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Assessing the Library: A Christian Liberal Arts College's Library-Wide Assessment Project



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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a library-wide assessment project at Spring Arbor University's White Library. It highlights the methods used to assess each element, along with a recap of the findings, and a section covering the successes and caveats. The library's website was evaluated using a focus group strategy where users completed a set of tasks using the website. The physical space was evaluated using a whiteboard approach. The freshman research instruction program at the White Library consists of one and two shot library sessions. The current teaching approach was assessed using "muddiest point cards" along with surveys.

Introduction

Assessment has been a point of interest for academic libraries, especially in the more recent years. As enrollment numbers continue to decline nationwide, it is more important than ever to prove the library's value to the institution. The recent *Condition of Education* report updated in May 2018 indicates that "while total undergraduate enrollment increased by 37 percent between 2000 and 2010, enrollment decreased by 7 percent from 2010 and 2016" (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). Many institutions rely on increased enrollment to keep up with rising costs. As costs increase, it is vital that librarians are proactive in finding ways to prove their value to administration. When the library is a valuable asset to administration, it is more likely to be a priority during the budget allocation process. One of the most effective ways to highlight your library's value is to provide documented assessment data. Creating an active and continuous culture of assessment is the best way to show the results and benefits of the work that you are doing in your library. It also provides you with information that you can use to make decisions about improvements or changes that need to be made.

Planning

Spring Arbor University is a small, Christian liberal arts college in south-central Michigan. The White Library has 4 faculty librarians, 4 professional staff members and a varying number of student workers. During the fall 2016 semester, the White Library conducted a library-wide assessment project.

The planning for the project started in the fall of 2015, almost a year before the assessment itself. The library director asked me to lead an ongoing assessment program for our library that would give us data on our information literacy program, our physical space, and our virtual space. I initiated the process by completing an extensive review of library assessment research (see reference list). I identified budget-friendly assessment methodologies that made the most sense for each area of our library assessment project. This process involved reading articles, reports, and books on assessment strategy published by other libraries of our size, looking for similarities and differences in those methodologies, and then synthesizing the methods to present as options to the other librarians involved in the project. Content published by larger libraries proved valuable when it came to learning about planning and strategy, but many of the assessment practices used were too costly to implement. It was key to find methods that had already been tested and published at comparable institutions in order to avoid repeating mistakes. Once I had some material to share, I presented it to the other three faculty librarians (director included) and we set aside several meeting times to continue our discussion, determine a timeline for the project, and divide responsibilities. After a few meetings, we decided to assess our freshman information literacy program. This program consists of two 1-1/2 hour-long instruction sessions. The students completed a pre-session electronic survey and an end of the semester electronic survey. We also included a “muddiest point” notecard assessment practice into each final session (discussed in detail below). The space assessment of the physical building consisted of using a moveable white board and strategically placing it in high traffic areas on each floor of the library to get feedback on what our users wanted from the space. Finally, we decided to use a combination approach, which involved selecting small groups of random library users at three different times of the day and asking them to complete basic tasks using the library’s website. Two librarians recorded observational notes and one librarian read the questions aloud. We also had the participants complete short pre-surveys and post-surveys. Once the strategies were determined, all participating librarians had to undergo IRB training. After the training was complete, an application was compiled and submitted to Spring Arbor University’s IRB committee. IRB approval was an important step in being able to share the results of this data outside of our own institution.

Information Literacy Instruction Program Assessment Methodology

At Spring Arbor University, all students in the introductory English course (ENG 104) are required to attend a library instruction session. In past years, we have used only pre-session and post-session surveys as an assessment strategy. However, with the new program we wanted to get more data to see what students reactions (both positive and negative) were to the sessions. We also sent out the post-session surveys at the end of the semester, rather than immediately after the session ended. The purpose behind this method was to see if students retained the information longer.

