you to ask a librarian for help?” specifically addressed the issue of students' not taking advantage of librarians' assistance. While the majority of the answers to this question indicated that students were satisfied with the services provided to them (responses such as “I already think it is pretty easy and accessible,” “Nothing, it's wonderful!” and “They are already easy to approach”) several themes emerged that indicated potential strategies for the library to use in making our services more available to students.

One common theme was the perceived approachability and accessibility of the reference librarians. Students commented that they would like the librarians to be more “approachable,” though they did not specify precisely what they meant by that. Students also noted their perception that the librarians should be out at the reference desk rather than in their offices; the fact that the reference desk was staffed from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily and from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Sundays apparently did not register with these students. There also was the perennial request for more librarians and extended reference hours, and several students suggested, in so many words, the practice of “roving reference.”²² More significantly, though, students noted issues of signage and wayfinding: the reference desk is currently unlabeled, except for a small nameplate with the name of the librarian currently on duty. One student even suggested friendly language for a possible sign, along the lines of “Ask me for help!” A temporary sign of that sort has been installed, and the library may soon be investigating better ways of identifying the reference desk.

A second theme that the students identified was the need for a personal connection with at least one librarian. One student even commented, “I talked to a librarian about information for an Art History paper, and he was immensely helpful. . . . Since my positive experience with him, I have not been intimidated to ask another librarian for help.” Several students suggested posting a list of librarians, possibly with photos, and including an indication of each librarian's subject specialties. The librarians are just beginning to move in the direction of developing a program of subject and departmental liaisons; this information from our students will help us understand the importance of such a program for supporting even such basic services as general reference and research assistance.

The other open-ended question, “If you've ever asked a librarian for help, did you get useful help? How was or wasn't it useful?” produced 244 affirmative responses, 4 negative responses, and 16 ambiguous responses. These responses, combined with the majority of positive responses to the question about how to make asking for help easier, suggest that reference and research assistance services at the Cushwa-Leighton Library at Saint Mary's College are healthy and successful. Even the healthiest program has room for improvement, however, and the results of this study suggest that one effective way to increase the likelihood that students in need of assistance will

ask for it is to impress upon the teaching faculty the fact that students pay much closer attention to their recommendations than to the librarians.' Other campus-specific suggestions, such as improving the visibility and approachability of the librarians and developing a subject liaison program, also were suggested by the qualitative data obtained through the study.

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APPENDIX. COMPLETE TEXT OF SURVEY

- Have you ever asked a librarian at Saint Mary's College for help with library research (in person, by phone, by e-mail, via online chat, etc.)?
 - Yes
 - No
- For the purposes of this survey, a "library instruction session" is when a librarian meets with your class, either in the library or in your regular classroom, to teach you how to use library resources, either for a specific assignment or just in general. Have you ever attended a library instruction session?
 - Yes
 - No
- [If the answer to #2 is Yes]: Did any of the librarian(s) who met with your class(es) encourage you to ask for help at the library?
 - Yes
 - No
- Has a faculty member ever encouraged or required you to ask a librarian for help with a research project or assignment?
 - Yes
 - No
- How many assignments that require library research (research papers, etc.) have you completed at Saint Mary's?
 - None
 - 1–3
 - 4 or more
- What class are you in?
 - 2011 (senior)
 - 2012 (junior)
 - 2013 (sophomore)
- If you've ever asked a librarian for help, did you get useful help? How was or wasn't it useful?
 - [free-response answer]
- If you haven't asked a librarian for help, why not? (multiple responses possible)
 - I haven't needed help.
 - A librarian wasn't available when I needed help.
 - I prefer to ask other people (my professors, my friends, etc.) for help.
 - Other: [free-response answer]
- What would make it easier for you to ask a librarian for help?
 - [free-response answer]