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**Finding Government Resources Online:  
A Webometric Study of Selective Federal Depository Library Websites**

By Charity C. Park

Masters Research Project  
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Dr. Xinyu Yu

**Introduction**

Over eleven hundred libraries across the United States and its territories participate in the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) by providing public access to free government resources. In the last decade, there has been a significant shift as many government publications are being published only electronically. At the same time, several older physical collections are being digitized and made available online. This shift has caused many FDLP libraries to weed their older physical government document collections and increase their electronic holdings.

These changes have also resulted in updates to the requirements for libraries in the FDLP. According to the legal requirements of the FDLP, libraries in the program must identify their FDLP status on their websites. One rule states that a “depository of Federal government information may be visible through cataloging, information on Web pages, or other promotional efforts” (FDLP, 2018, p. 6)

The reduced size of physical government document collections in FDLP libraries often result in government document librarians taking on other duties, while the smaller collections become less visible to the public. At the same time, the massive amounts of electronic resources produced by the government are becoming harder to navigate as this information grows (Chun & Warner, 2010; Bertot, Gorham, Jaeger, Sarin, & Choi, 2014). The electronic government document records produced by the Government Publishing Office (GPO) increased from 10,580 in 2017 to 13,666 in 2018, a growth rate of twenty-three percent (GPO.gov, 2019).

The increasing electronic government publications can make researching these resources difficult without research guides and knowledgeable reference assistance. It is now more important than ever to provide access and online reference for these collections which are becoming more intangible every year.

***Purpose Statement***

This study examines how Federal depository libraries in the United States provide information about their government document collections and other government resources on their websites.

***Research Questions***

R1. How many Federal depository libraries in this study have government resource pages linked directly to the library’s homepage?

R2. How many Federal depository libraries in this study offer subject or research guides about their own government document collection?

R3. How many Federal depository libraries in this study offer information about, recommendations for, or links to government websites or external resources?

R4. How many libraries in this study have some other form of online reference services devoted to government resources on the library website?

***Definitions***

*Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP):*

“Established by Congress as part of the Printing Act of 1895 to assure access for the American public to government information, the FDLP authorizes the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) and

contractors to distribute without charge copies of federal government documents to designated depository libraries in the United States (and its territories) that agree to provide unrestricted access and professional assistance at no charge to the user.” (Reitz, 2017).

*LibGuide*: “An easy-to-use content management system deployed at thousands of libraries worldwide. Librarians use it to curate knowledge and share information, organize class and subject-specific resources, and to create and manage websites” (Springshare, 2018).

*Regional Federal Depository library*: “A depository library designated by Congress to receive and retain permanently in its collections one copy of each government publication distributed free of charge in any format through the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). Regional libraries are also responsible for serving other depository libraries in their region by providing copies of government documents as needed and by assisting in the fulfillment of depository regulations” (Reitz, 2017).

*Selective Federal Depository Library*: “A depository library in the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) that receives only item numbers that fulfill the primary needs of users within the geographic area it is designated to serve, usually based on its stated mission. Most depository libraries are selective, receiving only a percentage of the total number of government publications available free of charge from the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO)” (Reitz, 2017).

*Webometrics* also called *cybermetrics*: “Description and evaluation of the impact of the Internet as a scholarly communication tool, primarily by means of quantitative analysis of Web-based scholarly and scientific communications” (Reitz, 2017).

### **Delimitations**

This study is limited to information provided on the websites of the Federal depository libraries selected for the sample. Any on-site promotion, (e.g., printed guides, flyers, or displays) are not included in this

study. Social media promotion (e.g., Facebook announcements, podcasts, or Pinterest pages) are also excluded from this study. This study does not address the quality or efficacy of the information and resources found on the library websites.

### **Assumptions**

It is assumed that the libraries chosen for this study are active members of the FDLP program at the time the information is gathered. It is assumed that the websites visited for this study are up-to-date and complete.

