

## The Southeastern Librarian

---

Volume 52 | Issue 3

Article 6

---

Fall 2004

# The Realities of Relevance: A Survey of Librarians' Use of Library and Information Science Research

Christine Brown

*University of Alberta*, [cdbrown@telus.net](mailto:cdbrown@telus.net)

Brett Spencer

*University of Alabama*, [dbspence@bama.ua.edu](mailto:dbspence@bama.ua.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Brown, Christine and Spencer, Brett (2004) "The Realities of Relevance: A Survey of Librarians' Use of Library and Information Science Research," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 52 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol52/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Southeastern Librarian by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

## The Realities of Relevance: A Survey of Librarians' Use of Library and Information Science Research

Christine Brown and Brett Spencer

Dr. Christine Brown is Circulation Supervisor, Rutherford Library, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta. She can be reached at [cdbrown3@telus.net](mailto:cdbrown3@telus.net). Brett Spencer is Reference Librarian/Instructional Coordinator, Gorgas Library Information Services, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa AL. He can be reached at [dbspence@bama.ua.edu](mailto:dbspence@bama.ua.edu).

---

### Introduction

This article grew out of the authors' desire to explore the widely held notion that librarians disregard LIS research because they consider it irrelevant. For example, in the early stages of this project one colleague commented that librarianship "is all practice" and that LIS research has had no effect upon his own work. Editors of many LIS journals also question whether research exerts influence on practice. Peter Hernon and Candy Schwartz, editors of *Library and Information Science Research*, lament that "research has not penetrated the soul" of the library profession,<sup>1</sup> and William Katz, former editor of *Research Quarterly*, notes that many authors have failed to show the implications of their research for practice.<sup>2</sup> A survey of LIS scholars revealed that many researchers themselves doubt whether their findings affect practice.<sup>3</sup> While many authors within the profession have thus agreed upon the existence of a research-practice gap in librarianship, they differ in regards to the gap's causes. Some authors blame researchers; some blame practitioners; and some attribute the breakdown to deficiencies in LIS education or dissemination channels. This article examines the research-practice gap by discussing the results of a recent survey that measured the use of LIS research among Alabama's academic reference librarians.

Scholars have called attention to the anemic nature of LIS research utilization ever since librarians' first attempts to organize themselves into a profession. For instance, William J. Goode of Columbia University highlighted the problem in his treatise "The Librarian: From Occupation to Profession?" at the Twenty-Sixth Annual Graduate School Conference in 1961. Goode explained that certain fields, such as medicine, had evolved into distinct professions while others, such as hair styling, had remained occupational in nature. He pointed out that professional status brought with it several benefits: autonomy, associations, higher salaries, greater respect, and university departments. These benefits arose from a body of relevant "abstract knowledge" that guided the profession's practitioners in carrying out their tasks:

The knowledge [of a profession] must first of all be organized in abstract principles, and cannot exist in mere details however vast in quantity. These principles must be applicable to concrete problems.<sup>4</sup>

In Goode's opinion librarianship had failed to achieve professional status (and missed out on many of the accompanying benefits) because it had not created relevant principles. Librarians had no theories that could guide them in solving the fundamental problem of finding and organizing information:

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Hernon and Cindy Schwartz, "Editorial: Can Research be Assimilated into the Soul of Library and Information Science?," *Library and Information Science Research* 17 (Spring 1995): 102.

<sup>2</sup> William Katz, "The Influence of Theory and Research in the Practice of Reference Services," *The Reference Librarian* 18 (1987): 1-5.

<sup>3</sup> Charles R. McClure and Ann P. Bishop, "The Status of Research in Library and Information Science: Guarded Optimism," *College & Research Libraries* 50, no. 2 (1989): pp. 127-143; Thomas James Waldhart, Editorial, *Library Research* 2 (1980): 105-106.

<sup>4</sup> William J. Goode, "The Librarian: From Occupation to Profession," *Library Quarterly* 31 (1961): 308.

The central gap is of course the failure to develop a general body of scientific knowledge bearing precisely on this problem, in the way that the medical profession with its auxiliary scientific fields has developed an immense body of knowledge with which to cure human diseases...most day-to-day professional work utilizes rather concrete, rule-of thumb, local regulations and rules, and a major cataloging system. The problems of selection and organization are dealt with on a highly empiricist basis, concretely, with little reference to general scientific principles.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, Goode thought that most librarians went about their work without consulting LIS research because so little useful research existed. Doctors had capitalized on research findings to improve treatments for their patients, but librarians, for whatever reason, did not harness research results in a similar manner. If one can appreciate the significance of research to the medical profession, it becomes clear why past scholars called attention to the inadequacy of research use in LIS. The continued progress of a field depends upon its ability to make the most of its research findings.

In the twenty-first century, the profession invests heavily in producing research, but the low level of research use persists. At LIS departments all over the country faculty pour considerable time and energy into research projects. Currently, dozens of journals and ALA committees strive to foster research and publication. Many colleges and universities also put pressure on librarians to conduct research in order to fulfill tenure requirements. Workshops on how to jump-start publication projects, such as "Is Publishing Your Passion? Take Small Steps First" at the 2003 ALA conference, have become common.<sup>6</sup> The Southeastern Library Association lists research as one of the group's major purposes in its Constitution.<sup>7</sup> Yet, a perception still lingers that the profession fails to make use of its research. As one writer puts it, "the actual value of research to librarianship remains an unanswered question in various quarters of the field--even though generous lip service to research is widely expressed."<sup>8</sup> To examine this irony, the authors of the present study feel that it is important to take a closer look at research utilization.

