

## **Incoming International Students and the Library: A Survey**

Pamela Alexondra Jackson

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study was undertaken to assess incoming international students' exposure to libraries, computer literacy skills, and to determine their library needs. Results from a survey conducted in August 2003 include demographic information about incoming students, computer and library use before coming to the United States, library concepts that are new to them, and opinions about the library. Survey results show that international students arrive in the U.S. with high levels of computer literacy and that most incoming students have used a library in their home country. Findings suggest that international students would benefit from specialized library information competence and orientation programs.

### **INTRODUCTION**

International student enrollment in American academic institutions has continually risen since 1945. According to the *Open Doors Report 2003*, there are currently close to 590,000 international students studying in American universities and there was an increased spike in enrollment figures for this group between the years 2000 and 2003 (Institute of International Education, 2003a). Most international students find themselves in the cultural and language minority when they travel to a foreign country and enroll in a new educational system. This adventure is undoubtedly exciting, but the experience can also be frightening and frustrating for many students. As the world changes, the process by which international students involve themselves in the American higher education system becomes more difficult. Heightened immigration security measures after the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center led to the 2003 implementation of the complicated student tracking system SEVIS—Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (Institute of International Education, 2003b). It makes sense that difficulties matriculating into American universities may make the learning experience itself much more stressful and can lead to heightened levels of anxiety for new international students.

This study was conducted to assess incoming international students' library and computer experience upon their arrival at San José State University. Unlike domestic students or continuing international students, incoming international students may experience heightened levels of library anxiety, compounded by their newness to the university and the country. This group's prior experience using libraries and computers may be considerably different than that of other students. While continuing students may have obtained an awareness of campus policies and grown more comfortable with library practices and services, incoming international

students exposure to our library is limited if not non-existent. This study explores incoming international students' self-perceived library needs and views before receiving any formal library orientation or instruction. Results of the survey will assist librarians in planning programs to meet the specific needs of this multicultural group and hopefully help to lower anxiety levels, build confidence, and graduate international students adept at meeting their information needs.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

It is well documented in the literature that students from other countries are accustomed to different library services and varying degrees of access to information than those offered by American university libraries. The survey of library directors by Goudy and Moushey (1984) indicates that international students experience more difficulty using the library than do domestic students, particularly in using online catalogs, print indexes, and with American classification systems. Koehler and Swanson (1988) show that ESL students, even those from within the United States, have difficulty conducting library research, and that language, cultural, and social barriers experienced by international students result in an "overall lack of library skills" (p.149). Liu (1993) asserts that international students, especially those from Asian countries, experience difficulties with American classification systems and are unfamiliar with certain self-service library concepts, such as open stacks. Kamhi-Stein and Stein (1998) confirm that international students come to American universities with limited training in traditional print sources, computer or database use, and lack an understanding of how an American university library functions. The Baron and Strout-Dapaz (2001) survey of 123 libraries and international programs support offices further strengthens evidence that the three main challenges to international student academic success are "language/communication problems, adjusting to new educational/library system, and general cultural adjustments" (p.314). Furthermore, many authors suggest that the concept of plagiarism is a Western academic value and is not always a strong part of the academic environment in other countries (e.g. Robinson, 1992, Scollon, 1995, Pennycook, 1996, Badke, 2002). While some case studies and interviews with faculty and students identify diverse views on writing, learning, and citing sources (e.g. Bloch & Chi, 1995, Crowe & Peterson, 1995, Sapp, 2002), comparative studies of domestic and international student incidences of plagiarism are lacking. Thus, one should not assume that international students plagiarize more than domestic students.

In addition to different cultural library practices, English language proficiency is a

difficulty widely documented in the literature on international students. Both librarians and students encounter verbal and written language barriers and nonverbal communication problems. In her article on teaching ESL students, Ormondroyd (1989) documents communication barriers experienced between language-minority students and librarians and shows the importance of staff training to effectively communicate with and provide instruction to ESL students. Bilal (1989) suggests that the difficulties encountered in teaching international students how to use the library may be due, at least in part, to the students' English language proficiency. Liestman and Wu (1990) detail the success of a multi-language library orientation program that assists non-native speakers in using library resources effectively. Kamhi-Stein and Stein (1998) state that "library-related terminology is a third language" (p.1) to international students. Sarkodie-Mensah (2000) points out that although international students have proven a sufficient level of English proficiency to enter an American university, they may find it difficult to excel in a culture in which all aspects of their academic lives are immersed in the English language. Although language can frequently impede international student academic success, it may not be the main barrier for all students. Conteh-Morgan recognizes that librarians have incorporated cognitive and behavioral learning theories into library instruction. However, she stresses the importance for librarians to understand and incorporate second-language learning theories, such as innatist and interactionist. She presents a model for including such theories in library instruction and suggests collaboration between librarians and ESL instructors (2001, 2002). Furthermore, Conteh-Morgan points out that some international students come from English-speaking countries or have used English as a primary language elsewhere before coming to an American university (2003).

