**OPEN ACCESS**

Volume: 10

Special Issue: 1

Month: October

Year: 2022

E-ISSN: 2582-6190

Impact Factor: 4.110

Received: 20.09.2022

Accepted: 18.10.2022

Published: 21.10.2022

Citation:
Basheer, Aariefa. "Library and Information Science Research." *ComFin Research*, vol. 10, no. S1, 2022, pp. 81–86.

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.34293/commerce.v10iS1-Oct.6153



# Library and Information Science Research

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**Abstract**

*This article indicates the research is primary purpose is to help teach the skills necessary for a librarian to conduct rigorous, basic research. Yet many of the methods, techniques, and tenets of basic research are relevant for applied research, and a person conducting applied research should benefit from a solid understanding of basic research methods. The librarian wishing to carry out a cost study, evaluate the performance of his or her library, or survey the library's users will need to be able to apply many of the principles and techniques treated in this book to his or her specific project. The more rigorous the research, the more useful its results, whether it be basic or applied in nature.*

**Keywords: Research, Basic Research, Library and Information Science Research**

## Introduction

The increasing complexity and specialization of research has tied in with a further development—the professionalization of research. There are many ways of defining a "profession." All agree that it should form one's main paid occupation, that it involves a high level of specialist knowledge, and that it should entail maintenance of appropriate standards of competence both individually and across the professional group. General acceptance that research satisfies these requirements only came in the decades around 1800. This does not mean that recognizably professional researchers had not existed before 1800. Medicine is a typical example of a profession, and some of its practitioners were famous researchers long before that time. Similarly, surveying was a well-regarded profession in North America from the early days of European settlement, and some of its members contributed to early American research. However, in virtually all these cases, the research was regarded as ancillary to their work, rather than as an essential component of it. Even in the academic world, though a number of professors or fellows of colleges contributed to research, the main justification for their posts was teaching.

The belief that university posts should require ability in both teaching and research grew gradually throughout the nineteenth century. Again, Germany led the way. The different German states competed to obtain the most eminent staff for their universities. Such eminence was assessed most readily in terms of what they had

published. Professors acquired research students to help develop their research programmes. These students needed some certificate of their research ability, and so grew up the process of awarding the Ph.D. The research reputation of German universities and the availability of doctorates attracted both German students and others from abroad (not least, from the United States and the UK). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the possession of a German Ph.D. was a widely accepted sign of a professional researcher. Though Germany especially attracted would-be researchers in science-based fields, its importance for research training extended into other fields (theology and philosophy, for example.

**Basic Research**

Mouly stated that "Research is best conceived as the process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of data.

Research also can be dichotomized as quantitative and qualitative. "Quantitative research methods involve a problem-solving approach that is highly structured in nature and that relies on the quantification of concepts, where possible, for purposes of measurement and evaluation." Qualitative research methods focus on observing events from the perspective of those involved and attempt to understand why individuals behave as they do. They take a more natural approach to the resolution of research problems. Some research projects utilize both quantitative and qualitative research methods to study and report behaviors and events.

**Library Research**

According to Shera, Ralph Beals once categorized library literature into the tripartite classification of Glad Tidings, Testimony, and Research, and noted that there was little of the last.

Goldhor, in his text on library research, categorized library literature with regard to research as including: one, a relatively small body of published research as defined in the narrow sense; two, a larger amount of published and unpublished services studies, or applied research; three, an even larger number of reports or descriptions of specific situations, or simply opinions; and four, original data.

**Library Research Trends**

Losee and Worley stated: "There is a tendency among information professionals to write and publish in the 'How I done it good' genre, a genre that is very situation-specific." In short, as was noted earlier, and as Busha and Harter indicated in their textbook, the preponderance of library-related research has been applied in nature. A 1984 issue of Library Trends was devoted to research in librarianship, and it reviewed research as related to the history of library and information science, economics of libraries, political science, sociology, psychology of information use, organization theory, public administration, and operations research. This work thus provided a categorization of library research in terms of both methodology and subject. In the first chapter of this issue of Library Trends, Mary Jo Lynch identified her own general categories for describing different research activities as practical research, bibliographical research, scholarly research, and scientific research. She characterized practical research as problem solving with information; bibliographical research as reordering the thoughts of others; scholarly research as systematic collecting, organizing, and analyzing of data; and scientific research as discovering new knowledge.

Mathews described research performed by the U.S. Department of Education from 1977 to 1988.18 Along with analyzing the products of the research; she also discussed recent research agenda efforts of the Department and implications for future research. McClure and Bishop provided a useful summary of reports published from 1976 to 1988 related to the status of research

in librarianship. several of the reports contained analyses of the types of research methods utilized during various time periods. Powell summarized some methodological studies ranging from an analysis of dissertations dating back to 1925 to an examination of research articles published in 1984. He also characterized more recent trends including qualitative, interdisciplinary, and technology-based research. Buttlar analyzed library and information science (LIS) dissertations to identify the authors' gender, the nature of the most highly cited materials, the most highly cited journals, the literature cited in disciplines other than LIS, the countries of origin of publications cited, and the currency of the cited literature.21 She did not identify the type of methodologies used, but did report that the literature from the LIS field is cited about 50 percent of the time and identified education, computer science, health and medicine, psychology, communications, and business as disciplines that impact LIS research.

