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# Comparing Apples to Apples Oranges: An Exploration of the Use of LibGuides in ARL Libraries

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## Introduction

The University of Louisville (UofL) Libraries, like thousands of libraries all over the world, use LibGuides content management software from Springshare to create and maintain several hundred subject guide webpages. Although the librarians spend countless hours every year on their guides, a study of guide usage has never been undertaken. As the authors began to look at the usage statistics for their institution, they wondered if examining only statistics from UofL Libraries would be looking at them in a vacuum. The UofL Libraries is a mid-size to large library system with six separate libraries and is a member of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). The authors decided to use UofL's statistics as a reference point in asking the following questions: How did UofL's usage compare to other, similar libraries? What types of guides have libraries created? What guide types are the most heavily used? How does guide placement affect use? The question of how to increase usage was also important given the amount of funding and time spent on the guides.

A number of challenges were present as the authors attempted to embark on the research. Since UofL Libraries is a member of ARL, the study was limited to other ARL member Libraries. Although LibGuides are ubiquitous at ARL Libraries, collecting usage data was dependent on the goodwill of those libraries as it was not publicly available. The implementation of the guides at institutions can be radically different and those implementations are affected by internal policies that were not readily available. In addition, LibGuides are more ephemeral in nature than it would first appear. They appear, change, and disappear with a rapidity that makes it difficult to do in-depth, meaningful analysis. Nevertheless, this article will provide a snapshot in time of the use of the software across 27 libraries, demonstrate the wide variation in use of the guides, and provide some practical suggestions for increasing usage based on the authors' findings.

## Review of the LibGuides Literature

Online research or subject guides historically known as pathfinders are a staple for many academic libraries: a digestible aggregation of links and content to assist students, faculty, and the public alike in navigating the complex ecosystem of the library. Historically, librarians have relied on traditional websites to house their research guides and pathfinders, a time-consuming process in terms

of maintenance (Morris & Grimes, 1999). To address this problem, Springshare introduced LibGuides, a user-friendly, template-based platform to publish research guides in 2007, and from this nascent technology emerged immediate discussions of utility, use, and implementation by academic librarians. Moses and Richard note that "librarians are pleased with the control and autonomy they have over their web content and the ability to communicate with our community" when their library implemented LibGuides (2008). Institutions both foreign (Pin Pin, 2010) and domestic are using them in a myriad of creative ways. Beyond their use as subject and course guides, some institutions initially developed LibGuides as a distance education tool (Arvin, 2009), a current awareness service (Kiscaden, 2014), or, in the case of Grand Valley State Library, used them internally for tenure and promotion management (Harris, Garrison, & Frigo, 2009). Use of LibGuides as a teaching tool for information literacy content delivery (Yelinek, Neyer, Bressler, Coffta, & Magolis, 2010) led to their inclusion in discourse on critical thinking and learner-centered pedagogy (Miner & Alexander, 2010). An additional example of this would be the student-created LibGuide assignment described by Scull (2014).

The ubiquitous nature of LibGuides, due in large part to their ease of use, has led to interest in usability testing of this librarian-controlled content (Sonstebly & Dejonghe, 2013), which in the past has often rested in the hands of website design or IT specialists. Comparatively, studies indicate content presented through LibGuides versus traditional websites has the same pedagogical impact on students (Bowen, 2014). Public access to the published content of LibGuides has allowed for a cursory exploration of content, running the gamut from the impact of the librarian's image profile picture (Anderson & Still, 2013) to the facility of LibGuides to host content related to special collections (Ford, Prior, Coat, & Warton, 2014). Rafferty used data from LibGuides to determine if students were using library resources highlighted in instructional sessions (2013). Ghaphery and White's (2010) survey revealed that 19% of the library respondents look to usage statistics to evaluate their LibGuides while 23% had no evaluation method in place. Only 4% had performed usability testing while many of the remaining respondents were interested in beginning some form of evaluation. Foster et al. (2010) examined the results of an effort to market their LibGuides in various ways, finding that marketing increased the use of the guides. No studies have

compared usage across libraries, and although subject-specific content has been studied across institutions (Dougherty, 2013), usage in conjunction with guide types has not been documented or explored at length.

