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Use and Awareness of Reference Management Software Among Community College Students

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Abstract:
This research study investigates the use and awareness of reference management software (RMS) among community college students. An in-person survey was conducted in April and May 2017 at two mid-sized urban public community colleges in New York City. Researchers recruited 124 participants for this survey. The 13-item survey instrument was designed to determine participants’ awareness and use of RMS. The results show a low awareness and use of RMS among community college students regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, field of study, undergraduate class level, English proficiency, or academic level. The article discusses areas for further research and suggests strategies for increasing RMS use and awareness among community college students.

Keywords: reference management software (RMS), community college students, community college libraries

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Introduction

In the fall of 2016, more than 20 million students were enrolled in various postsecondary institutions across the United States, and of these, nearly 31% (6,206,013) attended the two-year institutions known as community colleges (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2017). A substantial number of students transfer every year from community colleges to four-year colleges to seek baccalaureate degrees. In New York City’s City University of New York (CUNY) system, for instance, where both authors work, “more than 6,000” students transfer from associate degree programs to bachelor degree programs annually (“CUNY Expands,” 2016, para. 1). Students from CUNY’s seven community colleges also have library access privileges across the 24-campus CUNY system, the United States’ “leading urban public university” (“CUNY dominates,” 2017, para. 11). As CUNY librarians, the researchers provide citation services to students who either are attending, or have transferred from, community colleges. To gain a better understanding of these patrons’ awareness and use of citation (or reference) management software (RMS), the researchers conducted this survey. The findings of this study will be useful to academic librarians for designing support services and instructional initiatives that effectively meet the reference management needs of library users who have community college backgrounds.

The authors conducted this survey at two CUNY community colleges: Hostos Community College (HCC) and Queensborough Community College (QCC). HCC, or Hostos, is located in the Bronx, NY. It “offers 27 associate degree programs and two certificate programs that facilitate easy transfer to The City University of New York (CUNY) four-year colleges or baccalaureate studies at other institutions” (Eugenio Maria de Hostos Community College, n.d., para. 2). During the Spring 2016 semester, approximately 7,148 students were enrolled in various degree, non-degree, and certificate
programs at Hostos (Office of the President & Office of Institutional Research and Student Assessment, n.d.). HCC has a library on its campus.

Queensborough Community College (QCC) is located in Queens, NY. It is estimated that “more than 16,000 students are currently enrolled in associate or certificate programs, and another 10,000 students attend continuing education programs” at this CUNY campus (Queensborough Community College, 2018a, para. 3). Queensborough students can pursue associate degrees and certificates in a number of academic subjects, including accounting, business administration, computer and information systems, education, engineering, and health sciences (Queensborough Community College, 2018b). After obtaining associate degrees, nearly 50% of QCC students continue their educations at baccalaureate degree-granting institutions within CUNY (Queensborough Community College, 2018a). QCC has a library as well as a Holocaust Resource Center on its campus.

According to Gilmour and Cobus-Kuo (2011), reference management software (RMS) was “developed in the 1980s” (Literature Review section, para. 1). Other terms for RMS include bibliographic software, citation management software, personal bibliographic file managers, citation tools, and citation management tools (Duke University Libraries, n.d.; Stanford University Libraries, n.d.; Lorenzetti & Ghali, 2013). In this article, the authors use the terms reference management software and citation management software interchangeably.

For the purposes of this research article, reference management software (RMS) refers to software that enables users to “[store] citations in a digital form, either locally or via an online interface, to make organizing research and formatting bibliographies and in-text citations more efficient.” (Lonergan, 2017, p. 584). As Emanuel (2013) documents, over the past three decades, a number of citation
management tools have been introduced to academic library users. Examples include products such as RefWorks, EndNote, Connotea, Papers, Sente, Bookends, Zotero, Mendeley, and EasyBib (Emanuel, 2013). Some reference management tools are free; others require a paid subscription (Emanuel, 2013).

