

Shayera D. Tangri. Evaluating Changes in the Methods by Which Users of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Manuscript Department Learn of the Holdings of the Department. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April 2000. 26 pages. Advisor: David W. Carr

This study examined the methods by which the users of the Manuscript Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill learned about the holdings of the department. The purpose of this study was to discover whether there are noticeable shifts towards different sources of information.

The data collected from over 1300 research agreements filled out by new researchers in the year 1999 revealed that "word of mouth" sources are by far the most popular choice listed by new users to the collection. While electronic resources are shown to be popular as well, they are not often cited as the main source of knowledge for researchers.

Traditional printed methods, such as citations in published works also were found to be a popular method of learning about the collections.

Headings:

Use studies -- College and university archives

Use studies – Archives

EVALUATING CHANGES IN THE METHODS BY WHICH USERS OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL MANUSCRIPT  
DEPARTMENT LEARN OF THE HOLDINGS OF THE DEPARTMENT

by  
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Approved by:

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Advisor

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## INTRODUCTION

As the twentieth century becomes the twenty-first, manuscript collections have become more and more aware that they will need to utilize newer and more innovative methods of educating researchers about their collection's holdings. Researchers today are more technically aware than they have ever previously been. There has been an expressed need by researchers to gain access the information that they seek at greater speeds. But manuscript departments themselves have been faced with the question of learning how to meet these needs. The problem is that of being able to identify those researchers who are not aware of the holdings of a collection.

In the past, researchers were limited in the ways that they could learn about the holdings of manuscript collections. For years the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC) was among the most popular method for researchers to learn about the holdings of remote collections. The Library of Congress created and maintained a paper version of NUCMC from 1959 to 1993. This was updated and indexed every year. The paper version of NUCMC accounted for approximately 72,300 collections located in 1406 different repositories with approximately 1,085,000 index references to

topical subjects and personal, family, corporate, and geographic names. After 1993, NUCMC has only been available online at <http://lcweb.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/nucmccat.html>. At this site it is possible to search for all the entries in all past editions of NUCMC.<sup>i</sup>

Researchers also relied upon printed catalogs and guides that were produced by manuscript collections. These printed guides are prepared with great effort and care by the archivists and librarians in charge of the collections. Writing and maintaining these guides requires a great deal of effort on the behalf of the archivists and because of this, are not updated and published with great frequency. The Southern Historical Collection at UNC published one such guide in 1970. In 1976 a supplement that listed collections added between 1970 and 1975 was printed. There has not been a further update printed in the last fourteen years. The two printed guides leave approximately 20% of the current collection unrepresented.

In the late 1990s many more institutions have taken to using Encoded Archival Description –EAD- and MARC formats as ways of making the holdings of their collections searchable. It is the hope of these institutions that by doing this, they will be able to greater publicize their holdings and attract a greater number of researchers to their collections. In this paper, I am interested in learning whether these electronic methods are informing a greater number of researchers about the holdings of the Collection or whether the majority of researchers are still learning about the holdings through more “traditional” methods.

Previous studies and the literature of the field seem to disprove the theory that electronic methods are becoming the method by which researchers learn about

collections. The most traditional method for researchers to learn about a collection has been the “word of mouth method.” A collection’s reputation is built upon the comments and observations of the researchers who use the collection. Since the research community tends to be a closely-knit group, collection knowledge is shared with others. Researchers also learn a great deal about collections through directories of special collections and bibliographic citations.

In 1997 a student at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill published a paper that investigated how researchers learned about the holdings of the Southern Historical Collection on the University’s campus<sup>ii</sup>. I became interested in researching whether the increased on-line-searchability of the Collections’ holdings has resulted in any noticeable changes in the methods by which researchers learn about the collections housed in the Manuscript Department. In further discussion it should be noted that the Manuscript Department houses three separate collections: the Southern Historical Collection, the Southern Folklife Collection and the University Archives. The Southern Historical Collection is the group that is most often referred to in this paper. The University Archives and the Southern Folklife Collection, while important groups in their own rights, are not as heavily used as the materials in the Southern Historical Collection. The Manuscript Department does not differentiate between the users of any of the collections. For statistics purposes, all researchers are counted as one group.

