

Overview

After several years of providing access to its archival collections via an online finding aid website created using DLSX software, the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) partnered with the University of Wisconsin-Madison to expand the scope of the website to include contributors from throughout the University of Wisconsin System. The new shared website, *Archival Resources in Wisconsin*, went live in the spring of 2007.

Shortly thereafter, archival staff at the WHS identified ways in which we could become a more customer-focused organization. From this discussion, the need for a user study of the new finding aid site became apparent.

Project Goals

To study how our customers use EAD finding aids in an unmediated environment, and to use this data to inform future website improvements.

Project Planning

- Defined problems
- Identified sources of information
- Literature review
- Gathered in-house sources of data
- Solicited input from archives staff
- Selected methodologies
- Identified target users
- Created a “master list” of issues
- Ranked issues
- Designed research implements
- Recruited users

Three methodologies

Phase 1: Observational study
Phase 2: Focus group sessions
Phase 3: Online survey

Phases 1 and 2 were completed in April 2008, and used the same body of participants.

Phase 3 is scheduled for fall 2008.

Observational Study

26 users participated in the observational study, which included an entrance survey and exit survey.

The entrance survey collected demographic data and information on research habits and use.

The observational study was conducted in an instructional lab, with several participants completing the study concurrently. Each participant was assigned a tracker, who recorded the actions of the participant on a tracking sheet as he/she worked through a series of eight tasks. Each task was structured to answer one or more questions about the site.

Examples of the questions we were trying to answer include:

- Which finding aid view do users prefer—the outline view, full-text, or search terms in context?
- Are users able to print finding aids?
- Which search/browse options did users prefer?

The exit survey asked participants open-ended questions about what they did and did not like about the finding aid site.

Focus Group Sessions

15 of the 26 observational study participants returned the following week for a follow-up focus group session.

The sessions were informal but followed a set of loosely formed questions. The sessions allowed us to refine issues addressed in the observational study, and collect more qualitative feedback.