In addition, the research-practice question seems especially significant when considering the challenges facing the profession. Internet search engines, virtual reference programs, electronic databases, and e-journals offer many new ways to expand services for patrons, but librarians need guidance from research to take full advantage of these technologies. More than ever before, twenty-first century librarians must have research that can help them assess programs, forge new services, inform decisions, and prevent them from having to "reinvent the wheel." After realizing the significance of the research-practice connection, the authors of the present study decided to shed more light on this issue through a survey of practitioners.

## Literature Review

Writers have taken various approaches to the research-practice gap, but only a few have conducted surveys of librarians' attitudes and habits. Some authors approach the research-practice gap through content analysis of library journals. Derr (1983) believes that LIS research lacks relevance because it fails to develop "applied theory" that "focuses on the design of procedures for the effective performance of professional tasks."<sup>9</sup> Katz (1987), who has edited several of the field's textbooks and journals, notes that

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 312-313.

<sup>6</sup> Carol Shepstone, "Is Publishing Your Passion? Take Small Steps First," *ALA Cognotes*, June 2003 Conference Issue, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Southeastern Library Association, "Constitution of the Southeastern Library Association," Article II, accessed on December 2, 2003 at <http://sela.lib.ucf.edu/Handbook/constit.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Busha, ed., *A Library Science Research Reader and Bibliographic Guide* (Littleton, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1981), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Derr, "The Integration of Theory and Practice in Professional Programs," *Journal of Education for Librarianship* 23, no. 3 (1983): 193.

many authors view their work as “totally divorced from the experience of and education of the average reference/information librarian.”<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, Floyd and Phillips (1997) survey the authors and editors of twenty-two library journals and conclude that LIS research often fails to provide relevant advice for librarians.<sup>11</sup> Studies like these reveal the limitations of the research literature but do not actually assess practitioners' use of this literature.

In another approach, many authors have addressed the research-practice gap by exposing problems in the curriculum and goals of LIS education. One study revealed that twenty out of fifty-two LIS programs lacked a course in research methodology.<sup>12</sup> Thus, many librarians may not utilize research because their schools do not teach them how to interpret it. Morehead (1973) contends that the traditional lecture method inevitably leads to a research-practice disjunction because lectures fail to show students how to implement research findings. Therefore, he calls upon library schools to offer seminar and laboratory courses that give students more opportunities to apply theories in a real-life setting.<sup>13</sup> In a slightly different vein, O'Connor and Mulvaney (1996) argue that the campaign by LIS faculty to achieve the status of “information scientists” has led to a schism between researchers and librarians. LIS professors give too much attention to carrying out theoretical research instead of training future practitioners.<sup>14</sup>

Other authors assert that LIS research is relevant and chide complacent librarians for failing to apply research findings. Anderson (1985) believes that many practitioners reject research because they think in terms of a dichotomy of “theory vs. practice.” In challenging this notion, he points out that practice cannot exist without theory anymore than “bodily processes” can exist without “mental processes.”<sup>15</sup> He does admit, however, that sometimes theorists work on irrelevant topics. Intner (1990) claims that practitioners' belief in the uniqueness of their own libraries and adherence to tradition—not an absence of useful research—has prevented the successful application of research.<sup>16</sup> Anderson and Intner thus rebuff a perception of research among practitioners although they do not document that perception.

On the other hand, Crowley (1999) claims that LIS faculty produce research with unclear implications because they leave librarians out of the research process. Practitioners possess “tacit knowledge” (undocumented or private wisdom) that a LIS researcher can capture through techniques like analysis of practitioner accounts and interviews. Drawing on librarians' “how I did it good” experiences can help researchers create more relevant theories.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Katz, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara L. Floyd and John C. Phillips, “A Question of Quality: How Authors Perceive Library Literature,” *College & Research Libraries* 58, no. 1 (1997): 81-93.

<sup>12</sup> Soyeon Park, “Research Methods as Core Competency,” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 44, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 17.

<sup>13</sup> Joe Morehead, “The Theory Practice Problem and Library-Centered Library Education,” *Journal of Education for Librarianship* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1973): 119-128.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel O'Connor and J. Phillip Mulvaney, “LIS Faculty Research and Expectations of the Academic Culture versus the Needs of the Practitioner,” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 37, no. 4 (1996): 306-316.

<sup>15</sup> A. J. Anderson, “They Never Taught Me How to Do This in Library School: Some Reflections on the Theory/Practice Nexus,” *Journal of Library Administration* 6, no. 2 (1985): 3.

<sup>16</sup> Shelia Intner, “Theory and Practice or Theory versus Practice: Fundamental Issues and Questions,” in *Library Education and Leadership* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1990), 154-155.

<sup>17</sup> Bill Crowley, “Building Useful Theory: Tacit Knowledge, Practitioner Reports, and the Culture of LIS Inquiry,” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 40, no. 4 (1999): 282-295.

