

RESEARCH IN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARIES: A USER SURVEY

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ABSTRACT: Improved information about actual users is a key element in developing user-responsive archival administration. The findings of a 1984 survey of researchers in four presidential libraries are summarized. Rather than compare libraries, the study identified patterns of behavior within groups of researchers. The questionnaire collected information well beyond what is available on standard registration forms and linked researchers with the basic elements of reference service: preliminary correspondence, orientation interviews, and direct reference room assistance. The findings emphasize the academic affiliation (faculty, students) of over three-quarters of respondents and the predominance of traditional political and diplomatic topics of study. Researchers generally have made some advance preparation and have had previous research experience. These factors have a strong bearing on whether they adjusted their preferred and actual research styles in the course of a visit. High researcher satisfaction ultimately has more to do with whether they located useful archival materials than with the quality of particular reference services.

Archival priorities are not cast in bronze, nor should they be. For many years the primary focus of the archival profession has been acquiring and preserving historical materials. Recent journal articles, conference presentations, and task force activities, however, point to a need to change the emphasis. It is time to take into account the equally significant needs of those who use archival materials. To do this we need to know much more about our researchers, beginning with who they are, their topics of study, how they prepare, and how they conduct archival research.¹

Improved information about actual users is a key element in developing user-responsive archival administration. Indeed, the Society of American Archivists' Goals and Priorities Task Force has now called for a broad three year project to develop systematic measures of use and to unite the work of archivists and librarians who have been studying the needs of specific groups.² Archivists who would strive to build programs based on user needs must have hard evidence to supplement the wisdom of experience.

From April to August 1984, reference archivists in four presidential libraries distributed a survey to researchers as they completed their work. The question-

naire collected information well beyond what is available on standard registration forms and linked researchers with the basic elements of reference service: preliminary correspondence, researcher orientation, and direct reference room assistance. The study was not designed to make comparisons of presidential libraries, but rather to isolate patterns of behavior within groups of researchers, especially the forms and degree of advance preparation, and to identify some of the elements of a successful visit to an archives.

The Setting of Presidential Libraries

While to outsiders they may sometimes seem like the spoiled children of the archival world, the presidential libraries as a system are an almost ideal laboratory for studying users in a multi-institutional setting. The highly visible repositories, showered with about equal doses of praise and criticism over the years, are marked by diverse settings, but similar administrative structures.³ The older libraries (Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower) are in rural or non-academic locales, while the more recently established libraries (Kennedy, Johnson, Ford) have built close ties with universities. This trend of academic affiliation continues as plans for the Carter, and Reagan libraries proceed. A central office in Washington, D.C., procedures handbooks, staff mobility and relatively frequent meetings of library directors unify the system while allowing for considerable flexibility in implementing specific procedures. While the diversity of settings and procedures may complicate the comparison of presidential libraries as institutions, the key purpose of any multi-institution study should be to cut through individual diversity to identify and understand the behavior of groups of users.

Gathering and analyzing user data is not built into the presidential libraries reference system. The basic form used to register researchers collects only minimal information on their background and intended use of the holdings. It is not meant to be a log of research activity or a tool for evaluating reference services. Sporadic exit interviews typically pick up complaints or tips about potential research use, but they are not sufficient to fill the gaps in statistical information. This overall lack of available information about researchers led directly to the user survey.

The questionnaire contained twenty-six multiple choice, closed-ended questions, some of which had multiple parts. Descriptive questions solicited information about length of stay, subjects of study, expected results, background preparation, and occupation. Evaluative questions encouraged researchers to rate the usefulness of any reference letters received, the orientation interview, and the finding aids. Finally, several "experimental" questions tapped user attitudes and approaches to research well beyond basic evaluations of current services. Included in this last group were inquiries on the type of subject access researchers may have desired, the level of overall satisfaction, and their preferences and practices in carrying out research.⁴

Archivists in each participating library attempted to give a questionnaire to all researchers over 14 years old using historical documents. Excluded were those whose primary purpose was the use of audiovisual holdings filed separately from documentary resources. Of the 170 questionnaires during the four month survey period, researchers returned 120 usable questionnaires, for a response rate of about 70 percent.

Basic Groups of Researchers

For the period of the survey, five distinct groups of researchers visited presidential libraries. Taken together, the first three comprised over 75 % of all respondents. The largest, fully half, identified themselves as college or university faculty. Another quarter were students — ten percent undergraduates and sixteen percent at the graduate level. No high school students completed questionnaires.

A fourth group (18 %) may be thought of as “professional” researchers. Journalists, lawyers, federal and state government employees, and individuals affiliated with research organizations fall into this category, along with a whole host of “others”, including autograph dealers and graphic designers. Professionals are not a homogeneous group, and much of the variation in research behavior uncovered by the survey may be partly explained by the diversity of affiliations.

People in the fifth group (5 %) were primarily avocational users, such as genealogists, amateur historians, and others with little interest in publishing the results of their work or using the information professionally. The small number of researchers who placed themselves in this category limits the conclusions that may be drawn from their responses. Institutions with greater numbers of private researchers will see greater variation within this group than will be evident from this survey.

Since the study took place during a time of relatively low use, these five groups may best be thought of as the core presidential libraries clientele; they are not necessarily representative of the full range of use. Indeed, a decade of statistics from the National Archives shows that presidential libraries are visited by significantly more students (46 %), including high schoolers, fewer faculty (24 %) and about the same proportions of professionals (18 %) and private researchers (9 %), though the latter group has been imprecisely measured by the libraries.⁵ How researchers approach their work and react to services is more significant than the size of any particular group.

As repositories of presidential files and related materials, presidential libraries might be expected to attract researchers interested in studying political history, public policy and foreign affairs — topics relating primarily to the business of national government. In the survey, researchers indicated the broad subject of their research and then listed a second topic if they felt that their studies covered more than one major subject area.

