

# Understanding Library Impacts Protocol Report to History Department

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## Overview

The 'Understanding Library Impacts' protocol (ULI) was an assessment conducted for the History Department at Dickinson College during the academic year 2013-2014. The purpose of the project was to examine the ways students use library and information services to achieve student learning outcomes defined by the department and associated with their coursework in the History major. Students enrolled in History 204 and 404 during both semesters responded to a ULI questionnaire about their library and information uses when completing high-impact coursework such as research and senior seminar papers.

The instrument uses partially open and open-ended questions to identify:

- The library information resources, services, and facilities used when completing coursework;
- Library resources and services that students found to be most important;
- The learning activities each use of library resources and services supported;
- Benefits and problems associated with each type of resource, service, or facility; and
- Challenges faced when completing the project.

## Executive Summary

Students in this study demonstrated high levels of awareness of the goals of the history major as well as definite progression in learning the skill sets of professional historians. Students in History 204 self-reported that they were grasping the mechanics of research and writing, while students in 404 demonstrating mastery of skills and focused on the writing process. As a group, students in this study overwhelmingly reported utilizing appropriate research resources at appropriate times in the research process. They described a variety of coping mechanisms they used to work through challenges they faced, some of which were appropriate and some of which offer opportunities for improving research instruction. The results of this study further indicate that students are learning and mastering the goals and outcomes of the History Major as they relate to the research process. Relatively minor changes to the writing and research instruction could make the experiences of the majors even more successful and positive.

## Results

This assessment provided a great deal of rich data, but in the interest of brevity, this report will focus on four key indicators:

- 1) students' interpretation of learning objectives associated with the assignments,
- 2) library use during coursework,
- 3) library use by learning activity, and
- 4) challenges students faced and overcame during their work.

### ***Demographics***

Students who responded to this project identified as follows:

- 53 of 60 students enrolled in History 204 and 404 responded to the questionnaire, constituting an 88% response rate.
- 43 of the potential population were enrolled in 204; the remaining 17 were in 404.
- 39 students identified themselves as history majors; the rest identified various other majors.
- 41.51 % identified as sophomores; 13.21 % as juniors; 39.62 % as seniors

### ***Interpretation of Learning Objectives***

This section of the study examines library use in the context of high-impact coursework integral to the academic major. Learning objectives were compared against the department's course goals, that students will:

*Goal 1:* Express themselves clearly and convincingly.

*Goal 2:* Locate relevant and essential information.

*Goal 3:* Identify key historical issues, interpretations, and debates.

*Goal 4:* Formulate and support plausible arguments.

*Goal 5:* Develop a historical perspective.

*Goal 6:* Engage in scholarly debate and public discussions of history.

This assessment touches on most of these goals, but concerns itself largely with Goals 2 and 3.

At the beginning of the instrument, students were asked to comment in open-ended questions about what they perceived to be the learning objectives associated with their research project. Specifically, students were asked, "What do you think your professor wanted you to learn during this project?" At the end of the instrument, students were asked, "Did you achieve these learning objectives?" and "What would you do differently the next time you face a project like this?"

### **204**

Most of the students in 204 grasped the basic learning goals of the course, whether or not they were stated explicitly by the professor. Students mentioned the significance of learning how to research and write like a professional historian. Twenty-one of them stated that they felt they had achieved these perceived goals. Many students added that they should have started their research projects earlier or asked for more help early in the process.

Students in 204 emphasized that they were encouraged to:

- Ask a question about history;
- Demonstrate research skills using primary and secondary sources;
- Analyze and contextualize historical sources;
- Demonstrate organizational and disciplinary skills;
- Provide proper attribution for sources consulted.

Comments indicate that students are grasping the importance of and practicing the History Department's Goal 2 (locating information), and Goal 3 (identify historical issues) are developing skill sets needed to achieve Goal 4 (support arguments). Representative comments include:

