

Under-Served or Under-Surveyed: The Information Needs of Studio Art Faculty in the Southwestern United States

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Introduction

Studio art faculty are unique library patrons, and their information needs are not the same as those of other humanities scholars. Artists see the world in a distinctive way, and the services and information they need from libraries reflect the creative and tangential nature of art. The expectations and information needs of studio art faculty, whether these needs are being met by academic librarians, and suggestions to improve services to studio art faculty and, through them, to their students, are explored below.

Literature Review

Artists use books for two primary reasons: to obtain technical information, and to find inspiration. In the search for inspiration, artists do not limit themselves to books about art.¹ However, using books does not require that they use libraries. Whenever artists—or by extension art faculty—are the subject of a library study, this is the first question that must be answered. Some studio art faculty do use the library, but they also purchase many of their own books. In the best of both worlds, studio art faculty use the university library in conjunction with their personal library.

For a 1999 study, Jacquelyn Challener interviewed sixteen art history faculty and eleven studio art faculty at Kent State University. More than half of each group (nine teaching art history and six teaching studio art) reported that they maintain personal art libraries.² In 1996 Susie Cobbledick interviewed four practicing artists about their library needs; this group also confirmed that they purchase many of their own books. At least one respondent said that he prefers to buy new or important publications rather than waiting for the library to purchase them.³ Maria Downey found that 88 percent of her subjects, all of whom were studio art faculty and graduate students with teaching responsibilities, kept personal libraries. Because of these libraries, Downey pointed out that art faculty can get by without other libraries; therefore, the importance of the university library must be made more apparent to them.⁴ It has been nearly a decade since these studies were done. However, the tendency of artists to build personal book collections was established by Deirdre Stam in 1984. Stam, who interviewed art historians in museums and colleges, found that her subjects depended heavily on their personal libraries, purchasing ten to thirty books per year, and subscribing to an average of four periodicals per year.⁵

Art faculty who do use libraries have choices about which library they use; university libraries, public libraries, and museum libraries are all options for them. Also, some universities have specialized fine arts libraries, which present a fourth option for these faculty. Some faculty use more than one of these types, but there may be a correlation between the type of library an individual faculty member prefers and his or her specialty. Stam compared art historians in a museum setting and those teaching in academic settings and found that both groups used their institutional libraries, but that the college faculty were more likely to use small college and public libraries as well, repeatedly, while museum personnel limited their usage to large and well known institutions.⁶ Challener found that art history faculty were likely to use the university library, while the studio art faculty she interviewed showed a preference for public and museum libraries.⁷ Cobbledick, who interviewed practicing artists, backs up these results. The artists were lukewarm at best about the university library and shared a strong preference for the public library which they felt was more comfortable and friendlier, with helpful staff that were less focused on teaching patrons than their academic counterparts. These artists also found the academic collections overlarge, out-of-date, and lacking a strong collection of art periodicals. They also did not appreciate the separation of oversize and special collections from the main circulating collection.⁸

If studio artists and faculty do, in fact, prefer public libraries, it may be because they have a heavy preference for browsing as a search method. Most public libraries offer smaller, more-frequently-weeded collections that are conducive to browsing. Public libraries also keep dust jackets (unlike many academic libraries), and these catch the interest of artists. Another reason that some art faculty preferred public libraries was the staff. Karen Antell, a librarian at the University of Oklahoma, noticed that students from her university were using the public library instead of the university library. With the permission of the public library staff, Antell approached seventeen college students when they came to the public library and asked them why they chose it over the academic library. Students admitted that they did recognize the difference between public and academic library collections, but they felt less intimidated in the public library, the staff members were more helpful, and they didn't get the same "runaround" as in the university library.⁹ Although Antell was studying a general undergraduate library patron group rather than art faculty, her findings reflect the views of many artists who patronize academic libraries.

