

Teaching Undergraduates with Primary Sources: Highlights of Survey

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Abstract: Undergraduates constitute a potentially large and growing group of users of academic archives. This report describes the results of a 2007-2008 online survey of 627 historians of U.S. history on how faculty use primary sources to teach undergraduates. It provides a current, valid, and interesting statistical and qualitative overview of the benefits and barriers of using digital and non-digital primary sources to teach. It also suggests that collaboration between librarians, archivists, and faculty can help put new technologies and teaching methods to their fullest potential to improve student learning.

Introduction

Secondary teachers are routinely using online primary sources to teach history and other subjects. Using primary sources engages student interest, stimulates critical thinking, and invigorates classroom discussion. To date, no national studies have been done to determine if post-secondary faculty are also increasing their use of primary sources in undergraduate courses. Since more archivists work in academic archives than any other setting (36%), it would be valuable to know how faculty at these institutions use primary sources to teach undergraduates and what problems and benefits they report.¹ This 2007-2008 survey, "Teaching Undergraduates with Primary Sources," was an effort to solve the problem of the knowledge gap. It sought quantitative and qualitative information from 4,002 practicing history faculty and instructors. It asked how often and in what ways they use primary sources to teach undergraduate history courses, and about the barriers and benefits they encountered, both in the online and archives setting. This paper describes the results, emphasizing the different perspectives of senior (tenured) and junior (tenure-track) faculty, student responses to learning with primary sources, and faculty attitudes about collaborating with librarians and archivists. Improved understanding of these issues can prepare archivists to meet the needs of a new and potentially large user group of undergraduate students.

An online survey was chosen as the methodology to reach a large pool of faculty in a cost-effective manner. History faculty were chosen on the assumption that the field of history supplies a majority of academic archival researchers. (This assumption merits research, but was adopted as a working hypothesis.) An email invitation to take the online survey was sent to 4,002 teaching faculty at history departments from November 2007 to January 2008. A total of 627 historians (16%) replied. An additional 191 respondents included open-ended comments that supplied valuable details about the rewards and barriers involved. The survey was divided into sections about the kinds of primary sources they used to teach, specific questions about online and onsite sources, and demographic information. All survey questions were then analyzed in terms of the demographic groups described below.²

¹ Society of American Archivists, "A*CENSUS," pg 328. <http://www.archivists.org/a-census/ACENSUS-Final.pdf> Viewed 1/14/2009.

² The survey data can be accessed at: <http://www.archivists.org/conference/sanfrancisco2008/docs/sessionResearchForum-MalkmusB.pdf>.

The results of the survey are graphed in Charts 3 and 4 below. From these results, four findings hold particular salience for archivists:

1. Faculty as a whole use published sources to teach undergraduates more often than any other source, but tenure-track faculty use online almost as often as published sources. Seventy percent of all respondents indicated they already have enough online sources *to teach*, but are frustrated by the difficulty of searching for new digital content in their field.
2. Utilizing primary sources is an invaluable component of teaching critical thinking skills, but is difficult and presents major challenges to students and faculty.
3. Hands-on research in an archives may be more meaningful to students, but only 40% of faculty assign archival research (even though 60% of survey respondents had access to an archives with relevant sources).
4. Faculty appreciated help from and collaboration with librarians and archivists in this challenging endeavor.

Survey Respondents

The survey asked respondents to identify themselves as tenured faculty, tenure-track faculty, instructor/adjuncts/lecturers, or other. In this report, the term “faculty” will be used to indicate teachers from all three categories in general. The survey did NOT include graduate students, but included the years spent teaching as a graduate student in calculating years of teaching experience. Survey results found that the group of faculty with less than 10 years teaching experience correlated closely with tenure-track faculty, while faculty with more than ten years correlated with tenured faculty. To simplify this in the report, the labels “tenured” and “tenure-track” will be used to represent both the group of faculty with “more than 10 years experience” and “less than ten years experience” respectively, unless specifically noted. Comparing the differences between tenured and tenure-track groups can suggest trends in teaching practices as senior faculty retire. Survey results indicated that the third category, “instructors/adjuncts/lecturers,” and the fourth category, “other” included a mixed assortment of part-time emeritus faculty, long-term adjuncts, and new Ph.D.s. The group lacked any core set of characteristics that would make the results of their analysis useful, and this report will not include them.