A combination of researchers' first and second choices on the surface strongly confirms the primacy of traditional political topics. International relations and political history together comprise over half of all research subjects listed. Public policy, social and economic history and public opinion research account for an additional 31 percent. Given the constraints of the questionnaire's multiple choice format, researchers listed a wide variety of “other” topics, ranging from the expected — biographies and speech writing — to the surprising — an opera libretto. Lawyers, journalists and other professionals made up a significant portion of researchers listing “other” topics.

For at least a decade presidential libraries have grouped researchers by academic discipline, rather than by their subject of study. Statistics show greater dominance by history departments (60 %) than the survey uncovered.⁶ A truly open-ended evaluation of subject focus would probably find even greater var-

Presidential Libraries Reference Services: A Survey of Researchers



Thank you for taking a few minutes to complete this questionnaire.

The purpose of this survey is to get useful information from researchers using historical manuscripts in presidential libraries. An analysis of your responses will help us to understand more completely how you make use of the reference services we provide. Our goal is to provide you with the most responsive and useful reference system.

Identical questionnaires are being filled out by researchers in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, and Gerald R. Ford Library.

Please think of this questionnaire as a kind of conversation. We will outline what information we are trying to obtain. You should think about the research work you have just completed or are about to complete. We are most concerned with how the most important reference services we provide helped you carry out your research. In order to evaluate your responses, we will also ask you some background questions. You will not have to provide any personal information.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Please take about 10 minutes today to complete this questionnaire.
2. Please answer all the questions. Your questionnaire is most valuable if it is complete.
3. Unless given other specific instructions, please mark only one answer for each question. Circle the number next to the line that best answers the question. If you want, you may comment in the margins.
4. Do not sign the questionnaire.
5. Please try to complete the questionnaire here at the library and turn it in to a reference archivist.

If you cannot complete the questionnaire here, please mail it to:

Reference Services Survey
Gerald R. Ford Library
1000 Beal Avenue
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109

ALL QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES WILL BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL.

Q1. In the box to the right, please indicate the number of days you spent at this presidential library to work on your current project.

Q2. Please look at the list below and place the number one (1) on the line that best states the broad subject of your research.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>___ 11. political history</p> <p>___ 12. social history</p> <p>___ 13. economics or economic history</p> <p>___ 14. public policy (U.S.) or public administration</p> <p>___ 15. comparative history or politics</p> | <p>___ 16. archives administration</p> <p>___ 17. international relations, diplomatic or military history</p> <p>___ 18. mass media, public opin.</p> <p>___ 19. family or community hist.</p> <p>___ 20. other _____
(please specify)</p> |
|---|--|

Q3. Please look at the above list again and place the number two (2) on the line if you feel that your research covered more than one major subject category. You may note a more specific subject in the "other" category.

Q4. We would like to know how you intend to use the information gathered during your visit. Please circle one number below that best describes the expected result of your research.

- 11. course paper
- 12. senior thesis
- 13. master's thesis
- 14. PhD dissertation
- 15. conference paper
- 16. for use in teaching
- 17. article in magazine, journal or newspaper
- 18. book, or chapter in book
- 19. personal use
- 20. other _____
(please specify)

Q5. What portion of your project will be based on research work at this library or other presidential libraries?

1. I hope to use primarily presidential library sources of information.
 2. I hope to use presidential library resources and other information about equally.
 3. I hope to use other sources of information primarily.
 8. I don't really know yet.
-

IN ANSWERING THIS NEXT SET OF QUESTIONS, WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU EXPECTED TO LEARN ABOUT YOUR TOPIC.

Q6. Please indicate below how satisfied you are overall with your research visit in terms of what you had hoped to achieve.

1. much more satisfied
2. somewhat more satisfied
3. about what I expected
4. somewhat unsatisfied
5. very unsatisfied
8. I don't know

Q7. Considering how quickly you had expected to complete your work, how much faster or slower did your research go?

1. much faster to complete
2. somewhat faster
3. about what I expected
4. somewhat slower
5. much slower to complete
8. I don't know

Q8. Considering how much useful information you had expected to find on your research topic, are you leaving the library with more or less information?

1. much more information
2. somewhat more information
3. about what I expected
4. somewhat less information
5. much less information
8. I don't know

Q9. Considering how difficult you had expected your research to be, how smoothly did your research go?

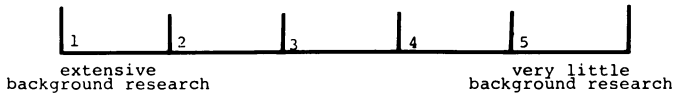
1. much more smoothly
 2. somewhat more smoothly
 3. about what I expected
 4. somewhat less smoothly
 5. much less smoothly
 8. I don't know
-

ONE PURPOSE OF THIS SURVEY IS TO FIND OUT HOW RESEARCHERS PREPARE TO USE THE LIBRARY'S HOLDINGS AND HOW THE LIBRARY STAFF CONTRIBUTE TO THAT PREPARATION.

- Q10. Excluding writing or telephoning the library directly, how did you find out that the library may have contained information of use to you? (Circle only one number.)
- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| 11. teacher, professor or colleague | 16. presentation by library staff |
| 12. archivist at another institution | 17. visit to a presidential museum |
| 13. newspaper or magazine | 18. I visited without knowing what the library had. |
| 14. professional journal | 19. I don't remember |
| 15. footnotes or citations | 20. other _____
(please specify) |

- Q11. Please think about how much background research you did on your topic before your first visit. This may include reading books and articles, consulting indexes and chronologies; or doing archival research elsewhere.

Please place an "X" on the scale below representing about how completely you prepared for your research visit.



- Q12. Please indicate below if you have ever done previous research at any places listed below. (Circle all that apply.)
1. this presidential library
 2. any other presidential library _____ (please specify)
 3. National Archives in Washington
 4. a federal records center
 5. Library of Congress manuscript division
 6. other archives or historic manuscript library
 8. none of the above

- Q13. Every presidential library has a list of historical materials for research. Did you consult these lists for other presidential libraries during your visit here?
1. yes 2. no 8. don't know

Q14. During your research on your current project, would you have benefited from greater subject access to the holdings of other presidential libraries?