Studio art faculty and practicing artists prefer browsing for a number of reasons. Deirdre Stam pointed out that artists are extremely visual, and simply do not think of information and research the way library catalogers do.¹⁰ Artists visit the library in search of images more than anything else, but most online catalogs (OPACs) do not index book illustrations.¹¹ Artists want to know about the content (subject) of images, how many images there are, and the type: are they black and white, color, line drawings, etc.¹² As a result of this lack in library catalogs, artists browse for the images they need. Another important reason artists browse is for inspiration. Artists in the library do not limit themselves to art books. Instead, they have very wide-ranging interests—politics, social issues, psychology, and religion, to name a few—because all of these subjects inspire their art,¹³ and they can make creative leaps and connections when books are laid out in front of them.¹⁴

Carol Van Zijl and Elizabeth Gericke were the only authors to find that the OPAC was the preferred search method over browsing. Fifty-six percent of the artists surveyed by Van Zijl ranked OPACs and databases as essential library search tools; 46 percent ranked browsing as an essential search method. Van Zijl found that females were more likely than males to browse.¹⁵

Art faculty still demonstrate a noticeable preference for print sources over electronic or online sources. As recently as 2002, Trish Rose studied the collection, organization, and analysis of information by art historians. The fifteen art historians Rose surveyed reported that 87 percent of their research continued to require print sources.¹⁶ The most common variable between Cobbleddick's subjects was the centrality of print materials in their creative process. For them, books and periodicals were the most important source of inspiration and/or information.¹⁷ Rose also found that print was used most often by 67 percent of her sample. Less frequently, they turned to the Internet (20 percent), professional conferences (20 percent), museums (13 percent) and interlibrary loan (13 percent). Reasons given for the lower usage of the Internet by these art historians were the lack of in-depth scholarly resources, the poor quality of images, and the lack of applicable images.¹⁸ Conversely, 39 percent of Challenger's subjects used books and journals while 48 percent used a computer in the classroom.¹⁹

In 2001, Van Zijl found some correlation between preferences and age of the artists, suggesting that print sources are preferred by female artists and those over forty years of age, while electronic sources held more sway with males and those under forty years of age. Patrons age thirty to thirty-nine were particularly likely to use electronic sources. Van Zijl noted a trend in preferences and predicted that electronic sources would become increasingly important to artists as the Internet becomes more available to them.²⁰

The print sources that Van Zijl's artists mentioned most frequently were periodicals and books; for online versions, they used the Internet and some subscription databases. Periodicals were the most important print source: 87 percent of respondents considered them essential. This is in contrast to Stam's 1984 study, in which periodicals were "distinctly less critical than books."²¹ Seventy-three percent of Van Zijl's subjects considered library books essential. Sixty-seven percent considered the Internet essential, and 27 percent rank subscription databases that way. Van Zijl hypothesized that the low incidence of subscription

database use might be due to the fact that using the databases often requires a librarian's help.²²

Perhaps in keeping with their preference for browsing libraries on their own, artists and studio art faculty do not typically turn to librarians when they need research help. They prefer to ask colleagues and friends how to find materials, or how to use a particular bibliographic tool such as the OPAC.²³ A correlation can be drawn between this common preference for seeking help from peers or colleagues and the *invisible college* described by Deirdre Stam, a "relatively stable, informal group with mutual interests who communicate over a period of years."²⁴ Art students also participate in an invisible college, asking their friends and peers for library assistance in the same manner. Students told Polly Frank, in her 1999 study, that they did not feel comfortable asking librarians for help, and felt they were expected to already know how to do everything in the library.²⁵ This situation illustrated a problem that can result from the tendency of art faculty to rely heavily on their personal book collections. When faculty rely on their own books, they are cut off from the library. As a result, they miss out on services such as acquisitions, interlibrary loan, and instruction. Even worse, it cuts their students off from these services, because faculty may not be likely to encourage the students to use the library if they do not make use of it themselves.

