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## **Library Awareness and Use Among Graduate Social Work Students: An Assessment and Action Research Project**

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*This article details the evolution of an action research project over the fall of 2011 through the spring of 2014. The project investigates the engagement of social work students at the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College with library resources and services. In addition to a review of the literature and a contextualizing discussion around the status of information literacy instruction in social work, the article describes the development and use of an online assessment tool, the introduction of new information literacy instruction strategies and materials including online research guides, and a discussion of the descriptive and inferential findings generated from 3 years of survey data.*

**KEYWORDS** *assessment, information literacy, social work education, research guides, surveys*

This generation is going out into an unpredictable world. With the vast increase in human knowledge, with information so accessible, and so subject to change, it is futile to attempt to teach students all that they need to know . . . the best education for life today is one which develops in students the capacity to acquire knowledge and to utilize it in thinking

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at [www.tandfonline.com/wbss](http://www.tandfonline.com/wbss).

for themselves. (Constance Warren, 2nd President of Sarah Lawrence College, 1938)

We maintain that for social work students and practitioners to use 21st-century technology and the burgeoning body of research evidence in their practice, they must become conversant with the retrieval, evaluation, and synthesis of information for problem solving and decision making in their clinical social work practice. (Wheeler and Goodman 2007, 236)

## INTRODUCTION AND IMPETUS

Effective and strategic use of information to advance social justice and initiate meaningful change in the social environment is not a new idea. It is a core tactic utilized and promoted by Sidney and Beatrice Webb during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Taylor, Dempster, and Donnelly 2003, 424). To engage the students at the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College in the pursuit of information literacy skills, the primary author has drawn at times on the contributions of the Webbs to connect the students to their scholarly roots and to instill inspiration.

Hoping to entice the students, the primary author exhibits the autographed, 209th copy (out of 500) of the Webbs' private subscription edition of *English Poor Law History* (Webb and Webb 1929) from the libraries' Schreiber Social Welfare Rare Books Collection. She imparts that the Webbs were members of the Fabian Society, founders of the London School of Economics, and advocates for state-sponsored welfare reform using demographic and statistical data to support their causes (Poole 2009, 3516–3518; O'Shea 2006, 337–338). She posits that for modern social workers to contribute in-kind, they must acquire the skills to discover, evaluate, and integrate diverse types of information from increasingly disparate sources into their practice, management, and leadership repertoire. In other words: Well-trained social workers possess comprehensive information literacy skills.

While the impact of the teaching strategy is not entirely clear, in vivo reaction often draws murmurs and quiet exclamations—"wow," "that's cool," "that's true," and once, "how much do you think you could auction that book for on eBay?" However, to the primary author, who is both a librarian and social worker, what is clear—albeit equally anecdotally—is that many social work students as well as many social work professionals struggle with basic skills and concepts of information literacy that may impede both optimal learning and professional practice.

Moreover, the impact may not be limited to individual academic success and subsequent practice. On a macro level, one may wonder how this collective struggle with information literacy might be an underlying factor in the discourse concerning non-social-work professionals (such as those holding

MBA or MPA) occupying senior leadership positions in social work settings (Hoefler, Watson, and Preble 2013, 437–446), given that business and administrative professionals are typically well prepared to adroitly manage and effectively utilize the information universe.

In 2011, the primary author joined the Hunter College Libraries faculty as the Social Work Librarian at the Schools of Social Work and Public Health Library. Since 2014, she has served as the Head Librarian for this branch. Located in Hunter's Silberman Building in New York City's East Harlem neighborhood, the library serves the academic and research needs of the Silberman School of Social Work and the CUNY School of Public Health at Hunter College.

This article details the evolution of an action research project undertaken by the primary author during these years investigating the engagement of Silberman social work students with their library resources and services.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION: INFORMATION LITERACY AND SOCIAL WORK

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) June 2014 "Revised Draft of the Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education" affirms that

Information literacy is a repertoire of understandings, practices, and dispositions focused on flexible engagement with the information ecosystem, underpinned by critical self-reflection. The repertoire involves finding, evaluating, interpreting, managing, and using information to answer questions and develop new ones; and creating new knowledge through ethical participation in communities of learning, scholarship, and practice. (American Library Association [ALA]/ACRL 2014)

Conceptually, such a declaration should carry particular gravitas for social work education for two reasons. First, the values around "critical self-reflection" and "ethical participation" are well aligned with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2008). Second, this definition captures the very essence of the skills and values required by the evidence-based practice model to seek, evaluate, and employ appropriate intervention and decision making in practice settings, which is now an imperative in the field of social work.

