

Reference Support for Interdisciplinary Scholars: Resources for Working with Women's Studies Faculty

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Abstract

Interdisciplinary scholars face complex information-seeking problems requiring multiple databases, strong interpersonal networks, and varied search strategies. Relatively little analysis of their information seeking experience is available to the academic librarians who serve these scholars. This study examines twenty information services and resources used in Women's Studies noting, among other points, little use of Women's Studies indexes, high use of interlibrary loan, and little familiarity with electronic document delivery services.¹

The increasing number of faculty whose research involves multiple disciplines² offer a complex service challenge to academic librarians in the areas of reference, instruction, and document delivery. Librarians serving these scholars find relatively little in the user-needs research literature to directly inform their service provision decisions. This report from an extensive examination of Women's Studies (WS) scholars analyzes their use of twenty

library resources and services in an effort to support further service development.

Research problem

Preliminary research indicates that interdisciplinary scholars face problems and concerns different from those of their single-discipline colleagues.³ They may use multiple interpersonal networks,⁴ expend significant resources in crossing boundaries,⁵ and work to circumvent inadequate periodical indexing.⁶ The effort to construct meaning and develop understanding across traditional theoretical boundaries may require forays into unfamiliar subject domains.⁷ The use of cross-disciplinary databases still requires the use of multiple strategies and search terms.⁸

Interdisciplinary scholars' use of library services and resources remains relatively unexplored. What do they need enough to expend precious time in obtaining? What have they used, rejected, and relied on regularly? Placing these research problems within the context of the Women's Studies community supports effective progress in understanding interdisciplinary information needs since WS faculty have had ties to many de-

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partments for over three decades and the field's resources are quite well developed.

Literature review

As a discipline, Women's Studies (WS) has been characterized by rapid growth, interdisciplinarity, and developing resources. The movement began in 1970,⁹ with the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) founded in 1977.¹⁰ Today the NWSA database includes more than 600 programs plus 3,100 individual and institutional members. Graduate work, even at the doctoral level, is increasingly available. The interdisciplinarity of WS was recognized as early as 1946, long before anyone thought of it as an academic discipline.¹¹ Elizabeth Futas' bibliographic analysis of the field in 1980 established that it functioned as a social science with significant inclusion of the humanities and some work in the natural sciences.¹²

To serve those growing and interdisciplinary information needs, a range of reference resources are currently available. Electronic databases have only recently become available but their value is developing.¹³ Traditional university presses have moved beyond occasional titles to established series on WS in their lists.¹⁴ The concept of "high scatter"¹⁵ certainly still applies to WS but the resources are becoming more fully developed and organized.

Academic librarians have served this field since the 1970s with all the tools of the profession. Recognizing the complex information needs of these interdisciplinary scholars, librarians have created substantial reference bibliographies,¹⁶ strengthened subject access,¹⁷ devised online search strategies,¹⁸ developed collections,¹⁹ and provided reference and instructional service.²⁰ Most of this work builds on a few finite research studies (such as examinations of subject headings)²¹ and praxis. A great many questions are yet to be answered before the work can build on more holistic research.

Study objectives

Given the generous support of the Carroll Preston Baber Research Award, this study progresses towards a more complete understanding of the information needs and search experiences of Women's Studies scholars. Building on earlier work,²² this research design required a diverse set of participants to answer both neutral and open-ended questions. Progress on the following two questions is discussed in this report.

1. What library services do Women's Studies faculty use in their research and teaching?

2. What information resources do Women's Studies faculty use in their research and teaching?

A set of twenty services and resources was offered to respondents in a series of three questions as one part of a substantial questionnaire. In addition, open-ended questions elicited explanations of attitudes, expectations, and techniques involved in decisions pertaining to both services and resources.

Methodology

The study's population, Women's Studies scholars, is amorphous in the extreme. Women's Studies programs range along a formality continuum from degree-granting departments with line-item faculty assigned on a full-time basis down to a simple array of course offerings labeled as WS with no formally assigned faculty beyond the part-time or nominal program chair. Faculty may be affiliated, part-time, or full-time. While hundreds have joined the National Women's Studies Association, many more hold memberships only in their "home" discipline organization.