Even art students need library skills to prepare for tests, do research, and write papers for their other classes. Art students who are not introduced to the library by their faculty will absorb the attitude that the library is not important to artists.²⁶ Some of these students will go on to teach studio art, and they will pass this message on to another generation of students. Some students received formal bibliographic instruction (B.I.) either in their art classes or in basic courses like English.²⁷ However, such general sessions are not always helpful to art students who may struggle to see the relevance of the B.I. if it is not directly applicable to art, and they may forget the information as soon as they walk out of the library.²⁸ When professors suggested that the students go to the library without organizing a formal session, the students did not necessarily follow through. If students did go to the library and had trouble, they were not likely to try again—and were not likely to seek out a librarian on their own.²⁹

Some studies suggest that gender influences a person's willingness to ask for help. In 1996, Tracey Burdick studied the search methods of male and female high school students enrolled in a summer program at a large university.³⁰ She found that while both genders sought help with their projects from teachers or librarians, boys expressed more confidence, were less likely to ask for help, and preferred to browse through library collections. In contrast, some girls lacked confidence in their ability to complete their projects successfully.³¹ There are social costs attached to help-seeking, and this also applies to the library. Library patrons may feel that asking a reference question makes them appear incompetent. They also fear that they may be bothering the help giver, or that their question is "too easy."³² Fiona Lee, who studied gender differences in help-seeking behavior in 1997, hypothesized that males and females are socialized to value different types of relationships. Females are oriented toward creating relationships, and men are oriented toward gaining power or asserting superiority in their relationships.³³ Taken in combination, the results of these studies suggest that

men and women both feel some hesitation about asking for help; however, women are more likely to ask questions because they are more concerned with making a positive contact than with "losing face" in front of the librarian. On the other hand, Carol Van Zijl and Elizabeth Gericke found the opposite to be true. In their 2001 study, male artists were more inclined to ask librarians for help with research questions than female artists.³⁴

Librarians should also realize that everyone learns differently, and that asking questions of reference staff is only one possible strategy for problem solving. Those seeking information can also find print or online resources that can help them learn what they need to know without approaching a person. Such alternate resources may make more people comfortable with help-seeking.³⁵ These online options can also be a boost to the bibliographic instruction program by providing materials to supplement instruction sessions. For example, if the B.I. session addresses a particular assignment or project, the student can visit the online tutorials and handouts created by the librarian and jog his or her memory about the librarian's instructions on how to complete the necessary research.

A discussion of learning styles and comfort level with librarians gives rise to the question whether art faculty are likely to take advantage of the bibliographic instruction sessions offered to their students. Several authors suggest that bibliographic instruction for art students should be done in their studios and should relate directly to their projects at the time.³⁶ Hannah Bennett acknowledged the difficulty of drawing art classes to the library for instruction, and she also proposed that librarians should visit the studio. Bennett also suggested that the average student seeking a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree has had less contact with the library than those taking other courses. Along with trips to the studio, Bennett suggests redesigning instruction for students to include information on finding a gallery, getting grants, and other topics important to the professional artist.³⁷

Most librarians who participate in bibliographic instruction will agree that many students retain information only long enough to complete an assignment. Deborah Johnson acknowledged this problem and introduced the integrated B.I. program at Clemson University. This program, designed for architecture students, links user education to the studio component of the four-year architecture program. First-year students have different training and assignments, which are linked to the studio component for that year. This means that all students in a particular year learn the same information at the same time. Because each year covers a different aspect of library research, the students are not bored by repeated instruction sessions and will continue to learn about how libraries pertain to them and to build their library skills. Instruction can take place either in the studio, or faculty can designate a separate time for the instruction to occur and require students to attend. This way, library instruction is integrated into the art class and is not perceived as taking time away from it.³⁸

As with all bibliographic instruction, the librarian in charge of art instruction must first sell art faculty and/or department heads on the idea. Faculty want their students to know about the library, but they do not want class time devoted to teaching them.³⁹ Constance McCarthy made several suggestions about motivating faculty to participate in library instruction: hold seminars about library collections; maintain a Web site that offers

library tips; and provide instruction in the form of short tutorials, handouts, or PowerPoint slides.⁴⁰ Pam Baxter suggested that librarians should publish about academic research, and the importance of librarians, in journals that teaching faculty read.⁴¹

Although the samples in existing studies are small, they do outline some behavior patterns that artists exhibit in libraries:

- Studio art faculty are likely to buy books that interest them, and may not use the university library at all;
- Many studio art faculty prefer browsing over using the library catalog, and they will look at volumes that they never check out, meaning that circulation statistics are not always a reliable indication of use for this subject area;
- Studio art faculty are somewhat hesitant to approach librarians for assistance and consult peers or colleagues first;
- Studio art faculty are not likely to request bibliographic instruction for their students, and they may assume that the students are getting this training elsewhere.

