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# A Comparative Study of Resource and Service Needs of International Students at an Academic Library

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## Introduction

International students constitute a large part of the student population on campuses in the United States. According to Open Doors Report of the U.S. Institution of International Education (2017), the number of international students in the United States was 582,984 in 2007. Ten years later, this number increased by 85% to 1,078,822, which means the total population of international students in the United States nearly doubled in the last decade (Institution of International Education, 2017). In 2017, the population of foreign students in Alabama was 9,549, which ranked 29<sup>th</sup> in the United States (Institution of International Education, 2017).

The University of South Alabama is a public university in the city of Mobile, Alabama. At 1,391 international students' enrollment, University of South Alabama has the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest number of international students in Alabama for 2017 (Institution of International Education, 2017). International student enrollment brought challenges to different departments on campus involved with helping students become accustomed to the learning environment, deal with language issues, and be successful in their academic study. University libraries face the same challenges due to the increased appearance of international students on campus. To better serve this group of students, it is necessary for university libraries to understand the needs, satisfaction, and expectations of international students at the library.

The Liaison Librarian for International Students at University of South Alabama conducted a research survey of two groups of international students: incoming and currently enrolled. This survey seeks to understand the needs, satisfaction, and expectations of international students at academic libraries and to discover relevant library programs to better serve international students. This will be accomplished by comparatively analyzing two groups of international students' demographic data, previous library experiences in their country of origin, and academic library experiences at the University of South Alabama.

## Literature Review

Research about library and information services for international students at academic libraries has been conducted for two decades. Generally, researchers analyzed the challenges and difficulties international students face at the library, discovered international students' library needs

and information-seeking behavior, and suggested effective solutions to better serve them at academic libraries.

Baron and Strout-Dapazb (2001) revealed "language/communication problems; adjusting to a new educational/library system; and general cultural adjustments" (p. 314) as three challenges of international students at the library. Due to these challenges, international students studying in the United States, especially for those whose native language is not English, "may face several hurdles not experienced by their American counterparts. Such differing expectations can lead to accusations of plagiarism, which can then bring about consequences ranging from lost points on an assignment to severe academic penalties" (Amsberry, 2010, p. 31).

Plagiarism is a serious issue among international students at universities in the United States; however, plagiarism should be avoidable if these students are prepared with the adequate information literacy skills after they begin study in the United States. Baron and Strout-Dapazb (2001) suggested a model for librarians to help international students build their library skills "by weaving together ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards with the communication, educational and cultural adjustments international students encounter when studying in the USA" (p. 314).

Researchers frequently used survey questionnaires to discover international students' library needs and information-seeking behaviors. Jackson (2005) conducted a survey to assess incoming international students' library and computer experience at San Jose State University. Results showed that "technical computer skills no longer appear to be a barrier to successful library research for incoming international students, strong information competence programs for these students do not need to focus on computer literacy" (Jackson, 2005, p. 207). Instead, Jackson (2005) recommended "library programs can concentrate on critical thinking and higher-level information competence skills, such as developing search strategies, and choosing and evaluating resources appropriate to university-level research" (p. 207).

Yi (2007) surveyed international students at Texas Woman's University to understand their perceptions of information needs and use. His study demonstrated library and information needs of international students as "frequently need[ing] information for augmenting their academic course work, improving library skills, and

enhancing their use of software application” (Yi, 2007, p. 671). His study additionally stated that the higher education level international students attained, “the more likely they are to use databases, remote access to the library offerings, and e-journals frequently” (Yi, 2007, p. 671). These research findings helped librarians to understand international students’ information-seeking preferences and provide target-oriented library service to them.

Liao, Finn, and Lu’s study (2007) surveyed the information needs of international and domestic graduate students at Virginia Tech. Their research found that “library electronic resources are preferred to other information sources and all graduate students value accessibility and convenience of access as the most important factors when seeking information resources” (Liao et al., 2007, p. 23). However, results of their study found “that international students use libraries much more actively and often than American students during their graduate studies” (Liao et al., 2007, p. 23). Further, “compared with American graduate students, the bond between international students and their departments is much tighter” (Liao et al., 2007, p. 24). Therefore, they suggested university libraries should increase the cooperation with other academic departments by using the advantage from this integration into the instructional and research fabric of different academic units (Liao et al., 2007, p. 24).

