



Primary Source Literacy Trends: Building Foundations with Today's Students

2025 Study of Academic Research Libraries and Universities

In partnership with:



Primary sources
reimagined

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Study Design and Fielding

This research employed an online survey of librarians from academic research libraries and universities globally. The survey was administered via email from September 18 to October 3, 2025 (fielding period), using a questionnaire employing a mix of single-choice, multiple-response, and open-ended questions.

Sample

A total of 302 responses were received (after disqualifications).

Data Preparation and Analysis

Findings are segmented by level of students served and institutional enrollment size (where applicable), with multiple-response questions totaling more than 100%. Open-ended responses were thematically coded to identify and quantify recurring categories. All results are reported as unweighted descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages).

Limitations

While the study is based on a non-probability email sample and voluntary participation (results are indicative rather than statistically projectable) the findings offer valuable, field-based insight into how academic librarians support and perceive primary source literacy. Institutional representation (e.g., student levels served, institutional size, geography) was not controlled and subgroup comparisons should be viewed as directional. Nonetheless, the data capture a diverse cross-section of perspectives, revealing observed instructional practices, implementation frameworks, and librarian perceptions surrounding student outcomes and success measures.

Respondent Demographics

Completed responses were captured from academic librarians that self-selected the following student levels served and enrollment size:

Level of Students Served

- Undergraduate Students 84%
- Graduate Students (masters) 54%
- Doctoral Students (PhD/research) 40%
- Continuing Ed or Adult Learners 34%
- Distance/Online Only 28%
- Professional School (law, medicine) 23%

Enrollment Size

- <1,000 students 12%
- 1,000-4,999 33%
- 5,000-9,999 19%
- 10,000-19,999 15%
- 20,000-39,999 13%
- 40,000+ 8%

Introduction

The 2025 Primary Source Literacy Trends study sheds light on how students of varying levels and disciplines engage with primary sources across academic institutions. While there is largely broad consensus among academic librarians about the pedagogical value of primary sources in cultivating research confidence and historical understanding, the findings also expose both structural and disciplinary disparities in how students are introduced to, guided through, and benefit from primary source literacy instruction.

Across all institutional types, undergraduate students begin their coursework with limited understanding of what constitutes a primary source. Nearly three-quarters (76%) of librarians in this study report that only “some” or “very few” undergraduates possess foundational source literacy knowledge at entry. These findings are reflective of AM’s prior, post-pandemic study “*Enhancing Student Access Through Primary Resources*” which highlighted how students with only a basic understanding often begin their introduction to primary sources “with feelings of difficulty and confusion.”

Most librarians are guiding students to primary sources through in-class instruction (80%) and assignments explicitly requiring their use (73%), with additional support through one-on-one consultations (62%). Larger institutions are more likely to offer structured, multi-layered approaches that combine faculty partnerships, workshops, and asynchronous learning tools, while smaller colleges rely heavily on self-guided materials or direct instruction due to limited staffing, time, and budget.

Humanities and General Disciplines

Findings suggest that student engagement with primary sources is consistent and diversified across humanities and general disciplines, with about one-third (31%) of librarians reporting regular or frequent interaction among these students overall.

In general, students are most often using newspapers and periodicals (77%), followed by visual materials such as photographs and maps (49%) and government or legal documents (46%).

[Quantitative data](#) indicate that librarians most often observe student gains in evaluating evidence within historical and cultural context (49%), developing critical thinking and analytical skills (41%), and building confidence navigating collections (40%). Larger institutions tend to emphasize cognitive skill development—such as analysis and reasoning—while adult and continuing education learners are more likely to demonstrate growth in confidence when accessing and navigating archives.

Humanities and General Disciplines (continued)

Complementing these patterns, [qualitative feedback](#) highlights that across humanities and other general disciplines students often experience a deeper sense of connection to history and authenticity through primary source work. Many librarians describe this engagement as helping students “make the past feel real” and “connect evidence to lived experience.” Roughly one in five respondents (21%) also specifically cite improvements in research confidence and self-efficacy as observable outcomes among their students.

Disciplines Outside the Humanities

While engagement with primary sources was observably lower outside the humanities, the study finds notable progress toward integration across STEM, business, and social sciences. Over half (54%) of librarians report that non-humanities students engage with primary sources only occasionally or rarely, but roughly one-third (32%) report frequent interaction. The difference lies in how students engage and the skills they derive from doing so.

Librarians report that [non-humanities students](#) gravitate toward specialized, professional, or applied source types, particularly government/legal documents (39%) and archival datasets or manuscripts (42%), suggesting disciplinary alignment with empirical evidence and case-based learning. Larger universities and professional schools exhibit the highest diversity of source use, supporting the link between institutional scale, resource availability, and curricular integration.

According to librarians’ [qualitative feedback](#), these students primarily develop research confidence and competencies (33%), a deeper understanding of historical and cultural context (25%), and improved analytical reasoning (23%).

The most frequently cited benefits among non-humanities students mirror those of their humanities peers but with a distinct orientation: critical thinking and analysis (48%) outrank evaluating evidence in context (39%), reversing the order seen in humanities and more general disciplines.

Moreover, non-humanities students are cited as more likely to construct original interpretations and arguments from evidence (35%), indicating a more applied, outcome-driven usage of primary materials. Humanities students, conversely, emphasize exploration and fluency: gaining confidence navigating and interpreting collections (40%).

Disciplines Outside the Humanities (continued)

The disciplines for which librarians cite the most benefit (outside of humanities) is the social sciences (59%), followed by cultural and ethnic studies (40%), education (39%), and political science/public policy (38%). At the largest institutions, engagement extends further into law, business, and communication, reflecting more robust interdisciplinary usage of primary sources.