The last three issues are explored in the present study.

Methodology

The survey sample was selected using two Web sites: *Regions of the United States* by the Library of Congress⁴² and *College Search* by The College Board.⁴³ From the latter, I was able to produce a list of four-year universities in the selected states (Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Louisiana, New Mexico, Nevada, Texas and Utah). One hundred fifty-seven universities met the criteria of location and type. Next, I visited the Web page of each university to ascertain whether both Master's and Bachelor's degrees were offered for studio art. Finally, the art faculty needed to have contact information available on the departmental Web page. Sixty-seven universities met all the criteria, with a total of 1,002 studio art faculty. I created a master list of e-mail addresses from the faculty pages and sent a test message to identify addresses that no longer functioned. The final sample size was 895.

Results were gathered through an online survey that I created in Survey Monkey.⁴⁴ A link to the survey was e-mailed to each individual with a cover letter explaining the project and requesting his or her participation. Clicking the link to open the survey was considered an agreement to participate. The Human Subjects Review Board at Oklahoma State University approved the methodology, the survey, the cover letter, and reminder notices.

The online survey asked faculty specific questions: the type of library preferred (academic, public, museum, or specialized fine arts); the search method preferred (browsing or library catalog); preferred resources (books or journals; electronic or print sources); the faculty members' comfort level with librarians; and whether they teach their students about libraries. If they reported a preference for browsing over the library catalog, they were also asked why browsing for information was important to them.

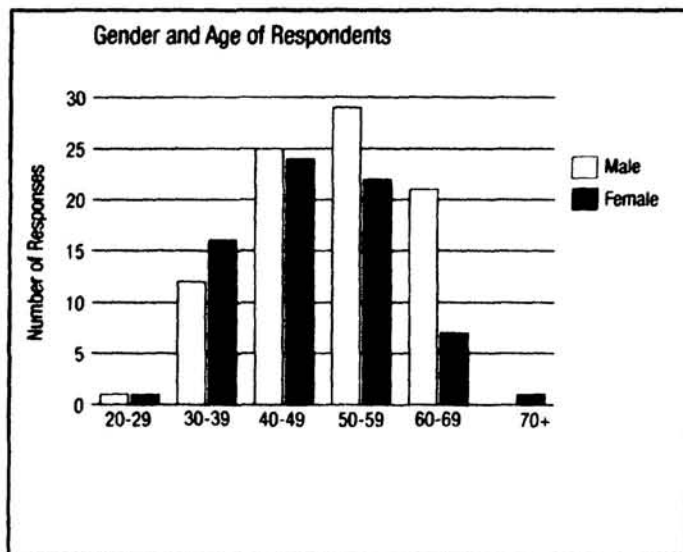


Table 1

Results

Gender and Age

Eight hundred and ninety-five surveys were distributed; 165 were returned, a response rate of 18 percent. Of the respondents, 53 percent were male and 43 percent were female. Four percent did not indicate their gender.

One percent of respondents were twenty to twenty-nine years old; 17 percent were thirty to thirty-nine years old; 30 percent were forty to forty-nine years old; 32 percent were fifty to fifty-nine years old; and 17 percent were sixty to sixty-nine years old. Only 0.006 percent were over seventy. Two percent did not respond to the question of age (Table 1).