Collecting User Input on a Shared Finding Aid Site

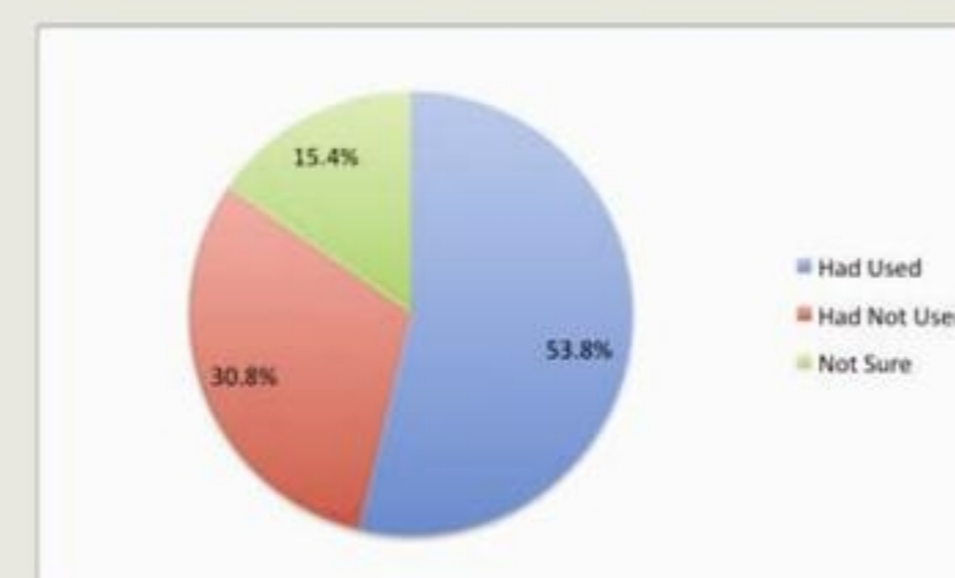


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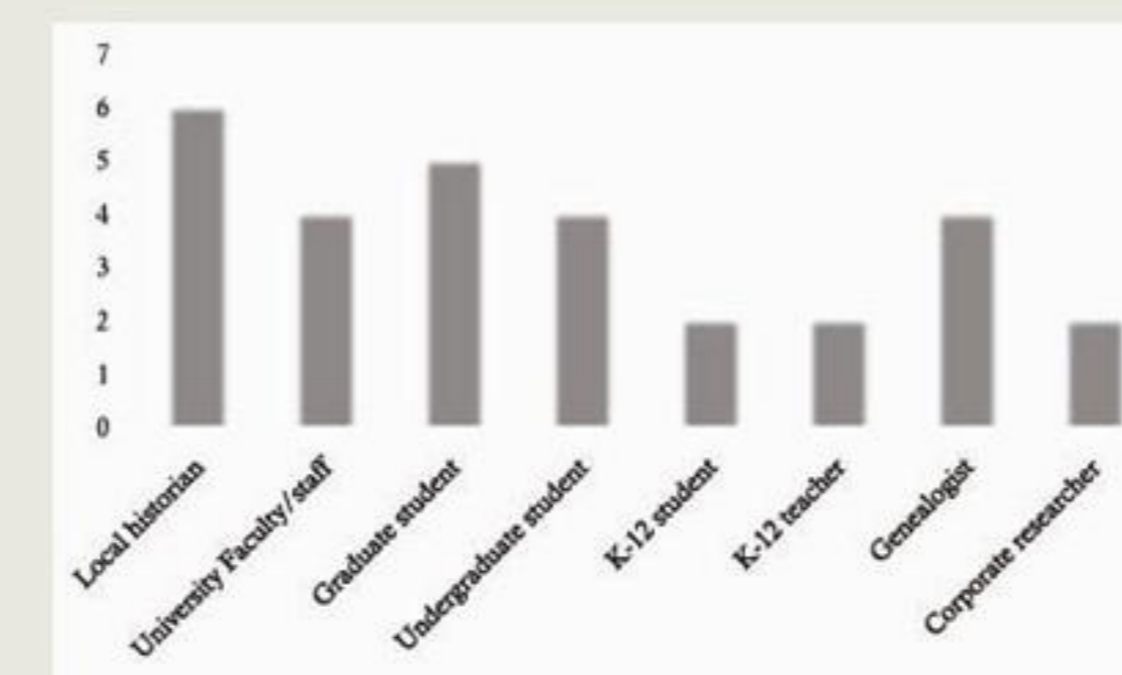
User Demographics

- 26 participants
- 85% had used the WHS archives in the past year (in person, via correspondence, or online)
- Approximately 1/3 had used paper finding aids before
- More than 2/3 had used online finding aids before