1. yes 2. no 8. don't know

Q 15. Before your first visit on this project, did you write or telephone to get information on holdings or services?

1. yes 2. no 8. don't know

Q16. If yes, did you get a letter back in response?

1. yes 2. no 8. don't know

Q 17. If you received a letter in response to your inquiry, we would like you to evaluate that response. Listed below are some of the possible parts of this library's letter to you. Check the first box if you did not receive the item. Otherwise, please circle the number that corresponds to how useful you found the item in preparing you for your visit.

- A. form letter
- B. body of letter addressed to you
- C. finding aids
- D. list of holdings or guide
- E. subject outline or "search" report
- F. information on travel or lodging
- G. other part of response

	<u>very useful</u>	<u>useful</u>	<u>uncertain</u>	<u>hardly useful</u>	<u>not useful</u>
A.	1	2	3	4	5
B.	1	2	3	4	5
C.	1	2	3	4	5
D.	1	2	3	4	5
E.	1	2	3	4	5
F.	1	2	3	4	5
G.	1	2	3	4	5

(eg. newsletter, documents, etc.)

Q18. Did you make use of any of the following archival reference sources in your current research project? Circle all numbers that apply.

1. Guide to the National Archives
2. National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)
3. Prologue, Journal of the National Archives
4. Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories (NHPRC)
5. newsletters or news notes in professional journals
6. none of the above

WHEN YOU FIRST VISITED THIS LIBRARY, YOU AND A STAFF ARCHIVIST MAY HAVE HAD AN ORIENTATION INTERVIEW TO TALK ABOUT YOUR TOPIC AND GO OVER THE LIBRARY'S REFERENCE PROCEDURES.

Q19. Did you have an orientation interview?

1. yes 2. no 8. don't know

Q20. If yes, please think about the interview process. Listed below are some of the parts of a typical interview. Check the first box if you did not discuss the item in your interview. Otherwise, please circle the number that corresponds to how useful you found each part in helping you with your research.

	<u>very useful</u>	<u>useful</u>	<u>uncertain</u>	<u>hardly useful</u>	<u>not useful</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> A. overview of library's holdings	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> B. help to narrow or define topic	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> C. help in locating important collections	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> D. overview of access restrictions	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> E. organization and use of the finding aids	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> F. location and use of other reference tools	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> G. procedures for safe handling of papers	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> H. photocopying procedure	1	2	3	4	5

IN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARIES, RESEARCHERS USUALLY BEGIN RESEARCH BY CONSULTING A SYSTEM OF FINDING AIDS. FOR PURPOSES OF THIS STUDY, THIS SYSTEM INCLUDES THE TYPED DESCRIPTIONS OF EACH COLLECTION OR FILE, AND ANY SPECIAL INDEXES DESIGNED TO HELP YOU LOCATE USEFUL MATERIAL.

Q21. Listed below are some of the major parts of a finding aid system. Consider for a moment how you may have used each of these parts. Check the first box if you did not use an item. Otherwise, please circle the number that corresponds to how useful you found each item.

	very useful	useful	uncertain	hardly useful	not useful
<input type="checkbox"/> A. descriptive introduction or scope and content notes	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> B. biographical information	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> C. series or file group descriptions	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> D. folder title lists	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> E. name indexes	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> F. subject indexes	1	2	3	4	5

Q22. Please think about how you approached your search of historical materials at this presidential library. Circle one number that corresponds to your most significant access point to important information on your current project.

1. proper names (persons, organizations, government agencies)
2. dates
3. subjects (events, issues, legislation, etc.)
8. don't know

Q23. While working in the research room, did any of the following items help you in your research?

- | | | | |
|--|--------|-------|---------------|
| A. card catalog of books | 1. yes | 2. no | 7. didn't use |
| B. vertical file of clippings or ephemera | 1. yes | 2. no | 7. didn't use |
| C. subject outlines, "searches", or bibliographies prepared by reference staff | 1. yes | 2. no | 7. didn't use |

Some researchers in presidential libraries prefer to rely on their background preparation or the finding aid system in the research room. Other researchers feel most comfortable if reference archivists guide their searches of the holdings.

Q24. Please circle the number that corresponds to your personal preference for doing research at an archives.

1. rely almost exclusively on the finding aids and preparation
2. rely more on the finding aids than on assistance of archivists
3. rely about equally on finding aids and archivists
4. rely more on archivists than on the finding aids
5. rely almost exclusively on the assistance of archivists
8. I don't know

Q25. Please circle the number that best describes the way you actually carried out your research project.

1. relied almost exclusively on the finding aids and preparation
2. relied more on the finding aids than on assistance of archivists
3. relied about equally on finding aids and archivists
4. relied more on archivists than on the finding aids
5. relied almost exclusively on the assistance of archivists
8. I don't know

Q26. From the list below, please circle one number that best describes your occupation.

11. high school student
12. undergraduate student
13. graduate student (Masters or PhD)
14. faculty
15. US government employee
16. journalist, media professional
17. professional researcher (for publication)
18. private researcher (not for publication)
20. other _____
(please specify)

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO GIVE US SO MUCH USEFUL INFORMATION.

iation than this survey's multiple choice approach. Knowledge of the subjects researchers study is certainly an interesting part of the total picture of use and may even help make the case for the value of specific types of archival materials. But when it comes to developing flexible reference services that can respond to this diversity, knowing more about how researchers approach and carry out their work can be more useful.

The Background of Archival Research

Archivists have traditionally expected researchers to prepare in advance and inquire directly. What constitutes advance preparation is a complex question — best answered by breaking it into parts.

Researchers first indicated how they found out the library had useful information other than by directly calling or writing. The question was carefully phrased to learn about knowledge of *holdings*, not simply about the mere existence of the archives — an important distinction. Nearly one-third (31%) of all researchers found out about holdings through printed sources such as footnotes or citations in books, journal articles, magazines, and newsletters. Footnotes and citations were mentioned most frequently, arguing favorably for building grants-in-aid programs that expect recipients to publish the results of their research.

