Abbie Anderson
L503: User needs and behavior in theory and practice
Summer 2001

Assignment 2:

User Group Profile Proposal

Exploring the Information Behaviors

of Walden University Students:

An Ethnography of Library Services

for Distance Learning

1.1 Project Profile

    Walden University is an accredited, exclusively on-line institution, which grants

Masters and Ph.D. degrees in Psychology, Education, Health and Human Services, and

Management (www.waldenu.edu). It began over thirty years ago as a means to help busy

social activists finish their dissertations and complete their degrees. Today it serves students

around the world (albeit primarily Americans) who desire advanced academic credentials

which they can pursue while maintaining their current and often demanding professional and

personal lives.

    Walden students are diverse and far-flung. They are teachers, social workers, nurses,

businesspeople, military people, civil servants, and others, many of whom are decades past

their original undergraduate degrees. Much has changed in the academic world in that time,

especially when it comes to obtaining and evaluating sound academic information. It is

especially critical for Walden students to develop sharp research skills considering that they

do not have an immediate university environment to support and direct them. Some of them

do not have access to traditional library services where they live, and most of them initially

have little experience with academic libraries or understanding of how to go about their

research. While they must have basic computing and Internet skills in order to pursue a

degree with Walden, their skill-levels are as diverse and unpredictable as their backgrounds

and locations.

    Walden University provides as much structure and support as it can to its students,

including a library staff located on the Indiana University-Bloomington campus, a writing

assistance center and a full-time editor of student papers and dissertations, computing

support, an academic counselor as well as a faculty advisor for each student, and high

standards of achievement. A relationship with Indiana University allows for Inter-Library

Loan and Document Delivery Services, plus a two to three week experience every summer at

the Indiana University Bloomington campus with special library and database privileges for

that period. However, the students are still on their own to complete their work, and the

majority of them enter the program initially lacking the academic search and evaluation skills

they need to navigate the universe of information that awaits them.

It is the mission of the Walden University Library Liaison office (WULL) to help

Walden students develop those skills, as well as to provide conventional library services in

the unconventional conditions surrounding distance learning. The library staff is available to

the students by e-mail and by phone. The Walden library website (www.lib.waldenu.edu)

includes features on how to identify, obtain and evaluate information resources, as well as the

requisite gateway to the academic databases to which Walden University subscribes. A

Virtual Reference Collection is also available online, and links to ask for help or report a

problem are posted on the library home page as well. A guide to finding the right database to

meet a student's needs is prominently displayed on the database gateway page, and a "Fulltext

Finder" link provides a list of journals that are available in full text online from the Walden

databases (along with cautions against relying too heavily on full-text resources).

Rita Barsun and Jay Wilkerson, the Walden librarians, supervise a small year-round

staff, supplemented by additional library assistants for the annual Summer Session on the

Bloomington campus. They and their staff have a great deal of experience with Walden

students and their information needs and behaviors, and will be valued as highly

knowledgeable "gatekeeper" informants for this study. As Jay puts it, like most people under

pressure Walden students tend to want to take the easiest path, even though that won't get

them what they need academically (a fact they're not always aware of and are often reluctant

to accept). The WULL staff therefore take every opportunity to educate and to explain things

in "baby steps" customized to the individual's learning style, with a good sense of humor and

a light touch, to avoid oversaturation as the students confront and work to master new

concepts and skills (personal communication, 7/15/01).

The author of this proposal has worked as a Walden Summer Session library assistant,

and works throughout the year for the TIS Distance Learning textbook order fulfillment

division serving Walden students. This proximity to and familiarity with the activities of

Walden University students prepares and qualifies the author to formulate and execute this

study.

Walden University and especially WULL already do a great deal to meet the

information needs of Walden students, and to make available to them not only the services

necessary for academic work but opportunities to develop the skills required for that work--

work to which most Walden students have either never been exposed before entering their

Walden degree programs, or to which they are long unaccustomed. The purpose of this study

will be to profile not just the tasks that Walden students must perform and the skills they

must acquire, but their actual experience and behavior in the domain of academic

information as they pursue their degrees. The goal of this study is to provide Walden

University and the Walden University Library Liaison office with a better, more concrete

understanding of how Walden students make sense of their academic work, with the ultimate

aim of generating new ideas for enhancing both service and skills-training for Walden

students.

1.2 Distance Learning and Library Services Literature

The idea of distance learning, with its rich potentials and problematic realities in the

Internet Age, has stimulated a great deal of both academic and popular interest and

discussion in the last several years. The Association of College and Research Libraries

maintains a Distance Learning section, which published its revised Guidelines for Distance

Learning Library Services in 2000 (www.ala.org/acrl/guides/distlrng.htm). The *Journal of Academic Librarianship* dedicated its January 2000 issue in part to Distance Learning, featuring an article by Dewald et al. that examines research and real-world applications regarding instructional design for information literacy online (Dewald, 2000). Slade and Kascus' third annotated bibliography on library services for distance learning lists eighteen user studies of distance learners between 1992 and 1998 in the U.S. alone, five of them published in 1998 (2000, 242-249).