### **Importance of the Study**

This study is important in that it provides information on current trends in FDLP libraries’ online access to government resources as well as reference guides and services to help researchers locate the government resources they need. The results of this study could help librarians learn more about what kinds of government information services are being provided by FDLP libraries and give them ideas for ways to improve their own services. This study may also provide important information to the administrators of the FDLP program by determining areas where FDLP libraries are lacking sufficient reference services or may be in need of more instruction or support. Finally, researchers using government information could find this study useful because it will make them more aware of the types of government information and reference services available on library websites.

### **Literature Review**

Promotion of and access to government documents is increasingly vital to researchers as the nature of government document collections are in a state of transition. The FDLP program is undergoing significant changes as more government documents become available in electronic form. This is causing reductions in the physical collections of selective FDLP libraries, which also decreases the workload of government document librarians. Recently, government document librarians are adding additional duties to their job descriptions or they have a new job title, limiting their role and time spent in government document management.

The importance of libraries providing government information, guides, reference services, and links to resources is echoed in Duvall's 2010 article on searching for government information. The author offers some insight into the problems of searching through massive amounts of government data and explains the benefits of useful subject guides and reference help with finding useful government information (Duvall, 2010). Without online guides and reference services to provide assistance looking for government information, the researchers might choose incorrect sources, or give up on their searches altogether.

### ***FDLP Libraries***

In the last decade, researchers have published studies documenting changes in FDLP libraries. In Mack and Prescod's 2009 study, the authors looked at how the new emphasis on electronic government documents has affected depository libraries in three key areas: collections, government document librarian duties, and public service. They found that the job advertisements for government document librarians had decreased significantly between 1997 and 2007. Over this same period, the authors described trends of decreasing physical government document collections or storing them off-site and merging government reference services with traditional reference. The purpose of their study was to discover some solutions to providing information literacy and reference services for government documents in FDLP libraries (Mack & Prescod, 2009).

A study conducted by Burroughs (2009) to analyze the preferences of library users seeking government information offered a survey in both print and electronic formats to faculty, staff, and students at the University of Montana. The survey gathered information about service and format preferences, awareness and usage of government resources, and use of government reference or instruction. The survey's results showed a wide variety of preferred instruction methods, but clearly indicated a preference for electronic government materials, and an increased need for more web-based services and instruction for government document researchers (Burroughs, 2009).

### ***Website Analysis***

Ratha, Joshi, and Naidu (2012) published a webometric study of Indian Institute of Technology (ITT) libraries. In this study, the authors analyzed the total number of links, inactive links, web pages, and PDF and DOC file links are on each ITT library website. The authors also gathered quantifiable information about each websites' user supporting services and information services, as well as whether or not the websites offered a Hindi language version. They noted several areas where these websites could be improved and offered suggestions to enhance the user experience (Ratha, Joshi, & Naidu, 2012).

Another study conducted by Wilson (2015) analyzed the design and content of academic libraries in the state of Alabama by looking at 32 different factors. This study evaluated the location and availability of library catalogs, social media links, databases, services, and library and information guides. The author concluded that academic library websites in Alabama needed more accessibility to services and better web design (Wilson, 2015).

In 2018, Faulkner published a website analysis of the largest public libraries around the United States that focused on the entrepreneurship resources provided on these websites. The author first evaluated the websites using a timed, qualitative technique, followed by a second evaluation using a checklist developed for the study. Faulkner discovered that although library catalogs were very helpful in providing entrepreneur resources, the library websites were often lacking in information and resources (Faulkner, 2018).

A key study related to this study was conducted by Johnston (2011) in which the author analyzed the websites of certain FDLP libraries in order to obtain information about their online government guides and resources. Johnston's research suggested that most libraries included in the study provide government information subject guides both on government information pages and within the general subject guides for the libraries (p. 25). The study was limited to 32 regional depository libraries and 45 selective depository libraries, all of which

were located in large academic institutions. If this study had looked at a broader selection of selective depository libraries, the results may have been very different since they include public and community college libraries, which often have fewer staff and resources to provide online reference guides and finding aids.

