The Library as Place in the Lives of African Americans

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Abstract

The focus of this research is to determine how the 187 African-American students and professionals in this survey perceived the library as a transforming agent in achieving academic and career success, and what factors motivated them to use the library and its resources. The findings are based on a survey questionnaire administered to a select group of African-American undergraduate and graduate students and professionals in Maryland and Delaware in 2002. Using descriptive statistical analysis to determine frequencies and mean scores, the researcher was able to identify participants: 1) engagement in library activities in order of frequency and mean score, 2) perception of the impact of library usage on academic performance, and 3) motivation for using the library and its resources. Further, Pearson's Correlation coefficients were used to establish relationship between library use and perceived effect on academic and career achievement.

Introduction

Libraries can mold character, giving an individual powerful words to live by.

Carl Rowan[1]

Library is the temple of learning, and learning has liberated more people than all the wars in human history. A black person who wants to be liberated first needs to get learning. If he does, it will make him a formidable force against a would-be oppressor.

Carl Rowan[2]

The late Carl Rowan, well-known African-American syndicated journalist, probably had in mind the traditional print-oriented library when he penned or spoke those words. Such enthusiasm by Blacks for the library had its heyday during the Civil Rights movement in America, during the 1960s and 1970s when education was promoted as a great weapon against rac-

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ism and a vital tool for the advancement of Black people. The library loomed large in the vision for empowerment therefore, it was not surprising that many African-American leaders in the media, education, politics, business, sciences, and the humanities shared Rowan's assertion that " libraries can mold character, giving an individual powerful words to live by"[3] and that "a black person who wants to be liberated first needs to get learning …"[4] An affirmation of Rowan's view is echoed in Richard Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy,* in which his dreams of becoming a writer were realized only by borrowing books through a library card loaned to him by his Irish Catholic coworker. Reading thereby became a passion for Wright.[5]

Similar struggles for access to books and libraries are carefully documented in *Untold Stories: Civil Rights, Libraries and Black Librarianship* edited by John Tucker[6] and which tells the story of the enormous efforts made against segregation and violence to bring to the local Black population books they could not get elsewhere. Effectively, "Freedom Libraries" as they were called, "offered hope to the next generation."[7] It is this hopefulness in the African American experience that fueled their pursuit of learning and fostered the romantic notion of the library as a place where minds are nurtured and liberated during and after the Civil Rights years. Through social and political activism the 'romantic notion' of libraries became a reality in practical and dynamic ways; libraries and library services to Blacks focused on building collections to preserve their history as well as providing books for education and entertainment.[8]

The activism of the Civil Rights Movement also resulted in the desegregation of colleges and universities, and here again the experience of Blacks is no less troubling than the efforts made to gain admission to such institutions. Black students in their pursuit of learning and academic excellence faced new challenges posed by the expectation, in predominantly white institution, for them to achieve parity with the majority population. Through activities such as summer enrichment programs, remedial classes, and mentoring programs Black students have been encouraged to improve test scores and grade, but perhaps more importantly, to remain in school.

Naturally, academic libraries, as full participants in providing excellence in education, joined in the ef-

fort to promote the academic success and retention of Black students. However, in the literature of librarianship, as in those of other social science disciplines, Black students, are too often categorized as "disadvantaged," "academically unprepared," "information poor," and exhibiting "library anxiety."[9] Library endeavors have largely been in the areas of collection development and library instruction. More recently, the literature reflects pedagogical and programmatic shifts which recognize cultural and learning differences.[10]

The Problem

There is a dearth of research and publications about Blacks and their response to library resources, services, and programs, except as part of a larger group. When such research or publications occur Blacks are invariably compared to the majority group.[11] This research did not compare Black students with any other group, but instead examined the engagement of Black students and professionals in library activities as well as their perception of the library as a place for developing academically and professionally. Based on a population, of 187 Blacks (129 undergraduates, 26 graduates, and 32 professionals) this research sought answers to the following questions:

• In which library activities are Black students most frequently engaged?

• What factors motivate African-American students to use the library and its resources?

• Is there a significant correlation between library activity engagement and perceived effect on the subjects' academic performance?

• Does the perception of the library's philosophical role as a transforming agent differ significantly by age of respondents.

