"I DON'T WANT TO LOOK STUPID FOR ASKING BASIC QUESTIONS"
Student usage and perceptions of academic library reference services

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UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
THE UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO

Background

- The University of Toledo (UT) is a comprehensive public metropolitan research university

- Enrollment of over 20,000 students

- UT Libraries: Carlson Library, Mulford Health Science Library, Engineering Library

- Hybrid, tiered reference models

- In the context of a library reorganization and changes in library administration, the authors became curious about how students used and perceived reference services

Research Questions

Are there differences in characteristics among students who do or do not use library reference services?

What are students' perceptions of reference librarians?

What are students' perceived barriers and facilitators to seeking reference assistance?
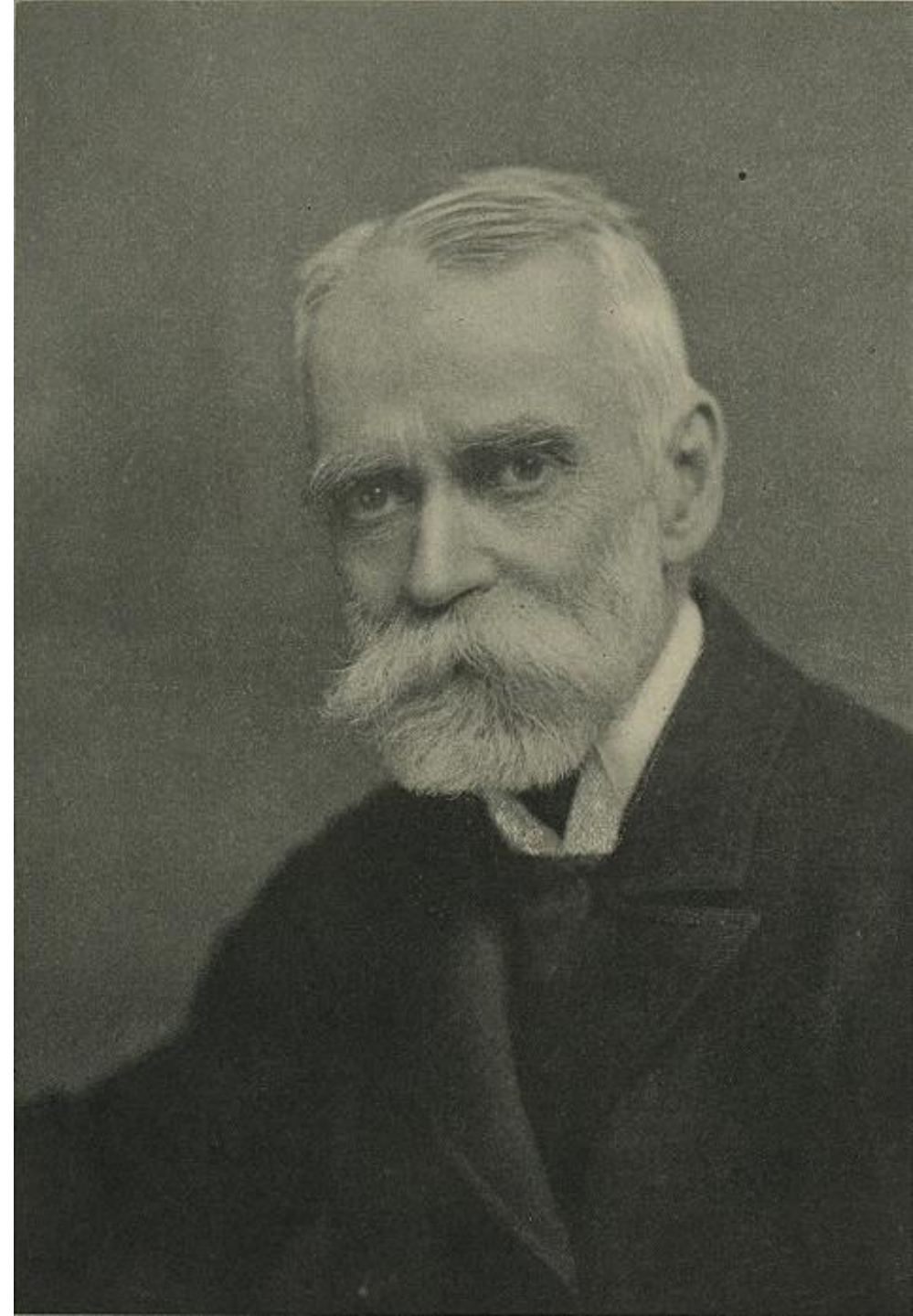
SELECTIVE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Samuel Swett Green