Many of the studies focusing on FDLP library websites were published nearly a decade ago. Of these articles, only Johnston (2011) addresses similar questions to those posed in this study, although the scope of the author's study was limited to academic regional depository libraries and a limited number of large academic selective libraries. This study differs in that it examines a broader group of FDLP libraries while excluding the regional libraries that are already required to provide a higher level of government reference services to researchers. This study provides a comparison with earlier studies to see how or if the website resources of FDLP libraries have changed in recent years.

### **Methodology**

The webometric study gathered information from the websites of selective Federal depository libraries to answer the research questions proposed.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The libraries included in this study were selected from the 2018 FDLP Library Directory (<https://catalog.gpo.gov/fdldir/FDLPdir.jsp>). The directory listed 1,081 selective depository libraries in the FDLP. To find a sample large enough to represent the whole of FDLP libraries, one-third of these libraries were selected, every third library from the total list of selective FDLP libraries on a spreadsheet organized by alphabetically by state. The total sample included 361 libraries. This selection process ensured that libraries from across the country would be included. It also ensured the inclusion of different types (i.e., academic, public, special) and different sizes of libraries in the sample. Most libraries in this directory include a link to a webpage listing the library's depository status. The data for each library website were recorded on an Excel spreadsheet.

Each research question produced either a 'yes' or 'no' answer. To clarify the first research question, a note was also included listing the number of clicks it took to get to a government page if it was not available from the library's homepage. These data were then analyzed to determine the types and amounts of libraries with recorded positive or negative answers. The results are illustrated in a series of charts.

### **Limitations**

For the purpose of this study, only the websites of selective Federal depository libraries were used. Regional Federal depository libraries were not included in this study because they are subject to stricter rules. It is expected that Regional libraries have more government information and reference services on the libraries' websites because they are responsible for larger collections and for overseeing all the selective FDLP libraries within the region.

The websites of the libraries included in this study were visited within a three-week period of March and April of 2019, but this window might have caught some website updates and missed others depending on when the website was viewed. This sample might also include a larger number of a particular size or type of library, due to the random selection process, which may have an effect on how accurately the sample represents the total number of selective FDLP libraries.

### **Results**

During the research phase, seven libraries were removed from the sample because their websites could either not be accessed or did not have enough public information available to answer the research questions. This reduced the total sample to 354 selective FDLP libraries. Table 1 (*Appendix*) lists the number of each type of library included in the study, broken down by the size of the institution according to criteria used by the program (FDLP, 2008). An analysis of the library type distribution in the sample compared to the overall amount of selective FDLP libraries found the variation was two percent or less for each library type, as shown in table 2.

**Table 2. Comparison of Library Type between Sample and Total FDLP Libraries**

Library Type	# Selective Libraries	% Selective Libraries	# Libraries in Sample	% Libraries in Sample
Academic libraries, general	587	54.3%	196	55.4%
Academic community college libraries	53	4.9%	18	5.1%
Academic law libraries	143	13.2%	39	11.0%
Federal agency libraries	34	3.1%	5	1.4%
Federal court libraries	10	0.9%	3	0.8%
Highest state court libraries	35	3.2%	16	4.5%
Public Libraries	174	16.1%	59	16.7%
Service Academies	4	0.4%	1	0.3%
Special Libraries	14	1.3%	11	3.1%
State libraries	27	2.5%	6	1.7%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1081</b>		<b>354</b>	

**R1. How many Federal depository libraries in this study have government resource pages linked to the library’s homepage?**

This first question focused on the accessibility of government information on selective FDLP library websites. To be considered linked directly to the homepage in this study, a link must appear either in the webpage content, attached to an FDLP logo, or listed in a drop-down menu that appears when a mouse hovers over it. A drop-down menu that requires a mouse click to open it is considered as one click.

The largest portion of the sample, 218 libraries (61.6%), did not have government resource pages linked directly to their homepages. The other 136 libraries (38.4%) do have pages accessible from the libraries’ homepages. As shown in Figure 1, most of the libraries’ government resource pages that are not available directly from the homepage are only one click away.

