Evaluating Trends in Instruction Scheduling Management: A Survey of Louisiana's Academic Libraries

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Abstract

This study analyzed the data of a survey on Louisiana's academic libraries and their instruction scheduling management. This data was used to evaluate trends, benefits, and limitations in these strategies. The survey asked participants to identify their teaching scenarios and scheduling software, and to provide feedback about that software. Analysis of data from 13 libraries revealed flexibility in teaching responsibilities and locations. However, responsibility for scheduling fell on directors and individual librarians using mostly lower-tech software, having not changed strategies in the past five years. Libraries should consider periodic reevaluation of their scheduling strategies and options. It is also suggested that libraries collect data on the labor invested in scheduling instruction sessions to advocate for resources to make necessary changes. More research is needed to uncover national trends and establish which strategies work best for libraries based on sizing, staffing, budget, and instruction volume.

Keywords: information literacy instruction; scheduling; academic library management

Technology is changing at a rapid pace. Despite any new advancements in technologies used for the practice of teaching and other areas of librarianship, one area appears to remain fairly undeveloped: software used in managing schedules for library instruction. Instruction programs in academic libraries are growing and transitioning; libraries are changing how, where, and who teaches. Developing programs such as First-Year Experience and Writing Across the Curriculum have increased demands for library instruction (Walter, 2008, p. 65). Emerging roles such as subject liaison, student success, online learning, and instructional design librarians are further shifting and complicating that landscape. Between 2007 and 2017, instruction sessions at Association of Research Libraries institutions increased by 16.3% (Association of Research Libraries, n.d.)[1].

Despite this growth, options for technologies to manage those programs have not grown with them. Existing technologies are either not designed with libraries as the end user or may still lack necessary features. In addition, funding is also not necessarily on pace with this expansion, and this can limit which management software options are available to libraries. As a result, those who manage instruction are often forced to work with what they have.

At the authors' institution, library instruction sessions have continually increased, as has the number of instruction staff. Space limitations have affected where those sessions are held, and a directive encouraging collaboration has affected teaching responsibilities. As a result, this led to a complicated set of potential teaching scenarios that the library's scheduling strategy was unable to accommodate. In 2017, a coordinator

[1] Retrieved from Annual Library Statistics of Association of Research Libraries. Sum of Group Presentations in 2007 was 105,075; in 2017, there were 122,200.

was hired to take responsibility of scheduling sessions, a task that had previously been a significant time investment for the head of the department and the individual instruction librarians. The library switched to a new software, but the authors were still unsatisfied with its limitations. They reviewed the websites of peer libraries and discovered that most seemed to be using in-house contact forms that would then be e-mailed to a staff member or members, but this strategy did not appear to cater to the needs of the authors' library. Little literature significantly addresses this issue, so the authors conducted a study in 2018 to capture a sample of instruction scheduling strategies in academic libraries.

This article will detail findings on Louisiana's academic libraries' instruction scheduling strategies, identifying who handled instruction scheduling, what their instruction scenarios were, and what software they were using to manage it. Based on the authors' initial searching, it was projected that Louisiana libraries would use similar software and share similar concerns. The premise of the survey was to gain insight into these strategies. Conversations surrounding instruction scheduling in academic libraries can reveal inefficiencies in time and labor, and can help advocate for necessary tools.

Literature Review

Library instruction management can be labor-intensive. Library staff report that they are already stretched thin and struggle to balance instruction with their other job duties. This is especially true for libraries with smaller staff or staff covering multiple positions; in some cases, staffing shortages lead to the lack of an instruction program at all (Julien, Gross, & Latham, 2018, p. 188; Tritt & Kendrick, 2014, p. 3). Collecting data on preparation time can identify the "hidden labor" in instruction management, which can be used to leverage increased funding for resources or staffing (Izenstark & Belanger,

2012, p. 2). A national survey of academic libraries in the Republic of Ireland revealed that a majority of institutions have a staff member responsible for the coordination of instruction programs, but it is unclear if that person acts as manager for the scheduling process (McGuinness, 2009, p. 271). Another national survey conducted in the United States has addressed who is responsible for teaching instruction sessions, but does not address who is responsible for coordinating those sessions (Julien et al., 2018, p. 182). Both surveys focused on instruction in academic libraries, but only briefly discussed instruction scheduling management. A case study from Mount Aloysius College Library noted their use of Google Forms, Calendars, and Sheets for instruction scheduling. Because those are not fully automated, scheduling responsibility fell on their secretary, who assigned requests to librarians based on subject liaisons and availability (Smith, 2015, p. 95). However, this case study focused on how these tools were applied to various tasks within the library, only briefly discussing their use for instruction scheduling management.

