Introduction
We recently surveyed a small group of students, asking them a few simple questions about their research journey and potential blockers that prevent that journey from being as seamless as it ought to be. Though the number of participants in the survey – 24 – was small, we found the responses insightful and helpful enough to share. We hope this can start a dialogue about students’ challenges during their research journey; we’d love to hear from faculty and librarians about your experience with these challenges and ways in which you are helping resolve for your students.

Motivation
At Lean Library (a SAGE Publishing company), we want to simplify the way library patrons gain access to resources for their research while improving library visibility along the way. Aiming to solve real issues he encountered in his time as program manager at an academic library, our founder created the Lean Library browser extension that streamlines access to licensed content and promotes library branding, based on user feedback. As we continue to look for ways to improve the product and ensure it stays relevant to users’ needs, we wanted to get some updated information about their journeys.

Methodology
The survey was distributed through a paid advertisement to students from SAGE Publishing’s Facebook Page. While responses gathered could help to inform the work of the Lean Library team, survey respondents did not see any information about us or our products before taking the survey. Survey respondents were entered into a contest to receive a $25 gift card. Survey respondents came from the United States, Canada, and the UK. 24 individuals participated – seven PhD candidates, four first-year university students, four fourth-year students, three second-year students, three Master’s-level students, one third-year student, and two declined to respond.

How do students find and access research?
Optimizing the student research journey
By Robert Lisiecki, Marketing Manager, SAGE Publishing
June 2020
**Findings**

The survey participants were asked to respond to six questions about their research process.

**Question 1: What is the starting point for your research?**

Unsurprisingly, most students start their research with Google or Google Scholar. Only a small portion go to the resources found on their library website to kick off their work.

For one respondent, that meant having the “ability to access papers without having to go through any more portals/logins.”

Another respondent wanted other resources centrally located, like “EDX.ORG; Coursera.org; Bartleby.com; student hut; wikipedia.org; codeschool.com; htmldog.com.”

**Question 2: What would you add to your library’s website to help with your research?**

Only three students answered this question, but two of the three answers are consistent with what Johan Tilstra, Founder of Lean Library, used to hear as a librarian at Utrecht University – navigating the growing list of resources available to students is often difficult. With these responses, we see students have a clear desire for an easier pathway to their resources.
Question 3: How do you usually gain access to resources for your research?

Moving beyond “starting points,” the goal with this question was to drill down into how students end up at their research “destinations.”

Out of 22 answers, nine identified the library as the means to gaining access with one specifying an authentication system (Shibboleth).

With a better understanding of where they are finding access, we wanted to know more about their frustrations with finding these resources.

Question 4: What is your biggest frustration when researching citable sources for coursework or papers?

While the responses vary, some common themes are related to time and access, which also impacts time. If students struggle to gain access to or locate the resources they need, they waste valuable time or could end up paying for resources the library has already paid for. And, of course, this is exasperated for students juggling school, jobs, and family.

In sharing their biggest frustrations, some respondents want access without having to pay extra:
- “Not hav[ing] access to them and them being too expensive to buy myself/extortionate price for a mere 24 hours of access to it.”
- “No access to the available material/research via my institutional account.”
- “Lack of access to paid publications, inability to find full text of older articles archived online.”

Other respondents either didn’t know where to start or weren’t finding what they were looking for:
- “Where to look initially.”
- “Not finding the needed journals and books in local library or my own university.”

After asking about their frustrations, we wanted to see if off-campus access is generally an issue.
Question 5: Do you struggle with gaining access to resources you need for your research when off campus?

Students do not always realize the difference between on-campus and off-campus research; with IP authentication, gaining access can be simple and seamless. When researching off campus, gaining access, we think, can be difficult and a slight majority agreed.

We might assume that more yes’s come from students who are earlier in their academic careers while more no’s come from more advanced undergraduates and beyond and beyond. However, it is evenly split throughout. This shows that while some students figure out how to gain access, others struggle throughout their careers.
Question 6: Would you download a browser extension if streamlined access to licensed content?

Of course, in full disclosure, note that we asked this question with the Lean Library browser extension in mind. When talking to librarians, we are often asked whether students would take the time to download a browser extension. From our experience, they do, but even we were surprised by the fact without mentioning Lean Library or providing any additional context, nearly all participants said they would (22/24). This signifies two things: downloading a browser extension is not a huge hurdle and even those who say they do not struggle gaining access would still like to streamline access further.

Download an extension?

Yes

No

22

2

Conclusion

No matter where students start or what they are looking for, researching comes with frustrations. Figuring out what they have access to or how to gain access to content for their research can waste valuable time and money. As more students move to online learning and off-campus research, resolving access issues becomes increasingly important.

A browser extension like Lean Library can help solve these issues while keeping the library at the center the researcher’s world. We continue seeing increased usage because, simply put, it works. Last month alone, we helped 129,538 unique users streamline access to library services.

What are some issues your patrons face in their research journey?

We would love to hear from you and discuss how we may be able to help.

Tweet or email us at:

@leanlibrary

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