Yet there is relatively little academic literature that speaks to the library engagement, library use, and information literacy needs of master's-level social work students. Examples of several searches in the Library and Information Sciences database for peer-reviewed, academic journal material published within the last 10 years are illustrative (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1** Overview of Library and Information Services Database Searches

Subject term/search string	Number of items returned	Number of items applicable to:
Academic libraries—services to graduate students	40	Master's-level students in the United States: 17
Academic libraries—services to graduate students AND “social work*”	0	
Academic libraries AND “social work*”	27	Social work education in the United States: 12
“Information literacy” AND “social work*”	22	Social work education in the United States: 12

Wheeler and Goodman (2007) note not only that social work has fallen behind in the integration of information literacy into its formal curriculum as compared to analogous professional fields but also that the historic and continuing segregation of social work research from social work practice has a reciprocally deleterious impact. They suggest that not only practitioner and agency efficacy suffer when social workers are unable to access, evaluate, and integrate evidence-based intervention. They assert that research findings that lack real-world vetting for feasibility, such as that which can be provided by an information literate social work practitioner, diminish the potential for successful application of evidence-based strategies. They posit that bridging the divide between research and practice by standardizing information literacy as a skill set necessary for all social workers will benefit the entire discipline (Wheeler and Goodman 2007, 235–237).

The literature suggests that this concern may not be specific to only social work but is endemic to the broader landscape of social science education. In a 2012 study from Georgetown University, Gibbs et al. (2012) found that social science graduate students are less aware of and less engaged with library services than are their counterparts. Students in this study concur that the single library orientation session at the start of a graduate program, which lacks meaningful curricular context, does little to connect students to the library or impart useful instruction (Gibbs et al. 2012, 268–276). Illustrative of this contention, Rempel (2010) found that graduate students at Oregon State University reported lasting positive impact on their research skills and products following participation in a contextualized literature review workshop intentionally timed to engage them early in a dissertation/thesis process. The data showed not only that participants connected to information sources of which they had been previously unaware, but also that with continued use of these sources both their search and evaluation skills improved (Rempel 2010, 532–547).

Bradley's 2013 study examining the integration of ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (ALA/ACRL 2000) into the accreditation standards of nursing, social work, and engineering programs in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia suggests both progress and continued challenges for American schools of social work and their library liaisons. While the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards do not forthrightly reference "information literacy," there is corresponding professional language used by CSWE applicable to four out of five of ACRL's competency standards. Still, Bradley notes that on balance, social work accreditation standards in the United States and Canada are lacking in overall incorporation of information literacy tenets as compared to their UK and Australian counterparts (Bradley 2013, 44–68).

Adams's 2014 study furthers such examination by comparing the basic precepts of the evidence-based practice (EBP) model against the ACRL competency standards. She notes that while the two models share a conceptual foundation, they are not entirely synchronous—nor do they need to be. However, she does specify areas of the EBP model that are contrary to or unacknowledged by ACRL competency standards. She notes that these areas are thus at risk for poor or absent coverage by librarian liaisons, the most glaring example of which would be the divergent criteria used by the two models to assess the quality of an information item (Adams 2014, 232–248).

With regard to its applicability to social work education, a limitation of Adams's study may be that it does not consider the ACRL Education, Behavioral and Social Sciences Section's Social Welfare & Social Work Roundtable's Information Competencies for Social Work Students (ALA/ACRL/Education, Behavioral and Social Sciences Section's Social Welfare & Social Work Roundtable n.d.). A derivative of the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (ALA/ACRL 2000), this document explicitly addresses the application of information literacy to EBP and thus may partially fill gaps left by the parent document as far as social work is concerned.

Lastly, Bradley (2013) and Adams (2014) both remark upon the absence of ACRL's fifth competency standard that concerns the ethics of information use from both the EBP model and CSWE accreditation standards. It is a puzzling omission, considering the absolute centrality placed upon ethical practice by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2008).

When examining the literature detailing information literacy instruction in social work education, consistent themes emerge concerning contextual, collaborative, and sanctioned programming. Brustman and Bernnard discuss a collaborative effort between the University of Albany School of Social Welfare and Dewey Library to formalize information literacy instruction into the curriculum. Vetted through the school's curriculum committee in 2001, social work students are required to attend a series of information literacy

instructional sessions. The requirement provides a framework in which sessions are completed to correspond with the cumulative acquisition of credits, thereby ensuring that the contents of the instruction sessions have real-time applicability to progress through the program (Brustman and Bernard 2007, 89–101).