Another approach, the survey method, provides an empirical perspective on the research-practice gap. In one of the first such surveys, Lynam, Slater, and Walker (1982) queried 1950 British academic, public, government, and corporate library workers selected from the membership rolls of the Association for Information Management, Institute for Information Science, and Library Association. The authors hoped to determine the attitudes of practitioners about research and what channels (journals, conferences, research reports) disseminated research effectively. They discovered that 44% of their respondents had a moderate interest in LIS research. Many respondents, however, noted that the irrelevancy of some research prevented them from taking a greater interest. Respondents listed journals as the most frequently consulted source for relevant research, and three out of four participants regularly used informal means like personal contacts to learn about research. Only a quarter of respondents had conducted research themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Ali (1985) followed the lead of Lynam, Slater, and Walker by surveying chief librarians at major libraries in the United Kingdom and United States. He affirmed their finding that journals serve as the most heavily used medium for learning about research.<sup>19</sup> In a 1986 survey of fifty Illinois practitioners, Ali reported that 88% of respondents perceived research articles as relevant to their practice; however, only 42% viewed secondary sources like *Library Literature* as definitely helpful in locating research findings. Ninety percent of respondents had attended conferences in the past year and reported that these events served as sources of relevant information (as well as catalysts for reading the professional literature).<sup>20</sup>

In a more recent study, Powell, Baker, and Mika (2002) conducted a survey that asked 615 American practitioners about their involvement in LIS research. They concluded that the "results of the study are mixed regarding the extent to which LIS practitioners read, conduct, and apply research." For example, nearly 90% of the 615 respondents said they read at least one research journal on a regular basis, but a much smaller number reported that they ever applied findings from the research literature.<sup>21</sup> Writers must conduct more such empirical studies so that they can clarify librarians' use of research and determine if new technologies have improved the dissemination process.

## Methodology

The present authors seek to describe the use of LIS research by Alabama's academic reference librarians through a survey based on the earlier one by Lynam, Slater, and Walker (1982). The Alabama questionnaire also includes new questions that take into account the rise of electronic dissemination. The authors chose to concentrate on reference librarianship, a subfield that has experienced a great degree of change in the last decade. For the purpose of the study, *research* consists of the findings, ideas, and theories that arise from the formal and intensive study of a phenomenon. Researchers disseminate their findings, ideas, and theories through various channels: journals, associations, listservs, and personal contacts. *Use* means the extent to which practitioners' consult dissemination channels and their perception of the value of research.

The authors created an online questionnaire that automatically compiled the responses into an SPSS database. Library science students working as reference assistants pre-tested the online survey, and the authors revised the survey based on the students' feedback. Library home pages and the *American*

---

<sup>18</sup> Peter Lynam, Margaret Slater, and Rennie Walker, *Research and the Practitioner: Dissemination of Research Results within the Library-Information Profession* (London: Aslib, 1982): 1-12.

<sup>19</sup> S. Nazim Ali, "Library Science Research: Some Results of its Dissemination and Utilization," *Libri* 35, no. 2 (1985): 151.

<sup>20</sup> S. Nazim Ali, "Attitudes and Preferences of Library Practitioners in Illinois to Channels for Dissemination of Research Results," *College & Research Libraries* 47, no. 2 (1986): 169-170.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald R. Powell, Lynda M. Baker, and Joseph J. Mika, "Library and Information Science Practitioners and Research," *Library and Information Science Research* 24 (2002): 71.

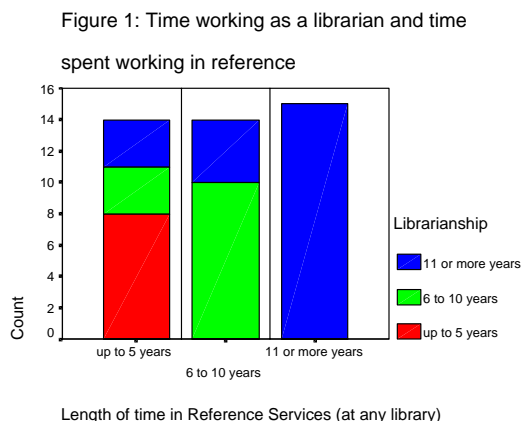
*Library Directory* furnished the names and email addresses of 115 librarians and full-time reference staff working at four-year colleges or universities in Alabama. The authors emailed the survey's link to all of the potential participants twice in December, 2002.

A total of forty-three responses yielded a response rate of 37.39%. While the investigators hoped for a higher percentage, the number of responses approximated those of past surveys on the same topic. For example, Lynam, Slater, and Walker (1982) had a response rate of 44%, and Powell, Baker, and Mika (2002) had a response rate of 42.6%. Like the studies of earlier authors, the present article offers a significant insight into the research-practice gap by presenting a detailed picture of one group of librarians' use of LIS research. Generalization to the greater population of American practitioners is limited; however, the responses highlighted issues that can guide future studies.

