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**HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR IN THE  
RESEARCH PROCESS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS**

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## ABSTRACT

Studies by Carol Kuhlthau and Constance Mellon of the research process of college students indicate that librarians are less frequently used as sources of help than might be expected. Neither researcher, however, has extensively explored the reasons for this failure to seek assistance. The findings of some recent studies by Stuart Karabenick of the help seeking behavior of college students may be usefully applied to students needing help with library research assignments. This paper describes a study of 326 undergraduates in twenty-two courses which required a library research project. Students were surveyed to determine the extent of their need for help, the sources from which they sought assistance, and the reasons for any reluctance to approach librarians or professors. Results confirm some previous findings but also reveal considerable willingness to seek help from librarians.

In a paper presented at the 20th National LOEX Library Instruction Conference in 1992, Stuart A Karabenick, a psychologist at Eastern Michigan University, and Jane Keefer, a librarian at the same institution, suggested that recent research on the information search process conducted by, among others, Carol Kuhlthau and Constance Mellon might profitably be melded with a rapidly growing body of literature on help-seeking behavior, literature which, to that point, had been largely ignored by librarians (1). They noted that both Kuhlthau and Mellon had identified a series of discrete, if sometimes recursive, stages in the process typically used by students engaged in research projects. Particularly in the early stages of this process, both Kuhlthau and Mellon observed, students often experienced a strong sense of inadequacy, a feeling that they did not know how to do research effectively and might not be able to complete the project. Accompanying this feeling was, as might be expected, a strong desire for help. Karabenick, who had already undertaken a number of studies of the help-seeking behavior of college students, felt that his work, and that of others in the field, might contribute to an understanding of the behavior of students needing help with research projects. This paper is a preliminary attempt to apply Karabenick's work specifically to the information search process as defined by Kuhlthau and Mellon.

Kuhlthau, who studied both high school and college students, made her most

significant contribution to the study of the information search process in her division of that process into six clearly defined, if sometimes overlapping, stages: task initiation, topic selection, prefocus exploration, focus formulation, information collection, and search closure. Kuhlthau noted that the stage of prefocus exploration is often the one which generates the highest level of anxiety. It is at this point that students have chosen a general subject area and located some information on it. They must now try to focus on a unified, coherent and manageable topic. Because the material they have found to this point is usually incomplete and often contradictory, they may despair of being able to focus appropriately and be tempted to abandon the proposed subject altogether (2). Constance Mellon's model of the research process, although similar in concept, includes fewer discrete stages and describes the process as more recursive with the stages of search, retrieval, and evaluation often being repeated several times prior to closure (3). Like Kuhlthau, Mellon found that students experienced feelings of inadequacy when confronted with a research assignment; in fact she coined the term "library anxiety" to describe this syndrome (4).

In the course of their research, both authors found considerable reluctance on the part of many students to ask for help, particularly from librarians, even at those stages of the process where they felt most frustrated and unsure of themselves. Mellon attributes this reluctance to a fear of revealing ignorance. Most students, she discovered, felt their perceived lack of competence was not shared by others (5). Kuhlthau sought information from the students she surveyed concerning exactly which sources they actually asked for help. She identified four types of help source, or

"mediator" as she calls them: "friend or family member; peer (one doing a similar task); expert (teacher, professor or one who knows about the topic); professional (librarian, one who knows about sources) (6). She found the most frequently consulted source, the expert, was utilized by only 39% of students surveyed; librarians were approached by only 25% (7). An earlier, in-depth study of a small group of college students also found that "librarians played only a minimal role in their search process" (8).

Neither Kuhlthau nor Mellon has explored in depth the question of students' reluctance to seek help. Kuhlthau, in fact, specifically mentions "the role of mediators in the search process" as an area requiring further study (9). It is precisely in this area, as Keefer and Karabenick note in their paper, that recent research on help-seeking behavior from fields outside librarianship can make a contribution. In fact, it is the work of Karabenick himself which appears to be most relevant to this issue.