Barriers, Evaluation Practices, and Institutional Gaps

Librarians consistently report clear benefits for students who engage with primary sources, yet several systemic barriers continue to limit access, primarily limited investment for primary source collections among STEM-related disciplines.

Evaluation practices skew toward operational metrics: usage analytics (52%), faculty feedback (41%), and course-embedded evaluations (37%) are the dominant methods, while only a minority employ external benchmarks (17%) or outcome-based indicators such as graduate success (20%). Larger universities employ more diversified and data-driven approaches, while smaller institutions reported lower usage of evaluation methods across the board.

Conclusion

Collectively, the findings highlight clear differences in how students across disciplines engage with and learn from primary sources. For students in the humanities, these materials serve as a bridge to lived experience, allowing them to discover history, culture, and human perspective in a tangible way. As one librarian observed, “Students often say the material feels real for the first time, like they’re holding a piece of the past rather than reading about it.” This kind of engagement deepens students’ understanding of context and meaning, while also building confidence in their ability to navigate and interpret original materials.

Students outside the humanities (particularly in STEM, business, and social sciences) tend to approach primary sources with a more analytical or applied mindset. Another respondent explained, “When I work with business or science students, they tend to focus on what they can prove or quantify. They use primary sources as evidence, to test a theory or strengthen an argument, rather than to explore meaning.” For these students, it’s about using data to make a case. This reflects a more outcome-oriented use of primary sources, where the focus lies in constructing arguments, drawing conclusions, and applying findings to real-world contexts.

Implications

These patterns shed light on how primary source literacy across disciplines is rooted in the same foundations of critical inquiry but shaped by the unique ways each field approaches research and evidence. For librarians, the challenges (and opportunities) lie in recognizing these differences and working to shape instruction that aligns with each mode of engagement: fostering interpretive curiosity and historical connection in the humanities while refining analytical precision and evidence-based reasoning among non-humanities fields.

Primary sources give students a direct and authentic way to connect ideas with evidence and turn learning into a more hands-on and meaningful experience. They help students think critically, question assumptions, and engage with information at its source—essential skills for both academic success and for navigating today’s complex information landscape.

Across institutions, most undergraduates begin their coursework with only a partial understanding of what a primary source is. More than three quarters of respondents in this study (76%) report that “some” or “very few” undergraduate students have a grasp of this concept upon entry. Based on a 5-point rating scale (where 5=All and 1=None) the mean value is 2.67, quantifying the relative lack of foundational source literacy among new students.

Fig.1 Among those reporting “most” undergraduates understand what a primary source is, the highest proportion (15%) occurs at institutions with 40,000 or more students, suggesting that students at larger institutions may enter with stronger preparation or prior exposure to primary source concepts.

Combining the top two ratings (5=All and 4=Most), we see that the smallest schools (<1,000 students) report the largest percentages of students (20%) enter with foundational knowledge of primary sources, highlighting where smaller student populations or class sizes may offer benefit via more direct faculty interaction or curricular exposure.

Smaller institutions are also the most likely to report (9%) that none of their undergraduate students begin courses with foundational knowledge of primary sources, highlighting wider disparity of student preparedness in smaller college settings.

Fig.1 How many undergraduate students understand what a primary source is when beginning their courses at your institution?

n=290			Enrollment Size					
Value	Overall Percentage	Row Total	<1k	1k-4.9k	5k-9.9k	10k-19.9k	20k-39.9k	40k+
5 = All	1%	3	6%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
4 = Most	10%	29	14%	7%	6%	14%	11%	15%
3 = Some	38%	110	37%	35%	37%	48%	39%	35%
2 = Very Few	38%	111	26%	44%	43%	29%	44%	31%
1 = None	2%	5	9%	0%	2%	2%	0%	0%
Unsure	11%	32	9%	12%	13%	7%	6%	19%

Most respondents agree that students are largely being guided to primary sources through “in-class instruction” (80%), “assignments or projects explicitly requiring primary sources” (73%), and via “one-on-one consultation with a librarian” (62%).

Although the top two ranked methods are endorsed by nearly three-quarters of respondents, the use of one-on-one librarian consultations (while still substantial) lags well behind the leading approaches, suggesting it may be a more targeted or resource-dependent form of support.

These findings suggest opportunities to strengthen and formalize librarian engagement as a primary guidance method. However, expanding responsibilities across the profession (in both academic and public settings) often limit the time librarians can dedicate to curriculum alignment and direct student interaction.

Fig.2 Among student levels served, the study highlights that librarian consultations are reported at the highest rate (75%) among professional students (e.g., law, medicine, business) suggesting more intentional interaction among students who are seeking to specialize.

Institutional size also appears to shape the pedagogical pathways through which students encounter primary sources. Over 70% of large universities employ explicit primary source-based assignments, compared with just 50% of small colleges, underscoring a structural difference in how source literacy is integrated into curricula.

Fig.2 In your experience, how are students at your institution being guided to primary resources? (select all that apply)

n=290			Level of Students Served							Enrollment Size					
Value	Overall Percentage	Row Total	Undergraduate	Graduate	Doctoral	Professional	CE or Adult	Distance or Online	Other	<1k	1k-4.9k	5k-9.9k	10k-19.9k	20k-39.9k	40k+
In-class Instruction	80%	225	83%	84%	88%	90%	83%	86%	58%	62%	85%	70%	83%	91%	84%
Via Assignments or Projects	73%	205	77%	77%	74%	81%	77%	85%	37%	50%	76%	74%	83%	71%	72%
One-on-one w/ Librarian	62%	174	64%	68%	68%	75%	67%	65%	53%	56%	66%	48%	78%	63%	56%
Self-directed Exploration	24%	68	23%	26%	28%	36%	33%	32%	26%	29%	23%	19%	27%	29%	24%
Peer/Study Group	14%	38	13%	15%	17%	20%	18%	18%	21%	12%	12%	13%	12%	20%	16%
Other	2%	5	2%	2%	2%	3%	0%	1%	5%	0%	0%	4%	0%	9%	0%

Nearly three fourths of academic librarians in this study (73%) are guiding students to primary sources by “creating and maintaining asynchronous guides and learning tools.” While subsequent methods receive less consistent usage, they still represent core practices across most institutions. **Fig.3** Over half of respondents report using “course-integrated instruction” (61%), “faculty collaboration” (56%), and “workshops or orientations on discovery and access” (51%).

