Outreach Programs for Graduates in Top Academic Libraries in China

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ABSTRACT

Series of communicational, interactive, and educational outreach services in academic libraries for graduates during the period immediately preceding graduation are well-established and expressed in broad and diverse ways annually, particularly in China. However, the literature documenting their development and details is scant, and reports and research are lacking. The study aims to investigate series of activities and programs offered and conducted by university libraries for this distinct user population to enhance library services, strengthen relationships, alleviate graduation pressure, and develop an ideal atmosphere on campus. The research is based on a survey of the 114 websites of top university libraries in China[1]. The survey revealed several outreach initiatives and major programs and issues occurring during the graduation season. The projects undertaken at China's university libraries can be adapted or adopted by others interested in developing their own diversity initiatives for graduates and enhancing their efforts in this area. The findings and implications in practice are applicable to the wider audience of national and international libraries.

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Introduction

Graduation is a memorable and once-in-a-lifetime occasion for students. It is an exciting time to celebrate accomplishments. Many regard it as an important event, and graduates eagerly look forward to it, including graduating undergraduates (seniors) and graduating Master's and Doctoral students. Libraries are actively launching workshops, talks, seminars, and series of activities such as "my library utilization report" and "preserve my cherished university memory" to cater to students' needs, demands, and sentiments and to create a sense of community for them to enhance their college experience. These types of activities are called "Graduation Subject Series Programs" (GSSPs), and the outreach programs vary as per academic institution depending on the types of graduating population, the details of which will be discussed in the Findings and discussion section. GSSPs are often conducted within and around the graduation period (also called the graduation season) in the spring semester annually, between late February and late June or early July (Graduation Ceremony).

Many previous studies focus on freshmen or first-year graduate students (Monroe-Gulick & Petr, 2012) or the overall information needs and behavior of undergraduates and graduate students, aiming to provide instructions for better usage of libraries and fulfilling their information needs (Catalano, 2013; Chen, 2010; Gibbs, Boettcher, Hollingsworth, & Slania, 2012; Rempel, 2010; Weiler, 2005; Whitmire, 2002). These studies are crucial for understanding the information needs and behavior of the target audience, i.e., graduates. Furthermore, they provide the theoretical underpinning for providing resources and conducting workshops, instructions, and seminar services for graduates. Many studies emphasize the importance of marketing, advocacy, and outreach programs related to library services to facilitate the use of library resources. These studies support the present study. However, few studies have explored how outreach programs, marketing campaigns, and reference services are delivered across different countries and cultures to graduating students, or offered a humanistic care perspective to enhancing library services and strengthening sentimental ties toward them. In the specific context of graduates, few international studies have focused on GSSPs, and none have been published in scholarly journals. Although increases in the alumni services' literature has made it possible to better understand ideas and practices for academic libraries, the research is still sparse in comparison with most other areas of study regarding current student users. In August 2014, researchers randomly scrutinized numerous prestigious university websites, including those of Loughborough University, Rutgers University, Texas A&M University, University of Hong Kong (HKU), and The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). The author observed that colleges organized the graduation and prize presentation ceremonies. Some libraries, like the HKUST Library, held library orientations for undergraduate students in 2014, including dates, times, topics covered, and venues. These libraries also provide services related to alumni work in alumni associations. Moreover, libraries in Hong Kong and Taiwan release library graduation procedure notices. However, few

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[1] The members of top academic libraries in China (also called "Project 211," see details in the Research sample section) are 112 libraries in addition to 4 branches (located in two different provinces that have different websites and managements, respectively). The sample for this study comprises these 114 academic libraries (with two military medicine universities being excluded due to inaccessibility of the library website during the period of investigation, which may be intranet-accessible).

libraries provide graduate services on their homepages, and it is unknown whether these libraries launched graduate services and programs. In sum, few articles on library studies have investigated and reported on graduate outreach programs.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating and sharing China's successful and interesting variety of activities and experiences within the field of academic libraries and discusses the current status of outreach activities for graduates and the delivery of library services to this user group. We hope to shed light on how to most effectively provide services and marketing campaigns for graduates. In particular, this study examines the following questions: What are the major activity initiatives and higher value services for graduates in academic libraries? For what purposes are these activities being developed by academic libraries? How do libraries contribute to the campaign? What are the characteristics of outreach initiatives? The results of this study have numerous implications. This type of research could provide information on academic librarians' efforts to assist this distinct user population as well as better information for people to understand the practices regarding humanistic concern of individual academic libraries aimed at graduates in China. Additionally, the findings of this paper provide insight into a new means of library marketing and the creation of a new level of outreach.