Much of the research done on the help seeking behavior of college students has tended to focus on students with personal or career problems. Karabenick is one of the relatively few who has examined the behavior of students needing primarily academic assistance. One study in particular, although its emphasis is on the classroom situation, offers a useful model which may profitably be applied to a study of help-seeking in the academic library. In it Karabenick and his co-author, John Knapp, surveyed 612 students in general psychology courses to determine the

extent of their need for assistance in that specific course. If students indicated a need for help, they were asked if they had, to that point, actually sought aid and from whom. The authors provided a list of possible help sources from which students could choose. This list reflected a distinction between "formal" and "informal" sources which roughly parallels Kuhlthau's categories of "mediators" mentioned above. Formal sources included the course professor, student tutors and various official support centers. Informal sources were friends or other students. Those students who indicated that they had felt a need for help but had not sought it from formal sources were asked why not. A list of possible reasons for failing to seek help was provided. The authors found that fully 94% of all students surveyed expressed some need for help. Of those who actually sought help, "informal sources were used to a considerably greater degree than their formal counterparts"(10). Although previous research had frequently suggested that help-seeking, particularly from formal sources, is a threat to self-esteem, ego did not appear to be a significant factor in the failure of these students to ask for assistance. While frequently admitting that their academic difficulties might be the result of inadequate effort, they rarely mentioned embarrassment or fear of being considered a failure as reasons for not seeking help (11).

## RESEARCH INSTRUMENT AND METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire (Appendix ) based on the one used by Knapp and Karabenick,

but modified to address some of the specifically library related issues raised by Kuhlthau and Mellon, was administered to students in twenty-two undergraduate classes at Providence College in the spring of 1995. Participating classes were all ones which had been given assignments requiring "significant library research" (although not, in all cases, an actual research paper). All students present in class on the day the questionnaire was administered were asked to complete it, insuring a very high response rate.

The questionnaire was designed to address the following questions:

What percentage of students felt a need for help during the research process?

At what stage(s) of the process did they need help?

Of those needing help, how many actually asked for it?

From whom did students seek help?

What were the primary reasons why students failed to ask "formal sources" (e.g. professors or librarians) for assistance?

Were there any significant differences in help-seeking behavior by sex, class or number of research papers done?



After providing basic information on their class (freshman, sophomore, etc.) and sex, students were asked to indicate whether or not they had ever had a library instruction class at Providence College and to estimate approximately how many research papers they had done. They were then asked whether they had, at any point in the research process, felt a need for assistance and, if so, at what stage(s). The listed stages were adapted from Kuhlthau but somewhat simplified because it was felt students might not understand Kuhlthau's stages without considerable explanation.

Those students indicating a need for help were asked if they had, in fact, sought it at any point during the semester. A list of possible help sources was provided. These sources also were adapted from Kuhlthau but reflected Karabenick's distinction between formal and informal. On the assumption that the two most frequently used formal sources would be professors and librarians, information was sought from students who did not use either or both why they had not. The list of suggested reasons was based on Karabenick's but included some that were specifically relevant to the library situation.

## RESULTS

326 usable responses were analyzed. 61.9% percent of respondents were female; 38.1% male. Although no effort had been made to balance the grade level of classes surveyed, the distribution was surprisingly even: 27.2% freshmen, 21.9% sophomores, 27.8% juniors and 32.1% seniors. 74.9% of respondents indicated they

had had a bibliographic instruction class. Responses to the question of how many research papers students had done while at Providence College were also split fairly evenly as indicated in Table 1. Although both over and under-reporting are likely in these totals, it was hoped that grouping responses would increase validity.

(INSERT TABLE 1)

85.3% of all respondents indicated they had felt, at some point during the course of the semester, a need for help with their project. Answers to the question of how much help was needed clustered, as might be expected, around the midpoint with a slightly higher percentage rating themselves below than above.

(INSERT TABLE 2)

When asked to indicate the stage or stages of the research process at which they needed help, students overwhelmingly chose "finding relevant information" although 21% noted difficulty in focusing on a specific topic.

(INSERT TABLE 3)

Of those students indicating a need for help, over 90% indicated they had actually sought assistance from at least one source. Over three-quarters of those saying they sought help from another student, the course professor or a librarian

indicated they had done so between one and three times. Although they were specifically encouraged in the survey cover letter to try to recall every time they had asked for help, under-reporting should perhaps be assumed in these responses.

(INSERT TABLE 4)

Of the reasons for not asking a formal help source (professor or librarian), by far the most frequently checked was "Got all the help I needed from other sources". 54.7% gave this as a reason for not consulting the professor and 41.6% for not asking a librarian. 25.8% of students offered as a reason for not asking the professor "Felt I should have known how to do it myself"; only 6.7% gave the comparable response as a reason for not approaching a librarian. The only other responses checked by more than ten percent of respondents were (for not asking the professor) "Didn't have time" (13.3%); and (for not asking a librarian) "Library staff seemed too busy" (12.4%) and "Didn't feel library staff would be able to help" (18.0%).

