

Research Using Primary Sources: A User Study

<http://www.lib.umd.edu/special/research/>

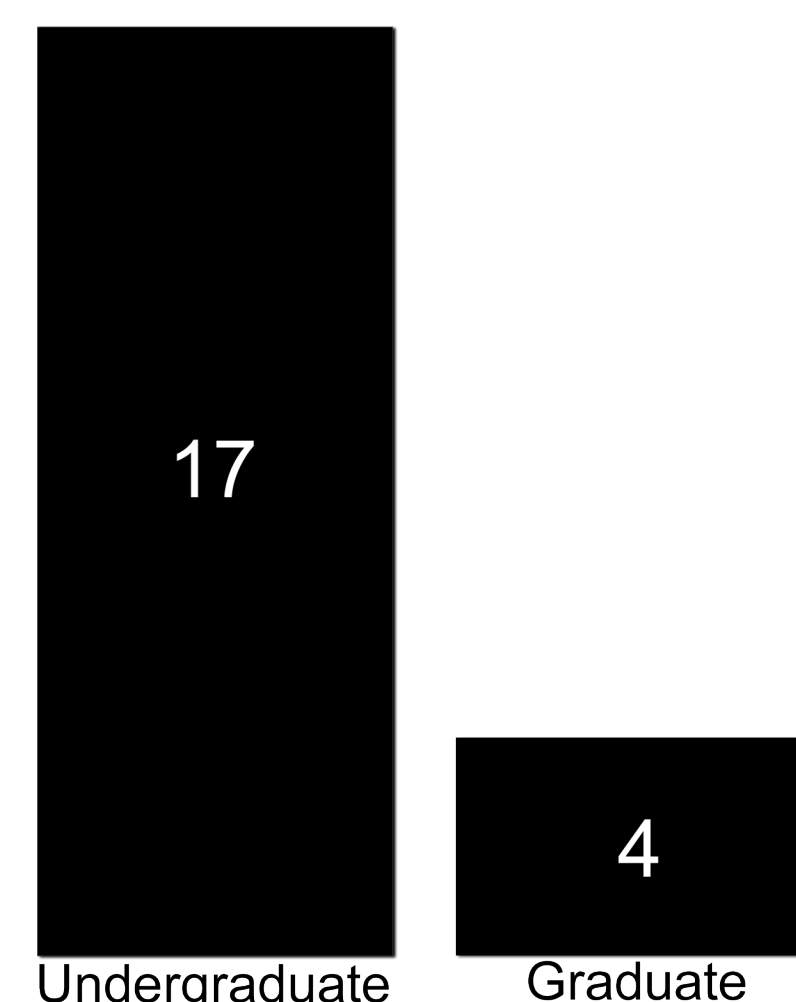
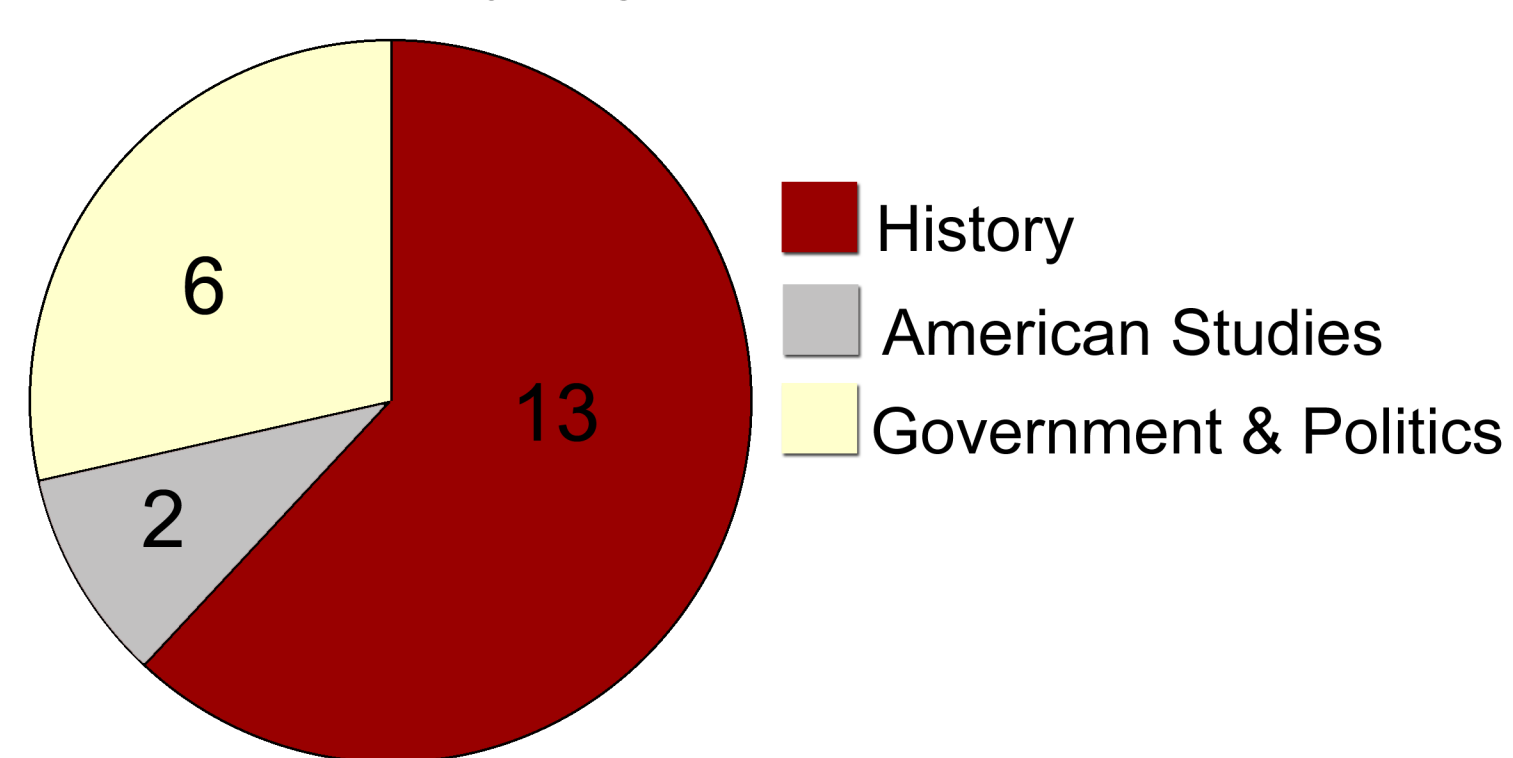
Special Collections
University of Maryland Libraries
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In 2006 we created an online guide to teach students the skills they need to locate and use primary source materials. We later tested the guide to assess how effectively it conveyed these skills. The study helped assess not simply the navigability of the website, but also provided the opportunity to explore the barriers students encounter when searching for primary source materials.