Nearly 70 percent of all presidential library researchers relied to some extent on an information "grapevine", rather than on published sources of information. Many were told of library holdings by a teacher, colleague, or fellow student. Others indicated that their prime source of information was unspecified general knowledge that the library may have contained relevant information. Many researchers simply assumed that an archives named for a former president in some way documented that man's career or the issues of his administration.

Notwithstanding previous research, survey responses clearly showed that the users of presidential libraries talk to each other about available resources and services.⁷ The existence of a "grapevine" may partly be explained by the relatively high visibility enjoyed by the libraries as a whole. More significantly, users of presidential libraries may talk to each other about their experiences because library archivists encourage it through outreach programs, academic symposia, and grants programs.

Some idea of the nature of this "grapevine" may be gathered from Figure 1.

As part of the general picture of how researchers found out about resources, the survey investigated the use of some of the standard archival reference sources: the 1978 NHPRC guide and the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC). All presidential libraries list at least some of their resources in these guides. The survey question also included two National Archives publications, the 1974 *Guide to the National Archives of the United States* and the quarterly *Prologue*, and newsletters or newsnotes in professional journals.

Only slightly more than 40 percent of all survey respondents used any of the sources listed. *Prologue*, NUCMC and the National Archives *Guide* together were used by only 16 percent of the researchers surveyed. Twice as many researchers made use of newsnotes and professional newsletters to track information about relevant sources as any other source listed. Most researchers who

consulted national sources found newsletters of particular value in their projects. While we cannot abandon the search for a national archival database, these figures and the evidence of an informal archival “grapevine” argue strongly for greater efforts to reach researchers through the existing forms of communication they favor, however selective and incomplete they may be.⁸

Archivists have traditionally urged users to prepare thoroughly for a research trip, regardless of the topic or expected length of stay. Philip Brooks devoted an entire chapter of *Research in Archives* to address why and how they should approach advance preparation. He emphasized carefully defining research topics, reading secondary literature and national archival sources, locating appropriate archival repositories, and calling ahead to confirm. More recently Larry Berman, in *Studying the Presidency*, advised users that they could expect better treatment from staff archivists and minimize their personal frustrations if they took pains to prepare thoroughly.⁹

The survey also asked users to evaluate their sense of overall preparation prior to their visit. Figure 2 presents these self-assessments, ranging from extensive to very little. As a group, researchers reported a fairly high level of preparation.

As might be expected, faculty and graduate students were the most confident about their preparation. Undergraduates, the group of researchers being urged by their teachers to do archival research, expressed a fair amount of apprehension at the prospect, even after completing their archival research.

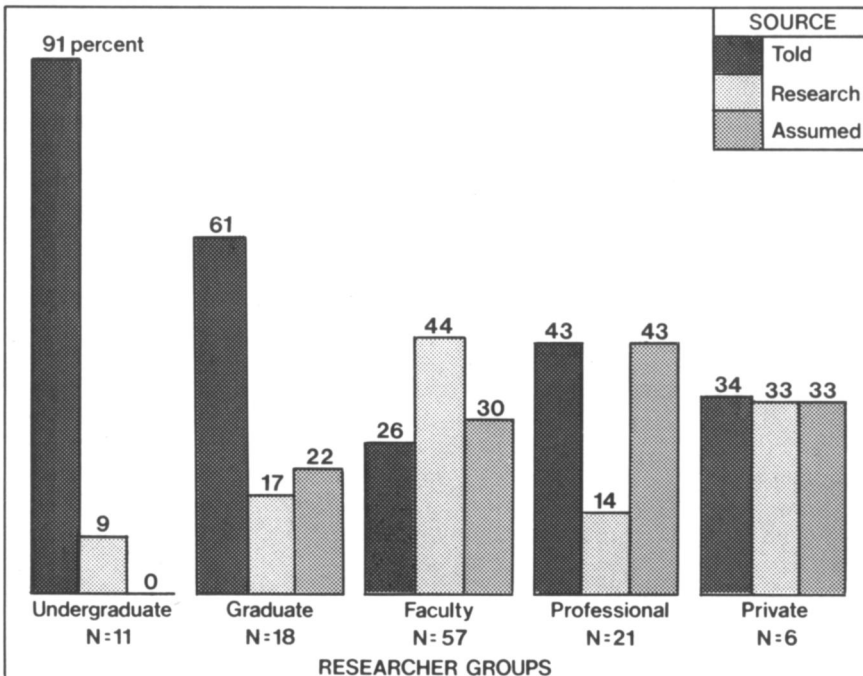


Figure 1. How Do Researchers Find Out About Holdings?

The survey results for professionals suggest that archivists may have to modify their expectations about what constitutes adequate preparation. It is one thing to expect faculty and students to do their homework, and quite another to adhere to similar standards for non-traditional users. Flexibility in reference services is needed to compensate for lack of preparation or at least lack of confidence.

Since familiarity with specific archival procedures is as important as advance preparation, the survey asked whether previous archival research, if any, had been done at a presidential library or another archives. Over three-quarters of all survey respondents reported some previous archival experience (see Figure 3). Half of this total indicated they had worked in one of the seven presidential libraries, including the one at which they completed the survey.

Not surprisingly, faculty dominate the ranks of the archivally experienced; undergraduates as a group are archivally innocent. The ranks of the archivally inexperienced are also populated by a sizable portion of non-academic researchers, both private and professional.

