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Socioeconomic Indicators Associated with First-year College Students' Use of Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine whether a wide variety of socioeconomic indicators were associated with first-year college students' use of academic libraries in six areas: checking out books from general circulation, reading electronic books, using online reference librarian services or speaking with a peer research consultant, logging into an electronic journal, using library workstations, or logging into a database. Data were drawn from 5133 first-year students attending a large, public research-extensive university in the upper Midwest of the United States. The results suggest that first-year students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds are less likely to utilize libraries in nearly all areas. Some mixed findings also emerged suggesting that socioeconomic indicators such as hours spent in employment each week, living situation, and family are not uniformly predictive of students' use of academic libraries.

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Researchers continue to demonstrate the many benefits of undergraduate students' use of academic libraries; for example, academic library use has been associated with students' development of information literacy skills (Hart Research Associates, 2009), retention (Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2013a, 2014), academic achievement (Moore, Brewster, Dorroh, & Moreau, 2002; Soria, Lingren Clark, & Coffin Koch, 2013b; Soria, Stebleton, & Huesman, 2013c; Soria et al., 2013a, 2013c, 2014), and engagement (Laird Nelson & Kuh, 2005). Institutions employing greater numbers of library staff, holding more volumes in their collections, and purchasing more books, journals, and technological resources for their libraries are more likely to have undergraduates who possess higher critical thinking skills (Whitmire, 2002). Academic libraries provide college students with vital access to information resources and course materials, often serving as a primary gateway to students' acquisition of knowledge.

Given the significant role of libraries in the academic enterprise—and in students' success—it is important to examine whether some groups of undergraduate students may be more or less likely than their peers to access and utilize library services. With this knowledge, librarians, partnering with faculty and staff, can better understand whether there exists a need to enhance current programs and services to reach out to students who may be disadvantaged in terms of their library knowledge and use of library services. We therefore designed the present study to address the following research question: are first-year college students' socioeconomic characteristics associated with their use of academic libraries?

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS WHO UTILIZE ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Researchers have discovered that some students may be more likely to utilize academic library services compared to their peers; for example, Grimes and Charters (2000) found that women, students of color, students who lived on campus, and students with lower ACT scores were more likely to spend time in the library. Partially contradicting those findings, Whitmire's (2002) data suggested that men were significantly more likely than women to use academic libraries, although a separate analysis supported the study of Grimes and Charters (2000) and suggested that students of color were significantly less likely than their peers to use libraries controlling for other background characteristics and college experiences (Whitmire, 2001). Scholars have also discovered that students who work full-time or off-campus were significantly less likely to spend time in the library compared to their peers (Grimes & Charters, 2000; Whitmire, 2001). Finally, students who have earned more academic credits (e.g., juniors, seniors) were significantly more likely to use libraries compared to less-experienced students across several institutional types (Whitmire, 2001, 2002).

There are several reasons students may not utilize academic library services; for example, students may not find the location or hours convenient or may not have time in their busy academic schedules to utilize the physical services. Students may also utilize alternative search engines more familiar to them (e.g., Google or Google Scholar) rather than utilize library databases, although it is more often the case that

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libraries are linking their OpenURL resolvers to these search outlets. More concerning is that many students may not utilize library services because they lack experience using library services, do not feel comfortable seeking assistance from libraries staff, and suffer from library anxiety (Jiao, Onwuegbuzie, & Lichtenstein, 1996). Some of these anxieties can stem from students' lack of familiarity with library services and resources, lack of confidence in their abilities to utilize libraries, and fear in asking questions that might be perceived as unintelligent (Jiao et al., 1996).

While the aforementioned studies shed light on some of the reasons why students may not utilize libraries—and speak of the potential populations that may be more at-risk of underutilizing libraries—indicators of students' socioeconomic demographic backgrounds are noticeably absent from the analyses. There are reasons higher education practitioners and administrators should be concerned about students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; for example, low-income, working-class, and first-generation college students in higher education often feel intimidated and lack confidence in their ability to be successful in academia (Cushman, 2007; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). These groups of students have lower grade point averages and greater academic challenges (Soria & Gorny, 2012; Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001), often struggle feeling like they belong in the cultural and social norms of higher education (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Soria, 2012; Soria, 2015; Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2012, 2013; Soria et al., 2013c; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012b; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012a), and are less likely to graduate from college than students with college-educated parents (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Ishitani, 2006).