The Father of Reference Work

"If you gain the respect and confidence of readers, and they find you easy to get at and pleasant to talk with, great opportunities are afforded of stimulating the love of study and of directing investigators to the best sources of information."
(Green, 1876, p. 78)

GENERATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Millennials hold an "ATM attitude" toward information-seeking (Gardner and Eng, 2005)

- Generation Z students favor in-person communication, prefer to learn independently, and often seek help from peers (Seemiller & Grace, 2017)

LIBRARY ANXIETY

- Many students express feelings of insecurity, embarrassment or concern about asking librarians for help with research (Mellon, 1986; Carlile, 2007)

- Library Anxiety Scale (Bostick, 1992)

- Shame has been identified as the emotional basis of library anxiety (McAfee, 2018)

PERCEPTIONS OF LIBRARIANS

- Librarians' nonverbal communication impacts users' perceptions of libraries and librarians (Radford, 1998)

- Embedded librarians are appreciated and viewed positively by students (Meredith & Mussell, 2014)

LIAISON LIBRARIANS

- Personalization of reference services contributes to students' willingness to consult with a librarian (Moore & Wells, 2009)

- Implementation of embedded liaison librarian programs leads to increased reference service usage (O'Toole, Barham, & Monahan, 2016)

PEER ROLES

- Students profess greater feelings of comfort when interacting with peers (Gardner & Eng, 2005)

- Student reference workers may positively influence student usage and perceptions of reference services (Brenza, Kowalsky, & Brush, 2015)

INSTRUCTION

- Library instruction reduces students' library anxiety levels (Platt & Platt, 2013)

- Scheduled research consultations minimize students' feelings of anxiety and stress in the initial reference encounter (Martin & Park, 2010)

Methodology

Data Collection

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

- 18-items with closed and open-ended questions
- Available online (SurveyMonkey) and in paper form from November 2016 – January 2017

SAMPLING

- Convenience sampling using self-selection
- Survey was promoted to students via library liaisons, library website, table tents, social media, and Blackboard
- Kiosks were set up in physical library locations for students to complete the paper form of the survey

The UT Social, Behavioral and Education Institutional Review Board (IRB) designated this study as IRB-exempt

Data Analysis

RESPONSES

- 235 completed surveys

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

- Descriptive statistics (frequencies and cross-tabulation)
- SurveyMonkey's built-in data analysis tools
- IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

- Thematic coding and categorizing (Gibbs, 2007)
- Textual passages from open-ended responses were coded to corresponding themes that emerged from the data
- SurveyMonkey's MyCategories feature (Vaughn & Turner, 2016)

Demographics of Survey Respondents

77%

18-24 Years of Age

74%

Undergraduate

63%

Female

76%

Caucasian

Respondents by College

|	n	%
Arts and Letters	44	19
Business and Innovation	10	4
Education	5	2
Engineering	67	29
Health and Human Services	23	10
Medicine and Life Sciences	24	10
Natural Sciences and Mathematics	6	3
Nursing	38	16
Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences	7	3
University College	5	2
Other	6	3

Quantitative Findings

Student Usage Patterns of Reference Services

The majority of survey respondents indicated that they often physically visited a UT campus library.

"Which library do you visit most often?" (n=233)		
	n	%
Carlson (main campus library)	182	78
Mulford (health science campus library)	37	16
McMaster (engineering library)	4	2
LaValley (law library)	1	0.4
I have not visited the library	9	4

Yet, nearly half had never asked a librarian for help.