<i>What do you think your professor wanted you to learn during this project?</i>	<i>Did you achieve those objectives?</i>	<i>What would you do differently next time?</i>
Simply put, my professor wanted us to learn how to become historians. She wanted us to take a look at a collection, find the information there, and make our own analysis of what we have seen. She wanted us to be able to look at primary sources and determine its context, its meaning, and its significance...Most importantly, she wanted us to love both history and the process by which it is made and recorded.	Yeah, it gave me a taste of what doing a college research project feels like!	Not have a million other things going on so that I could get to the assignment sooner.
To be able to find information in primary sources and be able to analyze it as well as putting it into a proper bibliography	i think i was able to develop my writing and research skills drastically through this project	i would gather information as soon as possible rather than wait until the project was actually assigned in order to have time to complete everything that i needed to.
I think my professor wanted me to learn how to properly do research that is to say how to find significance in all information that is given. Also not to take everything I see a face value.	yes I did, I learned not only how to use the research tools, but I learned how to get the best information about a source	
We will learn to gather and investigate documents left us by people in the past, we will assess these texts using the insights of other historians, and we will assemble what we have uncovered into new stories arguments, supported by powerful evidence. Our goal is not to memorize material but to develop skills, and to reflect and sharpen our intellectual process, through discussion, peer review, and continual work with primary and secondary sources.	Yes	
How to start with very broad ideas and narrow them down into a well-written research paper. Also how to go about research/writing in a recursive, not linear, process.	Yes	Start research sooner
The process of writing, editing, and revising an essay. How to do research and come up with a good, analytical question. Then, being able to reform this question and finally come up with an argument that can be backed up with evidence.	yes	do more research earlier in the process so I could make a more informed research question
How historians conduct their profession. How to use primary and secondary sources to "do" history. The theory of History/History Profession. How to cite sources. How to utilize archives and electronic/print resources for primary and secondary source materials. How to think like an Historian. How to read and understand other historians' work.		

404

Students' interpretation of course objectives for 404 were in some ways similar to those reported by the students in 204. Some saw it as an extension of the skills gained in 204, while others recognized the broader objectives of "owning" one's topic and sustaining an argument through writing. Most felt that they had achieved their perceived objectives; however 7 out of 17 students expressed some uncertainty about this.

Students in 404 emphasized that they perceived goals related to:

- Demonstrating mastery of skills learned in History 204;
- Asking a relevant historical question;
- Sustaining an argument;
- Using and/or creating historiography;
- Writing like a professional historian.

Student comments indicate that they feel they are practicing, and in some cases achieving, Goal 1 (using evidence), and demonstrating mastery of Goals 3 (locating information) and Goal 4 (analyzing sources). Representative comments include:

<i>What do you think your professor wanted you to learn during this project?</i>	<i>Did you achieve those objectives?</i>	<i>What would you do differently next time?</i>
How to work on a large project like a 20-page thesis using all of the skills I've acquired from my other history courses, including Methods (204).	Yes	Start reading earlier. But I didn't procrastinate too much.
How to tackle a very large amount of information on a very specific topic and make a clear and concise representation of that material in the form of a thesis.	Yes and no. I think I learned better research skills and have learned about what goes into writing a large-scale paper, but failed to fully understand what goes into a historiographical paper.	Work more on the historiography and choose a different topic for one of my first large-scale paper/research project.
Proper citation methods, primary source research methods, secondary source research methods, database skills, writing skills, critical thinking.	Yes, I do.	Because of the paucity of college library held sources, I would pursue using inter-library loan sooner and more fastidiously. This is one of the first times I have had to use that resource.
Understanding how to use and apply primary sources to create my own ideas	somewhat yes	choose an area whose archives I could access
I think he wanted us to take a specific subject in a field that was not necessarily familiar to us and make an argument that is comprehensive, thorough, and significant. In doing this I think he wanted us to use the skills we have attained over four years of history courses to complete a final project.	I hope so, but yes	

The professor wanted us to learn good research techniques and how to construct a logical and analytical work. He wanted deep historical thought to create findings in a less explored area of history.	I think that through the struggle I achieved most of the learning objectives. However I believe that there is a lot more to do to become more proficient in these goals.	Take more time researching, and immediately start looking for primary sources outside of Dickinson.
How to utilize primary and secondary sources to formulate an historical thesis on a topic and synthesize the research into a well-structured and logical argument. Especially for 404, using primary sources and allowing them to lead you to an argument/thesis is a goal for our professor.	The project isn't complete yet, but ultimately yes.	Given myself more time to thoroughly read sources and find the best arguments and supportive evidence.
How to diligently and accurately research a unique topic, and write about it in an informative and professional manner.	Yes	I would do nothing differently

### Library Use During High-Impact Coursework

Students reported what services and resources they used for their coursework in history. Students enrolled in both 204 and 404 reported high use of library-oriented resources. The high use of these resources indicates that students are practicing and working toward mastering the History Department's Goal 2: Locate Relevant and Essential Information.

- 98% of respondents reported using discovery tools such as databases, catalogs, footnotes, etc.
- 98% of respondents reported using library-provided electronic resources including ebooks, online articles, streaming video.
- 92% of respondents reported using traditional resources such as printed material and archival resources.
- 90% of respondents reported using library facilities and equipment including quiet study areas, the Cafe, and interlibrary loan.
- 90% of respondents reported using library services such as reference, class sessions with a librarian, interlibrary loan, citation software/manuals, and multimedia assistance.