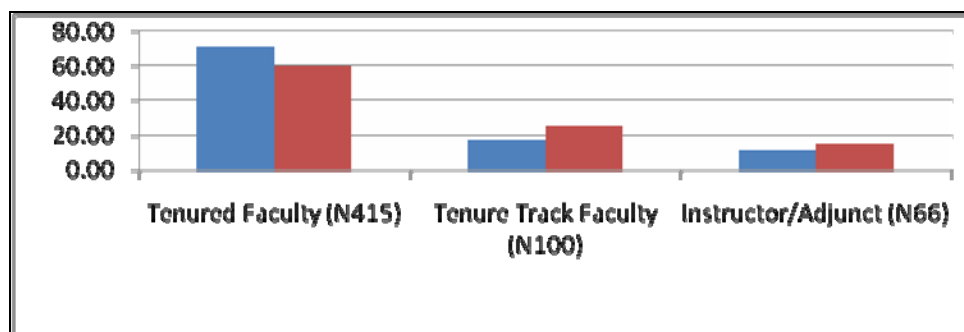


Figure 1. Percentage of Responses According to Teaching Status³

Figure 1 shows that tenured faculty were overrepresented while other categories were underrepresented in the survey compared to the national percentages. Respondents also reported the types of institutional affiliation. While this information would be very useful, a severe underrepresentation of associate degree

³ In Figure 1, the national percentage is on the right in red; survey respondents are on the left in blue; and N equals the raw number of survey respondents

institutions diminishes the validity of results for analysis by institution and those results are also not included at this time.

Types of Primary Sources Used

The survey indicated that academic historians use published primary sources more often than other formats, with slightly less than half of all faculty reporting that they are using more online primary sources in their classes. Commenters noted that convenience prompted faculty to use published primary sources such as source book readers to teach courses. Published readers are primarily available for survey courses; one commenter found sourcebooks that combine secondary literature with primary sources to be the ideal. Other commenters noted that the escalating price of sourcebooks prompted them to consider using more online sources in the future.

As seen in Figure 2, tenure-track faculty show a slightly different pattern of use from their predecessors. They use online primary sources almost as often as published primary sources and they assign archival sources less. This may portend a trend toward increased reliance on digitized primary sources and reduced use of archives by undergraduate classes in the future. On the other hand, this statistic may reflect the fact that faculty seeking tenure are under great time pressures and do not have the necessary time to develop archival assignments and guide students through the process. The latter possibility will be explored in follow-up interviews.

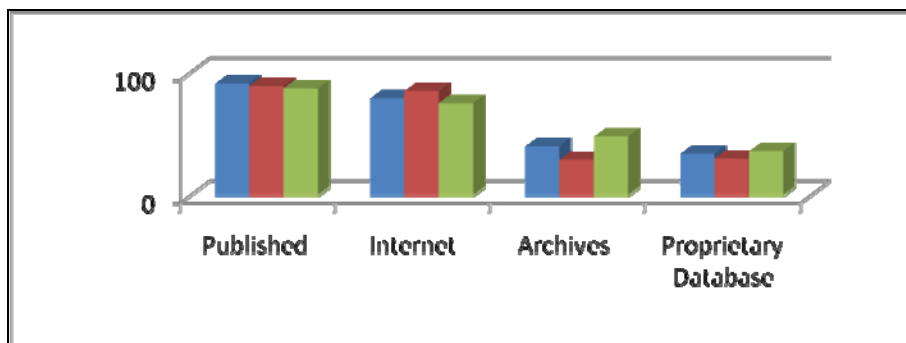


Figure 2. Types of Primary Sources Used in Undergraduate Instruction⁴

On-line Primary Sources in Undergraduate Teaching

As shown in Figure 3, respondents did not indicate a pressing need for more digitized sources to enable their teaching -70% indicated that they already had enough access to online primary sources for their undergraduate courses. Significantly more faculty (87%) reported a need for a way to find online primary sources in their field. Commenters noted that navigating the maze of digital collections was a problem for themselves and students. They reported using email, newsletters, Web browsing, and informal conversations to locate sources. No single method predominated, suggesting that most faculty were “muddling” through the maze of sources, in search of interesting objects for their research and classes. Although commenters voiced frustration with the difficulty in finding sources, they did not offer any indications of what kinds of access sites they would find helpful.

