A Toolkit for Reframing Services for a Diverse Group:
a research study of international students at Illinois Institutions

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Abstract

Statistics show that increasing numbers of international students have arrived in the current decade and projected trends in global education reveal that more international students than ever before will be attending academic institutions in the United States. This study was undertaken to discover current services, staffing, and practices that Illinois academic libraries have developed to identify needs and expand services that meet the educational or research requirements of international students. Starting with an online survey, followed by face-to-face interviews with library and institutional staff who work with international students, the results clearly show institutions will be better suited to provide services if there is more research and specific information shared about this segment of the campus population. Using the knowledge generated about their cultural, educational, and social practices, university and library staff will understand that these students are not a homogeneous group, and they are deserving of targeted services and outreach. The research process the authors followed is described, findings are discussed, and the resulting recommendations can be used as a toolkit; one that contains tips and successful examples that will assist libraries in reframing current services for international students.

Introduction

With the current and projected increases of international students arriving to study at academic institutions in the United States, there is an interest in understanding their unique needs. Librarians at academic institutions have adopted both accepted and uncommon paths to provide services, but in the past institutional staff treated the foreign-born as a single homogeneous group. In reality, the diversity of international students requires distinctive and varied programs and services. Today, a more global view is needed as library organizations confront the cultural and educational differences among these scholars, and changing existing services or adding new ones will aid the effort to meet the research needs of international students.

With anticipated increases in the international student population, this is an opportune time for librarians not only to educate students about research services and tools, but also to teach them about open access, collaborative and open collections, copyright, and intellectual rights and ownership. Developing lasting and cost-effective methods of scholarly communication in the pursuit of collaborative research efforts, and in support of education and research, is a challenge faced by all higher education institutions. Now, students from all over the world can learn how to store their research and publications in repositories, making their ideas available to a wider audience, while building collections at the home institution.
Academic libraries can use the increase in international students at their institutions to transform themselves in the present information environment, while positioning themselves for the future. The authors recognize that a unique opportunity exists with these international scholars, who will one day return to their home countries armed with new knowledge and practices they learned during their time here. These practices will expand collaborative research, encourage preservation, and create new collections and partnerships.

In addition to learning opportunities, research possibilities, and cultural exchange, international students studying in the United States are also important economically to our academic and municipal communities. International students contributed more than $21 billion to the U.S. economy in tuition, fees and living expenses, and with the American education system globally respected, these numbers are not expected to plateau or decline in the near future (Lewin).

The authors serve an institution which has a high concentration of international students from more than 95 countries and they are currently conducting a research study focused on the institutional members of the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI). The purpose of the study is to identify current services, staffing, and practices that Illinois academic libraries have developed to identify the needs and expand services to meet the educational or research requirements, of international students. They will share the methods and results of the research which includes examples of best practices; the types of assessment instruments used to identify the needs of international students; how services and programs were created or adapted; and the staffing necessary to serve foreign-born students. This study will assist libraries in assessing and reframing current services to international students.

**Review of Literature**

A review of the literature shows that librarians have searched for best practices to meet and support international students’ needs over the last two decades. Universities and academic libraries realize that the diversity of international students requires distinctive and varied programs and services. Their different cultural and educational backgrounds can affect their success of academic performance. Many of the research studies focus on discussing the language, cultural issues, and other difficulties that international students face in Western academic libraries. Researchers primarily use surveys to discover and learn more about the international students’ library experience. The literature reviewed includes three surveys that focus on finding international students’ information-seeking behaviors and challenges in using academic libraries, as well as advice to librarians on their approach to library instruction, outreach and other services for international students.

Baron and Strout-Dapaz, in their survey of 123 libraries and offices that support international programs in universities in a Texas library consortium, found that the major challenges international students face are language/communication problems, adjusting to a new educational/library system, and general culture adjustments (Baron and Strout-Dapaz 321). Based on their findings, they developed a sample for a skillset derived from the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards and also a suggested list of pedagogical methods and services for international students (319).
In another significant study, Nicole Sackers and colleagues at La Trobe University Library used an in-depth survey to discover international students’ preferences regarding library services and methods of communication (Sackers, Secomb, and Hulett 38). According to the survey results, online tutorials, in-class demonstrations, and hands-on workshops were highly-rated for learning about the library resources and tools (43). The survey also indicated that students want to know the basics about using the library resources by the third week of the semester (45). One recommendation is to have library orientation sessions sometime during the first three weeks of the semester to maximize student interest and involvement (47). In her study assessing incoming international students’ library experiences in San Jose State University, Jackson also found students repeatedly note the need for more orientation and introduction to the library (Jackson 205). That study’s recommendations included:

