HOW RESEARCHERS LEARN OF MANUSCRIPT RESOURCES AT THE WESTERN HISTORY COLLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT: Researchers discover manuscript resources in many different ways. Traditional methods of locating manuscripts, such as using printed guides and conducting citation studies, are today often supplemented by the use of electronic bibliographic databases and Internet search engines. Although archivists absorb through the reference process a fair amount of anecdotal information about how manuscript users find their collections, gathering statistical data on which access points are most commonly used can be beneficial for repositories and users alike. The information can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of a collection’s access points and outreach programs and lead to improved services for researchers. During the calendar year 2000, the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma conducted such a survey of its manuscript users. The results hold significance not only for the Western History Collections, but also for other manuscript repositories that plan to conduct studies on the information-seeking behavior of their users.

Introduction

The manuscript holdings of research repositories are invaluable resources to historians and scholars. Access to manuscript collections traditionally has been provided through in-house card catalogs and guides, published guides to repository holdings, and citations in monographs and journal articles.1 As a result of the limited avenues for discovery of primary sources, scholars have viewed locating them as one of the most challenging tasks in conducting research.

Since the 1980s, access has been supplemented and improved through the development of electronic bibliographic utilities such as OCLC using the MARC AMC format, which permit researchers to tap into a national database of collection-level descriptions with authority-controlled subject headings. Current developments in manuscript access take electronic media a step further, centering on the emergence of the World Wide Web as an information resource locator via commercial search engines, coupled with the popularity of manuscript repository Web sites. These Web sites are often used as an
extension of the repository’s outreach program, offering collection-level descriptions and subject access via HTML or XML/EAD-encoded finding aids.

Given the varied modes of access available to manuscript researchers, the question, “How does the average manuscript user discover the primary sources needed to conduct research?” should be asked. The knowledge of how users locate this information can benefit both manuscript curators and the users of manuscripts. User studies of manuscript researchers are a logical tool to discover this information.

Manuscript curators currently divide outreach efforts among in-house catalogs and guides; published catalogs and guides; local and national electronic databases; repository Web sites; and other outreach activities that disseminate information about collections to potential users. While the general public is often described as having “information overload” from current technology, information professionals experience the other side of this phenomenon as “information-production overload.” Statistical, fact-based knowledge about the information-gathering tactics of researchers can help manuscript curators decide how to allocate funds and staff resources among the repository’s outreach activities. This information, in turn, can be used to develop user education programs that assist potential researchers with research strategies.

A desire to achieve these goals inspired the staff of the Western History Collections to conduct our own study of how researchers locate our manuscript material. The study was conducted during the calendar year 2000 among all users of our primary sources by means of a brief survey that focused on determining which tools researchers had employed to find the collections. The results of the survey have proven informative for the Western History Collections; these results have implications for other repositories that plan to conduct user studies.

The idea of studying the information-seeking tactics of manuscript users has been addressed in the professional literature for many years, but received significantly increased attention in the mid-1980s. Between 1984 and 1987, Paul Conway, Bruce W. Dearstyn, Elsie T. Freeman, William L. Joyce, William J. Maher, and Mary Jo Pugh published seminal works on manuscript and archives users and their study. Key among these works is Paul Conway’s “Facts and Frameworks,” published in 1986, in which Conway offered archivists a comprehensive system for learning about users. His proposal was the first to put forward a practical and systematic plan for collecting data on patrons and their information-seeking behavior for the purpose of improving archival access.

Conway and his fellow proponents of archival user studies laid the foundation for today’s growing trend toward strategic study of archives and manuscript users. For evidence of this trend one need only look at the program for the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at which two full sessions were devoted to the subject of studying researcher behavior. Advocates of manuscript-user studies have steadily augmented the body of literature created during the 1980s.

Paul Conway’s Partners in Research: Improving Access to the Nation’s Archive (1994) explains in detail the results of his in-depth survey of eight hundred researchers at the National Archives and how they learned the resources they needed were located there. Conway also gave consideration to why patrons used the National Archives and how much experience they had with archives, among other issues. As a result of the com-
bined data, Conway suggested archivists should handle access issues from a "partnership" perspective. In other words, archivists should make print and electronic access tools available to researchers, as well as make themselves available to help patrons make the most of access tools and, consequently, the collections.

Several theses on user studies have been produced recently from the School of Information and Library Science at the University of Carolina at Chapel Hill. Megan E. Phillips's "Usage Patterns for Holdings Information Sources at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Manuscripts Department" (1997) and Shayera D. Tangri's "Evaluating Changes in the Methods by Which Users of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Manuscript Department Learn of the Holdings of the Department" (2000) directly address the issue of gathering statistical data on how patrons identify manuscript holdings in a library. These works are practical examples of how user studies can produce a significant body of statistical data that can be used in the administrative decision-making process for manuscripts and archives.