Outside the United States, researchers from other countries also tried to discover international students’ library experiences to find ways to better serve them. Hughes, Hall, and Pozzi (2017) researched the library experience and information literacy learning needs of first-year international students at a university in Australia. Their study showed the similarity of information literacy learning needs between international students and domestic students (Hughes et al., 2017, p.318). However, “low attendance at information literacy classes, infrequent consultation with librarians, and minimal use of online help” (Hughes et al., 2017, p.318) are still the problems in international students’ information literacy learning. According to the research findings, they recommended “an extensive, targeted promotion of the library to international students” (Hughes et al., 2017, p.318).

In Canada, Ishimura, Howard, and Moukdad’s (2007) study identified Japanese students’ information literacy skills and their needs in completing assignments at their universities (p.7). Their study showed that Japanese students do have certain information literacy skills; however, they still need further supports from the library (Ishimura, et al., 2007, p.18). To help international students improve their information literacy skills, outreach and campus-wide collaboration are very important for academic libraries (Ishimura, et al., 2007, p.18).

Previous research did attract academic librarians’ attention and they began to think about how best to serve international students. However, most previous research was conducted ten years ago or earlier, which means some research findings may need to be adjusted or may no longer

apply to the new generation of international students. In addition, most previous research focused on the differences and similarities between international students and domestic students at academic libraries. By contrast, research rarely was conducted to compare the differences and similarities of library service and resource needs between different groups of international students. However, international students’ library needs may vary due to their different ages, countries of origin, and length of stay within the United States. In order to better serve international students, it is necessary to investigate different library needs, levels of satisfaction, and expectations between different groups of international students.

## Methodology

The research utilized a survey method to explore the differences and similarities of library resource and service needs between incoming and currently enrolled international students. An anonymous online survey was published on Qualtrics survey software from July 13 to September 28, 2018. With the assistance of the Office of International Education and Global USA at the University of South Alabama, a cover letter and survey link were sent to international students via their email list or distributed in person. A request for survey respondents was also posted on the University Daily Digest mass mailing list. In total, 120 valid responses (52 from incoming international students and 68 from enrolled international students) were collected by September 2018.

The research was carried out by a 17-item online survey questionnaire which consisted of four parts. Part 1 was structured to discover the demographic information of incoming and enrolled international students. Part 2 was structured to discover the previous library experience of incoming and enrolled international students in their home countries. Part 3 was structured to explore the library experience of incoming and enrolled international students at the University of South Alabama. Part 4 was structured to include open-ended questions concerning library satisfaction and the expectations of incoming and enrolled international students.

The research utilizes statistical analysis methods to study the following areas:

Investigate the relationship between the length of stay in the United States of international students and their information-seeking behavior.

1. Investigate the relationship between previous library experience in the home countries of international students and their current library utilization at the University of South Alabama.
2. Explore the plagiarism acknowledgement and citation class experience of international students in their home counties and in the United States.
3. Investigate the relationship between English proficiency and international student library experiences at the University of South Alabama.

4. Compare the library resource and service expectations and satisfaction of incoming international students to that of currently enrolled international students.
5. Discover targeted library resources and services for incoming and enrolled international students.

## Results and Discussion

### Part 1: Demographic Data

At the University of South Alabama, despite earlier growth, international student enrollment began to decline in 2016. According to the University of South Alabama Fact Book, international student enrollment decreased by nearly 33% from 1,407 to 937 between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017 (University of South Alabama, 2016-2017). This is indicative of an overall downward trend in which 45% of American universities reported a drop in incoming international students the following year (Redden, 2017). Reasons for the drop in international students coming to the United States include competition from universities in other nations such as Australia and Canada, as well as a travel ban ordered by President Donald Trump on people from several Muslim-majority nations. (Lynn, 2018).

For currently enrolled international students, there are 68 survey respondents representing a total of 28 countries. India (18%), China (13%), and Kuwait (10%) are the primary countries represented. For incoming international students, there are 52 survey respondents representing a total of 14 countries. China (31%), India (25%), and Germany (18%) are the top three countries represented (see Figure 1).

For currently enrolled international students, majors of study can be categorized as Engineering (28%), Computer Science/Information Technology (16%), Business (15%), Medical Science (12%), and other (29%). Comparatively, new students' majors of study are Medical Science (35%), Computer Science/Information Technology (21%), Engineering (15%), Business (14%), and other (15%). Survey responses show Medical Science becoming a new preferred study area for international students at the University of South Alabama.