⁴ In Figure 2, Tenured faculty is shown in the blue bar on the left; Tenure track faculty is shown red bar in the middle; and Instructor/adjunct is shown in the green bar on the right.

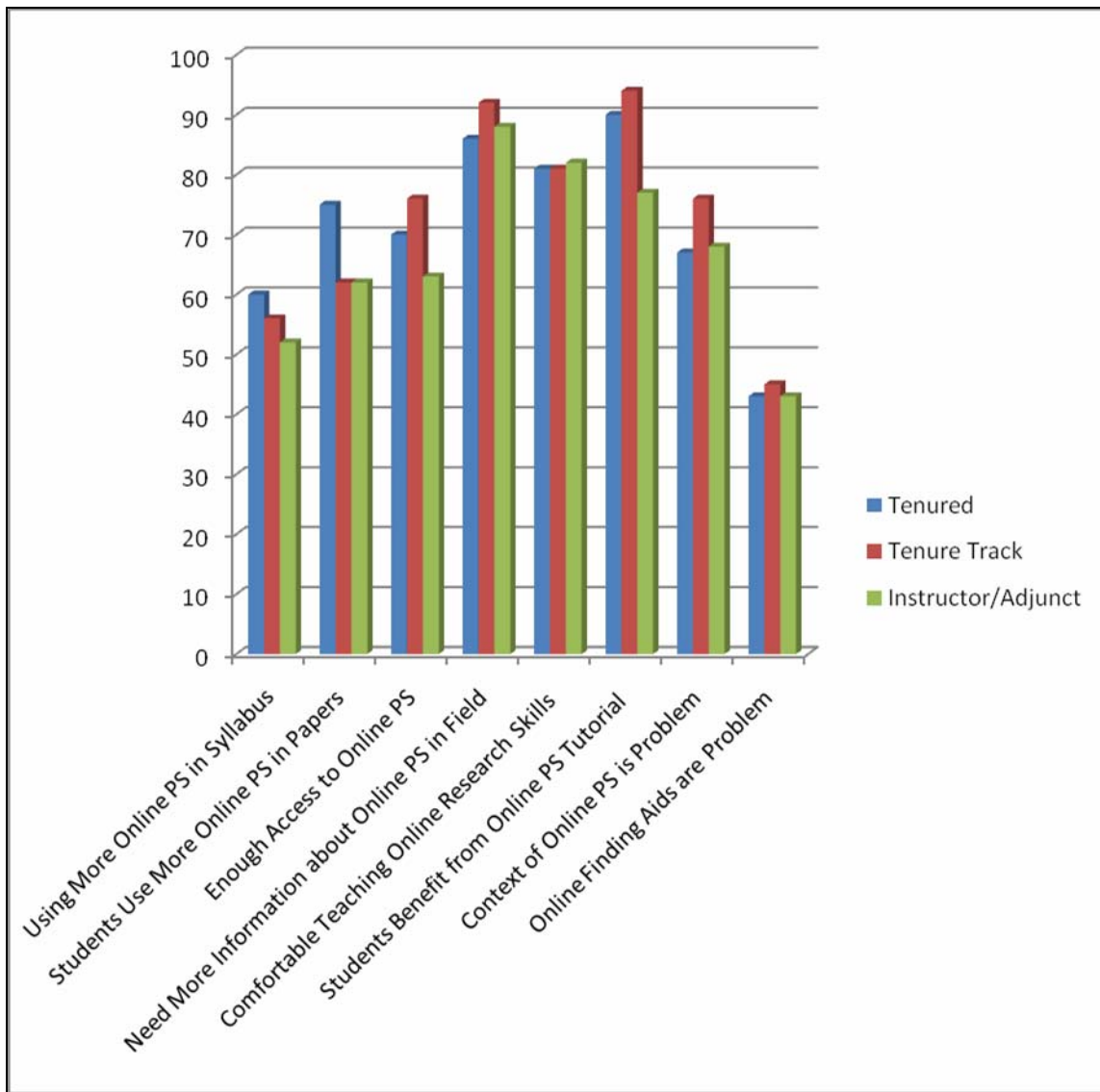


Figure 3. Use of On-line Primary⁵

Teaching Undergraduates to Think Like Historians

Respondents, even those who are enthusiastic about using primary sources to teach history, agree that teaching students to think historically—to approach sources skeptically, corroborate evidence, and hypothesize historical explanations—is challenging and time consuming. Commenters noted that students were poorly prepared for document analysis. They noted students were unfamiliar with the differences between primary and secondary sources. Student apathy and lack of confidence compounded difficulties. Several described students as overwhelmed by the prospect of primary source research, writing, “undergraduates, including history majors, are very intimidated by archival research.”⁶ One wrote that first generation students “cannot even imagine what kind of source might be out there, never mind start looking

⁵ Tenure track is shown in the bar on the left, Tenured faculty is shown in the bar in the middle, and Instructor/adjunct is shown in the bar on the right.

⁶ Comment 56, tenure-track, university, 11–15 years, no archives.

for it.”⁷ Another faculty member wrote, “students are so uncomfortable with constructing knowledge through their own analysis that they avoid [primary sources] in their own research.”⁸

These comments suggest that teaching students to effectively use primary sources requires considerable skill. Faculty voiced confidence in their ability to teach these skills—over 80 % of all respondents reported they were “comfortable” or “very comfortable” teaching students the online and archival skills needed for research. When broken into groups, tenured faculty were somewhat more comfortable teaching *archival* research skills while tenure-track faculty were more comfortable teaching skills needed for online resources. Alongside this confidence, they valued helpful resources and collaboration; 89% of all faculty reported that students would benefit from an online tutorial about searching for online primary sources, and 86% percent reported they would like an archivist to give a presentation (tailored to the class) on archival research.

The Value of the Actual

