

Stanford Law School

Book Lovers Beware: A Survey of Online Research Habits of Stanford Law Students

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A Survey of Online Research Habits of Stanford Law Students

By

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Abstract:

The Robert Crown Law Library surveyed Stanford Law students for the past three years. One question that the survey treated was the percentage of research that students performed online. The following article summarizes the findings of that survey question over the three year period (2002-2004).

Table of Contents:

Introduction	p.4
2002 Survey	p.5
2003 Survey	p.7
2004 Survey	p.9
Conclusion	p.12

Introduction

The Stanford Law Library routinely conducts a survey of Stanford Law students every spring. The survey has included a variety of questions – from satisfaction with library staff to the preferences for tables over carrels. In 2002, a question was added to the survey about online research and what percentage of our students' research was conducted online. We were all quite curious how students would self-identify as online researchers. And, it should come as no surprise that the students described their research habits as primarily online. What did surprise us was the strength of their preference. We decided to include the same question in our survey last year and this year to see if there have been any changes in the self-perceived research habits of our students. This article summarizes the results of our survey for the past three years.

2002 Survey

In 2002, the library produced a fifteen question survey for law students. In early spring, the paper surveys were stuffed in law student mailboxes and made available at the reference desk and students returned the completed surveys to a box in the law library entrance.³ One hundred and eighty nine law students completed the survey.⁴

The online research question was worded as follows: “What percentage of your research was accomplished online?” The question included a range from zero to one hundred percent in ten percent intervals [0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%]; we asked the student to circle the percentage that best represented his/her answer. The results, as broken down by class year of respondent, are provided below in Table 1.

³ Students received a piece of candy upon submitting their survey.

⁴ Our survey population included first year, second year, third year and all advanced degree candidates at the law school. Stanford Law School enrolls approximately 550 full time students.

Table 1: 2002 Survey Responses to Online Research Question

Percentage of research performed	1L	2L	3L	Adv Deg	Total
0%	0	0	0	1	1
10%	0	0	1	0	1
20%	0	0	1	0	1
30%	1	1	4	1	7
40%	3	2	3	2	10
50%	2	5	4	2	13
60%	2	4	4	1	11
70%	7	10	8	2	27
80%	14	14	19	2	49
90%	19	15	15	2	51
100%	11	1	6	0	18

2002 Robert Crown Law Library Survey⁵

Most law students claimed that they did the majority of their research online. Only thirty-three students reported that they did 50% or less of their research online, accounting for 17.5% of the sample. One student, an advanced degree candidate, reported that 0% of his/her research was accomplished online.⁶ Nineteen percent of the first year class stated that they did 100% of their research online. And, 75% of the first year students claimed to perform 80% of their research online.⁷ And, looking at all of the law school students, 62% stated that

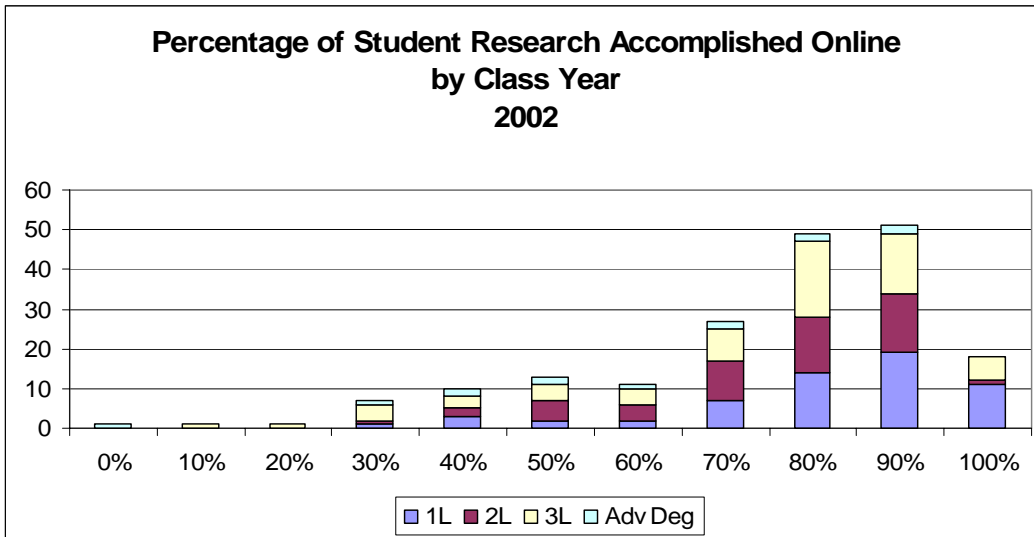
⁵ For this question, there were 59 1L respondents, 52 2L respondents, 65 3L respondents, and 13 advanced degree respondents.