"How often have you asked a librarian for help?" (n=235)
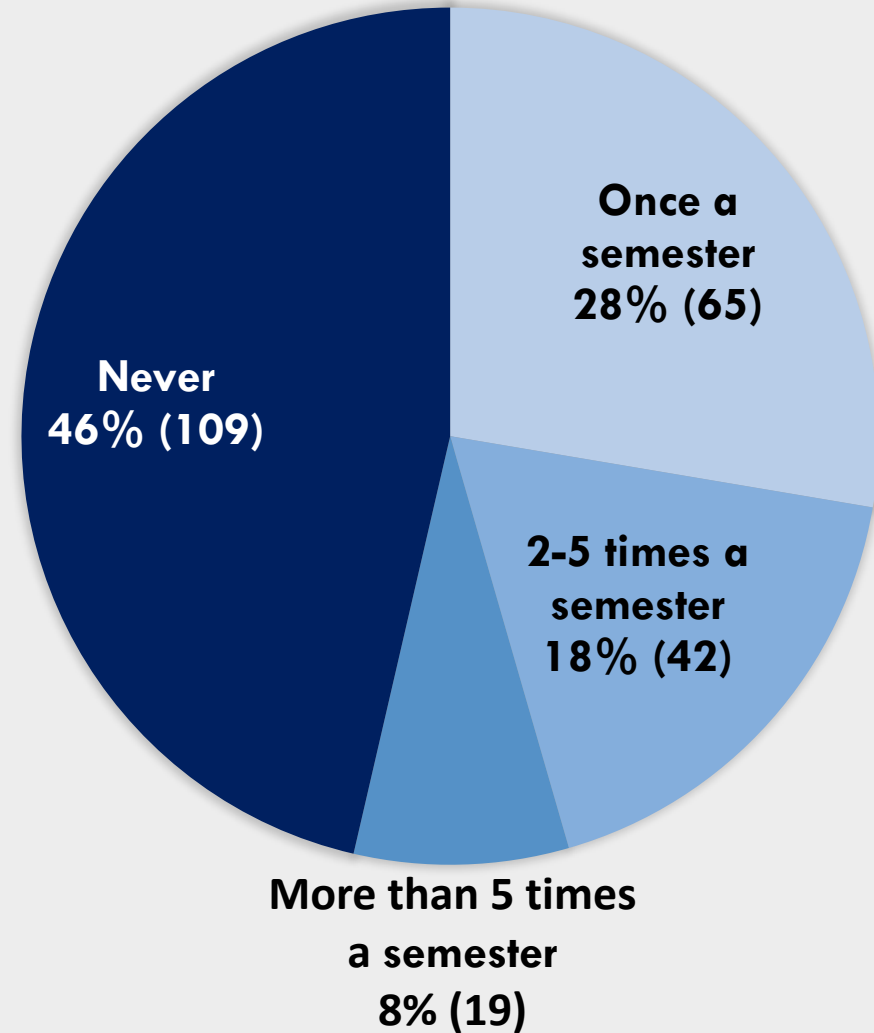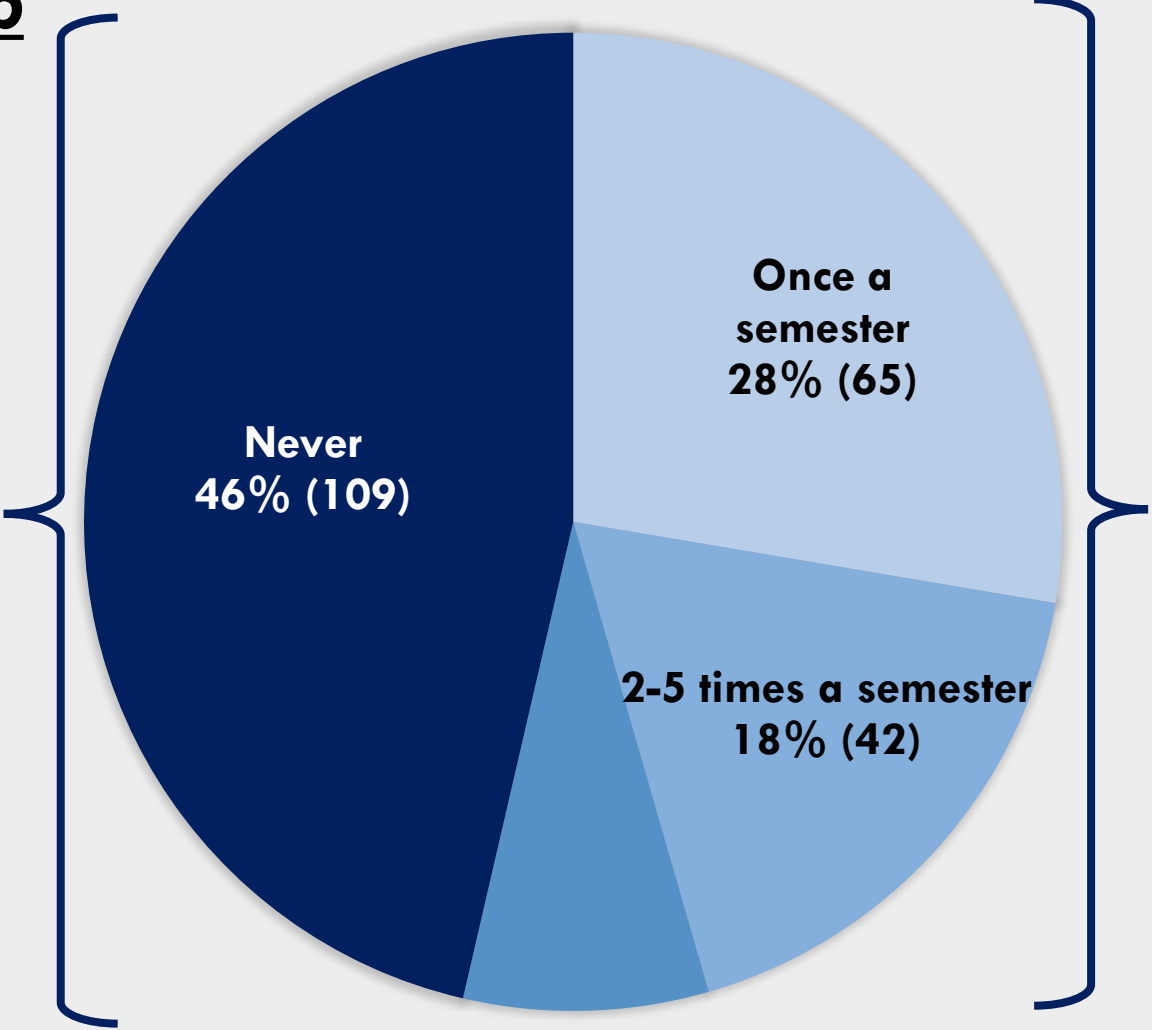
- Never 46% (109)