Degree levels of international students' study at the University of South Alabama have changed slightly as well. Survey results show the status of enrolled international students on campus break down as undergraduate (56%), master graduate (26%), doctoral graduate (15%), and other (3%). By contrast, for incoming international students, 51% are master graduates, 37% are undergraduates, and 12% are doctoral graduates, which indicate an increasing number of international students enrolled in master's programs at the University of South Alabama.

Length of time in the host country is one of the main factors that impacts successful information-seeking behavior of international students because "they would [be]

more familiar with library facilities, education system, self-study and searching in e-databases" (Meratian Esfahani & Chang, 2012, p.5). Therefore, survey responses from enrolled international students will help university libraries better understand their library resource and service needs. In comparison, responses from incoming international students help university libraries better understand international students' first impressions of the library. At the University of South Alabama, survey results indicate nearly half of currently enrolled international students (43%) have lived in United States for one to three years. For incoming international students, the majority (81%) have been in the United States less than a month (see Figure 2).

### Part 2: Previous Library Experience of International Students in their Home Countries

Survey responses indicate that online library databases, online library catalogs, circulation, and the Ask a Librarian service are the main library services both incoming and enrolled international students used in their home countries. This identifies that international students are familiar with similar library resources and services provided in both their home country and in the United States. However, survey responses also show that library services such as WorldCat, writing center, course reserve, and interlibrary loan are comparatively new concepts to international students (see Figures 3 and 4).

When asked about plagiarism and information literacy class experience, only 4% of incoming international students acknowledge plagiarism and take information literacy classes in the United States. By contrast, for enrolled students, 51% acknowledge plagiarism and take information literacy classes in the United States. This indicates an improvement of plagiarism acknowledgement and information literacy class experience after international students began study at the university. However, 38% of enrolled international students and 62% of incoming international students acknowledge plagiarism but do not take information literacy classes in either their home country or the United States. Even more troubling, nearly 6% of enrolled international students and 13% of incoming international students neither acknowledge plagiarism nor take information literacy classes (see Figure 5).

When survey responses are divided by international students' degrees, it shows master students are the weakest population of plagiarism acknowledgment and information literacy skills (see Figure 6). Even though 21% of master students acknowledge that plagiarism exists, there is no information literacy class provided to them. Compared to undergraduates (21%), only 7% of master students take information literacy classes in the United States. The problem is, unlike domestic graduate students, international graduate students rarely took information literacy classes in their home countries before coming to the United States. In addition, introductory English composition classes such as EH 102 are not provided to graduate students at the University of South Alabama. This means international students who come to the university for their master's or

doctoral degree may miss the chance of taking any information literacy classes. Universities assume these international graduate students have taken these classes in their home countries and have attained the information literature skills needed for their research papers, which is often not the case. Therefore, it is necessary to provide information literacy classes to international students and especially to these graduate students.

### **Part 3: Library Experience of International Students at the University of South Alabama**

Survey results indicate similar preference of using major library resources and services from both groups of international students. Print materials, databases and e-references, and electronic resources are the top three useful library resources and services that both enrolled and incoming international students select. By contrast, government documents, media, course reserve, interlibrary loan, and research consultation are rarely used by either group of international students (see Figures 7 and 8). As mentioned before, government documents, course reserve, interlibrary loan, and research consultation are new library concepts to international students because such resources and service are rarely provided at the libraries in their home countries. Most international students do not use these library resources and services often due to unfamiliarity. Some international students do not even realize such resources and services are provided to them at the university libraries. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a library tour or library orientation to introduce available library resources and services to international students before they begin their studies at the university.

English proficiency is an important factor which impacts successful information-seeking behavior of international students (Meratian Esfahani et al., 2012, p.4). When asked about English proficiency, a number of incoming international students think they have problems in English speaking (32%), listening (27%), reading (15%), and writing (29%). By comparison, a smaller number of currently enrolled international students believe they have problems in English speaking (5%), listening (5%), reading (3%), and writing (9%), which indicates a comprehensive improvement in their English proficiency after they begin study at the university (see Figure 9). Overall, most international students are confident in their English and do not believe it to be a problem when using the library.

