

Services for New American Users: Indochinese Students' Behavior in Using Academic Libraries

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The purpose of this study is to determine whether Indochinese students experience difficulties in using academic libraries effectively, whether the current library services are useful to them, and whether different programs are needed to meet the students' needs. Questionnaire surveys and interviews were conducted on both San Jose State University and University of California at Berkeley campuses to collect empirical data. The findings indicate that: (1) many Indochinese students did not use the library resources/services frequently enough to encounter any difficulties; (2) these students were not aware of the many helpful library resources/services and did not take advantage of them; (3) the core of the library programs should be promoted/developed to suit those students who are disadvantaged due to their language and cultural differences; and (4) these students were willing to submit their inquiries to library staff if they encountered library-related difficulties and hope to see more user-friendly library staff who are capable of meeting their needs.

The term "Indochina" in this paper is used to refer to the colonial empire that was created by France in the eastern

part of the peninsula after 1862. It covered three Southeast Asian countries, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, which were associated with the French Union peninsula as defined in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*¹ in 1985 edition.

Sutter stated in *The Indochinese Refugee Dilemma*² in 1990 that the United States has resettled more than 884,000 Indochinese refugees and has given them an estimated \$1 billion in federal assistance annually since the collapse of the South Vietnamese government in April 1975 and similar political upheavals in Cambodia and Laos. About 90 percent Indochinese refugees are Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese, and the remaining 10 percent are split almost equally between Laotians and Cambodians.

A portion of the refugees identified as ethnic Chinese did not actually come from China. They are Indochinese refugees of Chinese descent, who had resided in Cambodia, Laos, or Vietnam for many generations, and still consider themselves ethnic Chinese. Ong & Hee reported in *The State of Asian Pacific American: A Public Policy Report*³ in 1993 that it is difficult to determine the population of Indochinese immigrants because census reports do not include data on Southeast Asians of Chinese descent.

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Problem

The number of Asian students attending American colleges and using American university libraries is growing rapidly at San Jose State University (SJSU) and University of California at Berkeley (UC Berkeley). These students come from different cultural backgrounds, and adapting to American university libraries is not easy for many of them.

Very little library literature is focused on Indochinese students despite the large number of refugees admitted to the United States since 1975, and despite the increase of students attending American universities. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap, and analyze Indochinese students' behavior in using academic libraries.

Literature Review

Liu's⁴ article in 1995 mentioned that it is difficult for Indochinese students to be confident in expressing themselves and making themselves understood due to their lack of English proficiency. Consequently, they are often reluctant to ask for assistance and to request clarification when necessary. In addition to language barriers, many students are not familiar with self-service systems, library tools, reference services, and interlibrary services, etc.

Wang's⁵ article indicated in 1993 that the needs of recent Indochinese students entering U.S. universities are often ignored by the library services. Language proficiency and differences in communication style can often create barriers for these students. It is often assumed that these students do not need help in using library resources, due to the model minority stereotype. It has been suggested that academic libraries should prepare to examine their practices and make adjustments to provide quality service to all diverse clientele. Academic librarians must become teaching instructors who can aid these disadvantaged students.

Methodology

The research population of this study includes Indochinese students at SJSU and UC Berkeley. The Asian ethnic enrollment in fall 1999 at SJSU⁶ was almost 40 percent of the student population. And at UC Berkeley⁷, 41% of the UC Berkeley students were undergraduate Asian students. This is a large number of students for a researcher to contact and obtain survey samples. Because the specific ethnic background of Indochinese students cannot be known without further investigation, all available Asian students were contacted for the survey research, even though theoretically the research population should include only Indochinese students.

Both e-mail and in-person survey methods were used for this study, and the same survey questions were used in both cases. The survey was sent out via e-mail to Asian students in the beginning of September 1999. E-mail responses were collected until September 26, 1999. Students who preferred not to respond by e-mail were asked to send in their responses via regular mail by the same deadline. Participation was voluntary, and no follow-up e-mail was sent.

Due to the low response rates of e-mail survey, additional measures were taken to gather more data. On September 8, 1999, several professors, reference librarians, and student leaders at UC Berkeley were asked to distribute the survey questions to students in their classes, at reference desks, and in club meetings. Consequently, 360 copies of the survey questionnaire were handed out from September 8 to September 16. By September 26, a total of 50 responses were collected, yielding a 14% response rate.

