Digging in to Patron Data

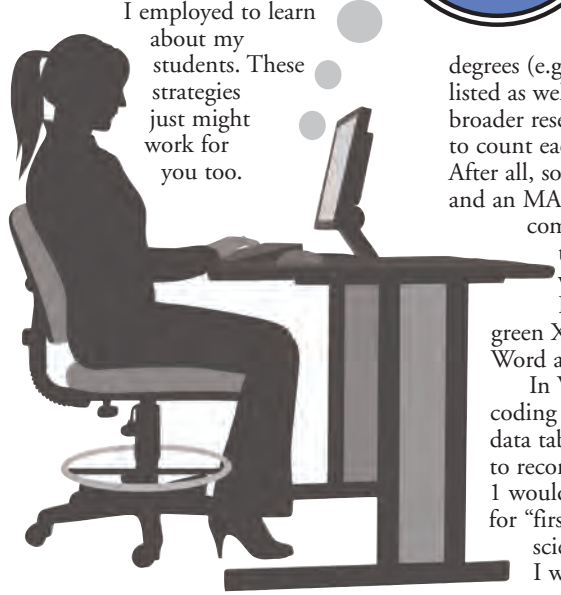
What I learned from the law school "facebook"

By Sarah E. Ryan

Soon after signing on as Yale Law School's first empirical research librarian, I started hearing a whistling murmur: "If you build it, they will come." Like a Midwesterner gifted with a cornfield, I felt the call to grow this new role into something special. But I wasn't sure how to start or for whom I was building "it." I realized that before I could create a new arena, I had to learn more about the athletes. Are 1Ls measuring medians? Are 2Ls calculating correlations? Are 3Ls running regressions? I needed a strategy for studying the students.

To serve patrons well, we try to understand their current needs and anticipate their future desires. Studies of patron practice prompted the California Council of County Law Libraries to launch the AskNow virtual reference service and the Massachusetts Trial Court Law Libraries to publish court rules as ebooks. Understanding library users ranging from pro se patrons in California to trial attorneys in Massachusetts to law students in Connecticut is challenging. Fortunately, many of our patrons share a common interest in the law and need assistance answering legal questions.

Common ground is a great place to start when designing services. But as specialist law librarians in emerging practice areas know, sometimes you only have an educated guess about where to begin. Digging in to patron data is one way to gain a foothold. The following account describes the social science techniques that I employed to learn about my students. These strategies just might work for you too.



Strategizing, Social Scientifically

I am a social scientist by training and habit. I bring to the profession of law librarianship a collection of research books, an appreciation for the differences among SAS, SPSS, and Stata, and a particular take on certain terms of art. For instance, the word "case" means "individual person" to me, as in "survey taker #412 is an interesting case." Thus, to me, each library patron is a unique case to be studied and understood. Together, the cases might offer some generalizable "rule" about our patron population that could inform the design of "treatments" (e.g., research guides). Before getting excited about possible treatments, I conduct research.

For my first study of Yale Law School students, I concentrated on one independent variable: prior degree. I felt that this single piece of information could tell me a lot about how to approach student patrons during my first year. After all, the entry point for empirical research support is different for classicists, chemists, cognitive psychologists, and so on. Consequently, I planned to tally the number of social scientists in each JD class. I had noticed academic credentials in the printed "facebook" published by the law school, and I thumbed through it again to see whether undergraduate degrees were listed.

students with degrees in six key social science fields

Beside nearly every student's picture was an undergraduate degree and institution. For many, additional degrees (e.g., a master's degree) were listed as well. I thought about my broader research question and decided to count each student's various degrees. After all, someone with a BA in English and an MA in sociology should be pretty comfortable with social science terms and practices. Thus, with some methods in mind, I clicked the blue W and green X and watched Microsoft Word and Excel spring to life.

In Word, I began creating a coding instrument, a mock-up of my data table and instructions for what to record in each column. Column 1 would be labeled "1bchsocsci" for "first bachelor's degree, social science." In this column, I would record a zero if the student's first bachelor's degree *was not* in the social sciences and a one if the degree *was* in the social sciences. The numbering scheme was easy enough; the hard part was defining social science.

Defining, (Un)Definitively

I often conceptualize research terms initially and operationalize them during instrument development. In this case, I knew what I meant by social science—disciplines that study people and their systems via scientific methods—but I realized I needed to be more specific while constructing my coding instrument in Word. No sweat, I thought. I'll visit the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) and Social Science Research Council (SSRC) websites and snag the best definition. However, neither body takes a clear stance on which disciplines constitute the social sciences. In the bar along the left side of the SSRN website are subgroups ranging from Accounting to Negotiations to Political Science. The SSRC seems focused on where social science is taking place (e.g., China) rather than on what it is. Empty-handed but undeterred, I realized I needed to examine how social science is operationalized at institutions like mine.

I decided to search the social science websites of the undergraduate and graduate arms of three high-ranked law schools (i.e., Harvard, Stanford, Yale) and three renowned social science institutions (i.e., University of Chicago and Princeton, distinguished in economics and political science, and the University of Michigan, home of the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research). As I reviewed the websites, I kept a tally of "votes" for various disciplines. Anthropology, for example, was voted a social science by five of the six schools. By the end, six disciplines had received at least four votes: anthropology, economics, history, political science/politics, psychology, and sociology. So I amended my coding instrument; students with degrees in six key social science fields would receive a one rather than a zero in the degree columns. Then I would record a one for anthropology, a two for economics, and so forth. I finished my instrument, transferred the column labels to Excel, and flipped open the facebook. Instantly, my efforts to definitively define the social sciences were undermined.