**Literature Review**

The literature on citation management has mostly examined RMS, as Lonergan (2017) puts it, “from the perspective of documenting its benefits for researchers and students, comparing the features of available software, investigating the accuracy of citations generated by RMS, and suggesting best practices for instruction and support” (p. 585). No prior research has investigated the use and awareness of RMS among library users at community colleges.

Two studies have focused solely on undergraduates at four-year American universities and their foreign counterparts. Kent State University librarians Salem and Fehrmann (2013) conducted a focus group study to examine the citation management practices of undergraduates. The authors noted that “most of the participants seemed either disinterested in using them [reference management tools] or at best, ambivalent” (Salem & Fehrmann, 2013, p. 115). They interpreted “students’ uncertainty regarding the use of bibliographic management software as indicating their lack of awareness of the tools and their potential” (p. 119). Francese (2013) examined academic library patrons’ use of RMS at Italy’s University of Torino using interviews and a survey. The results indicate that a huge percentage (92%) of the participants were aware of RMS, while nearly a quarter (24%) did not use it in any form. Analyzing respondents by age, Francese also found that 42% of the participants who were older than 55 years of age did not use RMS, while nine percent of the respondents belong to the 26-to-35-year-old age range did not use RMS (Francese, 2013).
Scholars in several countries have examined RMS use and awareness specifically among students pursuing advanced degrees. In Taiwan, Wu and Chen (2012) of National Taiwan University interviewed 18 graduate students pursuing degrees in a wide variety of academic subjects and found that 12 of them had used citation management software. Four students were aware of the RMS product EndNote, but had not used it, while another four participants were not aware of EndNote at all (Wu & Chen, 2012). In Italy, Vezzosi (2009), using interviews, examined the “information behavior” of students seeking doctoral level degrees in biology at an Italian university (p. 65). This researcher found that most respondents had not used citation management software (Vezzosi, 2009).

Melles and Unsworth (2015), researchers from Australia’s Monash University and Australian National Data Service used a mixed-methods design (online survey and interview) to study the reference management practices of Australian postgraduate students (the equivalent of graduate students in the United States), as well as full-time researchers. They discovered that 71.4 percent of students had utilized citation management software (p. 254). They also found that 29 percent of students “did not use any RMS” (p. 255). Doctoral students, unsurprisingly, were more likely to use citation management software than researchers (Melles & Unsworth, 2015).

Separately, Niu et al. (2010) surveyed over two 2,000 researchers, including graduate students, post graduate/fellows, and faculty members from various disciplines in five different American research institutions to assess their information-seeking behavior. They found that half of their participants had used citation management software (Niu et al., 2010).

Emanuel (2013) of the University of Illinois at Urbana investigated both graduate students and members of faculty, finding that a large percentage (85%) of this mixed category perceived citation
management software as “essential or very important to their research” while a low percentage (8%) felt that it was not essential or important (p. 647). Lonergan (2017) of Pennsylvania’s Dickinson College investigated “preferences and attitudes” about RMS specifically among faculty (p. 584). The researcher administered a web survey and contacted 272 faculty members, 51 of whom completed the survey (Lonergan, 2017). Lonergan (2017) also found that a majority (57%) of the study participants had previously used citation management tools, while a minority (43 percent) had not.

While these articles examined the use and awareness of RMS among multiple categories of academic library users (i.e., undergraduates, graduate students, doctoral students, researchers, and faculty), none investigated the topic in a community college setting. The present study thus expands on the existing library and information science (LIS) literature by examining the use and awareness of RMS in that specific student population.

Aims

The objective of this study was to examine use and awareness of reference management software (or citation management software) among community college students. This study explored the following research questions:

- **RQ1.** Are community college students aware of RMS?
- **RQ2.** Do community college students use RMS for their citation needs?
- **RQ3.** How do RMS use and awareness compare among students of different academic disciplines?
- **RQ4.** How do RMS use and awareness compare among students of different age, gender, and racial/ethnic groups?
• RQ5. How do RMS use and awareness compare among freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior undergraduate students?

• RQ6. How do RMS use and awareness of English as a Second Language (ESL) students compare with native English speaking students?

• RQ7. How do RMS use and awareness compare among undergraduate and continuing education students?