Literature Review

One of the studies which influenced the consideration and design of this research was done by Ethelene Whitmire and compared the difference in library experience between Black and White students.[12] Data extracted from the 1992–93 College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) dataset was used "to determine if African American and White students have different library experience."[13] Whitmire's findings indicated that African-American students used library resources more frequently than White stu-

dents in the following seven variables: (1)used the card catalog or computer,(2) asked librarian for help, (3) read in the reserve or reference section, (4) used indexes to journal articles, (5) developed bibliography, (6) read basic reference documents, and (7) checked out books.[14] A previous study, by Ory and Braskamp, also based on the CSEQ dataset, found that minority students used the academic library more than White students.[15] Ory and Braskamp studied how students in an honors program, a transition program, as well as in the regular curriculum, became engaged in a variety of curricular and extracurricular activities and how the quality of involvement was related to student growth and development. The researchers suggested that library orientation and instruction given during the transition program may have made the minority student more comfortable and more aware of the resources available in the academic library.[16] Whitmire, in her research, did not test for or suggest why the African American students utilized the library services and resources more than their White counterparts because secondary data analyses did not allow for more background information from students.[17]

Also, pertinent to this research are studies on library use and the effect of library use on performance.[18] Jioa and Onwuegbuzie in their research on "The Prevalence and Reasons for University Library Usage" identified the top three reasons for students' use of the library: (1) to obtain a book or an article for a course paper, (2) to study for a test, and (3) to use computerized indexes and online facilities.[19] Their research findings corroborated the findings from a previous research done by Fielder on the University of Washington Libraries which found that the main reasons reported by respondents for using the library were (1) to do class related reading, (2) to do class related research and (3) to study for a test.[20] Neither of these studies reported controlling for race, yet, it can be assumed that both populations would have had some level of diversity, including Blacks.

Methodology
Design
The study utilized the data collected from a questionnaire administered to Black professionals and students in Maryland and Delaware in 2002. Four hundred questionnaires were distributed, of which 190 (47%) were returned. Three questionnaires were dis-

carded due to too many missing responses. The questionnaires were distributed through Black student organizations, faculty, and various individuals attending the respective colleges and universities. This method of distribution ensured a high rate of return although it compromised the random sampling technique. However, the wide variety of institutions reached compensated somewhat for the lack of randomization. Professionals who were not students (some full-time graduate and doctoral students were also fulltime professionals) were reached through a network of persons based in different urban and local communities.

The questionnaire was comprised of fifty questions divided into three sections. The first section gathered respondents background information which included level of ongoing education, level of achieved education, age, sex, and attendance at an Historically Black College and University (HBCU) or not. The second section covered the activities students were likely to be engaged in while visiting the library, and the frequency with which they were engaged in these activities. In other words, responses to the statements indicated how students utilized the library as a place to do research, study, complete assignments, and foster personal development. Frequency was measured on a Likert-like scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating that the respondent used the library often for the particular activity and 5 indicating never. Intermediate points were "somewhat often," "occasional," and "seldom." The questions in the third section were designed to measure the respondents' perception of the library with regard to their academic and professional performances and the reasons which motivated them to use the library. The survey concluded with four questions on the philosophical role of the library. The answers to the questions helped to determine (1) whether or not the respondents reflected the same faith in libraries as an agent of change as expressed by Carl Rowan and others of the civil rights and post civil rights era, and (2) whether or not respondents perceived the library as an important place where minds are liberated. Perception was measured on a Likert-like scale. Respondents were asked to rank a series of statements on a five point scale ranging from 1, strongly agree to 5, strongly disagree, with intermediate points expressing intermediate levels of agreement or disagreement.

Table 1. Descriptive Summary of Respondents

Level of Continuing Education	N	Percentage
Undergraduates	129	69%
Graduate Students	26	14%
Professionals	32	17%
Gender		
Male	58	31%
Female	129	69%
Age Range		
18-23	126	68%
24-33	15	8%
34-43	15	8%
44-53	19	10%
54-63	10	5%
64 +	2	1%

Subjects

The survey included undergraduate and graduate students attending seven colleges or universities in Maryland and Delaware. The institutions can be categorized as large public universities, large private universities, HBCU, and small liberal arts colleges. The professionals all have at least a Bachelors degree, cover a wide range of professions, and reside in Maryland or Delaware. The sample population is predominantly undergraduates (69%) and female (69%). The ratio of males to females in this study mirrors the national ratios for Black college students in the United States. The population ranged in age from 18 to 64 and over with the 18 to 23 year-old in the majority (68%). (See Table 1)

Analysis of data

Data from the surveys were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The population was divided into two groups, Group 1, comprised of undergraduates and Group 2, comprised of graduate students and professionals. Due to the small number of graduate students and professionals those categories were combined to form Group 2. Frequency analysis was used to identify numbers, percentages, and mean scores of responses to each individual question or statement, and t-tests were conducted to compare and calculate mean differences between the two

groups, and to determine any significant differences. In addition, bivariate correlations using Pearson's method was used to identify and measure significant relationship, if any, between statements dealing with the effect of library activities on the respondents' performance and relevant statements on engagement in library activities.

