The Information Needs and Preferences of Interdisciplinary Social Scientists

Background

Focusing on UNC-Chapel Hill's Department of Public Policy, this study aimed to understand the research processes and practices used by interdisciplinary social scientists.

The Department of Public Policy is a heavily interdisciplinary social sciences unit with research strengths in education policy, environmental policy, economic policy and health policy.

The goals of this study were to learn more about their information needs and preferences, what services and technology tools they found useful, and the role the library plays in their research.

Methods

I interviewed current graduate students and tenured/tenure-track faculty members in the Department of Public Policy at UNC-Chapel Hill for this study.

All current Public Policy faculty and graduate students were contacted via email with a request for one in-person interview that was approximately one hour in duration. With the subject's permission and signed consent, the interviews were audio-taped.

Ten subjects (five graduate students and five faculty) responded and answered fourteen open-ended questions about their research processes and practices during this in-person interview. Interview questions were divided into three sections: research challenges, the Library's role in research, and fantasy research.

Findings

THEME ONE: The most frequently mentioned challenge was finding, analyzing and interpreting research data.

"Single biggest challenge is always finding data, and if it's not finding data it's finding the people who know whether data exists and where they [the data sets] are if they do exist, because for what I study the amount of free, useful data is limited and even among that available data it is hard to find what you're looking for sometimes." - Graduate student

THEME TWO: Faculty and graduate students express a strong DIY ethic.

"I think I am a kind of tremendously resourceful person, too, and I like to read and find written instructions and go and learn how to do something myself. I pretty much want to take a problem as far as I can get it, and then ask for help." - Faculty

THEME THREE: Faculty and graduate students would like tools for identifying interdisciplinary work and potential collaborators.

"[Responding to a question about "what would make your research life easier..."] something to augment the current library site that's local. In the sense that, it sort of, it's more people oriented and sort of like, I'm thinking about how you go to the university bookstore and there's a shelf that says faculty authors, what if there was sort of a journal database that says this is faculty researchers or university researchers, by topic." – Graduate Student

THEME FOUR: Faculty and graduate students express a need for assistance with personal information management.

"I do store the PDFs in about five thousand places on about five thousand drives on five thousand machines. I'm not particularly organized. I've tried to make my research assistants create a more organized system and I haven't succeeded yet in getting that done because I've got multiple people, there's multiple projects, multiple PDFs, and that's like an organizational thing, that I'm sure as a librarian that you could probably help me with, you know thinking of a system." - Faculty

THEME FIVE: Faculty and graduate students depend on grants to complete their research, travel and data analysis.

"We are all encouraged to seek grants to support our graduate students. That's one of the things that we have to do. We do have some TA positions and we do have a sizeable undergraduate major but not enough to support all our graduate students and indeed it's better for them to learn the grant seeking process and the grants based research seeking process, so that's an important part of how we form our graduate students." – Faculty

Next Steps

Integrate social scientists into the ReachNC Web portal to increase the discovery of interdisciplinary scholarship and expertise. ReachNC is an expertise database for North Carolina higher education and research institutions.

Increase outreach and assistance for faculty and graduate students who are seeking grant funding.

Provide consultations for faculty and graduate students on personal information management topics, e.g. file naming conventions, integrating PDFs across multiple drives, etc.