- Increase library orientation and outreach efforts for international students
- Create an online tutorial and web pages for international students
- Collaborate with campus ESL institutes
- Plan a professional development seminar for library staff

**Methodology**

In 2014 the authors were awarded a CARLI Research Subsidy to assist in their study of international students. The authors designed a multi-question survey to discover current services, positions and practices that Illinois academic libraries use to identify needs and expand services for international students. The expectation was that the survey results would not only illustrate best practices, but it would also establish if there is a shifting focus in how libraries reach out and engage the international population. The authors anticipated the survey results would include the types of assessment instruments used, whether new services were created or adapted from previous services, if new positions were developed to serve the needs of foreign-born students, and if members of the international community were routinely integrated into services or treated as a separate segment. The authors believed that the information documented in the survey would be useful to institutions seeking to develop or expand their own services and programming.

For our survey purposes, the definition of an International Student was pulled from the Common Data Set initiative: “A person who is not a citizen or national of the United States and who is in this country on a visa or temporary basis and who is enrolled for credit at an accredited higher education institution in the U.S.” (“Common Data Set, 2014-2015”) Note that survey questions do not apply to domestic students in international study abroad programs.

The survey was distributed to 139 CARLI institutions in fall 2014 and was available for five weeks. There were forty-two initial responses, with six institutions agreeing to be interviewed with follow-up questions. After analyzing the initial survey data, the authors began face-to-face interviews in the spring of 2015 with the institutions that had indicated their willingness to participate. All six libraries provide services for international students, and they represent various types of institutions, including an independent undergraduate liberal arts college, two public universities in Illinois, a private Ph.D.-granting research university, a small private college, and an accredited independent school of art and design. Those interviews were recorded, transcribed,
and the findings were used to strengthen earlier survey results or add new and meaningful information to the study results.

**Results**

The results are collected from the online survey data, and examples/best practices shared by librarians during the interviews. Results are presented below in three sections: Background, Services, and Activities and Outreach.

**Background: International Students on Your Campus**

According to the open door report from the Institute of International Education, over the last 60 years there was a steady 1% annual increase in the total number of students until the early 1990s when the annual increase shot to 3%, where it has stayed ever since. In the last 5 years, research universities have seen the highest percentage change in total enrollment with annual increases of 8%. (“International Students: Enrollment Trends”).

The survey asked if their institutions have international students and what percentage of international students makes up their user population. 90% of respondents indicated that they have international students in their institutions, with the largest number of respondents, more than two-thirds, in the 1-10% range and about one-fifth with 11-25% international students. The authors’ institution reports that 48% of the student population is international (see fig. 1). Of note is that one of the institutions in the survey reported their population as 1-10%, but when interviewed, it was discovered they actually have more than 30%. This is one example of why securing and using institutional data to inform your decision making is an important step.

![Survey Question: International students make up what percentage of your user population?](image_url)
Services for International Students

A separate section of the survey focused on the services provided to international students. Results show that 40% of those replying provide services, resources, or tools specifically for international students. When they were asked to give the primary reason for services, more than three-quarters chose anticipating the unique needs of international students. In another question, respondents indicated the method used to identify service and resource needs. The results show more than half of the libraries use guidance from outside of the library, followed by advice from liaisons or assigned library personnel, and then information gleaned from discussion groups (see fig. 2). Campus offices offering guidance includes the international student center, office of cultural affairs, diversity initiatives, and the admissions office.

![Graph showing methods of identifying service and resource needs for international students.]

Fig. 2. Survey Question: How do you identify service and resource needs for your international students?

Respondents were also asked to list the services they provide to international students. Results indicate orientation/tours, research assistance, study/research skills, writing/citing service, and research guides/pathfinders are the top services that most libraries offer (see fig. 3).