**Figure 1. # Clicks of Government Info from Homepage**

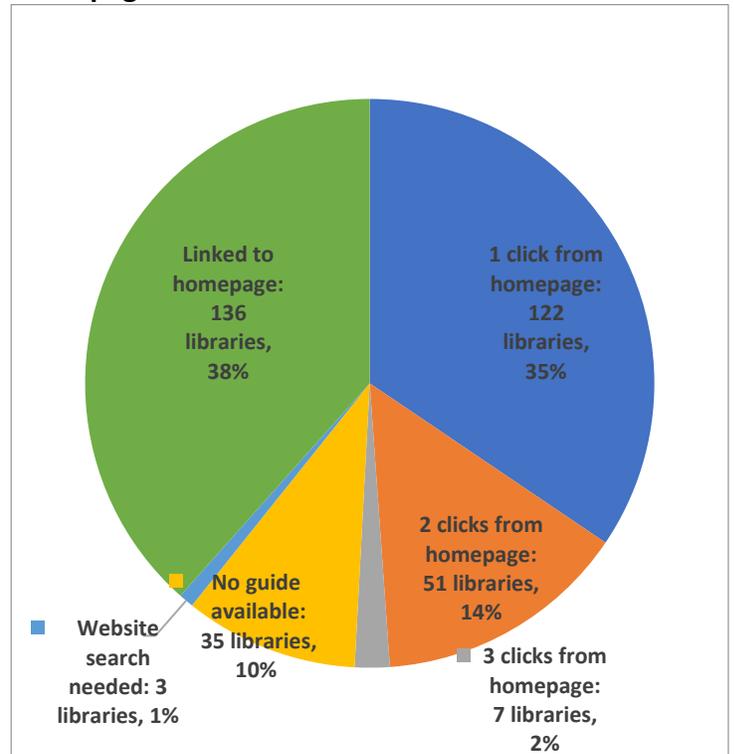
