Understanding your international students' expectations: Designing library collections and outreach for patrons from around the world

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Abstract

International students bring varied library experiences to their studies in the United States. After the Virginia International University Library transitioned to the Library of Congress Classification System (LOCCS) and built an accessible OPAC, students remained confused on how to locate and find materials on the shelf. Could there be a gap between students' prior library experiences, and how they perceived the VIU Library?

The librarians conducted an IRB-approved survey, and learned the only thing each student had in common from their former college or university libraries was a print book collection. Classification systems, electronic collections, and online access were all very different from VIU's library.

To address these diverse backgrounds in print material organization, English comprehension, and electronic access, librarians employed a plan that included social media marketing; scaffolded instruction; and dividing the collection into general and English as a Second Language (ESL) categories. This comprehensive strategy created more confidence in navigating library resources and an increase in library usage.

Objectives

At Virginia International University, the only language spoken for business and instruction is English in order for our population to acculturate to the United States (VIU, 2018). Comprehension varies widely, from students who comprehend several languages well to those students who are just beginning to learn English.

The librarians wanted to increase library usage and to make the experience better. With ninety-seven percent of the students coming from regions other than North America, the librarians noticed confusion in locating print materials as well as students' understanding of electronic use off-campus.

The VIU Library switched to the Library of Congress Classification System and had the entire collection divided into Reference or General sections, while also organizing the collection in an improved Koha ILS with off-campus usage capabilities. Furthermore, the VIU library utilized EZproxy to reduce remote login requirements for the electronic collection down to only one password instead of the prior six passwords, and implemented the installation of EBSCO Discovery Service to assist with research.

Even with the improvements, patrons still struggled in using library resources on their own, especially English as a Second Language students. Did a gap exist in students' previous library experience and the VIU Library collection? From 2017-18, The VIU Library performed a survey and made a number of changes to the curriculum and information literacy instruction to increase library use.

Methods

Library	Books	Classification Sys.	Electronic	Remote	Catalog
Tanzania	15k	Dewey Decimal	no	no	no
Nigeria	11k	Alphabetical	library only	no	no
India	60k	Alphabetical	yes	yes	yes
VIU	6k	Library of Congress	yes	yes	yes

To understand the VIU student experience better, the Director of Library Services first consulted student library employees about the libraries at their previous institutions, and learned their experiences varied widely. The three students came from Nigeria. India, and Tanzania. The only area of similarity they shared was in having a print book collection.

While each print book collection was larger than VIU's holdings, the student employee from Nigeria noted that his former school's collection was mostly outdated. The student library workers did not utilize the LOCCS. Only one of the three had remote access to the electronic collection.

This contrast in an informal survey prompted the Director of Library Services to ask the entire student body this same question on a broader scale. In spring 2018, The VIU Library conducted an Institution Review Board approved survey on how students' libraries were similar and/or different at the institution they had attended prior to enrolling at VIU.

Distributed electronically through social media and the campus email listserv, the voluntary survey had 34 respondents, roughly 10% of the student population. The survey asked students about their previous experiences with: the library having a website for online resources; types of materials in the library; access to online resources on or off campus; whether or not a librarian was employed to teach library skills; book organization on the shelf; and the students' individual preference for print or online materials (Prater, 2018).

Results

The survey mirrored student library workers' informal responses. When asked what kind of print or electronic materials their former schools' libraries had, all of the students responded that the libraries had print materials. Half of them stated the collections contained electronic resources.

While 56% said the collections contained online resources, only 35% stated that they could access those resources remotely. With regards to information literacy, 35% sated that a librarian visited the classroom to teach research skills.

The most startling discovery came from the question about how books were organized. Half of the respondents stated that books were organized by the author's last name, while 25% said they did not know. As for materials preference, students responded that they desired online resources 55% over print materials (34%), with the other 11% stating no preference (Prater, 2018).

The survey gave the VIU Library the data necessary to organize the collection and perform outreach services. To summarize, the students preferred online materials, but they needed instruction on how use the LOCCS and how to access the VIU Library from off-campus.

Outreach services were necessary. As the study confirmed a gap in access and collections (Prater, 2018), the VIU Library began a Facebook advertising campaign to inform students what it had to offer. The campaign advertised databases; interlibrary loan; study rooms; laptop-ready tables; and workshops. Furthermore, the VIU Library began offering library tours during orientation to introduce our collection and services to incoming students. Information literacy changed from an ad hoc request from faculty to a mandatory one-hour session during introductory courses.

Major changes were necessary for the ESL students. ESL Students were lost with the combination of the collections, so the VIU Library divided the collection into general and ESL sections. The ESL collection was reconfigured so that students with little English reading ability could browse this section and find materials without the aid of a catalog. The ESL collection was divided by reading levels and into categories for easier discovery. Librarians created a dictionary section, and allowed students to check out these materials to assist in learning English.

The biggest change for ESL students was information literacy. The VIU Librarian rewrote the ESL information literacy instruction by applying Lev Vygotsky's scaffolding theory (Novak, 2016). Lessons were rewritten into twenty-minute skill sessions based on the students' reading level, with students learning skills incrementally.

What kinds of materials did your library have? Select all that apply

How were books organized on the shelf at your former school?

Conclusion

The ESL community responded positively to these changes to the collection and information literacy reorganizations. ESL teachers brought their students to the ESL section and assisted in discovery of resources for their class and learning English.

The changes in outreach with Facebook advertising and information literacy began after learning the results of our informal survey of student workers. The results of the IRB survey in 2018 reinforced the continuation of these efforts.

Despite VIU having a fifty-two percent drop in enrollment from 2016 to 2017, the library increased its usage. Students logged into the library system 8,178 times (116% more often than in 2016). Full-text downloads increased in both article databases (34.3%) and eBooks (49%).