Prior to the first session, we emailed the English 104 instructors the link to the Survey Monkey pre-session survey and they sent it out to the students. We also asked them to require students to complete it prior to attending the first session. Then, at the beginning of the first session, librarians had students fill out informed consent forms and we told them a little bit about the research that we were conducting. We did not have any students object to participating, so we were able to include all student responses in our results. We proceeded to conduct our class sessions as normal. At the end of the second session, we explained the “muddiest point” assessment notecards and had students write out one thing that they felt was positive about the sessions and one thing that they felt could be improved or that they were still confused about.

We compiled the results and then the week before final exams we contacted all of the English 104 instructors and had them send their students a link to a post session survey. There was roughly 1-2 months (depending on the session time) between the final session and the post survey. Our information literacy instruction librarian tracks the number of students in each class that we teach. Her statistics show that 177 students received library instruction in English 104. Of that 177, 135 students completed the pre-session survey and 89 completed the post-session survey. This is a 76% response rate for the pre-session survey and a 50% response rate for the post-session survey.

Using the electronic survey software, Survey Monkey, compiling and analyzing the results from the pre- and post-session surveys was simple. Analyzing the results from the “muddiest point” assessment cards was more challenging. First, I read every card (front and back) and separated them into four groups (one for each librarian). From there, I created categories based on the type of content in the responses. I grouped the cards based on the appropriate corresponding categories and then I inputted the data into an Excel spreadsheet. The software made it simple to create charts and graphs showing the various categories and their percentages. Categories were slightly different for each librarian. See Figure 1 and Figure 2, showing the positive student trends (combined results) and the muddiest points recorded (combined results).

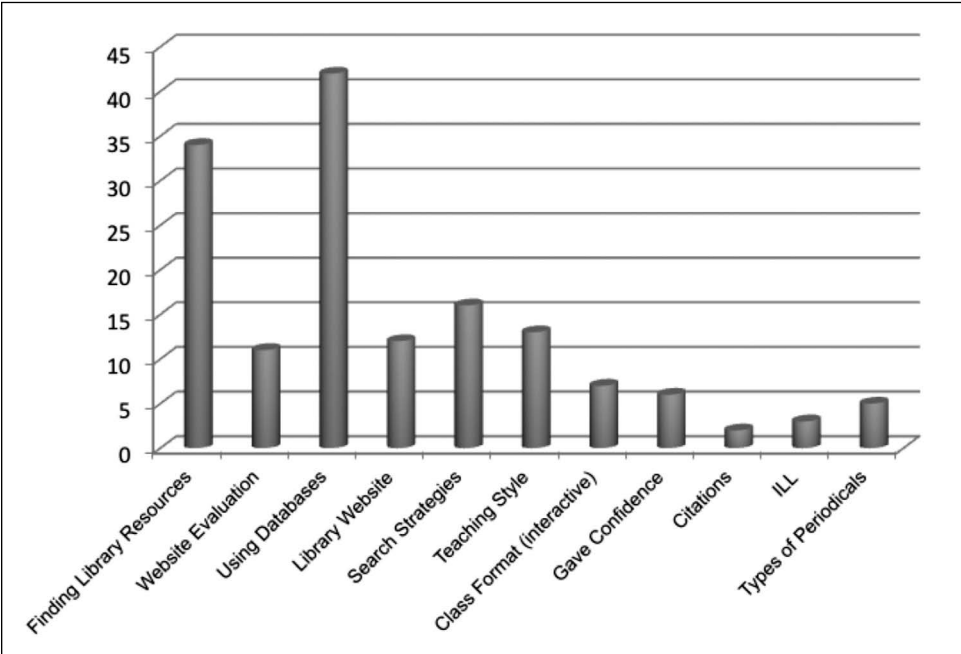


Figure 1. Combined positive trends.