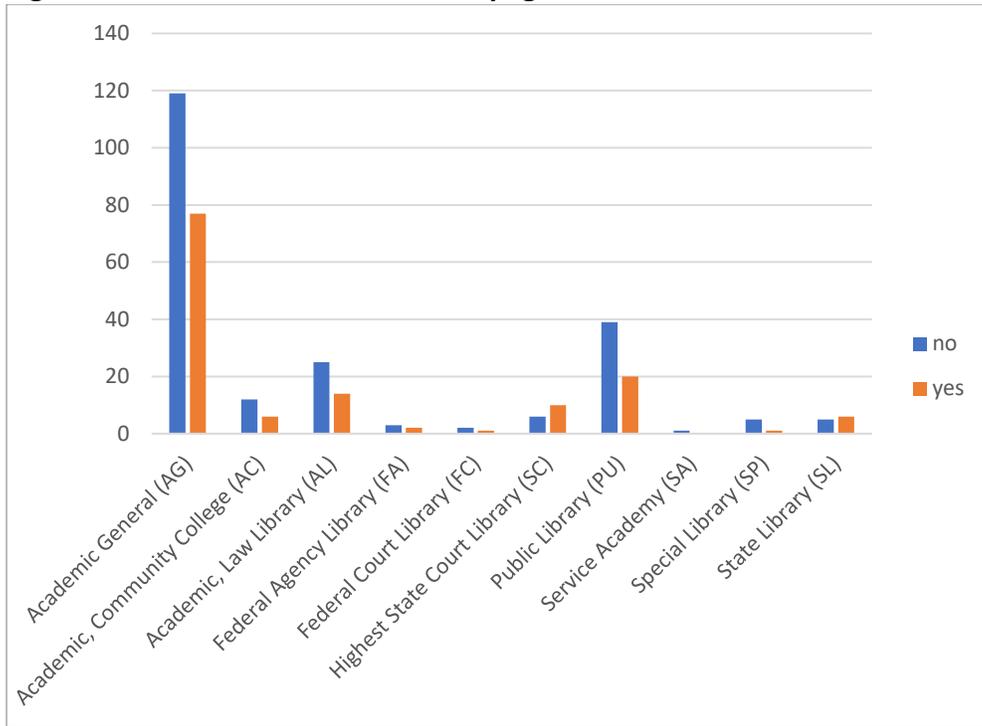
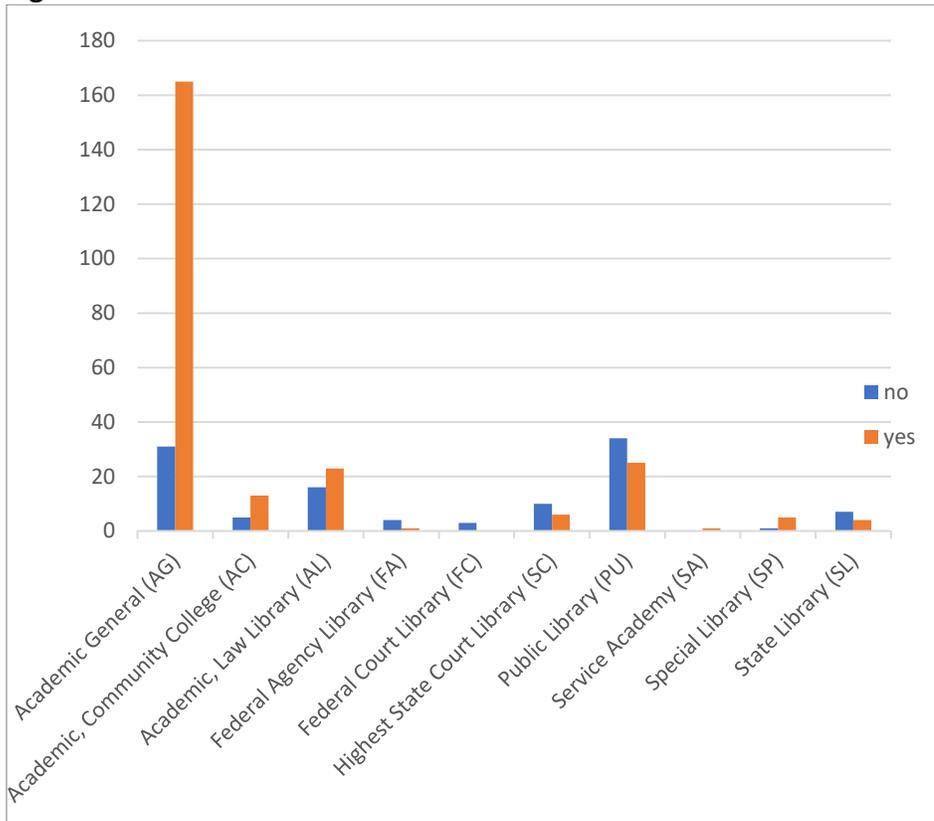