Similarly, Donna J. Baker's UNC thesis, "Frameworks Revisited: Comprehensive User Assessment System for the Manuscripts Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill" (2001), expands upon Paul Conway's 1986 article by studying the effectiveness of UNC's comprehensive system for collection and analysis of information about manuscript researchers. Baker recommends using everyday reference forms and procedures to gather patron data on a regular basis. The data may be sorted and analyzed using any of the database software programs available to consumers today to make the information easier to evaluate and share with other repositories for comparative study.

Appearing concurrently with the UNC theses on user studies was a cluster of articles in American Archivist that analyzed electronic access points for archival collections from a user-study standpoint. Kathleen Feeney's "Retrieval of Archival Finding Aids Using World-Wide-Web Search Engines" studied the use of Internet search engines to locate on-line finding aids. In her study, Feeney questioned whether electronic full-text finding aids negated the need for MARC AMC records in bibliographic utilities such as OCLC, since such utilities provide briefer descriptions and thereby fewer subject terms on which readers may hit. Feeney found that although searching a database of MARC records can be challenging due to inconsistent terminology and truncated subject access, searching the World Wide Web for finding aids can be just as difficult, due in part to the vast sea of information available on the Web. Instead of replacing MARC records with on-line finding aids, Feeney suggests that the creation of cooperative databases of finding aids in multiple repositories may be part of the answer. Continued support of MARC records that are linked to these electronic finding aids can supplement the databases.

Following on the heels of Feeney's article was Helen R. Tibbo and Lokman I. Meho's "Finding Finding Aids on the World Wide Web." Tibbo and Meho examined the success rates of six Web search engines in locating selected on-line finding aids. They found that retrieval rates varied greatly among search engines and that no two created identical lists of hits, even when using the same search strategies. Using combinations of search engines with phrase searches instead of simple key-word searches produced the best results. While the studies by Feeney and Tibbo and Meho are not user surveys
per se, they do address the ways manuscript users locate information about collections. Their work is essential to understanding the role the Web currently plays in archival reference.

Evaluation of user queries for archival material is the focus of Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson’s “A Virtual Expression of Need: An Analysis of E-mail Reference Questions” and Kristin E. Martin’s “Analysis of Remote Reference Correspondence at a Large Academic Manuscripts Collection.”¹³ Duff and Johnson examined E-mail reference questions submitted to multiple institutions to determine the types of questions that manuscript users ask by E-mail and how they formulate their questions. Martin’s study, on the other hand, analyzed E-mail, letter, phone, and fax inquiries to assess the impact of making on-line finding aids and E-mail reference service available to users.

Based on her findings, Martin predicts several user trends for the future, including increased use of E-mail to pose reference questions, especially among casual researchers; decreased on-site visits by remote users; and increased use of the Internet to refine searches before contacting the archives.¹⁴ Martin stresses the importance of anticipating the changes increased electronic access will bring and using these opportunities to better orient new manuscript users. Martin also encourages archivists to “use their Web sites as a way to facilitate remote access” and to better serve manuscript users as a whole.¹⁵

Clearly, there is a history of strong interest in the archival community about studying users and their information-seeking behavior. Published reports of user studies and related research give archivists insight into how users think about the process of locating original materials and how users interact with the framework of access tools that are provided to them. But this information is perhaps best understood within the context of one’s own repository. Would the findings of Phillips or Duff and Johnson ring true in a study of Western History Collections’ users? Discovering meaning in the differences and similarities among archival user studies is a part of one of the most exciting challenges that exists for archivists today: to contribute to the common body of knowledge about users of our collections so that they may be better served by the modes of access we offer them.

**Collection Access Points**

The Western History Collections focuses on the history and culture of the American West, with special emphasis on Oklahoma, the Southwest, and the North American Indian. Created in 1927 to support the academic curricula of the University of Oklahoma, the collections comprise three main divisions: the Library, the Manuscripts Division, and the Photographic Archives. In any given year, the three divisions combined respond to between 5,000 and 7,000 on-site and off-site research queries.¹⁶ The Manuscripts Division holds approximately 2,200 primary resource collections on Oklahoma history, Native Americans, and the development of the Trans-Mississippi West. Access to the collections is offered through the standard methods, which may be categorized as electronic, print, and verbal. Collections staff divide their time among maintaining all three methods of access.
Nearly all collections have paper inventories available in-house; more than three-fourths are described at the collection level on the University of Oklahoma’s on-line catalog. The manuscript collection descriptions in the on-line catalog are also included in OCLC’s WorldCat database. The entry of descriptions in the on-line catalog and OCLC is expected to continue. Electronic access is also offered through Western History Collections’ departmental Web site, on which over 130 inventories of Native American and transportation-related collections are available in full text. Western History has received positive feedback from patrons for the full-text inventories, so expansion of this project to include other subjects is likely.

