

## Information Needs of Performing Arts Students

Amelia Ishmael

January 30, 2019

Jennifer Mayer's article "Serving the Needs of Performing Arts Students: A Case Study" is concerned about the specific needs of performing-arts students, the author is concerned whether the library's services are useful for their populations' needs and whether students are receiving adequate disciplinary-library instruction.<sup>1</sup>

The author's article presents three inquiries: What are the information needs and research behaviors of upper-division performing-arts students? Given performing-arts students' specific needs (which are multimedia, primary, and interdisciplinary), are students receiving adequate instruction; are subject-liaison librarians meeting student-research demands? How can instruction, learning, and research services to these students evolve and improve?

"Serving the Needs of Performing Arts Students" involves a case study.<sup>2</sup> This study focuses on thirty (volunteer) music, dance, and theater majors who were current students at the University of Wyoming in Laramie in Spring 2014. The author used focus-group survey interviews (including 12 questions) that were followed by discussion sessions (1.5 hours in duration) to obtain qualitative data that would identify user behaviors and expectations of this unique population of library users.<sup>3</sup>

The author attests that the few research studies that have been conducted & published on this population group (such as those by Ann Medaille, Michael Olsson, Chern Li Liew & Siong Ngor Ng, Joe C. Clark, Kirsten Dougan, and Joseph Matson & Anne Shelley) are limited in scope and do not solely employ qualitative methods. In this particular case study, the author builds off of Hannah Bennett's 2006 user study of studio-art students.

From the initial surveys she learned that many students begun research with their studio or performance work, then consulted a professor and made preparatory Internet research (Google, *Wikipedia*, and YouTube), and then conducted library research including digital resources (such as databases and online reference texts) and consulting reference staff. Students largely prioritized the experience of browsing physical materials and meeting face-to-face with librarians.

The author identifies that performing-arts students have complex research needs. Users responded that the instruction that they had received during library orientation was too general and that the search tools that their library website facilitated were not compatible with their needs. These users' needs may be presented through three highlights. First, primary resources (including out-of-print and obscure materials) were broadly described as a *necessity* for many of these users. Due to the nature of their disciplines, users' research is often ambiguous and subjective in nature, and thus prioritizes direct experience. In order to find authoritative sources users were interested in consulting well-respected professionals in their field through web-based discussion forums and discipline-specific professional organizations. Secondly, users needed

---

<sup>1</sup> The users that this article focuses on are performing-arts students are defined in this study as "upper-division music, dance, and theater majors."

<sup>2</sup> A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates one specific group, it is an effective research method for this study due to the large number of factors involved and the yet undefined boundaries between library services, students' needs, and research systems (Connaway 80).

<sup>3</sup> The author is seeking qualitative data rather than quantitative data because she is trying to understand how participants ask and why; the phenomenon under her study "are complex, social in nature, and do not lead themselves to quantification," and she is interested in their subjective experiences and behaviors (Connaway 77).

access to high-quality multimedia resources—images, audio and video recordings (preferably streaming), music scores, manuscripts, and technical media information. Though historical resources were useful, students also needed access to a wealth of emerging and contemporary records, documents, and resources in order to study the latest productions in their field. Thirdly, users needed the library’s local catalogue and the discovery layer to compete with the search features offered by commercial websites (such as Amazon, iTunes, and Netflix) which users found more efficient to locate the sought information.

Based on this study, the author encourages libraries to adapt short-term and long-term changes. Firstly, the author encourages more information-literacy instruction to help users acquire primary research strategies and resources, and enhance their ability to evaluate the credible of encountered sources. The author also encourages that the university instate credit-bearing instruction in information literacy & research methods as a core requirement for upper-division and graduate students. Secondly, due to users’ interdisciplinary research and multimedia-material needs, the author recommends that librarians provide advanced comprehensive training of their specific library’s discipline-specific tools (subject-specific databases and assistance services). The author emphasizes that this instruction should include timely refresher orientation courses, online-visual tours, targeted tutorials that prioritized multimedia resources, and even different tools that considered the skills that this population specialized in (emphasizing, for example, more visual instruction for visual professionals). The author also notes that some of the users’ difficulty in accessing many contemporary resources could be due to copyright limitations, which the library could also give instruction in. Thirdly, the author recommends more proactive partnerships between librarians and performing-arts’ professors, the library’s technical services department, and even the vendors who are hired to provide the library databases. By working more closely with faculty, librarians could increase their own awareness of the sorts of research and assignments encountered by their users, and simultaneously ascertain that professors are actively leading students to the library’s resources. By working more closely with technical services, librarians could recommend that characteristics and terms are based more on students’ needs in order to make resources more accessible in catalogues. By working with vendors, librarians could insist that users’ interactions with the databases more user-friendly, that more efficient interfaces are developed, and that “discovery layers” are improved. Finally, the author recommends more assertive marketing of library services.<sup>4</sup>

#### Works Cited:

Connaway, L. S.; Powell, R. R. (2010). “Chapter 3: Selecting the Research Method” in *Basic Research Methods for Librarians*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 71-106.

Mayer, Jennifer. “Serving the Needs of Performing Arts Students: A Case Study.” *Libraries and the Academy*, vol. 15, no. 3 (July 2015), pp 409-431. *Project Muse*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2015.0036>. Accessed 28 Jan 2019.

---

<sup>4</sup> I found that these recommendations were very empathetic to Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan’s “Five Laws of Library Science” 1 ) Books are for use; 2) Every person his or her book; 3) Every book its reader; 4) Save the time of the reader; 5) A library is a growing organism.