Gathering a substantial amount of in-depth data from so diverse a population required the triangulation of several different contact methods and the use of a written survey instrument. Since this was intended as an open exploration rather than a quantitative analysis, the entire population was approached rather than a random sample selected. Scholars received word of the study through three structured methods:

- written surveys sent by postal mail to every individual (as opposed to institutional) member of the National Women's Studies Association;
- invitations to participate in the study sent to the primary discussion list for WS (WMST-L)²³ over a five month period with respondents receiving the survey via their preferred communication mechanism (i.e., electronic mail or postal mail);
- postal mail copies of the survey sent to the chairs of every U.S. program offering anything more than isolated undergraduate courses in WS with a request to share the instrument with all WS faculty.

The survey instrument developed from research questions raised by previous research in this field, including Bates, Gerhard et. al., and Westbrook.²⁴ Initial discussion of the research questions lead to an instrument draft that was pretested on seven WS scholars around the country.

The methodology was limited by four factors. First, those who chose to respond were self-selected and may, therefore, have a higher interest in, commitment to, or awareness of

the relationship between academic library service and their own information-seeking. Second, the respondents do not form a statistically accurate representation of the whole population, particularly in light of all the population variables such as size of institution, home discipline, and academic rank. Third, while WS scholars exemplify many aspects of interdisciplinary scholarship, they do not represent all interdisciplinary scholars. Fourth, the survey instrument demanded a good deal of thought from the study participants. While this almost certainly lowered the response rate, those who did participate provided rich data. Given those limitations, however, this study provides substantial information for academic librarians serving this complex population.

Results

In total, 215 viable surveys were returned, 70 via e-mail and the rest via postal mail.²⁵ The many variables within the community were well represented: rank, program type, geographic location, tenure status, department affiliation, and Women's Studies affiliation. The rich variety among each of these variables increases the value of these data.

Forty-two percent²⁶ of the respondents who reported their rank were full professors, lending the weight of their experience in information seeking to this general picture. Of the 537 programs offering anything more than isolated undergraduate courses (e.g., a minor, a major, or graduate courses) in WS, 168 (31%) were represented in this study. Sixty-two of those (37%) were from programs with only a minor and a total of fifty-one (30%) were from programs offering graduate level work. Of course, the program level does not necessarily correlate with the size of the parent institution but it could relate to the level of library support that faculty might reasonably expect or librarians might be funded to supply. Of the 49 states with WS programs, 44 were represented by respondents.

The vast majority of respondents, 185, reported a non-WS affiliation and 33 of those reported a second, non-WS affiliation. Dividing the affiliations into the long-established²⁷ areas revealed an emphasis on the humanities (50%) and social sciences (45%) with minor representation of the natural sciences (5%). Finally, 119 respondents (55%) reported a formal affiliation with WS.

The diversity in responses from such a wide range of academic ranks, program types, tenure-status levels, geographic locations, and disciplines strengthens the value of the responses by more thoroughly identifying the spectrum of possible information-seeking contexts.

Findings

Librarians offer the twenty library services and resources discussed herein in expectation of meeting user information needs and supplementing user information seeking techniques. The findings are, therefore, placed in the context of information needs and seeking.

Information needs

An active indication of various information needs is the actual use of library reference and instruction services designed to meet those needs. Respondents indicated whether or not they had found any of six increasingly standard library services useful.

Any discussion of or research into information needs takes place within certain boundaries. Individuals may (a) not recognize a need, (b) not act on a need, (c) give up on a need because they consider it impossible to meet, or (d) give up on a need because it is actually impossible to meet in their given situation.

A need to learn about the information-seeking process is increasingly common as the continual development of information technology renders yesterday's skills obsolete. The first two options, therefore, dealt with the established library service of group workshops in areas of technology: one workshop on searching a specific database or subject area and the other on using communication tools such as e-mail and discussion lists. Increasingly available for faculty are the one-on-one services in reference, instruction, and document delivery. The remaining four options covered those points: setting up a table of content service, setting up repeated searches, conducting extensive research, and instruction/reference consultations. In addition, respondents were invited to list additional services.