A printed guide to the manuscript collections is available: Guide to Manuscript Collections, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, by Donald L. DeWitt. A cursory search of WorldCat shows that this guide is held in about 60 library reference areas, primarily in the southwestern region of the United States, and is also available on CD-ROM. The printed guide, however, is outdated, as the collections have grown by 20 percent since its 1994 publication. Researchers accustomed to using up-to-date electronic resources demand timely guides as well, so Western History plans to publish an updated version in 2002.

Another paper-format guide is available to on-site visitors. It is an alphabetical, indexed list of manuscript collection descriptions produced in-house with the Statistical Analysis System software (SAS). The SAS guide is updated regularly to include the most recent accessions. This homegrown guide was originally created in the late 1980s. The SAS program, chosen for its ability to handle extensive subject indexing and production of customized reports, is now viewed as unnecessarily complex and has outlasted its usefulness for this function. Collections staff are evaluating new systems to which the guide data may be migrated, such as MS Access or FileMaker Pro.

Verbal communication about the collections is provided through frequent tours to visitors and through bibliographic instruction sessions to undergraduate and graduate-level courses. Instructors of history, anthropology, and art history courses regularly schedule bibliographic instruction sessions to introduce their students to using primary sources in class projects. Information about the collections is also spread through slide presentations given to local public schools and community groups.

Maintenance and improvements for the electronic, print, and verbal methods of access to the manuscript collections demand skill in juggling limited staff and funding. While the Western History Collections has long kept statistics on users and on use of the three divisions for annual reporting purposes, no other surveys of its researchers have been conducted. Occasionally, information regarding how researchers learn of the collections surfaced during the reference interview, but otherwise these details largely remained unknown. Gathering user feedback on access points could help Western History’s administration make key decisions regarding the continued expansion of electronic access, updating the published and in-house guides, and related issues.

**Methodology**

The survey was created primarily to answer a single question: “How did you learn of the Western History Collections’ manuscript holdings?” It is a two-sided document
bearing a form letter to the researcher on one side (figure 1), and the survey questions on the reverse (figure 2). The questions included:

- How did you learn of the WHC’s manuscript holdings?
- What was/is your topic?
- Why did you choose to use the WHC?
- Did you find the information you needed? If no, why not?
- Did WHC staff recommend other sources at WHC to assist in your research? If yes, were they helpful?
- How did you contact WHC?

The brevity and simplicity of the survey was intended to encourage patron response. The survey was given to reference staff for distribution to all users of manuscripts, both on-site and off-site during the calendar year 2000.

The contact types included letter, telephone, E-mail, and on-site researchers; faxed requests were considered letters. Researchers who visited the library to use materials were given the survey during the initial registration process and were asked to leave the completed survey at the reference desk upon their departure. Self-addressed, stamped envelopes were made available to all who preferred to return the survey by mail, although very few respondents took advantage of this option. A survey and a self-addressed stamped envelope accompanied all written responses by staff to letter, telephone, and E-mail manuscript inquiries. All surveys given to patrons were done so in hard-copy form. E-mail surveys were not provided due to technical difficulties encountered during the design process, but patrons who contacted us by E-mail were mailed hard-copy surveys with an SASE.

Results

A total of 427 surveys were distributed to researchers; 169 were received completed. This ratio translates to a 39 percent response rate. The respondents included 71 on-site researchers (42 percent), 38 E-mail researchers (22.4 percent), 33 telephone inquirers (19.5 percent), and 27 letter queries (15.9 percent). These percentages do not perfectly correspond to Western History Collections user statistics for fiscal year 2000, which are 50 percent on-site researchers, 33 percent telephone, 11 percent E-mail, and 4 percent letters.20 The contact-type breakdown of the pool of survey respondents is skewed slightly in favor of off-site patrons (42 percent on-site, 58 percent off-site), perhaps because off-site patrons were usually required to submit payment by mail for services rendered. It was easy for remote patrons to use the survey’s SASE to return their payments, possibly increasing the return rate for this group.

Because the survey instrument did not identify respondents by patron type, annual reference statistics were used as the presumed breakdown of patron groups. According to these statistics for the calendar year 2000, Western History Collections patrons were 57.1 percent independent researchers, 20.5 percent undergraduate students, 13.1 percent graduate students, 6.2 percent faculty, 2.5 percent staff, and 0.28 percent administration.21 The largest category, independent researchers, includes non-University of Oklahoma-related researchers, as well as genealogists and members of the general pub-
lic. Future surveys of WHC researchers will identify respondents by patron type so that the demographic breakdown of those surveyed can be determined with more certainty.