In-person interviews were conducted on both campuses during the month of September 1999. Wherever Asian students were found to be available, they were approached and interviewed on the spot. The in-person interviews were aimed at reaching those students who were not members of student associations and thus would not have received the survey via e-mail.

A total of 248 students were interviewed by the researcher in-person from September 2 to September 26, 1999. Most of the interviews were conducted verbally, and in such cases, the researcher recorded their responses, some of the students chose to complete the questionnaire themselves. Almost all of the approached students agreed to be interviewed. In total, 256 students were approached, and 97% of them were actually interviewed.

The final data set includes 181 responses from Asian students at SJSU and 145 responses from Asian students at UC Berkeley. Even though several strategies were used to reach students, each individual was specifically asked not to participate in the research more than once and the data set includes no duplicate responses as far as the researcher knows. A summary of questionnaire distribution and response rate for each survey method is given in Table I.

Analysis

Of the 181 SJSU students who responded to the survey, 107 were Indochinese, 38 were ethnic Chinese and 36 were of other Asian origins. Among the 145 respondents from UC Berkeley, 54 were Indochinese, 57 were ethnic Chinese, and 34 were of other Asian origins. Since the purpose of this research is limited to Indochinese students' behavior in us-

TABLE I
A Summary of the Return Rates

Type of Survey	Contacted	Responded	Response Rate
<i>1. E-mail Survey</i>			
A. SJSU	110	10	9%
B. UC Berkeley	126	18	14%
<i>2. Handout Survey</i>			
A. SJSU	N/A	N/A	N/A
B. UC Berkeley	360	50	14%
<i>3. In Person Interview</i>			
A. SJSU	177	171	97%
B. UC Berkeley	79	77	97%
Total	852	326	38%

ing the academic libraries and services, data from non-Indochinese subjects were excluded from further analysis. SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used to tabulate/analyze data from surveys.

Findings

At the time of this study, almost 90% of the Indochinese students were undergraduate students. Many students (72%) had chosen science-related fields for their majors, especially the SJSU students. Less than half of the Indochinese students spoke English at home; this practice became weaker as their stay in this country extended. On average, students who had been in the U.S. longer than 14 years (mean=14.314) often spoke English at home.

The Indochinese students (77.6%) often came to the library to study using their own books. They rarely borrowed library materials, requested interlibrary/reference services, or used library computers. For these reasons, they were not frequent users of library services, especially in reference and interlibrary services, even though they were frequent library visitors. The undergraduate students were more likely to study in the library, but less likely to ask for help than the graduate students were. Native-born students were more likely to read library reference materials than foreign-born ones. Students who spoke English at home used library reference materials more frequently than those who did not speak English at home. Students whose English proficiency was excellent were the heaviest users of library reference materials and library circulating materials.

Indochinese students learned library skills in many different ways. Handout instructions were often preferred to library workshops. Foreign-born students are more likely to learn library skills by following handout instructions

than native-born students. Students who speak English at home and who are more proficient in English are less likely to follow the handout instructions or to learn library skills by themselves, but they are more willing to ask library staff for help.

Indochinese students majoring in science-related fields were less likely to borrow library materials. They seemed to be less likely to have difficulties in using database systems or other library systems. They were least likely to learn library skills on their own, but they were also more reluctant to attend library workshops. Many students stated that they had little difficulty in using library, and they would ask library staff for help if they ever ran into library-related difficulties.

Many undergraduate Indochinese students (23.6%) were not familiar with the electronic reserve and had not had an opportunity to use it because it was seldom included in their school assignments. Many students may not understand a role of culturally diverse staff, and did not see benefit of having culturally diverse staff in the library. That may impact the students' preferring library staff from the same cultural background.

Discussion

Indochinese students (64.6%) claimed that they did not have any problems in using the library. One possible explanation is that these students did not use the library often enough to run into difficulty. An alternative explanation may be that these students chose not to report any difficulty, not because they really had none, but rather because they thought it was too embarrassing to admit. Nevertheless, these students need to be made to realize that denial of problems does not make problems disappear automatically and that they will have to confront their problems if they really want to solve/learn them. Finding information is difficult, but getting these students to share their problems is even more difficult. This is a real challenge for the academic librarian whose job is to help students from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition to good communication and interview skills, understanding different languages and cultures would be very helpful to get such students to open up and to cooperate. The librarian's cultural sensitivity and adjustment in his/her styles of communication and interaction make these students feel more comfortable to learn and acquire library skills.