There have been some major changes in the ways that researchers learn about collections in the 1990s. The most obvious of these has of course been the introduction of online catalogs and the world wide web. With the proliferation of computers there has

been a rapid increase in the numbers of researchers who are able to access collection information at any time. The Manuscript Department at UNC-CH has been in the forefront of collections that have utilized MARC format and OCLC as a way of disseminating collection knowledge. Another electronic tool, EAD – Electronic Archival Description – is making it possible for collection finding aids to be located more easily in an internet search.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a large body of literature about the Archival field but literature on the specific topic of user studies in archives and special collections is more difficult to find. Much of the available information was published a number of years ago. The oldest articles that I found were published in the late 1980s, 1986 and 1987. Most of the literature that I used while researching this paper were published in the mid to later 1990s.

One of the more recent works in this field is a Master's paper written by Megan Phillips at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1997. Phillips' paper *Usage Patterns for Holdings Information Sources at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Manuscripts Department*, studies how users to the manuscripts collection learned about the collection and its holdings. In many ways, the research that I am intending to do is in some ways similar to

Phillips' research. Phillips' research was based upon data gathered for the years 1996 and 1997. Ms. Phillips analyzed a total of 157 research agreements for the months of August, September and October of each year and studied the responses to the question "How did you learn about our holdings?" The results that she gathered were slightly different between the two years due to the fact that the research agreement that she used to gather her data was changed in the time between the months that she chose to use as her sampling data.

The most interesting result, though, was that only a very small percentage of the researchers using the collection cited the OPAC or World Wide Web as their chief source of information about the collection. In 1996, 18.5% of researchers cited the on-line catalog as their chief method of learning about the holdings. In 1997, 11.5% cited the online catalog. While there seems to be a drop in the number of persons who used the online catalog as their chief method of information, the figure can most probably be accounted for in the change of the research agreement. Referral by a teacher, 34% in 1996 and 33.8% in 1997, word of mouth, 36.3% in 1996 and 35.7% in 1997 or citation in a publication, 34.4% in 1996 and 24.8% in 1997 all were shown to carry much greater weight in alerting researchers to the holdings of the Southern Historical Collection.<sup>iii</sup>

Phillips' conclusion is that on-line catalogs are not the main manner in which researchers come to learn about manuscript collections. Phillips states that while there does not seem to be a trend in the data as yet it does seem as if researchers are able to locate the information they seek when they use the online catalog.<sup>iv</sup> She also concludes that manuscript researchers are willing to use other sources than those they are used to in order to learn about collection holdings.



In 2000, the questions we need to ask reflect the rapid cultural and professional changes brought about by computerized resources. Computers have made it possible for researchers who are remotely located to access information that they were previously unable to. Professionals have been forced to provide researchers with a way to learn about holdings. Public service archivists are asked to respond to questions from researchers who have no physical access to the collection and may have never used manuscript materials previously.

An important figure in Archival studies, Paul Conway has published many articles detailing user studies in archival collections. In an article published in *The Midwestern Archivist* in 1986 entitled “Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Survey”<sup>v</sup> one of the things that Conway studied is how researchers found out about the collection. His results in this specific study show that a majority of researchers to Presidential libraries, almost 70%, learned about the collections by word of mouth. This is not really a surprising statistic considering that researchers in small institutions will speak to each other. Also, older researchers are not likely to use computers for their research.