Many studies conducted on the library needs of international students focus on international student needs and difficulties as perceived by librarians, instructors, and international programs office staff. Other studies give insight into international student learning styles and critical-thinking skills (Chiodo & Tsai, 1995, Lee & Lodewijks, 1995, Ladd & Ruby, 1999 and DiMartino & Zoe, 2000), learner and library anxiety (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, 2001), and information-seeking and searching behavior (DiMartino, Ferns & Swacker, 1995, Liu, 1995 and Liu & Redfern, 1997). These studies provide valuable insight into the educational needs of international students. However, few studies focus on international students self-perceived library needs and their library experience before coming to the United States. Sarkodie-Mensah (1994) acknowledges the lack of research that includes international students themselves and stresses the importance of involving these students in studies about their

educational needs. Allen's (1993) survey of international students finds that online databases and catalogs are new to international students, and that most students have not conducted computerized research in a library in their home country. Garcha and Russell (1993) surveyed a group of non-matriculated ESL students and show that international students lack confidence in their ability to search journal article databases.

Many of these earlier 1990s surveys show that international students lack the necessary exposure to computers, especially to computers in libraries, to effectively utilize the growing online resources in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century academic university library. Now that we are fully entrenched in the digital age, more research is needed to determine the library needs of international students.

Research suggests that increasing outreach and orientation efforts to international students will enrich their educational experience in the United States. While international students are often served through traditional library orientation and instruction programs created for all students, Boers (1994) keenly points out that "we must ask ourselves whether or not these students are using the library as effectively as they can" (p.93). In the mid-eighties, Kline and Rod (1984) found that 56% of the libraries surveyed offered specialized library orientation sessions to international students. Of those sessions, 17% were not given by a librarian and some were only fifteen minutes in length. The Moeckel and Presnell (1995) survey to libraries about their international student programs resulted in their model for specialized library instruction program for international students. Natowitz (1995) analyzes eighteen articles written from 1985-1993 about international students' use of libraries and shows a library trend toward strengthening orientation programs for international students and developing library staff training programs to ensure effective communication with ESL students.

As San José State University moves forward to develop library programs for international students, it is clear that current research into incoming international students' library experience and needs is lacking. A study to assess new international students' current library needs that includes the students themselves is critical to the successful implementation of specialized library programs and services.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

San José State University is a large metropolitan university in the Bay Area of California. This public institution is one of the California State University System campuses and ranks eighth in the nation for international student enrollment in the category of master's

degree granting institutions in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2003a). Informal observation and interaction between San José State University staff and international students indicates a need for information competence programs targeting these students.

San José State University institutional statistics give a brief demographic look at San Jose State University's international students (San José State University Institutional Planning and Academic Resources Department, 2003). Recent campus enrollment statistics show that close to five percent of our students come to San José State University from other countries, and the university plans to increase enrollment of international students over the next five years. Twenty-five percent of all students enrolled in a graduate degree program at San José State University are international students. Campus international student enrollment is up 28.9 % since 1999 and the number of degrees conferred to international students is up 47.6% since 1997. The majority (77%) of our international students come from Asian countries.

Approximately 150 international students matriculate into San José State University every semester. While librarians identified the need for library outreach to this group of students, no programs had been created at the time of this study. Incoming international students were chosen as the survey group for a number of reasons. This group has not used our library services, received library instruction, or been exposed to library jargon at San José State University. Thus, they bring a fresh perspective to the survey questions, not shaped by formal training or exposure to our library. As the newest group of international students to matriculate into the university, they represent the most current view of student computer experience and library use before coming to United States. Additionally, surveying this group will allow the library to chart the growth and change of international students over time. By surveying the students, the library hopes to identify barriers to successful library research. Survey research questions include:

- What is the demographic profile of our incoming international students?
- What experience do incoming international students have using libraries in their home countries and what is their level of computer proficiency?
- What library services and terminology are new to international students?
- What do the students like/dislike about the library?
- What services/information do respondents think the library should provide to help international students?