- Once a semester 28% (65)
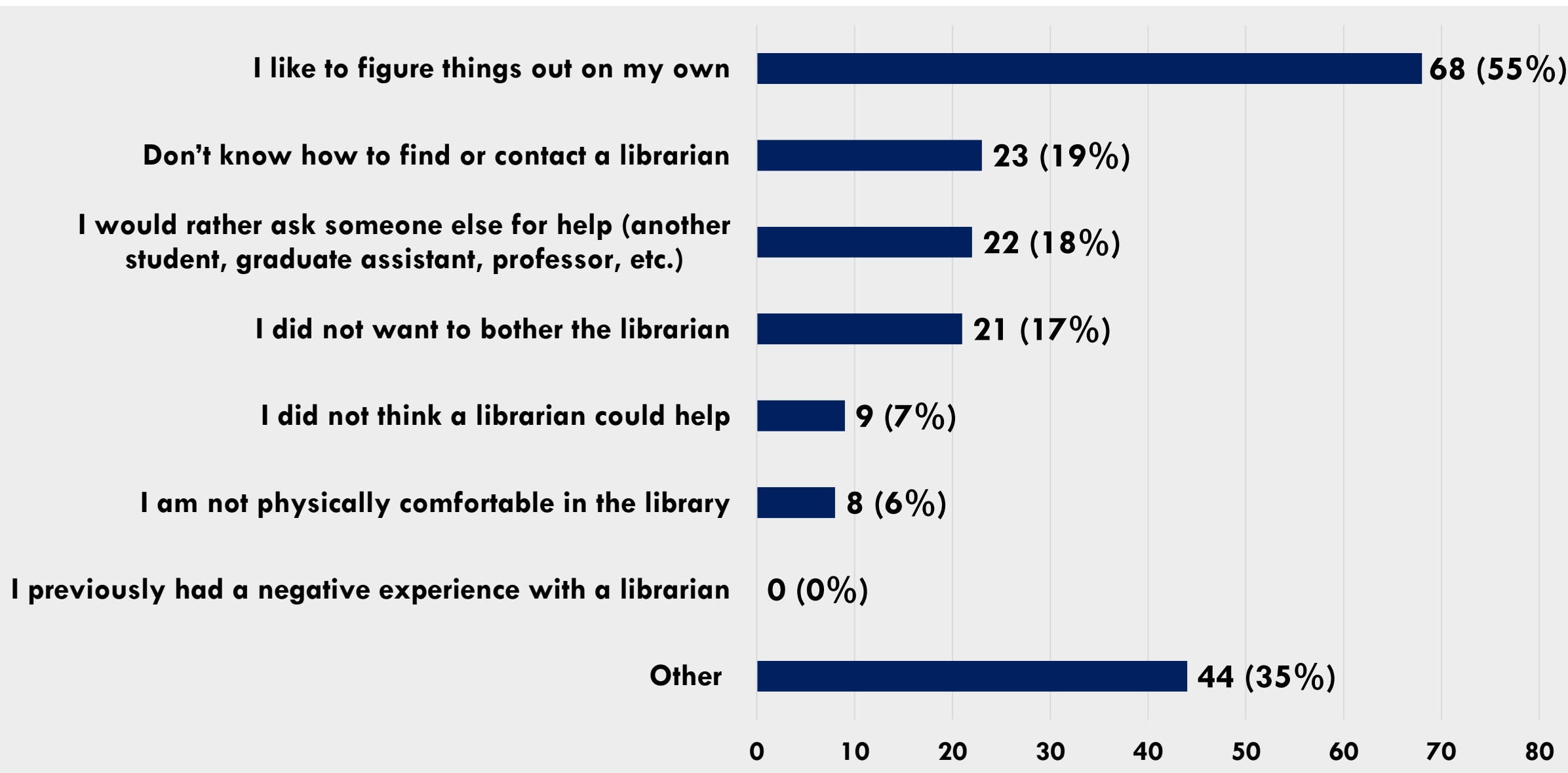- 2-5 times a semester 18% (42)
- More than 5 times a semester 8% (19)

