

# More than ESL: Exploring cultural collaboration opportunities with international students

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## ABSTRACT

International students are frequently consolidated into a monolith of students with language needs and information poverty, constituting a disservice to both students and the library staff who seek to better serve them. In this study we interview international students to better understand the potential for cultural collaboration in programming in an academic library setting, and the barriers that keep students from participating. Our findings broaden the view of international students from remedial library users in need of catch-up information literacy and language education, and position them more holistically as potential full partners in programming efforts moving forward.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

critical librarianship; community-led services; academic libraries

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

international students; cultural programming; partnership development

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘the international student’ is a long-held myth of a monolithic patron cluster to which librarians can apply a group of generalized principles to meet their collective

needs. Often categorized as students with specific deficiencies such as English language needs, information poverty, or low information literacy, little attention has been paid toward the potential for more holistic library use by international student patrons. In their 2017 review of the field, Click and colleagues found that only 16% of published library literature from 1990-2014 pertaining to international students focused on multicultural issues, while information literacy and English language education made up a combined 52% of the published materials in that time period (Click et al., 2017). According to the 2022 Open Doors Report from the Institute of International Education, there are currently approximately 950,000 international students in the United States, a 4% increase after the significant drop during the COVID-19 restrictions (Institute of International Education, 2022), which makes their broader needs far from a minor consideration when overall student enrollment has been on the decline. As such, this study seeks to center international students' voices in discussion about the potential for academic libraries to meet their needs beyond the traditional information literacy and language image.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Some scholarship has been done in an effort to bring in international viewpoints on what library service means and how we can better incorporate international values into our academic libraries. However, as a pragmatic profession, library literature has a tendency to sway toward corrective practical application. Countless examples of studies focusing on patron difficulties mark library journals. Liu's (1993) assessment of the barriers international students encounter in their attempts to access library services in the United States. Datig (2014) explored international student perceptions of the library, reiterating the 'book-heavy' perception of what an academic library means for international students. Similarly, Hughes (2010) highlighted the infrequency of use of library resources among international students due in part to unfamiliarity and poor outreach efforts, in the process citing the library's purpose as borrowing and free access, which entrenches the mono-use perception already in place. In 2010 Peters reviewed the literature on international student issues, emphasizing concerns of literacy, information poverty, and other lenses of deficiency applied to international students (Peters 2010). Also from 2010, Knight and colleagues encouraged librarians to rethink the library for the international student community, suggesting ways to move them from simple users of study spaces to engaging in all of the library's academic services (Knight et al., 2010). A notable contributor, John Hickok's work in Asian libraries (2009; 2011; 2015; 2019) sought to take a more holistic approach by centering partnerships and collaboration. Despite these gains, there remains the tendency in scholarship to see international student needs through the lens of lack of information and language ability. We seek to move beyond this conception of 'library as services' and move back into 'place and people' oriented conceptualizations of what it means to be an academic library.

Following Hanson and Abresch (2016), we agree that positioning the library as a space of social co-construction allows the diversity of our patrons to be reflected in the library itself. Taking this one step further, we believe that inviting international students to be full participants in that co-construction of the opportunities provided to the entire community gives them a sense of ownership that can enhance the academic library as an institution.

## METHODS

The data used in this study was captured as part of a larger study on international student acculturation strategy and sociolinguistic identity. For this portion of the study we interviewed 14 international students at a large, public university in the Eastern United States. While the broader study contained many participants from East Asian and Middle Eastern countries, the specific information collected in this portion of the study was not present in all interviews, due to a protocol addition. With this limitation in mind, the researchers actively sought to expand the remaining participant pool into areas lacking representation in academic library literature in addition to using thematic saturation as a consideration.

After receiving approval from the university Institutional Review Board, we posted flyers in the digital spaces of international student organization networks, and sent recruitment letters in international student listservs. Sampling became purposive to ensure a broad variety of nationalities from students in order to capture under-represented narratives. Table 1 below provides details of participants' demographic information.

*Table 1: Participants' home country and educational level.*

Participant	Home country	Educational level
P14	Ukraine	Graduate Student
P15	India	Graduate Student
P16	India	Graduate Student
P17	Sri Lanka	Graduate Student
P18	India	Undergraduate Student
P19	India	Undergraduate Student
P20	Togo	Graduate Student
P21	Ghana	Graduate Student
P22	Ghana	Graduate Student
P23	Argentina	Graduate Student
P24	Russia	Graduate Student
P25	Czech	Graduate Student
P26	Brazil	Graduate Student
P27	Moldova	Graduate Student

## **Procedure.**

Each interview followed a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of several sections of questions related to acculturation experiences, sociolinguistic identity, and family relationship maintenance before moving into academic library specific questions. The library specific portion of the protocol included questions on participants' perceptions of libraries as a resource, a place for activities, and their attitude towards participating and collaborating with academic libraries for cultural activities. Interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 30-60 minutes. Participants were compensated \$20 for their time. To prepare the data for analysis we used a commercial transcription service platform to transcribe our interview recordings and proofread the transcripts. We then analyzed the data using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

## **FINDINGS**

To recap, our study aims to explore the potentials for academic libraries to meet international students' needs beyond the traditional information literacy and language support. From the interviews, international students shared a diverse array of stances on their relationship with the library and library service offerings in general. However, the broad sentiment was a lack of outreach during the process of transitioning to academic life in the United States, and thus a feeling of disconnectedness with the potential for what the library could be. When questioned specifically about their willingness to engage in cultural events hosted in the library, the responses were predominantly open to the idea in some regard, with many students expressing a desire to partner with the libraries in order to increase visibility.