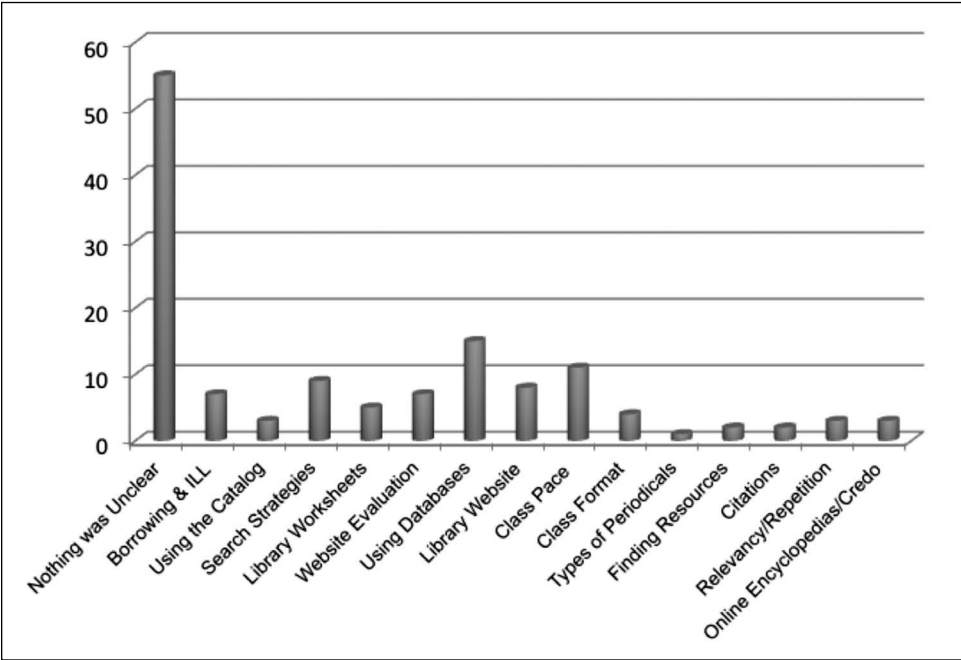


Figure 2. Combined muddiest points.

Information Literacy Instruction Assessment Results

Forty-two out of the 151 positive responses (28%) indicated that students left feeling as if they could better understand how to use library databases and resources. There were 135 responses on the “muddiest point” side of the card. Of those 135 responses, 55 (or 41%) indicated that nothing that was covered was unclear to them. However, there were still some students who were still feeling unsure of how to use the library's databases and some that felt that the class pace was too fast and/or there was too much information or too much work required. Those students left feeling overwhelmed.

In addition to the “muddiest point” assessment cards, we also used pre- and post-session surveys using Survey Monkey software. The 10-question pre-session survey was emailed to all ENG 104 instructors and was intended to be completed by students before coming to their scheduled session. The results (see appendix) of the survey indicated that 68% of students came from a public high school, 20% from a private school, 8% from a charter school, and 10% were homeschooled. Almost half (48%) said that their high school library had databases. However, more than half (57%) never used their library's databases. Despite almost half of the students having had access to library databases, an alarming 77% stated that they used Google/Internet for sources in high school. Twenty percent of students polled said that if they were required to use a library for research, they feel knowledgeable enough to do so. However, the majority, 54%, said that they feel somewhat knowledgeable when it comes to using the library for research. When asked about how students felt regarding the impending library session, 42% were concerned that it would be too complicated, 35% thought it would be boring, 37% felt like they already knew most of what was going to be taught, and 6% felt like it would be a waste of time.

The post session survey, administered via email from the ENG 104 instructor at the end of the semester, asked students to select the correct responses from a list of criteria describing databases (both true and false criteria were listed). Most students chose correctly. However, 39% selected the incorrect response stating, “a library database searches the entire web.” This incorrect response seems to support the “muddiest point” assessment card data, which showed that several students were still unsure of how to use the library's databases. Most students correctly answered the post survey question to identify whether a sample citation was from a book, journal article, and web site. More than half (59%) of the students felt that their instruction session was “somewhat helpful.” A smaller number, 33%, felt that their session was “very helpful” and only 3% felt it was not helpful at all (another 3% did not specify).