Methodology

Participants were asked to take a pre- and post- test, to complete a survey on the navigability of the website, and to complete four tasks after exploring the website. *Morae* software was used to capture their navigation, and the interviewers' interaction with the participants was recorded and transcribed.

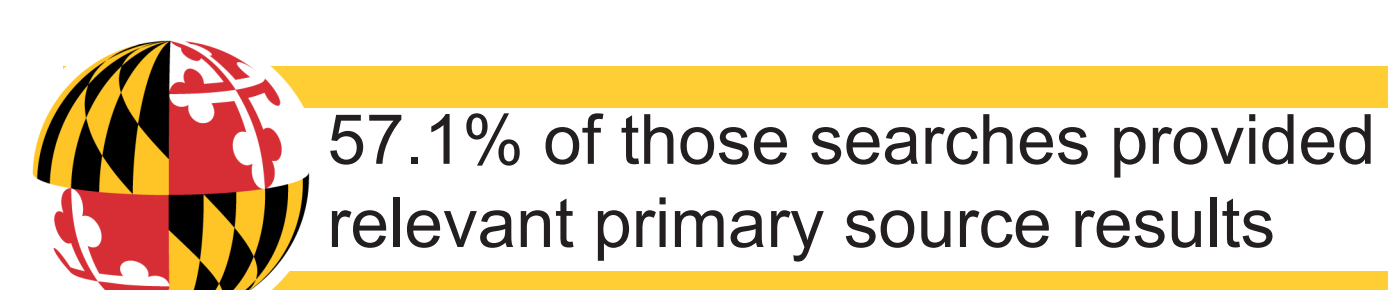
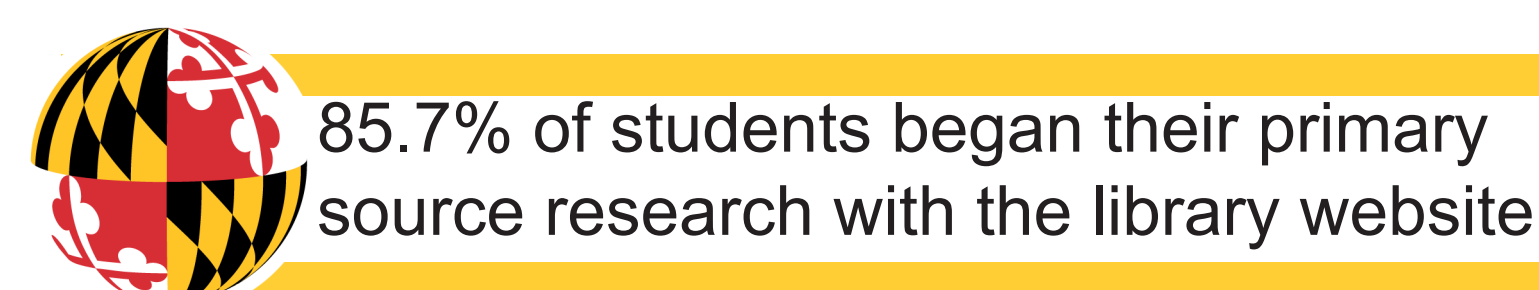
Participants by Major



Preliminary Results

Students do not distinguish between traditional library research techniques and those skills needed to locate primary sources.

- Almost 100% of incoming freshman receive formal library instruction within their first year at the University of Maryland
- Students assumed that familiar tools, such as the library catalog and databases, would yield equally comprehensive results for primary sources



- Students were quick to pick up on unfamiliar terms and tools when provided with specific instruction

The Missing Pieces

We identified four areas where students encountered obstacles that hampered their ability to effectively locate and use primary source materials

- * Unfamiliar with the concept of collections
- * Inability to interpret a variety of descriptive practices
- * Shallow or no understanding of the relativity of primary source materials

* Over-reliance on familiar tools and techniques

"...stuff that is irrefutable because the person was there..."
Ryan*, Senior, History

"I think the newspaper site is good... I've used that before."
-Hailey*, Senior, History

Clarifying Jargon

Find out what they don't know:

"Find a finding aid. Find a finding aid.... Ok. I'm a little unclear about what that means."
- Jacob*, Graduate Teaching Assistant, History

Find out what they do understand, and use it:

"Kind of an index, or an outline, summary of the different documents that are available."
- Kaylee*, Sophomore, Government & Politics

Definition: Finding aids are **indexes** to archival and manuscript collections.

Educating Student Users

In the Classroom

Collaborate with library instruction programs to provide more specific training to students and reference staff

Create simple instruction modules for library instructors and departmental faculty that demystify the basic skills and tools students should use

Find ways to help students visualize concepts: i.e., invite classes into the reading room or bring the "reading room" to the classes

Online

Design websites and handouts that address the "missing links" in student knowledge

Make simple, informed adjustments to interface design and examine use of terminology

Use visuals and navigational maps



* Not their real names