Questions 3, 6 and 7, which asked respectively whether help was needed, whether it was sought and, if so, from whom, were tested using the chi-square test to see if any significant differences appeared by either sex, grade or number of papers done. There were no statistically significant differences (at the .05 probability level) in any of these variables by sex. Males and females displayed an equal need for help and an equal willingness to ask for it. There was also no difference by grade in either need for help or actual help seeking. A barely significant difference surfaced in the

source from whom help was sought, with freshmen slightly more likely than seniors to request help from another student (chi-square=7.846, df=3, probability=.049). No significant difference appeared in any of the variables when measured against the number of papers done; those having done nine or ten papers reported as much need for assistance as those having done only one or two.

### ANALYSIS

Although roughly consistent with the findings of some of the studies summarized in the literature review, the results of this survey clearly diverge from earlier research in significant ways. The high percentage of students reporting a need for help reflects the findings of Knapp and Karabenick. Because of the way they reported their data, however, it was impossible to determine exactly what percentage of students in their study actually sought help. The figure appears, however, to be somewhat less than the 90.6% found in this survey. There is also support for some of Kuhlthau's findings. For example, about twenty-one percent of students reported needing help focusing their topic, the stage of the research process which Kuhlthau found most problematical. However, finding information was clearly the stage at which most help was needed. The rather strikingly high percentage (18%) of students who reported they did not ask a librarian for help because they did not think the librarian would be able to help reflects a lack of confidence also found by Kuhlthau.

Where the findings of this study diverge most strikingly from those reported

elsewhere is in the willingness of students to seek help from so-called formal sources. Knapp and Karabenick did not include a librarian in their list of suggested formal sources since the situation they were studying was not one where librarians could play a significant role.. While they found that 53% of students sought help from their instructor ( an identical percentage to that reported in this study), they found virtually no use of any other formal help source. As noted earlier, Kuhlthau reported in one study that only a quarter of the students she talked to reported seeking help from a librarian. Given these earlier findings the fact that over two-thirds of the students needing help in this survey reported approaching a librarian is sufficiently striking to warrant replication of the study at other institutions.

Because so many students did seek help from either their professor or a librarian, the reasons given by those who did not may be of questionable significance. In general, however, they confirm the findings of Knapp and Karabenick and do not support those of Mellon. It does not appear that embarrassment or a fear of revealing ignorance significantly inhibited help-seeking. It is possible, of course, that, even in a totally anonymous survey, students are reluctant to concede such feelings. The fact that over a quarter of respondents gave "Felt I should have known how to do it myself" as a reason for not asking the professor while only about seven percent gave the comparable reason for not approaching a librarian may be an indication of some reluctance to admit ignorance to the professor. It is also possible that the type of assistance students felt they might get from the professor (e.g. choosing a topic or actually writing the paper) is also the type they feel least comfortable asking for.

With respect to the breakdown of selected questions by sex, grade and number of papers, the most striking finding is that no strong differences emerged. The popular notion that women are more willing to seek help than men finds some empirical support in the help-seeking research but did not manifest itself here. It might also seem logical to assume an inverse relationship between need for help and number of papers done. The more papers a student has done, the less help he or she should need. This does not appear to be the case, however, a finding which may give pause to bibliographic instruction librarians who believe that basic research skills are both teachable and transferable. A likely explanation is that, although students do learn from the experience of doing research papers, the research assignments themselves become progressively more challenging so the need for help remains consistent. This hypothesis could only be tested through a careful analysis of the relative difficulty of different assignments and the type of assistance sought in completing them.

## CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study was the unexpectedly high percentage of students who were willing to seek help from a member of the library staff when confronted with a significant information need. Particularly if corroborated by similar studies at other institutions, this news is encouraging for librarians concerned about their inability to provide needed assistance to students who refuse to ask for it. Although more research should be done on the question, it does not appear that ego-related factors play a significant role in the behavior of students seeking help in

strictly academic situations. While this obviously does not mean that librarians should relax their efforts to create a welcoming and non-threatening environment, it does indicate that such efforts may be more successful than previous research has suggested.

