

This is an original manuscript / preprint of an article published by Taylor & Francis in the Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship on 7/29/2020, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/08963568.2020.1795551>

Research Skills, Perceptions and Attitudes of Incoming MBA Students

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Research on library-related perceptions and attitudes of MBA students is lacking, leading the authors of this article to survey a cohort of incoming MBA students at Arizona State University. The survey included self-evaluation of research skills, anticipated uses of library services and resources, and specific types of data/information the students thought would be most valuable during their studies. The survey uncovered differences based on how long the students had been away from higher education. The results are useful for business librarians and others working with graduate business students.

Keywords: MBA students, business librarianship, graduate business students, library skills, librarian engagement

Introduction

Master of Business Administration (MBA) students differ from many other graduate students, including other graduate business students. The MBA is a terminal degree and is open to students with an undergraduate degree from any discipline. For many MBA students, this is their first classroom exposure to subjects such as accounting, finance, economics, management, and marketing; others have extensive education through a concentrated undergraduate program. MBA students are typically older and have been out of higher education due to work requirements imposed by MBA programs. Their collective experience with libraries, library resources, and librarians is more removed than that of their peers in other graduate degree programs.

Research on the library-related perceptions and attitudes of graduate business students in general, and MBA students in particular, is scant. This led the authors to create their own survey, which was administered in the fall of 2019 as part of an intensive, hands-on workshop designed to introduce incoming MBA students to the collection of business databases at Arizona State University (ASU). The MBA program at ASU is housed in the W.P. Carey School of Business. In 2020, the Carey School's full-time MBA program was ranked 35th by *U.S. News & World Report* in its Best Business Schools report (Sorrells, 2020).

In order to more effectively engage this unique student population, the authors sought to ascertain how MBA students have engaged with the library during their previous educational experiences and how they anticipate using library spaces and

services. In addition, students were asked to self-rate their library research skills. The results of this work can provide insight for librarians to more effectively engage this specialized group with targeted, individualized support. Further, understanding the expectations and perceptions MBA students have about the library will allow business librarians to increase the relevance of outreach activities, and more effectively promote and encourage the use of library resources.

Literature Review

In 1997, Joseph D. Atkinson III proposed a Model of Business Information Users' Expectations. Atkinson's model purports that the business researcher frames the value of the information they seek within the constraints of cost, immediacy, and effort expended. Atkinson did not conduct an empirical study but instead created a model of a hypothetical relationship that predicted internal information processing behaviors in business researchers. Although based on a hypothetical understanding of the business researcher's interaction with the information environment, studies published before and after Atkinson's model support the idea that business researchers seek optimization of the utility and value of information (Atkinson, 1997).

Empirical studies that focus on business students have shown without question that cost, time and effort expended are a priority for business students when selecting resources for their schoolwork. In 1995-96 Atkinson and Figueroa conducted a survey and an observation study of undergraduate and graduate business students at California State University San Marcos. They discovered that this group preferred electronic resources over print, skewed heavily for the reasons that students expect to obtain their information quickly and conveniently (Atkinson & Figueroa, 1997). More recent studies conclude unequivocally that business students prefer to employ web resources over library databases (Bauer, Majid, et al., Senior et al., Makani & WooShue) due to quicker access and less-convoluted interfaces and search mechanisms. Makani & WooShue (2006) sum up this argument well, stating "The students' first step in the information-seeking process -- whether they realize it's their first step or not -- is identifying the best resources in terms of cost, effort, convenience, and time" (p.41).

Atkinson and Figueroa (1997) also concluded that library use is often a direct reaction to the imposition of a research assignment by a professor. Littlejohn and Benson-Talley (1997) concur, stating "because the faculty provide so much of the motivation for student use of the library, their participation and support is vital." (p.76). Further, Bauer's (2018) study posited that faculty are accepting of web resources, giving business students one less reason to value library resources.