⁶ At the time of this survey, all advanced degree students at Stanford Law School were foreign students, hailing from many countries around the world.

⁷ To get this number, we added the responses from choices of 80%, 90% and 100%.

they did 80% or more of their legal research online. A graphic representation of the 2002 preferences is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: 2002 Survey Responses to Online Research Question



2003 Survey

The 2003 survey was almost identical to the 2002 survey in length and format. The surveys were also placed in student mailboxes and students returned the finished surveys to a box in the law library.⁸ One hundred and fifty five students completed the survey in 2003 and 152 students answered the question about online research.

The online research question was worded the same as in 2002, “What percentage of your was accomplished online?” The answer choices were also the same as in

⁸ Students received a cookie upon submitting the completed survey.

2002; students were asked to circle the answer from a list of percentages, from zero to one hundred percent, in ten percent intervals. The results from the 2003 question, as broken down by class year, are provided in Table 3.

Table 3: 2003 Survey Responses to Online Research Question

Percentage of research performed Online	1L	2L	3L	Adv Deg	Total
0%	0	0	0	0	0
10%	0	0	0	0	0
20%	0	1	0	0	1
30%	0	0	0	1	1
40%	1	0	1	0	2
50%	3	4	2	3	12
60%	4	1	1	0	6
70%	8	3	10	2	23
80%	27	5	7	1	40
90%	38	6	5	1	50
100%	14	1	2	0	17

2003 Robert Crown Law Library Survey⁹

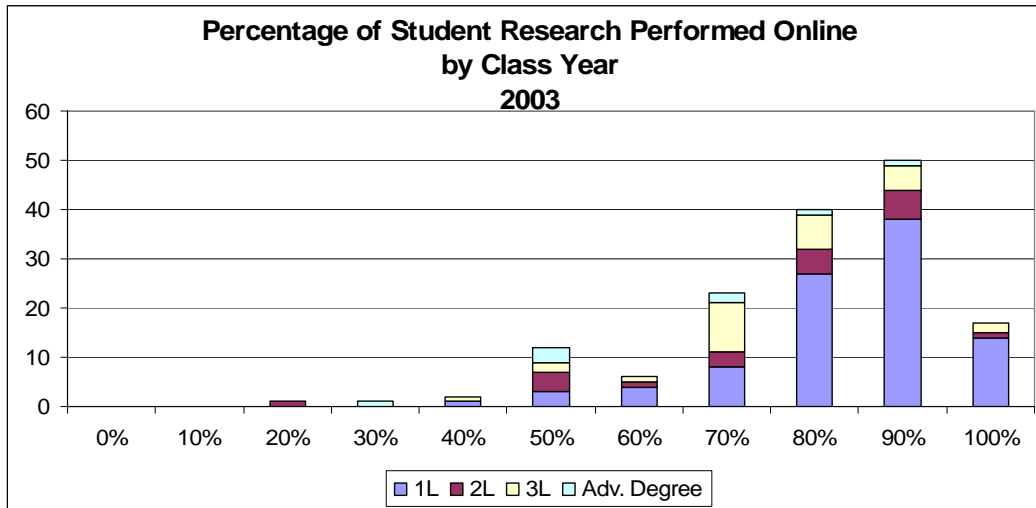
As with the 2002 results, the preference for online research is clear.