Despite these encouraging results, however, librarians need to realize that, even in the most congenial environment, large numbers of students will turn to other students for help. There is an inclination to assume that such assistance will necessarily be inferior to that provided by formal sources such as librarians and professors. At least with respect to students involved in library research, however, this assumption has never been formally tested. Librarians really know nothing very specific, other than what they may have gleaned from casual observation, about what types of assistance students give each other. As the information search process of most college students becomes increasingly less library centered, this question assumes greater urgency. It seems likely, now that students have widespread access to the Internet as well as to many of the online databases which used to be available only in the library, that they will depend even more on fellow students and less on librarians for help.

What is needed now is accurate information on exactly how dependable the assistance is which students receive from each other. Data on this subject can probably not be collected through simple questionnaires or surveys. What is required is detailed qualitative study, similar to that conducted by Kuhlthau, utilizing carefully

maintained student search logs and in-depth interviews. Such studies would be well worth undertaking because they would not only permit assessment of the level of assistance presently being provided to students but might also suggest ways librarians could help students to be better help providers. Rather than fighting what is likely to be an increasingly futile battle to convince students that only formal sources can provide the help they need, librarians should make a greater effort to ensure that all help sources, both formal and informal, function as effectively as possible.



TABLE 1

NUMBER OF RESEARCH PAPERS DONE

0-2 papers	23.0%
3-5 papers	35.6%
6-8 papers	20.9%
9 or more papers	20.6%

TABLE 2

EXTENT OF HELP NEED

1	7.1%
2	24.9%
3	42.7%
4	17.4%
5	7.1%

TABLE 3

STAGES AT WHICH HELP WAS NEEDED

Selecting a general subject	6.5%
Focusing on a specific subject	20.9%
Finding relevant information	80.9%
Evaluating information found	15.8%
Writing the paper	13.3%

TABLE 4

SOURCES FROM WHOM HELP WAS SOUGHT

Another Providence College student	51.3%
A relative or friend not at the College	11.2%
The professor of the course	53.6%
Another faculty member	7.2%
A tutor	1.8%
A member of the library staff	67.9%
Anyone else	2.9%

APPENDIX

COURSE NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ SEX: Male\_\_ FEMALE\_\_

CLASS: Freshman\_\_ Sophomore\_\_ Junior\_\_ Senior\_\_

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Have you ever, while at Providence College, been in a class which went to the library for a formal presentation on how to do library research? YES\_\_ NO\_\_

2. Approximately how many course papers have you done at Providence College which required library research?

Fewer than 3\_\_ 3 to 5\_\_ 6 to 8\_\_ More than 8\_\_

3. Did you feel at any time during this semester that you needed help with the research paper in this course? YES\_\_ NO\_\_

4. If you answered "YES" to Question 3, rate your need for help on the scale below.

Needed very little help    1    2    3    4    5    Needed a lot of help

5. At what stage(s) of your research project did you feel you needed help?

- Didn't need any help
- Selecting a general subject
- Focusing on a specific topic
- Finding relevant information (e.g., books, articles)
- Evaluating information found
- Writing the paper (e.g., grammar, organization, footnotes, bibliography)

6. Did you, at any time during the semester, ask anyone for help with your research paper? YES\_\_ NO\_\_

-over-

7. If you answered "YES" to Question 6, whom did you ask for help? (Check all that apply and, for each choice, indicate approximately how many times you asked for help.)

WHO	HOW MANY TIMES
<input type="checkbox"/> Another PC student	—
<input type="checkbox"/> A relative or friend not at PC	—
<input type="checkbox"/> The professor of this course	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Another PC faculty member	—
<input type="checkbox"/> A tutor	—
<input type="checkbox"/> A member of the library staff	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Anyone else (please specify)	—

8. If you did not ask for help from your professor, please indicate why not. (Check all that apply.)

- Didn't need help
  - Didn't have time
  - Got all the help I needed from other sources
  - Felt I should have known how to do it myself
  - Felt my questions might sound foolish
  - Didn't feel the professor would be willing to help me
  - Didn't think the professor could answer my questions
  - Didn't want the professor to know I needed help
  - Felt that getting help wouldn't improve my grade
  - Other reason (please specify)
- 

9. If you did not ask for help from a member of the library staff, please indicate why not. (Check all that apply.)

- Didn't need help
  - Got all the help I needed from other sources
  - Didn't have time
  - Didn't know library staff were available to help
  - No library staff available when I needed help
  - Library staff seemed too busy
  - Didn't feel library staff would be able to help
  - Felt I should have known how to do research
  - Felt my questions would sound foolish
  - Didn't want anyone to know I needed help
  - Felt that getting help wouldn't improve my grade
  - Other reason (please specify)
-

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