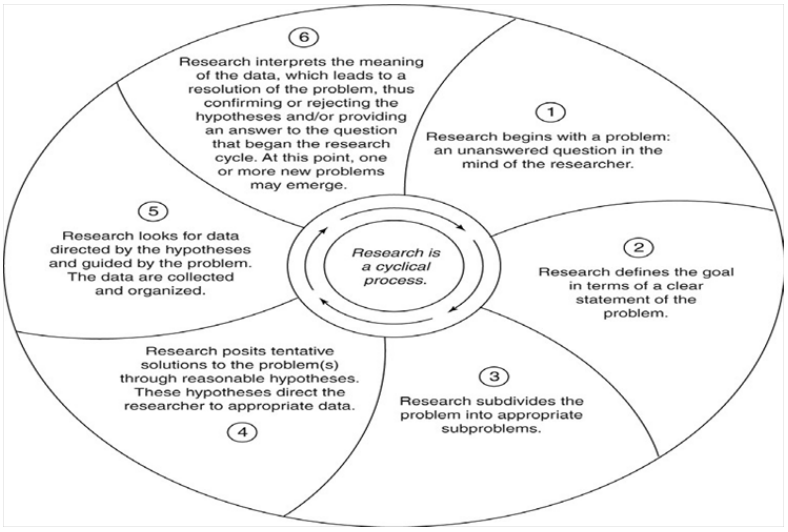


**Figure 1 The Research Process is Cyclical**

Throughout this process, but perhaps particularly at this point, the librarian will need to develop a plan for attempting to resolve the problem. In other words, it will be necessary to decide what methodology and data collection techniques, among other procedures, to utilize in the investigation. The librarian could elect to conduct an experiment during which a particular type of library instruction would be given, and after which the students' library skills would be post tested. Or a survey could be conducted in which students would, for example, be asked about their library use. Another characteristic of research inherent to most of the process is the necessity to deal with facts and their meanings. This activity is particularly crucial during the data collection and analysis stages. It is here that the researcher must attempt to gather information needed to solve the problem, organize it in meaningful categories, and analyze its significance. Data collected during the library instruction study could include scores on tests, attitudes toward the library, and self-perceptions of library skills.

And last, but not least, the librarian should keep in mind that this process is almost always circular in nature. The researcher's analysis and interpretation of the results of his or her study may well lead to new questions or fail to answer the original question, thereby starting the research process again. Leedy and Ormrod developed a diagram, reproduced below as Figure 1, which helps to illustrate the circular nature of research. As they state, "Every researcher soon learns that genuine research yields as many problems as it resolves". Such is the nature of the discovery of knowledge.

## Growth of Basic Research of Library and Information Science

As indicated earlier, one of the major purposes of basic research is to create new knowledge. "It is the purpose of science [scientific research] to go beyond experience and common sense, which frequently are quite limited and inadequate—and often quite incorrect, . . . for advancing knowledge, for promoting progress, and for enabling man to relate more effectively to his environment, to accomplish his purposes, and to resolve his conflicts."(Mouly, p15.) According To Kunge indicates that 'Learning to master theoretically and in practical application, the ground rules of research creates the best foundation for continuing growth in a profession.' But perhaps even more basic to the advancement of the profession "is the need for the field to test the various myths, assumptions, rules-of-thumb, and other conventions by which it has operated for so long a time, to link concepts which have been proven through testing to be valid, and thereby establish theories indigenous to the field itself."

In addition, the profession needs to advance beyond its heavy dependence on descriptive data and establish principles and theories on which libraries and information systems and services can be based. "One of the hallmarks of a profession is the ability of its members to give advice to clientele derived from a body of generalized and systematic knowledge that comprises its theoretical core." "Putting OUR Knowledge to Work: The Role of Research in Special Libraries, "defining library and information science research as not well developed, with fewer peer-reviewed journals and grant-funded research in comparison to other disciplines.54 The statement identifies ways that special librarians, researchers, and SLA can work together to contribute to the library and information profession and to build a foundation for evidence-based practice. (Special Library Association, 2001).

## The Future of Library Research

The past weaknesses of library-related research can at least partially be explained by the fact "that research in librarianship is still relatively young. Clear conceptions of the goals, objectives, and methodologies of library science research are only now beginning to be solidly formulated." (Busha, p6.)

It does appear clear, however, that it will become more and more "necessary to use the methodology of other disciplines—in particular, those of sociology, psychology, economics, linguistics, history—and to employ more generally applicable methodologies" in order to study the many problems facing librarianship today.

The American Library Association, a considerable number of programs and committee meetings directly deal with research and statistics. ACRL established a Research Mentoring Program to help members with various aspects of the research process. ALA's Committee on Research and Statistics is charged with promoting research to answer questions regarding library services.

"Research Statement" calls for evidence-based practice, which is decision making " . . . based on the strongest evidence" of what will work best for the libraries' clients. With the expanding role of library and information professionals and the widespread accessibility of information, SLA advocates for the selection, acquisition, organization, and management of information resources to be based on research findings. (Putting our Knowledge to Work," Special Libraries Association)

The vision of the society includes: "Advancing knowledge about information, its creation, properties, and use; providing analysis of ideas, practices, and technologies; valuing theory, research, applications, and service; nurturing new perspectives, interests, and ideas; and increasing public awareness of the information sciences and technologies and their benefits to society." ("Mission and Vision," ASIS&T: The Information Society for the Information Age)

It is always difficult to predict the future, but research in LIS will probably continue to incorporate more multidisciplinary and qualitative methods. Studies addressing the impacts and use of digital resources and technology are currently represented in the literature and will likely continue to pique interest in researchers and practitioners as the resources and technologies evolve and library users become more sophisticated in their demands for and use of these resources.

Hernon and Schwartz support this assessment and add, "The problems, research designs, the tool chest of methodologies, and data analysis techniques and software are richer today than ever before."

## Conclusion

Research is endless process, there is mounting evidence that the quality, if not the quantity, of Library and Information Science research is improving. And, hopefully, there is increasing recognition "that the results of research in a broad spectrum of effort extending well beyond librarianship will, in large measure, determine the future directions of library services and the nature of the profession itself" ALA a statement that still resonates after 40 years.

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