libraries," wrote Miller and Murillo. "In the absence of an established structure ensuring that students build relationships with librarians throughout their college careers, professors play a critical role in brokering students' relationships with librarians," they wrote.

Because librarians hold little sway with students, they can do only so much to rehabilitate students' habits. They need professors' help.

Unfortunately, professors are not necessarily any more knowledgeable about library resources than their students are. "Faculty may have low expectations for librarians, and consequently students may not be connected to librarians or see why working with librarians may be helpful," wrote Miller and Murillo.

Several recent studies by the nonprofit Ithaka S+R have highlighted the disjunct between how professors view the library and how the library views itself: library directors see the library as serving primarily a teaching function; professors see it above all as a purchasing agent. Miller and Murillo heard echoes of that in their study. "I think that what happens is the librarians know how to search for sources, but sometimes don't know how to do research," one anthropology professor told them.

Professors are usually willing to try to put students on the right path. However, "a student will not necessarily succeed in research if he or she relies on the professor alone," wrote Miller and Murillo. "...[Some] faculty members seemed to assume that students would pick up how to do library research, or that a one-shot instruction session, which at times professors erroneously assumed students previously had, would have been enough."

This finding resonated with the librarians gathered here in Chicago. "Students do enough to get by," says Lisa Wallis, a Web services librarian at Northeastern Illinois. "If they aren't told to use [specific library] databases, they won't." And many professors, like many librarians, overestimate the research fluency of their students. For example, a professor might tell students to find "scholarly sources" without considering that students do not actually know what a "scholarly source" is, says Logan, the Chicago reference librarian.

At DePaul, "One of the professors said, 'You mean they come to the library without the assignment?'" says Paula Dempsey, the coordinator of reference services there. "Yes. Yes, they do."

Heather Jagman, a coordinator of library instruction at DePaul, described this as the "curse of prior knowledge" -- a phenomenon to which both professors and librarians are vulnerable. Teaching and library faculty are likely to have been exceptionally skilled researchers as undergraduates. Career academics might have a hard time putting themselves in the shoes of a student who walks into the library knowing practically nothing.

Pragmatism vs. Idealism

Part of the challenge for faculty in learning to serve students more effectively might be adjusting their expectations to the realities of what students already know -- and can be reasonably expected to learn -- in the space of a given assignment, says Thill, the humanities librarian at Northeastern Illinois.