Beyond staffing, time constraints also create significant challenges. Lack of time is an issue, particularly toward the beginning of a semester when faculty place most instruction requests (Julien et. al. 2018, p. 187). Corresponding with faculty to gather information necessary to plan an instruction session can be a time-consuming and often last-minute process (Julien, Tan, & Merillat, 2013, p. 98; Staley, 2007, p. 104; Nelson, 2016, p. 58). In Julien et. al.'s (2018) survey of national instruction practices, a majority of staff other than full-time instructional staff spent at least a quarter of their time on instruction at the beginning of the semester, and still spent a considerable amount of their time later on. While a great deal of time goes into lesson planning and the development

of learning tools, a significant amount of time is spent on managing these programs behind the scenes.

Cost can also limit available options for instruction scheduling software. Where cost is an issue, libraries have employed free platforms such as online surveys and Google Forms (Staley, 2007; Parrigin, 2017, p. 14; Tritt & Kendrick, 2014, p. 4). Cloud-based software has its advantages in providing transparent availability for scheduling (Luo, 2012, p. 157). However, free software is not as customizable as its more expensive counterparts. It often serves as a "stopgap measure" until a better solution -- or more resources -- comes along (Izenstark & Belanger, 2012, p. 4; Parrigin, 2017, p. 15).

Even still, more expensive tools such as Springshare's LibCal still lack some of the needed features for some library instruction programs (Nelson, 2016). The most customizable software is developed in-house. However, while these management systems are more adaptable, they require a substantial amount of staff time and expertise to develop and maintain (Izenstark & Belanger, 2012, p. 4). Some libraries mitigate costs through their institution's own in-house management system, but this involves waiting for an institution to create a platform if one does not already exist and such a system may still not be customizable to fit the library's needs (Izenstark & Belanger, 2012, p. 4).

Flexibility is an important feature as instruction programs grow and student needs change (Parrigin 2017, p. 14; Izenstark & Belanger, 2012, p. 4). Customization capabilities that allow library staff to gather all necessary information and save time for teaching faculty and librarians streamlines the process (Nelson, 2016; Tritt & Kendrick, 2014, p. 4). Assessment is a growing area of focus for academic libraries, and with that, a need for systems that are integrated throughout the "library instruction lifecycle" -- from

scheduling to post-instruction assessment -- is paramount, although many systems are not well-integrated (Parrigin, 2017, p. 16; Izenstark & Belanger, 2012, p. 1).

Despite any shortcomings these strategies may have, library staff seem to be relatively satisfied with their current tools (Izenstark & Belanger, 2012). However, there is an openness to exploring other libraries' instruction scheduling strategies as an area where change is needed (Izenstark & Belanger, 2012). The library discourse surrounding instruction scheduling, while frequent in informal conversations among librarians, is lacking in the professional scholarship and likewise, lacking in answers (Parrigin, 2017). The existing scholarship is either dated, or focused on entire library instruction programs, either only briefly addressing scheduling or focusing more on pedagogy; little literature addresses who manages instruction behind the scenes and how. This is a burgeoning area of scholarship; the first survey of instructional practices in academic libraries in the United States was just published this year (Julien et. al., 20189).

Method

The aim of the study was to develop an overview of instruction scheduling in Louisiana's academic libraries. To capture a broad picture of the practice, the authors designed the survey with a mix of multiple-choice and free-response questions. These questions were designed to gather information on how instruction is scheduled, the efficacy of those strategies, and how instruction scheduling has or has not changed over time. Participants were asked who teaches instruction sessions, who coordinates scheduling, and where instruction sessions are held to gather information about scenarios that may lead to more complex or more simplified scheduling efforts. Identifying information, such as the participant's name or job title; the number of students or staff at

the institution; and which institution at which the participant worked, was not gathered.

The authors chose to conduct a focused study on libraries at institutions of higher education in Louisiana. Potential participants were identified from a list of colleges and universities in the state through The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The authors then located and selected participants from the library webpages that had a visible presence of an instruction program (either through the listing of an instruction librarian in their directory or through the presence of research guides, instruction booking forms, or verbiage referencing the ability to book instruction sessions). To aid in this effort, a question was added to the survey asking participants about the presence of instruction in their libraries; 'no' responses would end the survey.

The survey was then e-mailed to the designated instruction librarian, coordinator, public services/reference services manager, dean/director, or when otherwise no other contact information could be found, the general reference e-mail for the library. This was sent out to 37 potential participants in April of 2018. The e-mail contained an invitation to participate and a link to the survey, which was created using Springshare's LibWizard. A reminder was sent in May of 2018.

