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What the Heck Do Librarians Do with Students During Individualized Research Consultations???

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Background

At the University of Ottawa Health Sciences Library, librarians have shifted their method of assisting patrons by spending less time at the reference desk and giving the tailored individual help patrons need through one-on-one appointments. This shift in service appears to be a trend in many academic libraries, where reference desks have been increasingly staffed by paraprofessionals with success (Arndt, 2010).

At our library, we developed a referral service where students needing advanced guidance for their research projects or assignments fill out a form, detailing their needs. Furthermore, the University of Ottawa Library has embraced the use of LibGuides to create discipline-specific research guides. Subject librarians list their contact information in these guides, which provide an additional means for students to request assistance.

Pertaining to our own experience, we have defined **individualized research consultations (IRC)** as

“scheduled in-person appointments that aim at helping researchers and students one-on-one with their research projects, including, but not limited to, the literature review process”.

As with the time allotted to the appointment, the content of the IRC varies, and depends greatly on students’ needs.

Methods

To better understand what occurs during these consultations, librarians at the University of Ottawa were surveyed about the type of assistance they provide during these meetings. From February to May 2015, twelve librarians participated in this study. These librarians represented faculties of education, engineering, health sciences, medicine, science, and social sciences, as well as the school of management. The survey was intended to be short and easy to fill out, with only three multiple choices questions. For the period mentioned, librarians were invited to answer the survey every time they had met with a student or researcher for an IRC.

Table 1 : Activities Performed During an IRC

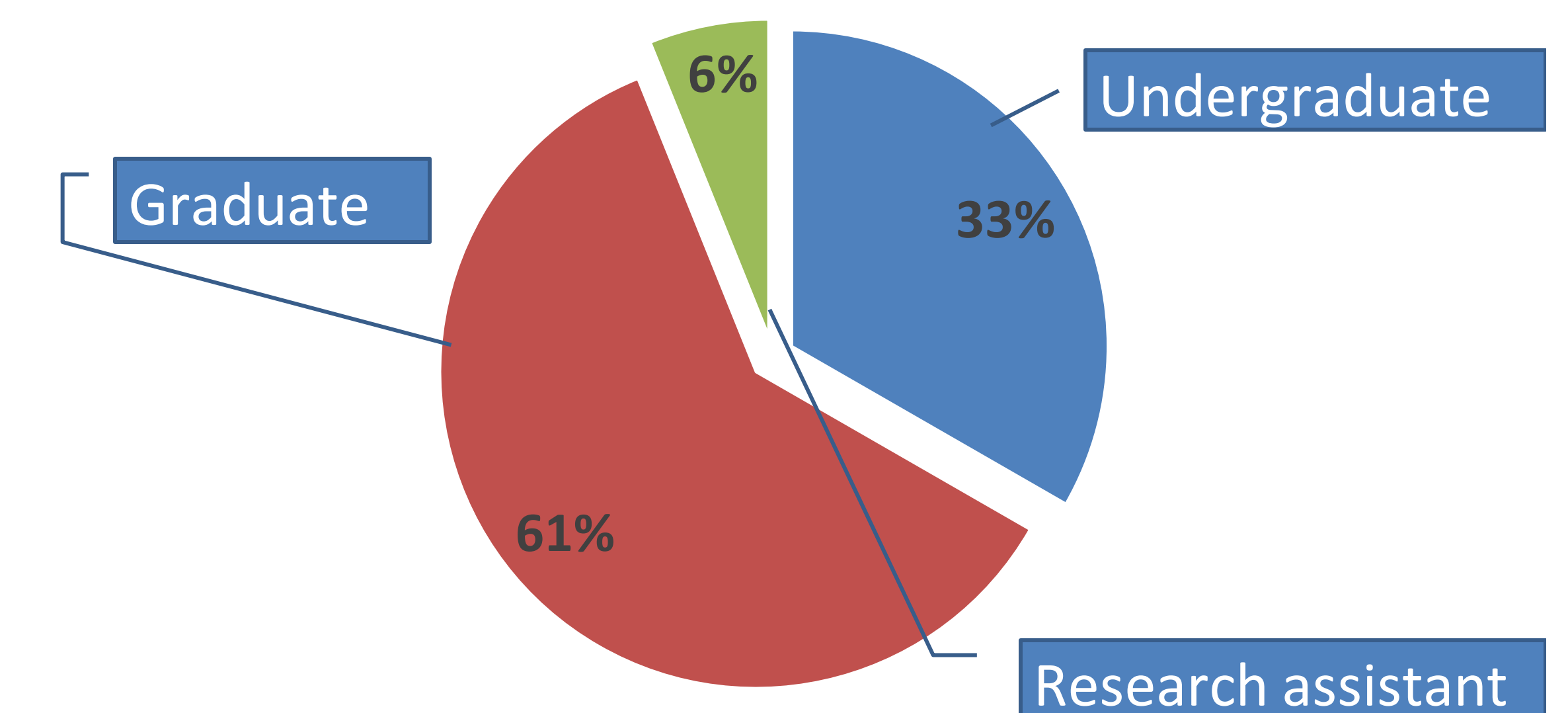
Response	Chart	Percentage
Help provided with bibliographic databases searching		91%
Help provided with keywords/subj. head. Selection		85%
Help provided finding full text articles		58%
Thesaurus consulted		52%
Help provided with web searching		49%
Help provided with catalogue searching		36%
Help provided with question formulation		30%
Help provided with Refworks		21%
Help provided with Zotero		15%
Help provided with Racer (ILL system)		12%
Help provided with grey literature searching		9%
Help provided with citation analysis		6%
Help provided with EndNote		0%
Help provided with Mendeley		0%

Results

We received thirty-three complete answers to our survey. For the first question, participants could select as many activities as they saw fit. The question was: **“What activities did you achieve during your in-person individualized research consultation by appointment?”** The answers *Help provided with bibliographic databases searching* and *Help provided with keywords/subject headings selection* were the main activities performed during meetings, with **85%** and **91%** of the time respectively. Other activities were broken down as such: *Help provided finding full text articles: 58%; Help provided with web searching: 49%, Help provided with question formulation: 30%.* See **table 1: Activities performed during an IRC** for more information.

Question two was: **“Did you meet with an undergraduate or graduate student?”** The answers were: *undergraduate student: 33%, graduate student: 61%, and research assistant: 6%.* The last question was **“How much time did your appointment take (without including preparation time)?”** The answers were: *less than 30 minutes: 6%, between 30-59 minutes: 85%, and 60-89 minutes: 9%.*

Figure 1 : IRC’s Requestors



Discussion

Results indicate that the main activity performed during these meetings was providing help with bibliographic database searching. The second most popular activity was help with keyword/subject heading selection; however, less than half of respondents consulted a specialized thesaurus while helping students. Providing help with citation management tools was popular, but was not as frequently requested as expected. Also, graduate students were the main requestors of individualized research consultations, and an appointment lasted 30-60 minutes most of the time. This study is of a small scale, which is a limitation. Although the survey’s answers cannot be generalized to all academic librarians’ practices, it is safe to assume that it gives a realistic and current snapshot into academic librarians’ appointments with students.

In conclusion, while additional types of assistance are provided, such as help with research question formulation, “traditional” activities, such as database searching, remain the main components of individualized research consultations.

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