## **METHODOLOGY AND SURVEY**

One-hundred-and-sixty-one undergraduate and graduate incoming international students were surveyed (survey can be viewed at: <http://www.sjsu.edu/~pjackso2/survey.pdf>). The survey was given to all incoming international students during the Fall 2003 International Student Orientation, a program offered by the Office of International Programs and Services. Incoming international students consist of students for whom San José State University is their first college experience in the United States (first-time students), and students transferring to San José State University from other U.S. academic institutions (transfer students). International graduate students who attended another U.S. institution for their undergraduate degree are considered transfer students for university statistical purposes. Students were given time during the orientation to complete and return the survey. Respondents were also given the option to return the survey to the library during a tour later that day, or via campus or regular mail.

The survey was divided into four sections. In addition to demographic data, information was collected about the students' library and computer use in their home countries before coming to the United States, library concepts and services that they have used or are new to them, and an open-ended question section for them to tell what they like/dislike about the library and how the library can best or better serve international students.

A strong partnership between the Office of International Programs and Services and the Library encouraged international student participation and allowed the targeted population to be reached for this study. Incorporating the survey into international student orientation led to a response rate of 82% of students for whom this is their first time in the United States and 65% for students who are transferring from another U.S. institution (a combined overall response rate of 75%).

## **FINDINGS**

### *Demographic Information*

There were 121 survey respondents, representing a total of 38 countries. Two-thirds (67%) of the respondents were under 25 years of age. Gender was nearly equal with only one more male than female. The class level break down is Freshman (14.1%), Sophomore (7.4%), Junior (18.2%), Senior (5.8%), and Graduate (54.5%). The students' time spent in the U.S. ranged from a few days to an average of 2.5 years.

Majors or areas of study under pursuit by incoming international students can be categorized as follows: Engineering, including Computer Engineering (37%), Business (27%),

Computer Science (8%), all other social sciences (18%), all other humanities (6%), and all other sciences (4%). These majors, especially in the fields of engineering and computer science, rely heavily on advanced computer knowledge and technical computer skills, suggesting a somewhat expected advanced level of computer literacy among our incoming international students.

### *Computer and Library Use Before Coming to the U.S.*

The second section of the survey reveals significant differences between international student surveys conducted in the eighties and early nineties and the students currently under investigation. Responses show that 94% of incoming international students used a library in their home country before coming to the United States. Of those, 84% used a computer inside of a library. Students who regularly use the Internet rate at 96%, with 93% having used email. A significant number of incoming students (80%) conducted some form of computerized library research before coming to the United States. These numbers certainly confirm what many involved in international student education suspected—incoming international students are adept at using computers and are immersed in a global information society. More importantly, a significant percentage of these students come to the United States with some exposure to using libraries. Furthermore, these students state that they not only used computers in libraries, but have conducted some form of electronic library research.

Students were given the opportunity to write in other uses they had for computers. Not surprisingly perhaps, given that many are in computer-related areas of study, students wrote that they use computers for gaming, web design, programming, database design and technical software packages specific to their fields of study. It should be noted here that students who wrote in additional uses for computers are almost exclusively from engineering, computer science and other computer-related majors such as instructional technology. This may suggest that international students would benefit from library instruction programs tailored to their majors and or general student knowledge in specific fields of study.

While student responses show significant computer use and even advanced technical software knowledge in their fields, one area where they lack computer experience is in the use of chat rooms and instant messengers. Half of the students surveyed had never used a chat room or instant messenger. This data may be of interest when determining international students' preparedness for virtual forms of reference service, such as live online chat room reference. This is not to suggest that international students are not technologically savvy

enough to handle virtual reference services, but rather that may be more apprehensive about using a service that uses an unfamiliar technology. A future study may compare international and domestic students' use of chat rooms and instant messengers, in addition to their overall use of computers and proficiency in using libraries.

#### *Library Concepts that are New to Students*

The third section of the survey ascertains which library services students have used and which service and concepts are unfamiliar to them. As incoming students they answered without having used the library for more than a few weeks and before attending a library orientation or instruction session. Responses suggest that services such as interlibrary loan, librarian reference-by-appointment, and live online reference are new concepts, whereas services and concepts such the reference desk and open stacks are understood. Students perceive themselves as understanding library terminology; however, further study is needed to determine the extent of their knowledge of library terms and jargon.

#### *Student Comments about the Library*

Section four of the survey asked students to respond to the following questions: What do you like about the library? What do you dislike about the library? What services can the library provide to help international students? What information would you like the library to provide?