More than half of the institutions provide orientation and tours for international students. Some of them shared their successful practices in the survey, while others gave more details during the interview. One library uses pre-written questions for attendees to read at each station during the library tour. This helps students to know it’s OK to ask questions, and to provide them with the type of answers they should be seeking. In some libraries, both orientation sessions and tours are offered by bilingual staff, and are usually very well attended.

40% of responses are related to the development of the students’ education and research skills. Providing research assistance and scheduling information literacy instruction sessions assist in
the development of these skills. In order to reach as many international students as possible, some libraries offer instruction sessions focused on writing courses being taken by non-native speakers and ESL students, and programs that feature high numbers of enrolled international students.

Offering writing and citing support is the third top used service that libraries presented for international students. Multiple institutions partner with the writing center on campus to cooperate on workshops, or they have writing center staff offer “office hours” using a table or a study room in the library to meet with students.

Some libraries choose to use research guides or pathfinders to share information with international students. Here are a few examples of online guides received from the survey:

- http://guides.library.iit.edu/internationalstudents
- http://libguides.uis.edu/international
- http://libguides.harpercollege.edu/ESL
- http://rolfing.tiu.libguides.com/esl
- http://library.usml.edu/FeehanLibrary/writing

![Fig. 3. Survey Question: Which of these services do you provide targeted specifically to international students?](image)

*Activities and Outreach*
Results in this survey section demonstrate that 23% of respondents plan events and activities targeted to international students. Respondents were asked to briefly describe an activity, program, or event. One activity shared was an international film exhibit and the library purchases movies in subtitled, foreign languages. Another library shared their story of holding a tea party for international students that was co-hosted by the international student center. Several libraries addressed partnering with non-academic departments, or placing a library liaison in those departments, as a great way to cooperate on organizing an event or activity, as well as to market and promote library services.

**Toolkit:**

*best practices for providing services, outreach and staffing to international students*

The authors analyzed the responses to the survey, incorporated information gleaned from the interviews, and added in their own experience to formulate a list of best practices, or a toolkit of tips for providing library services, designing outreach, and coordinating staffing to international students. What follows is a list of recommendations from the authors.

**Recommendation 1**

**Assess your current services.** That’s right, look at what you’re already doing. The most interesting reaction in the face-to-face interviews was that staff at each and every institution visited said “We aren’t doing anything special. We won’t have anything of interest to share.” Of course that wasn’t true once the interview started and responses were collected. So assessing what you are already doing is an important first step. That’s because services to students already exist, and services targeted to international students don’t need to be created, just modified from existing services.

Also, make your library visible by reframing your services and outreach to be more engaging to international students. Recognize international holidays, or have a table or booth at student resource fairs targeted to international students. Even having simple signs welcoming them in their own language can be effective.

Remember: Don’t try to change behavior. Identify it and then design for it.

**Recommendation 2**

**Update your own knowledge.** International students have different academic perspectives based on geography, and what they learn as educational concepts vary from those in the United States. Remember that some educational concepts that are accepted and common in the United States may not be common at all for international students. It is important for librarians to be aware of the differences in student learning behavior and use teaching opportunities to properly explain concepts.

Start by talking and interacting with international students. Hold events that will create opportunities to engage. Make sure to hire international students to work in the library. They will be happy to educate you about their culture and their home countries. Learn more about your international students by conducting surveys, having focus groups, and arranging “talk tables”
for sharing stories and experiences. Exchange stories with staff on campus who work with international students (faculty, departments, campus units, etc.). Seek out campus workshops on international students, attend library conferences, read articles in professional journals to better understand the international student perspective.

**Recommendation 3**

**Partner on campus with those in the know.** Why duplicate work marketing, engaging, and providing services to international students when there are already units on campus tasked with assisting in their success? Possible partners on campus include the International Student Center, Admissions Office, Student Affairs, Student Employment, Teaching/Learning Centers, and Student Organizations.

When you partner with any of these groups on events such as welcome receptions, coordinate activities such as captioned film viewings or cultural recognitions such as Chinese New Year, then the hours necessary for library staff to be successful in outreach or programming can be decreased.

Working with other departments will also assist library staff in understanding some of the challenges that international students face in such areas as financial aid and employment acculturation. Many of the units mentioned attend workshops or have access to webinars focused on the needs of international students, and sharing information with these departments can increase the engagement and enjoyment of everyone.