1998 was a big year for distance learning in library science, with a special OCLC Symposium at the ALA conference that year ("Distance Education in a Print and Electronic World: Emerging Roles for Libraries," http://purl.oclc.org/oclc/distance-1998); the Eighth Off-Campus Library Services Conference, held in Providence, Rhode Island (www.lib.cmich.edu/ocls/offcamplibs/publications/8th.htm); and a special issue of *Library Trends* journal dedicated to Service to Remote Users (47(1)). In 1997 the online *Journal of Library Services for Distance Education* was established (www.westga.edu/library/jlsde, apparently inactive in 2001), and the volume *Libraries and Other Academic Support Services for Distance Learning* was published (Snyder and Fox, 1997). The latter includes several case studies as well as a Selected and Annotated Bibliography (Preece and Russell, 1997).

Not surprisingly, the Internet hosts many rich resources for distance learning and library services. Dozens of universities administer distance learning in some form, with websites providing access to each program and its support services. The information guide website About.com includes a section on distance learning, featuring a special guide for library services (http://distancelearn.about.com/library/blpages/bllibraryservices.htm). University of Illinois Library Science professor Bernie Sloan maintains several websites pertaining to distance learning, most apropos to this study being his Library Support for Distance Learning links page (www.lis.uiuc.edu/~bsloan/libdist.htm). The Current User

Research Bibliography collects citations of information studies specific to the electronic environment (http://staff.lib.muohio.edu/~shocker/mars/bib.html).

In 1997, Hara and Kling began an in-depth ethnography of a small distance learning course, which in 2000 became the article "Students' Distress with a Web-based Distance Education Course: An Ethnographic Study of Participants' Experiences" (2000). The authors' primary intent was to correct a promotional bias in the research on distance learning, which has tended to focus on positive values and outcomes and to overlook potential problems or frustrations for students. The course studied was a distance adaptation of a traditional course at a major university; the course was being administered online for the first time, with a doctoral student as the instructor. It was a graduate course in education technology, designed to orient students in using information technologies relevant to their areas of expertise. Only six students were enrolled in the course, four of whom were local to the campus which originated the course and were accessible to the researchers for laboratory study and intensive interviews. Hara and Kling pursued Geertzian rich description (Geertz, 1973) in order to produce a detailed portrait of the students' experiences with this experiment in distance learning.

While there are obvious contrasts between this study of one fairly low-level, experimental course offered by a traditional university, and the larger, more established degree programs and far more dispersed student population of the online-only Walden University, Hara and Kling's intent and methods are instructive for this project. Their empirical case study drew on observation, interview, and document review. Data were analyzed simultaneously with collection, allowing cross-verification during research between the three categories of data acquisition. The authors add that "each interview transcript and interpretation was validated by the informants" (p. 6).

The qualitative orientation of Hara and Kling's study also contributes to its value for this project, since comprehending the subjective experiences of the students was the goal of the research. The authors note that communication medium sometimes affected the emotional content of what students relayed; for instance, students were more likely to detail the extent of their frustrations in a face-to-face interview than in an e-mail message. Following good reflexive ethnographic practice, the authors were aware that observing students' distress situations first-hand had an impact on the researcher as well, and were careful to indicate the context for each quote or excerpt from their materials. Their holistic, self-aware approach, combined with thorough and exacting research methodology and close attention to available literature, provide a model for this larger-scale project with Walden University students.

2.1 Project Design

Partnership with the Walden University administration and the Walden University Library Liaison office will be fundamental to this project. While the work of the research will be carried out by project personnel and will impinge as little as possible on the duties of Walden University and WULL staff, this research cannot be conducted without their approval and cooperation. The Walden University home page as well as the library website will be asked to feature links promoting this project to students (with material designed by project personnel and approved by Walden so as not to conflict with the overall goals and design of their website), and to host brief online surveys. The Walden University e-mail system will be needed to communicate with students who participate in the project. Focus groups, interviews and user shadowing will be conducted at two successive Summer Sessions in Bloomington, coordinating with the academic schedules for those sessions. This research should interest and engage Walden staff and students without disrupting regular activities,

with the shared goal of finding new ways to think about how Walden students can (and do) connect with academic information sources.