Library Preference

Many faculty members have access to more than one library. Along with the main library at their universities, faculty may have access to a branch university library specializing in art. Faculty may also visit libraries that are separate from the university, such as museum libraries and public libraries. The survey asked which libraries faculty preferred to use, and they were allowed multiple answers. Seventy-six percent of faculty stated a preference for the main university library. Thirty-six percent preferred to use the public library, and 15 percent preferred a museum library. Ten percent reported that they did not use the library.

The low popularity of museum and art branch libraries may be a result of their less frequent availability. Not every university has an art library separate from the main library. Likewise, not all faculty have easy access to museums whose collections are applicable to faculty interests.

Some faculty would prefer a fine arts library simply because it is specialized and, in theory, smaller and easier to browse. However, artists are inspired by much more than art. They draw inspiration from history, politics, and literature⁴⁵ as well as from other artists' works. In a specialized library, artists would lose access to those sources. Because of their reported needs for many types of information, university main libraries and public libraries appear to be the best option for art faculty.

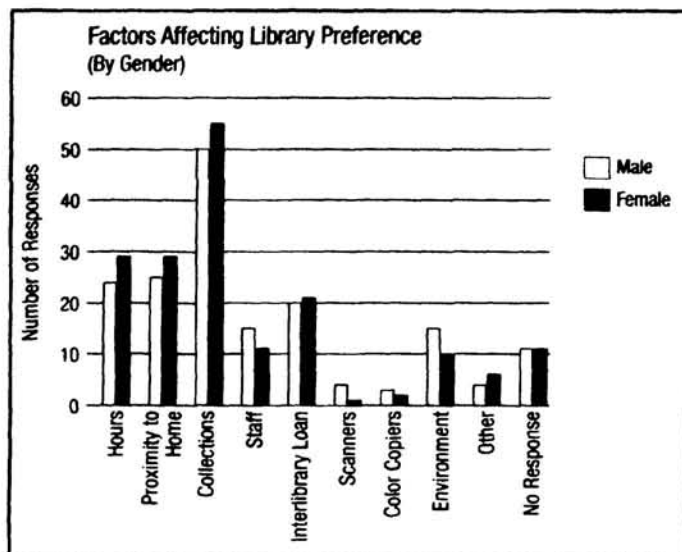


Table 2

Factors Affecting Library Preference

Naturally, library collections figure heavily into which libraries art faculty visit most frequently. Other factors are the hours libraries keep, the proximity of the library to home, the staff, services such as interlibrary loan, and availability of important equipment like scanners and copiers. Some patrons also like to work in the library, and the environment (noise levels, size and location of tables, and lighting) can also factor into the patrons' decisions.

There are some differences in how males and females weigh the most important factors in library preference. Not surprisingly, both males (57 percent) and females (77 percent) reported that collections are important when deciding which library to use. The library's hours and proximity to one's home were the second and third most important factors. Twenty-eight percent of males and 41 percent of females felt that proximity was important. Twenty-seven percent of males and 41 percent of females thought that library hours were important. See Table 2 for complete results.

Preference for Browsing

The literature suggests that browsing is a very important search method for artists⁴⁶ and acknowledges that artists draw inspiration from a variety of subjects and sources—not art only.⁴⁷ The present study also demonstrates artists' preference for browsing library collections. Forty-two percent of faculty who responded to the survey said that they browse some, but less often than they use the catalog. Thirty-nine percent of faculty said they browse more than they use the catalog; only 2 percent said they had never browsed. Sixteen percent did not respond to the question.

When age and gender were considered, there were no real differences between males and females or between age groups and the decision to browse (Table 3). This suggests that browsing at least some of the time is a characteristic of artists pertaining more to their discipline than to gender or age. Even faculty in large universities (those with 15,000 students or more) browsed at least some of the time. Forty percent of the respondents who worked at large universities reported browsing more than they