Methods

Research Methodology, Survey Instrument, and Pilot Study

To answer these research questions, the authors designed a survey. The investigators thoroughly reviewed relevant research articles (Melles & Unsworth, 2015; Salem & Fehrmann, 2013) in order to developed a 13-question paper-based survey for this study. The survey consisted of 12 multiple-choice questions and one that was open-ended. These questions were designed to address the research questions of the study. Questions 1–7 asked respondents about their college affiliation, academic level, year of study, gender, age, race, and field of study. Questions 8 and 9 addressed the use and awareness of RMS. In question 10, participants had to indicate where they find help if they do not use RMS. Question 11 inquired about participants’ interest in attending a library session about RMS. Question 12 asked participants if English is their second language and the final question allowed study participants to offer any comments or suggestions.

The survey instrument was pilot-tested with five Queensborough community college students for readability and clarity, as well as to garner feedback. Some survey items were consequently revised. See the appendix for the full survey instrument.
Data Collection and Analysis

Upon obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the authors conducted a paper-based face-to-face survey in the months of April and May 2017 at Hostos Community College (HCC) and Queensborough Community College (QCC). The investigators distributed questionnaires to HCC and QCC students in cafeterias, in hallways, in front of classrooms, outside library entrances, and outside campus buildings. The authors verbally explained the objective of the study to participants and provided copies of the informed-consent script. Respondents who completed the survey received one dollar in compensation. The survey data were analyzed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), versions 23 and 24.

This article reports findings pertaining only to participants’ use and awareness of RMS. Findings about what specific citation management tools respondents used are not reported here because of insufficient data.

Respondent Characteristics

Of the 135 students contacted, 124 participated in the study, yielding a response rate of nearly 92%. The completion rate of the survey was 100%. Nearly 52% (n=64) of participants were Hostos Community College (HCC) students; the other 46% (n=57) were Queensborough Community College (QCC) students. Three participants (2.4%) were students of other colleges taking courses on permit at HCC or QCC. Of the respondents, 82.3% (n=102) were undergraduates, 14.5% (n=18) were continuing education students, and 3.2% (n=4) fell into other categories (e.g., alumni, or both alumni and continuing education students). Among undergraduates, 37.9% (n=47) were freshmen, 35.5% (n=44) were sophomores, 6.5% (n=8) were juniors, and 2.4% (n=3) were seniors.
Approximately 60% (n=74) of survey participants were female and close to 40% (n=49) were male. Transgender made up just .8% (n=1) of study subjects. The vast majority of respondents (82.3%, n=102) were under 24 years of age. Approximately 13% (n=16) of study participants were in the 24–34 age group, 3.2% (n=4) belonged to the 35–44 age group, and two participants (1.6%) were in the 45–54-year range. In terms of race and ethnicity, 50.8% (n=63) of the study subjects were Hispanic, 19.4% (n=24) black, 11.3% (n=14) white, 4.8% (n=6) Asian, 5.6% (n=7) multiracial, and 8% (n=10) from various other racial and ethnic groups.

Nearly 42% (n=52) of respondents said that English was their second language; 58.1% (n=72) identified themselves as native English speakers.

Of the 124 survey respondents, 29.8% (n=37) majored in the liberal arts and humanities, 17.7% (n=22) in the social sciences, 15.3% (n=19) in the health sciences or allied health sciences, 11.3% (n=14) in business or accounting, 8.1% (n=10) in education, 2.4% (n=3) in the natural sciences, and 15.3% (n=19) in other majors (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Participants' fields of study by percentage
Results

RQ 1. Are community college students aware of RMS?

Overall, a large majority of (69.4%, n=86) of community college students who participated in this survey reported that they were not aware of RMS. Nearly 31% (n=38) indicated they were. Queensborough Community College (QCC) students showed slightly greater awareness than Hostos Community College (HCC) students (31.6% as compared with 29.7%). HCC students were more likely to report that they lacked awareness of RMS. Figure 2 provides complete data concerning QCC and HCC students’ awareness of RMS.

![Awareness of RMS by Institution](image.png)

*Figure 2. Awareness of RMS by institution*

RQ 2. Do community college students use RMS for their citation needs?