Three times more commenters were positive than negative about using hands-on primary sources in the archives to teach history. They noted a qualitative difference in teaching students with actual, tangible original sources and reported that their students found their archival experiences among the most memorable and engaging of all their class experiences. One wrote, “Students are bowled over by the actual documents,”⁹ and another noted, “Students love the adventure of primary source research and the challenge of it.”¹⁰ One commenter noted that encountering the actual documents was an important component for students, writing, “I do find that students learn more from direct contact with the archive than from online searching.”¹¹ Faculty from institutions with archives were the most enthusiastic. One commenter reported success sending a large survey class to the archives for an assignment. The majority of commenters disagreed and noted that archival research was not possible with large survey classes due to lack of space, relevant materials, and staff. This disjuncture indicates that more research is needed to clarify the kinds of archival assignments that are useful to undergraduates, a topic explored in the final section.

Faculty noted that teaching with archival sources demanded more time and creative involvement on the part of the faculty/instructors. Figure 4 summarises their responses regarding including archival research in undergraduate curriculum. One commenter noted, “I’ve learned that students love the adventure of primary source research, and the challenge of it. The major drawback as an instructor is the time it takes”¹² Another commenter noted that “instructors cannot send students to archives without providing a lot of support, first in class, in precise assignment material, in samples and run-throughs, and in repeat trips.”¹³ Another wrote, “Archival work would be useful, but it’s much too time-consuming for both instructors and students.”¹⁴ Tenure-track faculty (39 percent) were more likely than tenured faculty (28 percent) to indicate they lacked time to arrange for archival assignments. One commenter noted that teaching archival research draws “substantial time away from publication which is the primary consideration for tenure here.”¹⁵ Understanding the imperatives of the tenure calendar, archivists can anticipate that tenure-track faculty will be less likely than tenured faculty to assign primary sources of the assignment requires significant time commitments.