Students' Frequency of Asking for Help from a Librarian
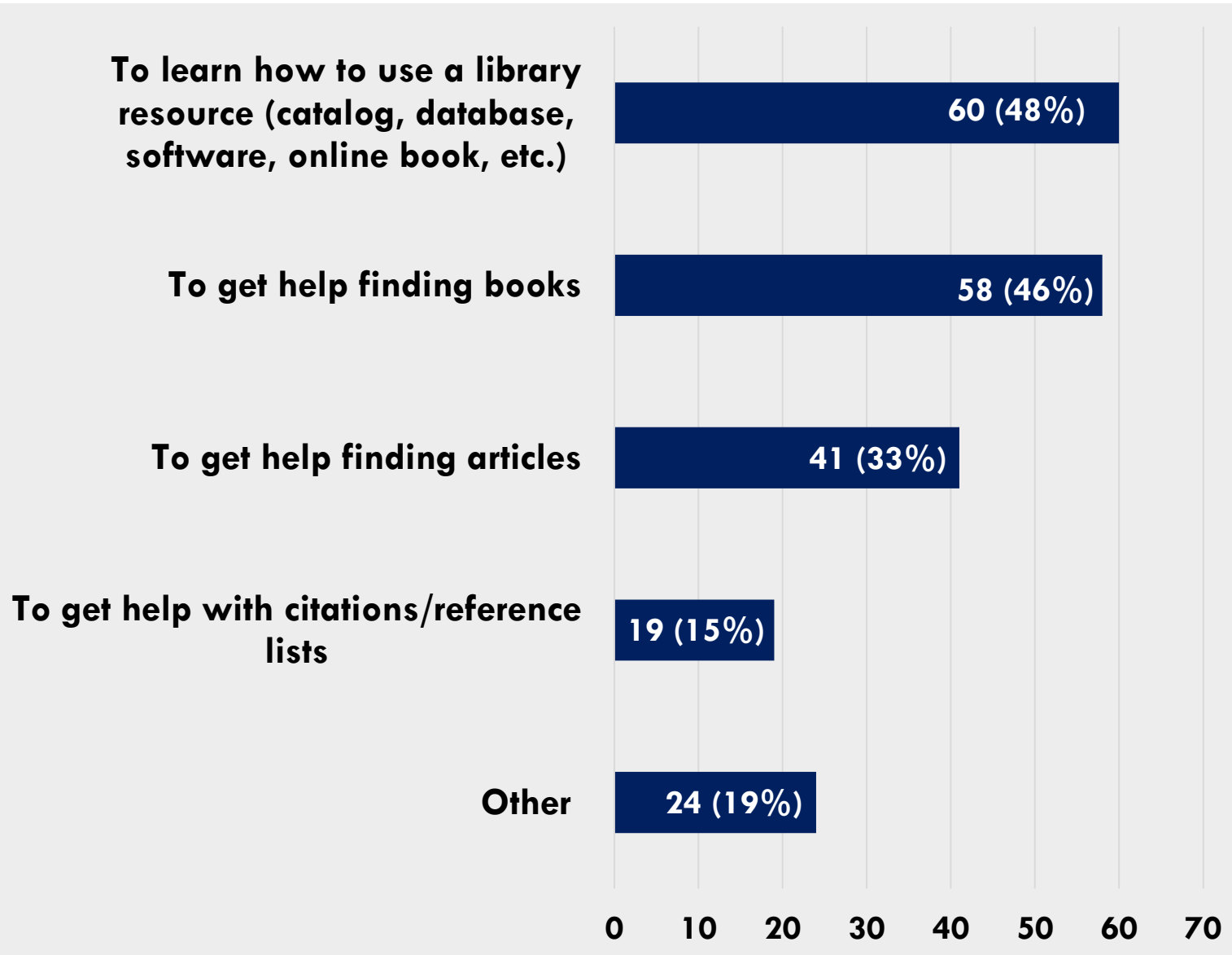## By Receipt of Classroom Library Instruction and Professor-Mandated Consultations