## Results

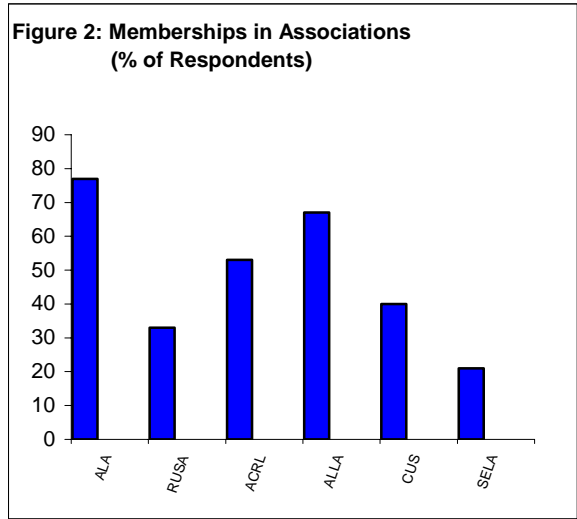
### Demographics of Respondents

Most of the forty-three respondents have had substantial experience as professional librarians. Although classified staff also received copies of the survey, nearly all of the respondents (98%) indicated that they hold an MLIS degree. In addition, 42% hold an additional subject master's degree in either the humanities or social sciences, and a small number (20%) hold advanced degrees in science. Only two respondents said they have Ph.D. degrees (one in history and another in comparative literature). Figure 1 shows that two-thirds of the respondents have worked in the field as a reference librarian for six or more years.



### Channels for Hearing about Research

**Membership & Participation in LIS Associations & Conferences:** Several questions sought to gauge librarians' participation in associations since these groups serve as conduits for new research. Eighty-eight percent of the reference librarians hold memberships in either a state or national library association. On average, respondents have memberships in at least three organizations. This activity ranges from one respondent who holds memberships in seven associations to five respondents who hold no memberships. The American Library Association (ALA) and the Alabama Library Association (ALLA) have the highest level of membership among respondents (Figure 2).



In terms of ALA participation, a third of the respondents involve themselves in the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), the ALA division dedicated to the work of reference librarians. Slightly more (40%) have a membership in the College, University and Special (CUS) Libraries Association of the Alabama Library Association. Several librarians take part in the Southeastern Library Association (SELA). The range of other associations mentioned by librarians included: Reforma, Georgia Library Association, Organization of American Historians, International Association of School Librarianship, Special Libraries Association, Art Libraries Society of North America, Black Caucus of ALA, Library Instruction Round Table, Music Library Association, International Association of Music Libraries, American Society for Engineering Education, and the Alabama Historical Association.

Participating in a committee in a LIS association helps librarians stay abreast of new developments in the field. Accordingly, twenty-three respondents currently serve as a committee member. The majority of them participate in committees in the Alabama Library Association and the American Library Association (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Association Activities**

<b>Committee/Round Table on which Librarian Serves</b>	<b># of Respondents</b>
Alabama Library Association College, University and Special Libraries Roundtable, College, University, and Special Libraries Research, Education, Public Relations, Round Table on Reference & Adult Services, Bibliography, Institutional Round Table, Government Documents Round Table	22
American Library Association Library Research Round Table, Intellectual Freedom Round Table, Business Reference and Services Section, Machine-Assisted Reference Section, Association for Library Collections & Technical Services, Library Instruction Round Table, Reference & User Services Association	12
Alabama Public Library Service Alabama Virtual Library	2
Reforma (National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking) Information Technology Committee	1

Network of Alabama Academic Libraries Continuing Education Committee	1
Southeastern Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee	1
Association of Research Libraries Educational Behavioral Science Section	1

Most of these librarians serve on an average of two committees with some serving on as many as five committees. Two librarians said that they participate in so many groups that they could not list them all. Fifteen librarians said they previously served with a similar arrangement of committees.

Conferences offer one of the main avenues for practicing librarians to learn about the discoveries of others. While formal programs supply a great deal of information, many librarians also gain helpful ideas from informal networking outside of official activities. Nearly 90% have attended at least one conference in the last year. Over half of the respondents (56.1%) have attended two to three conferences in the last year (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Conference Attendance of Academic Reference Librarians in Alabama**

Number of Conferences	Last Year (% of Respondents)	Last Two Years (% of Respondents)
None	14.6	4.9
One	19.5	17.1
Two	26.8	17.1
Three	29.3	14.6
Four	4.9	9.8
Five or More	4.9	31.7
Can't Remember	0	4.9
Total	100	100

Several factors shape librarians' decisions to attend conferences: subject matter, possibility of hearing interesting new ideas, opportunity to stay up-to-date with the latest developments, contact with other professionals, and guidance on work problems (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Factors Influencing Conference Attendance**

Factor	Important (%)	A consideration (%)	Not Important (%)	Not Applicable (%)
Subject matter of the event	90.0	7.5	2.5	0
Possibility of hearing interesting ideas	90.0	5.0	5.0	0
Keep up-to-date with latest developments	72.5	22.5	5.0	0
Possibility of practical guidance at work	67.5	22.5	7.5	2.5
Contact with other members of the profession	60.0	32.5	5.0	2.5
Meeting job requirements	33.3	28.2	25.6	12.8
Meeting tenure requirements	28.2	25.6	30.8	15.4
A speaker's reputation for provoking thought	27.5	60.0	10.0	2.5
Temporary break from work place routine	12.8	48.7	33.3	0

The speaker's reputation for provoking thought or getting a break from work only provided "a consideration" in the decision to attend. In fact, a third of the respondents feel that participating in a



conference is not a break from work. To the surprise of the investigators, tenure requirements provide only a slight incentive for librarians to attend. For the two respondents who had not gone to a conference in the last two years, one said that none of the factors applied while the other said that a limited travel fund prevented them from attending.