It was refreshing to hear that 59% of students reported that they will “frequently” use the Omni-File Full Text Select (the database that was used for demonstration during the session) or another library database instead of Google in their next year

at Spring Arbor University. Another surprising response was that almost half (46%) of the students stated that the information that they learned during their session was “new” to them. Since the pre-session survey indicated that 37% of students felt like they already knew what would be taught in the session, it was interesting to see how many ended up learning information that was “new” to them. Finally, what was most refreshing to see in the post-session survey was that 47% of students said that they would be “somewhat likely” to ask a librarian for assistance if they were having difficulty with research. Another 47% said that they would be “very likely” to ask for help with research if they were struggling. This showed us that we are successful in our efforts to get students more comfortable asking academic libraries for research help.

Information Literacy Instruction Assessment Caveats

This data showed the points of concern that our students had and it also showed things that resonated well with our students. However, there are some flaws with the results that need to be pointed out. Not all of the class sessions were identical. Each librarian taught the class with their own unique spin on the material. There were also issues with consistency related to how the in class activity on website evaluation was taught. Some librarians ran out of time and had to alter the activity or completely leave it out. The omission of this activity likely skewed the results. Another point of concern was how each librarian instructed the students to fill out the “muddiest point” assessment cards. Some librarians asked students to write one positive thing that they got out of the class on one side of the card and one thing that could have been improved on the other, related only to the content that was covered. Other librarians asked students to write one positive thing that they got out of the class on one side of the card and one thing that could have been improved on the other side of the card, related to the content or the teaching style. This made it difficult to categorize the results and compare them accurately. It also explains the lack of data on teaching style for each librarian. In future assessments we will be sure to write the directions down and read them aloud, so that we are consistent across classes.

Website Usability Testing Assessment Methodology

In order to assess our library's virtual space, we decided to randomly select students on different floors of the library during three different times of the day to complete a brief (20 minute) series of tasks using the library's website. We tried to get a mixture of underclassmen and upperclassmen so that we could get a range of skillsets. However, we were not strict about making sure we had an even ratio; we chose willing participants. We offered a free beverage of any kind from the coffee shop in the library to all participants during the morning session. For the lunch and dinnertime participants, we offered free pizza. There were 18 participants (6 for each session) total between the 3 sessions.

Our strategy for selecting participants was simple. We walked around the library and announced in sections that were populated heavily with students that we had free specialty coffee beverages (for the morning group) or free pizza (for the lunch and dinnertime groups) for anyone who wanted to take up to 20 minutes to complete a few tasks using the library's website. We did not have difficulty finding willing participants.

Once the students were seated in the quiet computer lab on the library's first floor, we went over the study details and asked them all to sign informed consent forms. Everyone obliged. One librarian read the instructions and questions aloud and I and a third librarian used observational note sheets to write down detailed notes on how the participants completed each required task. We each observed three students at a time. Each participant started by completing a short four question pre-survey. The questions were basic and asked students about their status as an underclassmen or upperclassmen and about their familiarity with the library's website. Then participants were asked to complete 11 tasks using the library's website, while we recorded our observations. At the end, we asked them to respond to five post questions to gauge their experience and reactions to completing the tasks.

Website Usability Testing Assessment Results

Our focus group participants were mostly upperclassmen, with only 2 of the 18 participants identifying themselves as "underclassmen." According to our pre-test questions, most participants felt that they were at a level 3 on a scale indicating familiarity from 1-5 (5 being the most familiar and 1 being not familiar at all) with our website. Several also identified with being at a 4 out of 5 on that scale, signifying that they were slightly more familiar with the website. When asked about any pre-existing notions about navigating through the library's website, most participants felt that it was easy to use and accessible. Although, a large percentage also felt unsure about navigating the website or they felt like they didn't use the website often enough to navigate it. Only two participants felt that the website was difficult to use or confusing.