Conway published an excellent paper in 1986 describing the difficulties and needs for studying users of archives. In “Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the *American Archivist*”<sup>vi</sup>, Conway lays out the basic methodology and objectives that should be met when implementing a user study in an archive. He points out that, unlike many users in libraries, a user of an archive typically has come to the collection to meet a specific research need. The user is likely to have done a great deal of base work and is well aware of the materials that they are likely to find.<sup>vii</sup>

In 1994 Conway published a book called *Partners in Research: Improving Access to the Nation's Archive: User Studies at the National Archives and Records Administration*. Of the 800 researchers who responded to his survey, Conway found that over 50% learned of the National Archives holdings by word of mouth. While the figures were lower than in his previous study, the results still point to word of mouth being the strongest factor leading researchers to manuscript collections.<sup>viii</sup> An interesting point to make note of is that in 1994, when the book was published, the use of electronic resources were almost unheard of. The researchers coming to the National Archives would be highly unlikely to have used any form of online source to locate information.

It was interesting to note that both Megan Phillips and Paul Conway, in studies done almost ten years apart came to the same conclusions. Word of mouth has been the leading method by which researchers are brought to collections.

Dr. Helen Tibbo has been urging manuscript collections to utilize OCLC and other electronic media for a long time. In her book *Abstracting, Information Retrieval and the Humanities: Providing Access to Historical Literature* Dr. Tibbo emphasizes the importance of user studies to assist archivists to better serve researchers using their collections.<sup>ix</sup> Dr. Tibbo urges researchers to discover the needs of their users in order to ensure that researchers are served to the best of our abilities.

An article that I found most interesting is “Why are Online Catalogs Hard to Use? Lessons Learned from Information-Retrieval Studies” by Christine L. Borgman.<sup>x</sup> Borgman points out that information retrieval is a complicated matter at any time. Users are limited by their knowledge of the syntax used by the search engine. Unless a user is

conversant with the Boolean strings and wildcards utilized by the catalog, they are almost sure to miss hits that would be of use to them.

The questions asked in this paper have emerged from my observations of researchers at the Manuscript Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. From observing researchers upon their first visit, it often seemed to me that many first time patrons relied upon the online catalog to learn about the collection holdings. From articles that I read, I discovered that theory of mine was most probably incorrect. The literature of the topic seemed to indicate to me that online catalogs played only a small role in educating researchers. I was also interested to learn of the difficulties that patrons had with online catalogs. This led me to Ms. Phillips' master's paper and I became interested in learning whether there had been any noticeable changes to the ways in which researchers learnt about catalog holdings in the past two years.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In many ways this project is a follow up to the work done by Megan Phillips in 1997. Ms. Phillips looked at three months worth of research agreements signed by researchers upon their first visit to the Southern Historical Collection. The research agreement serves a twofold purpose. The first purpose of the agreement is to identify researchers and their purpose for utilizing the collection. The research agreement asks for name, address, and institutional affiliation, if any, of the researchers. The agreement also

asks how the researcher learned about the collection holdings. Researchers are offered many options in this area. The second purpose of the research agreement is to inform the researcher of the rules and regulations of the collection. Each researcher is asked to fill out the front of the form, read and sign the back and return the agreement to a public service reference staff member with photo identification. The staff member makes a copy of the identification directly on the research agreement. The research agreement also serves as a security measure. All researchers have to sign the agreement saying that they have read and understand the rules of access to the collection.

My decision was to look at the entire group of research agreements for the year 1999. I felt that by studying an entire year's worth of agreements, I would be able to gather data from a full annual cycle of use. By this I mean, that I will be able to take into account the natural fluctuations of new researchers. In August/September, a rise would be noticed due to the influx of new students to the University. This rise would be seen again in January with the beginning of a new semester. June, July and August represent months when the greatest percentages of new users are persons not affiliated with the University. These are the months when researchers from other universities use the Collection to bolster their research.

While the Southern Historical Collection has been using MARC formats and cataloging their collections online for a number of years, it has only been within the last two years that they have been able to fully utilize the standards of EAD to its fullest extent. By limiting study to 1999, I will ensure that I am gathering the most current data available.

Researchers who visit the Southern Historical Collection from outside UNC generally have very limited time to use the collections and try and budget the time they do have as well as possible. Students who use the collection generally visit for class assignments and generally would not wish to be inconvenienced by a survey. For this reason I rejected the idea of using either a survey or interviewing researchers. I was able to gather a large enough sample without interrupting the work done by researchers.