Lee and Read (1972) and Culley, Healy, and Cudd (1977) were the first to kick off a number of studies that highlighted business students' unfamiliarity with the library. Researchers described graduate business students as "quite deficient" (Lee and Read, 1972, p.406) and "ill-prepared to use secondary source data for class exercises or research." (Culley, Healy and Cudd, 1977, p.295). Moving into the 1990's Littlejohn and Benson-Talley (1990) concluded that library use among business students had increased in the time since previous studies, but that students still did not possess a good understanding of the knowledge and skills necessary to make effective use of the

library. Other studies (Senior et al., 2009; Majid et al., 2012) show similarly disheartening conclusions about business students' library skills.

Skill self-rating has long been scrutinized as a component of studies that focus on business students. Lee and Read's 1972 survey asked graduate business students to rate their own knowledge of the library with 74% of respondents categorizing themselves as average, poor or very poor. This is much in-line with Littlejohn and Benson-Talley's later work. In their 1990 survey, respondents were asked to rate their own knowledge of business resources with 44% scoring themselves as average. Slightly more positive, Vargas-Atkins and Ashcroft (2004) and Makani and WooShue (2006) both conducted studies where most business students rated their information skills as "good".

The literature on students that return to school after years away and their relationship with the library is limited, separate from content that combines returning students within the broader category of a non-traditional student. Complicating this is the fact that although MBA students share many of the same general characteristics of returning students, the requirement of being in the workforce for a prescribed number of intervening years sets them apart from typical returning students. Broadly of note is a study that measures non-traditional students and their perceptions of their own library research skills (Leverence, 1997) and a discussion of specialized user education for the re-entry student population (Holmes, 2000).

Methods

The authors designed a survey as part of a library orientation workshop for incoming full-time MBA students. Out of 72 students, 66 completed the survey (91.7% completion rate). The survey was approved by ASU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in advance. Students were advised that participation was voluntary and responses would be anonymous. The response to each question was voluntary. The survey was administered at the beginning of the workshop, before any library-related instruction.

Results

After a qualification question regarding consent, the survey asked about time away from college.

Q2. Prior to starting your MBA, when did you last attend a college or university?

Answer Choices	Response Percent	Responses
Less than one year ago	7.58%	5
More than one year ago but less than five	42.42%	28
Five or more years ago	50.00%	33

Next, the instrument asked about the frequency of library use at their previous institution.

