The Perceptions of Undergraduate Students Toward Academic Libraries: A Literature Review

Joanna Marsh, Shea Sayers, Karen Wade, Gwen Geiger Wolfe

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Abstract

Understanding student perceptions can provide academic libraries the context with which to adapt resources and services that meet user needs. This literature review analyzes 28 studies published between 2002 and the present, utilizing survey methods and interviews to examine the perceptions of undergraduate students toward academic libraries. Three overarching themes illustrate the areas in which student perceptions are studied: (a) technology resources, (b) services, and (c) academic librarians. Findings discussed include negative perceptions related to student’s lack of awareness of library resources and overestimation of search abilities, as well as a lack of clear understanding about the roles of librarians. Alternatively, students have positive attitudes toward technology integration, reference services and librarians in general. Overall, students may believe that the library is important but sometimes fail to understand or even use it. Academic librarians, therefore, need to continue to adapt their services and make themselves known to students. The authors identify key areas for improvements in academic library resources and service.
The Perceptions of Undergraduate Students Toward Academic Libraries: A Literature Review

We chose to explore within the broad research topic of understanding information needs, seeking, use and users. This paper examines the following research question: what are the perceptions of undergraduate students toward academic libraries? This question is important because understanding user perceptions will help libraries adapt to meet the needs of college students.

Our scope evolved over the course of this literature review. Our research question originally involved current US students, though after delving into the literature we found there was a mixture of domestic and international studies. During the initial search, we also found that a majority of the studies involved the same types of methodology—surveys and interviews. We used the Library Literature and Information Science Full Text (H.W. Wilson) database provided by ESU. When searching the database, we used Boolean operators to narrow and expand our search as well as truncation to account for plural forms. We also checked the database thesaurus for variations of certain words and subject headings. Keyword and subject headings included academic libraries, students, undergraduates, college students, universities, perceptions, attitudes, and change.

Several of our successful searches included: Attitudes AND academic librar*AND college students, which yielded 46 articles, refining it to Attitudes AND academic librar* AND undergrad,* which yielded 21 articles. Articles were limited to scholarly, peer reviewed articles. The dates were initially limited to 2009 through 2013 to account for current perceptions. Using this limitation we searched Perception* OR attitude* AND college student* AND academic library,* which yielded 43 articles. We were able to access most of the articles online as full-text documents, but also utilized Inter-library Loan to retrieve articles when necessary. The 28
articles we ultimately analyzed in our literature review were published between 2002 and the present to account for current student perceptions toward academic libraries.

**Research Methods**

In order to determine undergraduate students’ perceptions of academic libraries, we focused on literature that studied college students in the United States as well as internationally. Within the literature, researchers used surveys and interviews as the primary method to explore the research question. Several studies utilized structured interviews such as surveys and questionnaires (Jones & Sinclair, 2011; Pellegrino, 2012; Ruppel & Fagan, 2002). A structured interview asks a specific list of questions, all with predetermined responses, in the same order to all people being studied (Beck & Manuel, 2008). Several studies used a 4-point to 7-point Likert scale to gauge responses (Oyedum & Nwalo, 2011; Paterson & Low, 2011; Rehman, Safique & Mahmood, 2011). Because structured interviews often yield numerical data, they are considered a quantitative form of research. For example, in Arif and Ameen’s (2011) study of college students’ use of electronic resources in an academic library, they employed a questionnaire-based survey, which resulted in percentages and other forms of numerical data displayed in tables.

In addition to structured, quantitative interviews, we also found numerous examples of unstructured and semi-structured interviews in the literature (Burhanna, Seeholzer & Salem, 2009; Colon-Aguirre & Fleming-May, 2012; Ouellette, 2011). An unstructured interview asks open-ended questions in which participants can respond using their own words (Beck & Manuel, 2008). These types of interviews are categorized as qualitative research, because they use “language, not numbers, as [their] primary data source” (Beck & Manuel, 2008, p. 68). For example, in Ouellette’s (2011) study of students’ use of subject guides, she conducted her
research using face-to-face interviews, which she recorded and transcribed. Rather than charts and tables, for this type of research authors typically quote participant responses to communicate their research findings (Colon-Aguirre & Fleming-May, 2012; Gross & Latham, 2011).