Figure 2 shows the results broken down by library type. The library type that had the most direct homepage links to government resource pages were the highest state court libraries at sixty-three percent, followed by six state libraries (55%), two Federal agency libraries (40%), and seventy-seven general academic libraries (39%). Only one of the six special libraries (17%) had direct links to government resource pages. The remaining four types of libraries landed in the middle, with direct links on thirty-three to thirty-six percent of their homepages.

**Figure 2. # FDLP Libraries with Homepage Links to Government Resources**



**Figure 3. # FDLP Libraries with Guides**



**R2. How many Federal depository libraries in this study offer subject or research guides about their own government document collection?**

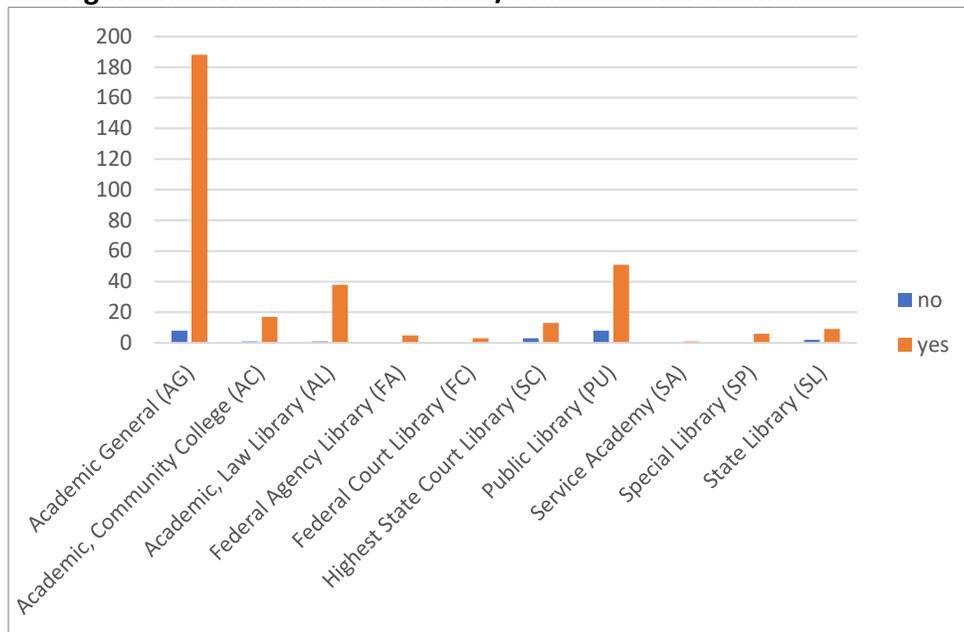
A positive answer to this question required the library to offer some information regarding the library’s government document collection areas, information about how to locate physical or electronic documents in the library, or information about the library’s history and status in the FDLP. As illustrated below in Figure 3, 165 out of 196 general academic libraries (84%) had the most guides about their own collections, followed by five special libraries (83%), thirteen academic community college libraries (72%), and twenty-three academic law libraries (59%). The three Federal court libraries had no government collection guides. The other library types offering the fewest guides were Federal agency libraries (20%) four state libraries (36%), and highest state court libraries (37%). Public libraries were in the middle with forty-two percent. Many of the libraries registered with negative answers to this question had guides that only listed outside government resources.

**R3. How many Federal depository libraries in this study offer information about, recommendations for, or links to government websites or external resources?**

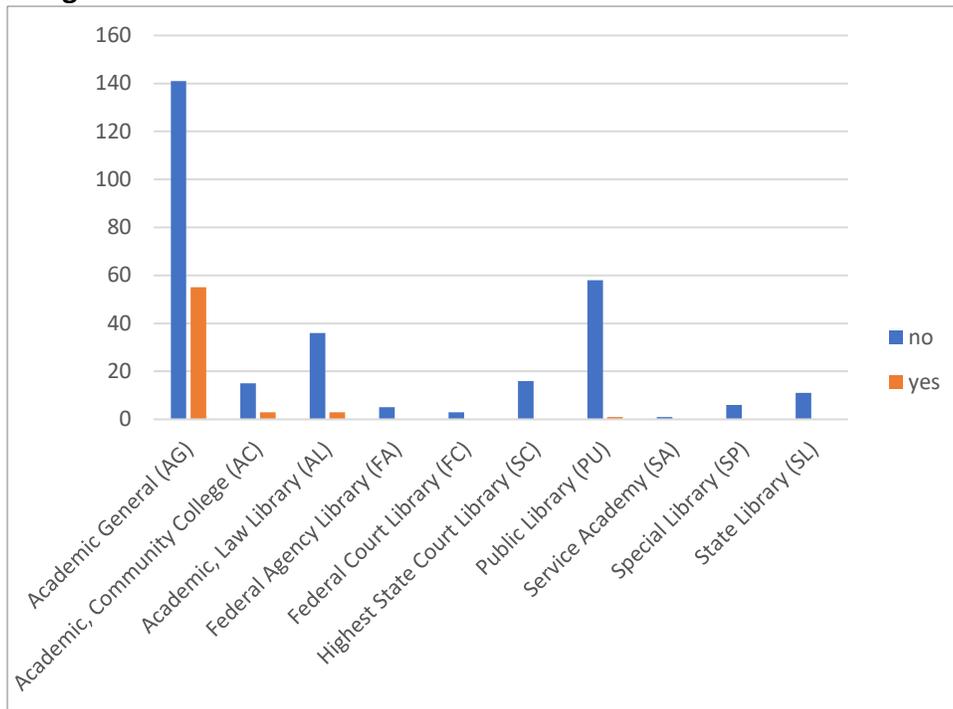
Figure 4 shows the results for this question below. The Federal agency, Federal court, and special libraries all had links to government websites or external resources listed on the webpages. Academic law libraries came in next with 188 of the 196 libraries (97%). Only thirteen of the sixteen highest state court libraries (81%) had links to external government resources, lowest among the FDLP libraries.

