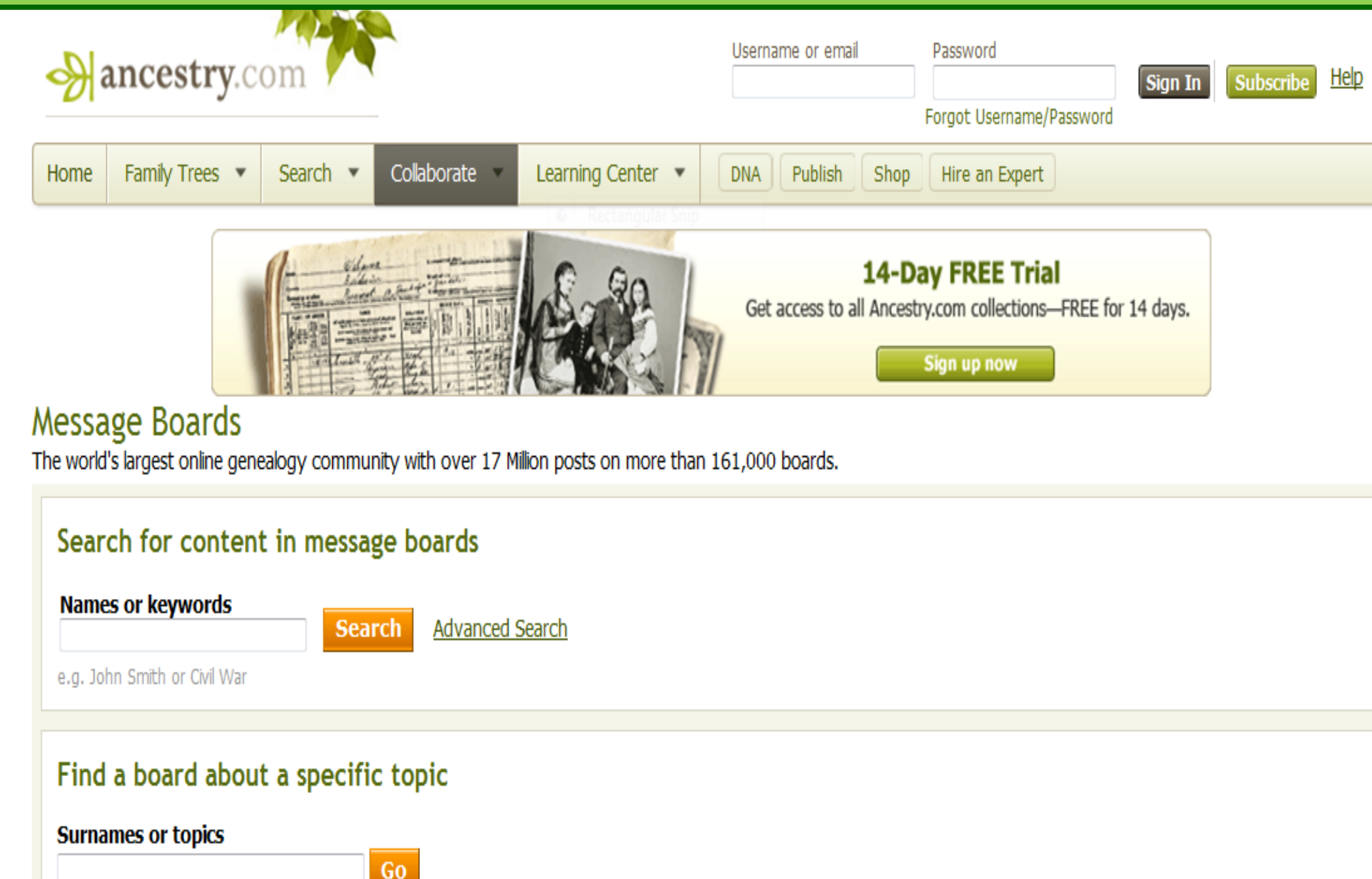