The pre-test also indicated that about half of the participants were very comfortable using the library's website to conduct research. Several participants did not feel comfortable using the website and a few felt somewhat comfortable. It is interesting that about half felt very comfortable but then the second highest category of responses was that participants felt not comfortable using the website for research. The fewest number of responses fell into that middle category, "somewhat comfortable."

After the study, the post-test indicated that most participants felt that the website was easy to use and navigate (most selected a 4 or 5, with 5 being easiest to use). About half of the participants felt that it was very easy for them to find scholarly journal

articles on our website. A large majority of participants felt that it was very easy or easy to find the library’s databases where they are broken down by subject. Finally, a large majority found it to be very easy to find information about our policies on the website.

The observational data was written out in boxes divided by question number and then response notes were assigned to a category of “completed task quickly with no hesitation,” “completed task fairly quickly with minimal hesitation,” “completed the task with significant hesitation,” “unable to complete task,” or “experienced technical difficulties.” Some examples of technical difficulties include web browsers not loading pages in a timely manner or error messages related to browsers being outdated. The observational data confirmed what was found in the post-test; that a large majority of participants could find where our subject specific databases were located without any issue. Participants were able to find our contact information as well as information about the archives, printing policies, reserve a study room, find citation help, get help from a librarian, and find information about the teacher education workroom. The biggest area of concern was locating video tutorials. Half of the participants were unable to complete the task of finding our video tutorial on how to distinguish between scholarly, popular, trade, and news articles. Most of the others completed this task, but with significant hesitation (see Figure 3).

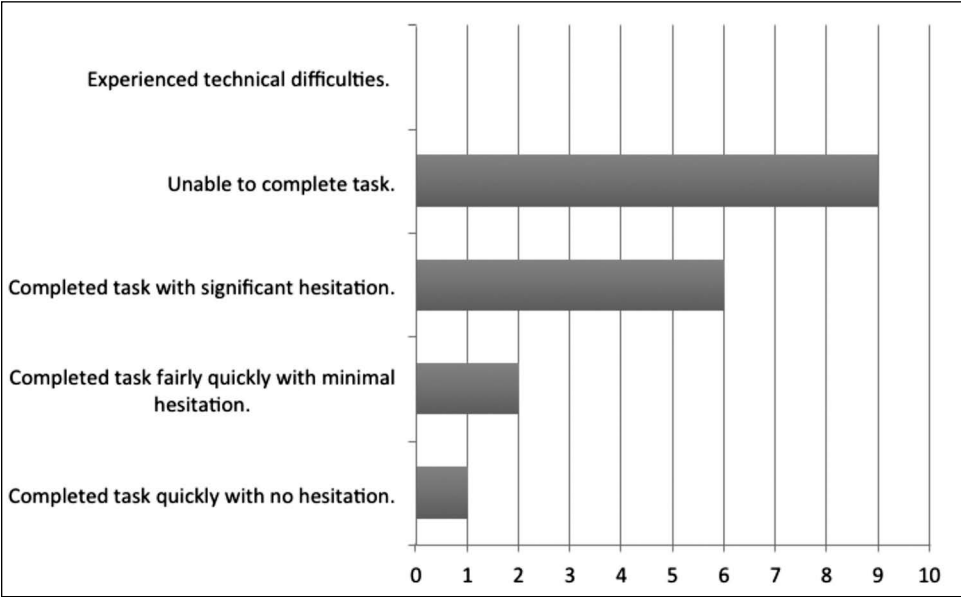


Figure 3. Number of participants who were unable to locate a video tutorial on our website.

Website Usability Testing Assessment Caveats

There were a couple of caveats associated with our website usability testing. Although the selection of participants was random, our pool was limited because we recruited students who were already in the library, making the likelihood that they were already active library users higher. Therefore, they might have already been more familiar with the library's resources and website, which could have affected their completion of the required tasks. There may also have been inconsistencies between my observational data notetaking methods and my colleague's methods. We discussed beforehand how we should categorize and rate the task completion, but there were still individual differences.