The survey showed a strong relationship between past archival experience and a researcher's self-assessment of background preparation. Those with any kind of archival experience tended to be quite confident of their preparation, whereas the archivally innocent generally downgraded their readiness for research. While only one "extensively prepared" researcher had no previous

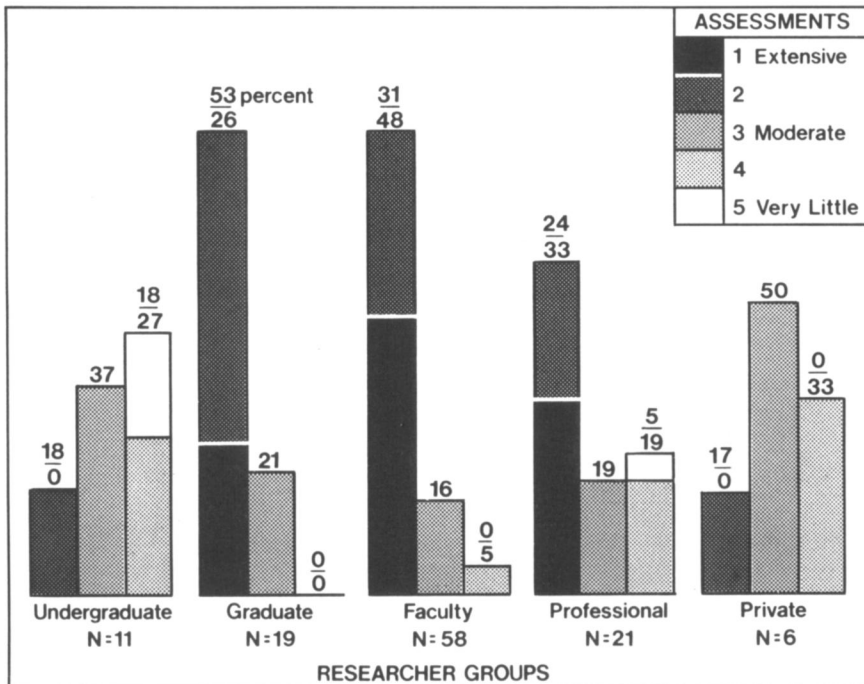


Figure 2. How Do Researchers Assess Background Preparation?

experience, more than one-third of those who rated themselves nearly extensively or moderately prepared also had never conducted research in any archives.

Archival experience apparently imparts important lessons for researchers that contribute to their overall confidence in future research trips. Archivists should value any reference services that offset inexperience and bolster researcher confidence.

Once researchers have identified a need for a visit, are they calling or writing ahead? Evidently so. Nearly 70 percent of all researchers tapped by the survey had either called or written before they started research. Of this group some had done their advance work exclusively by phone but most had received a letter in response to their inquiry.

Survey responses point to a significant relationship between the tendency to make advance contact and previous archival experience. Almost everyone (89%) who had conducted research in any presidential library made advance contact. How researchers found out about holdings also influenced their decision to make advance contact. Those told by a teacher or colleague that the library contained appropriate materials, usually did not confirm that information by phone or letter. Those who developed some idea about holdings through their own research efforts usually called or wrote to request more information. Taken together, these factors suggest that advance contact is viewed

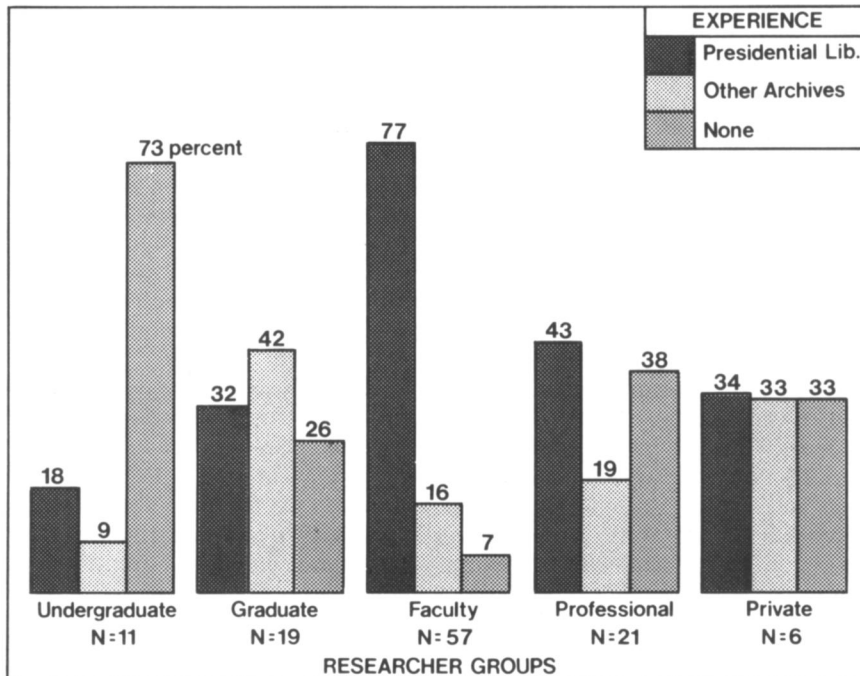


Figure 3. Which Researchers Have Archival Research Experience?

by a significant portion of researchers to be a natural and valuable part of presidential library procedures.

Orientation to Archival Research

By now it should be abundantly clear that there are differences among researcher groups, whether it be a specific information need, a frame of mind, or a set of expectations. The first real opportunity that archivists have to assess these differences is in the orientation interview, arguably the most personal service an archives provides. Although a reference letter may bring archivists in touch with researchers and provide some sense of their needs, the eventual shape of a research strategy can best be determined face to face.

There are at least as many ways to orient researchers as there are archivists to do the interviews. Although Robert Tissing of the Johnson Library proposed standardizing the interview around a checklist emphasizing procedures over guidance, most academic reference librarians prefer a kind of open-ended question-negotiation format emphasizing active listening and consciously cultivated teaching roles.¹⁰ Most orientation interviews probably fall somewhere between these two extremes. To help provide effective personal guidance, we need to know which elements of the reference interview researchers found most helpful.

Archivists oriented ninety percent of all survey respondents. Figure 4 suggests that researchers preferred an orientation that helped them get started efficiently. In contrast, researchers found help in narrowing or defining topics the least useful element of the orientation. The range of procedural information, including photocopying regulations, and the safe handling of materials, seem as a group less useful than specific advice on appropriate collections and finding aids.