Background

During the graduation period, libraries focus their efforts on the development of a series of activities and programs conducted by library directors, outreach librarians, or reference librarians, as supplemented by and collaborating with schools, graduate schools, student affair divisions, and propaganda offices. Colleges have also contributed generously to the campaign. GSSPs are primarily conducted in May and June. This campaign aims to develop greater passion to foster the sense of belonging or attachment to the alma mater; to create an ideal atmosphere for campus culture; to spread initiatives to the wider community, especially the next generation of students; and to provide enjoyment to the graduates. Series of activities can also be used as a useful platform to support and instruct normative research and thesis writing for graduating students that are enthusiastic about connecting to library resources and services. Furthermore, these activities work in concert with the school's appeal for graduates, namely to leave school with good memories.

In China, libraries constitute an essential part of leaving school. Other departments concerned with this procedure include the financial service sector (mainly tuition/accommodation fees), campus smart card centers (refundable fees, balances, logout of the consumption function), the IT service sector (refundable fees, balances, logout of the internet access function), logistics divisions (checking out of the dorm access control), and student office divisions. Graduates applying to leave school must complete the procedures of libraries and the above stakeholders for graduation, for which not only all degree requirements need to be met.

The library procedures are described below:

Students cannot obtain their diploma until all library materials are returned, including inter-library loans and consortia borrowings and until they have paid overdue fines and charges for lost and damaged items. In addition, many user-friendly measures and details are introduced in the next section. For graduating MPhil/PhD students, their thesis must be submitted to the library as a graduation requirement. They must submit their theses online to an electronic thesis/dissertations service system (ETDS) and, after passing the review, submit printed copies and a Copyright License Agreement form signed by a supervisor or a committee member to the library, which is similar to the procedures for the HKU Library. A few university libraries also require outstanding undergraduate or thesis defense forms for gifted graduates that submit their undergraduate theses to the ETDS, such as the BNU, BJUT, and LZU libraries.

After elaboration, design, and preparation, the procedures are then announced and promoted through multiple channels, including the library website; poster boards; post cards; book marks; word-of-mouth advertisements; WeChat; Renren profiles (www.renren.com, the equivalent of Facebook in China); and the library's Weibo page (www.weibo.com, the equivalent of Twitter in China). WeChat, an emerging mobile social media platform that provides a free and popular instant messaging application service (Xu, Kang, Song, et al., 2015), proved to be useful during the graduation period. Followers can receive messages instantly with reminder ringtones, including GSSP coming-soon notices, new session announcements, program reports, and other notices, using illustrations, videos, photos, etc. Users can also LIKE, comment, retweet or forward, and interact with librarians through real-time voice intercoms, video calls or texts for references, and the like. These features provide effective tools for librarians to advertise their library.

Literature review

Outreach initiatives in academic libraries

Presently, advocacy and outreach are two of the most widely discussed topics in the profession. Outreach services are becoming more prevalent throughout the library sector both in China and abroad. Substantial academic literature published on outreach suggests that libraries implement diversity programming and outreach activities to promote and market their services, resources, and facilities, reaching out to their diverse user population through their outreach efforts (Boff, Singer, & Stearns, 2006; Dennis, 2012; Hanna, Cooper, & Crumrin, 2011; MacKenzie, 2014; Welburn, Welburn, & McNeil, 2010).

A recent study by Dorset explored the perceptions of UK health library staff regarding the term "outreach" and demonstrated that various services are being offered under this umbrella term. Many regard this as key to future service developments, and it was concluded that outreach services will become the main method of delivery for library services in the future. Furthermore, the promotion of services is a key element of the outreach work of an outreach/liaison/subject librarian (Dorset, 2014). The results of Dorset's study also apply to the field of university libraries, although there may be differences in the target audience and information needs. More libraries are already focusing on and thinking of specific users in terms of other aspects of the new programs. For example, Mallon (2014) noted that the unique needs of Executive MBA (EMBA) students provide business librarians with an opportunity to design specialized outreach programs that can strengthen students' ties across campus. However, studies focusing on academic outreach librarians, specifically for graduates, are far less documented.

User study about graduate students and first-year college students

An increase in literature regarding undergraduate and graduate students' information needs and services provides theories that underpin and guide graduation outreach services. According to Gibbs et al. (2012), a library should offer designated spaces for Master's/PhD level graduates, such as study rooms and small multipurpose rooms for studying and delivering presentations; workshops for scholarly collections and thesis writing; and documentary delivery (e.g., VPN) services. Graduate students should also be divided according to disciplines or levels, offering different sessions (Chen, 2010). Attending electronic resource instructions' and literature review workshops, using citation and alert services to obtain updated information, and attending training sessions during downtime and before graduation can have long-term benefits, particularly during the thesis-writing period (Catalano, 2013; Rempel, 2010). Instead of being a traditional librarian, he or she should become a trainer, educator, or mentor. The changing role of librarians is essential in lifelong learning. In addition, there are numerous user studies on first-year college students (Latham & Gross, 2013; Pickard &