**Information Seeking & Reading Habits:** Indexes, abstracting services, and databases serve as essential resources for reference staff to use in the identification of relevant articles and books. Most respondents have access to *Library Literature* despite the limited number of LIS programs in Alabama, and 86.8% of respondents utilize this database (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Indexing and Abstracting Services used by Alabama Academic Reference Librarians**

Service	Use (%)	Don't Use (%)	No Access (%)
Academic Search Elite	91.7	8.3	0
Expanded Academic ASAP	91.4	8.6	0
ERIC	88.9	11.1	0
Library Literature	86.8	7.9	5.3
Library and Info Science Abs	42.4	24.2	33.3
Other Index	16.3	0	0

Respondents use general databases such as *Academic Search Elite* about as much as they tap *Library Literature*. The high use of general databases may result from their inclusion in the *Alabama Virtual Library*, a free service to all libraries in the state. General databases also offer the convenience of full-text articles, an especially helpful feature for staff at libraries with small professional collections. Although lacking the breadth of LIS-specific indexes, these general resources apparently provide other advantages that attract these practitioners. However, most of the LIS articles in these databases reflect a professional rather than a research approach. Many of the other indexes listed by respondents cover literature outside of LIS: *Business Source Premier*, *Professional Development Collection*, *Dow Jones Interactive*, *ABI/Inform*, *Emerald Databases*, *Proquest*, *Newspaper Source*, *CQ Researcher*, and the *Humanities Index*.

Table 5 presents the level of exposure to common print journals in reference librarianship.

**Table 5: Librarians Journal Reading**

Journal	Every Issue (%)	Sometimes (%)	Never (%)
Library Journal	32.5	52.5	15.0
American Libraries	67.6	21.6	10.8
Reference & User Services Quarterly	43.2	37.8	18.9
College & Research Libraries	48.6	40.5	10.8
College & Research Libraries News	48.6	31.4	20.0
Journal of Academic Librarianship	17.1	54.3	28.6
Information Today	6.7	33.3	60.0
Library Quarterly	0.0	27.6	72.4
Library & Information Science Research	5.9	23.5	70.6
Journal of the American Society for Information Science & Technology	3.3	23.3	73.3

The majority of respondents read either every issue or some issues of most professional journals listed in the survey with the exception of *Information Today*. The heavy exposure to professional journals, combined with the high use of general indexes and databases, suggests that these librarians have ample opportunities to learn about research reported in the professional literature. However, the librarians read very few articles from research journals such as *Library Quarterly*, *Library and Information Science Research*, and the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology (JASIST)*.

Respondents peruse general journals like *American Libraries* and *Library Journal* as much or more than journals like *College and Research Libraries* that focus on academic libraries. The fact that almost 80% of respondents reported membership in ALA may explain why so many read *American Libraries* (since this magazine comes with membership). One might have expected *Journal of Academic Librarianship* to score higher since *Magazines for Libraries*, a selection tool for libraries, describes it as basic to LIS collections. Interestingly, reference librarians seldom read technology journals like *JASIST* and *Information Today* despite the attention given to new technologies in libraries. Even from a professional perspective, it is puzzling that so few read *Information Today* since this magazine focuses on meeting the technology needs of information professionals.

In addition to the materials listed in the survey, thirteen of the respondents listed other journals or newsletters that they consult regularly. Two respondents mentioned *Research Strategies* and *Computers in Libraries*. Other journals listed by individual respondents included *Alabama Librarian*, *EBSS Newsletter*, *Library Trends*, *Library Hotline*, *Journal of Youth Services*, *Unabashed Librarian*, *World Literature Today*, *School Library Journal*, *Fontes Artis Musicae*, *Notes*, *Technical Services Quarterly*, and *The Southeastern Librarian*.

In addition to querying librarians about the journals they read, the survey asked respondents about specific types of articles in these journals. Most respondents indicated at least some interest in all of the choices except news about personalities (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Journal Content Interests**

Content Type	Very Interested (%)	Interested (%)	Little or No Interest (%)
Developing trends in library/information work	28 (65.1)	13 (30.2)	2 (4.7)
Discussion of ideas	24 (58.5)	14 (34.1)	3 (7.3)
Problems faced by librarians/information units	20 (46.5)	20 (46.5)	3 (7.0)
Information on availability of new services	19 (46.3)	17 (41.5)	5 (12.2)
How other libraries/information units are run	18 (43.9)	19 (46.3)	4 (9.8)
Research experience	15 (17.5)	20 (46.5)	4 (10.3)
Information about forthcoming events	7 (17.5)	25 (62.5)	8 (20.0)
News about personalities	1 (2.5)	15 (37.5)	24 (60.0)

Note: Figures do not include missing responses.

Respondents had the highest level of interest in developing trends in library-information work. Four respondents expressed interest in book or media reviews. Their interest in this material helps explain the popularity of *Library Journal* since this journal offers a large number of reviews.

All of the respondents either subscribe to or read electronic discussion groups. In total, they belong to seventy different groups, and on average they subscribe to 4.4 groups. Some only subscribe to one group, but one librarian reported belonging to seventeen. The most mentioned group is the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries Listserv (NAAL-L) followed by Alabama Virtual Library List, Alabama Library Association Listserv (ALLA-L), GovDoc-L, Digital Reference Listserv, and LIBREF-L. Although respondents thus read many general reference-oriented listservs, they also subscribe to various specialized listservs that relate to their respective work tasks.