⁷ Comment 78, tenured, baccalaureate college, 15+ years, yes archives.

⁸ Comment 7, no status given, baccalaureate college, 6-10 years, yes archives.

⁹ Comment 45, tenure-track, university, 15+ years, no archives.

¹⁰ Comment 41, tenure-track, university, 6-10 years, yes archives.

¹¹ Comment 40, tenure-track, university, 11-15 years, yes archives.

¹² Comment 41, tenure-track, university, 6-10 years, yes archives.

¹³ Comment 20, instructor, university, 0-6 years, no archives.

¹⁴ Comment 115, tenured, university, 15+, no archives.

¹⁵ Comment 167, tenured, university, 15+ years, yes archives.

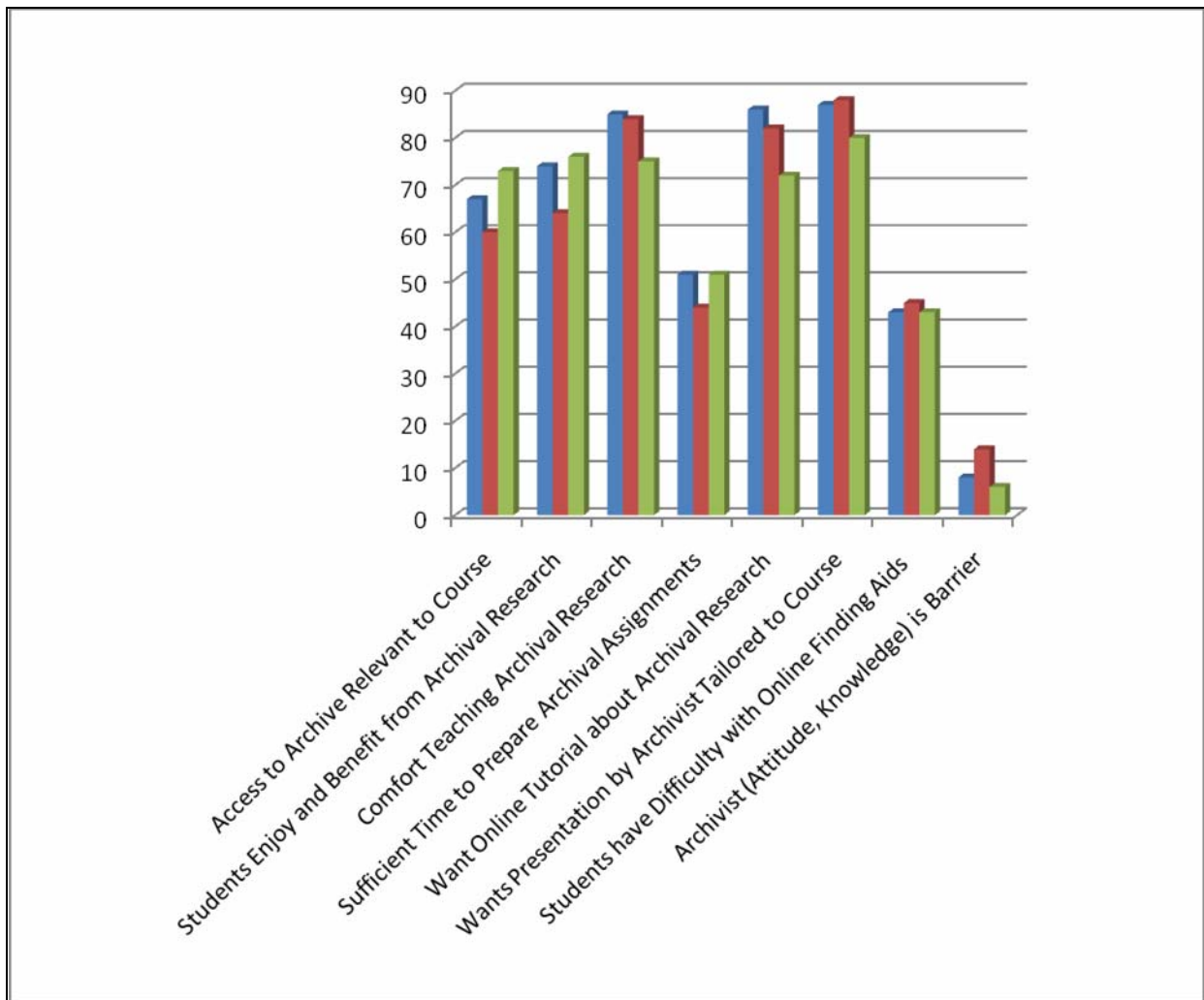


Figure 4. Archival Research in the Undergraduate Curriculum¹⁶

Collaborations in the Archives

Positive comments about collaborations between faculty and librarians or archivists were one of the most popular comment topics. Some senior faculty noted they relied heavily on reference librarians to teach online and database search skills to their students. Many faculty praised the archivists in their institutions for pro-actively encouraging them to take advantage of the rich archival source materials available to students. At several institutions, the archivist role included co-teaching students to interrogate sources.

Comments about collaboration were diverse and thoughtful, and cumulatively suggested that successful collaborations depended upon utilizing the strengths of the individual partners. One faculty member preferred to consult with the archivist beforehand and present the materials to the class personally. Another faculty member was a close friend of the archivist. In several institutions, the archivist also taught history courses. In several, librarians taught students (and faculty) to search for online sources.

¹⁶ Tenure track is shown in the blue bar on the left; Tenured faculty is shown in the red bar in the middle; and Instructor/adjunct is shown in the green bar on the right.

There was no one size fits all approach to effective collaborations between faculty and archivists and/or librarians.

Further Research Needed

Two topics for ongoing research emerged from the analysis of this survey: how to enable more efficient searches for online primary sources; and assessing what kinds of “archival assignments” are effective for different levels of undergraduate courses.

Research is needed into how faculty and students would most like to find and use online primary source collections. Locating online sources is a complex and frustrating endeavor. One approach to simplifying the process might be create hub or gateway website specific for individual sub-fields like Studies in the Early Republic, the Cold War, or environmental history. Hub sites have the advantage that they provide links to primary sources, display contextual information, provide opportunities for scholarly communication, and communication between librarians, archivists, and faculty within the field. The Center