THE INTERNET PUBLIC LIBRARY'S *ASK A QUESTION* SERVICE:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE USERS AND THE QUESTIONS THEY ASK

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BACKGROUND

The Internet Public Library (IPL) offers a digital information service to Internet users through an asynchronous question-answering enterprise. Since its launch on March 17, 1995, the IPL has maintained records of every reference question posed to the *Ask A Question* service, approximately 72,000 to date.

This exploratory study was undertaken to examine the self-identified demographic characteristics of the IPL's *Ask A Question* users, and explores the kinds of questions users are posing to the service.

The findings of this study may permit IPL staff to develop responsive services and collections, and prepare library/information science students participating in the IPL's digital reference learning laboratory to meet the needs of global information users.

METHODOLOGY

In 2007, 12,859 questions were submitted to the IPL's *Ask A Question* service. The number of questions submitted to the service varied greatly by month, from as little as 345 in December to as many as 1,429 in May.

Due to these monthly differences, a stratified random sample was generated using data obtained from the IPL's cleansed question logs. For the purposes of this preliminary analysis a 1% sample was generated, for a total sample size of 128 questions.
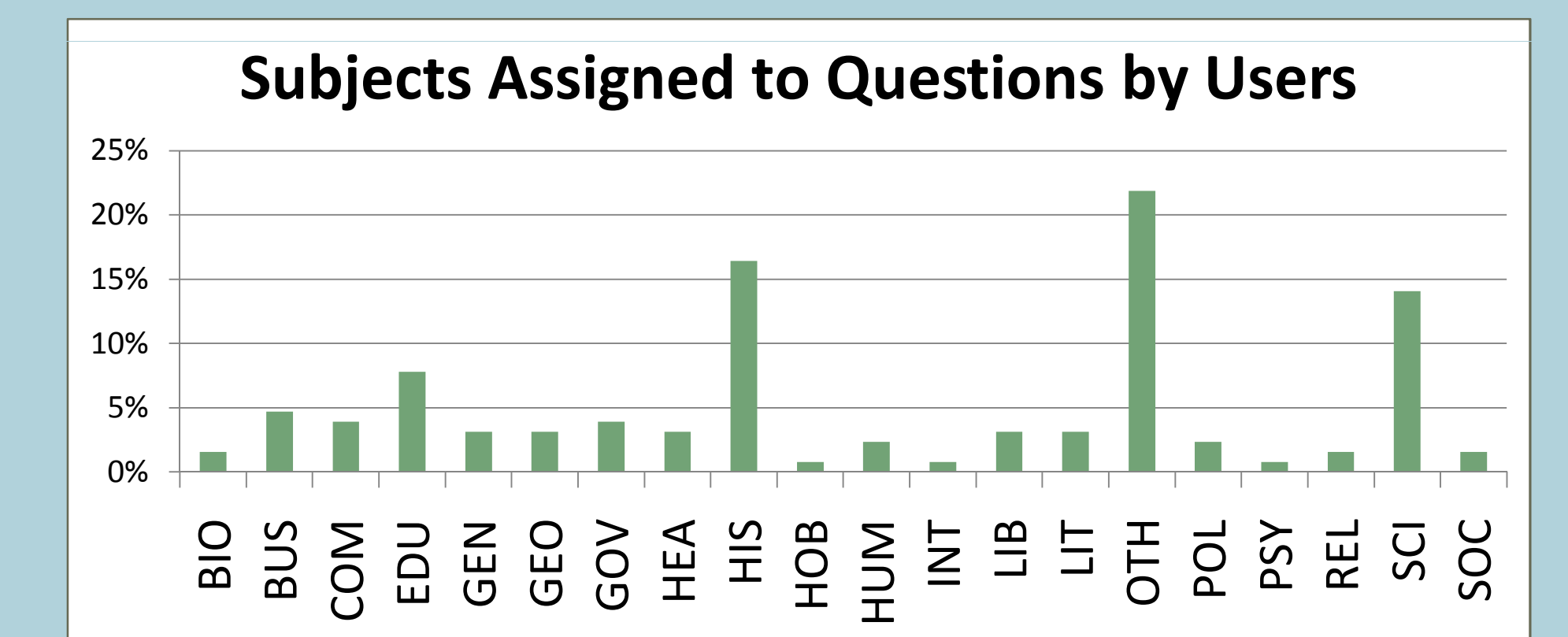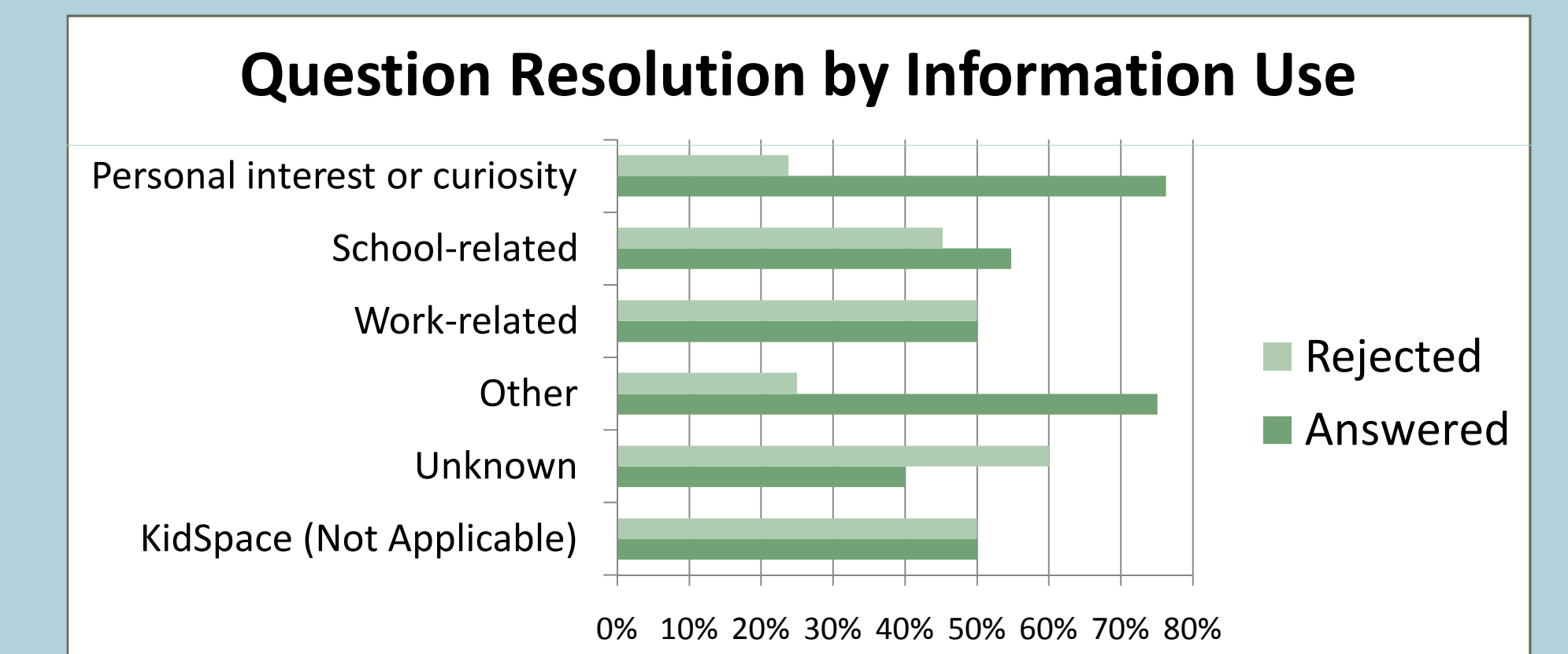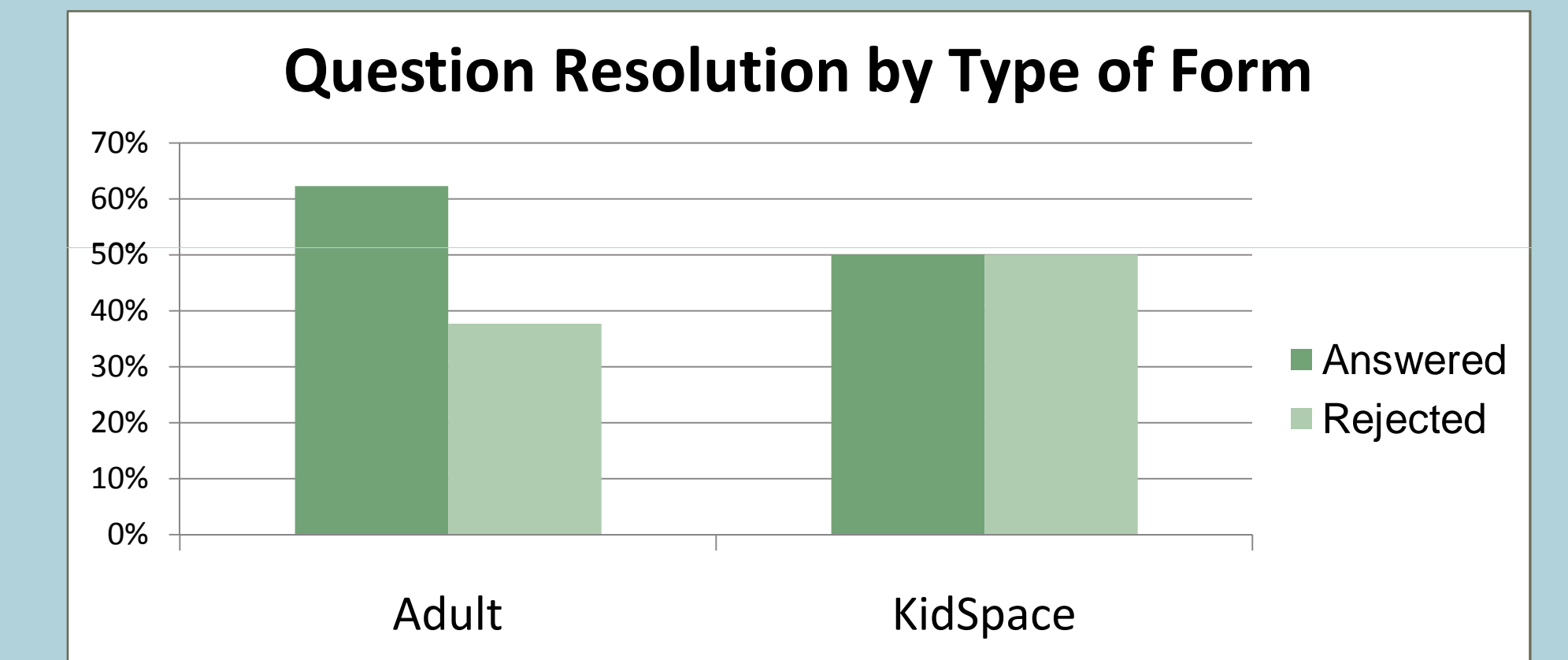
Researchers worked in teams to design and adhere to content analysis and question classification schemes for the purpose of coding all free-form responses from users for the analysis of data. There were also discrete responses from users that were classified in a consistent manner.