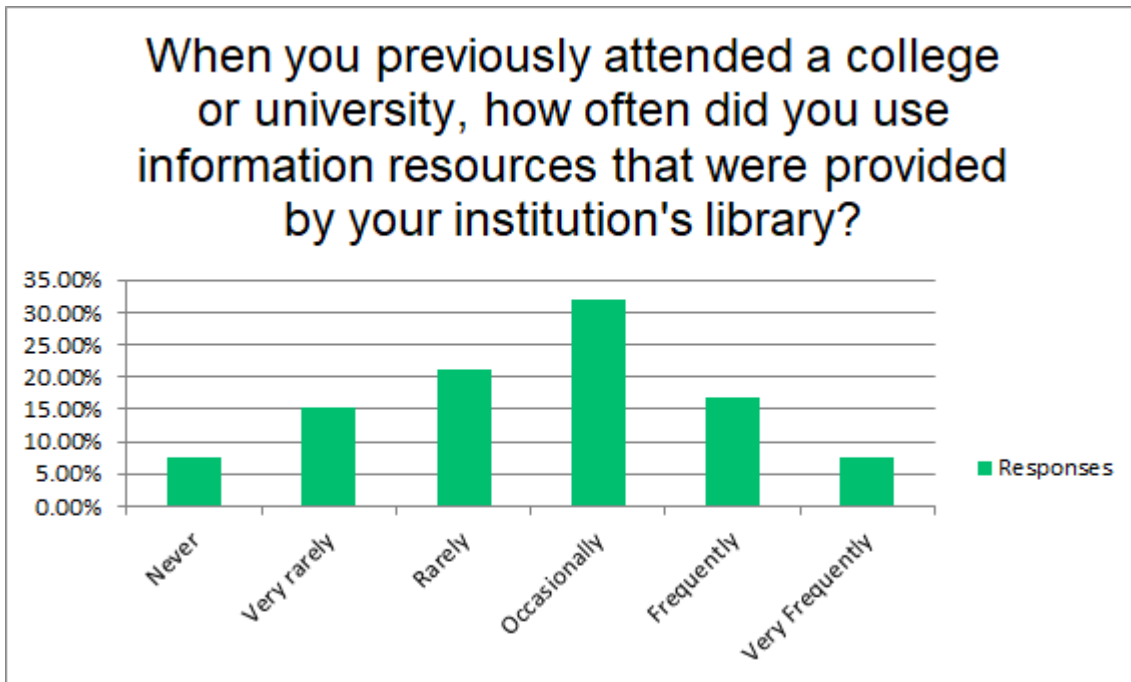


Figure 1. Question 3.

Q4 asked the student to rate their own expertise in conducting library research, compared to a hypothetical “average” MBA student. (Figure 2).

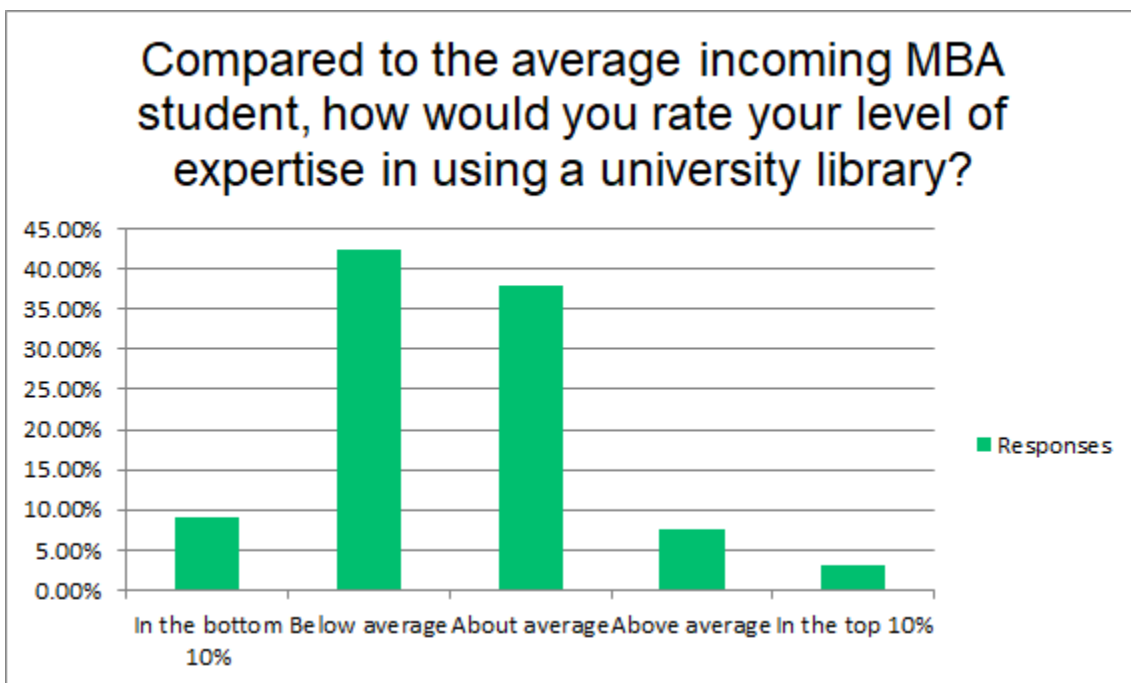


Figure 2. Question 4.

Q6 asked about what types of information the respondents anticipated to be the most important to their studies. Market research was the most popular answer. Books, data sets, trade journals, demographics, and tax information were the least popular.