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Measuring, Methodically

The first student held a bachelor's degree in philosophy, politics and economics from the University of Pennsylvania. A quick Google search revealed that the PPE bachelor's was a single degree (as opposed to a triple major). My system was stymied. The first degree consisted of two social science and one humanities disciplines. This was going to be more difficult than I had thought.

I went back to my coding sheet and added a new rule: If a degree program does not fit clearly into sciences (e.g., chemistry) or humanities (e.g., literature) and might be a social science, research it and use word frequency analysis of the courses, or the program description if no courses are available, to determine if it is a social science. In other words, if I couldn't tell what a degree was, I'd need to visit the university department's degree page(s). I'd then need to read and statistically analyze the text contained in the degree and course description sections. Thankfully, most departmental websites are well organized, and a facile frequency counter is available for free via the web (www.writewords.org.uk/word_count.asp). I put it to use nearly 50 times reviewing domestic and international degree programs. The results were fascinating!

Increasingly, it seems, law students are majoring in unique interdisciplinary fields. The focus of their degree programs is not always transparent; statistical analysis of course descriptions provides a window into their studies. For instance, Yale's ethics, politics, and economics degree is more economics than anything else. Harvard's "social studies" bachelor's program is really a political science degree. International relations can mean almost anything in the social sciences! At Brown, the IR degree focuses equally on economics and political science; at the London School of Economics and Political Science, the focus is on history and political science; at the University of Pennsylvania, history takes precedence; at Yale, an international relations degree is predominantly . . . economics. At least, this is according to the word frequencies I found. Of course, my results could be interrogated on a number of grounds.

In my quest to determine the composition of the Yale Law School student body, I made a number of research assumptions. I assumed that someone with a degree in the social sciences would be more comfortable with empirical legal research than someone with a degree in the humanities or even sciences. I then postulated that I could define social science validly and record students' degree information reliably. I trusted in the printed facebook and departmental websites as my only sources of evidence. Despite some reservations, I feel that my study uncovered some interesting information and yielded a solid process for collecting patron data, at least for those of us lucky enough to have facebooks.

Finding(s), Finally

Although there isn't space to delve into my full findings, I can report: most Yale Law School students are social scientists! In the 2013 class, 141 (70 percent) of the students' first bachelor's degrees are in the social sciences. Adding in degrees they picked up after that, a very large segment has been trained in the social sciences. As a result, I assume that they've asked questions about the behaviors of individuals, groups, societies, and/or markets. Since a large slice of them—more than 60 of the 141 (43 percent)—hold political science/politics/government degrees, they should be comfortable interpreting or even conducting a poll. And the 30+ economists in the class of 2013 should understand basic theories of supply and demand, as well as how to read regression output (i.e., the numbers table produced by performing regression analysis in a statistical program such as Stata). These findings put me on better footing to plan for the future.

Planning, Purposefully

Now that I have an idea of what my students bring to their studies, I can better address their current needs, anticipate their future desires, and design additional patron studies. Currently, most of our students should be able to synthesize social science research. Therefore, they should be better served by workshops focused on specific skills (e.g., basic Stata commands) than on the broad tenets of social science. Since many majored in political science or economics, they might be considering careers in the legal sectors of those fields. Through supplemental outreach and research, I hope to gain a clearer picture of their post-graduation goals. This information could inform collection development, guest speaker selection, and workshop planning. Though I have only begun to systematically learn about these patrons, I can make informed guesses about what to ask them next and how to serve them meaningfully. Now that I know who is coming, I have a better idea of what to build.

I plan to build an empirical research support program aimed at both the large majority of students who have training in the social sciences and the small minority who develop that interest during law school. Most workshops and future website content will presume a familiarity with empirical methods, though not necessarily advanced statistics skills. As I continue to research patron attitudes, beliefs, and needs, I will use emerging social science tools such as Qualtrics survey software to model effective research data collection. I will vet my plans with my colleagues at reference department and library meetings. I will continue to employ a circular process of brainstorming, designing a study, collecting data, analyzing the results, implementing new programs, assessing their effectiveness, and brainstorming. This process is my way of developing systematic user-centered empirical legal reference support.

Combining, Carefully

By engaging in social scientific study of my patrons, I attempted to combine a focus on library users and systems. I did not ask students what they want from me as a purely user-focused researcher might. But I also did not concentrate on designing an ideal empirical reference program absent a focus on users. I employed the sort of combinational approach that I learned from my mentors. According to emerging library scholar Hannah Kwon, this two-pronged approach embraces a cognitive pluralism needed in our changing field.

In "Systems-centered vs. User-centered Librarianship," a chapter within the edited volume *Reference Renaissance: Current and Future Trends,* Kwon argues the merits of an information profession grounded in a "cognitive sociological approach" to understanding patrons. Such a standpoint combines end-user studies, systems analyses, and an attention to the "socially determined and enforced" behaviors of information consumers. It requires robust data collecting, sense-making, and innovating. Kwon's social scientific approach suggests new pathways for program development and evaluation. In it, I hear the whistling murmur of great things to come . . . . ■

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