Further, students were asked to list which specific library resources and services they used. Their top 5 responses are listed in Table 1.

*Table 1 – Most Important Resources Used by Course*

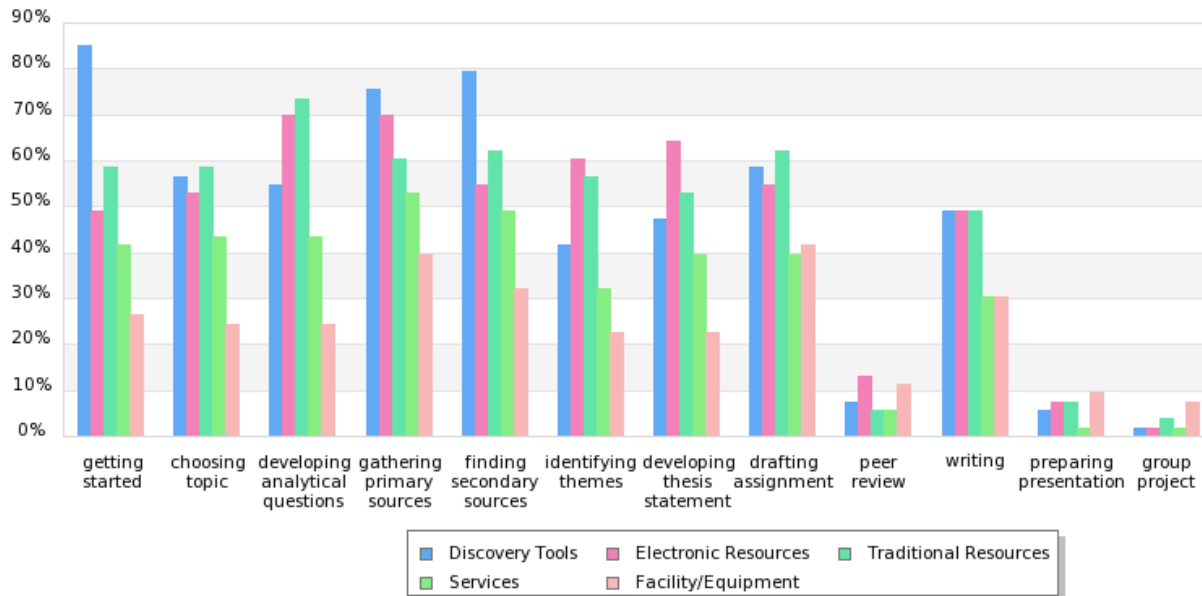
	204	404
Databases/Jumpstart	92%/86%	100%/58%
Catalog	92%	88%
Google	81%	76%
Archival Finding Aids	67%	53%
Journal Locator	56%	65%

### Library Use by Learning Activity

In this section, respondents identified the discovery tools, electronic and traditional resources, services, and facilities/equipment that they found to be most important to them at various stages of completing

their projects. Figure 1 illustrates the importance of various library resources and services at the various stages of writing a research paper for both 204 and 404 students.

Figure 1  
Percentage of respondents reporting most important uses by learning activity and type of use n=(53)



In Figure 1:

Discovery Tools = databases such as the library catalog, history-specific secondary source tools, the journal locator, footnotes, Google, etc.

Electronic Resources = ebooks, digital copies of journal articles and newspapers, e-reserves and streaming videos

Traditional Resources = physical copies of books, articles in print, artifacts and documents in the archives, physical copies of multi-media, and microfilm

Services = reference services, class sessions with a librarian, visiting the archives, interlibrary loan, citation software/manuals, multimedia assistance

Facility/Equipment = quiet study areas, the Archives' work areas, Biblio Cafe, printers/copiers, microfilm readers

## Challenges

Open-ended questions and probes asked students to describe any challenges faced during the project, when they faced the challenge/s, the source of the challenge/s, and how they attempted to overcome the challenge/s.

