

# How Historians Locate Primary Resource Materials: Educating and Serving the Next Generation of Scholars

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## **Introduction.**

No matter how quickly or comprehensively circumstances change, it is often hard to appreciate the extent of the differences and their impact when we are in the midst of them. The last twenty years have brought a visible evolution to cultural heritage institutions such as libraries, archives, and museums; some would even say a revolution. While these repositories still acquire, arrange, describe, preserve, and make information accessible, how these functions are conducted and the formats that carry the information are fundamentally different from what they were when most of today's scholars were learning their craft. So, too, are the ways in which users can interact with the materials and information and even with repositories. In the day of web databases and digitized collections, researchers may need only a connection through a proxy server to gain access to a vast store of materials that not so long ago could only be accessed in person within the repository.

Ever since the rise of "scientific," evidence-based history with scholars such as Leopold von Ranke in the 1880s, historians have searched for primary docu-

ments on which to base their presentations and interpretations of the past. These resources provide the words of the witnesses or first recorders of an event and more generally, are pieces of "evidence contemporary with the event or thought to which it refers" (Tosh 1984, 29). Familiar examples include: letters, diaries, court records, wills, and newspaper articles when these are the closest descriptions of an event. Methodologists have written a myriad of books on how to assess and analyze the veracity of sources (see for example: Burke 2001; Elton 2002; Howell and Prevenier 2001; Marwick 2001; Winks 1968), while judging each others' work by the evidence they find and the claims they make for and against it. Landes and Tilly (1971) point out, "is not so much research based on original ideas as first-hand research based on personal investigation of the original (that is, primary) sources" (5).

Interestingly, few methodological works for historians have discussed how to locate primary sources. Trinkle and Merriman (2002) have compiled webliographies of Internet sites with resources for teaching purposes and essays on using technology in the history classroom (1998, 2001; see also Andersen

1998), but these texts are not primarily designed for historical researchers. Professors have most often passed information regarding source discovery, and in large part the entire historical “method” to their students and protégées by means of example and “insider” tips as to where “the good sources” lay for a particular line of investigation. Irrespective of transmission techniques, historians have long used tried and true approaches to locating primary source materials.

In 1981 Margaret Stieg reported on a survey of over 700 historians to discover what types of library resources best facilitated their research, i.e., discovery and analysis of primary resources. She found the most highly ranked resources to be: bibliographies and references in journals or books, specialized bibliographies, book reviews, library catalogs, and abstracts or indexes to be the five most important tools for the historian. In 1994, Tibbo found much the same list with the addition of library shelf browsing. In a print paradigm these were all appropriate and efficient methodologies. Recent technologies, however, present the historian with many new possibilities for locating research materials. In 1999, Delgadillo and Lynch looked at how Ph.D. students searched for information, but did not really touch on web matters as their study predated the mounting of most electronic finding aids. Now that there is a large enough corpus of finding aids available to expect at least some historians to be using them it is time for a study such as this one to benchmark how historians look for archival collections in the digital age.

### **The *Primarily History* Project**

Funded by the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, The *Primarily History* project, a collaboration of the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) and the Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute (HATII) at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, is the first international, comparative project to explore historians’ information-seeking behaviors in today’s web-based, networked environments (Tibbo 2002). Perhaps most importantly, we are examining how historians are preparing the next generation of scholars, specifically, what they are teaching their graduate students about information seeking in the digital library environment and how the students are learning to use these tools. This project is