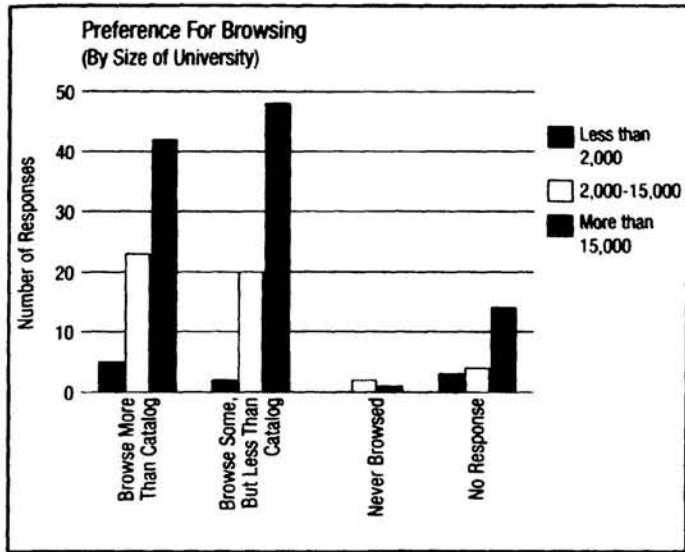


Table 3

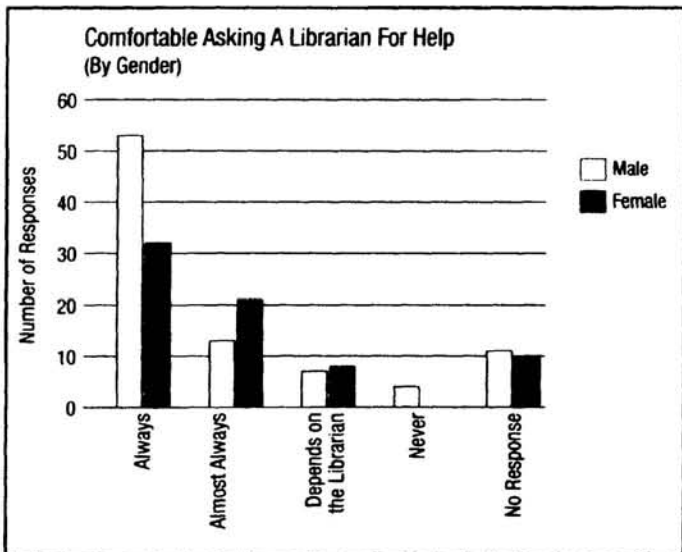


Table 4

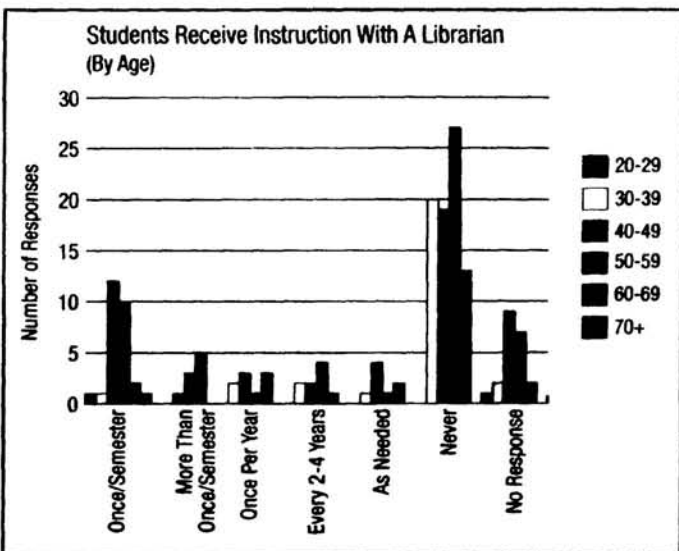


Table 5

searched the library catalog. Forty-six percent browsed at least some of the time; less than 1 percent had never browsed at all. The majority of respondents in small universities with less than 2,000 students (50 percent) and medium-sized universities with 2,000-15,000 students (23 percent) reported browsing more than they used the library catalog.