Q6 What kinds of data/information do you anticipate will be most important to your MBA studies? Please choose your top five from the list below.

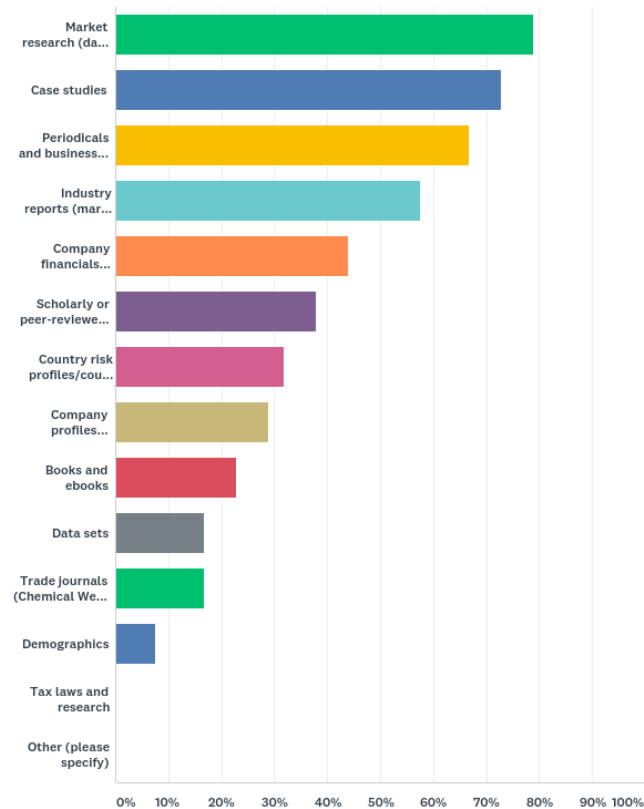


Figure 3. Question 6.

Post-college Time Span

To investigate the effect of time away from school, the authors divided the respondents into two groups: those who had attended college within the last five years, and those who had attended more than five years ago. Each of these groups contained 33 respondents.

The questions were then filtered according to these two groups, regarding views on the value of information resources and self-assessment of library research skills (Figures 4 and 5).