At the completion of the workshop series, students are given an anonymous 20-question assessment. Both the content of the sessions and the assessment are based upon the ACRL competency standards most applicable to the information literacy needs required of social work practitioners. An analysis of the assessment scores from 2003 demonstrated a successful acquisition of the targeted skills by 75 percent of the students. Moreover, it provided valuable data about the areas in which students were either proficient (creating search strings) or struggling (identifying appropriate information sources) (Brustman and Bernard 2007, 89–101). The long-term success of this program may be inferred, as the University of Albany Dewey Library's website continues to list this component as a requirement for graduation from the School of Social Welfare (Dewey Library n.d.).

In her 2009 case study about the University of Southern California's Randall Information Center, Xu describes a challenging set of circumstances in which the School of Social Work's library was integrated into the USC library's general collection and the space was converted into an information center. The center provides access to technology, reference librarians, group study, and library classroom spaces. In collaboration with the social work faculty, information literacy instruction is integrated into a policy class required of all first-year students. Throughout the program, information literacy is supported by interaction with social work librarians (in person and by telephone and e-mail), one-shot curriculum-focused library sessions, and Web-based instructional tools including tutorials and research guides (Xu 2009, 1–14).

Bellard (2005) reports on the information literacy needs presented by nontraditional students whose life experience and circumstances present unique challenges and obstacles in successful completion of graduate-level programs. Bellard brings voice to the concern that graduate-level library instruction tends to be sporadic, supplemental, and procedural in nature, which in sum does not teach information literacy. As the majority of the students attending the Adelphi University School of Social Work master's-level program fall into the nontraditional demographic, Bellard reports on a collaboratively developed workshop designed to remediate the technology and information literacy needs of these students (Bellard 2005, 494–505).

ROLE, or Required Online Experience, is a classroom-based, 3-hour instructional session required of all master's of social work (MSW) students, combining didactic elements with demonstration and *in vivo* experiences. Pretesting and posttesting support both the need for and the perceived efficacy of the ROLE workshop with consensus that other such instruction



opportunities integrated into the academic curriculum would be welcomed (Bellard 2005, 494–505).

Likewise, Ismail (2009, 2010) traces the needs assessment and programmatic response for nontraditional students enrolled in the Marywood University School of Social Work's satellite programs, for which there was no formal library instruction program. Using survey tools with students and faculty, Ismail found that while some instructors made an effort to provide library instruction in their courses, as a group the distance students lacked awareness about library resources, how to locate library resources, and how to use them. As a result, Ismail introduced a personal librarian service into the content management system (CMS) Moodle, consisting of postings, discussion threads, and the marketing of direct access to librarians via e-mail and telephone (Ismail 2010, 712–736; Ismail 2009, 555–564).

While the sample size of student users responding to her assessment survey was very small ( $n = 13$ ), the finding suggest that this program engaged distance-learning students with library resources and set the stage for the introduction of other such strategies, including synchronous online library instruction sessions. Ismail notes that the engagement of the distance-teaching faculty in both instruction and collaboration is essential to the successful engagement of distance-learning students (Ismail 2010, 712–736).

As online modalities gain traction in social work education, Kayser et al. (2014) detail the conversion of information literacy instruction at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work from a traditional model into an entirely online format. Utilizing a grant provided by the university's Office of Teaching and Learning, the instructional team developed 31 online tutorials. The curriculum model follows the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Social Work Students (ALA/ACRL/Education, Behavioral and Social Sciences Section n.d.) and is informed by the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE 2008). The program was created with input of the social work faculty and student body. Pretesting and posttesting showed a modest but statistically significant increase in information literacy skills (Kayser et al. 2014, 258–273).

While the curricular structure of the University of Denver program certainly represents best practices, the authors explicate concerns regarding the sustainability of such a program. One highlighted issue deals with the difficulty of maintaining the currency of the online tutorials. Additionally, they discuss the high level of training social work instructors need in order to integrate the online program into their curriculum and instruction as an obstacle to overall buy-in and consistent application, particularly where adjunct faculty are concerned (Kayser et al. 2014, 270).

In compliance with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' requirement that academic instructors collaborate with librarians to integrate information literacy competencies in the curriculum, the Fayetteville State

University initiated the Librarian/Faculty Collaboration for Information Literacy in 2009. The initiative consisted of three sequential elements: workshops provided for instructors by librarians covering information literacy and the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards; a process of partnering and revision of syllabi and assignments to incorporate information literacy training and standards; and in-class instruction provided to students by librarians. Participating instructors were selected from a competitive application process and received a \$2000 stipend (Johnson, Whitfield, and Grohe 2011, 5–21).

Pretesting of the social work cohort found students ill-prepared for graduate-level research, while posttesting demonstrated that most gained important competencies. Student survey and focus groups concurred, as students reported the perception that the program had increased their skills (Johnson et al. 2011, 5–21). While this initiative certainly supports the idea that collaboration between instructors and librarians can have positive impact on student learning, the nature of the project as one required by an outside accrediting agency and in which participants received compensation may raise concerns about actual instructor buy-in and sustainability.