Institutional size shapes how librarians guide students toward primary sources. At the largest institutions, nearly 60% or more of librarians report using each of the presented methods, reflecting a broad and diversified instructional approach. In contrast, among the smallest institutions (<1,000 students), the most common method is “course-integrated instruction” (47%), with all other approaches utilized by fewer than half of these respondents.

Librarians at small-to-mid-sized institutions (1,000–10,000 students) rely most heavily on asynchronous guides and instructional aides (~75%) as their primary mode of student support.

As enrollment size increases, there is a corresponding shift toward more time-intensive and collaborative strategies, including “faculty partnerships” and “dedicated workshops or discovery sessions,” highlighting how larger environments have the staffing capacity or institutional structures to support more direct instructional engagement.

Fig.3 At your institution, which methods are librarians specifically using to guide students to primary resources? (select all that apply)

n=273			Level of Students Served							Enrollment Size					
Value	Overall Percentage	Row Total	Undergraduate	Graduate	Doctoral	Professional	CE or Adult	Distance or Online	Other	<1k	1k-4.9k	5k-9.9k	10k-19.9k	20k-39.9k	40k+
Creating/Maintaining Online Guides	73%	198	75%	76%	79%	86%	71%	76%	50%	38%	74%	76%	85%	78%	80%
Course-integrated Instruction Sessions	61%	166	62%	69%	70%	78%	64%	70%	28%	47%	61%	66%	69%	59%	56%
Collaborating with Faculty	56%	154	58%	62%	64%	67%	58%	62%	39%	41%	57%	47%	67%	59%	76%
Workshops on Discovery and Access	52%	142	53%	60%	65%	67%	61%	65%	44%	38%	46%	57%	59%	56%	68%
Outreach/Promotion of Collections	44%	119	45%	52%	57%	64%	44%	51%	50%	34%	39%	43%	41%	53%	64%
Other	4%	11	4%	5%	6%	6%	2%	3%	6%	9%	3%	4%	0%	3%	8%

Question: Can you elaborate more on what strategies have been most effective in engaging students and helping them become more confident when working with primary sources? (n=196)

Training on resource navigation and accessing materials (40% of responses)

The most frequently cited strategy focuses on teaching students how to locate, navigate, and access primary source materials through instruction and guided discovery. Descriptions include how archive tours, catalog walk-throughs, and search training sessions help students build both familiarity and confidence

“

One on one instruction works best with our students. As the librarian, I create virtual office sessions to collaborate and help students navigate the portal. We have tutorials and other resources available.

– System/Technology Librarian, MO

”

Collaboration with faculty and course-integrated instruction (25% of responses)

Librarians consistently highlight collaboration with teaching faculty as a critical strategy for engagement. By integrating primary source instruction directly into course curricula, librarians can connect sessions to graded assignments, learning outcomes, and disciplinary frameworks, ensuring that materials feel relevant and purposeful.

“

Collaborating with professors on primary source focused library instruction sessions is the best practice. We have also explored EBA programs (such as Proquest Plan B) to drive access to primary sources online. These were most effective when professors integrated specific primary source collections into their curriculum and arranged for library instruction sessions to support student engagement.

– Subject Specialist/Liaison Librarian, CA

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Embedding primary source requirement into course assignments (25% of responses)

Librarians report that requiring primary source use in assignments is a great way to promote active learning and accountability. Students who are required to engage with primary sources reportedly demonstrate deeper investment and understanding.

“

I think that when an instructor clearly states that a primary source is required, students are more likely to engage with these materials. Often, instructors and librarians work together to create guided assignments and workshops that will facilitate the tools needed for students to better locate and interact with primary sources.

– Reference and Research Librarian, CA

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Librarians report that students in the humanities and general disciplines engage with primary sources more regularly and consistently than their peers in other fields. About one-third (31%) of humanities-focused students are described as “frequent” users, compared with roughly the same percentage of non-humanities students who engage only “occasionally” (27%). This contrast suggests that primary sources are more established within humanities coursework and their usage outside these disciplines remains uneven.

Fig.4 Nearly half of librarians (42%) perceive student engagement with primary sources as “occasional,” and another 31% observe regular or frequent interaction. A notable portion of respondents (15%) report that such engagement is rare or absent, and another 10% express uncertainty, revealing inconsistencies in both the integration of primary sources within coursework and librarians’ visibility into primary source usage.

When the top two categories (“very frequently” and “frequently”) are combined, institutions with 40,000+ students show the strongest rates of primary source engagement (44%), followed by those enrolling 10,000–20,000 students (37%). This suggests that larger institutions are better prepared with infrastructure, resources, or curricular frameworks to promote more consistent integration of primary sources among coursework.

“Occasional” use of primary sources is reported most often by the smallest institutions (<1,000 students) at 52%, yet this same group also reports the highest rate of “very frequent” use (21%), reinforcing the earlier finding of disparity in student preparedness among small college settings.