For this project I analyzed the research agreements signed by researchers for the year 1999. The research agreement asks the researcher to identify how they learned about the holdings of the collection. There are nine choices presented to the researcher: citation in a published work, word of mouth, world wide web (internet), printed guide, National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, online catalog, card catalog, instructor, and referral from another library department. Researchers are not required to fill this out, and any blank agreements were not included in my data gathering.

For the purposes of this assignment I also decided to group together a number of the categories. I am putting word of mouth, instructor and referral from another library department together as one category. The rationale of this choice is that these three methods basically all refer to one method: word of mouth. I also included world wide web (internet) and online catalog together as one category: electronic resources. The rest of the choices - citation in published work, printed guide, National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, and the card catalog are counted as "other".

After all the data were gathered and counted, I calculated the percentage of users who cited each method. Then I totaled each category percentage to arrive at three figures instead of nine.

## RESULTS

This study produced some very interesting results for me. For the year 1999, the Manuscript Department had a total of 1324 discrete, new users. They were spread throughout the year, with January and December being the least visited months of the year. The average number of new users for the rest of the months is 121.

Some of the statistics themselves were rather surprising as well. The distribution of choices cited were quite varied. When taken separately, there was a great range in the totals. 15 or 1% cited the card catalog as the chief method by which they learned about the holdings of the Manuscript department. Since the card catalog is located in the department itself, I translated this figure as people who happened to wander into the department by accident. On the other end of the scale, 344 people cited word of mouth as their chief method of learning about the collection. I was amazed at this number. It is surprising to me to discover that fully 26% of the users of the department were referred by other users.

The next highest number is referred by instructor. Two hundred thirty two persons or 18% gave this choice as their method of discovery. I was surprised to discover that none of the online resources were in the top two choices of educational method. In fact, citation in a published work, at 15%, scored higher than the online catalog, which 13% of the total cited. The number of persons who said that they used the world wide web to

learn about the holdings, 206, or 16% were similar in total to the persons who used citations in published works. It seems, from these numbers that as many persons are using traditional methods as are using electronic methods.

The last three figures were also quite interesting. Ninety-two persons cited referral from another library department. This works out to approximately 6% of the total. Thirty-nine persons, 3% cited the printed guide produced by the department and 27 people, or 2% cited the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. This means that almost as many people had learned about the collection from another part of the University as learned about the collection from printed materials that are nationally available.

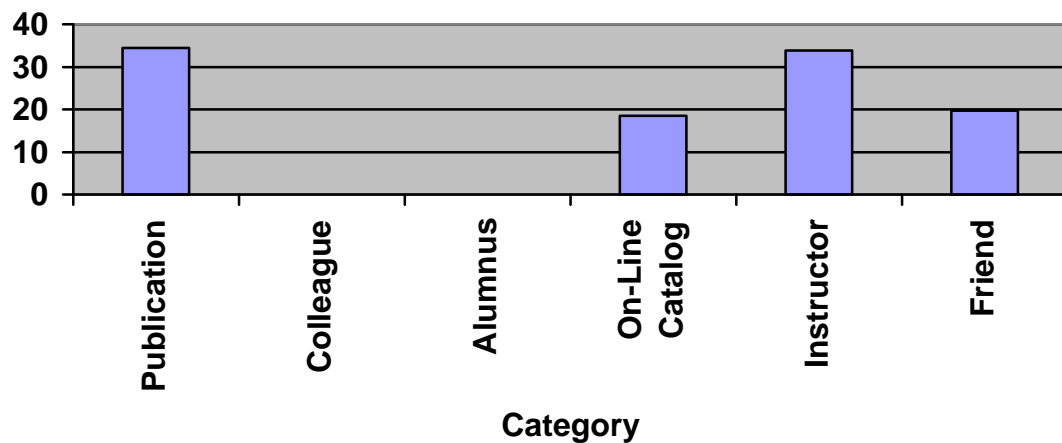
In consolidating the figures into the three categories that I had originally mentioned - word of mouth, electronic resources and other sources - the numbers present an interesting trend. 668 people or 50% cited word of mouth as their primary method of learning about the manuscript department's holdings. This is half of all new users. I expected that electronic resources would be by far the next largest percentage, and in a way, I was correct, although not by as large a number that I had originally considered. Three hundred and eighty seven people or 29% cited electronic resources. Two hundred and eighty eight or 21% cited the "other" category. Only 99 more people learned about the collection's holdings by using electronic means.