Nine state libraries (82%) were the next lowest, followed by fifty-one public libraries (86%). General academic and community college libraries were in the middle with ninety-six and ninety-four percent, respectively. Most of these libraries had government website links listed on government resource pages, but some were also incorporated into legal guides or database lists.

**Figure 4. FDLP Libraries with Info/Links to Government Resources**



**Figure 5: FDLP Libraries with Additional Forms of Reference Services**



**R4. How many libraries in this study have some other form of online reference services devoted to government resources on the library website?**

Most libraries have general reference phone numbers and email addresses or forms on their websites. FDLP libraries have a listed government document coordinator with contact information listed in the FDLP directory. This question was asked to determine if the libraries in this sample were using other forms of online reference services, i.e. chat or appointment scheduling, specifically for government resources. Therefore, a library would have to offer more than the phone number and email link to a library liaison or government document coordinator on a government research page.

Figure 5 above illustrates that the academic and public library types were the only libraries in this study that offered other forms of online reference services dedicated to government resources. Twenty-eight percent or 55 of the 196 general academic libraries offer some other type of online reference service, followed by 3 of the 18 academic community colleges (17%) and 3 of the 39 academic law libraries (8%).

Only one public library in this study offers another type of online reference for government resources. These online reference services were often either a “schedule appointment” form or an online chat box in addition to the contact information of a library liaison or government document librarian.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This study found that most libraries in the sample group maintained government resource pages of some kind on their websites, although these pages were not always linked directly from their homepages. The results suggested that most libraries were attempting to provide government resources and guidance to researchers. The difficulty in discovering these resource pages varied from library to library. Some websites had FDLP logos on their homepages linked directly to the resource page while others were listed under collections, resources, or LibGuides. The terminology used by the libraries also varied greatly. Libraries put these guides under names like Federal government, government documents, government resources, legislative history, or FDLP library.

The websites of the 35 libraries (10%) missing government research guides could be improved to better accommodate researchers.

More disappointing were the results of the second question about the availability of information about the library's physical and electronic collections. Even the highest-performing library type, academic libraries, had thirty-one libraries (16%) with little or no information about how to find government resources in their libraries or online through their catalogs. Johnson's (2011) study, limited to large academic libraries, delivered similar results. In that study, thirteen percent of the selective FDLP libraries provided access from government information only through general subject guides. Even libraries without physical collections should have some form of instruction about types of government documents the library selects and how they can be located in the catalog. Johnson (2011) argues that libraries without these types of guides "might miss those researchers who are seeking multi-disciplinary government data as well as miss the opportunity to instruct those not familiar with government information or how it is created or disseminated" (p. 26).

Libraries in this study were much more successful in providing links to government websites and other external government resources than they were in providing guides to their own research. Unfortunately, sometimes only a minimum of these resources was provided. A link to an outside resource still leaves the researcher finding materials on their own, especially if the main outside link is to the Catalog of U.S. Catalog of Publications or the Federal Depository Library Program page. Many researchers require more assistance to narrow down government information to a specific agency or subject. Duvall (2010) emphasized the importance of knowing where to begin searching for different types of government information, given the many government databases and websites available to researchers.