Fig.4 How often do students at your institution engage with primary sources as part of their coursework?

n=258			Level of Students Served							Enrollment Size					
Value	Overall Percentage	Row Total	Undergraduate	Graduate	Doctoral	Professional	CE or Adult	Distance or Online	Other	<1k	1k-4.9k	5k-9.9k	10k-19.9k	20k-39.9k	40k+
Very frequently	10%	26	9%	11%	12%	15%	11%	10%	6%	21%	11%	8%	8%	7%	9%
Frequently	21%	54	21%	26%	26%	28%	22%	25%	25%	7%	19%	20%	29%	23%	35%
Occasionally	42%	109	44%	36%	34%	33%	38%	34%	19%	52%	38%	45%	47%	39%	35%
Rarely	14%	35	14%	14%	13%	13%	13%	15%	31%	14%	19%	14%	3%	16%	9%
Never	1%	3	1%	2%	1%	2%	1%	1%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	3%	0%
Unsure	10%	25	9%	9%	12%	7%	13%	15%	13%	7%	11%	10%	13%	7%	9%
Other	2%	6	2%	3%	4%	2%	1%	0%	6%	0%	1%	4%	0%	7%	4%

Academic librarians most frequently identify newspapers and periodicals (77%) as the types of primary sources students use, about 1.5 times more often than any other category. Following at lower (but substantial) levels are visual materials such as photographs and maps (49%) and government or legal documents (46%). Roughly one-third of respondents also point to letters, diaries, or personal papers (34%) and oral histories or interviews (33%). A small but notable share (10%) report being unsure which types of primary sources their students engage with overall.

Fig.5 The use of newspapers and periodicals reaches its highest levels at mid-sized institutions (5,000–20,000 students, averaging 84%), while smaller colleges ($\leq 5,000$ students, averaging 69%) report lower engagement. This distinction likely reflects variations in access to resources, and in how primary sources are embedded within the curriculum as institutional size increases.

Among large institutions (40,000+ students), four of the five top source types are cited by more than 50% of respondents, whereas among smaller institutions (<10,000 students), only one of the five reaches the 50% threshold (newspapers and periodicals), suggesting a broader and more diversified use of primary sources at larger universities.

Newspaper and periodical usage peaks at the graduate (82%) and doctoral student (83%) levels, while visual materials see the highest frequency among professional school students (61%) such as law, business, and medicine.

Fig.5 What types of primary sources are students using most often? (select all that apply)

n=255			Level of Students Served							Enrollment Size					
Value	Overall Percentage	Row Total	Undergraduate	Graduate	Doctoral	Professional	CE or Adult	Distance or Online	Other	<1k	1k-4.9k	5k-9.9k	10k-19.9k	20k-39.9k	40k+
Newspapers and periodicals	77%	196	79%	82%	83%	81%	79%	77%	63%	66%	73%	80%	87%	77%	82%
Visual materials (photos, maps)	49%	125	50%	54%	56%	61%	57%	53%	44%	45%	47%	49%	55%	50%	50%
Government records and legal documents	46%	116	46%	50%	54%	54%	46%	55%	50%	45%	41%	47%	42%	47%	64%
Letters, diaries, or personal papers	34%	87	37%	41%	43%	46%	35%	37%	25%	31%	32%	26%	32%	60%	36%
Oral histories or interviews	33%	84	33%	38%	38%	44%	38%	38%	56%	24%	28%	35%	29%	33%	64%
Unsure	10%	26	11%	7%	8%	9%	12%	15%	0%	10%	9%	14%	11%	3%	14%
Other	8%	20	8%	10%	9%	9%	6%	8%	6%	10%	7%	8%	0%	13%	14%

Question: Can you share any specific feedback you've received from a student who has successfully integrated primary sources into their research and learning assignments? (n=118)

Improvements to research confidence and skillset (21% of responses)

Respondents most often described students who developed greater confidence and skill in conducting research, including statements about learning how to locate, interpret, and use original materials effectively, showing growth in research independence and understanding.

“

Yes, one student mentioned that working with primary sources made their research feel more original and meaningful. They said it gave them a stronger sense of ownership of their work and helped them develop more confidence in presenting their ideas.

– Subject Specialist/Liaison Librarian, Sri Lanka

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Connection to history and deeper authenticity (10% of responses)

Respondents also reported students that cited feeling a closer connection to historical events or people, often using words like “real,” “authentic,” or “alive.” These responses emphasize the tangible, humanizing effect of primary sources.

“

Many students using primary sources in our Native Studies collections feel closer to their ancestors; a few have heard their grandparents/great-parents' voices for the first time.

– Cataloguing/Metadata Librarian, SD

”

Improved conceptual understanding and insight (7% of responses)

A smaller but notable portion of feedback reflected a deepened intellectual or conceptual understanding of course material. Students reportedly indicated that working with primary sources provided new perspectives and helped them make sense of complex topics.

“

*“Students LOVE primary research sources. For example, we are reading *The Unthinkable*. Students will be searching for the experiences of disaster victims when they find those, their engagement with learning becomes transformative. Primary sources are transformative.”*

– Subject Specialist/Liaison Librarian, WA

”

When students successfully engage with primary sources, respondents most frequently cited three primary benefits: evaluating evidence within historical and cultural context (49%), strengthening critical thinking and analytical skills (41%), and building confidence in navigating collections (40%). The leading benefit, “evidence evaluation,” was clearly the dominant response, ranking first in five of six student-level and five of six enrollment-size segments.

Fig.6 A clear distinction between top tier choices and second tier choices also emerged, with the next-highest benefit, “recognizing source provenance” (32%) ranking fourth overall, and being selected ~1.25 times less frequently than the third ranked choice, “collection navigation confidence.”

Among institutions focused on continuing education and adult learners, “collection navigation confidence” (44%) ranked highest. This indicates that adult learners may benefit specifically from technical skill-building and increased comfort with navigating archives, databases, and special collections, as building these skills can help overcome technology-related barriers often associated with returning to academic study.