### **Library as a Space.**

The accessibility and visibility of the library was a big draw for many international students when considering partnering with the library for events. The centrality of the location was pointed out by several students.

"It's a great option simply because you can't miss it. When you say it's at [library], you know it's at [library]. ... there's this ease of navigation that comes with using the library for events." (P21)

"I like the open spaces, but when it's not cold outside, so the plazas in front of libraries, both of them. I think it's nice cause you can also kind of like walk by and you don't have to find some, uh, some classroom or something." (P24)

Another participant shared that they had sought out the library for cultural event partnership before, again because of the central location and visibility to promote their group.

"I think it's a very popular place especially ... there are all sorts of tables. And I think it's like on the crossroads of many people. So there is constant traffic, which is also good."

“And then [the librarians] helped us with the desk. They put the desk in front of the library and we were distributing those ribbons.” (P14)

## **MARKETING ISSUES**

When questioned about their awareness of the library’s services and spaces, participants cited a marketing issue, where the library’s services beyond containing books and quiet spaces were lost to the stereotypical image. Even when events are freely accessible and hosted inside the library, they tend to not be well advertised to passing students, which leads many students to set up outside the library’s door, as P14 had done with their group. Other participants echoed this issue:

“I’m not much aware about the structures or like the facilities available in the library, but I had like one or two meetings ... But I mean, people basically, they mind their own business and they don’t know what’s actually going on. So they’re, unless you have, if you have a big poster like, ‘Hey, this is this event you are welcome to join, no RSVP needed,’ then maybe they may join.” (P16)

“What is lacking is the information. Sometimes we are not aware that this thing that you are crying about is available here for free. You know, so that awareness should go out more, tell them what do you call it, the international community, tell the student that this is available here. If you need something, come to this office, send this email and you will get it. Instead of us having to struggle to get that pain done when you can get it so easily.” (P22)

As the participants themselves show, not every international student has the same available bandwidth, meaning that different students may want to be engaged at different parts of the collaborative process, so it falls to the library to be flexible with their engagement efforts.

## **CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT POTENTIAL**

Participants envisioned how to engage in cultural activities using the library as a nexus. In nearly every interview the participants mentioned food or beverages of some sort to “start with” to get people involved, which highlights the need for organizational budgetary support for international students looking to feel connected to their communities. They shared strong interests for cultural sharing activities to “see all of the other cultures”, “share [their] own culture”, and “meet other people”. For them, cultural sharing also carries a sense of “pride”:

“[International students] definitely feel a little sense of pride to share that and they’re happy that other people are aware and enjoying the things that they, you know, have grown up with and have enjoyed them. So I think, in general, yes, international students would be happy to participate.” (P26)

For these cultural activities to occur, participants also expressed willingness to partner with the library to help organize events or provide insights as a cultural insider. For example, participants shared:

“Sure. I really love to [partner with the library for cultural events]. Okay. I want to organize and you know, give your input for a better outcome.” (P18)

“I would help anyone to set up the thing or maybe like, you know, be a part of what they're doing to event plan or something ... I kind of helped [at a previous cultural event] for like an hour or something just to set up things and just serve food for that time period. And that was really fun because it's again, like I got to meet a lot of people from all over the place. So that was fun.” (P19)

## **MISGIVINGS**

Some students did have misgivings about the library, partly due to the conception of the space as an area with “quiet rooms” where their events would be perceived as disruptive.

“I don't know if you can do something in the library because there are a lot of restrictions. Like people come there to study and like if there's some sound they might complain or they might have an issue about it. So I don't think the library is a very good option.” (P15)

There was also a factor of cultural shame or discomfort that was brought up by a few participants, and the desire not to be seen as pushing their culture on anyone, which would need to be mitigated by careful planning and open access by those running the event.

“I think, internally, subconsciously I might be ashamed of certain aspects of my culture. So unless someone really wants to hear about it, I think, I don't want to explain because I, I think I have fear of being judged or something I think.” (P17)

Perhaps most critical is the aspect of agency given to international students in event planning, juxtaposed against the time required of them. The concept of imposition came up in several interviews, with students citing the need to be engaged in the planning process from the beginning without being burdened with an undue amount of additional free labor and “time demand”.

“I just want to be there when the, at the beginning. So together we come up with something that everybody will benefit from and that is also interesting to me. Cause I won't want to be doing, first of all if I don't know what they're talking about or if the thing they put, [that] they want me to talk about I'm not interested in, then I'm not doing it.” (P20)

“I think there's a value in sharing things from your own culture and like the multicultural kind of encounters, but yeah, I unfortunately don't really have time [to plan an event].” (P25)

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The initial skepticism with which our questions were met was disheartening but not surprising. Our participants discussed their desire for culturally oriented service provisions while

also showing the need for academic libraries to improve their marketing and outreach efforts in order to reach international students and be considered for potential partnership and future community engagement.

The juxtaposition of the students' perception of the library as a place where their cultural activities don't belong, and their desire to share their identities in a centrally located facility bring to the forefront the failure of academic libraries to meet international students where they are as individuals rather than an imagined collective. A sense of disbelonging echoed across our interviews, due to the conceptualization of their cultures as vibrant and social, to be shared via artifacts such as food and games, and thus not fit for a serious space dedicated to learning quietly.

Academic libraries can and should dispel this notion, in partnership with international students, in order to bring a healthier and more holistic concept of each party to the other. This collaborative effort must be done thoughtfully, engaging with international students in a way that doesn't require unreasonable time or labor on their part, and recognizes the emotional labor that goes into acting as a representative for their culture in any capacity. We must shift our thinking away from how we can better shape international students to efficiently use our services and recognize how we can better shape our spaces and services to fit our international student needs.

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