In reply to the survey question, “What was/is your topic?” a total of 196 responses were given to the following choices:

- Native American studies/history
- Anthropology
- History of the West in general
- Women’s studies
- Genealogy
- Other, please specify

As a survey query that invited more than one response, the number of responses was greater than the number of respondents. The researchers selected “Native American studies/history” at 32.1 percent, “Genealogy” at 26.5 percent, “Other” at 22.4 percent, “History of the West in general” at 8.6 percent, “Women’s studies” at 6.1 percent, and “Anthropology” at 4 percent. The “Other” category included such diverse write-in topics as literary history; the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad; the history of the University of Oklahoma; Helen Keller; and tornadoes.

The survey question, “Why did you choose to use the WHC?” received 194 responses. Survey choices included:

- Location (proximity)
- Needed resources located at WHC
- Probable resources located at WHC
- Ease of use
- Required by class instructor
- Other, specify

The majority of respondents, at 50 percent, chose “Needed resources located at WHC,” indicating that they sought sources already known to them, or at least known to exist at the Western History Collections. It also indicates that the majority of patrons have likely conducted some degree of research about the holdings prior to visiting. Similarly, 22.6 percent chose “Probable resources located at WHC,” indicating that researchers come to the Western History Collections with a clear expectation of what they will find. Only 7.7 percent cited “Required by class instructor” as their reason for using the collections. This is a surprisingly low number, as several undergraduate- and graduate-level history and anthropology courses are known to require students to use resources located at the Western History Collections for at least one class paper or project per semester. It is possible that some students who were required to use collection materials checked “Needed resources located at WHC” instead. “Other” was chosen by 7.2 percent, while “Ease of use” and “Location” tied for last place at 6.1 percent. These patron statistics combine to describe the average WHC manuscripts user as an on-site, independent researcher interested in Native American studies who uses the collections with some prior knowledge of the Western History Collections’ manuscript holdings.

The majority of respondents, 86.9 percent, indicated that they found the information they needed, while 13 percent did not. Of those who did not, 36.3 percent stated that the
desired resources were not located at Western History; 18.1 percent could not determine whether the resources were located at Western History. The remaining 45.4 percent checked “Other,” although the comments associated with this response may be interpreted as an indication that the resources they needed were not at Western History. Most used this comment line to provide information about various impediments to their research progress, especially those interested in genealogy. The results of this section of the survey suggest that a separate study on manuscript user satisfaction would be worthwhile.

The central question of the survey, “How did you learn of WHC’s manuscript holdings? (check all that apply),” was placed first in an attempt to ensure that patrons answered it. Researchers were given the opportunity to select as many answers as necessary from these choices:

- Bibliography
- RLIN AMC database
- Referral by another manuscript repository
- WHC Web pages, via OU’s on-line catalog
- WHC Web pages, via a search engine or non-OU related site
- Published guide to collections
- Article/book footnotes
- Direct inquiry to WHC
- Other, please specify

A total of 230 responses were given to this question. The results were surprising and initially dismaying. The largest percentage of the 230 responses calculated in the initial analysis of the survey data was 19.5 percent (45), for “Other,” which would be useless information unless the patron specified his or her source. Fortunately, a review of these 45 responses provided adequate explanation. An overwhelming majority, 33 of 45, or 73.3 percent of those who checked “Other,” specified a fellow researcher, instructor, or other word-of-mouth means as their source. When overall totals are corrected for this anomaly, 33 responses, or 14.3 percent were for word-of-mouth sources. The majority of the remaining “Other” respondents cited sources that should have been applied to different categories. Four of the 45 cited the Internet; six were actually direct inquiries to Western History; one should have been attributed to article/book footnotes; and one cited the National Union Catalog. Clearly, word-of-mouth sources should have been included as a separate choice for this survey question rather than allowing the “Other” category to catch these responses.

The category “Direct inquiry to WHC” received 10.8 percent. This choice was intended for all those who consulted no other source to learn of the Western History Collections’ manuscripts, but instead relied on logical inference or guesswork. When the additional six originally reported as “Other” are added, the total rests at 13.4 percent. “Referral by another manuscript repository” was selected by 9.5 percent of respondents and was included to reflect how many referrals we receive from institutions, as opposed to referrals from individuals. The Western History Collections regularly receives referrals from the nearby Carl Albert Center Congressional Archives and the
Oklahoma Historical Society. In future studies, this category should provide space to write in the name of the referring repository for further clarification.