Silfen and Zgoda (2008) employed a citation analysis approach to the assessment of the information literacy of social work students at Boston College's School of Social Work. The authors reflected that library instruction tended to focus on the mechanics of how to discover academic material, with little attention paid to the quality of the source or the appraisal of the item. To understand more fully about the quality of the material students were actually using in their academic pursuits, the authors collaborated with instructional faculty to recruit students from a required second-semester research class to share the reference lists from their assigned research proposal. The authors then measured the quality of the reference lists by counting the number of journal articles that were both peer reviewed and research based (Silfen and Zgoda 2008, 104–115).

The authors describe their findings as “not entirely disappointing,” as 64 percent of the citations were peer reviewed and 58 percent were researched based. Notwithstanding, given the emphasis both in the Boston College curriculum and in the social work field on the use of the EBP model, this finding held implications for future content of instructional sessions as well as for collaboration and liaison with the social work faculty (Silfen and Zgoda 2008, 104–115).

Lastly, from the United Kingdom, Eyre (2012) describes collaboration between the Department of Learning and Library and the Division of Social Work at De Montfort University as a participant in the PITSTOP project, the social work librarian contributed in the mediation of a social media discussion board used to support the academic needs of students engaged in the field training component of their program. Echoing Wheeler and Goodman (2007), Eyre describes the impact of the division between the

academic and practice environment as experienced by students (Eyre 2012, 344–348).

Eyre relates that while in the practice setting, students do not turn to academic resources to meet an information need. Instead, they tend to turn to a supervisor for clinical, procedural, or policy-related direction. While this strategy is perfectly sound and likely fulfills the requirements of internal agency policy, it is not comprehensive. He notes that for practitioners to incorporate EBP strategies in their professional lives, they must be trained in how and when to do so as students during field instruction. He posits that teaching information literacy only in the context of the academic setting does not promote generalization of those skills and processes into the practice setting (Eyre 2012, 344–348).

## ASSESSMENT AND ACTION

Given the relative scarcity of literature related to information literacy instruction in graduate-level social work programs, it is not surprising that within the Silberman social work community in 2011, it was unclear as to what the specific information literacy capacities, strengths, and challenges were within the student population. At the time, Silberman students received a 20-minute introduction to the library during orientation and 1 hour of bibliographic instruction embedded in a requisite first-semester course. There was no formal system to assess student engagement with the library, the impact of instruction, or general information literacy skills.

Some social work faculty shared with the primary author their concern over what had emerged as a troubling dialectic: gratification in a talented, dedicated student cohort, many of who juggled very complex and competing family, work, and school obligations, against apprehension that some students appeared to lack basic graduate-level research skills. They expressed concern that students were neither sufficiently engaged with nor recognized the value of the library services and resources available to them.

In order to respond to the perceived need for students to more meaningfully engage with the library, the primary author opted to pursue two concrete strategies: to initiate a means of assessment regarding student awareness and use of library resources, and to pilot an online research guide designed to advance information literacy among Silberman students.

## METHODOLOGY

Assessment—Social Work Student Library Awareness (SWSLA) Survey

Drawing upon concomitant research concerning the instructor–librarian relationship, the primary author adapted a survey tool designed to

measure faculty awareness and use of library resources (Bausman, Ward, and Pell 2014, 117–136; Pell, Ward, and Bausman 2014) for the student social work population. The purpose of the Social Work Student Library Awareness (SWSLA) Survey is to generate data illuminating what students know about the library and what services and resources they use in their academic work.

The project utilizes an action research framework such that data are used to inform program development and the process of data collection is iterative. The overarching intention is to create an ongoing, self-sustaining, reciprocal process of assessment using a robust longitudinal data set to reflect and inform the efficacy of programmatic intervention and to support data-driven program development. An action research approach such as this is an especially apt one for library research in that findings are immediately applicable to library practice (Jefferson 2014, 91–116).

The SWSLA Survey has been administered in three consecutive academic years. For readability, this article refers to the academic year of 2011–2012 as Year 1, to the academic year of 2012–2013 as Year 2, and to the academic year of 2013–2014 as Year 3.

The core section of the SWSLA Survey measures awareness and use of 11 central library resources and services, including the Information Commons, Reference Desk Services, Online Ask-a-Librarian Chat, Reference and Research Appointments, Course eReserves, eJournals and eBooks, Research Guides/LibGuides, Databases, Intra-CUNY Library Loan, National Interlibrary Loan, and Citation Management Tools. For each item students are asked to indicate “I have heard of this,” “A professor recommended this,” and/or “I have used this.” Students are free to mark as many responses as apply, or none. Each version of the SWSLA survey contains two open-ended questions: “Which library services and resources do you use the most?” and “What comments would you like to share with us about the services and resources at the Schools of Social Work and Public Health Library.” Each survey concludes with four demographic questions.