In comparing my results to the results that Ms. Phillips produced in 1997, I was struck by the similarities in our conclusions. Ms. Phillips used a very different method of arriving at her figures than I did. Part of her data, which I did not use, looked at the breakdown of who the researchers themselves were. Ms. Phillips studied the methods

which independent researchers, undergraduates, graduate students and professors selected as their method of learning about the collection holdings. Since she was forced to deal with changes in the research agreement between the years, there are some definite differences in the data. I think, though, that the differences are more in semantics than in actual differences in the data. The figures for both years do seem to be reasonably similar as to not indicate any shifts in the patrons' habits or general characteristics.

Charts of the data from Ms. Phillips' research can be found on page 13.

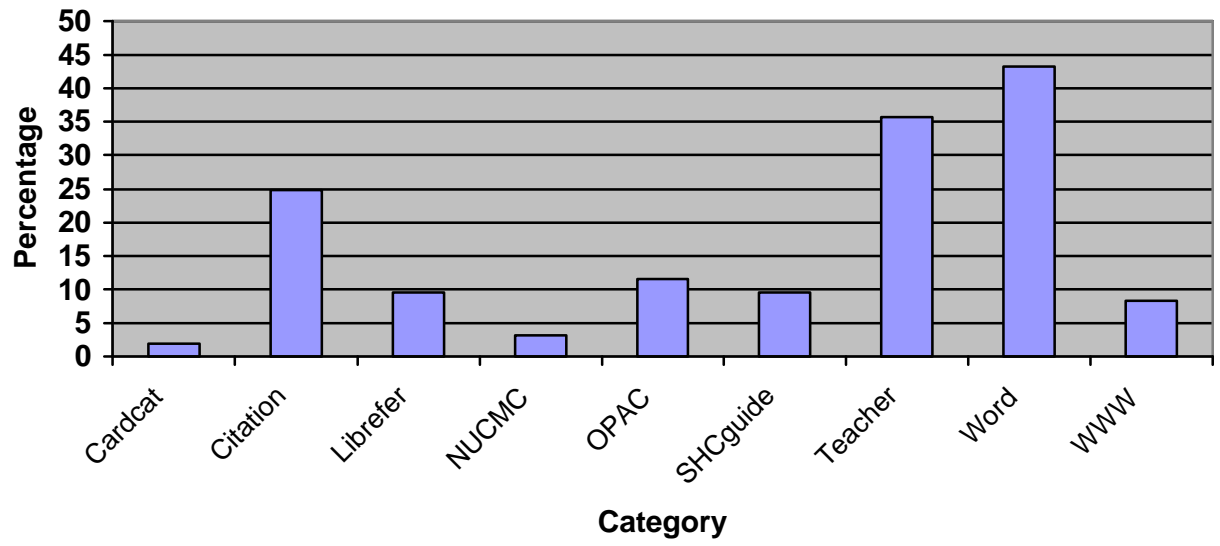
### Phillips' 1996 Percentages



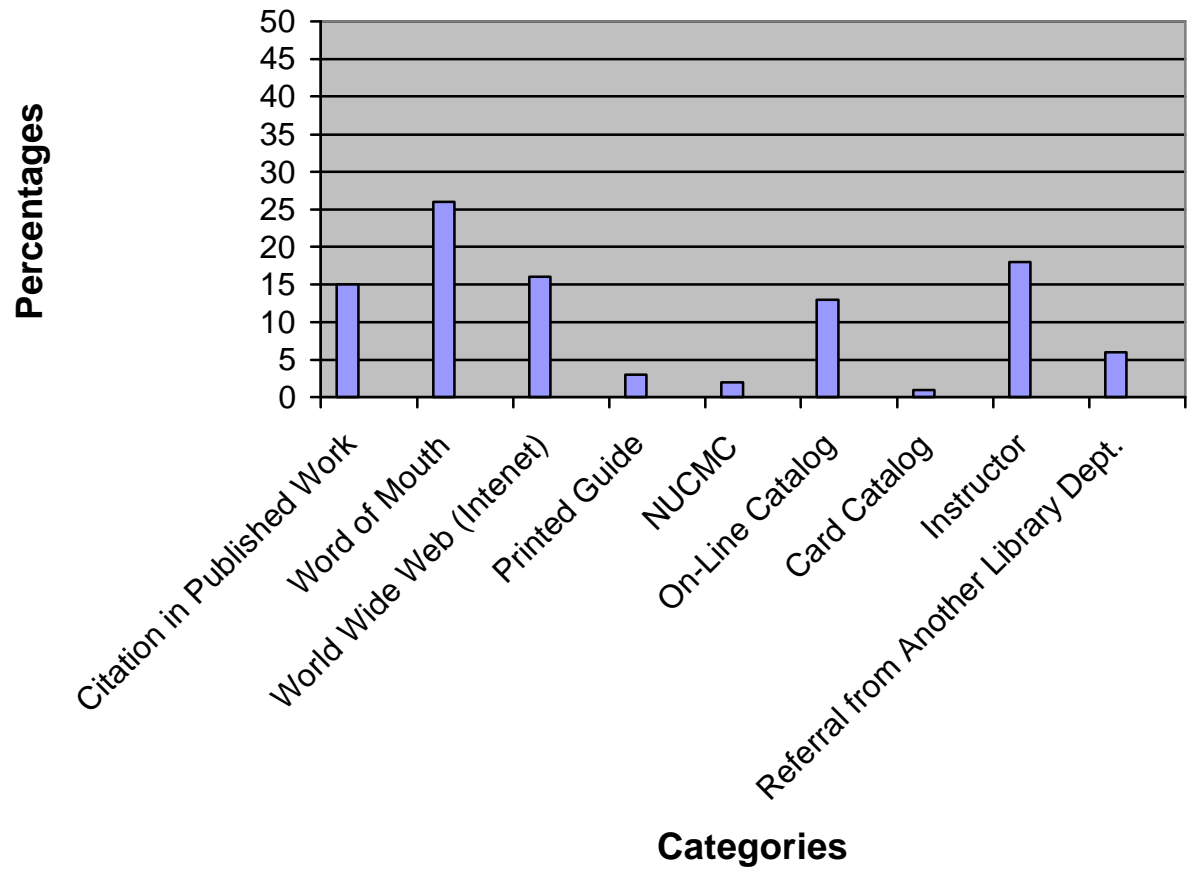
Please note, that I was unable to properly locate figures in Ms. Phillips' 1996 data to adequately represent the categories of "colleague" and "alumnus".