At this point in the data analysis, it is interesting to note that word-of-mouth sources scored far lower in this study (14.3 percent) than in similar studies. Researchers' preference for word-of-mouth sources is a finding common to archival user studies. Both Phillips's study at UNC–Chapel Hill and Conway's study at the National Archives found that approximately 40 percent of their manuscript users relied upon word of mouth to learn of repository holdings.22 The lack of respondents who cited word-of-mouth sources may be due to the fact that it was not clearly listed as a separate option: the “Other” category caught these answers by default. It is possible that some respondents who chose “Direct inquiry to WHC” were actually referred by a colleague or professor, but did not indicate this on the survey. Or, perhaps it is more practical to consider “Referral by other manuscript repository” as a word-of-mouth response and disregard whether it came from a person or from a repository. After all, patrons experience it only as a referral; the distinction between individual and institutional referral is important only to the surveying archivist. If the results for word-of-mouth sources (14.3 percent) are combined with those for referrals (9.5 percent), the total is 23.8 percent.

Respondents chose the categories for “Article/book footnotes” at 13.4 percent and “Bibliography” at 11.7 percent. These categories are similar in that they are both written sources found in published materials. Using footnotes and bibliographies are traditional paths to locating manuscripts; professors and historians often cite it as the preferred method.23 Undertaking citation studies in preparation for research can be tedious and time-consuming. It can be overwhelming for the inexperienced researcher, but is relied upon as the “tried and true” means by the experienced. It is important to consider, however, that to the average user the difference between article and book footnotes and compiled subject or author bibliographies is probably indistinguishable. They are simply both citations that lead researchers to the sources they need. If these two categories are combined, they create a much more formidable 25.1 percent total.

This is a significant finding that indicates researchers continue to frequently locate manuscript material using traditional print media as opposed to electronic means. Are researchers still more comfortable using familiar print tools, despite the fanfare that has accompanied the advent of on-line access? Are print tools more readily available to researchers? What are the root incentives and benefits for information seekers to use this informal method? These are questions that must be pursued with subsequent study.

Researchers chose the category “WHC Web pages, via a search engine or non-OU related Web site” at a rate of 15.2 percent, one of the largest single responses in the survey. This was not unexpected, as statistical reports generated by hit counters on WHC Web pages regularly indicate that many of our Web-site visitors locate our pages through major search engines such as Google and Yahoo! These statistical reports indicate that WHC Web pages are typically found through key-word and subject-phrase searches, as opposed to direct searches for the institution's pages. If the four responses erroneously attributed to “Other” as described in the above paragraph are added, the total is actually 16.9 percent.

This finding is significant in terms of the continued maintenance of an Internet presence for the Western History Collections. Since 1998, our Web pages have increased in
number and complexity. In 1999, the Western History Collections began a project to add manuscript collection finding aids to its Web site for Native American- and transportation-related manuscript resources. A total of 131 finding aids have been added to date. When this project began, WHC staff did not know whether these finding aids would be located and used by potential patrons as intended. Many older finding aids existing only in paper format were entered in a word processing program, edited for content, and converted to HTML for display on the Web site. This ongoing project is labor-intensive, although not challenging from a technical standpoint. Evidence that 16.9 percent of patrons utilize the Web pages lends support for their continued development.

It came as a surprise to WHC staff that only 11.3 percent of respondents cited “WHC Web pages, via OU’s on-line catalog” as their means of discovery. Employees of the Western History Collections and the Cataloging Department of the University of Oklahoma Libraries have devoted significant time and effort toward ensuring that manuscript collections are included in the on-line catalog. The contents of this catalog are also largely represented on OCLC’s WorldCat. Because many patrons arrive at the WHC reference desk with book call numbers in hand, it is evident that they have conducted at least some research via the on-line catalog prior to visiting the collections. It was presumed that seekers of manuscript collections would follow the same pattern if the collection descriptions were included in the on-line catalog.

However, it is possible that not all respondents can distinguish between the on-line catalog and the WHC Web pages, particularly when accessed remotely. Although staff would prefer to be able to distinguish between users of the on-line catalog and users of the Web pages, it may be simpler to design future user studies with a single “Internet access” option, with space or added choices provided for clarification. If both categories for Web access are combined, however, they total 28.2 percent, which eclipses all other categories. Rivaled only by the combined total of footnotes and bibliographies (25.1 percent), it is clear that electronic access, whether through Web pages or through the on-line catalog, is popular with researchers.