Faculty and graduate students most appreciated help in locating appropriate collections and finding aids. Undergraduates and private researchers found assistance in defining and narrowing topics and other non-procedural parts of the orientation most useful. Professional researchers most appreciated information on photocopying procedures and found information on related reference tools least useful. Those who contacted the library in advance rated their orientation interviews slightly lower overall. Elements rated most highly and most valued by academic researchers were also those elements most frequently discussed in the interviews.

After completing an orientation interview researchers continue personal contact in the reference room, but with additional complicating factors: card catalogs, registers, indexes and other finding aids. The ways in which they use finding aids and the extent to which they rely on archivists to find useful materials involve relationships that are far too complex to treat fully in a broad survey such as this. One purpose nevertheless, was to continue the investigation of searching strategies by looking at the balance between archivist and finding aid.¹¹

Researchers and archivists will always have to reach an accommodation about the amount and level of personal interaction in the research room; something we may call actual research style. If researchers had complete flexibility, their preferred mix of archivist's advice and finding aid guidance may have

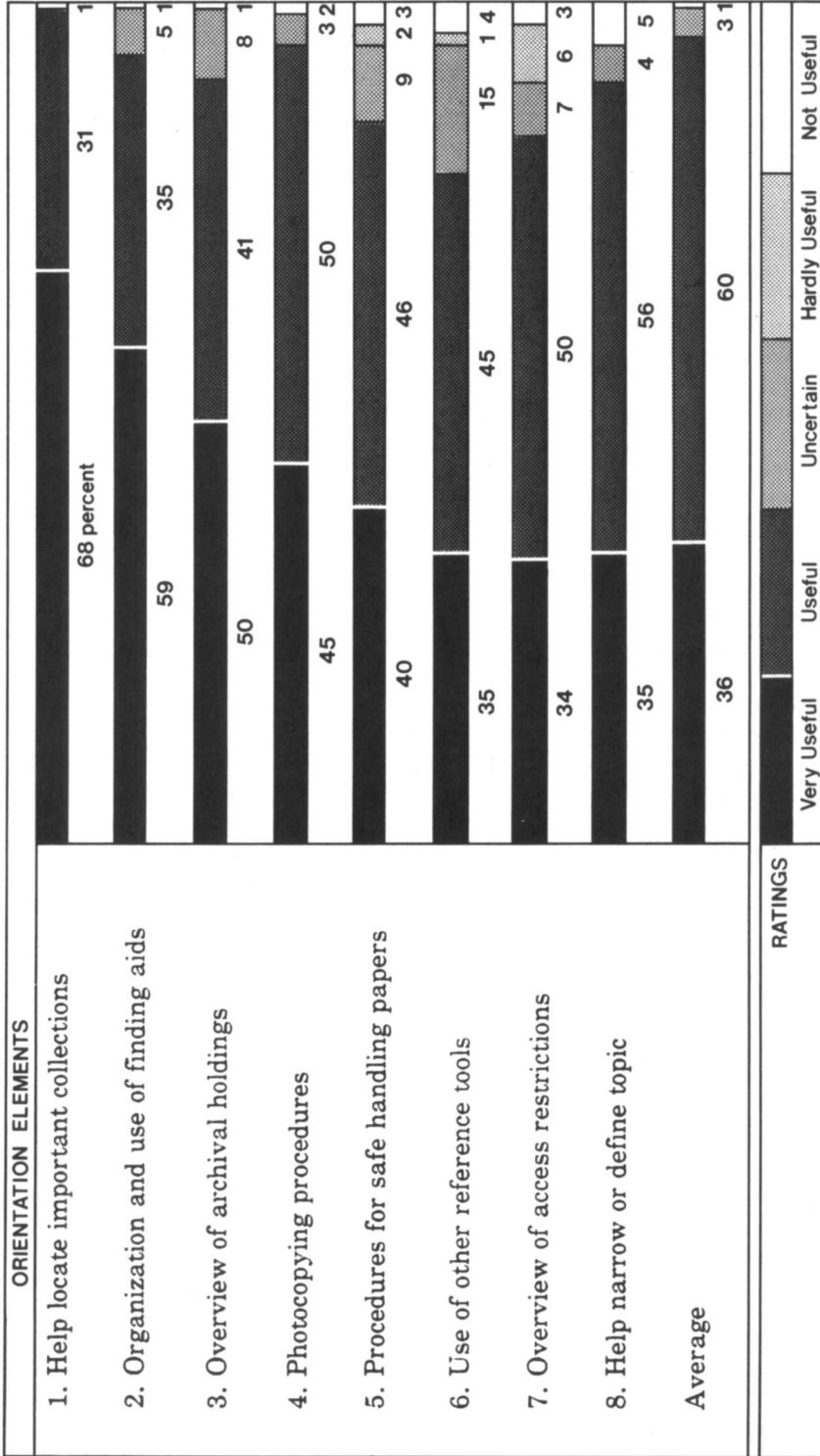


Figure 4. How Useful Are Orientation Interviews?

differed quite a bit from their actual research style. In the most "experimental" section of the survey, researchers answered two similarly worded questions pertaining to preferred versus actual research strategies. Respondents chose from a five category scale for each question, ranging from "relying almost exclusively on finding aids and background preparation" to "relying almost exclusively on the assistance of archivists."

Of the researchers who answered both questions, 68 percent indicated their preferred and actual research styles matched; most relied about equally on archivists and finding aids. Of the remaining 32 percent, most preferred to rely on archivists but actually made greater use of finding aids to locate materials. The remainder preferred to rely on finding aids but ended up consulting archivists in their searches.

Explaining why and how a researcher's style varied are complicated matters. Full explanations would consider whether finding aids were sufficiently useful and whether reference archivists were sufficiently helpful. A complete analysis would also question to what degree researchers simply accommodated themselves to the actual situation. As full answers to these questions were beyond the scope of the survey, the questionnaire was limited to the finding aids side of the equation.