Participant Use of WHS Online Finding Aids Prior to Study

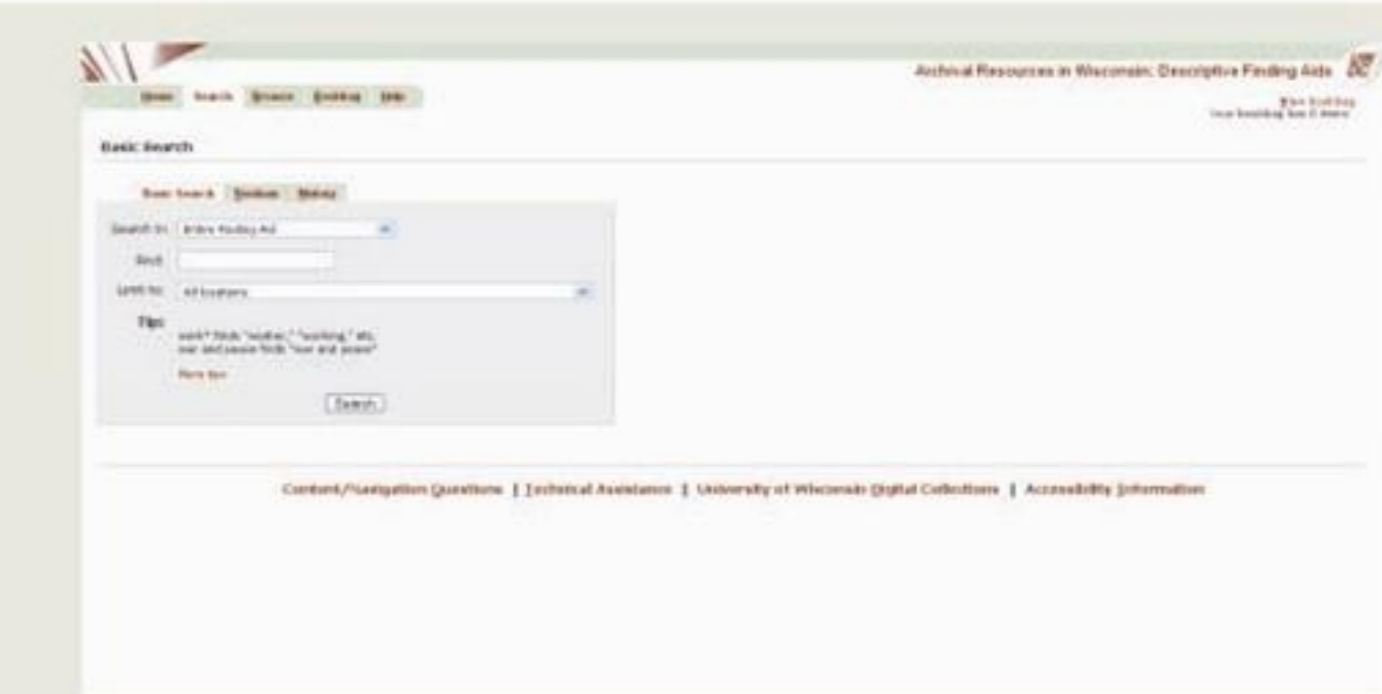


Participants by Type



Note: Users were self-identified, and some identified in more than one category

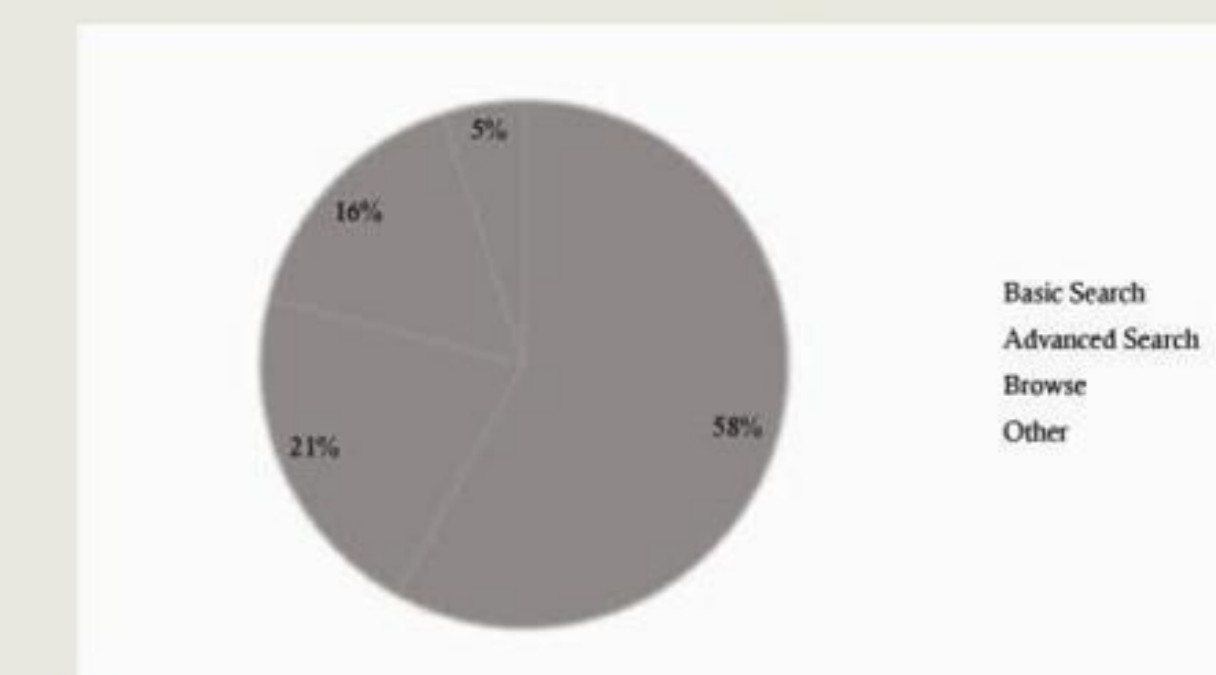
Initial Findings



Main Search Page of Archival Resources in Wisconsin

- Users did not find the browse function intuitive
- Users preferred the outline and full-text views over the search terms in context view
- Users were not adept at navigating and searching within individual finding aids
- Users did not understand the difference between different access tools (OPAC, finding aid site, WHS website)
- Users were confused by archival jargon such as “finding aid” and “scope and content note”
- Users were impressed by the breadth of resources available on the site

User Preference of Search and Browse Options



Conclusion

After completing a full qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data from the first two phases of the user study, an online survey will be mounted on the finding aid site. The purpose of the survey will be to solicit feedback from a broad base of remote users and follow-up on known issues discovered from the first two phases of the study.

After data from all the three phases has been analyzed, the data will be utilized by WHS archives staff and the University of Wisconsin System Archives Council EAD working group to make improvements to the existing finding aid site.

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<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/wiarchives>