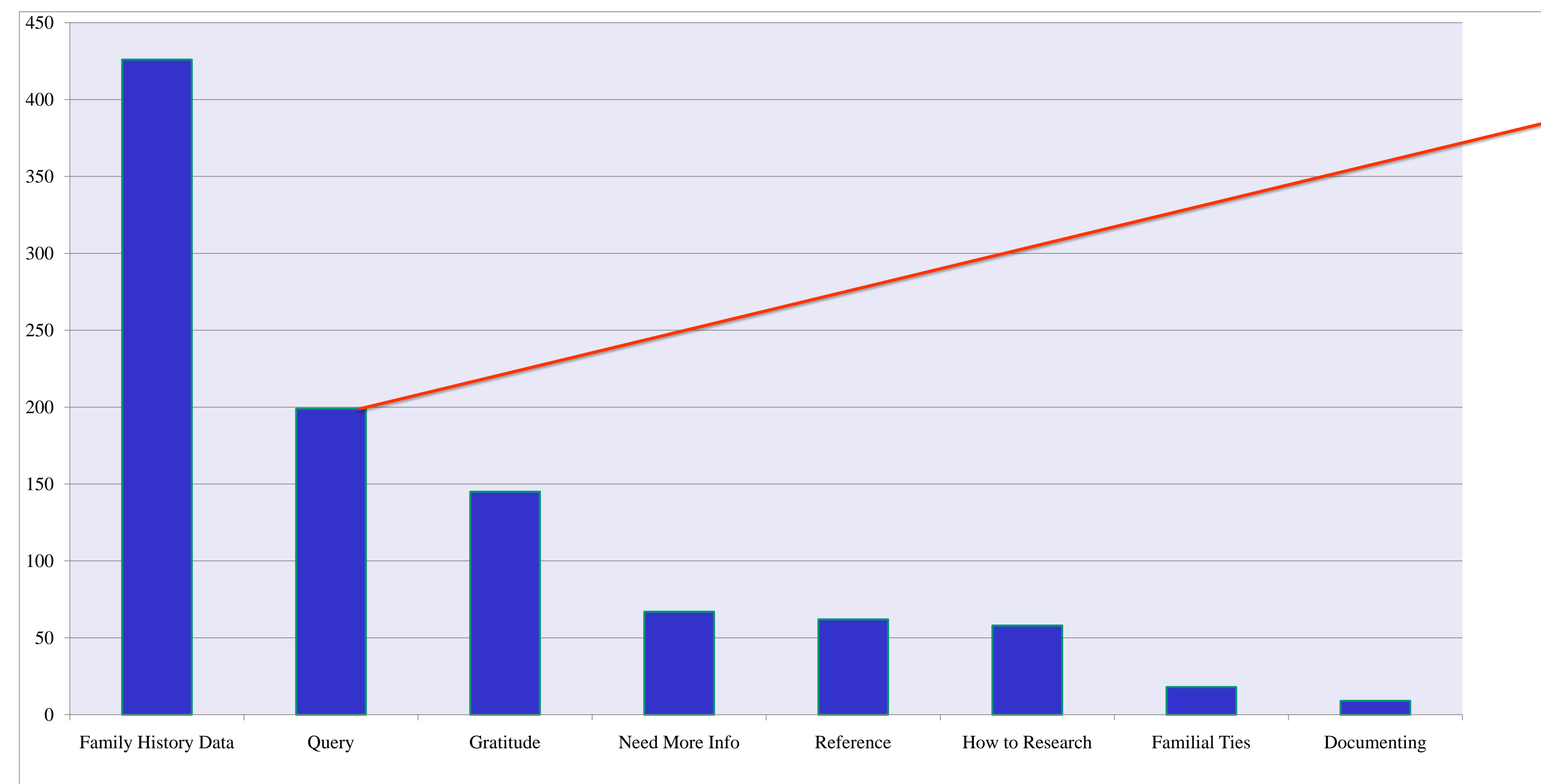