Along with how much they browsed, respondents were asked their reasons for browsing library collections. The most important reason was inspiration: 61 percent of respondents are inspired by materials they find accidentally through browsing in the collection. Seventeen percent felt that size of the library was important, which seems to contradict the findings indicating that even in large libraries, artists browse at least some of the time. However, when size was stated to be a factor, it was not made clear if large or small collections were an advantage. If artists prefer large collections to browse in, which may well be the case because of the high preference for accidental findings, the results would appear to be consistent.

Sixteen percent reported that they browsed because they had difficulty with the library catalog. Five percent cited other reasons, which came down to the fact that they found materials easier to locate when they browsed. Less than 1 percent of respondents said that they never browsed. Twenty-seven percent did not respond to the question.

Comfort in Asking for Help

The majority of faculty in this study reported that they are comfortable to some degree asking for a librarian's help. There were some gender differences on this issue, which are shown in Table 4.

While most respondents said they would always feel comfortable asking for help, a slightly higher percentage of males (60 percent) than females (45 percent) gave that answer. Of the respondents that said they almost always felt comfortable asking for help, 30 percent were female and 15 percent were male. Females were also slightly more likely to report that their comfort level depended on the librarian; 11 percent of females and 8 percent of males answered this way. Five percent of males said they never feel comfortable asking for help. No female participants gave this response.

The number of men who said that they always feel comfortable asking librarians for help supports Van Zijl's study.⁴⁵ The number of females that said their comfort level depended on the librarian supports the findings of Tracy Burdick and Fiona Lee in regards to confidence level and whether they can form a working relationship with the librarian.⁴⁶ The dichotomy may be explained by the age of respondents in each study (some were adult, some were high school students) and their status (some were faculty and some working artists). Young males might feel the need to "have it all under control" and not seek help with library research. Art faculty members may feel that they should be experts in library research because of their faculty status, while a local painter might feel he/she had nothing to lose by talking to a librarian.

Patrons' comfort level with asking for help is a complicated issue and represents an area for further exploration. For example, are males or females more likely to approach librarians with reference questions? What is their demeanor: confident or apologetic? If the librarians have specialties, does that factor affect

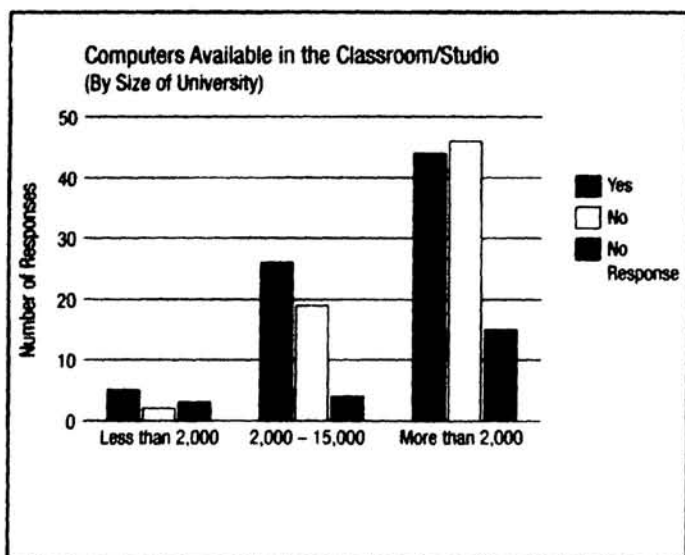


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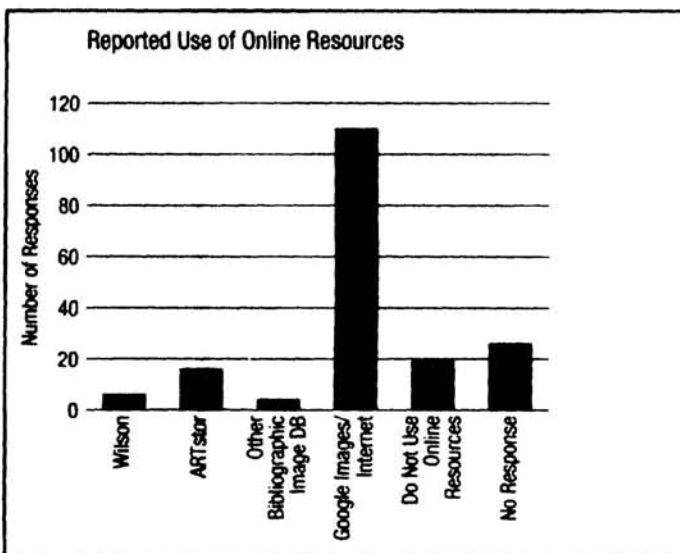