While all the respondents collect information from listservs, only ten stated that they regularly read web sources such as *Scout Report* and *Search Engine Watch*. It is hard to believe that so few of these librarians scan web sites. Perhaps the tediousness of having to recall this behavior deterred others from answering this question. Future authors should ask respondents to copy their bookmarks or send a link to their homepage, thus providing a more accurate picture of this information behavior.

**Research Projects in Reference Services:** Participation in research projects offers another obvious channel for learning about research. Such activity may also reveal the value that respondents place on research and sensitize them to research by others on the same topic. Although thirteen (31.7%) respondents have carried out a research project in reference services, only nine (20.5%) have published any of these projects. Five (11.36%) have presented their projects at national conferences while six (13.63%) have presented projects at local conferences. About half of respondents (51.2%) have published non-research articles, and more respondents have composed non-research articles than research articles.

One might have expected that a larger number of academic librarians would have carried out research projects since many of them face tenure requirements. Limited time may explain the low number of research endeavors. In addition, many Alabama librarians can meet tenure requirements by publishing non-research articles or performing committee work for associations. Furthermore, although nearly all reference librarians carry out projects like assessment surveys or administrative reports for their libraries, they may not view these undertakings as research even though these projects incorporate some steps of the research process.

**Informal Channels for Finding out about Research:** When asked about their use of informal contacts for finding out about research, practitioners overwhelmingly revealed that they hear about new ideas through colleagues rather than acquaintances or researchers (see Table 7).

**Table 7: Sources for Informal Information about Research**

Channels/Source	Only Colleagues (%)	Colleagues & Others (%)	Only Acquaintances (%)
Email** (n= 32)	17 (53.1)	13 (40.6)	1 (3.1)
Telephone (n=20)	12 (60.0)	6 (30.0)	2 (10.0)
Face-to-face (n=28)	20 (71.4)	8 (28.6)	0
Obtain copies of articles* (n =26)	11 (42.3)	11 (42.3)	0
* 4 (15.4%) respondents said they obtain copies of articles from researchers.			
** 1 respondent said they obtained research information via email with researchers			

The reliance on colleagues came as no surprise to the investigators since colleagues offer the most accessible informal source. In asking how the respondents communicate with colleagues, more respondents said they use oral channels like face-to-face conversations than written channels like email.

**Comparing the Channels:** When asked to rank their preference of formal and informal channels for finding out about new research, respondents indicated that they most preferred to hear about research through conferences, journal articles, and personal contacts. As summarized in Tables 8 and 9, respondents preferred conferences the most, but they ranked journal articles as the most important format to them.

**Table 8: Formats Used for Obtaining New Ideas/Research**

Format	% of Respondents
Conferences	79.1
Personal contacts	74.4
Journal articles	74.4

Electronic discussion groups	55.8
Staff meetings	46.5
Indexing/abstracting services	34.9
Newsletters	34.9
Reports/theses	7.0
No preference	2.3

**Table 9: Formats Ranked as Most Important**

Format	% of Respondents Ranking #1
Journal articles	29.4
Personal contacts	20.0
Seminars/workshops/courses	18.8
Electronic discussion groups	12.9
Indexing/abstracting Services	10.6
Staff meetings	4.7
News Letters	3.5

The librarians also valued personal contacts almost as much as these other formats. Although preferred by 55.8% and considered significant by 12.9%, electronic discussion groups have not overtaken more traditional channels in importance.

The responses to indexes, newsletters, and staff meetings seem ambiguous. Over a third of respondents said they prefer indexes or newsletters, but they also gave these formats low rankings in importance. In regards to staff meetings, 46.5% of respondents prefer this avenue, but only 4.7% listed it as an important format. The librarians viewed reports and theses as the least preferred and least important channel.

**Table 10: Level of Interest in Research about Reference Services**

Level of Interest	Frequency and (%)	Cumulative Percent
Very Interested	21 (48.8%)	48.8
Fairly Interested	10 (23.3%)	72.1
Moderately Interested	9 (20.9%)	93.0
Of Little Interest	2 (4.7%)	97.7
Not Interested	1 (2.3%)	100.0
Total	43	

### Perceptions of LIS Research

**Interest in Research:** As noted earlier, *use* consists of the extent to which practitioners consult dissemination channels as well as their perceptions of LIS research. In turning to perceptions, the librarians affirmed that they have an interest in research in reference services (Table 10). Thirty-one described themselves as very interested or fairly interested (72.1%). The survey also included a separate question that asked respondents whether they viewed LIS research as relevant or not. A large majority (75.7%) described LIS research as relevant although only twenty-three specified why they felt this way. Table 11 lists the factors that affected why these respondents perceived LIS research as relevant, sometimes relevant, or irrelevant.

**Table 11: Explanations of Why Research is Relevant (or Irrelevant) to Practitioners:**

**Why it is Irrelevant:**

Topic Not Relevant

- “Yes, sometimes...I especially like the articles about library instruction and ways I could improve and measure instruction. Sometimes, the articles are too related to administration, and that is not my area or my interest.”
- “There should be a not always choice. Some of the research I read is applicable to my current needs, but a lot is not. Some of the research is focused on very narrow highly-technical subjects that would not seem to help me as a reference librarian.”

Material Not Interesting

- “Mostly people writing to meet T&P requirements. Most is BORING!”

Authorship

- “Much of what is written seems to come from people who are not actively involved in serving the public as reference librarians. Or have very limited experience in the day to day challenges and activities of the busy reference department.”