	Once a semester n (%)	2-5 times a semester n (%)	More than 5 times a semester n (%)	Never n (%)
Received Classroom Library Instruction				
Yes	22 (35)	12 (29)	4 (21)	32 (30)
No	32 (51)	25 (60)	15 (79)	66 (61)
Don't remember	9 (14)	5 (12)	-	10 (9)
Total respondents	63	42	19	108
Required by Professor to Consult with Librarian				
Yes	10 (16)	10 (24)	3 (16)	4 (4)
No	53 (84)	32 (77)	16 (84)	104 (96)
Total respondents	63	42	19	108

Students' Reported Reasons for not Seeking a Librarian's Help

Reason	Value
I like to figure things out on my own	68 (55%)
Don't know how to find or contact a librarian	23 (19%)
I would rather ask someone else for help (another student, graduate assistant, professor, etc.)	22 (18%)
I did not want to bother the librarian	21 (17%)
I did not think a librarian could help	9 (7%)
I am not physically comfortable in the library	8 (6%)
I previously had a negative experience with a librarian	0 (0%)
Other	44 (35%)

When Students _do_ ask a Librarian for Help. . .

They do so for the following reasons (n=126):

Reason	Value
To learn how to use a library resource (catalog, database, software, online book, etc.)	60 (48%)
To get help finding books	58 (46%)
To get help finding articles	41 (33%)
To get help with citations/reference lists	19 (15%)
Other	24 (19%)

Also, they seek in-person assistance

87%

And tend to consult with a friend first

52%

Identification of Librarians

When visiting the library, can you tell which library workers are librarians? (n=223)

- ■ I can't tell which library workers are librarians
- ■ Anyone behind the reference desk
- ■ Anyone behind the circulation (check out) desk
- ■ Only the people with library degrees are librarians

5% (12)

26% (57)

38% (85)