Fifteen percent of the first year students claimed that they accomplished 100% of their research online. Eighty-three percent of the first year students stated that they performed at least 80% of their research online.¹⁰ The rest of the law student classes also continued to have online preference; 70% of all law school students responding claimed that they did at least 80% of their research online. A graphic depiction of these numbers is represented in Table 4.

⁹ For the 2003 survey, the online research question had 97 1L responses, 21 2L responses, 29 3L responses and 8 advanced degree responses.

¹⁰ This number was derived by adding the responses that selected choices: 80%, 90% and 100%.

Table 4: 2003 Survey Responses to Online Research Question

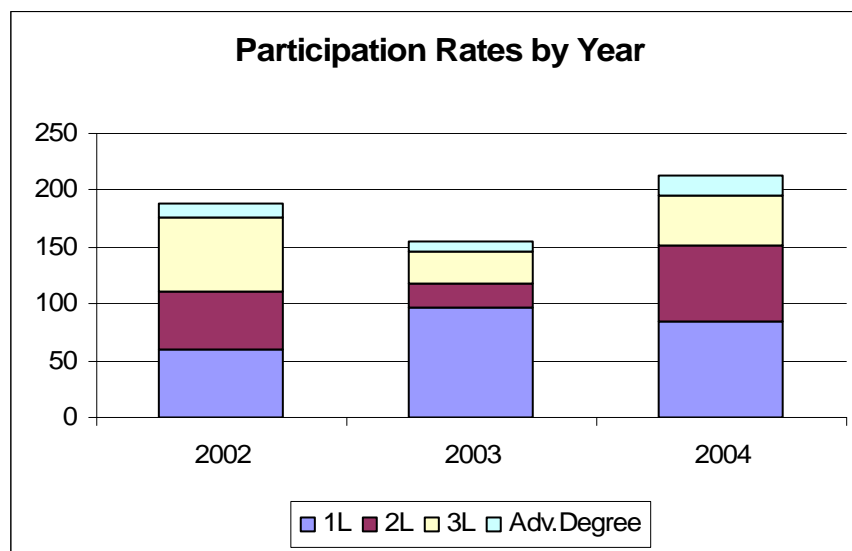


2004 Survey

In 2004, the survey format changed. Instead of a paper based survey, the library used a web survey tool, Zoomerang, to reach the students. The survey was available on the Zoomerang website for over a month in the spring. Through class based e-mail lists, the library e-mailed all law students with a link to the survey, and the library intranet site also posted a link to get into the survey. In addition, the librarians, who teach research as part of the first year legal research and writing program, announced the survey in class. In 2004, 216 law students completed the library survey and 213 students answered the online legal research question.

The librarians thought that the online survey would yield a higher response rate than the paper surveys from the prior years, and more students completed the online survey in 2004 than the paper surveys from the prior years. Considering the strength of student preferences for online resources, it is not surprising that the online survey had a slightly higher overall participation rate than previous surveys. Table 5 illustrates the number of respondents that answered the online research question during the past three years.

Table 5: Number of Responses, by Class & Year, 2002-2004



The wording for the online research question was the same as in the prior years; however, the answer choices for the students were slightly modified.¹¹

¹¹ One limitation of the Zoomerang survey tool is that for a given question, there can only be ten potential answers in a drop down menu. The range of 0% to 100% in ten percent intervals yielded eleven possible answer choices, one too many for Zoomerang. To deal with this hurdle, we consolidated the choices of 0% and 10% for an answer choice of 10% or less. Although this was

Students were asked to pick one answer from the following range of choices: 10% or less, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, 100%. The results, as broken down by class year, are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6: 2004 Survey Responses to Online Research Question