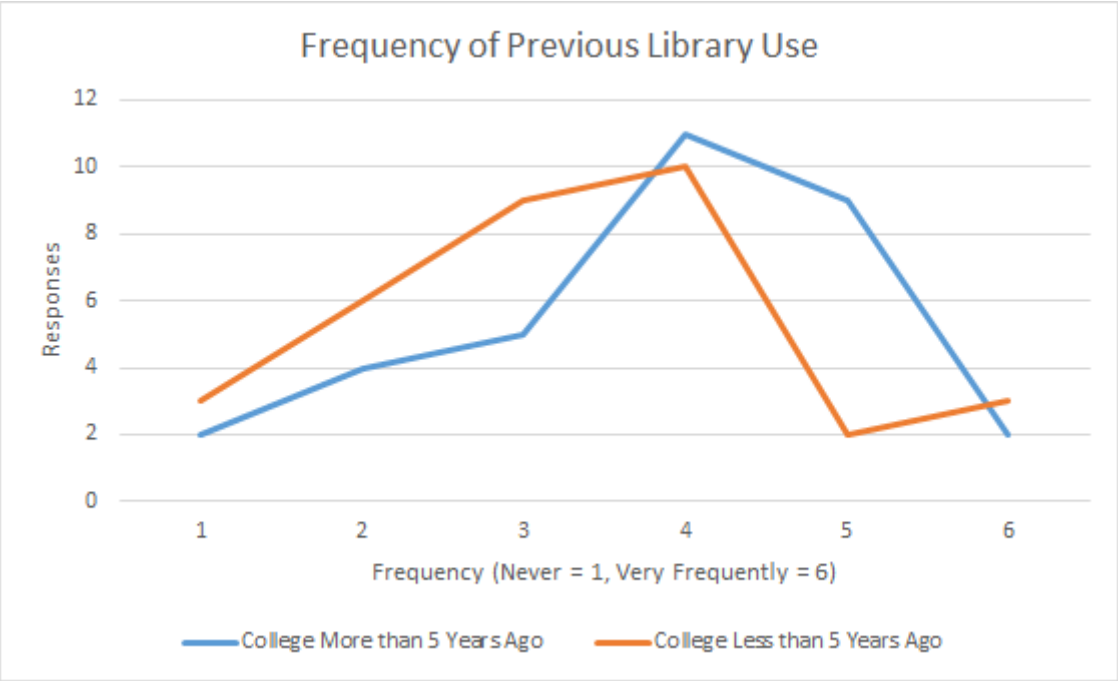


Figure 4. Frequency of Previous Library Use

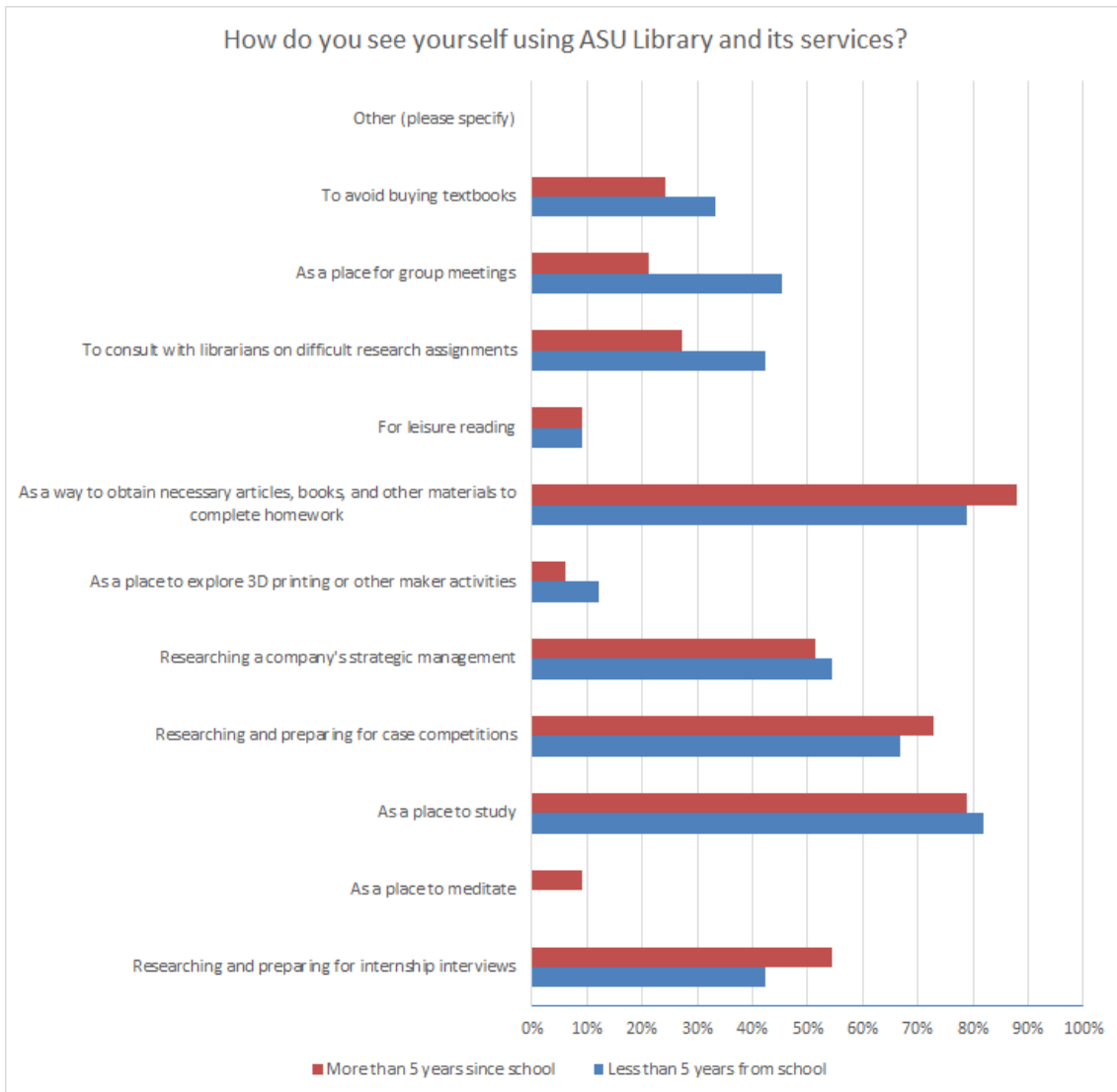


Figure 5. Anticipated Use of the Library and its Services

Discussion

This study showed differences between “recent students” (those who had attended college in the last five years) and those who had less-recent educational experience. Less-recent students were more likely to report they used the library information resources frequently. In addition to past behavior, there were differences in how the two groups anticipated using the library. Recent students were more likely to say they would consult with librarians, more likely to say they would use the library to avoid buying textbooks, and more likely to use the library for meetings. Neither group showed much interest in using the library for 3D printing, as a place to meditate, or for leisure reading.

The effects are subtle but may indicate that among MBA students, those who have more recent experience with college and academic libraries are more inclined to see librarians as allies, and more likely to see the library as valuable physical space. More research is needed to see if this effect holds true for larger sample sizes and programs other than the MBA.

The respondents chose market research reports as the type of information that would be the most valuable in their MBA studies. In the authors' experience, market research reports are indeed among the most valuable and sought-after types of information for MBA students, as a single high-quality report often addresses multiple issues or questions raised as part of a class project or assignment. MBA students see themselves as consumers, and business information as a commodity, much the same as corporate executives. The respondents chose case studies and periodicals as the next two most valuable types of information, further indicating they have a reasonable understanding of information sources for their program.

Previous work corroborates our findings that found that business students were very light users of the university library, with most responding they previously utilized the library only occasionally or rarely (Senior et al., 2009; Anderson & Vega Garcia, 2020). The most popular answer by the students in this paper's survey of how they envisioned themselves using the library was to obtain the necessary materials to complete