



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Journal of Academic Librarianship



Are Librarians Equipped to Teach International Students? A Survey of Current Practices and Recommendations for Training

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 January 2014

Accepted 21 April 2014

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Teaching experience

Academic libraries

International students

ABSTRACT

Past studies of international students and academic libraries have often focused on students' own characteristics and experiences. Using an online survey, this study instead investigated librarians' teaching skills for serving this population. The analysis reveals that participants perceived an importance in developing skills specifically for international students. They tried to accommodate students' unique needs and optimize teaching approaches using their own experience working with the students. Although they reported having obtained knowledge of students' backgrounds as well as communication and teaching techniques, they showed strong interest in having further training opportunities to improve their teaching. The survey results thus give insight into recommendations for the provision of training to improve teaching in the context of serving international students.

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INTRODUCTION

International students have changed campus demographics and is highly relevant to academic librarians in North America. The population has increased constantly. According to the *Open Doors Report*, 819,644 international students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States in the 2012/2013 academic year ([Institute of International Education, 2013](#)). Canadian institutions are also experiencing population increases. Data from Statistics Canada shows that 145,164 students enrolled in the 2011/2012 academic year ([Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012](#)). The term “international students” can be vague, but this study refers to international students who have a different cultural and linguistic background from North America. Librarians are expected to teach information skills and adapt to the changing student body. However, it does not necessarily follow that librarians are equipped to teach effectively in these circumstances. Therefore, this study uses a survey methodology to investigate librarians' experience in teaching international students and how their skills in this area can be further developed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recruiting international students is a high priority for many universities for a variety of reasons. International students help universities to develop international curricula and global perspectives, add cultural

diversity to classrooms and the university community, bring financial benefits to both universities and local communities, and contribute intellectually to universities ([Brennan & Dellow, 2013](#); [Maringe, 2010](#)). As part of a campus community, it is important for academic libraries to support all students' academic success. Librarians are often key figures in supporting academic success through teaching information literacy skills. To be effective as teachers, though, first academic librarians need to understand who they are teaching and how to approach their needs. Since campuses in North America continue to diversify, the relationships between international students and North American academic libraries have been studied for many years in the LIS (Library and Information Studies) field. Past literature highlights three common themes related to international students' challenges in academia, with the aim of improving librarians' approaches to working with this population: 1) knowledge of North American academic library systems, 2) understanding of academic expectations in higher education in North America, and 3) English proficiency.

CHALLENGES IN TEACHING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

DIFFERING ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

Different countries have different traditions and philosophies in education, and librarians can better understand students' difficulties by being aware of these differences. The academic practice that many students are familiar with are very structured and does not allow for independent research (which is often required in the North American educational setting). This is why students often have “no clue” where to start ([Ball & Mahony, 1987](#)). This is often caused by different understandings of what constitutes *learning*. In some education systems,

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memorization is a tool for learning. Knowledge from elders is highly valued and the ability to remember and reproduce the knowledge is highly desirable for better understanding (Valiente, 2008). Students are expected to memorize and recall information from teachers as their learning practice. Thus, they are not expected to do critical analysis, synthesis, or show creativity (Hendricks, 1991; Kumar & Suresh, 2000; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998). As a result, they tend to create verbatim reports compiling what experts say (Badke, 2002). Beyond not understanding how to do research, students may unintentionally commit plagiarism for reasons such as limited language abilities, different learning practices, and different ideas about textual ownership (Amsberry, 2010).

DIFFERENT ACADEMIC LIBRARY SYSTEM

Academic library systems vary by country. International students may not be aware or familiar with North American academic libraries. Library terminology is jargon, which is even harder to understand from the perspective of non-native speakers of English (Kamhi-Stein & Stein, 1999). North American library systems are often unfamiliar as well. Even though academic libraries are places to look for information to complete their assignments, students lack awareness of how to utilize them effectively. Based on his personal experience visiting different libraries in Asian countries (i.e., China, Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and South Korea) Hickok (2011) discovered that some libraries are very modernized and otherwise similar to North American libraries. However, he also discovered that not all libraries are “cutting edge.” Other libraries still have closed stacks, limited online and scholarly sources, and no professionally trained librarians, which is consistent with past literature (e.g., Allen, 1993; Goudy & Moushey, 1984; Macdonald & Sarkodie-Mensah, 1988; Morrissey & Given, 2006). Compared to native English speaking students, non-native English speaking students tend to have higher library anxiety and emotional discomfort in communicating with librarians and using libraries (Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 2001; Onwuegbuzie & Jiao, 1997).