Lack of Practicality

- “They are not always practical”
- “I wish I could check both. Many times, I’m left with “So what?” as my response. I suppose I want research to produce usable practical results.”
- “All reported research is neither relevant nor worth plowing through.”

Too Focused on Fads

- “I think LIS is as insecure as education. Both areas jump neck deep into a fad and in the process ignore all data that does not support “the” fad. Librarians and researchers in the area of LIS are rarely independent thinkers.”

**Why it is Only Sometimes Relevant:**

Lack of Practicality

- “Some of it is relevant. Sometimes you have to work to make the connection to the “real world” or practice, but I believe that it is important that we try to do so.”
- “They generally do not show me how.”
- “Yes, it is relevant, but not necessarily applicable to my library. I am more interested in the old fashioned “how we do it good” type article than the hard core research requiring some sophisticated analysis.”
- “This is a loaded question. I don’t read it if it isn’t relevant.”
- “I am more interested in practitioner articles.”
- “I choose what I want to read so I read only those items that are of any interest to me.”

**Why it is Relevant:**

Practicality

- “Generally the article sparks ideas.”
- “Most of the research that I read is based on searches for specific topics, so the readings that I do are focused and relevant to my needs.”
- “Much of it has practical application to be useful to my working life.”
- “I’ve picked up practical tips from these sources I’ve read and gotten some ideas on how to do things better”.
- “Seems relevant to my work.”

Part of Job

- “It is a big part of my work.”

- “As electronic resource coordinator, research regarding usage, usability, etc. is very important.”

**Keeping up With Changes in Other Libraries**

- “Most sources seem to be in tune with “changes” in the profession.”
- “Because it is good to see the views of other librarians and how other libraries do similar things.”
- “In this area of constant change, there’s no way I’ll ever feel as if I know it all.”
- “I like to know what work is being done in other libraries—one never knows when the opportunity to implement new and improved services will knock.”

Most of the responses center around practicality: respondents who perceived LIS research as relevant usually did so because the findings have clear implications for practice and the research helps them do their job. Others considered LIS research as relevant when it keeps them informed about changes and trends in other libraries. In contrast, one respondent denounced LIS literature as irrelevant for the same reason—it focuses too much on “fads.”

**Future Areas for Research:** The largest number of recommendations for future research dealt with electronic resources or services (20.58% of responses to this question; see Table 12).

**Table 12: Areas for Future Research in Reference**

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Respondents (%)</b>
Libraries’ Electronic Resources and Services	7 (20.6)
Quality of Reference Service	4 (11.7)
Library Instruction for Users or Staff	3 (8.6)
Subject-Specialized Reference	3 (8.6)
User Studies	2 (5.9)
Faculty Collaboration	2 (5.9)
Internet	2 (5.9)
Other topics	7 (20.6)
Apathy or no desire for more research in a particular area	4 (11.7)

The debut of web technologies has sparked a demand for more research in this area. Two responses reflected a special interest in the effects of the free Internet on libraries. In this vein, one respondent asked for more research on “how to keep the reference desk and in-person reference services relevant in an age when patrons keep deserting us for the dubious convenience of the Internet.” This emphatic call for more research on the Internet and technology topics seems ironic since few respondents read technology journals.

Four librarians expressed a desire for more research on the quality of reference services. One respondent stressed that research should focus on frequently-asked reference questions and “why these questions are consistently hard to answer, so that resources could be created to help the problem.” Two librarians asked for more research on subject-specialized reference. Four respondents expressed either apathy or no desire for more research. “I have trouble keeping up with professional reading as it is,” lamented one librarian! Ten respondents provided no answer to this question.

**Interest in Obtaining LIS PhD**

When asked if they would consider undertaking doctoral studies in library and information science, 39.5% of respondents said “no,” 14% said “yes,” and 46.5% said “maybe.” Unfortunately, this survey did not include an opportunity for respondents to justify their response. Future studies should seek to determine what would change a respondent's answer from “maybe” to “yes.”

**Discussion**

Overall, the responses from the Alabama reference librarians suggest that practitioners *do not use* a substantial amount of LIS research. It is true that most respondents stated that they have an interest in

hearing about LIS research when it addresses practical matters. They also read journal articles on a regular basis and frequently attend conferences to hear about new developments (not just because tenure requirements compel them to go). The high use of journal articles and conference attendance in the current study corresponds to the results of earlier surveys by Lynam, Slater and Walker (1982) as well as Ali (1985). The library profession can view these findings in a positive light since articles and conferences serve as conduits for research findings. However, the scant attention given to research journals, high use of general indexes with few research articles, low level of involvement in research projects, and sparse contact with researchers reveals a disconnect between research and practice.

The results of the Alabama study show that the respondents read mainly professional, magazines, not research journals. Most respondents peruse magazines such as *Library Journal* and *American Libraries* and a few peer-reviewed journals that specialize in reference services in academic libraries. However, respondents read few journals with research-driven content (e.g., *Library Quarterly*, *Library & Information Science Research*). This finding suggests that a great deal of published research never reaches the practitioner. If relevant research exists in a journal such as *Research Quarterly*, librarians probably have no awareness of its existence.

The survey revealed a particular problem in disseminating research about technology. When describing the kinds of research they would like to see completed, several respondents called for more research on information technology. While plenty of research focuses on this issue, few respondents read technology publications such as *JASIST*, a research journal, or even *Information Today*, a professional magazine.