Rigor is obtained in qualitative research through reliability and validity. In order to improve their studies’ reliability and validity, several researchers employed multiple methods for collecting data (Murphy, Long & MacDonald, 2013; Nkomo, Ocholla & Jacobs, 2011; Paterson & Low, 2011; Rojeski, 2012) known as triangulation. Using different methods improves a study’s internal validity, which measures how well the results of a study match up with reality (Beck & Manuel, 2008). If different methods produce a similar result, that is also a strong indicator that a study is reliable or would yield the same results if it were replicated (Beck & Manuel, 2008). In their study of college students’ use of mobile library services, Paterson & Low (2011) used both quantitative and qualitative research methods to obtain results; the qualitative results of the focus group supported the findings of their initial survey. Another technique to determine reliability in structured interviews is finding the Cronbach’s Alpha of a questionnaire, with a result of .80 or greater meaning a high level of reliability (Arif & Ameen, 2011; Rehman, Shafique & Mahmood, 2011).

**Review of the Literature**

Several themes were prevalent throughout the literature with regard to undergraduate student perceptions of academic libraries. Understanding the methodology and analyzing themes throughout the research helps us learn how to successfully meet the user’s needs, especially in an academic setting. The three major themes found throughout the literature focus on technology and resources, services provided by the library, and academic librarians.
Technology and Resources

While perceptions of library technology and resources vary amongst university students, some patterns have emerged from the literature. These themes include a lack of awareness of library resources and a clear preference for the open-web, but also a generally positive attitude towards the role of technology in finding information.

_Awareness of library resources._ University students are often unaware of the existence of certain library resources, such as OPACs, eBooks, and subject guides (Arif & Ameen, 2011; Islam & Ahmed, 2011; Ouellette, 2011). Often, those who are aware of these resources are still unsure of how to use them (de Oliveira, 2012; Gross & Latham, 2011). Many students reported confusion and frustration with electronic resources, especially when conducting searches in scholarly library databases (Colon-Aguirre & Fleming-May, 2012; Denison & Montgomery, 2012.) Others reported that they did not understand how to find physical materials in the library (Gross & Latham, 2011; Paterson & Low, 2011). One particular survey indicated that the majority of students at the library had come simply for a quiet place to study and none had come to check out physical materials (Jones & Sinclair, 2011).

_Open-web vs. library databases._ Current university students exhibit a strong preference for using open-web sources, mainly Wikipedia by way of Google, due to the perceived ease-of-use in comparison with both library databases and print resources (Burhanna, Seeholzer & Salem, 2009; Dooley, 2013; Gross & Latham, 2011). This dependence on Google for a fast search seems to be common even in areas where internet access is limited and connection is less reliable (Nkomo, Ocholla & Jacobs, 2011). Generally, college students tend to be confident in their ability to find information on the web and believe they do not need to seek resources
elsewhere unless required to do so by a professor (Denison & Montgomery, 2012; Gross & Latham, 2011).

**New technology in the library.** Students who were initially wary of recent reference service technologies—such as instant message chat—have grown to appreciate them for the quick response rate (Burhanna et al., 2009). Overall, student response was positive at the prospect of providing access to library catalogs on smart phones (Paterson & Low, 2012; Rojeski, 2012). Students also voiced a desire for the integration of library resources with tablets, and for the possibility of borrowing iPads and e-readers from the library (Dooley, 2013; Rojeski, 2012). With regard to eBook technology, some studies indicate that most students prefer print books (de Oliveira, 2012; Dooley, 2013), while others report satisfaction with eBooks (Rojeski, 2012). As with many new resources, students’ opinions of eBooks seem to improve after use (de Oliveira, 2012).

**Services**

Understanding student perceptions can significantly influence the development and maintenance of effective services within an academic library (Granfield & Robertson, 2008; Yi, 2007). The literature regarding this topic falls into one of two primary areas: (a) perceptions of services that meet student needs, and (b) perceptions of the changing roles of reference services. Both topic areas are relevant to understanding the vast and evolving landscape in which academic libraries function.

**Services that meet student needs.** Through surveys and case studies, librarians have targeted issues that reveal how students feel about contemporary library services (Bhatt, 2011; Lombard, 2012; Murphy, Long & MacDonald, 2013). For example, Lombard (2012) found that students who enroll in college find enormous value in library services. Based on his findings, he
was able to make a case for potentially increasing the retention of student populations based on their perception of library services (Lombard, 2012). Other studies have focused on the perceptions of culturally and ethnically diverse student populations, and how they influence the use or avoidance of some services, such as online catalogs and e-journals (Yi, 2007) or reference, (Elteto, Jackson & Lim, 2008) respectively. Still others have explored student perceptions of certain features of a library, such as the organizational system or administrative functions. In a case study of student perceptions of the Library of Congress call number system, students overestimated their abilities to search and find relevant material within the library stacks (Murphy, et al., 2013). Additionally, Bhatt (2011) examined student perceptions of overdue fines and found a startling 60.56 percent of students preferred to keep books beyond their lending limit, with the understanding that the fine is “a price rather than a penalty” (Bhatt, 2011, p. 410).