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND COMMUNICATION NORMS

The first step to academic success is to understand assignment guidelines and professors' expectations for written work. However, lower English proficiency may prevent students from deciphering their own research needs in relation to assignment requirements (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2001). Library instruction and orientations are great opportunities to develop research skills, but without sufficient language skills, international students often have difficulties understanding what librarians are talking about (Morrissey & Given, 2006).

International students have more difficulties in searching for information. For example, keyword selection, using plural forms, synonyms, and correct spellings is a difficult area for them, which limits their effectiveness in searching (DiMartino, Ferns, & Swacker, 1995; Hughes, 2005; Varga-Atkins & Ashcroft, 2004). Asking librarians for guidance can help with overcoming these challenges. However, miscommunication between students and librarians is common if students have limited communication skills and low confidence communicating in English (Jackson, 2005; Liu, 1993). Different non-verbal cues and communication norms may also cause misunderstanding or misinterpretation (Wang & Frank, 2002; Zhang, 2006).

PAST RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LIBRARIANS WHO TEACH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

In order to help international students overcome the difficulties described above, various approaches and recommendations have been discussed in previous literature. For example, understanding of students' background helps librarians provide better services and assistance. Sensitivity training for library staff on the topic of students' culture and language is essential (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2001; Wang & Frank, 2002; Zhang, 2006). A cross-cultural component could be

part of library and information studies programs' curriculum to help librarians have better communication skills (M. Liu, 1995). Avoiding library jargon, idioms and cultural references, speaking clearly at a normal speed, avoiding complex sentence structure, and providing language scaffolding are all important techniques (Amsberry, 2008). Training opportunities in listening techniques, such as exposure and practice to accented speech, focusing on context rather than words, and positive, encouraging attitudes for accented speech will also help with better comprehension of international students (Amsberry, 2009). In one study, some academic librarians' reference transactions with international students demonstrated a fair amount of success; they showed sensitivity to international students, approachability, active listening skills, and respect (Curry & Copeman, 2005).

Tailoring services for international students is essential to bridge gaps with regard to cultural and linguistic differences. Assigning librarians who are specifically responsible for international students can be effective to reach out to the population and provide support (Kumar & Suresh, 2000; Liu, 1993). Librarians even can become tutors during writing research papers to guide students to being independent learners (Mei-Yun, 2007).

Providing effective comprehensive assistance and facilitating collaboration with other campus units is also recommended, for example with, international students' offices, English language programs/schools, and faculty are beneficial (Ishimura, Howard, & Moukdad, 2008; Jackson, 2005; Morrissey & Given, 2006; Wang & Frank, 2002). Library instruction specifically for international students is effective with regard to different communication norms and educational systems (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2001), especially in collaboration with teachers of ESL (English as a second language). This approach is effective for accommodating international students' special needs to bridge their limited language skills and develop research skills required for academia (Bagnole & Miller, 2003; Conteh-Morgan, 2001; Feldman, 1989; Hurley, Hegarty, & Bolger, 2006; Ormondroyd, 1989). A recent edited book by Jackson and Sullivan (2011) illustrated various initiatives to help international students, which are built on these past recommendations.

WHAT IS STILL MISSING?

A review of the literature shows that international students tend to have difficulties with language and in understanding North American academic expectations and library systems. Although the literature provides suggestions for better teaching practices for the population, it often focuses only on students' challenges and approaches or recommendations to overcome these. We do not find studies on assessment of librarians' teaching experience and effectiveness. Therefore, it is important to know in what ways academic librarians are prepared to serve the international student population. In relation to this, this study addresses the following questions: 1) What are librarians' experiences in teaching international students? and 2) Is there a need for librarians to have training to teach international students? If so, what are these needs?

METHOD

The purpose of this study was to understand on a broad level academic librarians' experience in teaching international students. A survey is the most suitable method for data collection from a large number of participants at a range of institutions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2012). As opposed to a paper-based approach, an online survey had several advantages: collection of multiple responses at the same time, elimination of geographic restrictions, and direct data entry by participants (Sue & Ritter, 2007). The survey form was created with LimeSurvey, an open source survey platform hosted at the researchers' institution. The survey contained four major categories of questions: 1) demographics, 2) institutional profile including services provided in participants' libraries, 3) current educational experience, and 4) future training needs.

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