BRIDGING SERVICES: A UNIVERSITY LIBRARY ENGAGES WITH CHINESE STUDENTS
A MIXED METHODS STUDY IN PROGRESS

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In order to get into Miami, Chinese students will have passed a nine-hour government-sponsored college entrance exam in China that takes place over two days and “consists largely of rote memorization”. Next, they will have taken the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam. Students must reach a specified TOEFL score in order to matriculate at an American university like Miami.

According to Fall 2016 enrollment numbers, 13% of the Oxford campus undergraduate population consists of international students, and Chinese students makeup 87% of that population.

Since 2009, we’ve seen a 400% increase in enrollment of Chinese students, and it’s expected that this number will continue to hold steady or grow as Miami employs a full-time recruiter in Beijing and began a new outreach program through Sanya University.
ISSS offers campus orientations, academic advising, visa processing, and driver's license assistance.

Confucius Institute: I imagine that most of you are familiar with the Confucius Institute. China has established over four hundred of these non-profit institutes around the world on college and university campuses. The Confucius Institute at Miami offers Chinese culture and language courses, events and other outreach initiatives to the Miami community.

According to a letter to the editor in the Miami Student newspaper last March, an economics professor provided a summary description of the ACE program: “International students whose English fluency is below Miami’s minimum proficiency requirement are conditionally admitted to a one-semester American Culture and English (ACE) program, where they take a number of classes “to help international undergraduate students develop the English language skills they need to succeed at Miami University.” The program enrolls hundreds of students each fall.”

We mention this letter to the editor to also note that there has been public debate among professors about the readiness of Chinese students to take part in regular coursework versus the limited support and acceptance they are receiving in standard courses.

EDL151: This is a highly experiential course designed to acclimate and acculturate first year International students to the U.S. educational culture and in particular to the Miami University culture. There is a library component to this course: students visit our business, engineering, science and technology library and complete a hands-on scavenger hunt activity designed to introduce them to the library’s collections, services, spaces and staff.

ENG109: 4-credit course for second-language learners, where students write reflections and argument papers. Domestic students take ENG111, which emphasizes rhetoric and the inquiry process as well as composition. Library provides one-shot bibliographic instruction at the request of instructors.
OUTREACH LIBRARIAN

• Serve as Personal Librarian to all students in the American Culture & English (ACE) Program and a large percentage of first-year, non-ACE international students

• Lead or coordinate library instruction to courses designated for international students

• Work with on-campus partners to offer and/or participate in targeted programming and initiatives

• Advocate for collection needs, and advertise relevant holdings and materials

Laura.

I began talking a bit about the library’s involvement with Chinese international students, but in this slide I get into the details of my role as the library liaison to international students.

I serve as a Personal Librarian to all 250+ ACE students and many non-ACE international students. This means I email these students on a weekly basis about upcoming library events and relevant resources, and serve as their librarian contact for all of their first year. In their sophomore year, when many have students have declared a major, Personal Librarian students are transitioned to their subject specialist librarian.

In addition to some of the courses I mentioned working with in the previous slide, I provide instruction for other first year courses designated for international students. This is at both the undergraduate and graduate level, as well as other special groups. For example, this summer I led instruction for a couple groups of visiting high school global scholars.

Some of the campus partners I work with to provide programming and initiatives to international students were mentioned in the previous slide. I’ve partnered with the ACE program, ISSS, our on-campus tutoring center, the writing center and Miami’s orientation office. I’ve assisted in leading workshops, drop-in research and writing help and library tours and orientations, all targeted to serve international students.

When I came into this role a year ago, it became clear that there was no designated funding for the collection needs of these students. I took it upon myself to request one-time funding to compile a distinct English Language Learner collection. I was granted $2,000 and compiled a small collection of ~150 items, including readers, reference materials, audiobooks and games.
The study we're presenting on today is still in progress, but here are the details of the mixed methods approach we've adopted. We began with a literature review in order to craft interview questions.