At the conclusion of the survey, the authors exported the results to a spreadsheet for analysis; as the survey consisted of both multiple-choice and free-response questions, the results were analyzed through both qualitative and quantitative analysis, as appropriate. Free response questions were sorted into categories.

Results

Out of 37 invitations, roughly 35 percent of librarians or library staff (n=13) who

were contacted responded, which was determined to be enough data to draw conclusions. All 13 respondents currently offer information literacy/research skills instruction. Results for who currently handles library instruction scheduling and how are presented in Table 1. Results were mixed; the majority of respondents have either librarians handle their own requests or they are handled by a library director, while several others have an instruction coordinator or equivalent staff member. Respondents could choose more than one option for how library instruction in scheduled. Most respondents used e-mail and calendars, with several others using Springshare products.

Table 1

Who currently handles the scheduling of library instruction sessions for your library?		**How do you currently schedule library instruction? Select all that apply.**	
Individual librarians handle their own requests	4	E-mail and calendars	10
Library Director	4	Springshare (LibWizard, LibCal, LibStaffer, etc.)	4
Instruction coordinator or equivalent staff member	3	Google Suite (Google forms, Google Calendar, etc.)	1

Head of instruction/reference/research	1	Survey from software such as SurveyMonkey	0
Other	1 (Specific librarians at each campus)	In-house-created program	0
		Scheduling software such as Doodle, When2Work, etc.	0
		Other	1: Online web form located on the school's website (Drupal)

Participants were also asked how instruction responsibilities were assigned and where those sessions were held, presented in Table 2. Results were mixed; respondents primarily had liaison librarians teaching designated classes, one librarian teaching all classes, or gave faculty the option to choose a librarian or be randomly assigned one. A majority of respondents offered flexible locations, teaching in a library space or the regularly assigned classroom.

Table 2

How are instruction responsibilities assigned?	**Where are instruction sessions held?**

Classes are taught by the designated liaison librarian for that class	5	Either a library space OR the class' regular classroom space, depending.	11
Classes are all taught by one person	4	One or more library spaces dedicated solely for library instruction	2
Faculty can choose a librarian OR can be randomly assigned a librarian	3	One or more multi-use library spaces	0
Classes are randomly assigned to librarian/assigned based on availability	1	The class' regular classroom space	0
Faculty choose one librarian from a list to teach the class	0	Other	0
Faculty list preferences from a list to teach the class	0		
Other	0		

A small majority of participants had not changed their instruction scheduling strategies over the past five years. Responses of how it had changed or how it had not are presented in Table 3. The five who responded that they had changed were then given a free response field to describe how. The authors categorized the responses as such: three

moved from e-mail and calendars to SpringShare; one created an online form; and one had changed who taught and how the sessions were scheduled. Of the eight who had not changed, four had instruction volume low enough to be satisfied with what they had, three had no problems with their current software, and two found other options too expensive. Participants could select more than one response.

Table 3

If the strategy for handling instruction requests changed over the past 5 years, how?*		**If it has not changed, why not?**	
Moved from e-mail calendars to Springshare	3	Our instruction volume is low enough that we don't need to change	4
Created online form	1	We have no problems with our current software	3
Changed in who teaches and how its scheduled	1	Other software is too expensive	2
		We haven't found any alternatives that fit our needs perfectly	1
		Setting up new software is too time-consuming/no one to set it up	1
		We're used to this software	0
		Other	0

*This was a free response question; the responses were categorized by the authors.

Respondents were asked to provide their feedback in free responses regarding what worked well with their scheduling strategies and what limitations they experienced. Those responses were grouped into categories and are presented in Table 4. Only 54% (n=7) of participants responded with either complaints or benefits. For concerns, two noted that requesters were not using their form, two wanted a more automated system, one noted a confusing interface and a time-consuming process, one noted staffing limitations, one noted that requesters could not book more than one request at a time, and two had no complaints. When asked what worked well their strategies, two liked that they had direct faculty interaction; two liked that their system archived instruction statistics; one liked that it served as a single access point; and one noted that they were able to get instruction requests to the right staff member. One enjoyed the lack of long e-mail threads and transparent scheduling availability, and one simply noted that they liked what they were doing.

Table 4

What are the current complaints/limitations/concerns you have with your current strategy? *		**What works well with your current strategy? ***	
People aren't using form	2	Direct faculty interaction	2
More automated system desired	2	Archives instruction statistics	2
Confusing interfaces, time consuming	1	Single access point	1
Staffing limitations	1	Avoids long e-mail chains, transparent availability	1

Can't book more than one class at a time	1	Small staff; requests don't get lost	1
None	2	I like it	1
*This was a free response question; the responses were categorized by the authors.			