Results

• *In which library activities are Black students most frequently engaged?*

Frequency distribution analysis showed that based on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being often and 5 never, undergraduates were more likely to be engaged in using electronic resources, doing research, studying, doing homework, and checking out books than reading newspapers, watching videos, or reading periodicals for personal development. Attending library instruction and seeking help from reference librarians were identified as activities in which undergraduates were occasionally to seldomly engaged. Group 2, graduate students and professionals, were more likely to seek help from librarians than Group 1. T-tests confirmed that the frequency and ranking of these activities showed small to moderate significant difference between the groups. Table 2 shows activities of undergraduate students compared with graduate students and professionals ranked in order of mean score. Also, included in the table are the standard deviation for each group, t-values, and mean difference scores between the two groups. Items which were statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level are identified by asterisks (**).

• *What factors motivate Black students and professionals to use the library and its resources?*

Respondents were asked to rank statements pertaining to the reasons for using the library by level of agreement from 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree. On the list of motivational factors which influence library use, both groups ranked "improve academic performance" before "assignment completion," and "library instruction." Respondents disagree that they go to the library because they are required to do so by study skills mentors and programs. Analysis of motivational factors is illustrated in Table 3 with mean scores, and standard deviation for each of the two groups, as well as t-test values and mean differences. Variance tests for equality showed

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations and t-Tests by Activities Listed in Descending Order of Mean Score.
Scale: 1 = very often; 5 = never

Activity	Group 1 Undergraduates N = 129		Group 2 Graduate Students & professionals N = 58		t-test	Mean difference
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Use electronic resources	2.39	1.383	1.98	1.270	1.830	.41
To do research**	2.59	1.279	1.57	.806	6.411	1.02
Place to study	2.63	1.345	2.43	1.315	-.911	.20
Place to do homework	2.74	1.368	2.75	1.481	.043	-.01
Make photocopies	2.81	1.311	2.69	1.490	.574	.13
Check out books**	2.83	1.227	1.82	1.137	5.260	1.01
Place for group study	2.91	1.301	2.94	1.392	-.138	.03
Read reserve materials**	2.93	1.265	1.96	5.173	5.173	.97
Use periodicals for assignment**	3.23	1.339	1.60	.969	9.109	1.63
Seek help from reference librarians**	3.28	1.275	2.12	1.177	5.874	1.16
Read e-mail**	3.29	1.436	4.57	1.021	-6.699	-1.428
Use computers (word processing, etc.)	3.33	1.460	4.10	1.246	-3.295	.77
Library Instruction	3.56	1.359	3.20	1.486	1.450	.35
Read periodicals for personal development	3.98	1.336	3.57	1.432	1.830	.41
Read newspapers	4.24	1.151	3.71	1.404	2.669	.54
Watch videos for personal interest	4.57	.884	4.69	.860	-.834	.12

** Correlation is significant at the $p<0.01$ level

Table 3. Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, T-Tests by Motivational Factors Influencing Library Use
Scale 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree

Motivational Factors	Group 1 Undergraduates N = 129		Group 2 Graduate students & Professionals N = 58		t-test	Mean difference
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
I use the library and its resources because I believe it will help me to perform better.	2.69	1.395	2.16	1.211	2.532	0.54
I use the library because I am required to use the resources for assignments.	2.93	1.323	2.70	1.235	1.122	0.23
I am required to go to the library for library instruction.	2.98	1.514	3.23	1.637	-1.017	-0.25
I am required to study in the library by my mentor.	4.38	1.080	4.52	1.027	-0.838	-0.14
I am required to study in the library by the Study Skills Program.	4.29	1.211	4.50	1.095	-1.118	-0.21

**Table 4. Correlation of Library Effectiveness and Resources By Groups.
Control Variable: "Use of library resources made a significant difference
to my academic performance."**
Scale 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree

Resources variables	Group 1 Undergraduates		Group 2 Graduate students & Professionals		Pearson Correlation
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Score
Electronic Resources**	2.40	1.270	2.02	1.167	.380
Books for assignments**	2.86	1.217	1.88	1.166	.453
Reserve materials**	2.97	1.255	2.00	1.124	.438
Periodicals for assignments**	3.26	1.336	1.74	1.078	.469

** Correlation is significant at the *p<0.01* level

(See Table 4.) Correlation analysis also found moderate but significant differences between the two groups. As expected, graduate students and professionals used the listed resources more frequently and also ranked the effect higher than undergraduates

Next, the variable "Use of the library as a place to study contributed to my getting better grades" was correlated with the variable "I use the library as a quiet place to study" for significance. The results showed a strong relationship between the two variables, but no significant difference between the two groups. (See Table 5)

Further testing for perceived effect of the library on academic performance was done by looking at the relationship between the statement "librarian's help in finding answers to and resources on my research paper made a significant difference to my grade" with "I seek help with my research from the reference librarian." The correlation analysis showed a significant relationship between the two variables. Group 2, graduate students and professionals, sought help from the librarian more frequently than undergraduates. (See Table 6.)