ABOUT THEIR QUESTIONS...

The subject matter of the questions users pose to the IPL's *Ask A Question* service shows that History, Education, Science, and Other/Misc. are prominent categories users ascribe to their questions. This study also finds that users and IPL question-answerers reach an agreement on the assignment of subject codes 78% of the time.

The types of questions users submit to the service were analyzed using Schwartz's (2003) question classification scheme, which analyzes the implied intentions of the user's informational request. Using this typology, the questions in the sample were categorized as follows: *Advise (10%), Statements (1%), Factual (33%), Provide (38%), Instruct (6%),* and *Need (12%).*

Of the 128 question transactions from 2007 reviewed for this study, 40% of the questions posed to the *Ask A Question* service were not answered by IPL question-answerers. This percentage of rejected questions is slightly higher than the rejection rate for all questions received in 2007 (33%).

Question Resolution by Type of Form

Question Resolution by Information Use

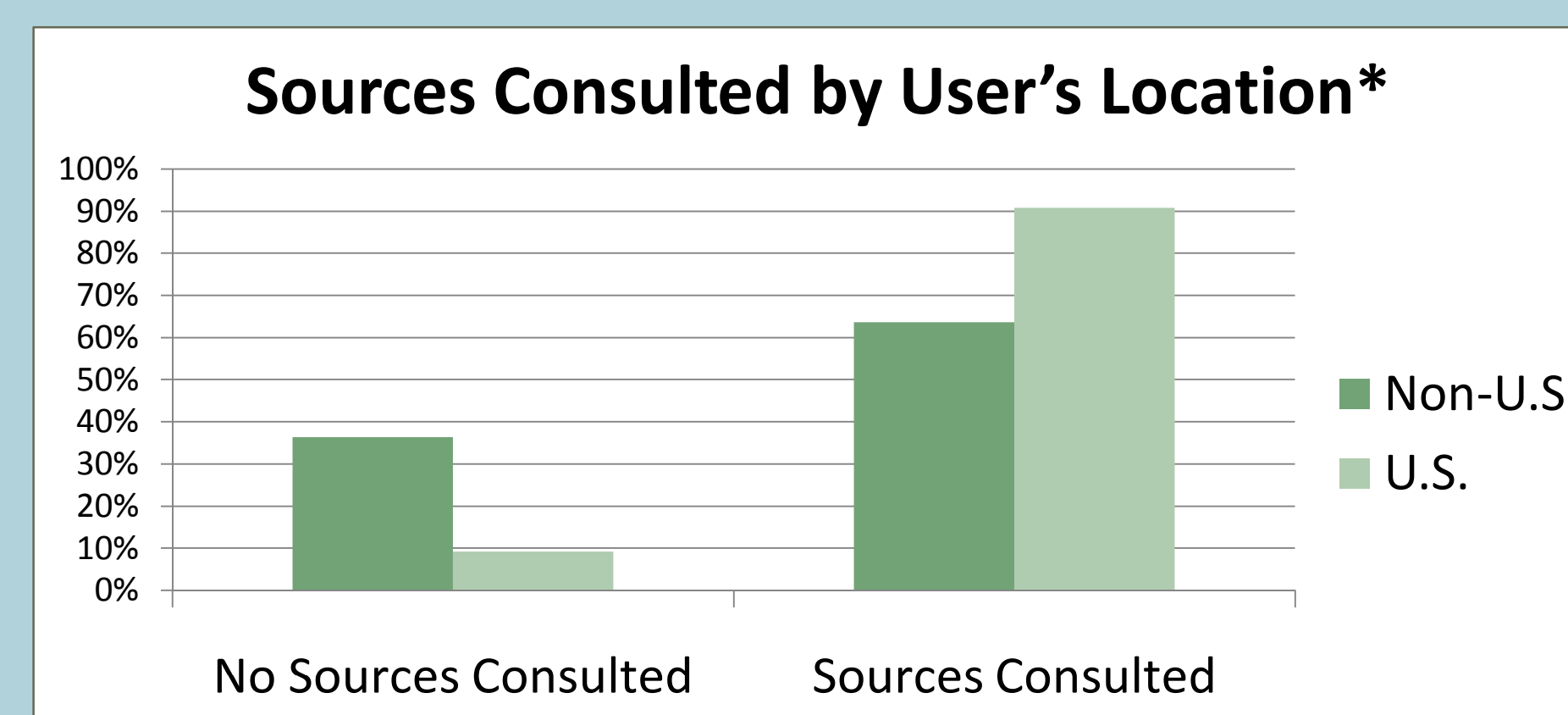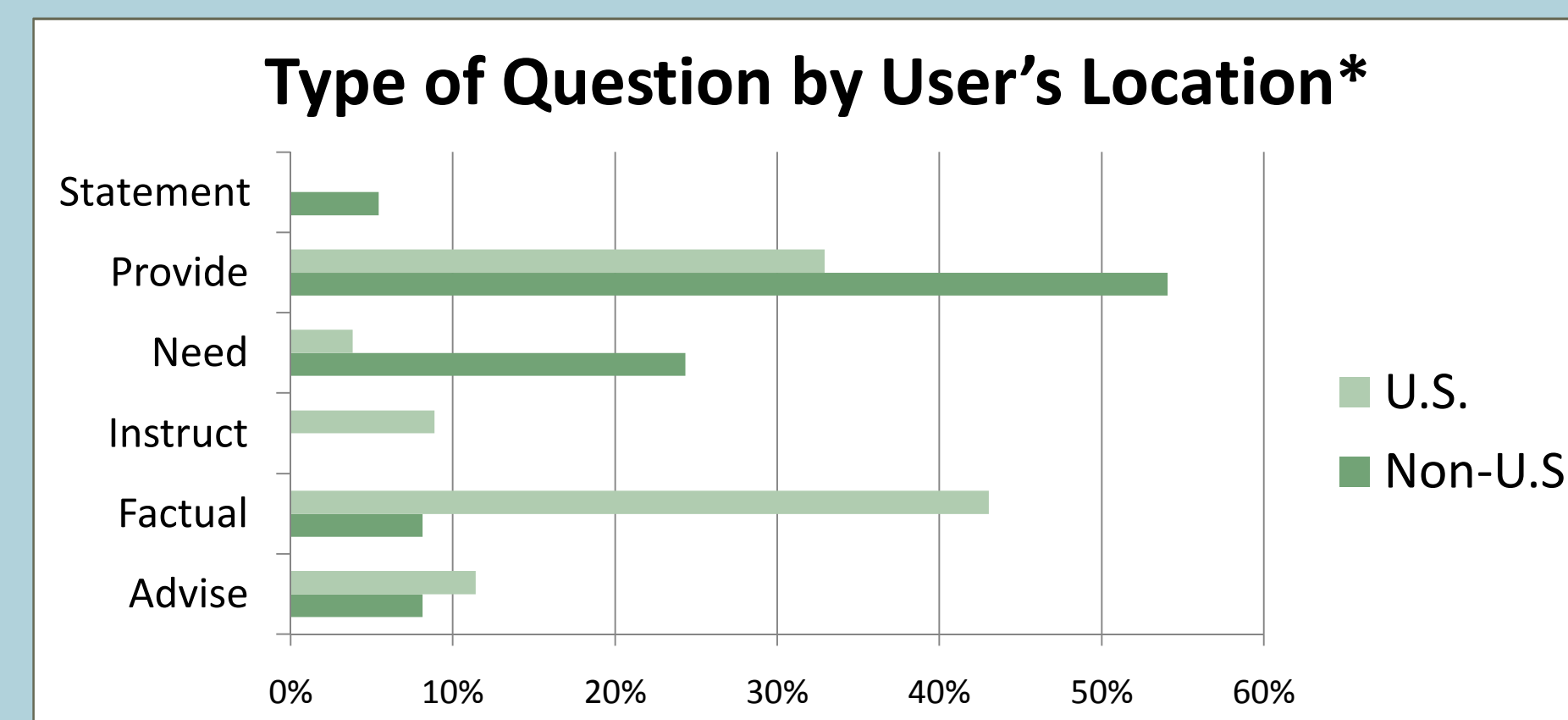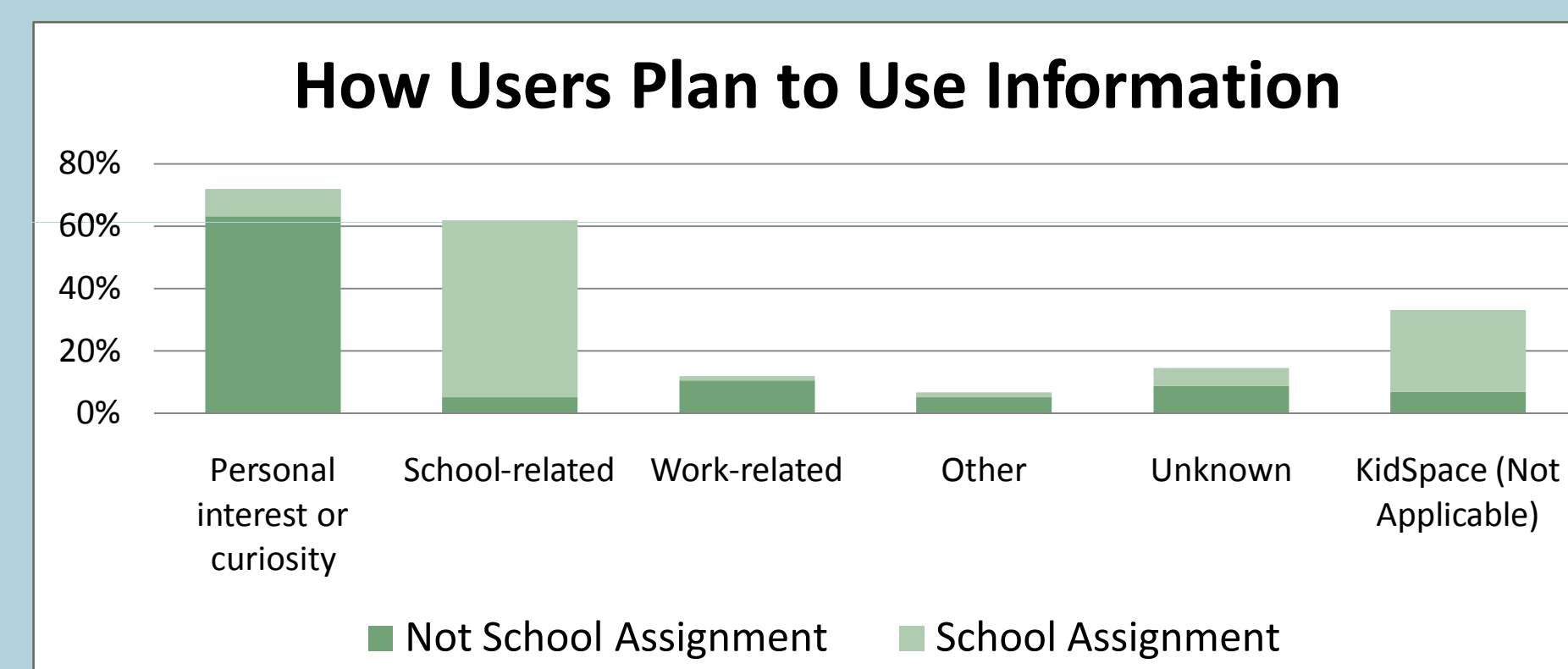**Subjects Assigned to Questions by Users**