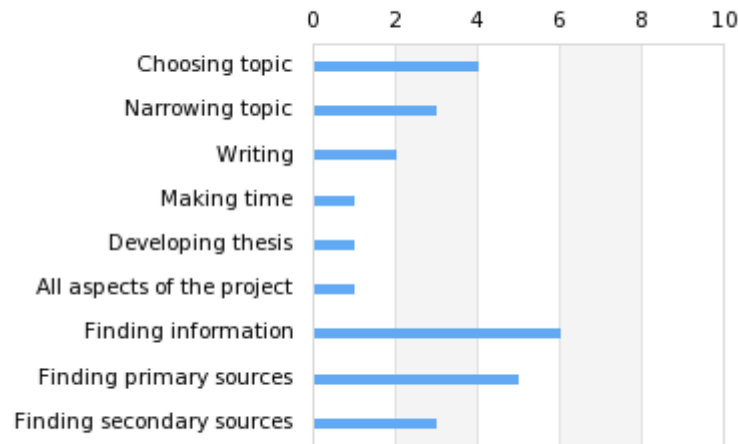
### Challenges in 204

Students were asked whether the nature of the any challenges identified were the result of their assignment or were library related. Ten students replied that the challenges were library-related, and 16 identified the library's online tools as a specific source of difficulty. Four students answered "Other" (time management, for example), and six identified no significant challenges.

The distribution of challenges by task type in 204 is presented in Figure 2. Finding information, finding primary sources, and choosing a topic ranked as the top three challenges among 204 students, with a fairly even distribution among the remaining responses.

Figure 2

Tasks associated with challenges, by type n=26



The free-response section for challenges reveal that students in 204 were thinking in terms of finding sources to “fit the claim” rather than allowing the evidence to shape the research question. Other themes related to the topic choice and finding primary sources. Nineteen had trouble choosing or refining a topic and sixteen noted trouble locating relevant primary sources. Representative comments include:

<i>Please recall a challenge you faced when completing this project</i>	<i>Activities engaged in when the student faced this challenge</i>	<i>How student attempted to overcome challenge</i>
Lack of secondary sources due to improper search terms and differences in describing phenomenon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- developing analytical questions about the topic</li> <li>- finding secondary sources</li> <li>- identifying relevant contextual themes</li> </ul>	Contacted library staff for guidance and research assistance
When I was trying to find the right primary source for my paper  You have to be strategic in how you put terms together to find sources, I learned that during this project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- getting started</li> <li>- choosing a topic</li> <li>- developing analytical questions about the topic</li> <li>- gathering primary sources that help me address my questions</li> <li>- developing a provisional thesis statement</li> </ul>	Tried different ways of wording what I was looking for
I couldn't find an accessible primary source to use for the focal point in my paper, and was really stressed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- gathering primary sources that help me address my questions</li> </ul>	Searched different keywords in the catalog, asked for help from the librarians.

I hit a roadblock in my paper and couldn't find adequate sources to back up my thesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- gathering primary sources that help me address my questions</li> <li>- finding secondary sources</li> <li>- developing a provisional thesis statement</li> <li>- writing or creating the final product for your assignment</li> </ul>	Talked with friend and professor, and ultimately changed my thesis
I really was struggling trying to come up with a thesis for my paper.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- developing a provisional thesis statement</li> </ul>	Speaking to knowledgeable people. I consulted the archivists who led me in the right direction, referred me to the Whistlestop Book Shop owner who I spoke with and through our conversation I came up with my thesis.
Yes, when I was trying to develop a topic. I struggled coming up with something narrow enough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- getting started</li> <li>- choosing a topic</li> <li>- developing analytical questions about the topic</li> </ul>	Went to my professors office hours
I had trouble finding secondary sources that addressed my topic in a substantive way.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- finding secondary sources</li> <li>- identifying relevant contextual themes</li> <li>- developing a provisional thesis statement</li> <li>- drafting my assignment</li> </ul>	Searched more, dug more out of the sources I found.

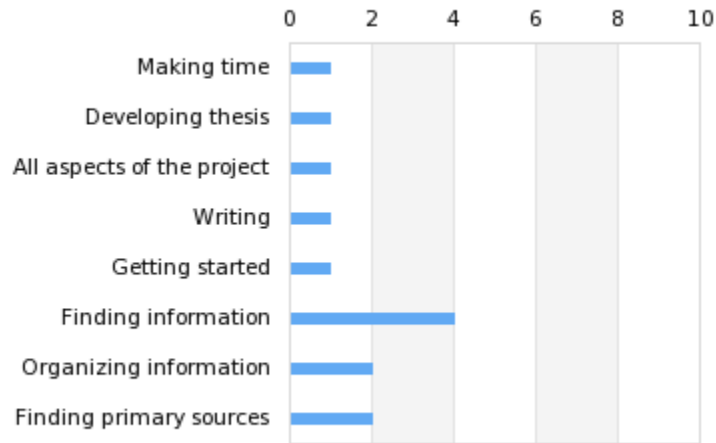
#### Challenges in 404

Students in 404 answered the same questions regarding challenges as the students in 204.

