Academic Help Seeking and Use of Library Services among Social Work Students

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Introduction

The goal of this study was to investigate undergraduate and graduate social work students' approaches to seeking help in courses, and in particular to understand students' preferences for seeking help related to research assignments.

Research Questions:

1. How are students' approaches to academic help seeking related to their preferred sources of help for research assignments?
2. Do age, undergraduate/graduate program status, or undergraduate program level influence students' preferences for library or non-library sources of research help?
3. Is attendance at a class session conducted by a librarian, enrollment in a particular course, or the course level related to students' preferred sources of research help?

Background

- Academic help seeking is an important skill for self-regulated learners (Newman, 2008)
- Studies have found a positive association between help seeking and academic achievement among college students (Alexitch, 2002; Karabenick, 2003; Williams & Takaku, 2011)
- Many college students do not seek help when it is needed (Alexitch, 2002; Karabenick, 2003)
- Library help services are often underused and students go to other sources (instructors, peers) more often than library sources for research help. (Head, 2013; Head & Eisenberg, 2009; Ismail, 2013; Tang & Tseng, 2014)

Methods

Participants

Students in selected in-person undergraduate and graduate social work courses at a comprehensive university in the Midwest.
Courses included a research assignment requiring use of outside sources.

- 7 sections of 4 undergrad courses: 105 students
- 6 sections of 4 graduate course: 88 students

Instrument

Academic help-seeking scale (Karabenick, 2003)

13 items, 5-point Likert scale assessing:

- Help-seeking threat
- Help-seeking avoidance
- Adaptive help-seeking goals (learning orientation)
- Executive help-seeking goals (get someone else to solve a problem)
- Formal vs. informal help preference

Research help seeking:

Likelihood of using particular sources of help, when searching for information to complete an academic research assignment, including library sources (research guides, online chat, etc.) and non-library sources (instructors, other students).
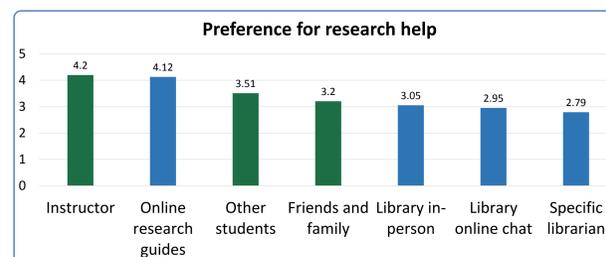Demographics and attendance at course-integrated library instruction.

Administration

In-class, paper survey.

Results

Academic & Research Help Seeking Scales

Scale	Mean	SD	α
Adaptive help-seeking goal	4.2	.82	.57
Formal help-seeking source	3.6	.83	.57
Library source of help	3.2	.96	.72
Non-library source of help	3.0	.51	.45
Help-seeking threat	1.6	.80	.83
Help-seeking avoidance	1.5	.68	.70
Executive help-seeking goal	1.5	.73	.42

Preference for research help

| Instructor	Online research guides	Other students	Friends and family	Library in-person	Library online chat	Specific librarian
4.2	4.12	3.51	3.2	3.05	2.95	2.79

Research Question 1

- Having an adaptive help-seeking goal was positively correlated with use of both library and non-library sources of research help.
- Students who preferred formal help were somewhat more likely to turn to library sources of research help.

Correlations between help seeking and research help sources

	HS threat	HS avoidance	Adaptive HS goal	Executive HS goal	Formal HS source
Library source of help	-.199**	-.303**	.361**	.018	.145*
Non-library source of help	-.255**	-.211**	.389**	-.009	-.113

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Research Question 2

- Among undergrad students, being in the 18-23 age group predicted less use of library sources of research help.
- Undergrads scored lower than graduate students on preference for library sources of help.
- Undergrads scored higher than graduate students on help-seeking avoidance, executive help-seeking goal, and preferring a formal help-seeking source.

Use of library help by age group, all students.
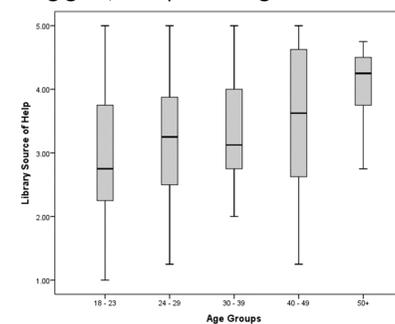
Research Question 3

No significant differences were found in preferred sources of research help by course, course level, or attendance at a class session conducted by a librarian.

Discussion

Conclusions

- Social work students generally had an adaptive approach to help seeking.
- Students with an adaptive approach to help seeking were more likely to use both library and non-library sources of research help.
- Younger, undergraduate students were more likely to avoid library help-seeking, possibly due perceiving help-seeking as a sign of weakness rather than as an adaptive learning strategy.
- Use of library help was related to a preference for formal sources of help.
- Librarians may have the disadvantage of being perceived as a formal, and potentially more threatening, source of help, while not having some of the advantages students find in course instructors as sources of help, such as familiarity and a readily understood role.

Recommendations

- Discuss the value of adaptive help seeking with students, in particular younger undergraduate students.
- Inform students about the professional ethic of library privacy to encourage use of library help by students who are threatened by help seeking.
- Optimize online research guides, the most preferred library help source.
- Build on students' preference for seeking help from instructors:
  - Instructors can encourage students to use library help when needed.
  - Librarians can provide instructors with information about library resources and services so they can also help students effectively.

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