In addition to leaving most research journals off their reading list, the respondents engage in fewer research projects than one might expect. The librarians also indicated that they have little contact with researchers (Table 7). When confronted with a new project in their work, librarians typically consult colleagues for advice rather than researchers. In summation, although many respondents expressed some interest in LIS research, their habits reveal a need to take steps to increase research use.

## Suggestions

Although the forty-three respondents to the survey cannot represent American librarians in general, the survey's results do offer a few preliminary suggestions for improving research utilization. One possible way of facilitating the flow of research to practice might lie in including more LIS research articles in general, full-text databases since many librarians have access to these resources through virtual libraries. In addition, adjusting the tenure requirements of LIS faculty so that they could publish articles in professional magazines would allow researchers to communicate their findings more widely. Disseminating abstracts of research articles through professional listservs might also prove effective.

In addition to broadcasting more research through practitioner-preferred channels, other ways of strengthening the research-practice nexus can take place through SLIS graduate programs. The results reveal some willingness on the part of Alabama reference librarians to learn more about research. When asked if they would consider undertaking doctoral studies, 14% said "yes" and 46.5% said "maybe." Recruitment efforts on the part of LIS researchers and educators could help to bring more practitioners into programs. Practitioners would learn more about research; researchers would learn more about the challenges faced by current practitioners. Perhaps more programs of part-time study or distance education would benefit both parties.

LIS schools should also explore new ways of introducing students to research and provide more opportunities for mentoring of students. Inconsistencies in the teaching of research courses may contribute to the clouded perception of research among librarians. As noted earlier, a survey of fifty-two LIS programs found that less than half required a research methods course.<sup>1</sup> One author has warned the profession about this deficiency: "until a majority of the field's practitioners can understand and apply the research results of others, the profession is not likely to realize much benefit from its research efforts."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Park, 17.

<sup>23</sup>Ronald R. Powell, *Basic Research Methods for Librarians* (Greenwich, CT: Ablex, 1997), 7.

More library school must therefore require research methodology courses or master's projects. Fortunately, recent activities and discussions surrounding research in the LIS curriculum may help.<sup>3</sup> More LIS schools should also encourage one-on-one experiences between LIS faculty and students so that they can forge a rapport that will last after graduation. This rapport would enable faculty to alert former students to current research.

However, as Table 11 suggests, creating more relevant research offers the most likely way of improving research use. Researchers and practitioners can both help create useful research by acknowledging each other's strengths and joining forces. On one hand, researchers should seek out collaboration with librarians so that research will focus on relevant topics and build upon the knowledge of practitioners. On the other hand, practitioners should strive to collaborate with researchers who have the social science expertise necessary to analyze data and publish research findings. Reference librarians conducting an evaluation of an instruction session, gathering statistics for an administrator, or performing some other "borderline-research" project should remember that this work has the potential to evolve into a publication when assisted by researchers. Only 20.5% of the Alabama survey's respondents have ever published research projects, but perhaps this figure would increase if more respondents had assistance from LIS researchers. Through cooperation, researchers and practitioners could create practice-focused research that would improve the overall relevancy of LIS literature and thereby boost its consumption by librarians.

While these suggestions may offer some help in bridging the research-practice gap, further study is required to fully understand the issue and guide the profession's attempts to find solutions. Some future topics might include: recruitment to doctoral programs, the value of tacit knowledge for reference librarians, the use of the "grapevine" for sharing research, the influence of LIS research on reference policy handbooks, and the effectiveness of LIS dissemination compared to dissemination in related fields. Authors must continue addressing this problem because librarians, like practitioners in medicine or other fields, need research that nourishes professional service. Considering the advent of new and often untested technologies in contemporary reference, the need for useful research is greater than ever before. In the recent statement "Dissemination of Research in LIS," the ALA Committee of Statistics and Research stressed the importance of research and proposed fostering more research use through awards, bibliographies, and conference programs. This call to action provides a start in strengthening the role of the research process in the LIS field.<sup>4</sup> However, for these kinds of efforts to succeed, researchers and librarians must build a mutually beneficial partnership. The profession will have a brighter future if the two groups can connect with each other, make sense of their common information needs, and move the field forward together.

---

<sup>24</sup>Peter Hernon and Carolyn Schwartz, "Regaining 'The Foundation of Understanding': The Role of LIS Education," *Library and Information Science Research* 17 (1995): 1-3; Barbara Moran, "Practitioners vs. LIS educators: Time to Reconnect," *Library Journal* 126, no. 18 (2001): 52-55. In addition to these articles, it is revealing to note that the topic of the 2003 Association for Information Science Educators Conference was "Declaration of Interdependence: Connecting Researchers and Practitioners."

<sup>25</sup>Committee on Research and Statistics, American Library Association, "Dissemination of Research in LIS: a Statement by the American Library Association Committee on Research and Statistics," (June 2001): [http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Our\\_Association/Offices/Research\\_and\\_Statistics/Committee\\_on\\_Research\\_and\\_Statistics/Dissemination\\_of\\_Research\\_in\\_LIS/Dissemination\\_of\\_Research\\_in\\_LIS.htm](http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Our_Association/Offices/Research_and_Statistics/Committee_on_Research_and_Statistics/Dissemination_of_Research_in_LIS/Dissemination_of_Research_in_LIS.htm).