Discussion

In conducting this survey, the authors hypothesized that Louisiana's academic libraries would have employed similar instruction scheduling strategies and have similar concerns about those strategies, but the results show several differences, as well as unexpected trends. When evaluating who handles instruction requests, a trend emerged: the majority of respondents have individual librarians or a library director doing this work. For these respondents, the data suggest that instruction volume is low enough for scheduling to be a manageable task, instruction scenarios are not complicated enough to need a coordinator, or these staff members simply place value on direct, individualized contact with faculty. Another finding was that there were other institutions in Louisiana outside of the authors' that have an instruction coordinator handling instruction requests, suggesting growing instruction programs and the labor that goes into managing them.

The majority of respondents used free software such as e-mail, calendars, and Google products. These tools require little technology expertise to set up and maintain and are familiar to librarians, so they are a natural choice for many libraries. Others used Springshare products. Many libraries already subscribe to LibGuides as their research guide platform. The data suggest that familiarity with the product has led to several Louisiana libraries adopting more of the Springshare suite of products to manage their

instruction. As Izenstark and Belanger suggest, instruction management systems are not typically well-integrated, so the use of Springshare products may be to take advantage of the streamlining that occurs when products (e.g. LibCal, LibWizard) communicate with each other. Based on the strategies that seemed to be employed at the authors' peer institutions, it was assumed that many respondents would be using an in-house-created contact form. However, only one respondent used such a form; their instruction scenarios may be complicated enough to warrant that labor or their staff may have the expertise to build a form regardless.

The majority of respondents noted that subject liaisons had responsibility for teaching at their institutions, which aligns with Walter's narrative that such roles have been expanding. The four respondents who had one librarian teaching all instruction sessions at their libraries may represent low volume or low staffing at those institutions. Three respondents selected that faculty could either choose a librarian or be randomly assigned one. Additionally, nearly every respondent also offered instruction either in their libraries or in the class' regular space. Both of these selections may reflect the increasing flexibility of modern library instruction programs. However, teaching outside of the library may not necessarily be a choice and may instead reflect lack of adequate teaching spaces within the library.

The majority of respondents have not changed their instruction scheduling strategy over the past five years. Those who had changed had migrated to Springshare, developed their own form, or had changes in staffing. Although Nelson addresses a few shortcomings in his review of LibCal, Springshare has made changes and developments to their platforms over the past few years. These changes make it a more attractive option

for those who can afford it, although it does still lack some needed customization capabilities. For those whose staffing has changed, it is unclear if this is the result of cuts or simply changing roles. Many reported that their volume was low enough that they did not need to change their strategy. The volume could be low because of low full-time enrollment or the institution does not emphasize library instruction, but this could also be the result of low staffing. Many others noted no problems with their current strategies, which may reflect less complicated instruction scenarios or adequate staffing to handle requests. Others noted cost as a factor, which shows that for many, the free options are a stopgap measure until more funding comes along. However, those who are constrained by budgets are clearly looking at more expensive options, which signifies an openness to adopt other options in the future. One respondent cited the time-consuming nature of setting up and running new software, which may speak to low staffing or a lack of staffing with the right expertise. One other respondent mentioned that they were not able to find a suitable alternative for their needs, emphasizing the need for software that is flexible and designed with academic libraries in mind.

Respondents addressed several limitations and concerns with current strategies. Some libraries reported that faculty were not using their request form. This could mean that the form was not user-friendly, but it might also suggest that faculty were accustomed or preferred to interact directly with librarians. The majority mentioned that their systems were not automated, were confusing, or were lacking in necessary features; as Parrigin suggested, there is a need for systems that streamline the process and communicate, especially when data is being gathered throughout the "library instruction lifecycle". One mentioned that the interface was confusing for library staff, which may

cause staff to fall back on less confusing strategies, even if they are less efficient. Although the question was optional, *two* respondents marked that they had no concerns. However, when asked why strategies had not changed, *three* respondents marked that they had no problems with their current strategy. This discrepancy can be explained by either the outlying respondent not considering their aspirations for a different strategy a concern, or the different language used in those two questions caused misunderstandings.

While libraries expressed some concerns with their strategies, they also highlighted some benefits. Many reported that they enjoyed the direct faculty-librarian interactions that came with their strategy, which presumably did not involve automation. Others noted that their strategies streamlined the process by delivering requests to the right staff member, serving as a single access point for requests, eliminating back-and-forth e-mails, and providing transparent availability. The latter benefit mirrors a similar response to Luo's survey of cloud-based tool use. It is interesting to note that while some respondents enjoyed direct faculty interaction through e-mail, others noted automating this process as a benefit, further highlighting varying preferences and needs between libraries. Growing demands for assessment of instruction call for statistics, and two respondents liked that their strategies allowed them to archive those statistics. Both questions addressing limitations and benefits were made optional; as a result, roughly 54% (n=7) of respondents answered at least one of those questions. Results might have included more feedback had responses to those questions been required.