The Year 2 SWSLA survey contained a set of questions about a specific research guide created collaboratively with the chair of the human behavior curriculum area. The Year 3 SWSLA Survey contained a set of questions about the social work research guides in general and a set of questions about library instruction.

Yearly, the SWSLA Survey is submitted to the CUNY Internal Review Board and has received an exempt status. The survey is designed using SurveyMonkey software. It is anonymous and responses do not include IP addresses. An invitation with an embedded link to the survey is distributed to the entire social work student body in an eBlast from the school’s Office of Student Affairs. Those who completed the survey may opt to enter a raffle for a \$50 Amazon gift certificate administered by a third-party service via SurveyMonkey.

## Action—A Brief Discussion about Research Guides

In 2011, LibGuide software was a relatively new resource at the SWPH Library. At that time, a small guide regarding online social work information sources was in development (Social Work: Information Resources Guide). The primary author collaborated on the expansion of this guide and initiated the creation of the Social Work: Library Guide. At the time of this writing, there are now a dozen published social work specific research guides, three of which are among the most accessed at the Hunter College Libraries. All guides are treated as evolutionary and receive ongoing stewardship. The reader can access a list of all the social work research guides at [http://libguides.library.hunter.cuny.edu/socialwork\\_and\\_publichealth\\_guides](http://libguides.library.hunter.cuny.edu/socialwork_and_publichealth_guides).

A standard resource in libraries since the 1970s, research guides are now routinely provided as an online resource (Brazzeal 2006, 358). Ghaphery and White (2012) report that 75 percent of the 99 academic library websites they surveyed prominently marketed research guides, 63 percent of which used the LibGuide software. However, in their survey of academic librarians, they found no consistent practice for the evaluation of efficacy with 41 percent reporting no assessment strategies, 19.6 percent following usage statistics, and only 4 percent applying usability testing methods (Ghaphery and White 2012, 12–31).

Following indications that suggested a low level of practical use of online guides by undergraduate students, Ouellette (2011) completed a small qualitative study that found that the participating cohort used research guides very little. More importantly, the findings indicated the primary reason for the oversight was that students did not know that research guides existed, followed by a preference for open Web sources and a perception that they did not need research guides (Ouellette 2011, 436–51).

Likewise, in an exploration of the online study routines of distance learning students, Mussell and Croft specifically studied the use of the then new library website at Royal Road University. While the homepage contained a link to research guides, usage statistics showed it was almost never selected as a first choice. In an online student survey, 49 percent of the respondents reported never using a research guide and only 25 percent reported finding them helpful (Mussell and Croft 2013, 18–39). There is no indication in the article, however, of whether there was any promotion of research guides besides the homepage link or utilization of them in library instruction.

Indeed, Bowen (2011) found that when a link to research guides was placed within the CMS, the guides were used as a first line research strategy. The students who participated in his survey indicated that placing the link in the environment in which they completed their academic work provided the “most convenient point of access” (Bowen 2011, 449–68). Likewise, Bielat, Befus and Arnold (2013) promote the use of LibGuides as instructional tools. They discuss the structural capacity of LibGuides to complement learning

theory approaches such as chunking and scaffolding, which in turn shape metacognition. Used in conjunction with instruction and as components embedded into CMSs, LibGuides can assist in the reduction of cognitive load and ameliorate limits of working memory that often hamper learning (Bielat et al. 2013, 121–42).

## ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

### Demographics

The cohort responding to the SWSLA Survey over 3 years is comprised primarily of students enrolled in the 2-year MSW program, specializing in either children, youth, and families (31.7–45.7 percent) or health and mental health (35.4–67.7 percent) fields of practice. The majority of the cohort pursues the clinical practice method (72.2–79.9 percent) and falls between the ages of 22 and 30 years of age (68–70.3 percent). This is consistent with the overall demography of the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College.

### Library Resources and Services Used by Silberman Social Work Students

Table 2 shows the top five ranked library resources and services as demonstrated by affirmative responses for “I have used this (library resource or service).” The top two services (electronic course reserves and electronic journals/books) hold steady across the 3 years. However, an interesting picture emerges for the third through fifth ranked services. Databases rise from fourth place in Year 1 to third place for the subsequent 2 years. More, Reference Desk Service drops to fourth place in Year 2 and finally to fifth place in Year 3, replaced by Research Guides.