27% (61)
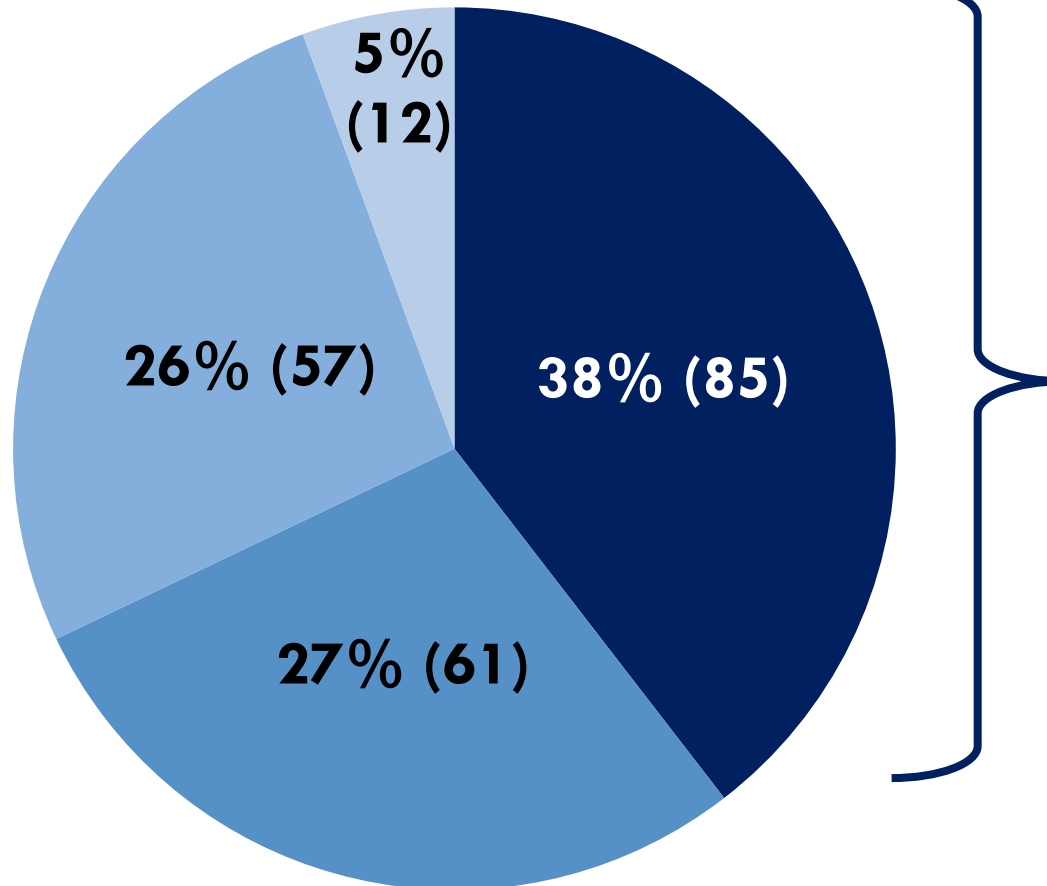
Among the 85 students who could not identify librarians:

- ■ 59% (n=50) had never asked a librarian for help
- ■ 58% (n=49) had never received classroom library instruction
- ■ 87% (n=74) had not been required by their professor to consult with a librarian

Ratings of Librarian Approachability

In general, how would you rate the approachability of librarians at UT (online or in person)? (n=228)

75	105	37	11

■ **Very approachable** ■ **Approachable** ■ **Slightly approachable** ■ **Not at all approachable**

Among the 11 students who rated librarians as "not at all approachable":

- 100% had not been required by their professor to consult with a librarian

- The majority (82%, n=9) had never received classroom library instruction and had never asked a librarian for help

Qualitative Findings

What makes it difficult for you to ask a librarian for help? (n=224)

Nothing (n=68)
- *"I don't find it difficult to ask for help because that is part of their job."*
- *"Nothing — the librarians are always warm, friendly, and knowledgeable!"*

No Need (n=48)
- *"Generally not necessary; I'm generally a self-sustaining person when it comes to figuring out what I need and how to obtain it."*

Additional students described specific barriers that prevented them from seeking a librarian's help.