A substantial percentage (78.2%, n=97) of community college students had not used RMS for their citation needs, while a small percentage (21.8%, n=27) had. Close to 74% (n=42) of Queensborough Community College (QCC) respondents and nearly 83% (n=53) of Hostos Community...
College (HCC) respondents had not utilized RMS. Fifteen QCC participants (26.3%), and eleven (17.2%) HCC participants had used citation management software (Figure 3).

![Use of RMS by Institution](image)

*Figure 3. Use of RMS by institution.*

**RQ 3. How do RMS use and awareness compare among students of different academic disciplines?**

The investigators disaggregated RMS use and awareness data by academic major. Examining awareness first, regardless of discipline, most students were not aware of RMS, yet a small minority were. A significant number of respondents with undeclared majors reported being aware of RMS. Table 1 presents complete data for RMS awareness by field of study.
A substantial percentage of students, regardless of major, reported not using RMS for citation purposes. Approximately 67% (n=2) of undecided majors, 50% (n=1) of education majors, and 50% (n=1) of mathematics and statistics majors, as well as 50% (n=1) of the respondents who were enrolled in certificate programs had used citation management software. See table 2 for complete data on use of RMS according to field of study.

Table 2

RMS Use by Field of Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of study</th>
<th>RMS Use</th>
<th>RMS USE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts and Humanities</td>
<td>2/5.4%</td>
<td>35/94.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>5/50%</td>
<td>5/50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>2/40%</td>
<td>3/60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>6/27.3%</td>
<td>16/72.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Sciences/Allied Health</td>
<td>5/26.3%</td>
<td>14/73.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>2/66.7%</td>
<td>1/33.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ 4. How do RMS use and awareness compare among students of different age, gender, and racial/ethnic groups?

The researchers sought to compare the RMS use and awareness of respondents belonging to different age, gender, and racial/ethnic groups.

**Age.** Slightly more than 34% (n=35) of participants younger than 24 years of age and nearly 19% (n=3) from the 24–34-year age group were aware of RMS. No respondent from the 35–44 or 45–54-year age groups indicated awareness of citation management software. Figure 4 displays data of RMS awareness by age group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Certificate Programs</th>
<th>1/50%</th>
<th>1/50%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>0/0%</td>
<td>3/100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math/Statistics</td>
<td>1/50%</td>
<td>1/50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Accounting</td>
<td>3/21.4%</td>
<td>11/78.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*b Number of Respondents/Percentage

Figure 4. Awareness of RMS by age group.
Nearly 24% (n=24) of subjects under age 24 and close to 19% (n=3) of those in the 24–34-year age group reported using reference management tools for their citation needs. On the other hand, no subject from either the 35–44 or the 45–54-year age categories utilized reference management software for citation purposes. Figure 5 illustrates RMS use findings according to age group.

![Figure 5. Use of RMS by age group.](image)

**Gender.** Approximately one-quarter of male respondents (24.5%, n=12), more than one-third of female respondents (33.8%, n=25), and the sole transgender respondent knew about citation management tools (Figure 6).
Figure 6. Awareness of RMS by gender

Slightly over 12% (n=6) of male respondents, 27% (n=20) of female participants, and the sole transgender subject indicated that they had used citation management tools for their citation needs (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Use of RMS by gender.

Race/Ethnicity. Slightly over 64% (n=9) of white, nearly 71% (n=17) of black, 73% (n=46) of Hispanic, and 71.4% (n=5) of multiracial respondents acknowledged a lack of awareness of reference
management tools. Fifty percent (n=3) of Asian students and close to 60% (n=6) of students from other races/ethnicities were unaware of citation management software. Figure 8 shows data for reference management software awareness according to race/ethnicity.

![Awareness of RMS by Race/Ethnicity](image)

*Figure 8. Awareness of RMS by race/ethnicity.*

Close to 29 % (n=4) of white, 12.5 % (n=3) of black, 17.5 % (n=11) of Hispanic, and approximately 43 % (n=3) of multiracial participants, as well as 30 % (n=3) of those identifying as other races or ethnicities had used RMS for academic purposes. The use of citation management software among Asian participants was higher than among participants from other racial and ethnic groups. Figure 9 presents findings for RMS use by race/ethnicity.
RQ 5. How do RMS use and awareness compare among freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior undergraduate students?