As might be expected in a complex field of interdisciplinary information needs, more scholars recognized and acted on the need for one-on-one reference or instruction consultation than any other listed service. Automated services, relatively new and less commonly understood, were used least often.

Table 1: Use of Library Services

Library service	Used	Not used
Workshop, searching in a database/field	38%	62%
Workshop, communication technology	34%	66%
Set up repeated, regular searches	10%	90%
Set up table of contents services	10%	90%
Conducting extensive research	25%	75%
Reference/instruction consultation	64%	36%

Table 2: Use of Library Services by Academic Rank

Library service	Asst.	Assc.	Full
Workshop, searching in database/field	40%	42%	33%
Workshop, communication technology	26%	51%	40%
Set up repeated, regular searches	10%	11%	7%
Set up table of contents services	17%	12%	7%
Conducting extensive research	24%	26%	23%
Reference/instruction consultation	50%	62%	66%

Looking at each of these choices in terms of academic rank provides additional insight. As Table 2 indicates, 66% of the full professor respondents found individual reference and/or instruction consultations useful.

The marked increase in use of the communication workshops among associate and full professors might reflect the demand made on graduate students to utilize these technologies during their studies, a demand which reduces their need for such workshops when they move into assistant professorships. The disparity between assistant and full professors in the use of individual consultations, however, may reflect a number of different situations such as the development of more narrowly defined, specialized research agendas among full professors or the recent use of the latest reference tools among assistant professors. Neither disparity can be definitely explained but the differences are suggestive.

Finally, an examination of service use in light of program level suggests some interesting possibilities. As Table 3 indicates, faculty from institutions which have only undergraduate programs are almost twice as likely as those from graduate programs to use extensive library research services.

In general, program nature (i.e., graduate or undergraduate) does not seriously affect use of these services. It might well be expected that faculty from programs with graduate courses in WS would make significantly more use of these special services than those from undergraduate programs since they would, in general, conduct more research. It may well be, however, that while the WS programs differ, the faculty home departments may not. Given the varied formats in which WS programs operate, the faculty affiliated with them may conduct extensive research even when the programs function at a modest level.

Information seeking

The responses to the two other questions discussed in this report pertained to other library services

and resources. While these questions also indicate need to a certain extent, they are particularly revealing in terms of information seeking because the format of the questions permits respondents to indicate the frequency and consistency with which they use these services and resources.

Services

Five services may be of particular use to interdisciplinary scholars who work to identify the latest research in a number of fields: table of content services, automatic searches, document delivery, interlibrary loan, and alert or updating notices.

Table of content services were more unfamiliar (38%) than used (21%, often and 19%, seldom) by respondents. While its use was fairly equally divided among the ranks, more full professors had tried and rejected it than had the two lower ranks combined.

Weekly search results sent via e-mail were almost entirely unknown (62%), despite the relative availability of such services. Again, the service was slightly less useful to full professors than to those in the lower ranks. An equal percentage of respondents from graduate and undergraduate programs were unfamiliar with this service so it may just be too new or unavailable for general use.

Electronic document delivery via e-mail was used often (15%) or seldom (20%) but was unfamiliar to 46%. More respondents from graduate programs (41%) than from undergraduate programs (31%) made use of this service.

Interlibrary loan, as might be expected, is the most commonly used service with 83% using it often. This is hardly surprising given the need for WS resources which are new, from small presses, printed in small runs, rarely reviewed, or likely to be somewhat scarce for some other reason. As respondents increased in experience, their tendency to use ILL seldom (rather than often) increased slightly moving from 11% of the assistant professors to 19% of full professors.

Table 3: Use of library services by program nature

Library service	Undergraduate	Graduate
Workshop, searching in a database/field	40%	35%
Workshop, communication technology	36%	24%
Set up repeated, regular searches	10%	10%
Set up table of contents services	11%	10%
Conducting extensive research	30%	16%
Reference/instruction consultation	63%	67%

Update notices sent via e-mail were used to some degree by 30% of the respondents. Given the relatively recent availability of this service, it was not surprising to find that 49% were not familiar with it.