At the largest institutions (40,000+ students), “critical thinking and analytical skill” development ranked highest (60%), suggesting that large-scale academic environments place strong emphasis on developing cognitive reasoning and analysis. This trend is mirrored among professional schools (e.g., law, medicine, and business) where 52% of respondents identified the same benefit, underscoring the disciplinary focus on analytical rigor and structured reasoning.

Fig.6 In your experience, what are the top benefits students gain when they successfully engage with primary sources in their research? (select up to three)

n=242			Level of Students Served							Enrollment Size					
Value	Overall Percentage	Row Total	Undergraduate	Graduate	Doctoral	Professional	CE or Adult	Distance or Online	Other	<1k	1k-4.9k	5k-9.9k	10k-19.9k	20k-39.9k	40k+
Evidence Evaluation	49%	119	51%	50%	53%	54%	42%	46%	44%	46%	50%	42%	53%	57%	50%
Critical Thinking/Analysis	41%	98	41%	43%	41%	52%	44%	46%	50%	32%	43%	33%	39%	43%	60%
Navigation Confidence	40%	96	38%	39%	43%	36%	44%	42%	25%	43%	44%	38%	31%	43%	35%
Recognize Source Provenance	32%	78	34%	36%	32%	32%	32%	29%	19%	32%	33%	38%	36%	30%	15%
Citation Ethics	30%	72	29%	30%	26%	23%	31%	33%	56%	43%	28%	29%	31%	23%	30%
Interpretive Reasoning	28%	68	30%	32%	33%	34%	28%	38%	13%	11%	30%	38%	31%	23%	25%
Research Ownership	28%	67	29%	31%	33%	32%	30%	29%	19%	29%	23%	42%	25%	17%	35%
Build Transferable Skills	26%	63	25%	26%	30%	30%	28%	22%	13%	18%	25%	25%	33%	27%	30%
Other	0.4%	1	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Findings indicate that students outside the humanities may have fewer overall opportunities to develop primary source literacy, reflecting broader differences in how disciplines approach research, evidence, and interpretation. Primary source use is more deeply embedded in humanities coursework, where it is often a core component of study, while in non-humanities fields it remains more peripheral by being introduced selectively or tied to specific assignments.

Fig.7 A majority of respondents (54%) indicate that students in fields outside the humanities (such as STEM, social sciences, and business) engage with primary sources only occasionally or rarely. About one-third (32%) report frequent engagement, while another 20% note limited awareness or uncertainty regarding how these students interact with primary source materials.

When combining the top two categories (“very frequently” and “frequently”), institutions with 40,000+ students show the highest rate of primary source engagement (35%) among these non-humanities students, with a similar trend observed for both professional schools (32%) and institutions focused on doctoral studies (31%).

When compared with earlier findings for humanities and liberal arts disciplines, responses for non-humanities fields show a similar proportion of students engaging frequently with primary sources (31% Humanities; 32% Outside Humanities).

The key differences become notable as frequency levels diminish: “occasional” use is reported more often among humanities and general disciplines (42%) than outside humanities studies (27%), while “rare” engagement is notably higher among non-humanities students (27%) compared with humanities counterparts (14%).

Fig.7 At your institution, how often do students in disciplines outside the humanities, history, or liberal arts (e.g., STEM, business, social sciences, professional programs) engage with primary sources as part of their coursework or research?

n=239		Row Total	Level of Students Served							Enrollment Size					
Value	Overall Percentage		Undergraduate	Graduate	Doctoral	Professional	CE or Adult	Distance or Online	Other	<1k	1k-4.9k	5k-9.9k	10k-19.9k	20k-39.9k	40k+
Very frequently	5%	13	5%	7%	7%	9%	8%	7%	7%	11%	8%	2%	3%	3%	5%
Frequently	15%	35	14%	16%	23%	23%	14%	19%	0%	22%	9%	13%	17%	13%	30%
Occasionally	27%	65	28%	28%	26%	27%	24%	28%	14%	15%	21%	32%	37%	40%	20%
Rarely	27%	65	28%	27%	26%	25%	27%	20%	36%	22%	33%	26%	29%	23%	20%
Never	5%	12	5%	5%	2%	2%	5%	6%	7%	4%	11%	4%	0%	0%	0%
Unsure	20%	47	19%	16%	15%	14%	22%	20%	36%	22%	18%	23%	14%	20%	25%
Other	1%	2	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Data suggests that non-humanities students tend to engage with more specialized and professionally oriented primary sources, particularly at larger institutions and professional schools where the breadth of collections and curricular emphasis may provide greater opportunities for exposure.

Fig.8 A majority of academic librarians (51%) report that students outside the humanities most often engage with newspapers and periodicals as primary sources. However, all other leading categories show lower levels of engagement than those observed for students in humanities and general disciplines. For instance, visual materials were cited by 49% of respondents for humanities students but only 32% for non-humanities students, while government and legal documents saw a smaller gap (46% vs. 39%).

For non-humanities students, government and legal documents are cited most frequently by institutions serving professional school populations (61%), followed by doctoral programs (50%) and large universities with 20,000 or more students (52% on average).