The last question in this study was how many selective FDLP libraries offered online reference services beyond the usual phone, email, and name of a librarian. The results were not impressive. Only

academic libraries, apart from one public library, offered other types of services, and the chat boxes offered often turned into email forms if the librarian was not in their office, or the library was closed. In another study looking at general chat reference in academic libraries, Wilson (2015) concluded that forty percent of those libraries did not offer reference chat services. This explains the much lower percentage of academic libraries offering these services specifically for government information in this current study.

The "schedule appointment" forms used in some of these libraries were more promising, offering the chance to schedule an appointment with a subject liaison or government documents librarian in person or virtually. While it can be argued that an appointment can be made as easily with a call or email, this feature assures the user up-front that appointments are a regular service provided by the librarians. A couple of libraries in this study also offered services like document request forms or Interlibrary loan request forms directly from the government resources pages. Interlibrary loan services are already available in most libraries, and a link to these services on research guides is an easy way to provide additional help for library users.

While some of the academic and public libraries in this study offered these types of online reference services, none of the other library types did. This could be due to a variety of factors, from limited staff and funding to a more generalized focus on reference. Many libraries did not mention a specific librarian in connection with government resources, leaving the research requests for the reference desk to answer. This can become a problem, especially if the reference desk staff are not sufficiently trained in government document research. Mack and Prescod (2009) concluded that this training would be critical for reference staff in libraries to continue providing quality reference services in government information. Furthermore, a government depository coordinator for each library must be listed in the FDLP Directory, so it makes sense that libraries should also be able to provide this information on their websites for researchers.

This study suggests that most libraries are comfortable with putting government resources on their webpages, but many fail to meet the mark when it comes to providing library collection information, and government information-specific reference services. Some of these deficiencies might be caused by the changing roles of government document librarians documented by Mack and Prescod (2011), or the increase of electronic government documents causing libraries to send researchers directly to the source, but this study shows that there is room for improvement in many selective FDLP libraries.

This study was a quantitative look at the online reference and resources of FDLP libraries, similar in subject and approach to Johnson's (2011) study of academic FDLP websites. While the data from these studies give an insightful look into the online government resources and reference services offered by FDLP libraries, the methods used limited the amount of information that could be gathered from these websites. A future qualitative study of the government reference services and resources of selective FDLP libraries similar in scale to this study would be beneficial to the field. Future research could record the vast differences in the quality of government resource pages and reference services in these libraries and possibly discover what factors impact the level of quality of these services in the different types of libraries.

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## Appendix

### Libraries in Research Sample Listed by Type and Size

Row Labels	Count of Library Type
<b>Academic General (AG)</b>	<b>196</b>
Large (more than 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	79
Medium (250,000 - 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	81
Small (less than 250,000 volumes in the library)	36
<b>Academic, Community College (AC)</b>	<b>18</b>
Small (less than 250,000 volumes in the library)	18
<b>Academic, Law Library (AL)</b>	<b>39</b>
Large (more than 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	2
Medium (250,000 - 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	33
Small (less than 250,000 volumes in the library)	4
<b>Federal Agency Library (FA)</b>	<b>5</b>
Large (more than 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	2
Medium (250,000 - 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	3
<b>Federal Court Library (FC)</b>	<b>3</b>
Small (less than 250,000 volumes in the library)	3
<b>Highest State Court Library (SC)</b>	<b>16</b>
Medium (250,000 - 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	3
Small (less than 250,000 volumes in the library)	13
<b>Public Library (PU)</b>	<b>59</b>
Large (more than 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	23
Medium (250,000 - 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	22
Small (less than 250,000 volumes in the library)	14
<b>Service Academy (SA)</b>	<b>1</b>
Medium (250,000 - 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	1
<b>Special Library (SP)</b>	<b>6</b>
Large (more than 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	1
Medium (250,000 - 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	1
Small (less than 250,000 volumes in the library)	4
<b>State Library (SL)</b>	<b>11</b>
Large (more than 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	2
Medium (250,000 - 1,000,000 volumes in the library)	6
Small (less than 250,000 volumes in the library)	3
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>354</b>