**Changing roles of reference services.** It is well understood that user satisfaction surveys are a reliable measure of “useful perceptions of library quality” capturing data at the point of need (Rehman, Shafique & Mahmood, 2011, p. 86). Given the variety of types of reference services currently available, library staff have used this method to better characterize student preferences for a given venue of service (Granfield & Robertson, 2008; Patterson & Low, 2011; Ruppel & Vecchione, 2012). Interestingly, it appears that students still prefer traditional reference desk services, but also prefer virtual reference services involving computers, smart phones, and other digital technology (Granfield & Robertson, 2008; Patterson & Low, 2011; Ruppel & Vecchione, 2012). The common denominator, however, is that the quality of services provided—regardless of delivery type—is “high-quality, quick, convenient, [and] personalized” (Ruppel & Vecchione, 2012, p. 423).
Academic Librarians

In addition to technology, resources, and services, academic librarians also play a key role in college students’ perceptions towards academic libraries. Examining student perceptions toward the librarians themselves will enable academic libraries to meet the needs of students more effectively. The literature relating to student perceptions towards academic librarians revealed three dominant themes: librarians’ skills and roles within the library, librarians as teachers, and librarian attitudes and approachability.

**Academic librarians’ skills and roles.** When it comes to understanding what academic librarians actually do in a library, the literature shows that college students are only vaguely aware of librarians’ roles. When asked to identify the duties performed by academic librarians, shelving, locating, and organizing books within the library were the most popular responses (Bickley & Corrall, 2011; Polger & Okamoto, 2010). Additionally, college students do not--and possibly cannot--differentiate academic librarians from other library staff (Bickley & Corrall, 2011). Finally, students are equally unaware of the type of education required to be an academic librarian. Many students believe that no specialized degree is required to be an academic librarian, although for those who identified “library sciences” as the appropriate degree guessed it to be an undergraduate degree (Bickley & Corrall, 2011; Polger & Okamoto, 2010). These perceptions indicate that academic librarians need to create a more visible role within the university, and to find ways of making students more aware of the specialized knowledge they offer.

**Academic librarians as teachers.** For most academic librarians, teaching and assisting students are significant parts of their role in the library. Pellegrino (2012) studied whether encouraging students to ask for help in an academic library had an effect on whether or not they
The results of her study indicated that when librarians encouraged students to ask for help, it made no difference; however, when students were encouraged by teaching faculty to ask librarians for help, they were more likely to do so. This result highlights the important relationship between academic librarians and faculty members. In addition, the literature addressed student perceptions of librarians in their role as teachers. In one study, roughly half of the student population surveyed viewed librarians as teachers, with more freshmen and sophomores viewing librarians as teachers than juniors and seniors (Polger & Okamoto, 2010). This may be the result of an increase in information literacy classes taught by librarians, which typically target freshmen and sophomore students.

**Academic librarians’ attitudes and approachability.** In general, college students had a positive view towards academic librarians (Bickley & Corrall, 2011). Although this was the case, when students were asked to give more details about their perceptions of academic librarians, many stated that they would like them to be more approachable (Pellegrino, 2012). Lack of approachability was also one reason students gave for choosing not to ask an academic librarian for help (Bickley & Corrall, 2011). Furthermore, students desired a more personal connection with an academic librarian (Pellegrino, 2012). Connecting with one librarian and having a positive experience led many students to feel more comfortable asking other librarians for help in future situations. The results of these studies have important implications for academic librarians. It is not enough for academic librarians to be more visible in their roles within the library; they also must make an increased effort to be approachable and make personal connections with students.
As information technology continues to evolve, further research on students’ perceptions of libraries becomes increasingly vital. Understanding student perceptions provides academic libraries the context with which to adapt their resources and services to meet user needs. As primary users, university students expect fast, convenient and personalized service, as well as integration with the new technology to which they have grown accustomed. These expectations have likely contributed to some negative perceptions of libraries amongst students. However, criticisms usually regard specific aspects of resources, services or staff and not the library as an institution, which seems to have retained its important status as the information center of the university. In other words, students may believe the library is important, but sometimes fail to understand it or even use it. Academic librarians, therefore, have no choice but to continue to adapt their services and make themselves known to students, who are not always aware of what the library has to offer. Increased collaboration between librarians and faculty may be one practical way of expanding their presence, as students often only abandon Google for library resources when they are required to do so by a professor. Whatever actions are taken to improve the library’s presence, continued attention to students’ perceptions will remain essential.
References