In some ways, this was perhaps the worst time to conduct a survey of student impressions about the library. The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library opened its doors it just over three weeks before the survey was administered. This new, innovative merged library is a collaborative project between the City of San José and San José State University, and houses both the city and university library collections. As with any new institution, it takes time and hard work make the transition into a new building, let alone transition into the new concept of a library. While student survey responses were collected well before we settled in and became "normal" at the library, they nonetheless provide valuable insight into what international students want and need from the library, and prove helpful in guiding the creation of library programs for international students.

#### *What do you like about the library?*

Respondent comments to this question can be grouped into four broad categories:

Library Building/Facility Issues, Staff/Service, Technology, and Materials. There were numerous general comments about the beauty and cleanliness of the new library building. Although very large in size, students find the new library inviting and seem generally excited about the building itself. Students are very pleased with the availability of group study rooms, and even more pleased with the availability of laptop connections throughout the library and easy access to the Internet. A number of students commented on how friendly and helpful library staff had been, even during a difficult time with the opening of the new library. A few students noted the existence of library materials in their native language.

*What do you dislike about the library?*

Some of the students' dislikes about the library might be attributed to the newness of the building and the technical glitches at the time of the survey. For example, the library experienced some initial server slowdowns that may have led to comments about the slowness of the Internet speed. However, the students noted a couple of significant dislikes not related to the newness of the building, in particular, they feel the library's hours do not sufficiently meet students' needs. Many respondents stated that the library's hours are too short and wished that students had access to a 24-hour library computer lab. In recent years, funding was made available for the library to keep its doors open until midnight, however, current budgetary situations reduced that funding, requiring the library to close its doors at 10pm. Other dislikes include noise levels, lack of staffing on the upper floors where the university research collections are housed, missing books, and a concern that sharing collections with the general public will lead to more competition for library materials, especially in fields such as computer science.

*What services can the library provide to help international students?*

Responses to this question can be sorted into three main categories: Service/Staff, Technology, and Library Orientation. Student responses display an understanding of the need for friendly and patient public service desk employees, especially when language barriers can negatively impact public service transactions. International students want internet access and longer hours to use online resources while they are inside the library. A significant number of responses relate to library orientation. Although a follow-up study is needed to confirm this, analysis of responses suggest that students are having more difficulty with the physical layout of the building than with the library's online presence. Students repeatedly note the need for

more orientation and introduction to the library and even requested that library orientation information and changes in library policies be sent to all students via email.

*What information would you like the library to provide?*

Respondents repeatedly state that they want the library to provide more resources in other languages, especially daily newspapers from their home countries. The merge with San José City Library now provides San José State University's community with convenient access to the city's large language collection, including multimedia and daily newspapers from around the world. This access is an unforeseen and very valuable benefit to our international student population. Students also express an interest in the library providing local San José area information and job-related information, both functions that have traditionally been provided by the public library, but can now be coordinated for our university international student population.

Sprinkled throughout all of the responses to these questions is the ever-presence of technology issues. International students, once viewed as technology-deprived and coming to U.S. universities with limited computer skills, are now quite proficient in the digital age and show evidence that they, much like domestic students, think in terms of their lives as they relate to computers and computer access.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

There are a number of considerations when deciding how the library should proceed to best serve the needs of incoming international students. Although continuing international students are frequently served through course-integrated library instruction, findings suggest that providing specialized library orientation and strengthening library outreach to this target student population will enhance international student learning. Librarians and course instructors have discussed providing multilingual library instruction for international students. Some studies suggest that orientation in a student's native language can improve library research skills (Liestman & Wu, 1990 and Spanfelner, 1991). However, English language proficiency is required of all university students and concern has been raised that providing too much library service in non-English languages could detract from the instructional mission of the university. Additionally, as noted by Conteh-Morgan (2003), many international students come from English-speaking countries or are proficient in spoken and written English as a second language. Therefore, while language proficiency does play a key role in international

student success, it may not be the main barrier to academic success for all international students.

A significant number of incoming international students (54.5%) are at the graduate level. It has been noted by San José State University librarians that graduate programs, in general, lack advanced library instruction initiatives and that graduate students are in need of specialized information competence programs. Development of a full-scale graduate student information competence initiative will address, in part, the needs of international graduate students.

In contrast to years past, incoming international students are highly computer literate and most have used a library in their home country. This suggests that librarians can use many of the instruction methods currently used with our domestic college students, such as database and website demonstrations, hands-on instruction sessions, and online tutorials to reach international student populations. A global information society linked by computers and the World Wide Web is evident. Online, web-based library resources do not appear to be more foreign to international students than to domestic students.

