observed doing research, 27 failed to narrow their search criteria at all when doing so would have turned up more helpful returns.

Unsurprisingly, students using this method got either too many search results or too few. Frequently, students would be so discouraged they would change their research topic to something more amenable to a simple search.

"Many students described experiences of anxiety and confusion when looking for resources -- an observation that seems to be widespread among students at the five institutions involved in this study," Duke and Asher wrote.

These results can be taken in a positive light: as the library building has receded as a campus mecca, librarians have often had to combat the notion that online tools are making them irrelevant. The evidence from ERIAL lend weight to their counterargument: librarians are more relevant than they have ever been, since students need guides to shepherd them through the wilderness of the Web. Indeed, students who had attended library orientations or tutorials showed more proficiency than those who had not.

There was just one problem, Duke and Asher noted: "Students showed an almost complete lack of interest in seeking assistance from librarians during the search process." Of all the students they observed -- many of whom struggled to find good sources, to the point of despair -- not one asked a librarian for help.

In a separate study of students at DePaul, Illinois-Chicago, and Northeastern Illinois, other ERIAL researchers deduced several possible reasons for this. The most basic was that students were just as unaware of the extent of their own information illiteracy as everyone else. "Some students did not identify that they were having difficulties with which they could use help," wrote anthropologist Susan Miller and Nancy Murillo, a library instruction coordinator at Northeastern Illinois. "Some overestimated their ability or knowledge."

Another possible reason was that students seek help from sources they know and trust, and they do not know librarians. Many do not even know what the librarians are there for. "I don't think I would see them and say, 'Well, this is my research, how can I do this and that?'" one senior psychology major told the researchers. "I don't see them that way. I see them more like, 'Where's the bathroom?'" Other students imagined librarians to have more research-oriented knowledge of the library but still thought of them as glorified ushers.

"Librarians are believed to do work unrelated to helping students," wrote Miller and Murillo, "or work that, while possibly related to research, does not entitle students to relationships with them."

Co-opting the influence of professors

In lieu of librarians, whose relationship to any given student is typically ill-defined, students seeking help often turn to a more logical source: the person who gave them the assignment -- and who, ultimately, will be grading their work. "[R]elationships with professors ... determine students' relationships with