Although the statistics for Web access may be combined for comparison to non-electronic access means, it is important to note the difference between users of the catalog and users of the Web pages. If users prefer to locate manuscript information through repository Web pages or have more success locating them in this manner, is it necessary to continue creating MARC records for the on-line catalog? Although on the basis of her research Kathleen Feeney recommends continuing the use of MARC records and linking them to descriptions in electronic databases, this may be feasible only for repositories with the staff and funding to adequately support both projects. Will some repositories choose to eliminate one of the two modes of access? A review of manuscript repositories that face this dilemma is needed.

Related to the discussion about the relevance of MARC records is the result for the category “RLIN AMC database,” which received 0.4 percent, or one response. This category was included because from 1988 to 1989, the Western History Collections entered manuscript collection descriptions on RLIN in an effort to expand access to its primary source holdings. Although RLIN is less commonly used today, in the pre-Internet
days it was one of few national electronic databases available for locating manuscript collections.

Only 8.6 percent of those surveyed indicated that a published guide to the collections led researchers to WHC manuscripts. This low rate was unexpected by WHC staff because our daily use of the published guides has led us to view them as indispensable tools at the reference desk. Arrell M. Gibson published the first guide to the Manuscripts Division's holdings in 1960, titled, *A Guide to Regional Manuscript Collections in the Division of Manuscripts, University of Oklahoma Library*, which served researchers for many years. Donald L. DeWitt published *Guide to Manuscript Collections, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma* in 1994. DeWitt's guide has been an invaluable tool for on-site researchers, for quick reference questions at the desk, and for bibliographic instruction sessions. Although this guide is still in use today, the University of Oklahoma Press will publish an updated version in the fall of 2002.

The decision to publish an updated guide to the collections was made in part because the WHC staff receives regular requests from on-site and off-site patrons to purchase a new copy. DeWitt's guide has been out of print for several years, which has meant that researchers' requests for a current printed guide have gone unfulfilled for quite some time. Thus, the 8.6 percent came as a dismal revelation during the survey data analysis. Some careful thought should be given to this finding. Despite the fact that the guides are always designed for easy use, with alphabetically listed collection descriptions and a subject index, the guides may not be as useful to patrons overall as they should be. This may be a problem of availability of the guides, a lack of knowledge of the guides, a preference for other modes of access, or a combination of these factors. For example, not all researchers have equal access to a copy of the printed guide. Of the approximately 60 libraries in the United States that currently hold DeWitt's *Guide to Manuscript Collections*, most are concentrated in the southwestern region. Those who live outside this region may not be able to borrow a copy of the guide. Furthermore, if researchers are not aware of the existence of such a guide, they may not seek to obtain it. In response to the low percentage of patrons who indicated they used the existing printed guide to learn of UNC holdings, Megan Phillips concluded in her study that it was "probably not worth updating." I suspect that although researchers do not often use the printed guide to initially learn of repository holdings, they do use it to learn of other holdings, especially if they are on-site visitors. It is my opinion, based on experience assisting patrons at the reference desk, that the printed guide is a useful and popular tool for learning about manuscript holdings. On-site visitors use it frequently to find material on their subjects and staff members use it often to assist on-site and off-site researchers. Its popularity as a ready-reference tool should be evident to the casual observer from, if nothing else, its constantly tattered, dog-eared condition no matter how frequently the reference desk copy is replaced with a new one. For the future, perhaps guides should be considered as primarily an in-house access tool instead of for remote users. Rethinking the guide's target audience does not diminish its usefulness to those who are familiar with it and use it often, but a separate study to discover the ways researchers use printed guides is warranted.
Cross-tabulation of the survey results yielded an added pool of information on WHC patrons. When viewed by contact type, it is clear that patrons who contacted us by E-mail were far more likely to have located our resources via the Internet than any other source. Fully 51 percent of survey respondents who contacted us by E-mail selected one of the two categories for Internet access, compared to 31 percent of on-site users, 24 percent of telephone researchers, and 4 percent of those who wrote hard-copy letters. It is not surprising that those who feel comfortable enough to send queries by E-mail would also view the Internet as a useful tool in their search for manuscript collections. Other findings included the fact that researchers who contacted us by E-mail and by letter were usually working on genealogy, at 47 percent each; and those who visited on-site cited Native American studies as the most common topic, at 36 percent. Patrons who telephoned us were more likely to be working on Native American studies (36 percent), and other topics not listed as an official category (39 percent), which were most frequently related to university history.