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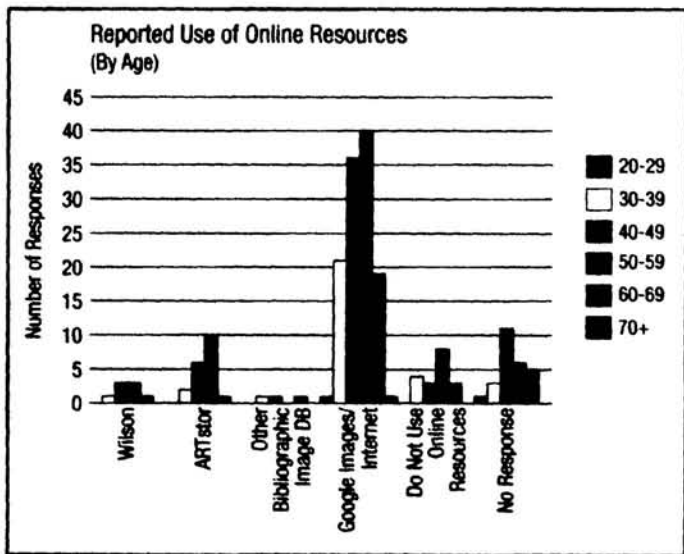


Table 8

patron comfort? Is it easier for working artists to ask questions than for art faculty? What other factors affect patrons' comfort with librarians?

Requests for Library Instruction

Despite their reported comfort level with librarians, few studio art faculty reported that they request instruction for their classes from librarians. Forty-seven percent never requested instruction for their students. Fifteen percent requested instruction once each semester. Five percent requested instruction more than once per semester. Another 5 percent requested instruction once per year. Six percent requested instruction once every two to four years. Another 6 percent requested instruction only when an assignment required it. Thirteen percent did not respond.

Men and women did not differ greatly in their answers to this question. There were some slight differences in responses by the respondent's age; although only small numbers reported requests for bibliographic instruction, older faculty members, forty and above, appear more likely to request instruction, as shown in Table 5.

Bibliographic instruction is another area in which art librarians can improve. However, the first question we must ask is whether faculty are being informed of instructional services offered, or whether traditional instruction sessions are not what art faculty and students need. In addition to, or possibly in place of, traditional bibliographic instruction, art librarians should consider offering instruction sessions on topics that apply to working artists. Examples suggested by Hannah Bennett include copyright issues, fellowships in art, and grants.⁵¹

Availability of Computers

Forty-five percent of faculty said they have computers that allow library access in their studios or classrooms. Forty-one percent said they do not have computers in their studio/classrooms. Thirteen percent did not respond to the question. See Table 6 for a breakdown of responses by school size.

Respondents were not asked if there were computers for every student; however, that would be an issue for further research. Computers in the classroom represent another opportunity for librarians to promote their usefulness to students and faculty. With computer access in the studio, librarians can visit the studio/classroom while students are at work, answer questions, and demonstrate library resources that meet immediate needs.⁵¹ Students may be more likely to use the library if they are shown how the library can help them while they actually are working on projects. The faculty member is less likely to see it as a disruption of class time and may be more likely to refer students to the library in the future.

Universities that do not yet offer computer access in the art studio/classroom present an opportunity for the librarian. Librarians could write grant applications to purchase computers for the art classroom. With fresh ideas and research expertise, library professionals can forge a bond with their art faculty that makes future contact and instruction opportunities that much more likely.

Use of Online Resources

Artists need images; they are teaching tools for faculty and inspiration for students. In the past, many of these images came