The survey encouraged researchers to rate the usefulness of presidential library finding aids. Over 95 percent of all researchers rated the finding aids useful or very useful overall.¹² Neither academic affiliation, previous archival research, background preparation nor length of stay had much bearing on finding aid evaluations.

The survey data strongly suggest that finding aids were not an important factor in explaining why two-thirds of all researchers had realistic expectations, yet the remaining one-third had to adjust their preferred and actual styles. Two other factors were more enlightening. First, those who found their reference letters very useful were more likely to match research styles than those who rated them lower. Second, those with previous archival research experience, especially at presidential libraries, matched actual and preferred styles to a much greater degree than the archivally inexperienced. Reading secondary literature or defining a topic in some way cannot impart realistic expectations in the same way that actual research experience can.

What Constitutes a Satisfactory Research Visit?

Another way to look at archivist-patron interactions is through researchers' evaluations of their experience as a whole. The survey asked respondents to "indicate how satisfied you are *overall* with your research visit in terms of what you had expected to achieve." Researchers responded to a five part scale ranging from "much more satisfied" through "about what I expected" to "very dissatisfied."

The major assumption underlying the wording of the question was that satisfaction with a research visit and the set of expectations a researcher brings to archival research are linked. Simply asking researchers directly how satisfied they were or how high their expectations were on a five point scale would probably have elicited the same positive responses that researchers gave to reference letters and finding aids. By asking them to relate their satisfaction to their

expectations, we were able to measure the reactions researchers have when their expectations are tempered by a research visit.

Very few researchers (6%) expressed disappointment in their research visits. Almost half (45%) indicated they were more satisfied than they had expected they would be. The remaining respondents were neutral about their overall experience, neither pleasantly surprised nor disappointed (see Figure 5).

Private researchers were the most positive about their overall research visit. Professional and undergraduate researchers as a group also expressed a fair amount of overall satisfaction, although undergraduates were more apprehensive about their background preparation. Graduate students and faculty were generally neutral about the visit. These groups had the most realistic expectations about what they would find.

The role of various sources of information about library holdings also influenced user satisfaction. Those who decided to come as a result of their own investigation (mostly faculty members) were most likely to be neutral about the visit. On the other hand, those who were told of the holdings by someone else were pleasantly surprised at what they found. Both contacting the library in advance of a visit and receiving a response helped significantly in building realistic expectations. As a group, those who did not call ahead expressed much more surprise at the outcome of their visits, suggesting that these people may have had the lowest expectations about achieving useful

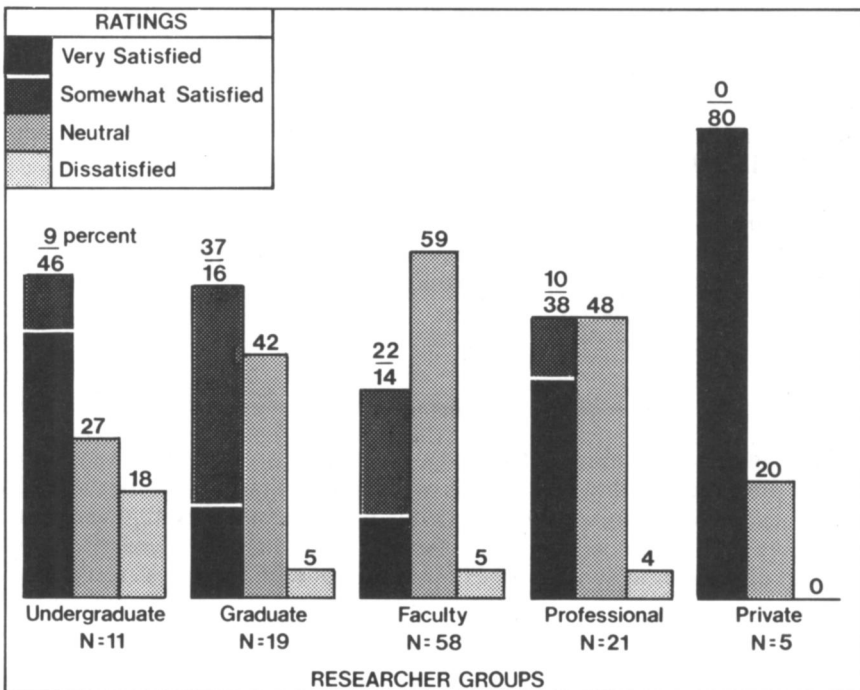


Figure 5. Who Are Most Satisfied?

results. They dropped in, hoping for the best, and were pleased by what they found.

In general the more confident researchers were of their preparation, the more likely they were to be as satisfied as they expected to be. Those with moderate or less preparation expressed much more satisfaction and surprise at their overall experience. The confidence gained from previous archival research of any kind, either at a presidential library or other archives, also leads to realistic expectations.

Researchers with no previous archival experience were considerably more surprised at the outcome of their visit, while those who had previously worked at a presidential library were neutral about their overall experience. The similarities among libraries enabled researchers to build realistic expectations about what they would encounter.

That the most inexperienced or unprepared researchers expressed such high levels of overall satisfaction speaks highly of personal reference services provided to patrons. They clearly welcomed added personal attention at the beginning stages of research and in the research room. Those researchers who relied to a large degree on archivists to guide their searches marked themselves much more satisfied than researchers who relied more on the finding aids. Again, personal assistance seems to leave a much more positive impression than even very useful finding aids.

A final variable sheds light on why satisfaction seems so high overall. In addition to asking them to rate their overall satisfaction, the survey asked researchers how much useful information they found in relation to how much they expected to find. A comparison of the responses to these two questions yields striking results. Over 82 percent of the researchers who found about as much useful information as they expected to find were about as satisfied as they expected to be. In addition over 70 percent of those who found much more useful material than they expected to find also marked themselves much more satisfied than they expected to be.