This survey study also collected data on RMS use and awareness according to undergraduate class level. Nearly 47% (n=22) of freshmen, 11.4% (n=5) of sophomores, close to 38% (n=3) of juniors, and 33.3% (n=1) of seniors were aware of RMS (Figure 10).
Approximately 26% (n=12) of freshmen, 15.9% (n=7) of sophomores, 25% (n=2) of juniors, and 33.3% (n=1) of seniors said that they had utilized citation management tools (Figure 11).

Figure 10. Awareness of RMS by undergraduate class level.

Figure 11. Use of RMS by undergraduate class level.
RQ 6. How do RMS use and awareness of English as Second Language (ESL) students compare with native English speaking students?

The researchers further disaggregated RMS use and awareness data by student type (ESL and non-ESL). A large majority of ESL (67.3%, n=35) and non-ESL (70.8%, n=51) students reported that they were not aware of citation management software, whereas only a minority of ESL (32.7%, n=17) and non-ESL (29.2%, n=21) students said they were (Figure 12).

![Figure 12. Awareness of RMS by student type.](image)

A significant percentage of ESL (75%, n=39) and non-ESL (80.6%, n=58) participants had not utilized RMS, whereas a small percentage of each group said that they had (ESL, 25%, n=13; non-ESL, 19.4%, n=14) (Figure 13).
RQ 7. How do RMS use and awareness compare among undergraduate and continuing education students?

The study also collected data on reference management software use and awareness according to academic level. Thirty-one undergraduate respondents (30.4%) and close to 39% (n=7) of continuing education respondents indicated awareness of citation management software (Figure 14).

Figure 13. Use of RMS by student type.

Figure 14. Awareness of RMS by academic level.
A significant majority of undergraduate (78.4%, n=80) and continuing education (72.2%, n=13) respondents had not used RMS, while approximately 22 percent (n=22) of undergraduate and nearly 28% (n=5) of continuing education respondents had (Figure 15).

![Use of RMS by Academic Level](image)

**Figure 15.** Use of RMS by academic level.

**Discussion**

This study found a lack of awareness and low use of RMS among the vast majority of surveyed community college students. The survey results also indicated variations in RMS usage and awareness according to factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, year of study, academic major, academic level, and English proficiency. Some of these differences could be explained by varied citation needs of these students. For instance, students taking upper-level sociology courses may have different citation needs than students enrolled in a lower level biology course or English course.

As was discussed in the literature review section, most published studies on RMS use and awareness have focused on graduate students, doctoral students, faculty members, and researchers (Francesce, 2013; Lonergan, 2017; Melles & Unsworth, 2015; Niu et al., 2010; Vezzozosi, 2009; Wu & Chen,
2012). Francese’s (2013) study, in particular, found that a small minority of participants were unaware of RMS. In contrast, the data from this study indicate that a large majority of participants were not aware of RMS.

Findings concerning RMS usage also differ from those of Melles and Unsworth (2015), who found that a large percentage of postgraduate students who participated in their survey utilized RMS. Melles and Unsworth (2015) noted that “RMS was the most frequent means of managing references, with 71.4% (n=55) of the students reporting its use” (p. 254). The analyzed data also contrast with Wu and Chen’s (2015) study, which found that two-thirds of respondents used a citation management tool. Similarly, RMS usage findings of this survey do not corroborate with those of Lonergan (2017). Lonergan (2017) reported that a high percentage of respondents utilized RMS. Other studies, however, were in line with the current study’s findings. Vezzosi (2009) and Nie et al. (2010) discovered that a substantial percentage of participants in their studies did not use RMS.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

There are three main limitations to this study. First, the study’s small sample size (n=124) and non-probability sampling method may have weakened the generalizability of the survey’s findings to other community college library patrons. Second, the use of self-reporting may have weakened the validity of the findings to some extent. Finally, this survey was conducted in the daytime during weekdays only. Evening and weekend students were not able to participate in the study, and they may have responded differently than their daytime counterparts.