The project will begin in the spring quarter (which begins on March 1) with a broadcast e-mail sent to all Walden students, briefly announcing and describing the research project. This message will invite students to complete a short survey on the Walden library website about the ways they obtain academic materials for their studies (see Appendix for sample survey). Highlighted links to the survey will appear on the Walden main page and on the Walden library main page, encouraging participation. The survey will include questions asking whether the student is willing to work more closely with a researcher by e-mail or phone, with contact either once a week or once a month to discuss research strategies and experiences; whether they would be willing to be interviewed at the Bloomington Summer Session; and whether they would agree to be observed by a researcher during an information seeking session while on campus. Personally identifying information will be required on the survey only if the student wishes to participate in part or all of the more in-depth research.

Data will be collected and collated from the surveys throughout the spring and early summer, and students who express an interest in more extensive participation will be contacted to arrange for regular distance interviews, the local interview series in Bloomington, and shadowing sessions, according to the preferences indicated on the survey. It is acknowledged that representative participation cannot be guaranteed with this technique, and that participants will be self-selected from among those students who are more comfortable sharing their thoughts (or perhaps more eager to complain) and who manage their time effectively enough to make an additional commitment outside of their studies, professional lives and other obligations. However, informed consent and cooperation must be obtained for interviewing, and a random sample is thus not feasible. It is hoped that the resulting profiles

will include at least one participant from both Ph.D. and Masters programs in each Walden

University division (Psychology, Education, Health and Human Services, and Management).

Between three hundred fifty and four hundred students usually attend the Walden

Summer Session on the Indiana University-Bloomington campus each year. During the first

Summer Session covered during this project, two sets of focus groups will be conducted,

promoted to students as moderated roundtables in their registration materials and schedules

for the Summer Session and clearly identified as connected with the research project.

Participation will be optional, like any other forum in the Summer Session schedule.

Participants in the focus groups, if they have not already expressed an interest in further

research involvement from the online survey, will be asked at the end of the session if they

would like to continue through the year with regular contact from a project researcher to

profile their information and library experiences. Focus group sessions will be conducted by

project personnel according to Young's guidelines (Young, 1993).

The first focus group will be a Research Roundtable, encouraging students to bring

their thoughts, questions, strategies, complaints and wish lists for making academic

information searches more effective and more satisfying. Three iterations of this focus group

will be scheduled during the first week of the Summer Session (one in the morning, one in

the afternoon, and one in the evening) to allow for maximum participation, aiming for at least

four and hopefully a maximum of twelve participants per session. The second focus group

will be a Library Roundtable, asking students to share their experiences, ideas, frustrations,

praise, bewilderment and brainstorming about their access to library services (Walden and

otherwise). Like the first focus group sessions, three roundtables will be held at different

times of day during the second week of the Summer Session. Since most students do not stay

for the optional third week of Summer Session, no focus groups will be held during the third

week.

Those students who expressed an interest on the survey in being interviewed during Summer Session will be contacted prior to their arrival in Bloomington and interview sessions scheduled. A researcher will meet one-on-one with the student for a one to two hour session for each week the student stays in Bloomington, most likely over a meal (paid for by the research project). These interviews will focus on obtaining a more detailed profile of the students' background, skills, and information habits; their experiences and expectations regarding academic information prior to enrolling in their Walden program; their experiences as Walden students; and any differences between their information strategies and perception of information as students and their information attitudes and behaviors in other areas of their lives.

Those students who indicated on the survey a willingness to be shadowed while seeking information during the Summer Session will be contacted prior to their arrival in Bloomington to discuss the shadowing session and make an appointment. The researcher performing this observation will not provide research assistance, but will follow the students' steps and encourage "talk-aloud" where appropriate.

After Summer Session the "live" data obtained will be transcribed and analyzed for patterns and categories of responses. Member validation will be solicited by e-mail from the focus group and interview participants ("this is what we learned from the time and thoughts you gave us: do you have anything to correct or add?"). For those students who signed up for continuing research, regular phone or e-mail contact (per the student's preference) will briefly profile specific information situations and solutions, either once a week or once a month (per the student's preference). Time is the most precious possession of busy Walden students, juggling their advanced studies with work and family, so these regular contacts will be made as painless as possible.

Participants in the regular "check-ins" will be asked open-ended questions soliciting one or two scenario examples of how they have gone about finding the information they need for their Walden studies since the last interview. A few questions will ask what difficulties or assistance they encountered, how satisfied they were with the results, what might have helped make it easier, etc. Accruing these information narratives over the course of the year will provide rich data describing the students' information experiences and providing perhaps unexpected insights into their information worlds.

All interview results will be kept confidential, whether in person or at a distance, with respondents identified by codes for data collection and by pseudonyms in research reports. All interviews, whether in person or at a distance, will be informed by Dervin's Sense-Making Theory (Dervin, 1977, 1992), by Wilson's holistic model of information behavior (Wilson, 1999), and by Sonnenwald's formulation of social networks and information horizons (Sonnenwald, 1999).