Aside from the long-established interlibrary loan, these services were unfamiliar to between 38% and 62 % of the respondents. Although more experienced respondents tended to be the first to drop or minimize use of these services, it may still be worthwhile to make a particular effort to insure that these scholars understand the place, value, and use of each service.

Resources

Nine information resources of various types were used by at least some of these scholars: e-mail, discussion lists, their own institution’s online catalog, other online catalogs, WS periodical indexes, non-WS periodical indexes, the University of Wisconsin library publications on WS, the Web, and grant databases. Each resource links the scholar directly to information or to other academics who may have information.

E-mail and discussion lists link individuals to each other and to groups. As might be expected, e-mail was used regularly by 95% of the respondents. (The three who were not familiar with e-mail were at the associate and full professor ranks as were four of the five who seldom use it.) Discussion lists, on the other hand, were used regularly by only 60% of the respondents despite the emphasis on personal networking in this discipline. Of those who seldom used, rejected, or were unfamiliar with these lists, most were at the associate or full professor rank. The interpersonal networks often developed by mature scholars within their theoretical and disciplinary communities may lead them to make less use of the broad-range discussion lists.

Online catalogs, given the growing number of WS monographs and series, might be expected to play a role in most information seeking. Local catalogs were used regularly by 85% of the respondents. Remote-site catalogs, however, were used regularly by only 49%; a full 11% were not even familiar with them.

Periodical indexes, both within and outside of Women’s Studies, provide structured, consistent access to much of the research literature used by these scholars.

Almost as many scholars used non-WS indexes as were unfamiliar with the WS indexes. The largest proportion of those unfamiliar with non-WS databases came from respondents in programs with only a minor (34%) while the three ranks were almost equally divided on that response. Unfamiliarity with the WS databases was evident in both the undergraduate (35%) programs and the graduate programs (38%).

The University of Wisconsin Women’s Studies Library publications²⁸ provide enhanced, affordable access to a wide range of monographic and serial publications in WS. The majority of respondents (55%) were unfamiliar with these publications although 29% used them with varying levels of frequency. The more experienced scholars tended to make more use of the publications: 36% of the full professors and 31% of the associate professors compared to 19% of the assistant professors. Given the specialized nature of these publications and their lack of commercial advertising, it makes sense to find more experienced and research-centered scholars making use of them while a high proportion still need to learn about them.

The World Wide Web, on the other hand, is ubiquitous. Only 8% (all of whom were associate or full professors) were unfamiliar with it. Regular use was common in both undergraduate (66%) program respondents and graduate (62%) program respondents.

Finally, grant databases such as SPIN and IRIS may be of use to WS scholars who need funding for their work. Almost half of the respondents were unfamiliar with these databases.

Perhaps the relatively limited funding available for the study of women’s issues makes grant databases less necessary in that the few viable sources are already known.

Implications

Each of the twenty services and resources discussed herein is potentially useful to Women’s Studies scholars but few of them are well known, much less regularly used. Respon-

Table 4: Use of WS and non-WS Periodical Indexes

	Use	Seldom	Rejected	Unfamiliar	Total
WS	13%	32%	3%	44%	92%
Non-WS	40%	28%	2%	26%	96%

Table 5: Grant Database use by Rank

	Use	Seldom	Rejected	Unfamiliar	Total
Assist.	14%	16%	5%	47%	82%
Assoc.	3%	26%	8%	51%	88%
Full	16%	25%	5%	47%	93%

dents' willingness to use interlibrary loan (a fairly impersonal service) and reference/instruction consultations (a highly personal service) indicate that focused services and resources of various types might be accepted.

Reference, instruction, and document delivery services, traditionally, generally reach individuals at a moment of recognized need. Women's Studies scholars may benefit from a more holistic, integrated approach. To use a medical analogy, they may require a preventive osteopathic approach rather than an MD-style intervention for acute needs. If they expect and are only aware of needing acute intervention, then the first step in developing a more holistic approach may be to help them see other options. Helping them see this array of services and resources as an integrated part of their existing information network, rather than a toolkit only for handling bottlenecks, may be useful. Understanding more about the use of these twenty services and resources informs decisions pertaining to their implementation.