### Self-Service Versus Relational Services

One way of looking at this descriptive data is to parse the services themselves into self-service or relational services. The services reported in Table 2 all can be described as independent, self-service resources except for Reference Desk. Therefore, the ranking of services longitudinally shows the relational service Reference Desk declining year to year in favor of independent, self-services resources.

### Use of Research Guides

The SWSLA Survey findings specific to the use of research guides shows that in Years 1 and 2, only 32–33 percent of the respondents reported using a

**TABLE 2** Five Top Ranked Library Resources and Services, Year 1 through Year 3

	Year 1: 2011–2012 ( <i>n</i> = 292)	Year 2: 2012–2013 ( <i>n</i> = 215)	Year 3: 2013–2014 ( <i>n</i> = 219)
1	Electronic course reserves	Electronic course reserves	Electronic course reserves
2	Electronic journals/books	Electronic journals/books	Electronic journals/books
3	Tie: Reference desk CUNY library loan	Databases	Databases
4	Databases	Reference desk	Research guides
5	Bibliographic manager	Bibliographic manager	Reference desk

research guide, holding its ranking in seventh place. In Year 3, however, 68 percent reported using a research guide, catapulting its ranking to fourth place.

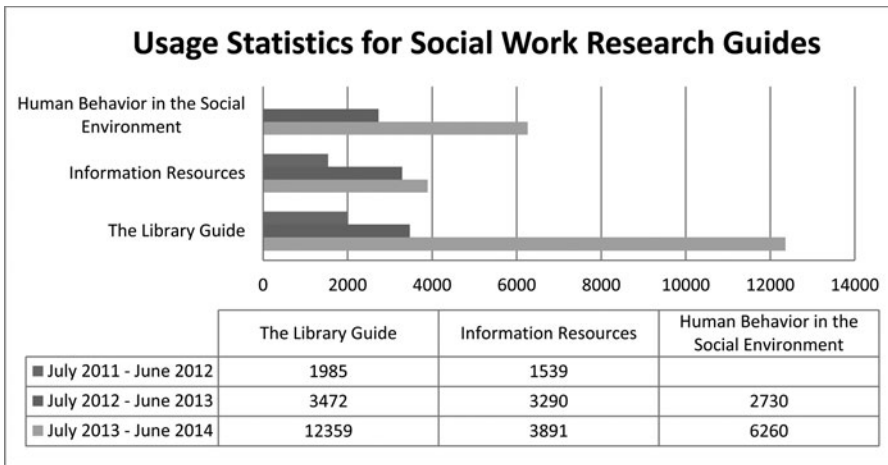
These data become more interesting when contrasted with the LibGuide usage statistics for the top three social work research guides. Figure 1 shows that the actual use of research guides increased solidly from Year 1 to Year 2, yet the SWSLA Survey data show that reported usage from Year 1 to Year 2 is unchanged. The disconnect is a puzzling one. Perhaps students did not know that the materials they accessed online were Research Guides, or perhaps they looked at the guides but found them unhelpful and therefore did not use them. By Year 3, however, there seems to be resolution in that the SWSLA Survey indicates a doubling in reported use while LibGuide statistics likewise show substantial increase.

### Statistical Analysis of Services Used by First-Year Students

In order to gauge the impact of instructional changes enacted from Year 1 to Year 3 (see further discussion), it was a logical step to apply statistical methodologies to the data gathered from the cohort of first year students in order to test for significant changes in distribution and use of library resources year to year.

Figure 2 shows the distribution and the mean of first-year students' use of library services from each year of the survey. From Year 1 (*n* = 116, mean = 3.96) to Year 2 (*n* = 77, mean = 3.97) the distribution and the mean remained fairly stable. In Year 3 (*n* = 86) the mean number of services used increased to 4.74, although the general distribution remained much the same as the previous years.

Next, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the mean



**FIGURE 1** Usage statistics for social work research guides.

number of library services used by first-year students in Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3 of the survey. The independent variable of first-year students includes three levels: Year 1 (2012), Year 2 (2013), and Year 3 (2014). The dependent variable was the number of library services used by first-year students each year. While the respondents were a self-selected, nonrandom sample, which violates one of the underlying assumptions of the ANOVA, it was decided to go ahead with the ANOVA for exploratory purposes with the understanding that the results of the analysis may not be valid.

The overall ANOVA was significant,  $F(2, 276) = 4.68, p = .01$ . The small to medium effect size of  $\eta^2 = .033$  indicates that there are significant differences among the groups.

Finally, follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate the significance of differences among the means for each year of the survey. The variances among the groups ranged from 3.59 to 4.13, indicating that the variances were relatively homogeneous, which is optimal. While the shift from Year 1 to Year 2 was not large enough to warrant investigation, post hoc comparisons were conducted using Scheffé's test to assess the differences between the means of Year 3 (2014) to both Year 1 (2012) and Year 2 (2013).