homework. Student self-rating of library research skills was in line with past studies that resulted in an average, or below-average score. (Littlejohn & Benson-Talley, 1990; Lee & Read, 1972). In our study, the most common response was "Below Average". When these two data points are combined, we are left to conclude that business students rarely use the library, and when they do, they view themselves as less skilled than their peers. This may be tied to the nature of the work in business school as shown by Atkinson and Figueroa (1997); students are most often motivated to use the library as prescribed by faculty-driven assignments. In light of the results of this study the authors are hopeful that illuminating the anticipated needs of incoming MBA, even if the anticipated do not become actual, will open the door to discussing the library's strengths and help librarians deliver better service and positive, more meaningful interactions on business information literacy and competencies. This will lead to increased student-librarian interaction and greater confidence in library research skills.

Conclusion

This study further uncovered the unique combination of motivation, expectations and values that MBA students share in relation to library information resources. Within one MBA cohort the study found differences in these factors that varied depending on the length of time students have been away from higher education. Notably, the sample is split on frequency of past library use, self-rating of library skills, and of particular interest to the authors, willingness to consult a librarian.

In this study the respondents rated themselves at or below the average MBA student in terms of library research expertise, which stands in contrast to the commonly held view of the MBA student as overconfident. The respondents were also adept, in the views of the study authors, in anticipating which types of information would be valuable to their studies. This indicates the respondents were aware of both the challenges ahead and to some degree, the resource environment that they hoped to inhabit.

While this study examined one MBA cohort at one business school, it should assist academic librarians in outreach and engagement activities with MBA programs across a wide spectrum of institutions and point the way for further research.

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