Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Interesting Patterns Found When Academic and Public Library Use by Foreign-born Students Is Assessed Using 'Super-Diversity' Variables

Albarillo, F. (2018). Super-diversity and foreign-born students in academic libraries: A survey study. portal: Libraries and the Academy, 18(1), 59-91. https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2018.0004

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:
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Abstract

Objective – To evaluate the relationship between academic and public library usage and various characteristics of foreign-born students.

Design – Survey questionnaire.

Setting – Medium-sized public liberal arts college in the northeastern United States.

Subjects – 123 foreign-born students enrolled at the institution in fall 2014.

Methods – The researcher emailed a five-part survey to participants who indicated on a screening survey that they were foreign-born students currently enrolled at the college. Of the participants emailed, 94 completed the survey. The survey used a super-diversity lens to assess academic and public library use by foreign-born students in relationship to multiple variables, including student status, race and ethnicity, immigration status, first-generation student status, gender, age, age of arrival in the United States (US), years living in the US, and ZIP Code (used to approximate median income based on the US Census Bureau's 2014 American Community Survey). Respondents reported frequency of use on a Likert-type scale of 1=Never to 6=Always. The author adapted items from the In Library Use Survey Instrument (University of Washington

Libraries, 2011). Usage types included: computer, Wi-Fi, staff assistance, electronic resources, physical resources, printing/scanning/photocopying, program attendance, and physical space. Independent sample t-tests were used to evaluate mean differences in reported library usage based on demographic variables. The author used Somers' d statistical tests to explore the relationship between library use and age, age on arrival in the US, years lived in the US, and median income. The survey asked participants to describe both academic and public libraries in five words. To show term frequency, the author used word clouds as a visualization technique.

Main Results – The study reported on the results of the library use survey section. Overall, foreign-born students used college libraries more frequently than public libraries. The author reported on findings that were statistically significant ($p \leq 0.5$), focusing on those with mean differences ≥ 0.5. Key findings included: undergraduate students used public libraries and Wi-Fi/e-resources onsite at college libraries more often than graduate students; first-generation students gathered at the library with friends more frequently; no significant difference was reported in library resource use by gender; and non-white students used the college library more frequently as a study space and for printing. The author was surprised no significant differences in usage were found between participants with permanent vs. temporary immigration status. Somers' d associations showed an inverse relationship between age and Wi-Fi use and age of arrival in the United States and likelihood of eating in the library. Overall, both library types were positively described in open-ended responses as places with social and academic value.

Conclusion – The author suggested the concept of super-diversity equips librarians with a more inclusive approach to studying library user perspectives and behaviors. The author used survey data and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Diversity Standards (2012) to highlight library service considerations for foreign-born

students. Examples of suggested service improvements included supporting printing in Unicode non-English fonts, cultivating a diverse library staff, and providing culturally appropriate library orientations and outreach. The author recommended that more research with foreign-born students was needed to assess culturally appropriate areas for eating and socializing, unique information needs, and expectations and awareness of library services. The author suggested first-generation students' use of the library for socializing and non-white students' higher use of libraries for studying as two areas for further qualitative study. The author also suggested creating services and partnerships between public and academic libraries could support foreign-born students, even recommending cross-training of library staff.

Commentary

Vertovec (2007) describes super-diversity as moving beyond ethnicity to evaluate the interplay of variables like gender, immigration status, religion, and others. Library use by diverse populations has been studied focusing on single (Whitmire, 2003) and multiple variables (Herrera, 2016; Nackerud, et al., 2013; Stone & Collins, 2013; Sei-Ching & Kyung-Sun, 2008). Some studies used self-reported survey responses (Sei-Ching & Kyung-Sun, 2008; Whitmire, 2003) while others assessed usage data (Herrera, 2016; Nackerud, et al., 2013; Stone & Collins, 2013). The author furthered these research efforts by exploring the relationship between library use and multidimensional characteristics of foreign-born students. The study simultaneously examined academic and public library use, making it unique among similar studies. Most importantly, the author introduced the concept of super-diversity as a way to support a more inclusive exploration of diversity in libraries.

Evaluating the study using Glynn's (2006) EBL Critical Appraisal Checklist revealed some of its strengths. The methods were well articulated, including details on recruiting, survey administration, and analysis. Results were clearly outlined, with a focus on findings that demonstrated statistical significance. The

author also provided a detailed explanation of potential study limitations, with suggested improvements useful to practitioners pursuing similar research.

There were also areas for improvement. Only a portion of the five-part survey instrument was provided. Ambiguous question design may have caused underreporting of first-generation status. "I am the first in my family to get a college degree" was listed as one of nineteen possible responses for the question: "Ideally, what's your intention for completing a degree? Check all that apply" (p. 89). When asked to "list five words that best describe" each type of library, respondents used phrases (p. 71). Reporting word frequency may have removed some context in the analysis of these responses. The author identified several study limitations: interpretation of Likert-type responses as continuous variables; potential inaccuracies of self-reported survey responses; use of a convenience sample with a 10% margin of error (95% confidence interval); use of zip code to estimate income; and lack of formal survey validation. Super-diversity was presented as a study framework, but there was no evidence of multivariate analysis to assess the interaction of variables, as suggested by Vertovech (2007). The author noted a larger population would afford more data to analyze.

The results of the survey are of interest to libraries serving foreign-born students and provide a starting point for further examination of services for these users. By using the concept of super-diversity, the study offers a broader lens for exploring the relationship between diversity variables and library use. The development of increasingly robust studies using this lens may enhance inclusion efforts in libraries. Areas for further research include the exploration of additional variables (e.g., sexuality, gender identity, disability, neurodiversity) and relationship to other diversity frameworks (e.g. intersectionality).

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