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Savvy Searchers

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A new study addresses academic library use in the age of Google.

Story by KIM HILL

Today's college students are sometimes called the "Net generation" because they cannot remember a time when there was no Internet.

Yet the most technologically savvy generation to date — for whom "Google" is a verb — is not very good at using it, according to one of many surprising results from a two-year study of how Illinois college students use academic libraries.

Entitled ERIAL (Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries), the study at Illinois Wesleyan and four other higher education institutions in the state examined how students view and use their campus libraries.

Two of the most striking results: 1) students did not understand the logic of how a search engine organizes and displays its results, and 2) librarians were nearly invisible to students within their academic worldview.

The Ames Library is a busy hub on Wesleyan's campus. But a new study showed that students don't always make effective use of its myriad resources.

"I assume librarians are busy doing library stuff," one sophomore said during the ERIAL study's data collection. During the study, researchers routinely observed students choose one search term in an academic database that yielded disappointing results. Without asking a librarian for help, the student would abandon the topic without further search.

In addition to working with faculty to engage students early on in the research process, Ames librarians strive to clarify how that process differs from, say, Yelping a restaurant for reviews. Above all, the Ames faculty want to make sure students know that librarians are there to help them.

Results thus far are encouraging. For example, in the 2007-2008 academic year (prior to the ERIAL Project), Ames librarians provided 85 instruction sessions on how to conduct academic research for 57 teaching faculty, whose classes reached 1,266 students, according to Academic Outreach Librarian Lynda Duke, Illinois Wesleyan's principal investigator on the project.

The most recent statistics (the 2011-12 academic year) indicate both the instruction sessions and the number of students reached had more than doubled. Librarians are now providing assistance for students in 80 percent of IWU's Gateway courses.

Rather than fighting today's students' dependence on Google, Duke uses that dependence to her advantage. In her classroom presentations alongside teaching faculty, she encourages students to discuss what makes Google so easy to use and why it's the default search engine for 900 million visitors each month.

"Then we talk about the 80 or so academic databases the library has, and how we pay to have access to scholarly information that Google doesn't," said Duke. She said the sessions focus on teaching students how to effectively access and utilize those databases and evaluate sources while encouraging students to consider asking a librarian for help.

Results from the ERIAL Project indicated college students exhibited a lack of understanding of search logic, didn't know how to build a search to narrow or expand results and didn't know how search engines (including Google) organize and display results. Duke emphasized that ERIAL's findings were not unique to Illinois Wesleyan students — rather, the ERIAL Project results are indicative of student attitudes and research habits across the nation.

When students did get the connection between librarians and what they do (i.e., help students and others with research), students reported high levels of satisfaction with the help provided, returned to that librarian for help with other assignments and recommended librarians to their peers, according to the ERIAL Project's findings.

Library staff and faculty have made physical changes as well. After realizing the word "reference," as in "Reference Desk," had no meaning for students, the reference desk was physically removed along with the reference collection.

"The materials in the reference collection are now in the stacks, and some of those items circulate," said University Librarian Karen Schmidt. "Students now find reference material alongside the regular collections. This encourages serendipitous discovery."

"The waves resulting from the ERIAL Project have been significant," said Duke, who also served as co-editor of *College Libraries and Student Culture: What We Now Know* (ALA Editions, 2012), a publication of the ERIAL Project's findings.

Those waves will continue breaking thanks to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, whose grant will fund research on how students acquire information literacy in their disciplines, train student tutors in writing and research skills, provide workshops for faculty and fund partnerships between library and teaching faculty.