When the data are broken down by topic of research, the most striking result is that by far the largest percentage (42 percent) of patrons working on genealogy located WHC manuscript resources using the Internet instead of other sources, whereas only 12 percent of those researching anthropology used the Internet. Respondents interested in anthropology most often cited article and book footnotes (50 percent) as their source of information about the collections. Of those who indicated Native American studies as their topic, the mode of discovery was primarily via the Internet, at 25 percent, and thereafter split among bibliographies (16 percent), article and book footnotes (14 percent), and “Other” (usually word of mouth) at 16 percent. However, if bibliographies and article/book footnotes were combined as “citations,” they would constitute the largest group for Native American studies, at 30 percent.

The cross-tabulation statistics are interesting due to their specificity of information on particular user groups. They suggest that separate user surveys pinpointing individual groups such as E-mail queries or those studying anthropology could generate more precise data for the Western History Collections to use in planning for future modes of access to materials. This seems particularly appropriate for studying our newest group of researchers: those who use the Internet as their primary means of searching. Little is known about Internet users who seek primary documents. Their expectations, search patterns, and success rates when looking for electronic access points to archives would be helpful information for a repository that plans to develop its Internet resources.

**Methodological Issues**

This survey is the first study to be done of Western History Collections manuscripts users. As such, it is not a perfect instrument. Several changes to the survey questions could have improved the quality of data received. First and foremost, no testing phase of the survey was completed. A trial run of the survey conducted during the fall semester of 1999 would have pinpointed some methodological problems before the survey began in January 2000. Having reviewed the data from several angles since the completion of the survey, it is clear that having some experience conducting user studies is a
key factor in designing an effective survey instrument. Some of the specific changes to this survey would be to include information about patron demographics that correspond to the information categories listed on our patron sign-in forms so that respondent demographics could be compared directly to our annual statistics. This would also permit tracking the information-seeking tactics of different types of patrons such as students, faculty, and independent researchers. This information could lead to the development of access tools such as on-line pathfinders for specific patron groups. Additionally, the inclusion of E-mail surveys may have improved our return rate by making responses more convenient.

Other changes to the survey focus on construction of the questions to reflect the viewpoint of researchers. In other words, when researchers have difficulty distinguishing two options (such as information found on repository Web pages as opposed to the on-line catalog), the two should be combined into a single option (Internet access), possibly with space provided to elaborate. Although the distinction between the two options may be important to librarians and archivists, researchers may be unable to answer accurately when faced with choices they view as quite similar. For those who wish to study the issue further, using focus groups with one-on-one discussion between archivists and patrons may help. Care should be taken to make the questions as clear and mutually exclusive as possible to ensure proper responses.

The survey should also be designed to produce clear and concise data. The WHC survey permitted multiple answers to single questions, which sometimes made several facets of data analysis more difficult. If questions had been more tightly controlled by asking patrons to choose only one category for how they initially learned of the manuscript source they needed, the survey results might have been easier to interpret. Similarly, this survey included several questions that were unrelated to the main point. Questions about whether or not patrons located the information needed and if they received helpful recommendations from staff members are certainly worthwhile subjects of study, but they do not add relevant data for our main query.

Overall, the survey included too many broadly worded questions without adequate guidance for patrons to provide additional information. The survey was designed to be as brief as possible to encourage patron response and was considered a "starter" survey to get WHC on the path to learning more about its users. However, in simplifying the questions, they became too broad and yielded less useful data. Future surveys will be designed with fewer, more tightly focused questions with added sub-questions that help clarify responses. Surveys that concentrate specifically on one issue will likely be more successful.

Summary

The results of this survey indicate that the Western History Collections' typical manuscript user identifies our primary materials through Internet sources and by following citations in books, articles, and bibliographies. The two response categories for discovery via the Internet received 11.3 percent (Web catalog) and 16.9 percent (Web pages), for a combined total of 28.2 percent. This level of interest in repository-supported Web access points is encouraging to libraries that have committed significant staff time to
developing on-line access. Megan Phillips's study of 1997 UNC users found that 8.3 percent accessed holdings information via the Internet. Phillips speculated that Web access would increase in future years.27 This idea was supported by Shayera D. Tangri's 2000 follow-up study, which found that fully 16 percent of 1999 UNC users utilized the Internet.28 These numbers and the findings of our study indicate that Web access is quickly growing to a level that easily rivals traditional sources. As researchers continue to become comfortable searching for information on the Web and as libraries expand access to holdings on Web pages, this trend will likely continue.

The second largest category, citations in books, articles, and bibliographies, seems particularly noteworthy because it is such a traditional method of research. The fact that it placed a close second behind the Internet access categories raises questions. Do researchers intentionally locate WHC materials through citations, or does it happen by chance in the natural course of research? Have these researchers already looked for the needed sources on-line but failed to find them? Have they avoided on-line access because they prefer traditional methods of research? If so, is this a characteristic common to people who conduct historical research? Librarians and archivists should give serious thought to why researchers locate the information they need completely independent of the multitude of access tools we create and maintain.