Library Space Assessment Methodology

The library's physical space was assessed using a moveable whiteboard methodology. For three weeks we placed a medium sized moveable whiteboard in high traffic areas around the library. The whiteboard spent one week on each floor. A sign was placed on the board that said "The library wants your feedback! On the _____ floor ... What do you love? What would you change?" The blank was replaced with whichever level of the library the whiteboard was on for the week. Markers were placed near the whiteboard so that users could easily add their comments. When the board began to look full, a photo was taken of it so that comments could be recorded, and then it was wiped clean so that more users could add their thoughts. Once the three weeks were up, comments were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet, organized by floor with a section for "positive comments" and "suggestions."

Library Space Assessment Results

The positive comments from the space assessment were valuable because they showed us that what users really like about our library isn't necessarily the space itself, but the staff, faculty, and students who work there. Most of the positive comments were about interactions with specific library workers. Suggestions on the main level, where most of our computers are located, focused on faster computers and more comfortable seating. Upstairs and downstairs suggestions were also focused on adding more comfortable seating. There is currently a coffee shop which also serves muffins, bagels, and donuts on certain days of the week on the main floor. However, there were several suggestions for food carts or a café to be added to the library.

Library Space Assessment Caveats

The comments were anonymous and there was no way to know if the same people were commenting repeatedly or if we were getting a range of responses. In addition, because the comments were open-ended, there were many that were humorous

rather than serious. However, aside from some of the non-serious comments, we were able to learn more about what are users like about our space and what they are hoping to see changed or added in the space.

Conclusions and Recommendations

An analysis of the data from the assessment project helped give us ideas for improvement in each area that we evaluated. We have made some changes as a result of the assessment (see appropriate sections above). The instruction assessment showed that 11% of students felt unclear about how to use databases and 8% felt there was too much information to learn. As a result, we are working to develop more concise ways to help students understand how to use library resources while still providing the in-depth content that students need in order to be successful researchers.

The biggest issue with the website usability focus group assessment was the difficulty that users had with finding specific how-to video tutorials on our site. To organize our research guides and add video tutorials to related guides (rather than on the tutorials page), we have purchased a LibGuides subscription. The guides are nearly ready to launch on our website. The video tutorials will be reorganized and housed on the related section of each guide(s). We are also considering having a “How To” LibGuide, which organizes all of our videos according to task. We suspect that this will make finding our video tutorials slightly easier. Once the guides launch, we will do another usability study similar to this, to see if we have resolved the problem.

The simplest change that we made in response to the space assessment was adding additional comfortable seating. Students commented on the whiteboards that they liked our oversized bean bag chairs and so we ordered more bean bag chairs for our upstairs quiet floor. Students have been using them frequently and they get moved around upstairs in front of different windows and inside cozy nooks. This space assessment provided great feedback and was easy to do with little to no budget. We plan to continue this method of assessment every few years. †

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy James is the Director of Library Services at Spring Arbor University. She can be contacted at amy.james@arbor.edu.

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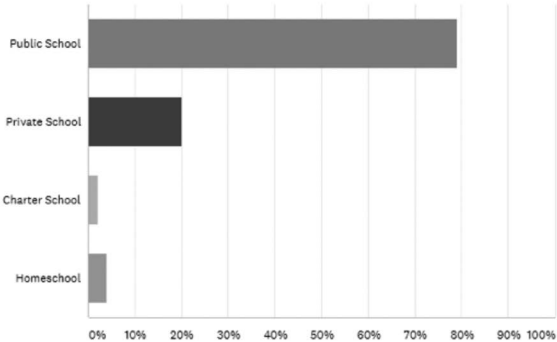
APPENDIX: PRE-SESSION SURVEY DATA

Q1

Customize Save As

Did you attend...