for History and New Media (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/>) is an example of a large gateway site that includes a digital platform, Omeka, (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/news/chnm-releases-omeka-010b/>) to enable historians to share personal collections online. Gateway sites have the disadvantage of requiring maintenance; they often become inactive when the sponsor drops the project, or as the number of links becomes unmanageably large. Another difficulty arises because subfields may wither over time leading to the ossification of mature sites while additional sites proliferate.

Another approach would be to develop large, consortial search sites like the Online Archive of California to include all collections within a geographical region or group of affiliated institutions. To enhance search and usability of its digital objects, the California Digital Library created the interface Calisphere suited for school communities and the public.¹⁷ Calisphere provides subject browse access of images, contextual information, and links to full finding aids. Research can help include the perspective of academic faculty and students in the discussion of usability and site design.

The second area of research suggested by this survey is to assess the different kinds of archival assignments help develop historical/critical thinking. Respondents to this survey tended to use the terms “archival assignments” and “archival research” interchangeably, in part because little effort has yet been given to differentiate assignments from archival research. As an example of an archival assignment, the archivist in collaboration with the faculty, might create sets of documents related to a course and ask students to investigate the documents, describe what they see, and list questions the materials prompt in the context of a course. An exercise of this kind orients students to archival holdings, asks them to think independently about sources, and to build upon their pre-existing knowledge, but it is not “archival research” in the traditional sense of the word. History faculty involved with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) are an identified group dedicated to improving the practice of teaching history. Archivists could join forces with them to assess what kinds of collections engage students’ interest and what kinds of collections are appropriate for different levels of courses.

Both of these research agendas would enhance mutual understanding between faculty and archivists. This in turn would provide a basis for effective collaboration, as educators and archivists adopt new technologies and teaching methods to meet their common goals.

¹⁷ Online Archive of California can be visited at: <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/>. Calisphere can be visited at: <http://www.calisphere.universityofcalifornia.edu/>.

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