In 2013, the Library Information Technology Association (LITA), a division of the American Library Association, published the book *Using LibGuides to Enhance Library Services*, a practical primer on creating effective LibGuides, with essays from longtime users on implementation, including a vocabulary list, checklists, and an exploration of broad issues to be considered when incorporating LibGuides. At its core, *Using LibGuides* is a response and how-to distillation of the academic discourse surrounding best practices generated by LibGuides in its early years (Dobbs, Sittler, Cook, & Library Information Technology, 2013). Pertinent to the topic of LibGuides usage, Baldwin and McFadden's chapter of this volume provides a rubric for measuring the value of LibGuides (2013). This rubric includes aspects such as economic value, instructional role value, value in distance learning, and incidental value, which are combined to create a score indicating how much value one's library is realizing from its LibGuides implementation. While the authors address effectiveness through intra-library assessment, no direct guidance is given on how to compare or assess LibGuides across institutions.

Springshare's LibGuides has been a catalyst for librarian-driven creation of online research tools and its flexible platform has seen use in many other library-specific initiatives. Use of LibGuides has increased exponentially across institutions, making LibGuides omnipresent in the landscape of academic libraries. At the same time, their mutable and transient nature makes it difficult to capture, collect, and analyze data that might inform assessment of LibGuides based on usage statistics. The following examination of LibGuides usage includes the average number of guides per institution, the average usage of the guides, the most used guides by guide type, the number one most used guide at institutions, the presence of a top ten list, usage disparities that appeared in the data, and guide types that were absent from the top twenty guides at each institution.

## Methodology

In the Winter of 2014, using Springshare's Community website, each member library of the Association of Research Libraries was searched; it was determined that at the time of the study 100 of the 125 or 80% of ARL libraries used Springshare's LibGuides. Next in Spring 2014, individual e-mails were sent out to the LibGuides administrator in each ARL library who used LibGuides. Libraries not directly affiliated with a college or university were excluded. Special libraries, such as law school or medical school libraries were also excluded. If the institution had a main library LibGuides presence and secondary guides through an affiliate campus, school, or department, only the main library LibGuides data was used. Data was received from 27 (including the UofL Libraries) of the 100 libraries for a 27% response rate. The data

included the guide titles and number of views per month for each guide in the library's system from July 1, 2012-June 30, 2013. Guides that had been deleted over that time period were titled [Deleted], and their lack of monthly views reflected their change in status. The LibGuides corpus from the 27 institutions included 8,438 total guides.

After collecting the data, the authors focused on a manageable subset of guides. This subset included the top 20 guides from each institution; this threshold was chosen because it included guides that accounted for at least .5% of the total views of all guides. These top 20 guides, 540 in all, were extracted from the original dataset. Finally, the authors manually scanned and categorized the title. This categorization was derived from the "Uses for LibGuides" section of *Using LibGuides to Enhance Library Services* (Dobbs et al., 2013, p. 12) and included the categories of subject, course-specific, general library services, the research process, technology, other, e-books, data, and citation management. The latter three categories were not a part of the "Uses for LibGuides" section but were of interest to the authors since they appeared regularly in the top-twenty data set.

## Results

### *Number of Guides and Hits per Institution*

From the Springshare website, the authors recorded the number of guides available at all 27 ARL Libraries who made their LibGuides statistics available. The average number of guides per library was 313. The numbers of guides ranged from 107 to 625 [Table 1]. Total views of all guides at each institution varied widely and, in many cases, were independent of the number of guides, with some as few as 30-40,000 total views and one as large as 1.6 million views. In addition, six institutions had over half a million total views [Table 2]. The average number of views per institution was 390,564. UofL Libraries had a total of 397 guides created at the time of the study, placing it in the top third of this sample in terms of number of guides, but total views was 363,129 a number that was squarely in the middle of the ranking by number of views.

### *Most Used Guides by Guide Category*

In the top-twenty data set, subject and course guides were the most prevalent [Table 3], but the variety of subjects covered made it difficult to draw conclusions related to the use of the guides. Subject guides amounted to 55% of the top twenty most used guides (Figure 1) and ranged from broad subjects such as Psychology to more specific subjects such as Ethnomusicology. Course guides were the next most common at 11%, and these tended to focus on very specific subject areas related to the courses with which they were associated. The next most common guide type was general library services, accounting for 10% of the total. Not surprisingly, guides dedicated to some aspect of research instruction were the next largest category with 7%. The catchall category of other and the category of citation management accounted for 5% each. Guides dedicated to providing information on data sources made up 3% of the

total, while e-books and technology guides represented 2% of the guides in the data set. In UofL's top-twenty guide set [Table 4], these percentages were reasonably consistent with the overall data set totals in that subject guides made up 55%, course guides made up 10%, and general library services 15%. Citation management, the research process, and e-books were each represented one time.

#### *Most Used Guide at Each Institution*

At some institutions, uneven usage was evident. For example, UofL was one of seven universities where the number one guide had close to or over 100,000 views [Table 5]. Since the median number of views for this most used guide was a little over 33,000, these guides stood out. Of the seven guides in this group,

- three were A-Z database lists which provided links to every database subscribed to by the library
- two were guides helping students navigate some part of the research process
- one was a library using a LibGuide as their homepage
- one was a subject guide from an information-intensive discipline

Two A-Z database guides, at the time of this study, were linked from their main library webpages. Such exposure drives up use considerably. Logically, guides used as comprehensive lists of databases would be heavily used guides as well, because they act as a single access point or conduit of access to a wide array of aggregated database links. Unsurprisingly, all of the comprehensive database guides in the high-use group were the number one most-viewed guide at the institution.

Looking at the remaining number one most-used guides by institution beyond database lists, there was a diversity of guide categories [Table 6]. Nine were either subject or course guides, five were research process guides, one was a guide to newspapers, one was a guide to citation management, one was a library webpage, one was the LibGuides homepage for that institution, and the remaining five were categorized as general (i.e. a list of universities, a page for a specific software, etc.).

One interesting finding for the authors was that UofL Libraries had the largest disparity between the number one guide and the number two guide in terms of views. Schools, where the top guide had over 100,000 views all had significant gaps between the most used guide and the second most used, but none were as large as the authors' institution [Table 7].

#### *Presence of a Top Ten list*

In addition, 13 of the 27 schools who responded (or just under 50%) had a "Top Ten" guides link on their pages at the time of the study. The presence of a top ten list, which is generated by the LibGuides system based on the number of views, could potentially influence the usage statistics of

the highest-use guides by perpetuating the use of those same guides.

#### *Guides Categories Not Present in the Top Twenty*

What's missing from the LibGuides surveyed? Although there were LibGuides on a variety of topics, certain areas were not well represented. Scholarly communication, for example, was the topic of just two of the 540 top twenty LibGuides. Open access and faculty research were also absent in the top twenty. Obviously, this may not represent a lack of information since these topics may be a part of library webpages, but simply that LibGuides is not seen by librarians at these institutions as a heavily-trafficked venue to provide information to faculty. Due to the high number of course guides and related subject guides, students seemed to be the target audience for most guides. It is also possible that library web policies could affect the type of guides created at some institutions. For example, at UofL, LibGuides is used for the library collections and tutorial or instructional information while regular webpages are used for all other library information such as services, hours, etc.

#### **Discussion**

Although the use of LibGuides is common to 100 of the 125 ARL Libraries researched in this study, the implementations and manifestations of LibGuides do not share enough in common to allow statistical comparison. Each institution's librarians have adapted the Guides to their unique situations and contexts despite the software's template-based format. Conventional wisdom in the library literature has pointed to special collections as the area of libraries that make each valuable and unique (Koda, 2008); the authors would argue, along with others (Waters, 2009), that this view sells other parts of the library short. The variety of LibGuides implementations and the diversity of ways the Guides are being used make the case that library resources beyond special collections are valuable and those resources, while not necessarily unique to an institution (i.e. Citation style guide), may be highly prized and heavily used at that institution.

LibGuides are easy to use and accessible in the broadest sense and the overwhelming majority of ARL libraries have embraced them. Many ARL Libraries are using LibGuides for their intended purpose as course and subject guides, but the diversity of uses was what proved far more interesting in this examination. Using the guides as replacement webpages or to address topics such as citation management or data analysis might indicate a broadening of the library's traditional bibliographic role. The variation in guide categories across universities exposes the diversity of institutional contexts and confirms what a review of the LibGuides literature revealed: librarians are using the guides in creative and innovative ways such as highlighting current issues, new technology, or new services, reaching out to particular audiences, or as online exhibit showcases. The ease of LibGuides construction and use is also indicated by the ephemeral nature of the guides. Even by collecting data in fall of 2013 for the 2012-2013 academic year, many guides had already disappeared, been re-named,

or changed to be unrecognizable. Since the authors did not actually attempt to look at every guide, it is not possible to say what percentage had been changed, but surprisingly a number of the guides in some of the top twenty lists that were sought were no longer able to be accessed. Unfortunately, it was beyond the scope of this research to investigate this phenomenon, but it does speak to the transitory nature of LibGuides.

While the authors were able to accomplish the original goal of comparing UofL Libraries's LibGuides usage to that of peer institutions, the results were not as clear as they would have desired; however, it did seem that most of UofL's guides with the exception of the A-Z list were not getting the usage that they perhaps could get. For example, UofL ranked in the top third of number of guides created but in the middle in terms of views to those guides. In addition, upon closer inspection, the usage numbers for UofL were being skewed by the presence of one very well-used guide. This was an important point, given that the value calculations recommended by Baldwin and McFadden (2013) would have presented an inaccurate picture if the authors had included that standout guide in their calculations.

For the authors, the question still remains, what affects usage of LibGuides? Many conditions could affect the use of guides such as the size of school, promotion of guides, whether guides are readily available via links in a course management software, the presence of a LibGuides top ten list, or linking to a large program or course requirement. Since many libraries spend a considerable amount of time and thus money on their LibGuides, making sure the guides are well-used is imperative. A list of recommendations is offered from this research, as well as the LITA guide and other literature on the topic.

Provide links to your guides on the front page of your library's website. This seems to be the single most important factor in high hit counts. This could even be done via a rotating program of "Guide of the Week" highlighting a specific guide.

- Integrate the LibGuides into the campus course management software.
- Provide LibGuides for large enrollment classes or specific, large programs.
- Focus on creating high-quality, high-impact guides rather than creating guides for every possible subject.
- Name guides in a way that reflects how users think: thinking about the topic in a way that your students and faculty would search it in a search engine to maximize usage. Many search engines like Google use IP Address in their result ranking algorithm. Consequently, even if the guide is named similarly to another institution, your users

would likely see your guide in their localized results.

- LibGuides usage can also reveal to librarians what students are actually doing when they do research. As usage fluctuates over time, librarians can work with faculty to respond to the changing research needs. If librarians are monitoring their LibGuides usage, this analysis can affect how and when they create new guides.
- Ask LibGuides users at your institution what they would like to see or what types of guides would be helpful. In addition, ask non-users of LibGuides, why they avoid them.

### **Future Research**

Among ARL Libraries, there are a wide variety of library sizes and student populations. How does the size of an institution affect the use of their LibGuides? Would there be a way of combining enrollment with usage to create a metric for evaluating the Guides' effectiveness? Future research on LibGuides could combine this type of usage data collection along with follow-up interviews with administrators asking about policies affecting guide creation and the types of promotional efforts undertaken. Additionally, LibGuides has now had its second release, LibGuides v2, improving on features from v1. Now that many libraries have implemented LibGuides v2, what effect, if any does that have on their usage data?

### **Conclusion**

While LibGuides are clearly not a solution for every library due to their cost and upkeep, LibGuides at ARL Libraries are clearly an important piece of librarians' work as a tool for connecting users with collections. They are in widespread use, and although the majority of the usage is as subject guides, a surprising amount are used by librarians as a simplified mechanism for creating webpages to highlight a wide variety of library resources and services. Our study confirmed the finding from our review of the literature: librarians are using LibGuides for far more than just subject and course guides. They often appear, change, and disappear with a rapidity that befits their ease of use. Their use can be captured, but not easily compared because usage is highly influenced by factors outside of the LibGuides platform, including implementation, anticipated audience size as represented by enrollment, and access points across institutional webpages. Nevertheless, it is important for an institution to examine usage more granularly since, as this study found, total usage numbers can be skewed considerably by one particularly high-use guide (such as an A-Z list). Librarians must ask themselves what they want from their LibGuides implementation in their own context and then find their own measures of success.

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**Table 1: Ranking Institutions by Number of Total Guides \*UofL**

	Total Guides	Total Views
ARL Institutions	107	55316
	110	493109
	150	47412
	153	283565
	186	300478
	187	181042
	206	677928
	233	644413
	240	34724
	252	297585
	257	570635
	274	197960
	281	413532
	302	457879
	332	363129
	366	177195
	368	325562
	380	500373
	<b>397*</b>	<b>363129*</b>
	399	251973
	407	395210
	414	297080
	414	174972
416	381644	
483	1614558	
499	775254	
625	388197	
<b>Average</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>394958</b>

**Table 2: Ranking of Institutions by Total Number of Hits \*UofL**

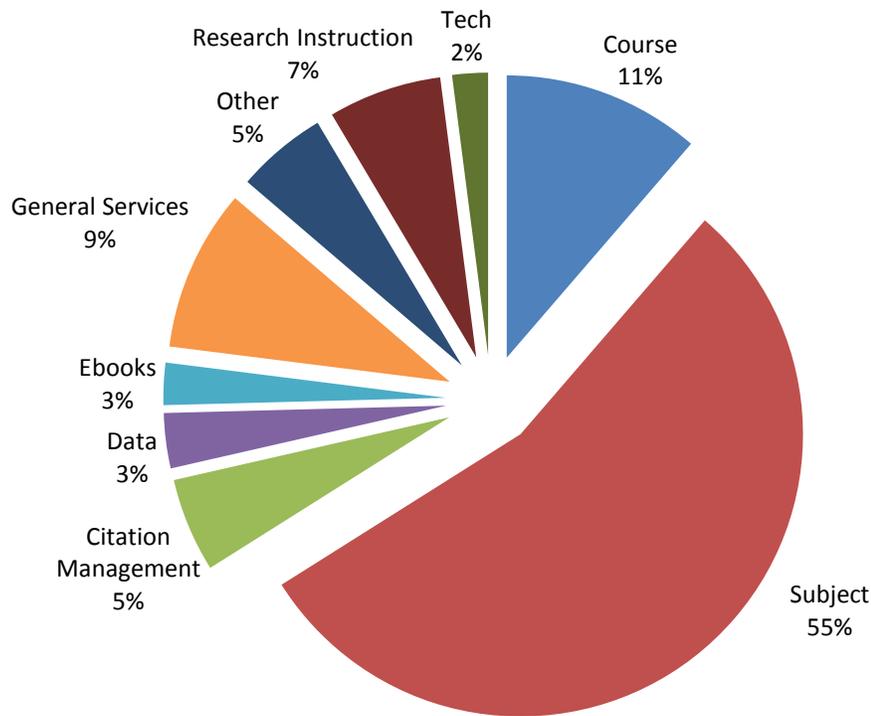
ARL Institutions	Number of Guides	Number of Hits
		240
	150	47412
	107	55316
	414	174972
	366	177195
	187	181042
	274	197960
	399	251973
	153	283565
	414	297080
	252	297585
	186	300478
	368	325562
	332	363129
	<b>397*</b>	<b>363129*</b>
	416	381644
	625	388197
	407	395210
	281	413532
	302	457879
	110	493109
	380	500373
	257	570635
	233	644413
	206	677928
	499	775254
	483	1614558
<b>Average</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>394958</b>

**Table 3: Frequency of Guide Category in Top Twenty Most Used Guides**

\*One guide was a deleted guide and not able to be categorized

Tag	Amount	Example
Subject	295	Social Work
Course	61	Integrative Marketing Strategy (MKT 460)
General Services	50	Databases List
Research Instruction	35	*What Is a Primary Source?
Citation Management	29	Beginning EndNote
Other	28	Cat Videos on the Web
Data	17	Data and Statistics
Ebooks	13	eBook Collections for the Health Sciences
Tech	11	Scanning & Imaging
<b>Total</b>	<b>539*</b>	

**Figure 1: Guidelines by Category**



**Table 4: UofL Top Twenty Guides Usage Distribution**

<b>Guide Name</b>	<b>Views</b>	<b>Category</b>
<b>Databases List</b>	197879	General
<b>eBook Collections for the Health Sciences</b>	7983	Ebooks
<b>Course Guides &amp; Assignments</b>	7246	Course
<b>Nursing</b>	6930	Subject
<b>Social Work</b>	6466	Subject
<b>Beginning EndNote</b>	6259	Cite
<b>Business</b>	5474	Subject
<b>*What Is a Primary Source?</b>	4038	RP
<b>Education and Human Development</b>	3917	Subject
<b>Health Sciences Databases</b>	3631	Subject
<b>Government Resources: Quick Find</b>	3408	Subject
<b>All Subjects Guide</b>	2919	Subject
<b>University Archives' Finding Aids</b>	2854	General
<b>Literature</b>	2728	Subject
<b>Integrative Marketing Strategy (MKT 460)</b>	2720	Course
<b>Psychological and Brain Sciences</b>	2714	Subject
<b>Oral Histories</b>	2586	General
<b>Dorothea Lange: Migrants in Steinbeck Country</b>	2342	General
<b>History</b>	1966	Subject
<b>Industry and Company Analysis</b>	1775	Subject

**Table 5: Number One Guide by Hits with Category \*UofL**

Total Hits	Type
373112	General
197879*	General
178717	General
155439	Subject
155392	General
104281	Research Process
99409	Research Process
93465	General
83937	Research Process
79963	General
54168	Subject
45384	Other
36540	Subject
33414	Subject
25650	Data
25599	Research Process
25032	Subject
25022	Subject
24932	Subject
24398	Subject
24291	General
22910	General
12227	Citation Management
10476	Research Process
7007	Course
4537	Subject
4398	General
<b>33,414</b>	<b>MEDIAN</b>

**Table 6: Number One Most Used Guide by Category**

Category	# of Institutions with Category of Guide as #1
General	9
Subject	9
Research process	5
Citation	1
Data	1
Course	1
Other	1

**Table 7: Usage Disparities: #1 Guide and #2 Guide Total Views Compared \*UofL**

#1 Guide Total Views	#2 Guide Total Views
373112	26685
197879*	7983*
178717	27520
155439	27967
155392	52523
104281	24576
99409	42051
93465	77455
83937	40644
79963	14589
54168	22401
45384	18200
36540	30745
33414	24902
25650	19885
25599	23640
25032	8062
25022	17877
24932	18500
24398	14050
24291	16889
22910	15236
12227	9837
10476	3897
7007	6181
4537	2922
4398	2296
<b>MEDIAN</b>	<b>33,414</b>
	<b>18,500</b>