Answered: 100 Skipped: 751



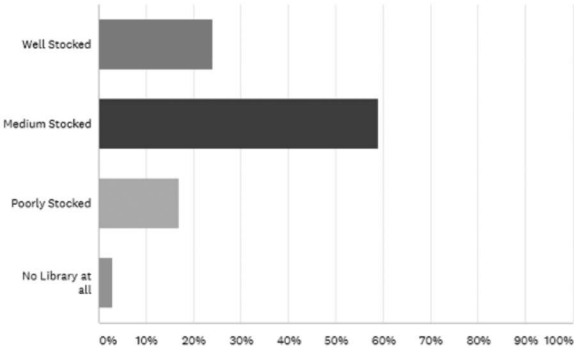
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Public School	79.00%79
Private School	20.00%20
Charter School	2.00%2
Homeschool	4.00%4

Q2

Customize Save As

Was your school library...

Answered: 100 Skipped: 751



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Well Stocked	24.00%24
Medium Stocked	59.00%59
Poorly Stocked	17.00%17
No Library at all	3.00%3

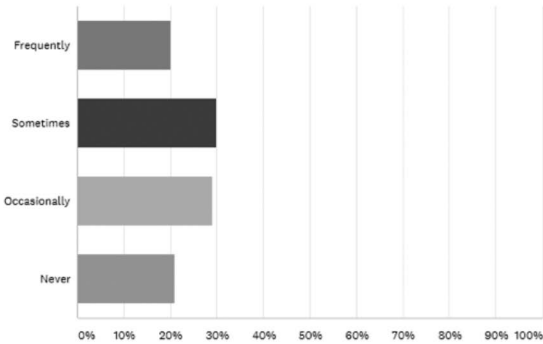
Q3

Customize

Save As ▼

Did you receive library/research instruction?

Answered: 100 Skipped: 751



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Frequently	20.00%	20
▼ Sometimes	30.00%	30
▼ Occasionally	29.00%	29
▼ Never	21.00%	21
Total Respondents: 100		

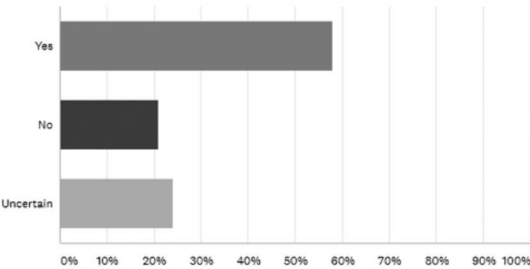
Q4

Customize

Save As ▼

Did your library have databases?

Answered: 100 Skipped: 751



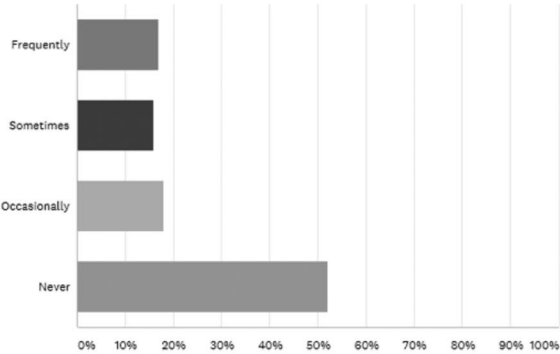
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Yes	58.00%	58
▼ No	21.00%	21
▼ Uncertain	24.00%	24
Total Respondents: 100		

Q5

Customize Save As

Did you use your library's databases?

Answered: 100 Skipped: 751



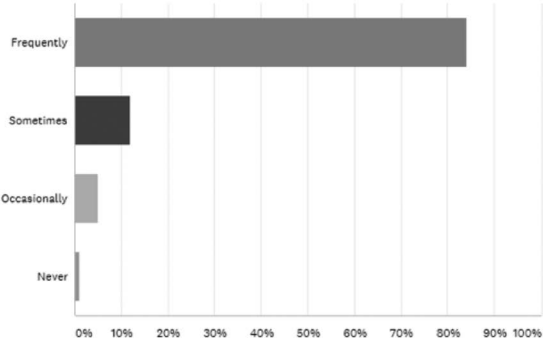
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Frequently	17.00%17
Sometimes	16.00%16
Occasionally	18.00%18
Never	52.00%52
Total Respondents: 100	

Q6

Customize Save As

How often did you use Google/Internet for sources?