The literature showed that a student's prior library experience is the best predictor for how difficult their transition will be. So, we asked Chinese students about their prior library experience. The literature also showed that Chinese students have trouble adjusting to certain academic conventions, including: group work, active learning environments, and assignments requiring deep analysis. We asked students about their experience with group work and research assignments.

We conducted interviews to hear the individuals' voices and to explore how they describe or feel about a particular topic so that we might now begin developing a more calibrated survey.
IRB APPROVAL

- Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for research involving human subjects
  - interview questions
  - recruiting materials
  - consent form
  - data protection plan

Kate.

IRB approval process involved online training and an application review/approval through the Office for the Advancement of Research & Scholarship (OARS)
RECRUITMENT

• Sought out up to 15 volunteers for 30-45’ one-on-one interviews
  • via listservs and campus fliers
  • outlined purpose of study
  • 18 years and older
  • anonymity guaranteed
  • chance to win a gift card

Kate.
INTERVIEWS

- seven interviewees
- signed consent
- recorded the interviews for transcription
- span of one month
- three interviewers/transcribers/reviewers

Kate.

All undergraduates in a range of majors: Physics, Economics, Finance, Sports Leadership, Education, Undecided

Juniors and one sophomore

One student dropped out when he learned that the interview would be recorded.
INTERVIEW TOPICS

- Information-seeking behavior questions
- Research-oriented questions
- Library culture questions
- Group work-related questions

Kate.

Approximately twelve open-ended questions covering four main topics:

Information seeking:
- Where did you go for school-related information in China? Changed to: In China, where did you go to find information for school assignments, such as projects or papers?
- What new ways of finding information have you used at Miami?

Research:
- Have you heard the term “research”? What does that term mean to you?
- Do you have experience doing research? Describe.
- How is your previous experience with research similar to or different than your research experience at Miami?

Library culture:
- What are libraries like in China? Did you ever talk with a librarian in China? Why/What was the situation?
- Do you use the library at Miami? Describe.
- Have you ever spoken with a librarian at Miami? Why/What was the situation?
- Tell me about the expectations you had of the library and its services when you started here.

Group work:
- Students often work in groups at Miami. Does that happen in Chinese schools?
- Do you like group work? Why or why not?
- Describe a group work experience at Miami.
- Were you assigned to your group, or allowed to pick your own? Which of these options do you prefer? Why?
- What role(s) did you play? (For example: editor, presenter, researcher, writer, etc.) Which of these roles do you like? Which do you dislike? Why?
COMMON RESPONSES

• Using Internet as predominant source to locate information
• Speaking of ‘research’ in vague terms
• Making distinctions between research papers and experiment-based research
• Viewing library for socializing or quiet study
• Interacting minimally with librarians

Kate.

Perhaps it is not very surprising that multiple individuals speaking on the same topics provided different—sometimes contradictory—accounts. For instance, some interviewees said that group work is not common in Chinese schools while one interviewee said that it happens often. Or, some said that libraries in China are few and far between; others said that libraries were commonplace and popular. A 2002 study on libraries in other countries (not specific to China) stated that “reference and information services are not necessarily available...Access to books and other forms of information may be limited...Card catalogs and closed stacks are still used in some libraries.” (Wang and Frank)

In general, the seven interviews did not reveal anything earth-shattering although they did shed more light on common experiences and perspectives of the Chinese interviewees.

In regards to high use of the Internet for research, Chinese students seem much like their American counterparts who are in early years of study. Same thing with the minimal use of librarians: a 2013 study conducted at two Chinese universities among 83 Chinese college students who had studied abroad indicated that only 8% had found librarians to be a useful resource, as opposed to the availability of books and databases, study space, and the Internet. The same study found that Chinese students asked for “a multicultural service desk” and a librarian who understands Chinese. (Shao et al.)
“I rarely use the library service—which I should do—but I heavily rely on the Internet. I think it’s just the nature of communication and what I’m used to right now.”