Conclusions

The survey of Western History Collections manuscript users educated staff about the identity and needs of the average patron. The statistics gathered will assist in anticipating user activities and demands. However, the survey also highlighted how much is not known about manuscript users and their information-seeking behavior. As a single survey, it cannot be used to track developing trends in manuscript use without a follow-up study. In order to gain the maximum benefit from user studies, they should be conducted on a regular basis. This study has laid the foundation for such a program of systematic studies for the Western History Collections. Although studies may be done with a stand-alone survey instrument, the more efficient approach is to incorporate selected survey questions into reference registration forms and procedures. As described by Conway and Baker, patron sign-in sheets that include brief questions about information-seeking tactics can generate the needed data.29 Results can be tabulated yearly with existing repository statistics. As the current reference request forms used at Western History do not include such questions, a redesign of the registration form is necessary.

To make these user studies ultimately worthwhile, the data gathered must be used constructively in planning for technical and reference services. Collecting information about patrons only to shelve it for posterity is pointless, although this is often the fate of library surveys.30 As Schlichter and Pemberton observed, "Planning and evaluation are not independent processes."31 In other words, survey data must not be used simply as a descriptive tool for portraying a repository's user community in administrative reports. The data should be used in the administrative decision-making process when serving user needs is being addressed.

Manuscript repositories that actively engage in regular studies of researcher behavior will create a data bank for staff to consult when faced with decisions that affect users.
As in the case of the Western History Collections, decisions to implement new technology such as the application of EAD encoding to finding aids, or to continue existing access points such as printed collection guides, can be aided with this information. This knowledge produces reciprocal rewards for manuscript users and collections staff. When manuscript curators are provided with clues on which access tools are used most by researchers, staff may narrow the focus of their energies on them, and users will thereby benefit from improved access. In this way, systematic user studies can be ultimately used as one of the keys to a successful partnership between manuscript repositories and the manuscript research community.
January 3, 2000

Dear Researcher:

Thank you for your recent use of the Western History Collections’ manuscript resources.

In the interest of assessing our services, we are conducting a survey of researchers who have used our manuscript collections during the calendar year 2000. Please complete the survey on the reverse side of this letter and return it in the enclosed SASE. Do not hesitate to include any additional comments or concerns that are not addressed by the survey questions. This survey is anonymous.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Kristina L. Southwell
Manuscripts Librarian
### University of Oklahoma Libraries
### Western History Collections
### Research Survey 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How did you learn of WHC’s manuscript holdings? (check all that apply):</th>
<th>Why did you choose to use the WHC?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>Location (proximity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLIN AMC database</td>
<td>Needed resources located at WHC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral by other manuscript repository</td>
<td>Probable resources located at WHC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHC Web pages, via OU’s on-line catalog</td>
<td>Ease of use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHC Web pages, via a search engine or non-OU related site</td>
<td>Required by class instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Published guide to collections</td>
<td>Other, please specify:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article/book footnotes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct inquiry to WHC</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, please specify:</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What was/is your topic?</th>
<th>Did you find the information you needed?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native American studies/history</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>History of the West in general</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women’s studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Genealogy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other, please specify:</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did you contact WHC by:</th>
<th>General comments:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-site visit</td>
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<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>If no, why not?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resources not located at WHC</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to determine if resources are located at WHC</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, please specify:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th>Did WHC staff recommend other sources at WHC to assist in your research? Yes / No</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If yes, were they helpful? Yes / No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you contact WHC by:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kristina L. Southwell is Assistant Professor of Bibliography and Manuscripts Librarian for the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma. She holds an M.L.I.S. from the University of Oklahoma and is vice president of the Oklahoma Conservation Congress. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the MAC Spring 2002 meeting in Minneapolis.

NOTES


10. Feeney, 209–211.


17. Collection-level descriptive entries for Western History Collections primary materials are available at <http://www.libraries.ou.edu/webcatalog.shtm>. To view the collection summary, select “All” from the View Options menu.
The project to make selected finding aids available on-line began in February 1999 with the Native American Manuscript Resources page, at <http://www.libraries.ou.edu/depts/weshistory/namr.htm>. The Native American-related materials were chosen to display first due to the high demand for their finding aids. The second subject page of finding aids is Transportation Manuscript Resources, at <http://www.libraries.ou.edu/depts/westhistory/transpx.htm>. These resources were chosen for the high level of interest in Oklahoma’s railroad history. The pages have received 5,556 and 1,022 total hits, respectively, from their inception until April 2001.


26. Phillips, 47.

27. Phillips, 45.


31. Schlichter and Pemberton, 257.