# Factors Impacting Library Visibility on Academic Institution Home Pages

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This study identifies factors affecting the placement of the library on post-secondary academic institution home pages. The study is a mixed method research project, consisting of content analysis of 357 home pages from all types of institutions and 15 interviews with web librarians and institution webmasters. Institution home pages were coded according to an author-developed library visibility scale. Quantitative analysis of the results indicated that financial status (public, private, or for-profit), highest degree offered, and institution size were potential factors influencing library link placement. Interviews confirmed that financial status and degree offered influenced library visibility in relation to the home page's function and the institution's marketing efforts. Additional local factors such as advocacy, engagement in web decision-making or technology, institutional understanding of the library's role, and accreditation were found to influence link placement.

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## INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the academic library, the phrase "If you build it, they will come" has been outdated for some time. The online presence of the library is just as or more important to its educational mission as its physical presence. So it is interesting to note the wide variation in how libraries are placed on the websites of higher education institutions. At one institution, there may be a direct link to the library from the home page in a very prominent place. At another, the library is hidden below the fold in the footer, or behind a drop-down menu, or only accessible by clicking to another page, or worst of all, not even present. In the course of doing another research project, the researcher became intrigued by this variation in practice and what it might mean. It is easy—too easy—to surmise that the library's visibility is an indication of its importance to its institution. The construction of web presence very likely is more complex than that. And more hopeful, because if there are factors that influence how the institution presents the library on its website, then there also should be ways to achieve better placement by manipulating those factors. This study seeks to determine what if anything influences the placement of links to the library on the academic institution website and what librarians can do with this knowledge to achieve optimum visibility and thus more effectively fulfill their mission to users.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### LIBRARY LINK PRESENCE OR ABSENCE

The University of Illinois, the institution responsible for the Netscape forerunner, Mosaic, is credited with setting up the first library website in 1994 (Oswald, 2009). The first phase of literature on library web page design was written soon after, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as libraries put up their first pages and began experimenting with offering services through the Web.

A number of these studies collected data on the presence of a link to the library from the university home page as one component of a larger study. King (1998) studied trends in front-end web design using the home pages of 120 ARL libraries. He found that 44% of ARL libraries could be reached from their institution's home page in one "step", 37.5% in two "steps", and 10% in three "steps" (p. 462). Dewey (1999) surveyed services offered on the home pages of the thirteen member libraries of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), finding as part of the study that five out of twelve CIC institutions had a direct link to the library from their home pages. Agingu (2000) used presence of a link on the university home page as one component of a comparison between libraries at publically-supported Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and those at publically supported non-HBCUs in the Southeast. She found that only 2 out of 65 of the libraries in her study were not linked from the institution's home page. Eighty-five percent of HBCUs had library links compared with 100% of non-HBCUs (p. 33). Tolppanen, Miller, & Wooden (2000) conducted a survey of 133 academic libraries at medium-sized universities in order to determine the core components of their websites in terms of design

elements and content. They found in one portion of the study that nearly one third of the libraries surveyed did not have a link from the university home page to the library and suggested that the library negotiate for a "library icon" on the top page in order to increase the chances that students could find it (p. 12). They repeated their study in 2003, finding that direct links from the university to the library website increased by 3% in 3 years (Tolppanen & Miller, 2005).

In the mid-2000s, the presence or absence of a link to the library on the university home page continued to be a component of studies on academic libraries' use of the web. In a study focused on the use of library home pages for marketing and fundraising, Welch (2005) found that 80.1% of her sample, 106 doctoral and masters granting institutions, had direct links to the library from the university home page. Onyancha (2007) conducted a Webometric study of all types of academic libraries in eastern and southern Africa to ascertain their web presence and performance. One component was the existence of a link to the library on the university home page, which occurred in 34 of the 36 universities studied (p. 29). In all of these studies, the placement of the library home page on the university website was one component among many that the authors were considering, and the link placement findings were reported as descriptive statistics.