Furthermore, first-generation students are significantly less likely than their peers to access campus services and resources (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Theoretical contributions suggest that students from low-income, working-class, and first-generation backgrounds possess different types of social capital—knowledge and resources shared between networks—than their peers from middle/upper-classes or those who were not the first in their families to attend college (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). The type of social capital passed from parents who attended college to their children places non-first-generation and middle-class students at a greater advantage in higher education, as these students can more easily navigate higher education institutions (Hurst, 2010; Stuber, 2011).

The relative ease with which college students can navigate campus services can potentially include students' use of academic libraries; however, prior scholarship has not examined whether students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to utilize libraries compared to peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The lack of scholarship connecting students' socioeconomic diversity and their library use is particularly concerning given the disparities in students' success rates that can be attributed to their socioeconomic backgrounds. If students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, first-generation students, or those who have fewer financial resources to attend college are utilizing academic libraries at significantly lower rates than their peers, these students may not be in a position to reap the many benefits of their academic libraries—including the aforementioned benefits associated with students' academic achievement or retention as well as cost savings that students can realize by using library resources and services.

Therefore, in this study, we examined whether socioeconomic factors in particular may disadvantage some first-year college students from utilizing their academic libraries. The socioeconomic indicators we examined included whether students were the first in their families to attend college, received Pell grants, or participated in access and retention programs. Additionally, we considered students' self-reported financial aid packages, the number of hours they worked in high school, and their financial concerns. We investigated first-year college students for two primary reasons: first, the first year of enrollment in higher education is critically important in predicting students' long-term success. Second, there are fewer variables potentially influencing first-year

students' use of any campus services—including libraries—thus, researchers are better able to isolate the effects of specific variables on students' outcomes and participation.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

In fall 2012, 5514 non-transfer, first-year students were enrolled at a large public university classified by the Carnegie Foundation as having very high research activity. All of the first-year students were invited to take the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey during their freshman orientation sessions, which were held from June to August in 2012. The survey was administered through collaboration between the Office of First-Year Programs and the Office of Institutional Research. Of these students who took the survey, we retained 5133 (93.09%) for analyses because some students did not have a reported ACT/SAT score, did not write their correct student ID on a paper–pencil survey (and thus were not possible to match with institutional data), and did not answer all survey questions used in the present analyses. Within this first-year student cohort, the majority of students were female, White, and residents for tuition purposes, all of which closely mirrored the demographics of the full first-year population. These first-year students were primarily enrolled in one of seven colleges within the University, with the greatest percentage enrolled in a liberal arts college (46.80%). Table 1 demonstrates more detailed demographic data for the participants in the sample.

Table 1
Description of variables included in analyses.

	n	%
Male	2518	49.1
Female	2615	50.9
African American	173	3.4
American Indian or Native American	55	1.1
Asian American	611	11.9
Hispanic or Latino	146	2.8
Hawaiian	24	0.5
White	4124	77.7
International	163	2.3
English as a second language	528	10.3
Pell grant recipient	1091	21.3
First-generation	1289	25.1
Immigrant	112	2.2
Parents' income less than $40,000	659	12.8
Parents' income between $40,000 and $75,000	1112	21.7
Prior college credit at a different institution	1328	25.9
Access to Success program	402	7.8
TRIO program	136	2.6
Lived with family	391	7.6
Books	1552	30.2
E-books	1053	20.5
Journals	3516	68.5
Workstations	1985	38.7
Peer tutoring or online reference	206	4.0
Databases	3327	64.0
Workshops	732	14.3

	m	sd
ACT scores	27.72	3.39
Age	18.11	0.43
Get a job to help pay for college expenses	3.46	0.78
Work full-time while attending college	2.07	0.83
Number of college applications submitted	4.19	2.18
Effect of current economic situation on college choice	2.63	0.95
Financial aid that does not need to be repaid	3.36	1.74
Financial aid that needs to be repaid	3.29	1.99
Concern about ability to finance college education	1.80	0.61
Hours per week working in high school	4.06	2.55
Selected college because of the cost	2.19	0.74
Selected college because lack of financial aid offered by first choice	1.24	0.57
Selected college because the first choice was not affordable	1.35	0.68