

Interesting Findings from Ithaka S&R's Latest Faculty Survey

POSTED BY RICK ANDERSON · APR 11, 2013 · 5 COMMENTS

Ithaka S&R recently announced the release of its latest survey of academic faculty members in the United States. As usual — the survey has now been fielded five times, once every three years since 2000 — the questions are interesting and incisive and the analysis dispassionate but acute.

This round of survey results contained no findings that truly shocked me, but I did find some results more surprising than others, and all were quite useful. Below, I have pulled a few of the less surprising (but, to my mind, significant) findings along with some of the more surprising ones. I encourage all with an interest in the future of scholarly publishing, libraries, and research practice to download the report and give it close attention. Like its predecessors, it is freely available to the public, as are the datasets from previous surveys (the data from the 2012 survey will be deposited soon).

Less surprising findings

The importance of public, general-purpose search engines continued to increase (fig. 4). In 2003, 20% of faculty members surveyed reported that they typically begin their research with a “general purpose search engine on the internet.” In 2013, that percentage had climbed to about 35%.

Freely-available materials have come to play a significant role in meeting faculty research needs (figs. 17 & 18). Free online materials come in second only to local library collections in the estimation of survey respondents, and “search for a freely available version online” is the top strategy reportedly used by respondents when they find they do not have immediate access through their local libraries.

A dramatically growing share of respondents believe that within five years, print collections will no longer be necessary in research libraries (fig. 16). Those who believe this are still a minority, of course — about 9% of humanists, 19% of social scientists, and 18% of scientists. But in 2009, those numbers were closer to 2%, 5%, and 4% respectively. This growth is significant and suggestive, if not surprising.

Spotty enthusiasm for newer dissemination methods designed to maximize access and impact (fig. 36). A little under 35% of respondents rated “making a version of my research outputs freely available online” as “very important”; perhaps more interestingly, that rating was virtually identical across disciplinary groupings. On the other hand, when asked to rate the importance of “helping me to determine where to publish a given work to maximize its impact,” scientists responded “very important” about half as often (about 18%) as either social scientists or humanists did (about 36%).

Faculty members perceive library services as less important than library directors do (fig. 39); however, the number of respondents who characterize themselves as “very dependent” on the library for research support has held steady at around 40% since 2003 (fig. 43). While librarians might take some comfort in this consistency, they might be wise to consider why consistently fewer than half of faculty members feel that the library is as necessary to their scholarly work as librarians themselves believe it to be.

A small minority of faculty respondents believe that the library has a principle responsibility for teaching research skills, though a majority rate librarians' contribution in this area highly (fig. 30). This finding, though unsurprising, should give librarians serious pause, inasmuch we often respond to the

decline of library use in other areas by emphasizing the importance of bibliographic instruction and information literacy training by librarians.

The number of faculty respondents who see librarians and libraries as decreasingly important has doubled in the past ten years (fig. 44). In 2003, fewer than 10% of respondents agreed that librarians are becoming less important or that university resources should be shifted away from libraries and towards other needs. In 2012, the affirmative responses to both of those propositions hover at around 20%. Again, this is not necessarily surprising, but should prompt serious consideration on the part of librarians.

More surprising findings

The library catalog has regained some of its status (fig. 4). When asked where they typically begin their research and asked to choose between a specific scholarly database or search engine, a general search utility (like Google), the library catalog, and the library building, an increased number of respondents reported using both general search engines and (reversing a years-long trend) library catalogs. Reported use of disciplinary databases fell slightly from the previous year, and reported use of the library building continued its precipitous decline. None of these changes was dramatic.

Since last survey, respondents have become “modestly less comfortable” with shifting journal subscriptions from print to online formats (fig. 8). This one is, frankly a real shocker — and the change is roughly the same across disciplines. The different levels of comfort with this shift from discipline to discipline does not surprise me, but the fact that respondents from all areas reported the same decline in comfort surprises me very much.

Relatively few “feel strongly motivated to seek out opportunities to use more technology in their teaching” (figs. 27 & 28). That relatively few undergraduate instructors feel intrinsically motivated to seek out technological support for their teaching is not too surprising; using technology is not (and arguably should not be) a goal of teaching in and of itself. But given the current environment, I was surprised to see that 40% or fewer of respondents reported even occasionally seeking out opportunities to do so.

The library’s “gateway function” has increased in perceived importance, despite a rise in OA publishing and generally easier availability of copies via informal channels (fig. 38). Astutely, the survey’s authors drew an explicit distinction between the library’s functions as a gateway in the sense of research portal (“The library serves as a starting point or gateway for locating information for my research”) and as access broker (“The library pays for resources I need”). Interestingly, and to my mind counterintuitively, respondents’ assessment of the library’s importance rose in the former category (after falling in the previous three iterations of this study) and fell in the latter (after rising in each of the previous three studies).

Ithaka S+R Local Faculty Survey

What do your faculty think? Now you can know.

Librarians, provosts, and others throughout colleges and universities are charting new paths for their organizations – whether investing in tools to foster digital scholarship, developing ways to support open access publishing, or providing content and other support services for MOOCs.

Making the right directional choices and investments, and ensuring they will have the greatest impact, requires understanding the big emerging trends across the academy as well as having a finger on the pulse of the views and interests of one's own faculty members.

For a decade the Ithaka S+R Faculty Survey has been an essential guide for those looking for trends across higher education. Now, academic leaders have the opportunity to implement the 2012 US survey at their own institutions to understand their faculty member attitudes and practices related to the evolution of their work in the emerging digital landscape for scholarly research, publishing, and teaching.

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About the Survey

The Ithaka S+R Local Faculty Survey explores current broad strategic issues to provide you with heightened situational awareness about your own faculty members across disciplines to help you chart a course for your institution's approach to dealing with environmental change.

The survey has eleven modules, composed on average of 5–6 questions each, covering these four major topics:

- the ways that scholars discover and access needed scholarly materials in their teaching and research;
- the evolving role of the library and of library collections;
- research and teaching practices, with a particular emphasis on how these are changing in light of opportunities created by new technology; and
- the ways in which scholars communicate the findings of their research through a variety of media.

You can choose to implement: the full survey, specific modules based on your institutional context and priorities; or a brief overview survey that utilizes a subset of questions from across modules to get a general overview of faculty attitudes and practices.

Additionally, if there are important topics not covered in our existing questionnaire, we can work with you to generate a new module to address these issues.

Implementation Details

Implementing the Ithaka S+R Local Faculty Survey is a shared responsibility. Essentially, we provide the survey instrument, software, and reporting. You recruit participants, send out a link to the survey, and analyze your results.

What We Do

- Guide you in selecting the version of the survey that is right for your needs
- Provide you with instructions and forms to gather the needed information to prepare your local survey
- Share advice on tactics for how to recruit participants
- Prepare your custom, branded online instance of the survey and provide a link to it
- Deliver the raw data and a tabular report of the findings
- Provide guidance on how to analyze findings, especially in comparison with the latest cycle of the Ithaka S+R US Faculty Survey

What You Do

- Decide which version of the survey to implement
- Determine how to recruit participants and manage recruitment efforts
- Address any necessary approval requirements your campus may have
- Analyze the findings we provide and share them as you deem appropriate

Timing

Once you decide you would like to implement that Ithaka S+R Local Faculty Survey, we recommend that you allow 12 weeks for preparation (e.g. receive necessary approvals, develop recruitment strategy, etc.) and 2–4 weeks for the survey to run. We will provide your data and a report on the findings back to you within 2 weeks of the survey closing.