Percentage of research performed	1L	2L	3L	Adv Deg	Total
0-10%	0	0	0	0	0
20%	0	0	0	0	0
30%	0	0	4	0	4
40%	0	0	1	1	2
50%	0	1	1	4	6
60%	2	6	0	4	12
70%	4	9	4	3	20
80%	23	14	11	4	52
90%	44	33	16	1	94
100%	12	3	7	1	23

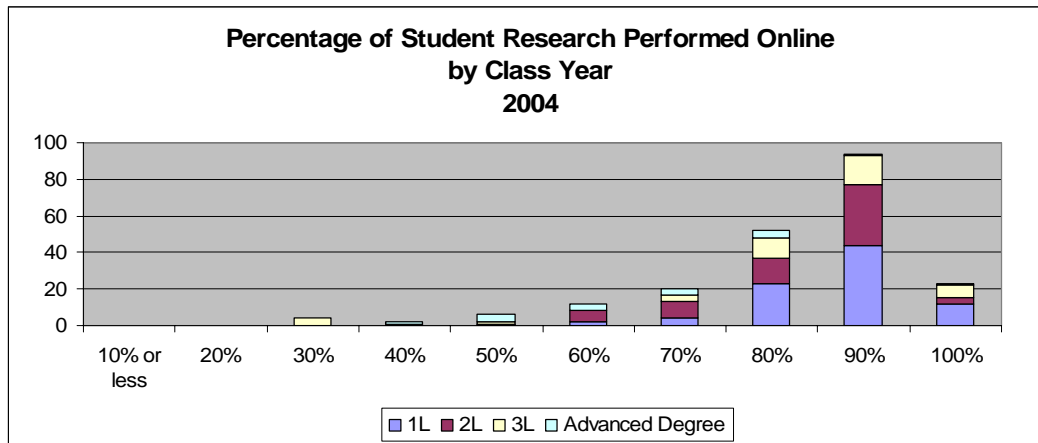
2004 Robert Crown Law Library Survey¹²

In 2004, the results continue to display the online research habits of law students. Of the first year students who replied to this question, 14% claimed to 100% of their research online. And, 93% of the first year students stated that they did at least 80% of their research online. The trend towards an online preference is also apparent in that 79% of all law students who replied stated that they accomplished at least 80% of their research online. The results for the 2004 survey are graphically displayed in Table 7.

not ideal, in 2002 and 2003, no students had selected either 0% or 10% as an answer and we felt that the consolidation of the two choices would not impact the results.

¹² For the 2004 online survey question, there were 85 1L responses, 66 2L responses, 44 3L responses and 18 advanced degree responses.

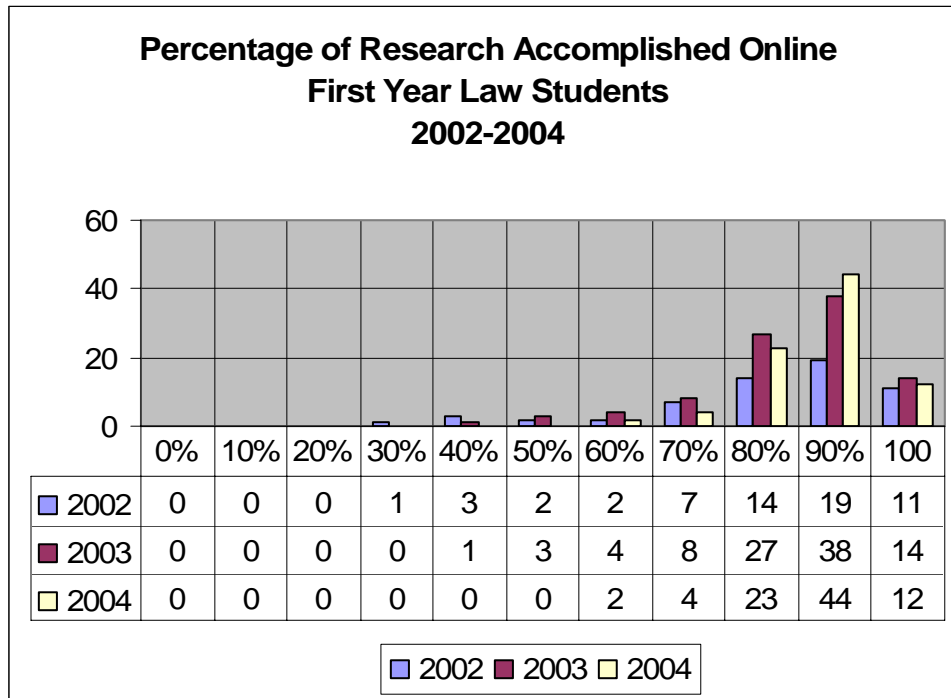
Table 7: 2004 Survey Responses to Online Research Question