Notes

1. This research was generously funded by the American Library Association's Carroll Preston Baber Award.
2. Julie Klein, "Interdisciplinary needs: The current context." *Library Trends* 45: 2 (fall 1996): 134-54.
3. Marcia Bates, "Learning about the information seeking of interdisciplinary scholars and students." *Library Trends* 45: 2 (fall 1995): 155-64.
4. Lynn Westbrook, *Interdisciplinary Information Seeking in Women's Studies*. (Jefferson, N.C., 1999): McFarland, 113-16.
5. Judith Palmer, "Information work at the boundaries of science." *Library Trends* 45: 2 (fall 1995): 165-91.
6. Kristin Gerhard, Trudi Jacobson, and Susan Williamson, "Indexing adequacy and interdisciplinary journals." *College and Research Libraries* 54, 2 (1993): 125-133.
7. Judith Palmer, "Scientists and information." *Journal of Documentation* 47, 2 (June 1991): 105-29.
8. Scott Stebelman, "Analysis of retrieval performance in four cross-disciplinary databases." *College and Research Libraries* 55, 6 (November 1994): 562-7.
9. Florence Howe, *Seven Years Later*. (Washington, D.C.: Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs, 1977).
10. Marilyn Boxer, "For and about women." *Signs* 7 (March 3, 1982): 661-95.
11. Joanna Schneider Zangrando, "Women's Studies in the United States." *American Studies International* 14 (August 1975): 15-36.
12. Elizabeth Futas, "Communication and Information Patterns in the Emerging, Interdisciplinary Area of Women's Studies." (Ph.D. dissertation. Rutgers University).
13. Westbrook, 57.
14. Westbrook, 57-58.
15. L.J.B. Mote, "Reasons for the variations in the information needs of scientists." *Journal of Documentation* 18, 4 (December 1952): 169-75.
16. Sue Searing, "A quiet revolution." *Women's Review of Books* 6 (February 1989): 19.
17. Mary Ellen Capek, "Wired words." In *Alternative Library Literature 1986/87*. eds., Sanford Berman and James Danky (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1988): 25; Sanford Berman, Foreword. In Joan Marshall, *On Equal Terms: A Thesaurus for Nonsexist Indexing and Cataloging* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1977).
18. Joyce Duncan Falk, "Humanities." In *Women Online*. eds., Steven Atkinson and Judith Hudson. (New York: Haworth Press, 1990); Hildenbrand, Suzanne, "Women's Studies Online." *Research Quarterly* 26 (1) (1985): 63-74.
19. Sarah Pritchard, "RLG Conspectus Women's Studies." In *Women's Studies Collection Development Policies*. Chicago: Women's Studies Section, Association of College and Research Libraries, American Library Association. (Chicago: ALA, 1990.) Appendix C, 1-32.
20. Ellen Broidy, "Bibliographic instruction in Women's Studies." In *Conceptual Frameworks for Bibliographic Education*. Editors, Mary Reichel and Mary Ann Ramey. (Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1987), 86-96; Pritchard, Sarah, "Linking research, policy, and activism." *Reference Librarian* 20. (1987): 89-103.
21. Kristin Gerhard, Mila Su, and Charlotte Rubens. 1998. An empirical examination of subject headings for Women's Studies core materials. *College and Research Libraries* 59 (2): 130-38; Rogers, Margaret. 1993. Are we on equal terms yet? Subject headings concerning women in *LCSH, 1975-1991*. *Library Resources and Technical Services* 37, 2 (April): 181-196.
22. Westbrook, 1999.
23. For more information, contact WMST-L-request@umdd.umd.edu.
24. Bates, 1996; Gerhard, et al., 1998; Westbrook, 1999.
25. Not every respondent answered every single question so some of the totals do not equal 215.
26. Percentages are rounded off so their totals do not always equal one hundred.
27. Futas, 1980.
28. The three publications of the Women's Studies Library of the University of Wisconsin are: *Feminist Collections: A Quarterly of Women's Studies Resources*, *Feminist Periodicals: Current Listing of Contents*; and *New Books on Women and Feminism*.