When the 404 students were asked whether the nature of the challenges identified were the result of their assignment or were library related, six students replied that it was the result of the assignment, seven that the challenges were library-related, and five identified the library's facilities or online tools as the source. Two students answered "Other" (time management, for example), and two identified no significant challenges. The distribution of challenges by task type in 404 is represented in Figure 3.



Figure 3  
Tasks associated with challenges, by type n=13



The only task that emerged as something of a “top challenge” among 404 students was finding information, with 4 students reporting this. In the free response section, 404 students reported various challenges, which may at this stage be indicative of their individual styles as writers and researchers rather than any pervasive lack of skill. Seven of them reporting feeling challenged when drafting the assignment. Other than that, no clear pattern emerged. Representative comments include the following:

<i>Please recall a challenge you faced when completing this project</i>	<i>Activities engaged in when the student faced this challenge</i>	<i>How student attempted to overcome challenge</i>
Realizing that I needed to possibly refocus my thesis after doing all my research as I was unable to use the information that I had collected for my original idea, mostly because there was too little information to support my ideas. I only had a minor emotional/mental breakdown.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- drafting my assignment</li> <li>- writing or creating the final product for your assignment</li> </ul>	Relaxing, taking a breath, and going forward and trying to put everything together. It was like a really stressful puzzle that controlled whether or not I got a degree in history.
Our library had limited physical sources related to my topic. I was able to find a fair bit online and from other sources. The electronic sources I used were sufficient, but I find it much easier to work with physical sources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- gathering primary sources that help me address my questions</li> <li>- finding secondary sources</li> </ul>	Interlibrary loan and purchasing books
My biggest challenge was starting to research because I had all these sources in front of me and a huge paper to write and I did not know where to start. It was very overwhelming. It is nice that I had access to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- getting started</li> <li>- choosing a topic</li> <li>- developing analytical questions about the topic</li> <li>- identifying relevant contextual themes</li> </ul>	I just had to start somewhere so I read the introductions to each of my books and essays to get a sense of the topic.

so many sources but it was hard to get going.	- developing a provisional thesis statement	
Simply finding enough information in a relatively small field.	- getting started - choosing a topic - gathering primary sources that help me address my questions - finding secondary sources - drafting my assignment	By searching out of Dickinson Library books, and by relying more heavily on the information that I found.
Trying to sift through all of the information to find a single thesis and approach to my topic.	- developing analytical questions about the topic - gathering primary sources that help me address my questions - finding secondary sources - identifying relevant contextual themes - developing a provisional thesis statement - drafting my assignment	Re-working the information to try to see it in a new way.
I did not face any significant challenges with this project. The hardest part was finding time to read the material with a busy schedule.	developing analytical questions about the topic - drafting my assignment - writing or creating the final product for your assignment	I managed my time by reading portions of the sources every night, and also divided my writing into sections.

### Areas for Improvement

Overall, students expressed high levels of satisfaction with available research resources, and demonstrated that they are using them to good advantage. In addition, several themes emerged that could help the library staff and the History Department further improve students' understanding of the goals of the history major, the nature of their assignments, and the role the library staff plays in training the students:

- Build in more deadlines, and check in throughout the research and writing process. Some students, particularly in 404, noted that time management was a challenge for them.
- Reinforce the idea that the research question/thesis should guide the research process. Students, mostly in 204, were trying to research by forcing a source to fit a question. This problem may be due to the nature of the library and archives assignment and will be examined for improvement.
- Reinforce the role of the librarian and archivists as resources when students experience challenges such as choosing a topic and finding certain kinds of sources. Their frustration might be minimized with additional guidance following class sessions.
- Encourage students to use the Writing Center to minimize their frustration with the drafting process. Consider attaching Writing Associates to the courses.

## **Conclusion**

During a conference call at the conclusion of this study, the designer of this assessment, Derek Rodriguez, repeatedly mentioned that the results of this study are “remarkable.” He assured us that, Dickinson’s history students are operating at a higher level than those he has studied at comparable institutions, and that our information literacy programming is unique and clearly effective.

The partnership among the Library, Archives, and the History Department represents highly distinctive programming that has been cited repeatedly as a model of good information literacy practice with other departments, and with good reason. Our students expressed high levels of satisfaction with the library’s resources, services, and assistance, even offering some good suggestions for improving our facilities. Following instruction, they expressed familiarity with the processes and tools necessary to use throughout the history major and the wider profession. Most importantly, they expressed a clear understanding of the goals of the major and described how they worked toward achieving them.