

Faculty Attitudes toward Electronic Resources

The proliferation of electronic resources has had a significant impact on the way the academic community uses, stores, and preserves information. In an effort to more fully understand how this technology is affecting the behaviors and attitudes of academic professionals, JSTOR conducted an anonymous survey of faculty at higher education institutions in the United States in late 2000. The main objectives of the study were (1) to find out how U.S. academics perceive and use electronic resources for research, (2) to learn about their attitudes regarding the current and future impact of technology on their use of the library, and (3) to gain insight into their awareness of issues related to archiving.

With support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, JSTOR retained

Odyssey, a market-research firm based in San Francisco, to conduct the study.¹ The data for the study were gathered from responses to a detailed questionnaire mailed to over 32,000 randomly selected humanities and social sciences faculty in the United States. More than 4,000 faculty completed and returned the survey.

1. Research

Over 60 percent of the faculty responded that they are comfortable using electronic resources, they believe that a variety of electronic resources is important to their research, and they consider electronic databases to be invaluable. In addition, 62 percent expect that they will become increasingly dependent on electronic resources in the future. The resources they use most often are online catalogs, full-text electronic journal databases, and abstracting and indexing databases.

Over 70 percent of all respondents consider their library's online catalog to be "very important" to their research. However, the importance of this resource varies significantly by field. Just over 60 percent of the economists consider their library's online catalog to be "very important," while nearly 90 percent of humanists regarded it

as such. In fact, the home library catalog is the most important electronic resource for humanists, by a large margin. Based on their replies, it is as important to their research as are personal computers.

2. The Library

Faculty continue to rely on the library. When asked to rate how dependent they are on the library for their research, 48 percent indicated that they are "very dependent." However, some expect this reliance to decrease in the future. When asked how dependent they think they will be in five years, only 38 percent felt that they would be "very dependent." According to the responses, this reliance on the library is not about the library as a "place"; in fact, many faculty can foresee a future in which they will never actually go in the library. The survey gave the following statement: "Before long, computers, the Internet, and electronic computer-based archives and databases will allow academics to conduct much of their research without setting foot in the library." Of all the respondents, 44 percent said the statement described their view "very well," but these results varied by field: 54 percent of economists indicated this statement described their view very well, compared with only 22 percent of the humanists.

Along these same lines, the survey asked faculty to rate the importance of three broad library functions or roles: the library as gateway, as archivist, and as buyer. More than 75 percent of respondents (in all fields) felt that the roles of archivist and buyer were very important. For the library's gateway function, however, the responses varied considerably by

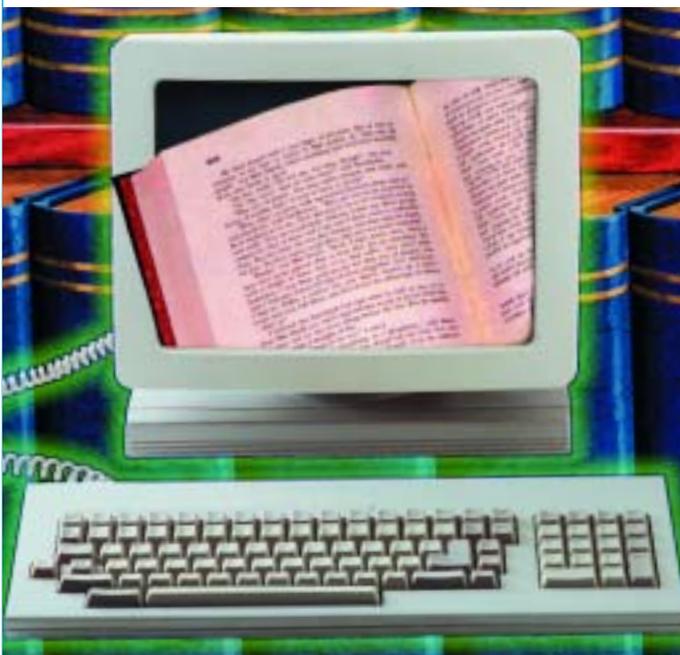


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field. Consistent with their view of the online catalog, humanists seem to utilize and rely on the library much more for their research: 80 percent of the humanists rated the library's role as a starting point for research as "very important"; by contrast, only 48 percent of economists considered this library role to be "very important."

3. Archiving

One interesting question is whether academics will be able to trust an electronic repository in place of locally stored volumes. Faculty indicated fairly strongly that they want libraries to maintain paper copies. The following statement described their view "very well" for 48 percent: "Regardless of what happens with electronic archives of journals, it will always be crucial for libraries to maintain hard-copy archives." Once again the social scientists' view differed from that of the humanists: just 24 percent of the economists thought this statement described their view, whereas 63 percent of the humanists agreed with it.

Further, most academics do not condone discarding hard-copy back runs. More than half of the respondents—56 percent—noted that the following statement did *not* describe their point of view: "Assuming that electronic archives of journals are proven to work well and are readily accessible, I would be happy to see hard-copy archives discarded and replaced entirely by electronic archives." Economists are somewhat more prepared to accept that possibility, with only 35 percent disagreeing with the statement, whereas the humanists had a strongly negative reaction to the statement, at a rate of 74 percent.

Finally, the survey asked faculty to indicate how important it is that electronic journals be preserved for the future. With very little discrepancy across academic discipline, 76 percent indicated that the following statement described their point of view "very well": "With more and more journals becoming available electronically, it is crucial that libraries, publishers, or electronic databases archive, catalog, and protect these electronic journals."

Conclusion

Faculty attitudes seem to vary most widely in how they view the library and

its role, particularly its role as gateway: providing assistance with access. Humanists depend heavily on the library to assist them in seeking research materials—to act as a starting point for research—while social scientists value the library much less for this role. Moreover, although it is expected that the library's role as gateway will have less importance in the future as faculty access more and more resources directly from their desktops, again this expectation is more strongly felt among social scientists than humanists. Thus, given how much humanists rely on their libraries, one cannot help but wonder if resources are being directed toward the academic disciplines that most value the library's services, especially with respect to access. In thinking about future investments for providing new access tools and services, colleges and universities should perhaps give careful consideration to serving the constituents that most value and depend on the libraries. In the areas of research and archiving, faculty's perceptions and attitudes about electronic resources also vary across disciplines, but faculty do seem to agree overall that (1) electronic resources have become an invaluable tool for research, and faculty will become even more dependent on them in the future; and (2) hard-copy archives should not be replaced entirely by electronic archives, but preserving electronic journals for the future is extremely important.

Note

1. Established in 1992, Odyssey focuses on consumers' changing attitudes toward electronic technologies and new media.

More details on this survey are available at the JSTOR Web site: <<http://www.jstor.org/about/faculty.survey.ppt>>. In a related article, the E-Content department of the September/October 2002 issue of EDUCAUSE Review will discuss a recent survey—conducted by Outsell, Inc., and commissioned by the Digital Library Federation—studying how faculty and students at colleges and universities use the academic library and how they perceive the library within the larger scholarly environment.

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