Fig.8 What types of primary sources are students in these fields using most often? (select all that apply)

n=237		Row Total	Level of Students Served							Enrollment Size					
Value	Overall Percentage		Undergraduate	Graduate	Doctoral	Professional	CE or Adult	Distance or Online	Other	<1k	1k-4.9k	5k-9.9k	10k-19.9k	20k-39.9k	40k+
Newspapers and periodicals	51%	121	51%	55%	59%	57%	55%	53%	64%	59%	44%	51%	59%	50%	58%
Data sets	43%	101	44%	52%	53%	59%	47%	50%	36%	33%	40%	40%	59%	37%	53%
Government records and legal documents	39%	93	40%	48%	50%	61%	45%	46%	43%	41%	34%	32%	41%	57%	47%
Visual materials (photos, maps)	32%	76	33%	33%	37%	39%	37%	32%	29%	41%	29%	30%	35%	30%	37%
Archival documents and manuscripts	22%	53	23%	31%	33%	39%	26%	27%	21%	19%	16%	21%	21%	33%	42%
Letters, diaries, or personal papers	14%	34	15%	16%	22%	20%	13%	13%	0%	11%	10%	17%	12%	27%	16%
Oral histories or interviews	14%	32	13%	19%	17%	24%	15%	15%	14%	7%	11%	13%	15%	13%	32%
Unsure	19%	45	20%	19%	16%	17%	22%	25%	7%	11%	20%	23%	18%	17%	21%
Other	6%	14	6%	6%	7%	6%	5%	7%	0%	7%	6%	4%	3%	7%	11%

Question: In your own words can you share examples of how working with primary sources has strengthened these students' skills (i.e., critical thinking, analysis, or historical understanding)? (n=126)

Improved research confidence and competencies (33% of responses)

The most common theme, for students outside the humanities, reflects how students gain practical research competencies by learning to find, evaluate, and use primary sources effectively. This positively impacts their confidence and improves their ability to identify credible evidence.

“

Once students understand what a primary resource is, why it's so important, and understand how to find primary sources, their confidence in their own research skills vastly improves. The questions they ask are more specific and nuanced, as opposed to general questions like "how do I begin my research?". They also gain the confidence they need to apply the info they find in primary sources not only to their coursework, but to their careers as well. (Most of our students are working adults).

– Electronic Resource Librarian, OH

”

Deeper understanding of historical and cultural context (25% of responses)

Many librarians observed students expressing deeper comprehension of historical events and cultural perspectives after engaging with primary sources. Students described realizing how context influences interpretation and reported a stronger grasp of how history is constructed through firsthand evidence.

“

...For example, students review files of materials concerning land transactions... The variety of documents, maps, plats, etc. provide the opportunity for critical thinking about how a research narrative can come together. It helps students to think about context, and "reading between the lines" about relationships. It allows students to see how researchers piece together their historical understanding from a variety of sources.

– Instruction and Outreach Librarian, SC

”

Improved critical thinking and analytical reasoning (23% of responses)

Librarians report students who commented on how primary sources encouraged them to analyze evidence more deeply, draw independent conclusions, and question assumptions.

“

I've watched a student looking for primary sources realize that in order to actually understand what they were looking at, they needed to learn more about the time period. Watching them piece it together was real time critical thinking and analysis, and it was driven by the materials they were reading, not by the assignment or the teacher.

– Information Literacy Librarian, MO

”

Findings highlight that non-humanities students tend to benefit from use of primary sources most by learning how to combine ideas and build strong arguments, while humanities students gain more confidence in finding, understanding, and interpreting primary sources. In other words, each group develops different skills based on how their fields approach research and learning.

Fig.9 Among non-humanities students, nearly half of librarians (48%) identify critical thinking and analytical skill development as the most common outcome of engaging with primary sources, with learning to evaluate evidence in historical context (39%) close behind. These top-ranked benefits are consistent with those observed for humanities students, though their order is reversed. Evidence evaluation (49%) slightly outpaces critical thinking and analysis (41%).

While non-humanities students are more likely to benefit from developing original interpretations and arguments grounded in evidence (35%), humanities students tend to emphasize greater confidence navigating collections as one of their top three outcomes (40%).

This pattern suggests a meaningful distinction in how students from different disciplinary areas approach and benefit from primary source engagement. Non-humanities students appear to apply primary sources in more outcome-oriented ways, using them to construct original interpretations and evidence-based arguments within analytical or applied research contexts. In contrast, humanities students tend to derive greater benefit from the process of discovery and exploration, emphasizing confidence and fluency in navigating collections as a key outcome.

Fig.9 In your experience, what are the top benefits students outside of humanities subjects gain when they successfully engage with primary sources in their research? (select up to three)

n=225		Row Total	Level of Students Served							Enrollment Size					
Value	Overall Percentage		Undergraduate	Graduate	Doctoral	Professional	CE or Adult	Distance or Online	Other	<1k	1k-4.9k	5k-9.9k	10k-19.9k	20k-39.9k	40k+
Critical Thinking and Analysis	48%	107	48%	50%	49%	54%	51%	59%	36%	31%	45%	56%	46%	57%	50%
Evidence Evaluation	39%	88	40%	45%	52%	52%	43%	50%	36%	23%	38%	42%	42%	47%	39%
Interpretive Reasoning	35%	78	36%	40%	39%	48%	32%	38%	36%	23%	34%	29%	33%	40%	61%
Build Transferable Skills	32%	71	33%	33%	38%	37%	35%	29%	21%	31%	33%	36%	21%	33%	33%
Collection Navigation	29%	65	29%	27%	26%	17%	32%	27%	29%	46%	26%	18%	36%	27%	33%
Confidence	27%	61	27%	28%	26%	27%	27%	27%	29%	35%	27%	27%	24%	30%	17%
Citation Ethics	27%	61	27%	28%	26%	27%	27%	27%	29%	35%	27%	27%	24%	30%	17%
Research Ownership	24%	54	23%	23%	21%	21%	23%	23%	29%	19%	23%	29%	30%	10%	33%
Recognize Source	23%	51	22%	24%	21%	23%	20%	17%	14%	15%	23%	33%	21%	20%	11%
Provenance	23%	51	22%	24%	21%	23%	20%	17%	14%	15%	23%	33%	21%	20%	11%
Other	1%	3	2%	1%	1%	2%	1%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	3%	0%

When analyzing primary source engagement beyond the humanities disciplines, data highlights how the social sciences (59%) emerge as a leading area of impact among this sample. The next five highest-ranking choices are all reported by roughly one-third of respondents, suggesting that while primary sources remain central to the humanities, their value is being increasingly recognized across other disciplines that also emphasize inquiry, evidence, and context.