Many Indochinese students do not utilize reference and interlibrary services often due to their lack of awareness of library service programs. Their families and cultural back-

ground may also influence them. Several field experts stated in the interview that many parents of foreign-born Indochinese students typically do not frequent the library. These new Indochinese refugees often had to take low-paying jobs because of their lack of English proficiency and relevant work experience. In order to earn enough income to support the family, these parents have had to work multiple jobs and they rarely have time to get involved in their children's school activities. Neither do they have the language skills to understand and participate in their children's school activities. Without any guidance and support from their parents, new immigrants' children are less likely to develop a habit of reading and using the library effectively.

The study showed that only 11.8% of Indochinese students attended workshops to learn library skills. They did not seem to realize that library workshops might provide more information and teach them more advanced skills. On the other hand, certain skills covered in library workshops might be too complicated for some students to digest and master within a short period of time. In order to please the majority of the students, some instructors of library workshops rushed through their presentations to cover as much as they could within their limited amount of time, and these Indochinese students were pushed through the process in order to catch up with the others. Learning will not take place if students find themselves frustrated and lost. Past negative experiences discourage students from attending library workshops again. Given their limited English proficiency and lack of familiarity with the American education/library system, the pace of teaching in library workshops must be adjusted to suit these students if actual learning is to be achieved.

Recommendations

Library outreach programs should include:

- visiting their dorms;
- reaching out to resident assistants;
- being a guest speaker at student association and residence hall meetings;
- advertising in the student newspapers and Web pages;
- setting up a table on campus at the beginning of each semester;
- co-sponsoring workshops with the job fairs, technology fairs, counseling groups, and admission/scholarship/financial aid offices, etc.

Special library workshops in various formats should include:

- offering a class that is limited to a small number of

students who have language difficulties or are intimidated by large crowds of native-born students;

- developing a training workshop in a less intensive format. Libraries should avoid packaging too much content into one workshop;
- making one-on-one consultation available to disadvantaged students;
- encouraging the students to get involved in developing their own training plans.

Other services should include:

- providing clear printout/online instructions. It is important that the instructions are written clearly and easy-to-follow for the foreign-born students;
- promoting reference/interlibrary services, and providing prompt service for users. Many students refuse to use the services, because they cannot wait for the services;
- increasing availability of library staff, especially multicultural librarians, to provide the services and fulfill students' needs;
- listening to the students' needs and including their ideas about improving library service programs as part of library planning decision-making process.

Conclusion

Indochinese students did not use the library effectively even though many helpful library programs were available at the libraries. The students seldom took advantage of the library's resources, services, and programs because (1) they saw no need of such resources in completing their assignments; (2) they did not have much free time for the services, and (3) they were unaware of the services and resources available to them. While the findings of this study were in agreement with that of earlier research, this study has one major difference from others. In this study, a clear distinction is made between using the library in general and using library resources/services in particular. While Indochinese students were frequent library users in the sense that they come to the library frequently to study, they were not frequent users of library resources/services such as reference, circulation, and interlibrary services.

It is hoped that the findings of this research and the recommendations will attract the attention of library administrators, librarians, and minority students. On the library side, it is hoped librarians and administrators find these results helpful for planning and improving library services to minority students. On the user side, it is hoped this study will prove useful in helping them adjust their library use behaviors and learn to utilize library resources more effectively.

Notes

1. Encyclopaedia Britannica, *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1985).
2. V. O. Sutter, *The Indochinese Refugee Dilemma* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).
3. P. Ong and S. J. Hee, "The Growth of the Asian Pacific American Population: Twenty Million in 2020," in *The State of Asian Pacific American: A Public Policy Report* (Los Angeles, CA: LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1993), 11–23.
4. M. X. Liu, "Library Services for Ethnolinguistic Studies," *Journal of Educational Media & Library Sciences* 32:3 (spring 1995): 239–46.
5. L. L. Wang, "Trends in Admissions for Asian Americans in Colleges and Universities: Higher Education Policy," in *The State of Asian Pacific American: A Public Policy Report* (Los Angeles, Calif.: LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1993), 49–59.
6. SJSU Web page <http://www.sjsu.edu/>
7. UC Berkeley Web page <http://www.berkeley.edu/>