



Graduate Student Library Research Skills Workshop Series: A Needs Assessment

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Background

The University of Western Ontario is placing increasing emphasis on the development of graduate students and research at the University. Western Libraries is therefore focusing on providing resources and services specifically for graduate students. Research & Instructional Services (R&IS) Librarians at the Allyn & Betty Taylor Library would like to emphasize information literacy skills for graduate students by establishing a library research skills workshop series for all graduate students served by Taylor Library. As a first step in developing the workshop series, a team of R&IS Librarians at Taylor Library conducted a needs assessment in July and August 2006. The goals of the needs assessment were to identify particular library research skills required by graduate students and determine how graduate students would like to learn those skills.

The needs assessment was carried out by means of three instruments: faculty focus groups, student focus groups, and a student survey. The faculty and student participants were from the Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Health Science, Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, and the Faculty of Science.

Discussion of Results

There were 274 survey responses, for a response rate of approximately 16% based on total enrolment figures for 2005/06 from the Western Databook 2006. The student focus groups had 33 participants in total, and there were 8 participants in the faculty focus group. Survey respondents were well represented across the four faculties, and the sample was also representative with respect to the proportion of Master's and PhD respondents in each faculty. A significant number of survey respondents had obtained previous degrees outside Canada; 35% of respondents overall have a Bachelor's degree from another country and 15% of respondents have a Master's degree from another country. 67% of respondents from the Faculty of Engineering had an international Bachelor's degree, compared with only 4% for Health Sciences, 12% for Medicine & Dentistry, and 37% for Science.

Current Information-Seeking Practices

Students were asked how they currently feel about their library research skills – whether they have been taught how to do library research, what are their main challenges with library research, and which sources they primarily use. Overall, 72% of respondents have been taught how to search online article databases at some point in their academic careers, but this percentage decreases for most other skills, down to only 9% who have been taught how to find patents. Those areas where students had received the most instruction were: using the library catalogue, searching online article databases, doing a literature review, and formatting citations in a bibliography.

Survey respondents identified many challenges with finding the information they need for their work. Certain challenges were more evident in the individual faculties, which was appropriate given the nature of those disciplines. In particular, all faculties had four major challenges in common: keywords & search terms, too much information, online access issues, and materials we don't have.

Most students reported using databases that are appropriate for their subject areas. Each faculty also reported databases that would be primarily associated with other disciplines, which reflects the interdisciplinary nature of many students' research.

Workshop Preferences

Survey respondents were generally very positive about the usefulness of the ten workshops described. Overall, each workshop was rated “very” or “somewhat” useful by anywhere from 67% to 83% of respondents. Some interesting differences were evident between respondents in the four faculties. Respondents in Engineering were much more interested in the workshops on Introduction to Western Libraries, Scholarly Communication Process, and Ethical Use of Information. From the focus groups, it seemed that international students were generally more interested in these sessions, so the higher percentage of international students in Engineering might account for this difference. Students in Engineering, Science and Health Sciences all chose Identifying Key Research Papers as the most useful workshop, and for Medicine & Dentistry students this workshop was a close second behind Introduction to RefWorks.

Participants in both the faculty and student focus groups said that several of the workshops could be combined. Faculty members thought that all of the workshop topics were important for students to know, although they seemed to feel most strongly that their students should gain a repertoire of strategies for searching the literature. One interesting difference from the students’ perspectives was that faculty placed more importance on knowledge of copyright, plagiarism, and intellectual property.

There was a clear preference among graduate students for receiving instruction about library research skills online rather than in person. In the survey responses, 64% said they would prefer online tutorials, 47% would like workshops run by a librarian and a faculty member, and 43% would like workshops run by a librarian (respondents could choose more than one option). In the focus groups, students felt that many of the points in the proposed workshops could be adequately described in online FAQs or other online documents, although many students said they would like to have a workshop to introduce the topic and then online material to refer to afterwards. Students also indicated that time constraints would influence their decision to attend a workshop, and would therefore make online resources more appealing. In contrast to the students’ opinions, faculty members expressed a strong desire for students to have hands-on experience with library research skills instruction. They also said that collaboration between faculty and librarians was an important component of teaching library research skills.

Students were asked what would be incentives for them to attend the workshops, and what would prevent them from attending. The top incentives for them to attend were: topics relevant to my work, learning what I need to know, hands-on opportunities, and relatively small class size. Deterrents from attending were time constraints (too busy), topics that are not relevant to my work, inconvenient workshop time, topics that sound too basic, and workshop is too long.

Overall, 85% of survey respondents indicated that subject-specific workshops were “somewhat” or “very important” for their work. This was lowest in Science, at 78%, and highest in Engineering and Health Sciences, both at 90%. Faculty focus group participants said they thought subject-specificity would be valuable for workshops such as Identifying Key Research Papers and Writing the Research Paper, where it would be important to address different tools or styles depending on the discipline. Faculty also thought that it could be difficult to teach a workshop on searching and selecting databases if the students were in several different disciplines.

There was no clear indication about the time of day that would be suitable for most students. The majority of survey respondents indicated that their preference for time of day would depend on their schedule each term. Opinions about the length of workshops also varied. Some students felt that short (as short as half an hour) workshops would be more appealing, but others said they would like a full day workshop.

Conclusions

The proposed workshop series was received favourably by graduate students and faculty members. Many commented that the series would be very useful and was a great idea. The perceived need by Taylor Library’s Research & Instructional Services Librarians for this workshop series was confirmed by

the needs assessment. Significant numbers of students have not had previous instruction on library research skills, and students and faculty members identified many challenges that graduate students have with finding information. Recommendations for a graduate student workshop series based on this needs assessment follows.

Proposal for Graduate Student Library Research Skills Workshop Series

The first offering of this workshop series will be in the January – April 2007 term. The following workshops will be offered:

1. Introduction to Library Research at Western

Includes navigating the Library's website, searching the catalogue, locating materials in the library, as well as an overview of copyright, plagiarism, and how to cite references appropriately.

2. Basic Searching Skills

The workshop will include searching the library catalogue, requesting materials from ARCC or via RACER, choosing subject databases, developing search strategies, techniques for narrowing searches, and a brief introduction to RefWorks. The workshop will be offered in at least two subject-specific streams.

3. Advanced Searching Skills

The workshop will include a broader range of search strategies, discussion of various tools for identifying key research, and a brief introduction to RefWorks. The workshop will be offered in at least two subject-specific streams.

4. Keeping Current with Scholarly Literature

Includes discussion of how to construct an effective search strategy for current awareness alerts. Participants will have the opportunity to set up alerts.

5. Introduction to RefWorks

Includes setting up a RefWorks account and hands-on practice with importing citations from various sources. Participants should have taken at least one of the searching skills workshops, or have equivalent experience.

From the original list of workshop topics presented to focus group participants and survey respondents, the following will not be offered in this first iteration of the workshop series:

- Scholarly Communication Process
- Library Research for the Literature Review
- Writing the Research Paper

Online material will be prepared in conjunction with each of the five workshops, and will be available to all graduate students. A brief skills audit will be made available to students, which will assist in determining which of the workshops will be most appropriate for each individual. Announcements about the workshop series will be distributed via email and posted to the Taylor Library website.

For further information about the Graduate Student Library Research Skills Workshop Series, please contact your [subject librarian](#) or the [workshop series planning team](#).

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