The online survey will be maintained throughout the academic year, with a new short survey being posted for each quarter. Successive surveys will be composed in part based on the data obtained from interviews, focus groups and shadowing, soliciting further details and testing conclusions regarding information sources used, who/what the student consulted with his or her most recent information problem, student awareness of resources available and how to evaluate sources, satisfaction with the support obtained from Walden and WULL for their research, multiple-choice endorsement of ideas for more effective assistance, etc. As incentive to participate, a drawing will be held at the end of each quarter from among survey respondents, with the selected student receiving a prize such as a free shipment of textbooks from TIS or a free round of Document Delivery from Indiana University (paid for by the project).

At the following Summer Session, another round of focus groups, interviews and shadowing will be used to validate the previous year's work and to gather a final set of personalized data. Subsequent analysis will no doubt lead to more than one publication due to the depth and breadth of data collected. Reports of conclusions and suggestions for service gleaned from the research will be made to Walden and WULL at the conclusion of the project. As a result of this project, Walden University and the Walden University Library Liaison office will gain a deeper, richer understanding of their students' information behaviors along with new ideas for assisting the students in reaching their academic goals; and richly descriptive contributions will be made to the research literature on information behavior and distance learning.

References

Dervin, B. (1977). Useful theory for librarianship: Communication, not information. *Drexel Library Quarterly*, 13(3), 16-32.

-------. (1992). From the mind's eye of the user: The sense-making qualitative-quantitative methodology. In J. D. Glazier & R. R. Powell (Eds.), *Qualitative research in information management* (pp. 61-84). Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

Dewald, N., Scholz-Crane, A., Booth, A., and Levine, C. (2000). Information literacy at a distance: Instructional design issues. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 26(1), 33-44.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc.

Hara, N. and Kling, R. (2000). Student's distress with a web-based distance education course: An ethnographic study of participants' experiences. Retrieved July 16, 2001, from the World Wide Web: www.slis.indiana.edu/CSI/wp00-01.html

Slade, A. L. and Kascus, M. A. (2000). *Library services for open and distance learning: The third annotated bibliography*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, Inc.

Snyder, C. A. and Fox, J. W. (Eds.). (1997). *Libraries and other academic support services for distance learning*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, Inc.

Sonnenwald, D. H. (1999). Evolving perspectives of human information behaviour: contexts, situations, social networks and information horizons. In T. D. Wilson & D. K. Allen (Eds.), *Exploring the contexts of information behaviour : proceedings of the Second International Conference on Research in Information Needs, Seeking and Use in Different Contexts 13/15 August, 1998, Sheffield. UK* (pp. 176-190). London: Taylor Graham.

Wilson, T. D. (1999). Models in information behaviour research. *Journal of Documentation*,

    55(3), 249-270.

Young, V. (1993). Focus on focus groups. *College and Research Libraries News*, 54(7), 391-

    394.

~Website references to follow~

Appendix: Prototype for First Online Survey

1. What is your degree program with Walden University?
   - ❑ Masters
   - ❑ Ph.D.

2. In what department?
   - ❑ Psychology
   - ❑ Education
   - ❑ Health and Human Services
   - ❑ Management

3. In what year did you begin your degree with Walden?

   ┌─────────┐
   │   │
   └─────────┘

4. Where do you usually start when you are looking for articles or books you need?
   - ❑ An online search engine (e.g. Google, AltaVista)
   - ❑ Some other website (e.g., about.com, a library website, a professional association homepage)
   - ❑ The Walden Library website
   - ❑ Your local library
   - ❑ An online database

5. How often do you use the Walden Library website?
   - ❑ Every day
   - ❑ One or more times a week
   - ❑ One or more times a month
   - ❑ Rarely
   - ❑ Never

6. Do you use a library near to where you live?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

7. Do you use Inter-Library Loan (ILL) to obtain materials for your Walden studies?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

8. Do you use Document Delivery Services (DDS)?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

9. Have you ever contacted the Walden University Library Liaison staff (WULL) with a question?

        ❑   Yes
        ❑   No

10. Would you be willing to be contacted regularly by a researcher to briefly discuss your information searching experiences?

        ❑   Yes
        ❑   No

If Yes, would you prefer to be contacted by:

        ❑   E-mail   e-mail address: [_____]

        ❑   Phone   phone number: [_____]

                         when to call: [_____]

If Yes, would you prefer to be contacted:

        ❑   Weekly
        ❑   Monthly

11. Would you be willing to be interviewed at the Indiana University-Bloomington Summer Session regarding your background and experiences related to your Walden degree?

        ❑   Yes
        ❑   No
(Contact Information)

12. During the Indiana University-Bloomington Summer Session, would you be willing to allow a project researcher to observe the steps you take when you're looking for resources?

        ❑   Yes
        ❑   No
(Contact Information)