This study provides opportunities for further explorations of this topic. Future researchers can replicate this study with larger, randomized samples, and include students from other public and
private community colleges to determine whether the findings remain consistent. Prospective investigators could design studies utilizing ethnographic methods, such as interviews and participant observation, in order to better understand community college students’ behaviors concerning RMS use. Tewell, Mullins, Tomlin, and Dent (2017) note that the advantages of ethnographic research “lie in developing a detailed and contextualized understanding of one’s topic” (p.88). Future researchers could examine the RMS use and awareness of community college and four-year college students in order to compare their responses. Alternatively, one could investigate the effect of full-time or part-time status on students’ RMS use and awareness. Another avenue of inquiry would be to compare the RMS use and awareness of evening and weekend students with that of daytime or distance learning students.

**Conclusion**

This appears to be one of the first studies to investigate the use and awareness of RMS among community college students. The researchers found low use and awareness of citation management tools among overwhelming majority of surveyed community college students. Findings clearly indicate a need to increase awareness of RMS among such students. The authors suggest that CUNY two-year college (community college) libraries devise strategies to raise RMS awareness and use among their patrons. One such strategy could involve educating patrons about RMS through workshops. Other strategies include incorporating RMS into library instruction, and creating handouts and online tutorials pertaining to citation management.

CUNY senior (four-year) college libraries should also consider adopting strategies to promote citation management tools to those among their patrons who have community college backgrounds.
Librarians might provide short presentations on RMS at special events (e.g. transfer student orientations), for example. Other approaches include offering special reference management workshops to students who have transferred from community colleges.

The authors hope that not only CUNY librarians, but also other academic librarians serving community college patrons—either in two-year institutions or with community college backgrounds—find the results of this survey useful for planning support services and instructional programs concerning reference management.

References


Appendix

Questionnaire: Reference Management Software Use & Awareness

1. Which college do you attend? Please select ONE of the following:
   a. Queensborough Community College
   b. Hostos Community College
   c. Another CUNY college_______________
   d. Other college______________
   e. I do not attend a college

2. What is your academic level? Please select ONE of the following:
   a. Undergraduate student
   b. Continuing Education student
   c. Alumni
   e. Other (Please specify)

3. If you are an undergraduate student, please select ONE of the following. Otherwise skip this question.
   a. Freshman
   b. Sophomore
   c. Junior
   d. Senior

4. What is your gender? Please select ONE.
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Transgender

5. Approximately, what is your age? Please select ONE.
   a. Under 24
   b. 24–34
   c. 35–44
   d. 45–54
   e. 55–64
   f. 65 and up

6. How do you identify yourself? Please select ONE.
   a. White
   b. Black
   c. Hispanic
d. American Indian or Alaska Native
e. Asian
f. Arab/Middle Eastern
g. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
h. Multiracial
i. Other (Please specify)_____________________________________________________

7. What is your major OR intended major OR in what subject area do you hope to obtain a degree or have a degree? Please indicate:

8. Reference management software (RMS) helps people to organize, save, and share their articles, books, and other citations. RMS also allows people to create bibliographies and insert citations into an assignment.
   Are you aware of RMS?
   a. Yes
   b. No

9. Do you use reference management software (RMS) for your citation needs?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   If yes, please circle one: RefWorks, EndNote, Mendeley, Zotero, EasyBib, RefME, Citation Machine, Citavi, Bib Tex, CiteUlike, Papers, None, Other (please specify) ___________________

10. If you do not use reference management software (RMS), then where do you find help for your citation related issues?
    a. I ask a reference librarian at my college library
    b. My friends help me
    c. I use a citation style manual
    d. I use an online site (e.g., Purdue OWL)
    e. I do not seek help
    f. I cannot answer

11. Are you interested in attending a library workshop that will educate you about reference management software (RMS)?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Do not know

12. Is English your second language?
    a. Yes
b. No

13. Any other comments and/or suggestions: