

# Information Science Students' Emotional Response to Copyright

Sara Rachel Benson and Melissa Ocepek  
*University of Illinois, Champaign, Illinois, United States*

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Copyright intersects with every field of Library and Information Science (LIS) from archival and preservation practices to reference services and academic librarianship. However, copyright instruction is still lacking in many Information Science programs across the country (Cross & Edwards, 2011; Schmidt & English, 2015). The sudden move to remote online education in the spring of 2020 due to a global pandemic highlighted the importance of understanding copyright exceptions and, especially, the power of fair use to quickly provide resources to a wide variety of patrons with novel needs. The need for accessible copyright education for all information professionals has never been stronger. However, engaging with copyright often provokes cognitive as well as affective uncertainty, likely due to the fear and anxiety that can come from the threat of serious financial and reputational consequences. Logically, it seems that librarians might feel less anxious about copyright if they had participated in formalized training about copyright focused on legal issues impacting library and information professionals. To understand this likely correlation, the researchers queried students using a qualitative survey both before and after taking an eight-week intensive copyright course that paired legal expertise with an everyday approach to material designed to demystify the law. Using phenomenographic methodology, the investigators asked their information science students how they attempt to answer copyright questions and how they feel about doing so. The results provide evidence supporting the need for more robust copyright education in schools of information science, as such training to help future librarians to feel more prepared to answer copyright questions and less anxious about intersections between copyright and their field of librarianship before they enter the workforce.

**Keywords:** copyright, information literacy, library science, library and information science education, qualitative

## Introduction

Copyright intersects with every field of Library and Information Science (LIS) from archival and preservation practices to reference services and academic librarianship. However, copyright instruction is still lacking in many information science programs across the country (Cross & Edwards, 2011; Schmidt & English, 2015). Academic librarians frequently report feelings of avoidance and confusion when copyright issues arise in the course of their daily work (Morrison & Secker, 2017). When librarians view copyright as a “problem” that occurs in librarianship rather than an opportunity to further expand access to information legally, they may avoid tackling copyright issues. Thus, instructors should focus copyright educational programming on empowering librarians to increase access to library materials through copyright exceptions and limitations. Now more than ever, with most colleges, K-12 schools, and all variety of libraries conducting most instruction and business online due to the 2020 global pandemic, having a clear understanding of the power of copyright

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**KEY POINTS:**

- Phenomenographic evidence from library science students demonstrates more confidence with copyright after engaging in a copyright intensive course.
- Copyright education should be included in the information science curriculum.
- Copyright training enhances students' future professional lives as they likely would not avoid future projects due to copyright issues.

exceptions and the fair use doctrine is a key to providing patron support and access as a librarian or information professional.

Previous research demonstrates that, while most librarians and LIS students are moderately familiar with copyright basics, many lack a clear understanding of copyright exceptions (Estell & Saunders, 2016; Saunders & Estell, 2019). The sudden move to mostly online education in the spring of 2020 highlighted the importance of understanding copyright exceptions and, especially, the power of fair use to quickly provide resources to a wide variety of patrons with varied and novel needs. Questions abound in the online

teaching environment about how to share material online, whether it is permissible to read books to students, and whether the same audio-visual resources that instructors have relied on for years can legally be shared in a new online environment (Bultman, 2020). Many librarians, the de facto copyright experts at their various institutions, were unsure what advice to provide to members of their institutions in the face of a rapid shift to online-only teaching, so copyright experts worked together to quickly share a *Public Statement of Library Copyright Specialists: Fair Use & Emergency Remote Teaching & Research* (Public Statement, 2020).

The need for accessible copyright education for all information professionals has never been stronger. However, engaging with copyright often provokes cognitive as well as affective uncertainty, likely due to the fear and anxiety that can come from the threat of serious financial and reputational consequences (Benson, 2019; Wakaruk & Gareau-Brennan, 2020). Logically, it seems that librarians might feel less anxious about copyright if they had studied copyright and learned about the powerful exceptions librarians and other information professionals have in their information science preparatory programs. To test this assumption, the researchers queried students with a qualitative survey before and after taking an eight-week intensive copyright course. Using phenomenographic methodology, the investigators asked their information science students how they attempt to answer copyright questions and about their affective experience with answering such questions. The results confirm the researchers' hypothesis that, indeed, copyright training helps future librarians to feel more prepared to answer copyright questions and empowered to assert copyright limitations and exceptions applicable to in their field of librarianship before they enter the workforce.

## Literature review

The importance of copyright to LIS is hard to understate. All of the major professional associations have some mention of the prominence of copyright knowledge as a core compe-

tency of the field. According to the American Library Association's (ALA) Core Competences of Librarianship, an understanding of copyright is foundational to the profession (ALA, 2009). The Society of American Archivists notes in its "Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Study" that an understanding of the legal systems including intellectual property rights provides important contextual knowledge to the profession (Society of American Archivists, 2016). In the "Information Has Value" frame of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, the ACRL notes that the ability to understand copyright and intellectual property is a core component of academic information literacy (ALA, 2015).

Yet, researchers have found that copyright training for burgeoning librarians is generally lacking in schools of information science. In 2013–2014 researchers scoured the websites for 51 schools of information science to determine the level of copyright instruction incorporated into the programs (Schmidt & English, 2015). Six institutions seemed to include no course content covering copyright or intellectual property issues. At that time, no schools offered a required course solely covering copyright, but nine schools offered a copyright component to a required course. This lack of thorough training in school also impacts librarianship in practice and, in the same survey, the researchers found that "80% of respondents received no copyright/IP specific, on-the-job training when they started working in libraries" (Schmidt & English, 2015, p. 741). Similarly, a nationwide survey of librarians indicated that "attention to copyright in most LIS programs seems to be variable and in some cases tenuous" (Estell & Saunders, 2016, p. 225). Many of the respondents in a survey of 220 librarians indicated that they were interested in more copyright training with one respondent sharing, "Just about ALL topics/issue in copyright should be at least introduced, with a special emphasis on exemptions, fair use, and digitization" (p. 223).

To delve deeper into understanding the particular challenges librarians face regarding copyright, Morrison and Secker (2017) developed a set of semi-structured interview questions aimed at librarians' emotional responses to copyright using a phenomenographic approach. Phenomenography is a qualitative research method derived from the field of education "concerned with understanding variation in people's experience of a phenomenon and underpinned by the idea that people collectively experience and understand phenomena in different but interrelated ways" (p. 358). In phenomenography, the researcher asks questions to determine "how and what the participants do, and their feelings," rather than "why something happens" or the perception of the research team. The researchers, instead, ask the participants questions to determine how they are experiencing a given phenomenon. In their study, Morrison and Secker interviewed 21 librarians in three groups to determine how they experience copyright in their daily work. They coded the transcripts of the interviews into 11 "categories of description." Ultimately, they found "that there are four qualitatively distinct ways that librarians experience copyright" (p. 359). First, they see it as a "problem." Next, they note that copyright is "complicated and shifting." Then, they begin to see copyright as a "known entity requiring a consistent message." And, finally, they begin to understand that "copyright is an opportunity for negotiation, collaboration, and co-construction of understanding," (p. 360). Moving librarians' approach to copyright

from the first level to the fourth is ideal and is best accomplished by prioritizing copyright literacy as “a central part of librarianship.”

In addition to this library specific work, two Canadian scholars are in the midst of developing a new copyright anxiety scale designed to further understand the affective nature copyright uncertainty has on the public at large (Wakaruk & Gareau-Brennan, 2020). They define copyright anxiety as “nervousness and apprehension associated with navigating copyright issues” (sec. Theoretical Justification). Their preliminary results show that a majority of a representative Canadian and American group of survey respondents have avoided projects because of copyright issues. However, the study also found that approximately 68.5% of the 521 respondents had been engaged in some sort of formal training. Of that group, 62.8% responded that they had not avoided or failed to complete projects due to copyright issues. Suggesting that, with formalized training, copyright uncertainty is less prevalent—a finding also supported by the current study.

## Research methodology

The purpose of this research project was to investigate whether library students have a similar affective response to copyright questions and issues as those experienced by the librarians studied by Morrison and Secker. Additionally, the researchers sought to determine whether the intervention of a copyright intensive course designed to demystify and provide applicable examples between law and librarianship would ease some of the anxiety and fear potentially associated with copyright that can chill the lawful use of materials.

The research was conducted online through Qualtrics by using open-ended qualitative research questions to elicit the emotional responses from students enrolled in the Copyright for Information Professionals course at an iSchool during three different semesters. The researchers sought and received approval from the Institutional Research Board (IRB) to conduct the study. Two semesters were taught online, and one class was taught in-person. Students were asked to voluntarily complete a written, online survey instrument before taking the eight-week copyright-intensive elective course and after taking the course. Because the students were receiving a grade for their coursework, care was taken by the researchers to indicate the voluntary nature of the participation as well as the anonymous nature of the data collection, as requested by the IRB. Therefore, there was no way for the researchers to directly correlate the student inputs at the beginning and end of the course on a one-to-one basis and, in fact, some students did not complete both surveys.

The researchers conducted this study through a written anonymous survey to obtain more genuine, honest responses and due to the nature of the relationship between the researchers and their subjects as professors and students. The research was conducted by anonymous qualitative written survey responses to an online survey instrument. Students chose to voluntarily complete the survey instruments both before and after taking the course. In the summer 2018 course, 9 of the 19 enrolled students completed the surveys. In the spring 2019 course, with an enrollment of 23 students, 10 students completed the pre-survey, and 4 students completed the post-survey. Finally, 10 students out of the 23 enrolled students completed both surveys for the summer 2019 course.

**Table 1: Student demographics for the participants**

Semester	Online	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey	MSLIS/IM
Summer 2018	Yes	9	9	8/1
Spring 2019	No	10	4	10/0
Summer 2019	Yes	10	10	9/1
TOTAL		29	23	27/2

## Demographics and data results

The student demographics for the participants are illustrated in [Table 1](#) including when the course was taken, whether the course was administered in person or online, how many students took the survey before and after the course, the student's enrolled program (Master of Science in Library and Information Science [MSLIS] or Information Management [IM]), and the average number of semesters the students had been enrolled in the iSchool before taking the course.

## Research results

### Pre-Course survey

As part of the pre-course survey, students were asked about their previous experiences with copyright. They were asked how many years of experience they had working in some way with copyright, as well as whether they had received any previous training in the area of copyright. [Table 2](#) below indicates, across all three classes, the range in the number of years students had experience working with copyright prior to taking the course from zero (15 students) to nine years (one student).

Many students indicated that they had some previous, relevant work experience with copyright. These experiences include getting permission to use specific items for a library or museum, acquiring and assessing archival documents (2 respondents), inter-library loan (2 respondents), working as a faculty member, working as a literary agent, working as a librarian with patrons, working with digital exhibits, working directly with a copyright librarian to prepare workshops, or working at a university press as an intern.

Despite their previous experience with copyright (with one student having nine years of experience working with copyright), few students indicated that they had any significant (longer than a single one to two-hour training session) prior training in copyright-related

**Table 2: Number of years of experience with copyright**

Years of © Experience	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Number of Students	15	6	3	0	3	1	0	0	0	1

**Table 3: Responses to pre-course survey**

Description	No.
Not confident	4
Confused	3
Anxious	3
Afraid	1
Intimidated	1
Uncertain	1
Nervous	1
Wary	1
Conflicted	1

matters. Seven students mentioned that at least one class session was dedicated to copyright literacy in 1–2 iSchool courses. One student attended a 1-hour fair use lecture as part of the University Library’s Fair Use Week celebration. More formal training was mentioned by seven students. Four students attended at least one 1–2 hours of training on copyright in a workplace setting (one of whom attended such a training twice—one ten years ago and one six years ago, and one who attended these workshops every year for the past three years). One student was engaged in assessing rights statements for a digital collection and worked one-on-one with a supervisor to do so. Despite these previous experiences with copyright, most of the students surveyed (see [Table 3](#)) still felt quite anxious about copyright.

Students were also asked to write a response to the following question both in the pre-course and post-course survey: “Some information professionals feel confident or happy about copyright. Others feel less confident or anxious. How do you feel about copyright issues?” The majority of students who answered this question before having taken the eight-week copyright-intensive course were wary, intimidated, uncertain, confused, or anxious. [Table 3](#) illustrates the number of time terms like “uncertain,” “confused,” “anxious,” and “intimidated” were used in the descriptions for the students’ initial reactions to addressing copyright issues as information professional students.

There were still some students who did not feel excited about copyright or were still a bit concerned after having taken the course. Some described themselves as being “in the middle” between confident and anxious. Overall, however, the majority of the students, at a total number of 12 out of 16, answered in a more positive manner after having taken the course as highlighted earlier. Only one student remained anxious about copyright and one student was frustrated by the copyright rules because “one must buy into the white, Western system of capitalism and all the constructs created to govern through patriarchal lenses.” In that student’s opinion, “copyright is a jerk.” However, this observation reflects a very keen understanding of copyright law and the legal system in which it operates and

**Table 4: Responses to post-course survey**

Description	No.
Very confident	1
Confident	3
More confident	2
Fairly confident	1
Much more comfortable	1
Pretty good	1
In the middle	5
Anxious	1
© is a jerk	1

does not necessarily reflect any fear or anxiety on behalf of the student, rather a critique of the broader socio-cultural legal system in which copyright operates.

After having taken the course, students' responses to the question about how they approach copyright questions varied greatly from the pre-course responses (Table 4). The majority of the class responded that they approach copyright questions by consulting Google before having taken the class, with explanations such as, "I would probably start with a general web search and dig from there. I am not foolish enough to believe there is any such thing as a simple answer when it comes to copyright; however, I can see myself engaging in various levels of digging and then simplification that would depend on whether I had personal or academic purposes for looking." Some students did mention specific sources that they would consult, such as the Copyright Act or the U.S. Copyright Office, but the responses before the course tended to be much more vague, such as, "I don't have a preferred reference source for copyright questions at the moment" or "[v]iew CONTU. 6 months ago, I would have said Google ... ." Interestingly, the student who, before having taken the course, mentioned CONTU would not yet understand that CONTU is not the law and is outdated. However, it is, of course, a more nuanced response than a simple "Google" as other students reported.

Students' responses in the post-course survey were much more nuanced and specific. Now, the students mentioned sources like reaching out to the copyright librarian, looking for case-law and regulations, consulting professional organization sources like the ALA website, as well as assessing fair use. One detailed response indicates the new level of discernment students had when reviewing sources, such as:

Now that class is over, I have a much better grasp on how to play the game, if you will. Searching [the] university library, the Library of Congress, Congressional records, or copyright librarians and IP lawyers might be good sources for every different level of the search.

Another similarly detailed response to where to look for copyright answers included the following:

First, I would look up the relevant section of Copyright law to try and discern an answer. Then depending on the scope of the question I would then look to see if there was any relevant legal preceden[t] that addresses the question. Finally, if I could still not discern an answer, I would consult with an expert ...

Google was mentioned as an approach to answering copyright questions in the post-course survey, but only by two students out of the twenty-three students who responded.

## Discussion

Students tackling a new course in copyright for information professionals as part of a school for information science curriculum were consistently concerned about approaching library copyright issues. Interestingly, although some of the students had extensive real-world experiences with copyright, they were still worried about engaging with copyright in librarianship. This fear and anxiety likely stem from an apprehension of engaging with the law and a possibility of being sued (Benson, 2019; Wakaruk & Gareau-Brennan, 2020). Unlike other areas of librarianship, where students learn to engage in reference interviews, database searching, and collection management, copyright carries with it the possibility of legal ramifications and, because laws change frequently, is not a static topic. Possibly the same apprehension that students have when approaching copyright is shared by their professors, leading too few schools of Information Science to offer courses in copyright (Schmidt & English, 2015; Saunders & Estell, 2019).

When provided with an intensive eight-week copyright specific course, students were able to change their perception of copyright issues and were more open to addressing copyright issues in their librarianship. Students' response to addressing copyright issues moved from scared and apprehensive to confident and aware of available resources. Additionally, students were much more capable of locating reliable sources of copyright information. Instead of relying on Google or a general internet search for information about copyright, students noted that they would search government websites, such as the U.S. Copyright Office, Library Association websites, such as the ALA website, as well as appropriate statutory, regulatory, and case law. In the future, then, if the students do not have the exact answer at hand, they are empowered to locate a high-quality source of up-to-date copyright information.

These findings shed a positive light on copyright education, as other studies demonstrate that "LIS students are highly likely to turn to librarians with copyright questions, which is similar to professional librarians, 68% of whom said they turn to colleagues" (Estell & Saunders, 2016; Saunders and Estell, 2019). While Saunders and Estell's (2019) results concluded that students are less likely to turn to professional library organizations than they are to rely on other librarians for copyright information, these results demonstrate that after taking a course in copyright law specifically, students are much more likely to turn to those crucial, reliable sources of copyright information. It is problematic to rely on other librarians for copyright information when previous studies demonstrate that the copyright training for librarians, both in schools for Information Science and during their professional career, are



lacking (Estell & Saunders, 2016; Saunders and Estell, 2019). Thus, the results of this study are encouraging in demonstrating both that students can become more confident and comfortable with copyright during a short course and become more strategic in searching for answers to more complex copyright questions as they move forward into their librarianship careers.

## Conclusion

Copyright issues abound in the field of Information Science. Practitioners will face copyright questions and issues both in their own practice and in interactions with patrons. To better prepare future information science professionals, courses on copyright should be included in the information science curriculum. As demonstrated in this study, students feel more confident and have a better grasp on where to find reliable copyright information when they have taken a copyright-intensive course during their time studying information science. As such, it would be beneficial for more information science programs to offer copyright courses to students to better prepare them for the workforce. Such formal copyright training will lead to better results in their professional life as well because they likely would not avoid future projects due to copyright issues (Wakaruk & Gareau-Brennan, 2020). Sometimes, though, the answer we must provide to patrons is that we cannot share a given resource due to copyright law. In that instance, it is helpful for librarians to be able to explain why the law prevents us from complying with the patron's request. An email message from a former student proves the point. The student notes that after having taken the copyright intensive course at the iSchool and then going on to practice librarianship, the course enabled the student to "fully explain [to a patron] why I refused to [make a copy of a particular work] by citing both case law and statutes as well as explaining how it puts the library at risk ..." (T. Jencks, personal communication, Sept. 16, 2020). As such, the copyright knowledge gained in the course is used in a productive way, both for the information professional and their institution, which is the ultimate goal of any preprofessional program: to prepare students to enter a professional field.

**Sara Rachel Benson** is the copyright librarian and an assistant professor at the Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She holds a JD from the University of Houston Law Center, an LLM from Boalt Hall School of Law at Berkeley, and an MSLIS from the School of Information Science at the University of Illinois. Prior to joining the library, Sara was a lecturer at the University of Illinois College of Law for ten years. Sara is the host of the Podcast © hat ("Copyright Chat") available on iTunes.

**Melissa Ocepek** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in the School of Information Sciences. Her research draws on ethnographic methods and institutional ethnography to explore how individuals use information in their everyday lives. Her research interests include everyday information behavior, critical theory, and food studies. She received her Ph.D. at the University of Texas at Austin in the School of Information.

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