Introduction: Genealogists, Information Sharing, and the Web

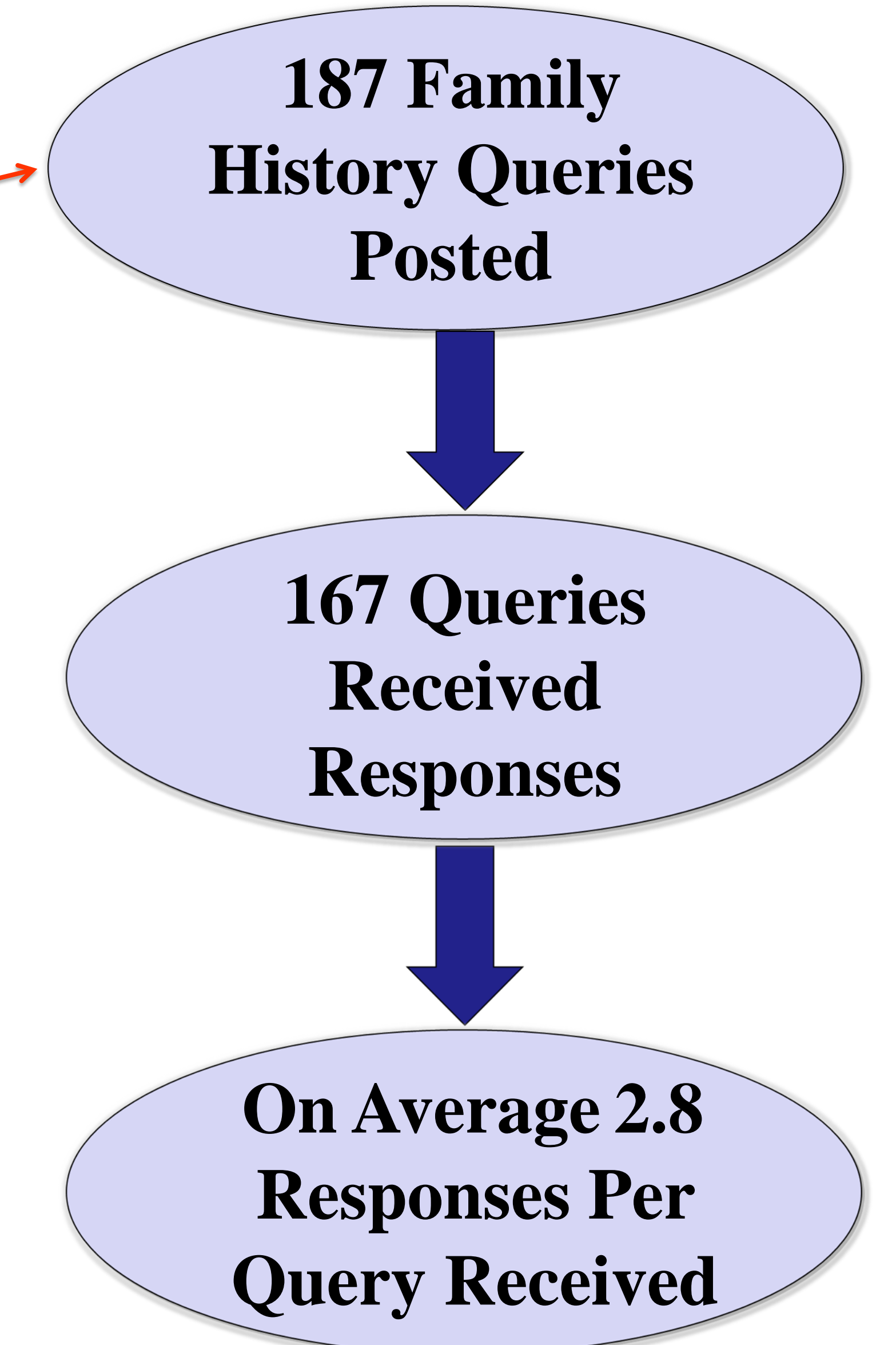


According to the PEW Internet and American Life Project, 54 million Americans belong to a family in which a family member has used the Internet to research their genealogy. Previous researchers found that amateur genealogists prize informal information sharing with other genealogists to advance their research interests, and that the Web has played an important role in supporting this information sharing. Our study will examine the information seeking and sharing activities of genealogists on the heavily used message boards on Ancestry.com, a popular family history website.

Findings



Analysis reveals that posts offering specific genealogical data in response to posted queries were the most common type of post, and family history queries were the second most common type of post.