### Phillips' 1997 Percentages

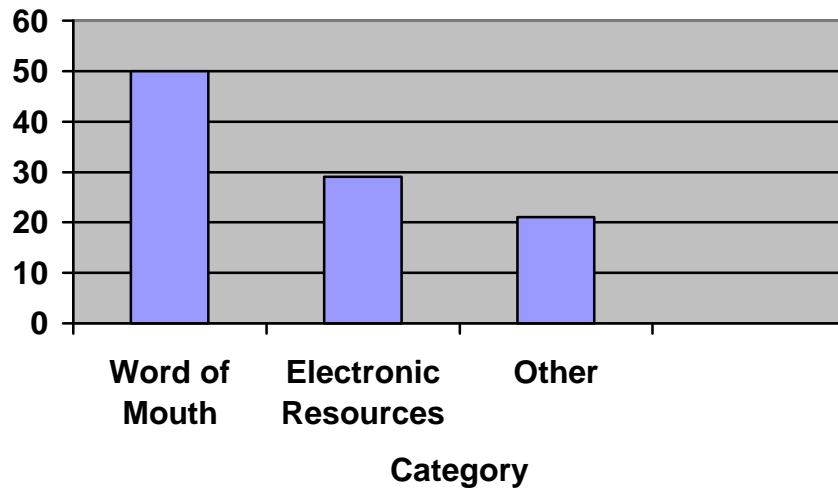


### 1999 Category Percent Totals

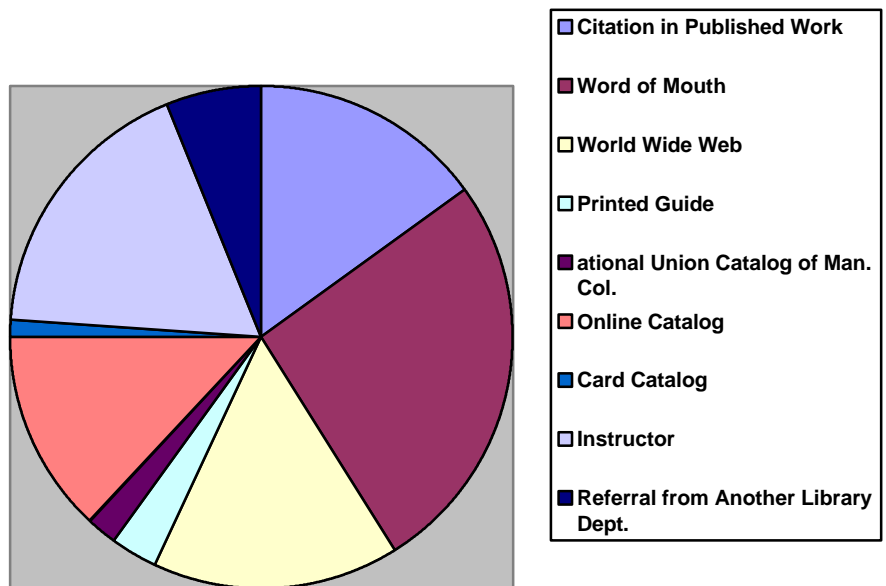


The table above represents the raw percentages of the totals of each of the categories listed on the research agreement. The table on page 15 represents the percentages of the categories when consolidated to the three main categories – word of mouth, electronic resources, and other.

### 1999 Category Choice Percentage



### 1999 Percentage Totals



In comparison to the data that Ms. Phillips collected, the data that I collected is much more basic. I was interested only in how researchers learnt about the holdings of the manuscript collection. I was not interested in a breakdown of who the researchers were. I didn't feel that it was important to break down the larger group of researchers into smaller groups.

Another very important distinction between my research and that of Ms. Phillips' is the fact that I used a much larger pool of agreements than Ms. Phillips. Ms. Phillips used only 157 total agreements in her data gathering. She limited the time period of her data to three months alone. The months she used - August, September, and October – exemplify some of the busiest months of the year. I wanted to study the data for an entire year. From my research, it appeared to me that the cycle of researcher visits tends to occupy an entire year. There are shifts that occur with Summer vacation as well as with the beginning of each semester. I wanted to take all this into account.

I think that the method I chose to study the researchers at the Manuscript Department is an excellent choice. It is relatively simple; researchers are not disturbed in any manner, since they are required to fill out the research agreement. The data gathered could be tabulated in a relatively fast pace and are non-ambiguous in their results. It is also easy to calculate percentages from the totals.

## CONCLUSION

In 1997, Megan Phillips learned that word of mouth is the method by which most researchers to the Manuscript Department at UNC-Chapel Hill learn about the holdings of the collections. This is a finding that is also borne out by previous studies of archives and manuscript departments.

With the rise of electronic resources and the proliferation of computers in the country, I had anticipated that electronic resources would be cited at a greater percentage than they were. I expect though, that as time goes on the percentage of new users will cite electronic resources as their main method of learning about the holdings. I believe that word of mouth will continue to account for the greatest amount of new users.