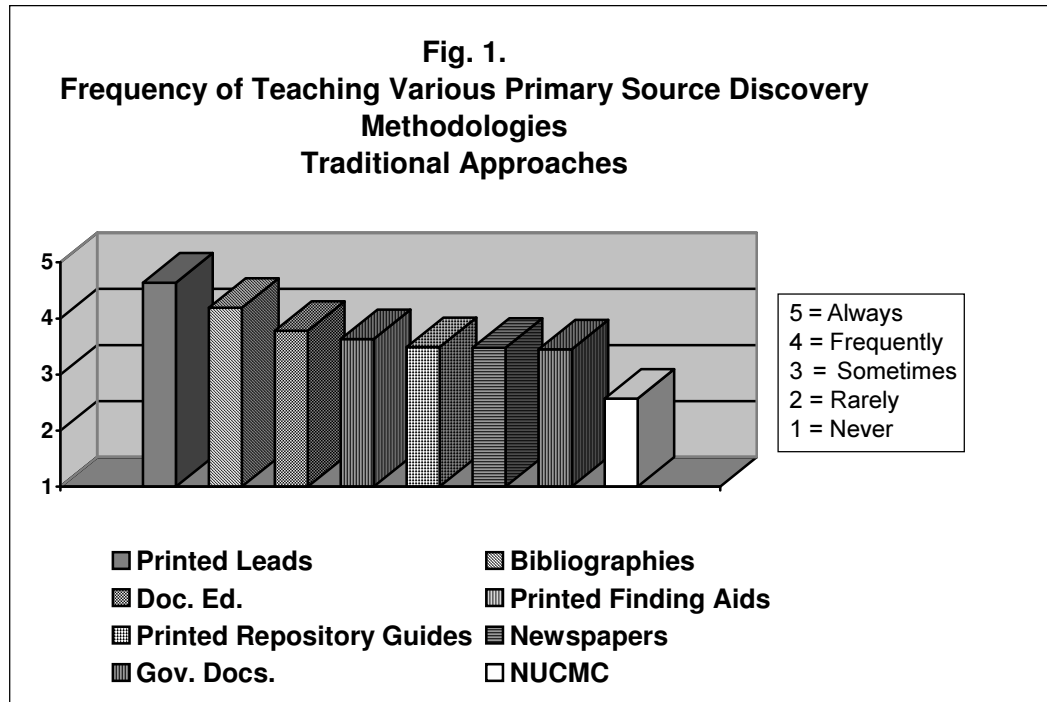
also surveying how special collections libraries and archives provide access to these materials and is seeking enhanced models for outreach and user education that will facilitate historians and their students in locating and using primary resources.

Through surveys and interviews we are exploring how historians are employing these new tools and techniques. Dr. Tibbo from UNC-CH has surveyed 700 historians from 70 U. S. universities in the doctoral/research universities—extensive (Carnegie I) category of the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education [[www.carnegiefoundation.org/Classification](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/Classification)]. Dr. Ian Anderson from Glasgow surveyed close to 800 historians working at universities in the United Kingdom. Both investigators have followed the surveys with in-depth interviews with a subset of these populations.

### **Faculty and the Next Generation of Historians**

Overall, 258 historians responded to the U.S. survey (see Tibbo 2002 for details regarding methodology) for a response rate of 37 percent. Five-hundred-fifty historians were sent surveys that asked questions regarding teaching information seeking strategies. Of these, 200, or 36 percent, responded. Historians were asked to indicate how often they instructed students, either in a classroom setting or in mentoring situations, i.e., advising for thesis or dissertation research, to use a number of potential information seeking behaviors and tools to locate primary resources for their research. Results of the U.S. survey concerning what faculty tell their graduate students in classroom situations regarding information seeking strategies and tools to locate primary resources are presented below with averaged responses represented in Figures 1–4.

Strategies to locate primary source materials are presented in four categories: traditional approaches, online approaches, behaviors when visiting archival repositories, and non-repository strategies. In the figures below, 5 equals “always,” 4 “frequently,” 3 “sometimes,” 2 “rarely,” and 1 “never.” Figure 1 shows that there is no universal source discover approach that all historians suggest to their graduate students all the time. Even following up leads and citations in printed sources, a time-honored technique, garnered an “always” response from just 70 percent of the participants. Interestingly, fifteen percent of historians in-



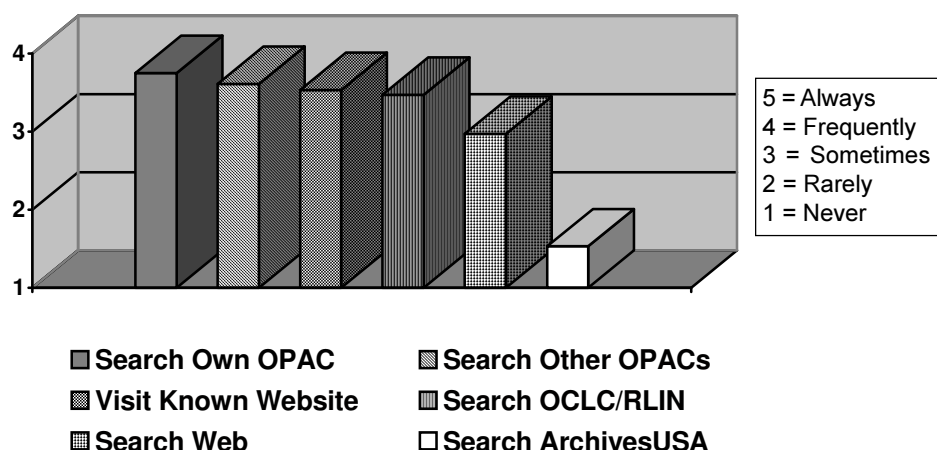
indicated that they always suggested use of the now well out-of-date print version of the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collection* with another eleven percent stating they did so frequently.