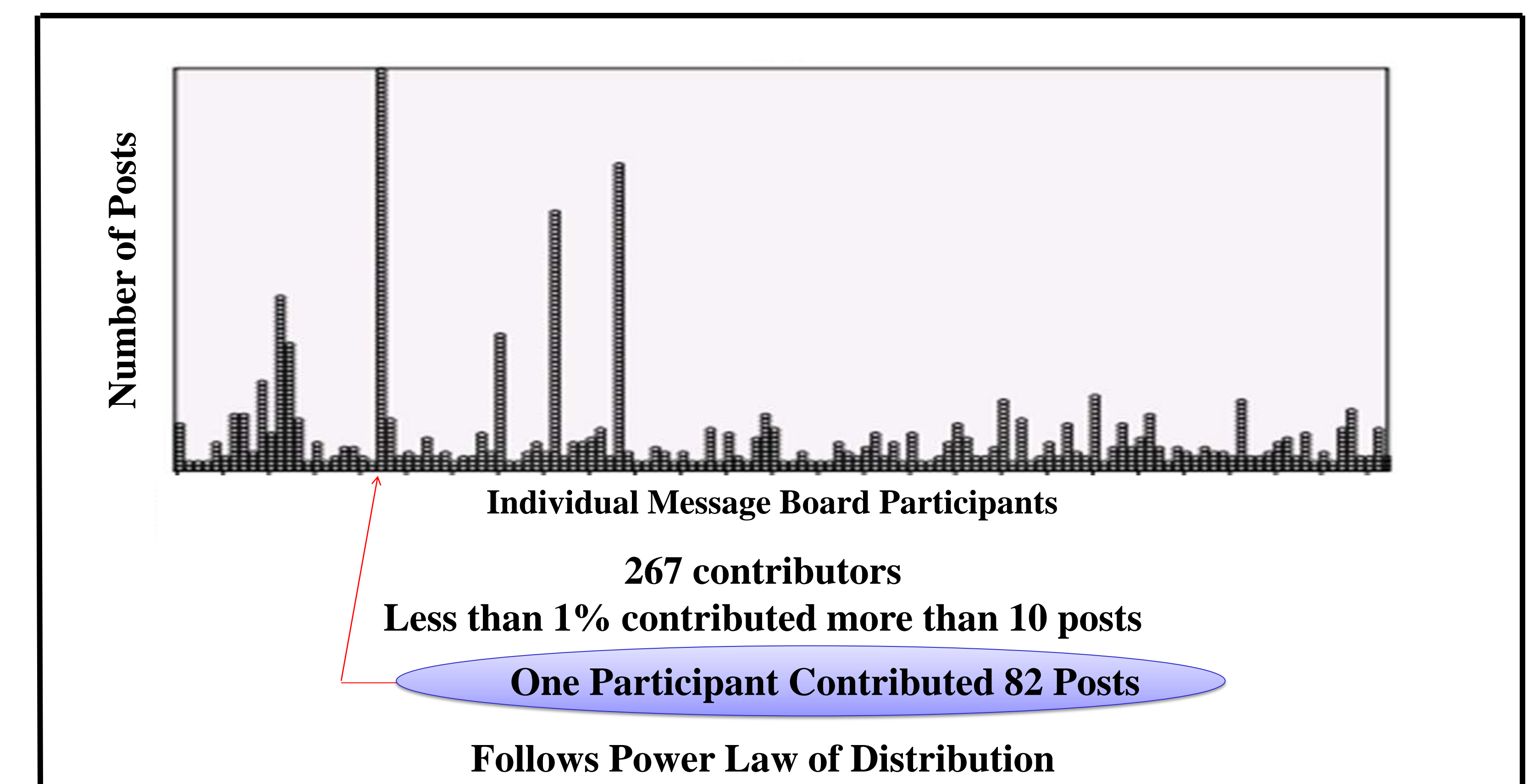
Research Questions and Methodology

The research questions that guided the study are:

- 1) How are genealogists employing message boards to support their research efforts?
- 2) Do the message board posts suggest that reciprocal information sharing is occurring among genealogists?

The researchers extracted text from 951 posts from Ancestry.com's "United States - General" message board for the period January 2010 to August 2010. Employing a grounded theory approach, content analysis was utilized to categorize the primary content theme of each message board post. In addition, quantitative data, such as the number of participants in the message board exchanges and the answer rate to posted inquiries, was also collected. The exchange of messages among message board participants was mapped to determine whether reciprocal information exchanging was occurring.

Message Categories	Category Descriptions
Data	Providing family history data (e.g. census data) or scanned documents in response to a query
How to Research	General advice on how to conduct genealogical research in response to a query
Reference	Providing specific information about where data or documents might be found in response to a query
Need more information to conduct research	Asking for additional information from an individual who posted a query in order to aid researcher in the information search process
Query	Family history question
Expression of gratitude	Thanking others for providing information
Expression of familial connection	Suggestion of familial connections between message board participants
How to properly document family history	How to cite sources properly



Conclusion

- Message board data reveals the presence of a communal research service for genealogists by genealogists.
- Presence of volunteer 'super sharers,' who disproportionately provide information to other genealogists.
- To support genealogists' information sharing, memory institutions may want to include message boards for patron use on their websites.