I believe it is important that electronic resources continue to be expanded in order to meet the needs of researchers. Statistics are showing that more people everyday are purchasing computers and getting on the internet in some form or the other. This is leading to a rise in numbers of people who can have access to information about the collections of an institution. I feel it is in the best interests of an institution to encourage as many new persons to visit as possible. The form of this visit does not necessarily need to be a physical one. Researchers send email to public service archivists and by doing this are able, in some small way, to access the holding of the collection. It is important to include these virtual visitors in the statistics that an institution keeps.

Since the website is generally the first stop for on-line visitors it is vitally important to keep it as comprehensive as possible. This includes updating holding

information as soon as a new collection is processed and ready for use. A current list of rules and regulations should also be included at the website. It is important for researchers to know what is expected of them as outsiders using material. The website should also include a history of the collection, so that researchers can have a historical background to the material. In my opinion, it is also vitally important for the website to contain as complete a version of the finding aid as is available. This would assist researchers in learning about the actual collections and what they contain. It may also be a good idea to include an on-line form that researchers can complete in order to request more in depth information. Everyone does not have instant access to email, and an on-line form will ensure that researchers are able to make inquiries at any time.

## **SUMMARY**

Times are changing rapidly and manuscript collections need to change along with them. In the last ten years or so researchers to manuscript collections have become much more technologically knowledgeable than they have ever previously been. There is a greater emphasis on locating and utilizing information as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, not all research institutions have become aware of this fact. There are still collections that are nominally, if at all searchable from the World Wide Web or on an online catalog. The use of MARC formats and EAD have made it simpler to catalog manuscripts and make them available to researchers.

It is my hope that this project will be one method of making fellow professionals aware of the possibilities available to them to interest researchers to use their collections. I hope that in a small way that it will demonstrate a simple method of advertising. Manuscript collections are historically important and it is incumbent upon us as professionals to inform possible patrons of the many resources that we have for their use.

Websites are continuously changing entities. A site that that is updated regularly should provide its users with the most current and interesting information that it can. If the collection has added a new collection should advertise this. It is important to demonstrate to patrons that they will be sure to discover something of interest every time they visit the website. A website is also an excellent place to highlight collections of special interest. If you have a collection of a well known historical figure, or one of an important literary figure, a website is an excellent place to publicize this.

There are many reasons to monitor the method by which researchers learn about a manuscript collection's holdings. It is an important tool to use to learn which researchers are not being served. A large percentage of researchers have learned about holdings of the Manuscript Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill by word of mouth. A study such as this one allows us to see whether the increase in electronic resources has made a difference in the researcher patterns. It can show whether the department's increased efforts in providing electronic information has been successful.

I would like to see a survey similar to this completed in 2003. There are many changes being anticipated in the electronic world and I would like to see whether these changes would affect how researchers learn about the collections. I think that three years will allow these innovations to become an everyday part of a researcher's life and thereby

will allow us to study what, if any, changes they have brought about in researcher habits. It is my belief that even with the rapid changes that are occurring in the world today, it will be a long time before we see a change in researcher behavior. I think that if this study is updated on a regular basis, we will be able to make note of these changes as they happen and continue to meet the demands that they make.



## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> <http://lcweb.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/nucmccat.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Megan Phillips, *Usage Patterns for Holdings Information Sources at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Manuscripts Department*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Library, 1998)

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> Paul Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Study," *The Midwestern Archivist* 11:1 (1986)

<sup>vi</sup> Paul Conway, "Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives," *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986)

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>viii</sup> Paul Conway, *Partners in Research: Improving Access to the Nation's Archives: User Studies at the National Archives and Records Administration*. (Pittsburgh: Archives and Museum Informatics, 1994)

<sup>ix</sup> Helen Tibbo, *Abstracting, Information Retrieval and the Humanities: Providing Access to Historical Literature*. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1993)

<sup>x</sup> Christine L. Borgman, "Why are Online Catalogs Hard to Use? Lessons Learned from Information-Retrieval Studies," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 37 (Nov. 1986)

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