- *Does the perception of the library's philosophical role as a transforming agent differ significantly by age of respondents?*
The population was grouped by two age groups: 18 to 33 years-olds and 34 and over. Four statements in the questionnaire allowed for exploration of the above question. The statements reflected the philosophical role of the library as expressed by Carl Rowan and others. Variance and t-test analyses showed a small but significant relationship between each statement and between age

no significant difference between the responses of the two groups.
- *Is there a significant correlation between use of the library and its perceived effect on academic performance?*
Analysis of three statements which measured the perception of the library's effect on academic performance concluded that the respondents perceived the library as having a positive effect in three areas: (1) use of electronic resources, books for assignments, reserve materials and periodicals; (2) use of the library as a quiet place to study; and (3) help from the librarian. The variable, "Use of the library resources made a significant difference to my academic performance" was correlated separately with each of the four variables specific to library resources. The results showed moderately significant correlation, ranging from .380 to .469, between the control variable and the variables on resources. (Correlation was significant at the *p<0.01*.)

**Table 5. Correlation of Library Effectiveness and Resources
Controlling Variable: "Use of the library as a place to study
contributed to my getting good grades."**
Scale 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree

Resources variables	Group 1 Undergraduates N=129		Group 2 Graduate students & Professionals N=58		Pearson Correlation
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Score
I use the library as a quiet place for study.**	2.64	1.345	2.43	1.339	.684

** Correlation is significant at the *p<0.01* level

groups. (See Table 7.) The mean score of the respondents in the "34 and over" age group indicated a higher level of agreement with the statements than than that of 18 to 33 year-olds, However, the younger generation was more agreeable with the statements than was expected.

Table 6. Correlation of Library Effectiveness and Resources Controlling Statement "The librarian's help in finding answers and resources on my research project made a significant difference to my grade." Scale 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree					
	Group 1 Undergraduates N=129		Group 2 Graduate students & Professionals N=58		Pearson Correlation
Resources variables	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Score
I seek help with my from the reference librarian.**	3.33	1.270	2.16	1.167	.569
** Correlation is significant at the *p<0.01* level					

Conclusion

Given the small sample size of this study it would not be statistically reliable to generalize the findings to the population at large. However, in this population, respondents have clearly indicated that the main reasons they use the library are to improve their performance and complete assignments. Thus, using electronic resources, doing research, studying, and doing homework were the library activities in which most respondents were frequently involved. The results closely paralleled those of Jioa and Onwuegbuzie.[21] Course assignments and test preparation seemed to be the main determinants behind students engagement in library activities. Further research is needed to explore and explain what types of electronic resources were being used by Black students and for what purposes. Similarly, more research on how Black students "do research" would help to identify their instructional needs. Difference in use of resources between the two groups is likely due to the level of education and professional experience of Group 2.

Respondents who used library resources more frequently scored higher on the opinion scale indicating that library resources made a significant difference to their performance. So too, those who used the library to study more frequently believed that it contributed to better grades, and those who sought help from the librarian earned better grades on their projects. Further research is necessary to identify actual relationships between the library activities and student performance based on measurements

Table 7. Correlation of the Perception of the Philosophical Role of the Library with Age Groups. Scale 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree						
	Age					
	18–33		34 & over			
Perception of philosophical role	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t-test	Mean difference
"Libraries change lives"**	2.83	1.415	2.00	1.166	4.074	.83
"The library is a temple of learning, and learning has liberated more people than all the wars in human history."**	2.45	1.266	1.79	1.051	3.508	.66
The library and its resources have helped me achieve my career goals.**	2.79	1.255	2.02	1.097	3.999	.77
"Libraries help Black people understand their history."**	2.98	1.467	2.20	1.154	3.750	.78
** Correlation is significant at the *p<0.01* level						

of program effectiveness and grades rather than on perceived effectiveness.

Older students and professionals had a more philosophical perspective on the role and purpose of the library in the lives of Black students and professionals than the younger group of undergraduate students. Nevertheless, undergraduates did not disagree with the statements. Age and experience might explain the difference between the groups. Respondents indicated that they seldomly went to the library to read newspapers, especially undergraduates. Immediacy and versatility of the internet and 24 hour television news stations may be the reason for this, or possibly, students are just not reading newspaper or the library does not carry the papers of their choice. The finding that undergraduates sought help from librarians only occasionally or seldomly is a concern, and further research on Black students should explore the affective reasons which prevent students from working with librarians. Such a research would measure behavior rather than perception.

This study is exploratory, and the researcher intends to expand the geographic area and limit the population to undergraduates only in subsequent research endeavors including the research concerns suggested above.

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