ABOUT THE USERS...

The Internet Public Library's *Ask A Question* service provides information assistance and instruction to a global community: this preliminary study finds that 29% of the service's users are located outside of the United States.

Users submit questions to the *Ask A Question* service through the IPL's General Adult or KidSpace web-based form. An inspection of which form was utilized by users for submitting their question reveals that 83% of users posed a request for information through the General Adult web-based form. Further, 49% of users who used the General Adult form indicated that they planned to use the response to their informational request for a school assignment.

Users who reported consulting outside sources prior to contacting the IPL stated having referred to a search engine (32%), a specific or general Internet resource (28%), an academic or public library (9%), or another person (1%).

These results are statistically significant at the α=0.05 level when using Pearson's chi-square test for contingency tables.

How Users Plan to Use Information

Type of Question by User's Location*

Sources Consulted by User's Location*

RECOMMENDATIONS

The reference interview in an asynchronous, digital reference environment necessitates library and information professionals to improvise methods for understanding the true informational needs of users. From this study, we recommend that information professionals consider gathering information from the user that will result in an exemplary reference response coupled with the information professionals' need for a reference question intake form that helps the professional learn about users.

The reference question intake form should seek to collect information that profiles users' on their demographic characteristics and their subject matter needs. The reference question intake form should be redesigned to ensure that data is gathered in a consistent, reusable manner. This redesign can be accomplished by use of radio buttons, drop-down menus, and cue/trigger words.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As typical with exploratory studies, our examination raises many more questions than answers. While this study examined current IPL *Ask A Question* service users and their questions, the data can serve as a powerful tool for further exploration. Other avenues for exploration include content analysis of users' questions and the development of a rigorous question typology, user satisfaction studies, library and information science education in a global information environment, and automatic question answering.

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