## ACCESS TO AND CATEGORIZATION OF THE LIBRARY

Two studies from the early 2000s focus in a more significant way on the problem of access to the library from the university's home page. In 2000, Bao studied 143 institutions taken in a stratified systematic sample from the *Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*. He analyzed both the level (top, second, third, etc.) of the university website at which a link to the library appeared and commercial online databases offered on the library home page (Bao, 2000). Results for the former indicated that 57.3% of the sample institutions listed the library on the top-level page, 24.5% on the second level, 2.8% on the third level, and 9.8% provided no link to the library (p. 193). Public doctoral and masters granting institutions were most likely to put the library at the top level (p. 193). At the second and third level, Bao analyzed link categories used to classify the library, finding "Academics" to be the category most often chosen (p. 193). Bao states that the results indicate that only 57.3% of the academic libraries studied are perceived to be important by their institutions (p. 194). He suggests contacting people at these institutions as an avenue for additional research (p.195).

Around the same time, Astroff (2001) examined 111 ARL institution home pages using genre analysis. She argued that the university home page is a developing genre with certain expected rules and conventions, including a direct link to the university library. Twenty-four percent of the libraries she studied did not provide a direct link to the library, indicating that "the Web page designers … do not consider the library a primary destination for their Web visitors." (p. 98). Astroff also explains how universities link to libraries when they do not include a direct link on the home page, for example using redundancy and search engines, and in some cases classifying the library with other offices and services. The categories under which the university places the library in the third case (i.e., student services, academics) gives an indication of how the institution sees the library's role in the academic community (p. 95). However, Astroff notes that the library may have a number of definitions within the university and that representation on the website does not necessarily mean that the library is considered unimportant in terms of other factors like funding or faculty status (p. 95) The study also suggests that the overall classification schema used on the site (organizational, functional, role of the site visitor in the university community) has implications for accessibility of the library, with the method of organizing by the visitor's role providing no place for an obvious library link (p. 96).

## LINK PLACEMENT ON THE INSTITUTION HOME PAGE

Harpel-Burke (2006) conducted a thorough examination of library link placement within university websites. Her sample included the websites of 77 four-year, medium sized university libraries in the same Carnegie class as her home institution, Hosfra. Her study is the first to address the placement of a library link in a certain section of the home page (for example, upper center) and to address home pages that have multiple links to the library as a result of navigational features of a template. Harpel-Burke's study delved more deeply than Astroff's into university websites divided for separate user groups such as students or alumni. She coded for a link to the library on each separate user group landing page. Harpel-Burke's findings showed that 91% of the universities in her sample had an "obvious" though not always direct link to the library on the home page and that 24% had more than one link to the library (p. 15). The center section of the home page was found to be the most popular for a first link to the library (47%), followed by the upper (36%) and lower (17%) sections (p. 16). Secondary pages devoted to internal users had an obvious link to the library significantly more often that those devoted to external users, with percentages ranging from 94 to 97% for internal users as opposed to 49 to 74% for external users (p. 17). While Harpel-Burke states that "the representation of the library on the university's home page and subsequent user group subsites is not an indication of the worth of the library as perceived by the institution," (p. 12) she concludes that the high percentage of websites with a visible link to the library indicates that the people responsible consider it to be important (p. 22).

Studies of library presence or placement on institutional home pages drop from the academic literature after the mid-2000s. However, the topic has recently resurfaced in medical library literature. Marton (2012) examines the web presence of hospital libraries in the ten top-ranked hospitals in the United States. She finds that hospital libraries are frequently shunted to third- or fourth-level web pages, making them virtually invisible, and suggests working with hospital IT staff and communication staff to add appropriate library links (p. 23).

This study furthers the body of literature on library link placement in several ways. It updates earlier studies conducted more than a decade ago for the current academic web environment. Additionally, aside from Bao, previous researchers have confined data collection to certain sizes or kinds of academic institutions, many times choosing those with ARL libraries or those with the characteristics of the researcher's home institution. This study focuses on determining factors influencing link placement using institutions of all sizes, funding status (public, private, for-profit), and Carnegie class. While previous studies relied on observation of websites only, the current study seeks to add further meaning to the statistics by supplementing observation with interviews. The current study hopes to determine whether there are strategies that would help increase library visibility on the institution website.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is a mixed method research project with a quantitative and qualitative component. The quantitative portion is a content analysis of the home pages of a broad range of educational institutions. The content analysis was followed by a qualitative phase consisting of interviews with web librarians and institution webmasters about how the library got placed on the current home page.

### CONTENT ANALYSIS

The National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) was used to develop a population for the study. IPEDS is a comprehensive dataset intended to collect information about all providers of postsecondary education in the United States. For this study, basic data, including sector, financial status (public, private or for-profit), 4-year or 2-year, highest degree offered,