The mean difference from Year 3 to Year 1 was .79,  $p = .02$ . From Year 3 to Year 2 the mean difference was .77,  $p = .05$ . The means, standard deviations, mean differences to Year 3, and 95 percent confidence intervals for the pairwise differences are reported in Table 3.

Overall, this analysis demonstrates a modest finding that indicates that Year 3 first year students experienced a statistically significant increase in number of engagements with library resources and services compared to their Year 1 or 2 counterparts.



**TABLE 3** 95% Confidence Intervals of Pairwise Differences in Mean Changes in Number of Library Services Used by First-Year Social Work Students

Year	M	SD	Year 3 95% CI	$M_{\text{difference to Year 3}}$
1 (2012)	3.96	1.90	0.10 to 1.48*	0.79
2 (2013)	3.97	2.03	0.01 to 1.53*	0.77
3 (2014)	4.74	2.00		

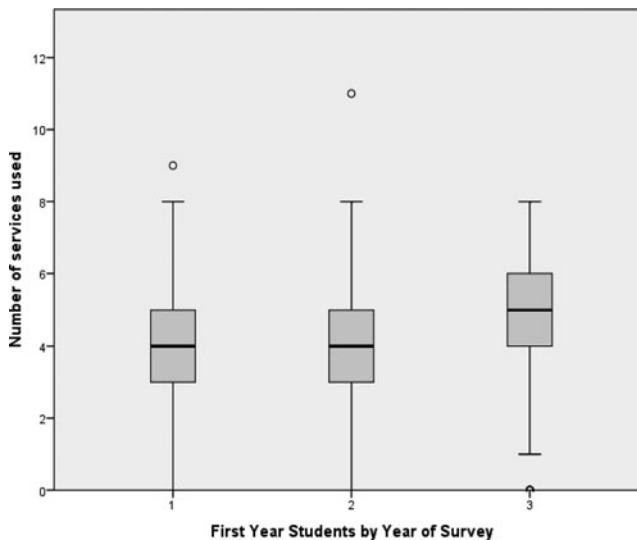
\*Indicates that the 95% confidence interval does not contain zero and is therefore significant at the .05 level using Scheffé's test.

## ASSESSMENT FINDINGS IN THE CONTEXT OF ACTION

### Action Narrative

In juxtaposition to the SWSLA Survey are the “action” elements of this project, which target instructional activity and resources.

In fall 2011, first-year Silberman social work students received a 20-minute general introduction to the library during their orientation. Subsequently, all students received 1 hour of bibliographic instruction as a component embedded in a first-semester course required for all first-semester students in the 2-year program. These sessions were shared between the then head of the library and the primary author. The content was primarily procedural in nature and intended to instruct students in (1) the discovery of library materials through the CUNY libraries system; (2) the selection and use of library databases for reference, academic, and popular press articles; and (3) the access to demographics, statistical, and governmental sources

**FIGURE 2** Distribution of responses by first-year students.

of information. Social work instructors had the option to invite the librarian back for a second session, and bibliographic instruction is ubiquitously available to the social work faculty at every level of the program.

During the course of Year 1, the research guides received a high level of stewardship and several new ones were published. Of note is the collaborative creation of a research guide with the chair of the Human Behavior in the Social Environment curriculum area. The guide contains a page for each required human behavior course, as well as several electives, and provides guidance to information resources complementing the course curriculum. The research guide was promoted by the chair to her colleagues teaching the sections, including encouragement to create a link to the guide on the individual class CMS pages. The Human Behavior Guide was published for the start of Year 2.

Moreover, during Year 1, the social work librarians had the opportunity to advocate for a modest increase in the time dedicated to library instruction. There was consensus that the brief introduction and 1 hour of information literacy instruction were insufficient time in which to accomplish the agreed-upon instruction goals. As a result, in the fall of Year 2, new students received an hour of bibliographic instruction during orientation, followed several weeks later by the embedded in-class component.

Over the winter of Year 2, the then head of the Social Work and Public Health Library (SWPHL) moved into another position within the Hunter Libraries Department. Therefore, in the fall of Year 3, the primary author, serving as the acting head for the branch, provided the orientation sessions and 14 in-class sessions over the course of approximately 4 weeks (with an additional five in-class sessions provided by an adjunct librarian). The content of the two-session instruction cycle was reworked and paired with the Social Work: Library Guide. An overarching objective was to present the material less as a set of discrete tasks, focusing instead on the sessions as gateways toward the contextualized acquisition of professional information literacy skills for social work practice.