Barriers to Seeking Help from a Librarian

Theme	Salient Quotes	Frequency of Theme
Inability to identify librarians	• *"I don't know how to tell who is a librarian and who isn't."* • *"I'm not sure if the people behind the circulation desk are librarians. . ."*	**31**
Library anxiety	• *"I don't want to look stupid for asking basic questions."* • *"I don't want to look 'new.'"* • *"I feel uncomfortable and hate bothering people with stuff that I think I should know how to do."*	**25**
Lack of awareness	• *"Sometimes I am unaware of what resources are available from the library, so it doesn't occur to me to ask a librarian for assistance with those resources."*	**15**
Librarian unapproachability	• *"they look busy or not ready to help"* • *"They always look busy..."*	**12**
Inconvenience	• *"It seems like they are never there on the weekends, or at night! I'm usually in class or at work during the day, and it doesn't seem like anyone is there to ask when I'm there."*	**12**
Lack of confidence in librarians' abilities	• *". . . I doubt they'd be able to do anything"* • *"Sometimes I might not ask for help because . . . I don't think they can answer my question."*	**5**

What would make you more likely to ask for help from a librarian? (n=227)

Nothing (n=31)
- *"Literally nothing prevents me from asking for help."*

Other students described specific facilitators that would encourage them to seek a librarian's assistance.

Facilitators to Seeking Help from a Librarian

Theme	Salient Quotes	Frequency of Theme
Need a reason	▪ *"I'd be more likely to ask for help if I had more questions."* ▪ *"If I can't find something specific for my class work."*	70
Ability to identify librarians	▪ *"If it was more clear who they were and what they could assist with."* ▪ *"Friendly signs to alert they are there to help."*	26
Librarian accessibility	▪ *"If they were in the area I needed help (specifically if I needed to find a book on the 4th floor."*	25
Librarian approachability	▪ *"Friendliness"* ▪ *"Helping nature"*	20
Increased awareness	▪ *"If I knew more about what they were capable of helping with, I would be more likely to ask for help."* ▪ *"I would probably ask librarians for help more if I a) knew what sort of texts/books we had available for use and b) which staff were 'librarians' or who I should ask to assist me in the library."*	18

Facilitators (Continued)

Theme	Salient Quotes	Frequency of Theme
Library outreach	▪ *". . . reaching out to me and asking if I need help."* ▪ *" they could approach me"* ▪ *"Right to read week events like in elementary school but cooler and for college students . . ."*	**11**
Library instruction	▪ *" . . . if I had a presentation in my college on the specific resources available to me in the library."* ▪ *"Having the orientation class freshman year working with a librarian."* ▪ *"I would also probably ask for help if my instructor told me to consult with a librarian. I can see how that would make them have crazy schedules, but I think I would feel more inclined afterwards to talk to a librarian."*	**7**
Decreased anxiety	▪ *"If I wasn't afraid to talk to people."* ▪ *". . . If I was just more self-confident"*	**5**

Limitations

- **Study was conducted at one institution**

- **235 respondents represented 1% of the UT student population**

- **Lack of diversity in respondents' demographic profile**

- **Convenience sampling and possibility for self-selection bias**

Conclusions

CHARACTERISTICS
- *Students perceive themselves to be self-sufficient in finding information*
- *Library anxiety continues to impact students' help-seeking behaviors*
- *Graduate students slightly more likely to seek reference help*

PERCEPTIONS OF LIBRARIANS
- *Difficulty identifying librarians remains an issue*
- *Negative views may influence non-usage of reference services*
- *Importantly, most students hold favorable views toward librarians*

BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS
- *Library anxiety and inability to identify librarians are top barriers*
- *Level of need is the top facilitator followed by librarian identification, accessibility and approachability*

New Directions and Initiatives

- Creative marketing and promotion
  - Marketing Committee
  - Library Outreach and Programming Committee
  - Events Coordinator

- Library programming and events

- Welcoming and informative signage

- Emphasis on consultations and library liaisons

SnapCode table tents

Liaison librarian signage

"*I think we live in a world where a lot of information is only a click away. We are conditioned to seek out answers ourselves on Google or other sites. People in general don't know the extent of resources the library provides and this combined with the expectation to be self-sufficient might explain a patron's reluctancy [sic] to ask for help.*"

————————

UT Graduate Student

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Thank You!

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