–Junior, Finance major
ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

• 40% of interviewees attended American high schools or international schools
• Moderate to minimal amount of group work in high school
• Cursory research assignments in high school
• Large national and smaller town libraries in China
• Librarianship is not a developed profession or role in China

Image: New national library in Beijing, biggest in China at 77,000 sq. ft.

These responses about librarians are in line with other studies: International students are usually unaware of library services (Shao-Chen, 2006; Liu & Winn, 2009; Shao et al, 2013). Further, they are generally unfamiliar with the role of reference librarians, and therefore do not make distinctions between reference librarians and other staff members (Shao-Chen, 2006; Ilheanacho, 2008). In their study of Chinese graduate students at the University of Windsor, Liu & Winn (2009) asked respondents about their experience with reference librarians. “No such thing in China,” was a typical answer (Liu & Winn, 2009, p. 569). In another study (Morrissey & Given, 2006), respondents described the library staff as “keepers of the books,” (p. 227).
“Research provides me a chance and helps me develop many skills like social skills... [and] time management. I have to have a plan...It’s totally different from what I experienced in China.”

-Junior, Education major
Basic non-credit conversational Chinese classes are being taught through the Confucius Institute, but the expectation remains that international students are to learn and master the English language.

Interviewees talked about enjoying independent work when they have confidence in their knowledge of the subject matter. They see working solo as efficient and less stressful. However, they also said that they prefer working in groups when they can draw on the expertise of their peers in order to learn new things.

Students talked about the amount of time and energy wasted on identifying group roles and leadership. Our recommendation would be to have students establish ground rules based on a series of questions pertaining to work styles and project tasks.

Students interviewed talked about their proficiency with film editing software, and they often assume this responsibility in film projects. A couple interviewees emphasized that they like to present findings in front of a class and do not mind speaking English in front of their peers. On the other hand, the majority of interviewees said that writing papers is difficult, especially when it comes to grammar, and they often defer this duty to native students during group projects. The topic of research came up very little overall in their responses during the course of interviews.

There remains a deep cultural divide on campus between native students and the Chinese students, and this is due in large part to the language barrier and cultural differences. It's worth mentioning that group work offers a rare opportunity for meaningful intercultural exchange.
“If there’s not much people I know, I just prefer to not do a group project...[since] you don’t know how to assign jobs or how to negotiate with them.”

-Undergraduate, Physics major
RECOMMENDATIONS

• Review curriculum in intro composition and culture classes to emphasize the research process in more basic and explicit terms
  • lessons on authoritative resources and academic integrity
• Explore similarities and differences between research in the humanities, the sciences, and business in order to target different majors more mindfully
• Continue the dialogue with stakeholders about the nature of research at the university (e.g., assignments, support services, awards)
• Increase profile of library as a research center
• Develop materials and instruction to support and facilitate group work

Kate.

All international students get a thirty-minute “crash course” on academic integrity during orientation. The director of the ACE program Carol Olausen was quick to note that “an academic integrity policy is completely based on our culture. It’s not universal.” According to an article related to plagiarism on campus, over 40 percent of reported incidences of academic dishonesty involved international students last year.
Kate.

We plan for a survey in order to expand our research in more quantifiable terms. Given our sense of some general similarities in the information-seeking behavior between Chinese students and American students, it has been suggested that we use a control group for our survey.

In designing the survey, we will be incorporating some questions from other studies as well as devising our own questions. For instance, we plan to address students’ experiences with research more explicitly through questions. There has been an emphasis in previous studies on providing Chinese students with bibliographic instruction. Is there more we can be doing to facilitate their “academic adaptation” involving research?

The term “academic adaptation” has been used in a 2010 thesis at Bowling Green State University to describe Chinese students’ experiences in American higher education. Our questions about research and group work point towards our own interest in finding out how the libraries can better support students as they adapt to an American liberal arts education.