Figure 2 reveals that historians, on average, recommend electronic information seeking strategies for locating primary resources somewhat less than frequently to their students. Only 56 percent of historians frequently or always instruct students to search their own university's online public access catalog (OPAC) for primary materials. This seems quite appropriate as it is unlikely that any one institution will hold archival materials for a wide range of historical topics. For example, while a student writing a dissertation on Southern culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill will find the UNC-CH OPAC and the Southern Historical Collection full of useful material, someone matriculating at the University of Maine might not find their own university library's collection so useful. The fact that only 53 percent of instructors always or frequently tell students to search the online catalogs of other institutions, given most large repositories do create MARC records for all or most of their archival materials is, however, disturbing. The online catalog is a gateway to archival collections in most academic repositories today.

Perhaps the most disappointing finding from a library and archival perspective is that only 48 percent of historians frequently or always tell their students to search the OCLC or RLIN union databases and only seven percent mention the Chadwick Healey database, *ArchivesUSA*. These databases are the most comprehensive sources of location data on archival collections in research institutions within the United States. Indeed, *ArchivesUSA* is the electronic replacement and extension of the printed NUCMC volumes as well as the update of the *Directory of Archival and Manuscript Repositories in the United States*, formerly published by the National Historic Publications and Records Commission, coupled with direct links to online finding aids. While fifteen percent of faculty at least frequently recommend printed NUCMC that ceased publication in 1993, only seven percent indicate the value of *ArchivesUSA* much of the time. Because of its cost, some large academic libraries may not provide access to *ArchivesUSA*, but students at all 70 institutions where the respondents teach can access all post 1986 NUCMC records through either OCLC or RLIN and many other records of archival materials at the Library of Congress website for free (<http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/>).

We can see a continuation of a traditional approach to finding primary resources in responses con-

**Fig. 2.**  
**Frequency of Teaching Various Primary Source**  
**Discovery Methodologies**  
**Online Approaches**



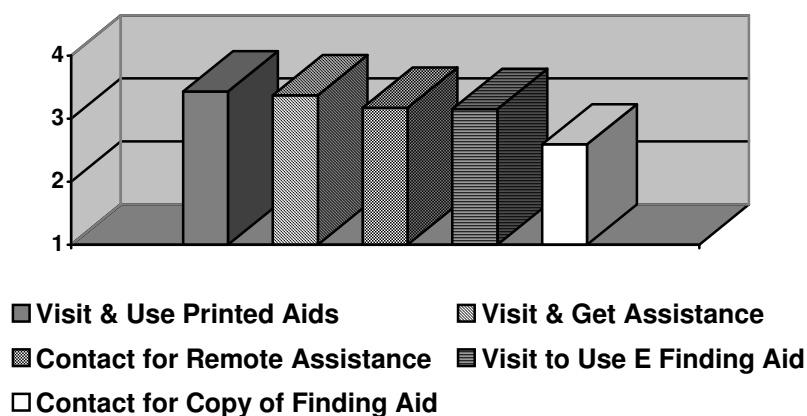
cerning web visits and searches. Fifty-one percent of the history faculty frequently or always tell their students to visit websites of known repositories. For example, a professor of Southern history at the University of Wisconsin might tell her students to go to the website of the Southern Historical Collection at UNC-CH and search for relevant materials. This is analogous to her having told the students fifteen years ago

to call or write the repository and inquire about their holdings. Much like searching their library's OPAC rather than card catalog, visiting known repository websites is not so much a new behavior as a traditional behavior directly adapted to the networked digital environment. Searching for relevant materials on the web using a search engine such as Google is more indicative of a new retrieval behavior, although it is

not so different from searching electronic files such as *America: History and Life* that almost all academic libraries have offered for a number of years. Only 35 percent of the professor frequently suggested to their students in classes that they search the web to discover the location of relevant primary resources. In the ongoing interview phase of the research several individuals seemed to confuse digitized documents found online and the finding aids to analog collections.