The remaining question to be answered is what can the library do to meet the needs of our globally connected, techno-savvy international students?

#### *Create a Partnership with University International Programs Offices*

Critical to each step toward the implementation of new services to international students at San José State University was a strong partnership between the Office of International Programs and Services and the Library. Based on a combination of the results of this survey, conversations with international students, librarians, library administrators, and international student programs office staff, San José State University is implementing a number of new library programs that support international student learning.

#### *Assign a Librarian to International Student Programs and Outreach*

Librarians can provide a solid foundation for international student success by developing and increasing library efforts and programs for this target group. To effectively do this, the library should appoint a librarian responsible for international student outreach and instruction. Kumar and Suresh (2000) advise libraries to assign one librarian to the role of library liaison to international students. They state, "Having one contact person who... is perceived as approachable and interested in [international students] will go a long way towards improving communication, and building a positive relationship between the library and the international

student body” (p.333). Assigned librarian staff time ensures that the library’s information competence goals in reaching this target population and library needs of international students will be met.

#### *Increase Library Orientation and Outreach Efforts to International Students*

The Office of International Programs and Services offers a mandatory two-day orientation session for incoming international students. During this orientation, students learn about the American university system and services available to them at San José State University. The event commences with a special dinner at the International House, a place where many students choose to live near campus. In the past, librarians at San José State gave international students a brief welcome to the library during the pre-semester international student orientation event. In collaboration with Office of International Programs and Services, the library’s presence has strengthened at incoming international student orientation, resulting in a full-scale instructive library orientation session. Introductory library guides for international students were created and are distributed during orientation. The librarian assigned to international student instruction and outreach brings students to the library as it is important for them to see the physical space. The new international student library orientation session includes a demonstration and tour of the library’s online resources and web presence, a question and answer session, and a library activity that requires students to travel throughout each floor of the library, identifying key resources and services specific to their major or field of study. Physical tours of the library in languages other than English can also be arranged.

#### *Create an Online Tutorial for International Students*

Online tutorials are a great way for students to learn important library concepts at their own pace. If a student misses the orientation session or wants to learn about the library before arriving in United States, this basic library orientation tutorial allows them to do so. The tutorial, *Library Basics*, introduces new or prospective students to library resources, services, and the physical layout of the library at San José State University. It includes a virtual tour of the library with descriptions of the library’s print and electronic holdings, and explains key library concepts, policies and services. While developing this tutorial, the library discovered that it was needed by and would greatly benefit both our domestic and international students. The tutorial is currently available in English and will soon be available in Spanish, with hopes to translate it into other languages to better serve both our international and language-minority

student population.

#### *Create Library Web Pages for International Students*

Recently developed web guides with tips and resources for international students are valuable additions to the instruction and student support missions of the library. Web pages include an overview of library practices in the United States, specifically at San José State University, in addition to a glossary of key library terms and concepts. Beyond simply providing students with information, these web pages serve as a library welcome mat, assuring the international student population that the library is committed to understanding international students and meeting their needs.

#### *Collaborate with Campus Pre-College ESL Institutes*

At San José State University's Studies in American Language (SAL) program, students strengthen their English skills often before matriculating into San José State or other local colleges. SAL instructors frequently request library instruction sessions for these potential college students. Librarians, staff and administration are working on the development of an information competence and library outreach program to language-minority students in the SAL program.

#### *Plan a Professional Development Seminar for Library Staff*

Library staff professional development seminars are a critical step toward strengthening communication between students from various cultures and language backgrounds and the library. Informal discussions with librarians, instructors, students and international programs office staff suggest there is sometimes a tendency to mistakenly assume a student who is less proficient in English is also less proficient in critical thinking skills or that they need a lower academic level of library resources. Training will assist library staff in developing solid communication skills to work with large communities of language-minority patrons, international students included. Staff training strengthens intercultural communication by increasing awareness of body language, eye contact, personal space, cultural customs of other countries and teaching methods.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study was conducted to assess incoming international students' library and

computer experience upon their arrival at San José State University. Results of this survey show that students from other countries have lessened the gap in their technical computer skills, and that their exposure to libraries far exceeds what was once evident in the library literature. Since technical computer skills no longer appear to be a barrier to successful library research for incoming international students, strong information competence programs for these students do not need to focus on computer literacy. Instead, library programs can concentrate on critical thinking and higher-level information competence skills, such as developing search strategies, and choosing and evaluating resources appropriate to university-level research. By strengthening library instruction programs to better serve incoming international students, libraries can help build confident researchers and support the information competence, retention and academic success of international students.

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