**Recommendation 4**

**Redesign and create a separate orientation for international students.** Most libraries hold orientation sessions or informational tours, but there is definite success in holding separate sessions focused on the learning needs and educational transition of studying in a foreign country. One important function of separate sessions is to provide an opportunity to have library staff appear approachable and friendly. Staff can slow down and speak clearly in sessions, providing handouts when necessary to explain library policies and services, but still taking time to indicate that the library is an open and welcoming space for all on campus. It will allow for staff to build early relationships with students who want to learn and know as much as they can about their new and strange surroundings. Separate sessions will create opportunities not just to speak, but also to listen. Initiate questions about their native countries, as they may like to talk about their experiences.

**Recommendation 5**

**Create information literacy opportunities.** Experience of the librarians and institutional staff interviewed uncovered that international students have a real fear of missing out (FOMO) and want to attend instruction sessions. FOMO is real for international students. They question what American students know about the campus, the community and coursework that they don’t. Librarians can assist with FOMO by working with faculty in basic level courses, by creating specific instruction sessions for upper level or graduate courses that have high international student enrollment (such as business or engineering).
Offering open workshops on topics ranging from the basics of library services (such as interlibrary loan) to more specific topics (such as patent searching) are useful. Reach out to faculty and work together to create course content targeted to specific topics with which a class may be struggling.

Other units on campus that can partner on offering informational sessions include the Writing Center, Tutoring Services, and Career Services. Especially popular are Career Services sessions as students are interested in job opportunities, resume writing and how to best present themselves. The library can assist in teaching them industry or company research so they are fully prepared when they go on interviews.

**Recommendation 6**

**Additional recommendations.** Collections and resources should be considered for your international students. Do you already offer foreign language learning programs? Make sure to provide upper level English resources through these types of providers, a resource that will not only assist your international students but also remedial learners. Do you collect or provide popular fiction? Try to include multilingual resources in your collection. Copies of Harry Potter or The Hunger Games, in foreign languages from Spanish to Chinese to Polish will not only expose international students to cultural norms, but American students will also read them to increase their language fluency.

Hiring international students in the library is a huge benefit for all. It provides a student staff that more closely resembles the campus population, library staff will learn more about cultural and social norms, and they can assist in your efforts to serve international students. In some libraries, student staff has assisted in creating signage or online resources such as research guides with bilingual or multilingual aspects. For example, one library posts welcome signs in appropriate languages throughout the library for that year’s incoming group.

Outreach targeted to international students is challenging, but in the survey, the top four recommended marketing tools to reach international students were:

a. Posters or flyers. These students try to read everything they can, remember FOMO? Target areas where they gather: dorms, dining hall, or study space.

b. Library website. If you’ve held sessions for them, then you’ve also told them to find news in the banner, breaking news feed or elsewhere on your web site.

c. Partners outside of the library. Many libraries did not have email blast capability, but partners on campus such as the International Student Center, Admissions or Campus Affairs probably does, and they also probably have a newsletter or monthly email they distribute. Ask them to help market your event, program or session.

d. Library social media sites: blog, Facebook, Twitter, etc. One very important thing to remember is that many of the international students may not be using Google, Facebook, etc. when they first land on your campus due to restrictions in their native countries or internet access issues. Don’t rely on social media until you have built its use among your
students. One good way to do that is to work through the student organizations that provide social opportunities on campus.

The last recommendation concerns staffing. In this research the authors have not uncovered anyone with as specific a job title as one of the authors, International Student Library Services Liaison. Her efforts on campus both within the library, and external to the library, has increased the engagement and level of services offered. However, that uniqueness in her title is deliberate because of the 48% population of international students on campus.

What the survey and interviews uncovered is that whether a specific person is assigned or if it is a shared staff duty, services to international students should not be left to chance or overlooked.

Conclusions

This study provides a valuable learning experience for the authors. The findings have helped them to assess and update their current services to international students. They also hope this study can offer varied perspectives, ideas, strategies and examples for academic libraries to reform their services to serve this segment of the student population. Further research is called for and the authors intend to continue to study the impact of international students on the services, staffing and outreach in academic libraries, and to also continue promoting and encouraging the adoption of best practices for meeting the needs of international students.

Works Cited


Survey Link https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BPBXNRF