It is clearly the challenge of the hunt and the resulting pleasure of discovery that drive overall satisfaction. Researchers often expect archival research to be tedious, time consuming, and frustrating. But they persist, expecting to find useful information. Particular reference services are less important to researchers than the overall usefulness of the holdings and researchers' own abilities to exploit these resources.

Conclusion

Through their responses to this survey, the users of presidential libraries confirmed the basic soundness of the reference services now in place for the traditional academic researcher. Non-academic professionals, private researchers, and undergraduate students were much more varied than their faculty counterparts in approaching archival research and responding to services provided. Despite overall satisfaction with services, the survey also found considerable variation in the usefulness of particular reference elements and that this variation relates largely to the degree of advance preparation and previous archival experience.

The survey responses demonstrate that increasing use by non-academic researchers will require real flexibility in reference services — primarily a will-

ingness to take steps to compensate for inexperience, inadequate preparation or low levels of confidence in general. Archivists should not routinely expect researchers to bend to a reference system, but rather should flex the system itself. Ultimately a user focus is a service focus. Good reference service, like good business, means discovering patron needs, developing the means to meet these needs, and following up to measure the impact of services. One of the worst disservices we have done to ourselves is to continually call reference service an art and to use that as an excuse to dismiss analysis of it.

Surveying current researchers is only one part of a user focus, but one that helps put this role of archivists in proper perspective. The users of presidential libraries place a high value on personal reference service and will tell others about their experiences. If we really believe that the "use of archival records is the ultimate purpose" of our work and that "the widest possible access to information contributes to the strength and well being of a democratic society," then we may well revise our tradition of detached service and join with present and future users in an active information partnership.¹³

This yearlong project benefited from the encouragement of many people. Gerald R. Ford Library Director Don Wilson provided basic support and developed ties with The University of Michigan that made the data processing possible. Supervisory archivists at the Eisenhower, Roosevelt, Johnson and Ford Libraries made sure that researchers received the survey and encouraged the project from the beginning. Other archivists at the National Archives, National Gallery of Art, Bentley Historical Library, and Institute for Social Research supported and commented on various phases of the project. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and in no way represent the official position of the National Archives and Records Administration.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Elsie T. Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 112; Elsie T. Freeman, "Buying Quarter Inch Holes: Public Support Through Results," *The Midwestern Archivist* X (1985), p. 89-97; Bruce W. Dearstyne, "The Impact of Research in Archives," unpublished paper presented at SAA annual meeting, September 1984.
2. Society of American Archivists, Goals and Priorities Task Force, "Planning for the Profession," initial discussion draft 1984, pp. 30, 54; Mary N. Speakman, "The User Talks Back," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 164-71; Phoebe R. Jacobsen, "The World Turned Upside Down: Reference Priorities and the State Archives," *American Archivist* 44 (Fall 1981): 341-45; Margaret F. Steig, "The Information Needs of Historians," *College and Research Libraries* 42 (November 1981): 449-460; Elaine Z. Jennerich, "Before the Answer: Evaluating the Reference Process," *RQ* 19 (Summer 1980): 360-65; Edwin C. Bridges and Lisa Weber, ed., *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States*, (Atlanta: NHPRC, 1984).
3. Some of the highlights of this literature are: Elizabeth Hawthorne Buck, "General Legislation for Presidential Libraries," *American Archivist* 18 (1955): 337-341; Richard S.

- Kirkendall, "Presidential Libraries — One Researcher's Point of View," *American Archivist* 25 (1961): 441-448; Richard S. Kirkendall, "A Second Look at Presidential Libraries," *American Archivist* 29 (1966): 371-386; Herman Kahn, "The Long Range Implications for Historians and Archivists of the Charges Against the FDR Library," *American Archivist* (1971): 277-84; James E. O'Neill, "Will Success Spoil the Presidential Libraries?" *American Archivist* 36 (1973): 339-51; Robert M. Warner, "The Prologue is Past," *American Archivist* 41 (1978): 5-15.
4. Two works on survey research proved particularly useful in putting the questionnaire together and preparing the analysis. *Survey Research*, by C. Backstrom and G. Hursh-Cesar (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981) is a thorough and readable primer. *Survey and Opinion Research: Procedures for Processing and Analysis*, by W. Dunkleberg and J. Sonquist (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), while more advanced, contains important technical information.
 5. Summary Tables, "Presidential Library Researchers, 1974-1983," National Archives and Records Service, Office of Presidential Libraries, 1984, 4 pages.
 6. "Presidential Library Researchers," Table III.
 7. Steig, "The Information Needs of Historians," p. 553; Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder," p. 114; William A. Katz, *Introduction to Reference Work*, vol II, (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1977), pp. 50-54.
 8. Nancy Sahli, "National Information Systems and Strategies for Research Use," *The Midwestern Archivist* IX (1984), p. 5-14.
 9. Philip C. Brooks, *Research in Archives: The Uses of Unpublished Primary Sources*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), Chapter 2 passim; Larry Berman, "Presidential Libraries: How Not to Be a Stranger in a Strange Land," in George C. Edwards and Stephen J. Wayne (eds.), *Studying the Presidency*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), p. 231.
 10. Robert W. Tissing, "The Orientation Interview in Archival Research," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 174; Benita J. Howell, Edward B. Reeves, and John Van Willigen, "Fleeting Encounters — A Role Analysis of Reference Librarian-Patron Interaction," *RQ* 15 (Winter 1976): 127.
 11. Richard H. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives," *American Archivist* 43 (Spring 1980): 191-207; Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 33-40.
 12. It would be wise to retain a healthy skepticism about the generally high ratings given to finding aids. If researchers had a viable alternative means of access to the holdings, a sophisticated automated system perhaps, would they find the traditional means so valuable? Additional controlled experiments on searching strategies should be undertaken before we automatically assume that any new system will satisfy researcher needs any better than traditional finding aids. Additional research on the linkages between researcher and archivists may show that any finding aid system is less valuable without the active involvement of reference archivists. The goal of a self-service archives may be a chimera.
 13. SAA, Goals and Priorities Task Force, initial discussion draft, p. 38.