Answered: 100 Skipped: 751



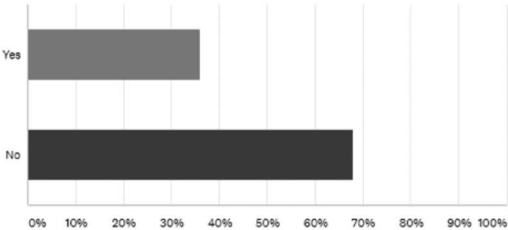
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Frequently	84.00%84
Sometimes	12.00%12
Occasionally	5.00%5
Never	1.00%1
Total Respondents: 100	

Q7

Customize Save As

Did your parents provide you with instruction?

Answered: 100 Skipped: 751



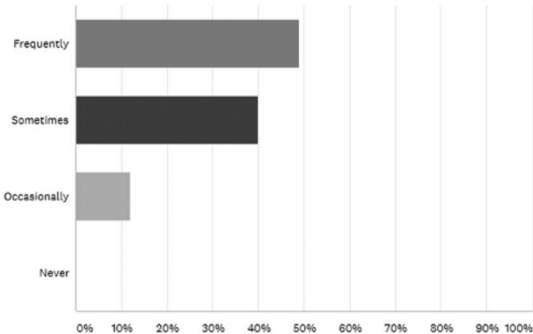
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	36.00% 36
No	68.00% 68
Total Respondents: 100	

Q8

Customize Save As

How often were you required to do research for projects, papers, assignments, etc.?

Answered: 100 Skipped: 751



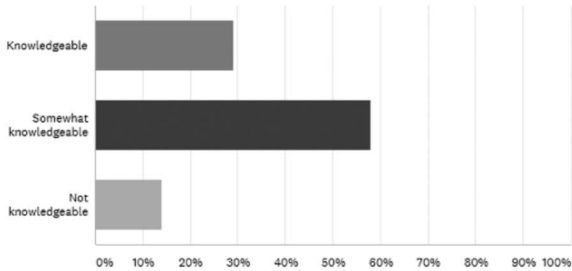
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Frequently	49.00% 49
Sometimes	40.00% 40
Occasionally	12.00% 12
Never	0.00% 0
Total Respondents: 100	

Q9

Customize Save As

If required to use a library for research, do you feel...

Answered: 100 Skipped: 751



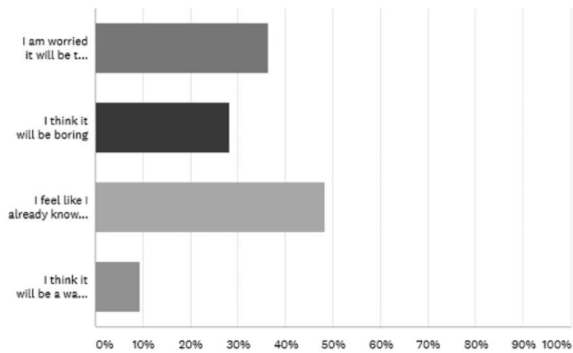
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Knowledgeable	29.00%29
Somewhat knowledgeable	58.00%58
Not knowledgeable	14.00%14
Total Respondents: 100	

Q10

Customize Save As

Please answer this question with regard to your feelings about the library here at Spring Arbor University:My feelings about the library instruction session I am about to participate in: (choose as many as apply)

Answered: 85 Skipped: 766



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
I am worried it will be too complicated	36.47%31
I think it will be boring	28.24%24
I feel like I already know most of what will be taught	48.24%41
I think it will be a waste of time	9.41%8
Total Respondents: 85	