Figure 3, that focuses on strategies used when visiting archives in person, is perhaps the most surprising. Here we see less than 50 percent of faculty consistently telling

**Fig. 3.**  
**Frequency of Teaching Various Primary Source Discovery**  
**Methodologies**  
**Visiting Repositories**



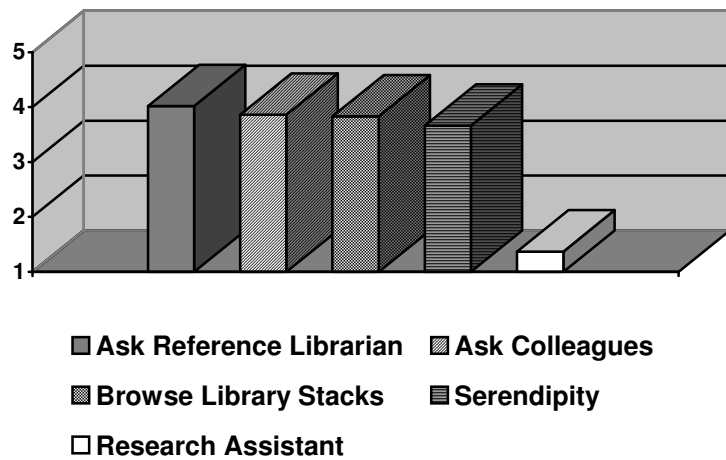
students to visit repositories to use finding aids or seek assistance from archivists. Given the stringencies and expense of travel, it is reasonable that instructors would not tell their students to do this very often, yet almost all history Ph.D. students must use archival documents in their research and almost of them must travel to repositories to use them. What is more striking is that students are not being told to contact the archives for remote assistance or copies of finding aids. Coupled with the only 50 percent that generally recommend visiting archival websites, it is unclear how students are learning about finding aids at all.

Figure 4 presents strategies that do not involve an archival repository or archivist. Interestingly, we see history professors are more likely to tell their students to ask reference librarians for help with their research than archivists. Seventy percent of historians at least frequently tell their classes to ask reference librarians for help while only 46 percent indicate asking an archivist for such help (see Figure 3).

### Conclusions

Because many history programs do not require students to take a specific research methods course, we asked professors from all ranks and subject specialties what they taught their students regarding discovery of relevant primary resources in their classes. While these data only reveal what history professors are telling their graduate students in classes rather than mentoring situations, there are several implications for both librarians and archivists. There appears to be a paucity of information reaching students, at least from faculty, regarding key databases that are useful in locating primary archival resources, such as OCLC's WorldCat, RLIN, Library of Congress's "electronic NUCMC" (links to OCLC and RLIN) and *ArchivesUSA*. Most academic libraries provide access to at least some of these tools. Two outreach and user education roles for librarians are indicated. First, librarians need to insure that faculty know of these resources and know how to search them effectively. Not

**Fig. 4.**  
**Frequency of Teaching Various Primary Source Discovery**  
**Methodologies**  
**Non-Repositories Approaches**



only can searching be tricky, but it is often hard to even find such databases in the myriad of electronic resources most academic libraries offer. Targeted dissemination of information regarding these tools to appropriate faculty is in order. Second, librarians need to reach the graduate students, today's young scholars who will be tomorrow's faculty, directly. Librarians may suggest to faculty that they visit classes to discuss information retrieval tools and strategies, or they might reach students through departmental listservs or other means outside of class. Such outreach is common in departmental academic libraries, but is often missing for such programs as history where the collection is often housed within the large research library on campus.

Archivists should take note of these findings as well. While the archival community is spending a good deal of time, effort, and angst to create encoded finding aids, MARC records, and websites, archivists clearly need to do more to reach potential users. It is alarming that only 50 percent of faculty consistently discuss the use of finding aids in classes or visiting archival websites. Archivists must reach both faculty and students in this regard. Even though the majority of faculty and students at any given institution will not find relevant materials within the archival and manuscript collections on campus, the archivist should still

be seen as a guide to locating primary materials elsewhere and in using archival databases. Archivists need to become expert searchers and advertise this skill to students and faculty on their own campuses as well as profession-wide. Additionally, more archival websites need to contain explicit links to means of locating archival collections such as the Library of Congress NUCMC website and *ArchivesUSA* if the university subscribes to this database.

Most if not all areas of scholarly endeavor are facing significant changes in the research landscape. None more so than history. Provision of networked access to finding aids and digitized collections will greatly facilitate research. But these are new or at least transformed tools. Historians and their students must learn about these tools and must incorporate them into the way they do their work. Effective electronic information retrieval is not a trivial task. Mounting databases and finding aids is only a beginning. Librarians and archivists must move to the next stage of access through user education and outreach. Access must become accessible.

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