The orientation session covered the first three pages of the Social Work: Library Guide accompanied by a corresponding handout. This session focused on the technical aspects of access to the libraries' collections in person and remotely. The general session themes targeted "Library as Place" and "Library as Activity." The in-class sessions covered the fifth through seventh pages of the guide also with a corresponding handout and was linked to an annotated bibliography assignment. This session focused on the difference between reference and scholarly articles, selection of appropriate databases, foundational search skills, and integration of citation management tools and critical analysis of information sources into research and practice. The general session theme targeted "Information Literacy and Social Work Practice." Both sessions utilized projector or SmartBoard technology in order to move fluidly from the Social Work: Library Guide to the libraries' online resources.

Instructional content was multimodal, contextualized to social work practice, and interactive.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Looking through the lens of the action narrative, the assessment data take on additional nuanced meaning and implications. First, in isolation, the decline in ranking of the use of reference desk services in favor of self-service resources could be seen as a red flag, as students losing engagement with the library. However, contextualized by the action narrative, one may posit that the increase in instruction, the reworking of instructional content, and the shift in pedagogy provided the foundation for students to independently engage with library resources and encouraged confidence for seeking guidance both in autonomous and relational formats. Moreover, the statistically significant upward shift in overall usage of library services reported by Year 3 first-year students shows an aggregated increase in library engagement year to year.

Second, as the literature indicates, the use of research guides is predicated upon adequate promotion of their existence, optimal placement of an access point, and demonstrably practical utility. Thus, the promotion of the human behavior research guide by instructional faculty members, some of whom also provided links within their CMS page, may largely account for its strong usage statistics in its introductory year (Year 2) and steady increase since. Likewise, the Year 3 targeted use of the Social Work: Library Guide as an instructional tool may correlate not only to the surge in usage statistics but also to the improved balance between usage statistics and reported use of research guides in Year 3.

## GOING FORWARD AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Relatively speaking, this would appear to be a satisfactory outcome in that the primary goals of this project were accomplished: The SWSLA Survey provides a tool to assess library awareness and use, and the Social Work: Library Guide provides an online resource to promote information literacy. Still, the findings from this study are formative at this juncture and, like any worthwhile research project, open the door to a multitude of related and emerging queries.

Certainly, the use of the SWSLA Survey will continue in order to track trends and to extend our knowledge of how Silberman students engage with the Social Work and Public Health Library, as well as to improve the survey tools itself. Also, it would be interesting to employ qualitative and ethnographic research approaches to further explore this question. Moreover, a

meaningful understanding of Silberman students' level of information literacy pre or post instruction and the impact of exposure to instructional sessions and online tools upon scholarly outputs is conspicuously absent. This will be a priority over the next several academic years.

Additionally, the evolution of the Silberman master's program curriculum provides rich opportunities for innovative collaboration between social work and library faculty, as does the anticipated advent of a BSW program. As of this writing, one cannot begin to postulate what the SWSLA survey data will reveal in Year 4. In August 2014, the library orientation was offered for the first time as a 30-minute online podcast followed by a brief quiz available through the CMS. A subsequent 30-minute, in-person question-and-answer (Q & A) module took place during on-campus orientation. The podcast was watched by 84 percent of the admitted first year students, 93 percent of whom passed the quiz. The foundational information literacy session was moved to the human behavior course required of all first-year students.

On a more global note, given the dearth of literature about information literacy instruction in social work education, one cannot help but be curious about how individual social work librarians and instructional teams are approaching information literacy instruction. A broader examination of library practice and pedagogy in social work education could provide important contributions to 21st-century social work education and scholarship.

Likewise, on a macro level, the much-anticipated revision of the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, now entitled the Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education, looks to be a potential game changer across the board. Moving away from procedural instruction toward a modality based upon the principles of threshold concepts will create a new set of parameters with which to align information literacy instruction, the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, and the evidenced-based model for social work practice.

Lastly, the available literature along with the findings of this assessment and action research project would support the following as basic tenets concerning the information literacy needs of social work students:

- There is a deficiency of research focused on information literacy instruction and assessment in social work education.
- Social work librarians need to be conversant with and address inconsistencies between the structures governing social work education accreditation, the evidence-based practice model, and information literacy competency standards.
- The one-shot, procedurally focused instruction session alone is insufficient in teaching information literacy for professional social work practice.
- Optimal instruction models consist of multiple instructional components, both remote and in vivo, inserted at critical junctures within curriculum at

varying levels, supported by a range of autonomous and relational library resources, services, and tools.

- Optimal instruction models contain assessment and feedback tools to identify information literacy needs, to gauge pre- and postinstruction skill sets, and to measure overall student engagement with the library.
- Information literacy instruction is enriched through collaborative program and curricular development involving social work librarians, social work instructors, and social work field placement facilitators.

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