Conclusion

Although different numbers of students replied to our survey over the years, a discernable and undeniable trend is apparent. First year students' survey results perhaps best indicate the trend in legal research. In 2002, 75% of the first year class stated that they performed at least 80% of their research online; in 2003, this percentage grew to 83%; and by 2004, the number had increased to 93% (see Table 8).

Table 8: First Year Law Student Responses to Online Research Question, 2002-2004

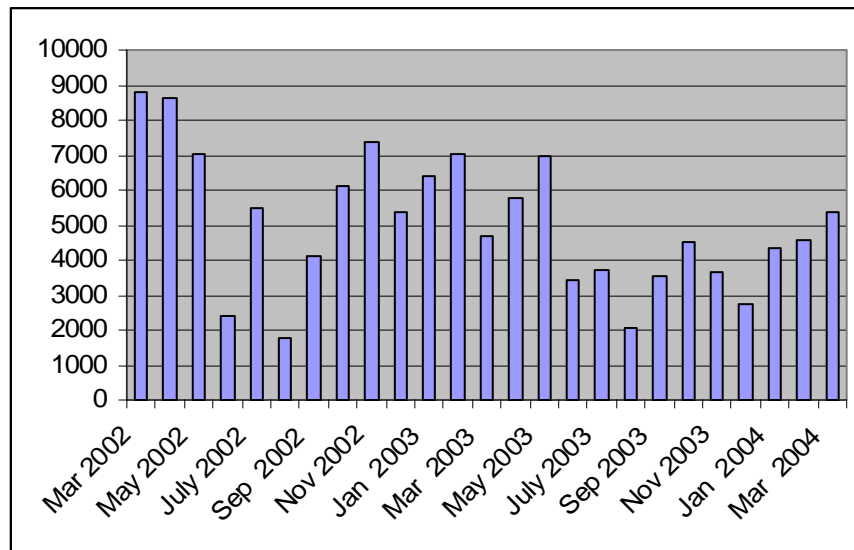


The reference librarians have long observed that students strongly favor electronic resources, and the survey results bear out this observation. When helping students with their research, we often will generate a bibliography of citations, some of which are available electronically and others of which exist only in print. Many students will only look at the online resources.

The survey results are also consistent with the library's declining circulation statistics. Table 9 displays the law library's circulation statistics from the spring of 2002 (when the library first asked the online research question in the survey) to the present. While some months show seasonal increases, the general

trend is one of declining circulation. In March of 2002, for example, the library circulated 8,816 items; in March of 2004, just 5,368 items circulated. Most months show a similar decline.

Table 9: Law Library Circulation Statistics, March 2002-March 2004



An amusing anecdote sheds some light on today's student and his/her research mind-set. Last year, early in the Legal Research & Writing course, the librarians divided each class into groups of four and each group was given the same task: find the statute of limitations for fraud in California. The law school classrooms are equipped with wireless connectivity and students are required to come to class with a laptop and WiFi card. To complete the assignment, one group was asked to use LEXIS; another group was told to use WESTLAW; the third group was told to use free Internet resources, and the fourth group was sent

to the library. The librarians assumed that the fourth group would use the print edition of the California codes or a paper treatise; instead, the fourth group made a beeline for the library computers, and "Googled" their way to the answer.