### **Part 4: Library Satisfaction and Expectations of International Students at the University of South Alabama**

For current library layout and facilities, the order of enrolled international students' satisfaction is: locations and numbers of restrooms, location of the information desk, locations and numbers of computers, layout arrangement of the library collection, comfortable seating and environment, locations and number of scanners and copiers, and locations and number of study rooms (see Figure 10).

Compared with the enrolled students, survey results show that incoming students were most impressed by the location of the information desk, comfortable seating, and environment (see Figure 11).

Survey responses indicate that English study materials, information literacy classes, and multicultural library events are top three recommended library resources and services by both groups of international students (see Figure 12). In this part of the survey, both groups of international students were asked to write comments about their satisfaction and expectations of the library. Both groups' compliments mentioned the peaceful and relaxed study environment, friendly and helpful library staff, organized library collections, and convenient library layouts. Most enrolled students' suggestions were focused on increasing the number of study rooms and collaborating with other departments on campus to hold multicultural events for international students at the library. By contrast, most incoming students suggested providing library orientation and conducting library tours to help international students understand the library collections and library services.

### **Recommendations and Future Study**

University of South Alabama Libraries currently offer a 15-minute on-site library tour for incoming international students at their orientation. However, no information literacy class has been designed for this group of students thus far at the University of South Alabama.

The effectiveness of the current on-site library tour for international students is questionable. First, some incoming students cannot attend this for various reasons such as conflicting schedule, culture shock, or other reasons. Second, one liaison librarian regularly needs to reach more than 20 students during the on-site tour. This student-to-librarian ratio makes it difficult to ensure the quality of the tour, let alone its efficacy for international students. Third, due to time limitations, there is no chance to get student feedback after the tour.

A virtual library tour would solve these problems. This virtual tour would contain information about library resources, services, facilities, and layout. English proficiency issues can be resolved by adding subtitles on the screen of the virtual library tour. Time would no longer be a constraining factor as a virtual tour need not be scheduled in advance, can be taken at any time, and can cover topics in sufficient detail. Additionally, a virtual tour can relieve pressures from the personnel shortage of librarians and rush traffic inside and around the library.

Similarly, online information literacy classes could be provided to international students on campus. Different from on-site instruction, online information literacy instruction could be an effective way to reach a large number of international students at one time. English subtitles would be added on the screen so it will be easy for them to understand the instruction. This class would be an

information literacy instruction concentrating on research development, online library resource discovery, and citation assistance. Research consultation requests would be attached to online class to make sure students still can reach librarians in person when further assistance is needed.

The videos of the virtual tour and online information literacy class can be conducted by the Liaison Librarian for International Students, who is professionally trained in outreach to these students. Once videos are completed, their web links can be sent to the Office of International Education at the University of South Alabama to be shared with all international students on campus. An online evaluation survey can be attached to be completed by students after they watch the videos to get their feedback.

Future studies could conduct further research to evaluate the effectiveness of virtual library tours and online information literacy classes among international students. Research data would be collected from class evaluations, online surveys, and in-person interviews for further research.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper conducted survey research concerning library resource and service needs for incoming international students and enrolled international students at an academic library. Survey responses indicate similar preferences in using major library resources and services from both groups of international students in their home countries. Survey results also indicate similar preference of using major library resources and services from both groups of international students in the United States. However, government documents, course reserve, writing center, interlibrary loan, and research consultation are rarely used by international students at the University of

South Alabama. Because such resources and services are rarely provided at the libraries in their home countries, most international students do not use them due to unfamiliarity or they do not even realize such resources and services are provided to them at the university libraries. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a library tour or library orientation to introduce available library resources and services to international students before they begin their studies at the university.

Survey results indicate an improvement of plagiarism acknowledgement and information literacy skills after international students began to study at the university. However, plagiarism and inadequate information literacy skills are still serious problems for international students. Especially for international graduate students, universities assume these students have adequate information literature skills for their research papers, which is often not the case. Therefore, academic libraries should pay more attention to and provide information literacy classes for this group of students.

Survey results shows both groups of international students are satisfied with peaceful and relaxed study environments, friendly and helpful library staff, organized library collections, and convenient library layouts. English study materials, information literacy classes, and multicultural library events are top three recommended library resources and services by both groups of international students. To better serve them, academic libraries, liaison librarians, and the Office of International Education on campus should collaborate to discover more innovative and targeted library collections, programs, and services for different groups of international students. All efforts are to create a better academic library and a better learning environment for them, which will benefit their academic success in the future.