Fig.10 The social sciences stand out as the clear leader, cited by a majority of librarians in this study (59%) as the discipline where students benefit most from primary source engagement. This rate is roughly 1.5 times higher than the next most frequently selected field, cultural and ethnic studies (40%).

A number of disciplines show broad consensus, with education (39%), political science and public policy (38%), arts and performing arts (37%), and journalism and communication (32%) each cited by about a third of respondents, supporting how perceived value of primary sources spans diverse areas of study.

Political science and public policy are particularly emphasized at institutions serving doctoral and professional students (55% each), suggesting that advanced-level research and civic inquiry heighten the relevance of primary sources in these programs.

Fig.10 Beyond the humanities, in which disciplines at your institution do students most often benefit from engaging with primary sources? (Select all that apply)

n=222		Row Total	Level of Students Served							Enrollment Size					
Value	Overall Percentage		Undergraduate	Graduate	Doctoral	Professional	CE or Adult	Distance or Online	Other	<1k	1k-4.9k	5k-9.9k	10k-19.9k	20k-39.9k	40k+
Social Sciences	59%	131	62%	62%	67%	67%	61%	63%	31%	42%	58%	58%	64%	62%	77%
Cultural & Ethnic Studies	40%	89	41%	42%	50%	53%	42%	42%	15%	31%	36%	38%	49%	48%	47%
Education	39%	86	39%	45%	43%	39%	42%	43%	39%	50%	28%	44%	39%	48%	35%
Political Science/Public Policy	38%	85	38%	43%	55%	55%	39%	40%	15%	8%	31%	38%	61%	48%	59%
Arts & Performing Arts	37%	81	38%	41%	46%	43%	34%	32%	8%	23%	39%	31%	42%	38%	47%
Journalism & Communication	32%	71	33%	44%	52%	51%	38%	37%	8%	15%	26%	40%	33%	41%	41%
Law & Legal Studies	28%	63	28%	33%	40%	45%	32%	29%	8%	12%	18%	18%	42%	48%	65%
Library & Information Science	14%	31	11%	17%	17%	28%	22%	14%	23%	19%	17%	4%	12%	14%	24%
Unsure	12%	26	12%	8%	10%	8%	7%	9%	31%	12%	11%	16%	12%	10%	6%
Other	8%	18	9%	8%	7%	10%	8%	11%	8%	8%	14%	4%	0%	7%	12%

Fig.11 Findings indicate that libraries most often rely on usage data and analytics (52%) as the primary mechanism for assessing the value and impact of primary sources, followed by faculty feedback and curriculum reviews (41%) and library instruction evaluations (37%).

This suggests a clear emphasis on quantitative evidence and course-embedded feedback loops over more formalized institutional or accreditation-driven assessments. However, the relatively low incidence of reported use of external benchmarks (17%) and graduate student success indicators (20%) implies that evaluation practices remain largely internal in focus and operational, rather than comparative or outcome-based.

Fig.11 At your institution, what mechanisms are used to gauge graduate success and provide funding support for primary sources? (select all that apply)

n=218		Row Total	Level of Students Served							Enrollment Size					
Value	Overall Percentage		Undergraduate	Graduate	Doctoral	Professional	CE or Adult	Distance or Online	Other	<1k	1k-4.9k	5k-9.9k	10k-19.9k	20k-39.9k	40k+
Usage Data and Analytics	52%	113	53%	54%	55%	52%	46%	57%	17%	31%	47%	56%	67%	52%	65%
Faculty Feedback and Curriculum Reviews	41%	89	42%	48%	51%	56%	39%	44%	0%	27%	42%	35%	58%	33%	53%
Library Instruction Evaluations	37%	80	36%	47%	44%	44%	39%	41%	17%	31%	35%	40%	36%	41%	41%
Accreditation or Program Review Requirements	34%	75	34%	37%	38%	38%	42%	46%	25%	23%	28%	35%	42%	48%	41%
Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes	31%	67	30%	31%	34%	38%	30%	35%	25%	27%	31%	23%	21%	48%	47%
Allocations/Institutional Priorities	31%	67	31%	35%	38%	46%	30%	32%	25%	27%	35%	23%	24%	44%	29%
Graduate Student Success Indicators	20%	44	21%	31%	34%	40%	27%	33%	8%	8%	15%	26%	18%	26%	41%
External Benchmarks and Peer Comparisons	17%	36	17%	19%	23%	32%	23%	25%	8%	12%	7%	14%	24%	33%	29%
Other	9%	20	9%	7%	8%	10%	12%	8%	42%	15%	8%	7%	3%	11%	18%

Welcome! Thank you for taking part in this survey on the role of primary resources in academic research libraries. Our study seeks to better understand how librarians at these institutions support student engagement with primary sources, how these materials are integrated into research and instruction, and what challenges and opportunities exist in collection development and funding.

What level of students does your institution primarily serve? (select all that apply)

- Undergraduate Students (associate or bachelor's level)
- Graduate Students (master's level)
- Doctoral Students (PhD or equivalent research degrees)
- Professional School Students (e.g., law, medicine, business, divinity)
- Continuing Education or Adult Learners
- Distance/Online-only Students
- Other (please specify)

What is the size of student enrollment at your institution?

