In her contribution to the ERIAL tome, called “Pragmatism and Idealism in the Academic Library,” Thill wrote about the tension between library pragmatism -- the desire to satisfy the minimum requirements of a research assignment -- and library idealism, which glorifies the tedious unearthing and meticulous poring-over of texts. Unsurprisingly, most students tacked toward pragmatism, while “librarians and professors [repeatedly] wished that students could invest more time in contemplation and discovery, painting an idealized portrait of students leisurely wandering the stacks or pensively sitting down to await inspiration.”

Her findings, based on open-ended interviews with 30 faculty members and nine librarians at Northeastern Illinois and DePaul, pointed to the tension between the idealized view of academic research and the practical matters of deadlines and other limitations -- a tension librarians often have to resolve. If a student needs sources on a topic but does not know how to retrieve them, does the librarian find the source for him? Does she nudge him in the right direction but make sure he finds it himself? Librarians often have to walk that line between giving a person a fish and teaching her how to fish, proverbially speaking, says Thill. And the answer can rightly vary based on how quickly she needs a fish, whether she has the skills and coordination to competently wield a pole, and whether her ultimate goal is to become a master angler.

“Obviously I’m not saying we just have to be paper pushers -- just pushing out whatever it is the student wants,” Thill says. “But I think that, in general, we make decisions assuming that everyone is a career academic.”

This is treading on treacherous ground, and Thill knows it. The debate over whether librarians should be complicit in students’ efforts to “satisfice” -- that is, do what they can to get by and graduate -- can be a contentious one, since it runs to the root of what the library (and higher education in general) is for. “To be honest I was almost afraid to write this paper,” she says, sitting in a conference room at the Northeastern Illinois library. “Whenever I talked to people about what my paper was about, they got their backs up.”

Thill says she does not think “satisfice” should be a dirty word. In her paper, she points to a 2008 NASPA Foundation study that indicated only 6 percent of college students earn a degree because they “like to learn for learning’s sake.” Back at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Logan mentioned the fact that a growing proportion of students are adult learners and first-generation students with jobs and family obligations. If these students are trying to “satisfice,” it probably isn’t so that they’ll have more time to goof off, she said.

There is also the somewhat dissonant fact that despite what the Illinois institutions now know about their students’ poor information literacy skills, many of those students have continued to pass their courses and eventually graduate. “I think we definitely saw that students are managing to get through without the level of certain research skills that we would like to see,” Asher told Inside Higher Ed.

“It’s not about teaching shortcuts, it’s about teaching them not to take the long way to a goal,” says Elisa Addlesperger, a reference and instruction librarian at DePaul. “They’re taking very long, circuitous