Because the responses to the survey were anonymous, there are some limitations. Individual participants' responses are not presented together, so connections cannot be drawn between answers. In addition, since no information about number of staff, student

enrollment, budget, or volume of instruction was requested, the reasoning behind any of these responses can only be left to informed speculation. Louisiana is a small state with institutions that sit close to either end of the size spectrum; therefore, this information was anonymized because participants could be identified by their responses. However, there is value in imagining any of the given scenarios behind these responses. As the data have shown, there is some variance in instruction scheduling strategies, even between thirteen institutions in one state. Any number of circumstances may occur in a library instruction program, and the strategies for handling scheduling can vary as much. Considering all potential circumstances emphasizes the finding that there is no "one size fits all" strategy for academic libraries.

While this survey illuminates the strategies employed by Louisiana's academic libraries and the issues they face in instruction scheduling, it is by no means representative of academic libraries nationwide. When asked, "How do you currently schedule library instruction?" 11 out of 16 responses indicated the use of free tools, which could reflect budgetary constraints that may be unique to Louisiana's academic libraries. Louisiana has 39 colleges and universities accredited by SACS, while Florida has 77; a similar survey conducted in Florida with a similar response rate would likely provide more homogenous responses, or at least responses from some institutions with similar strategies and issues. With 13 responses in a state where each of the institutions varies so greatly in size, staffing, and budget, those responses may be idiosyncratic. However, while these results are useful for identifying the issues and strategies unique to Louisiana's academic libraries, they also identify the need for a larger discussion that has yet to occur.

Conclusion

This survey has identified the diversity of instruction scheduling strategies within Louisiana's academic libraries. While the authors did find commonalities between their own strategy and those described by the respondents, no "perfect match" was found. Results from this survey indicated significant differences between each institution and some degree of dissatisfaction with those strategies. A larger discussion is needed to identify more suitable strategies for all institutions. Future research should be done on a national scale. This survey tool (Appendix A) can serve as a model for this research, but revisions are suggested. On a national scale, questions about student population size, staff size, volume of instruction, time spent handling instruction, budget, and what information is collected in requests should be included to help identify "peer problems."

With the finding that many of Louisiana's libraries had not changed their strategies in the past five years, and with technology changing more rapidly than ever, it is increasingly important for libraries to periodically reevaluate their scheduling software. Many libraries are currently using e-mail to schedule; this can be a fine solution when it works. However, there are an increasing number of options available at different price points, many of which cater specifically to libraries. Academic library staff should be encouraged to review more frequently and question why a certain strategy is employed. Even if the same strategy persists, it is important to keep track of the hidden labor behind scheduling to advocate for greater funding, staffing, and change.

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Appendix A

- Does your library currently offer information literacy/research skills instruction?
    - Yes
    - No
- How do you currently schedule library instruction? Select all that apply.
    - E-mail and calendars
    - Google suite (Google Forms, Google Calendar, etc.)
    - Survey form using software such as SurveyMonkey
    - Springshare (LibWizard, LibCal, LibStaffer, etc.)
    - In-house-created program
    - Scheduling software such as Doodle, When2Work, etc.
    - Other:

- How are instruction responsibilities assigned?
    - Classes are all taught by one person
    - Classes are taught by the designated liaison librarian for that class
    - Faculty choose one librarian from a list to teach the class
    - Faculty list preferences from a list to teach the class
    - Classes are randomly assigned to librarian/assigned based on availability
    - Faculty can choose a librarian OR can be randomly assigned a librarian
    - Other:

- Where are instruction sessions held?
    - One or more library spaces dedicated solely for library instruction
    - One or more multi-use library spaces
    - The class' regular classroom space
    - Either a library space OR the class' regular classroom space, depending
    - Other:

- Has the strategy for handling instruction requests changed over the past 5 years?
    - Yes
    - No
- If it has changed, how?

- If it has not changed, why not? Select all that apply.
    - We're used to this software
    - Other software is too expensive
    - We haven't found any alternatives that fit our needs perfectly
    - Setting up new software is too time-consuming/no one to set it up
    - Our instruction volume is low enough that we don't need to change

- We have no problems with our current software
- Other:

- What are the current complaints/limitations/concerns you have with your current strategy?

- What works well with your current strategy?