- <1,000
- 1,000-4,999
- 5,000-9,999
- 10,000-19,999
- 20,000-39,999
- 40,000+

Which of the following best describes your role?

- Access Services/Circulation Librarian
- Archivist/Special Collections Librarian
- Assistant University Librarian
- Cataloguing/Metadata Librarian
- Data Services Librarian
- Department Head/Manager/Administrator
- Electronic Resource Librarian
- Head of Acquisitions/Collections
- Information Literacy Librarian
- Instruction Coordinator Librarian
- Library Director
- Outreach/Engagement Librarian
- Reference and Research Librarian
- Subject Specialist/Liaison Librarian
- Systems/Technology Librarian
- Other (please specify)

Where is your institution/place of work located?

- [Dropdown menu] – US States/Canada/Other International

How many undergraduate students understand what a primary source is when beginning their courses at your institution?

- All
- Most
- Some
- Very few
- None
- Unsure

In your experience, how are students at your institution being guided to primary resources?

- In-class instruction (by faculty/instructors/librarians)
- One-on-one consultation with a librarian
- Assignments or projects explicitly requiring primary sources
- Peer or study group guidance
- Self-directed exploration
- Other (please specify)

At your institution, what methods are librarians specifically using to guide students to primary resources? (select all that apply)

- Course-integrated instruction sessions (e.g., definitions, types, use cases)
- Creating/maintaining online guides (e.g., tutorials or asynchronous learning tools)
- Collaborating with faculty (e.g., co-designing assignments, emphasis on primary resources)
- Outreach and promotion of digital/special collections (e.g., highlighting access, relevance, context)
- Workshops/Orientation on discovery and access tools (e.g., intro to archives and special collections)
- Other (please specify)

Can you elaborate more on what strategies have been most effective in engaging students and helping them become more confident when working with primary sources?

OPEN-END _____

How often do students at your institution engage with primary sources as part of their coursework?

- Very frequently (in most courses)
- Frequently (in several courses)
- Occasionally (in some courses)
- Rarely (in one or two courses)
- Never
- Unsure
- Other (please specify)

What types of primary sources are students using most often? (select all that apply)

- Government records and legal documents
- Letters, diaries, or personal papers
- Newspapers and periodicals
- Oral histories or interviews
- Visual materials (photographs, maps, posters, art)
- Unsure
- Other (please specify)

Can you share any specific feedback you've received from a student who has successfully integrated primary sources into their research and learning assignments?

OPEN-END _____

In your experience, what are the top benefits students gain when they successfully engage with primary sources in their research? (select up to three)

- Build transferable skills for advanced study or professional research
- Construct original interpretations and arguments from evidence
- Develop stronger critical thinking and analytical skills
- Enhance information literacy by citing and using sources ethically
- Gain confidence in navigating archives, databases, and special collections
- Increase engagement and ownership of the research process
- Learn to evaluate evidence within historical and cultural context
- Recognize how primary sources are created, preserved, and accessed
- Other (please specify)

At your institution, how often do students in disciplines outside the humanities, history, or liberal arts (e.g., STEM, business, social sciences, professional programs) engage with primary sources as part of their coursework or research?

- Very frequently (in most courses)
- Frequently (in several courses)
- Occasionally (in some courses)
- Rarely (in one or two courses)
- Never
- Unsure
- Other (please specify)

What types of primary sources are students in these fields using most often? (select all that apply)

- | | |
|--|--|
| • Archival documents and manuscripts | • Oral histories or interviews |
| • Data sets | • Visual materials (photographs, maps, posters, art) |
| • Government records and legal documents | • Unsure |
| • Letters, diaries, or personal papers | • Other (please specify) |
| • Newspapers and periodicals | |

In your own words can you share examples of how working with primary sources has strengthened students' skills (i.e., critical thinking, analysis, or historical understanding)?

OPEN-END _____

In your experience, what are the top benefits students outside of humanities subjects gain when they successfully engage with primary sources in their research? (select up to three)

- Build transferable skills for advanced study or professional research
- Construct original interpretations and arguments from evidence
- Develop stronger critical thinking and analytical skills
- Enhance information literacy by citing and using sources ethically
- Gain confidence in navigating archives, databases, and special collections
- Increase engagement and ownership of the research process
- Learn to evaluate evidence within historical and cultural context
- Recognize how primary sources are created, preserved, and accessed
- Other (please specify)

Approximately what percentage of your library's expenditure on primary source collections is dedicated to STEM-related disciplines?

- <10%
- 11–20%
- 21–30%
- 31–40%
- 41–50%
- 51–74%
- 75%+
- Unsure

Beyond the Humanities, in which disciplines at your institution do students most often benefit from engaging with primary sources? (Select all that apply)

- Arts & Performing Arts (art history, visual arts, music, theater, dance)
- Cultural & Ethnic Studies
- Education
- Journalism & Communication
- Law & Legal Studies
- Library & Information Science
- Political Science & Public Policy
- Social Sciences (anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, geography)
- STEM Fields
- Unsure
- Other (please specify)

At your institution, what mechanisms are used to gauge graduate success and provide funding support for primary resource procurement?

- Accreditation or Program Review Requirements (evidence of student engagement with primary sources)
- Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (e.g., integration of primary source literacy into course or program-level outcomes)
- Available Budget Allocations or Institutional Priorities (strategic funding linked to research needs)
- External Benchmarks and Peer Comparisons (ARL statistics, ACRL metrics, or discipline-specific standards)
- Faculty Feedback and Curriculum Reviews (input on student performance and resource needs)
- Graduate Student Success Indicators (completion rates, theses/dissertations citing primary sources)
- Library Instruction Evaluations (surveys or assessments following primary source workshops or sessions)
- Usage Data and Analytics (database usage, digital collection access, circulation of archival materials)
- Other (please specify)