While Facebook marketing increased awareness, the librarians implemented a mandatory information literacy class in introductory courses and taught 14 sessions. Library instruction sessions, including workshops and upper level courses, increased to 41 classes, reaching 437 students (192% more classes and 180% more students than in 2016). Total downloads of electronic materials increased by 63% from 2015 to 2017 (Prater & Weis, 2017).

In conclusion, librarians must be aware that international students have very different library experiences. In teaching this population, librarians should teach every aspect of the library experience including off-campus access; collection content; and library services; and should be aware of English comprehension.

To learn more about how the VIU and five other academic libraries provide services to international students, please read *Profiles of Academic Library Services for International Students* from the Primary Research Group (Click, 2018).

Do you prefer print or online materials?

Print 34%
Online 55%
No preference 11%
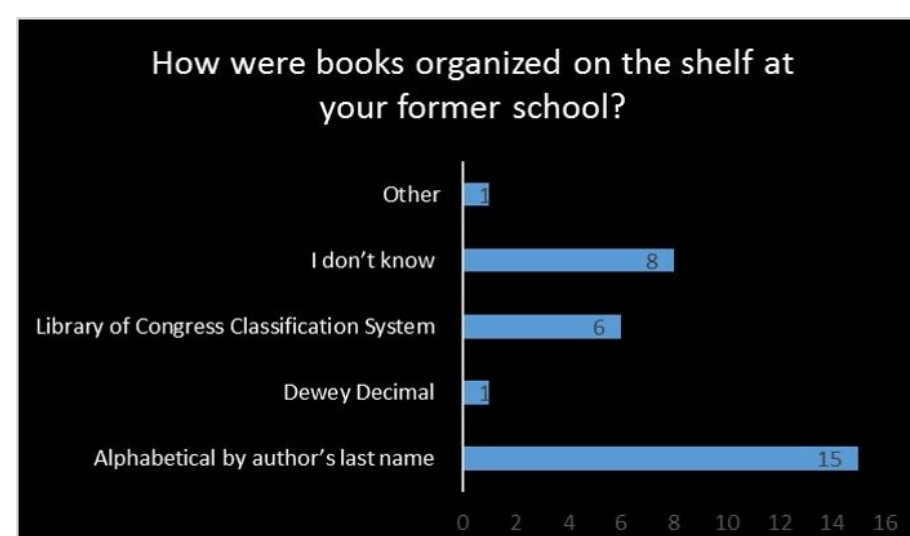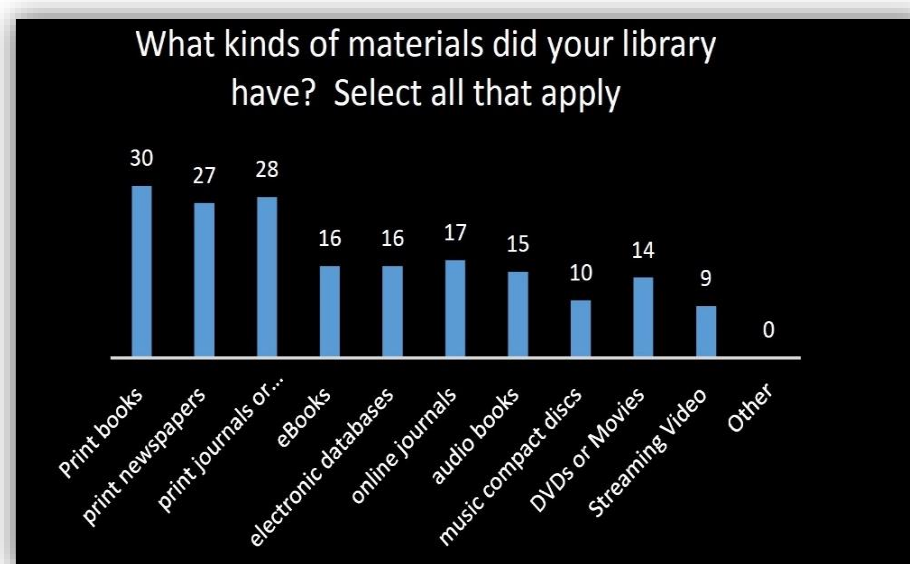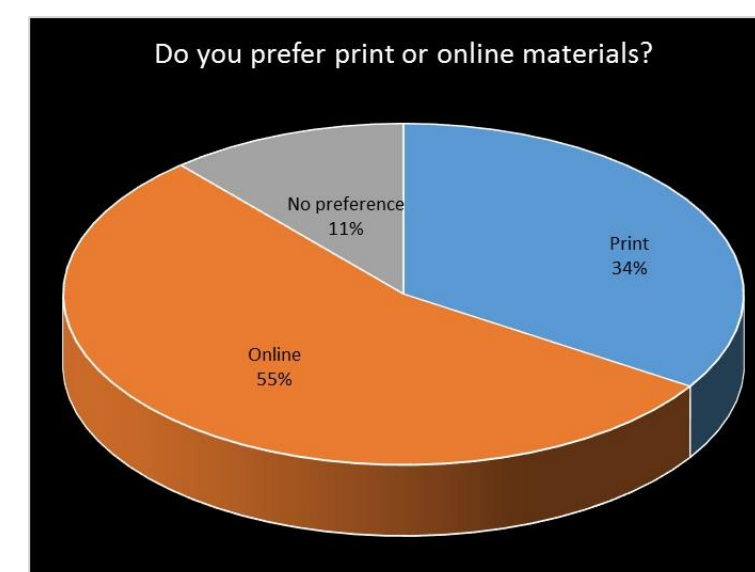
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