Graduate Students at U.Va.

**Methodology**

Stemming from discussions of potential services to graduate students in our Usability User Requirements Committee, we became interested in the entirety of the research and writing processes of this group. If we could recognize and identify stages of growth and concomitant information needs, we could better design library resources and services to integrate more precisely at the appropriate times.

We needed funding to purchase an audio recorder for student interviews, text coding and mining software (NVivo), and incentives to provide to our participants. Simultaneously, we were in consultation with the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to design our study and were identifying all the departments in the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences who offered Master’s and Ph.D. degrees. Library administration was intrigued by the study’s possible implications on library services and funded our project.

**Unexpected Challenges**

- Finding funding for incentives for study participants
- Multiple interviewers—certain idea streams may not have been pursued
- Open-ended nature of questions and interview process impacted consistent follow-up and probing of answers
- NVivo software used for transcribing, coding, and analyzing interviews is expensive, non-intuitive, and has a steep learning curve
- Intense time investment—it takes between 4 and 8 hours to transcribe an interview
- Vastly underestimated time required for transcribing and coding interviews
- Interpretation—only can use the words the interviewees offered—if they didn’t mention something, we can’t assume they use it
- Semantics and language issues in interpreting, coding, and analyzing interviews

**Preliminary Results**

- Graduate students use library resources—databases and the catalog
- They do not take advantage of the extensive array of library web pages as they currently exist
- Known item searching seems to be of paramount importance
- Topical/concept searching is secondary to known item searching
- The research process does vary across disciplines, especially in terms of preferred information search tools
- The usefulness of Google Scholar varies from student to student
- Graduate students are often unaware of key information resources unique to their area of research interest

**Conclusions**

Even though graduate students exist across a continuum of development from their first-year projects to their dissertation research, we are beginning to get a clearer picture of some of their characteristics. Graduate students:

- lead very busy lives so they want tools that are easy to find, use, and that produce relevant results
- tend to stick with resources in which they have previously conducted successful searches
- students may rely on “it’s good enough” they don’t take advantage of the full potential of databases
- graduate students don’t use library web pages or explore new resources
- graduate school is a “job” with hours and set routines

**Next Steps**

- Finish transcribing the remaining interviews
- Standardize coding with NVivo software
- Focus on relationships graduate students have with faculty, advisors, peers, scholarly organizations, etc.
- Moving beyond just library resources and mapping the entire research and writing process
- Identifying unique stages in graduate student life
- Analyzing the impact of not including the professional schools in the study

**References**