Figure 1. Countries of origin of international students at University of South Alabama.

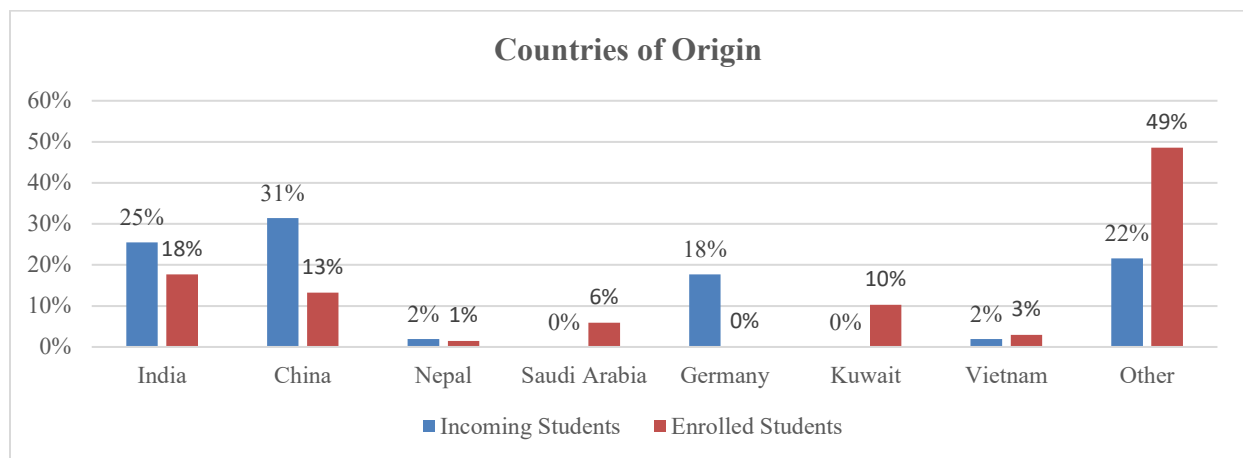


Figure 2. Length of time international students at University of South Alabama have been in the United States.

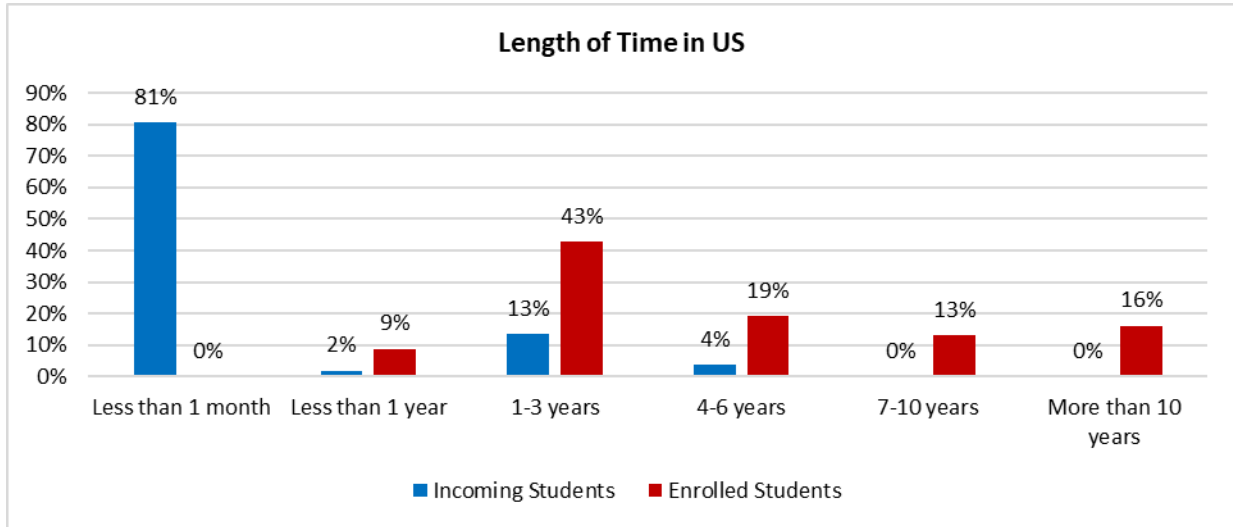


Figure 3. Library resources and services enrolled international students use in their home country.

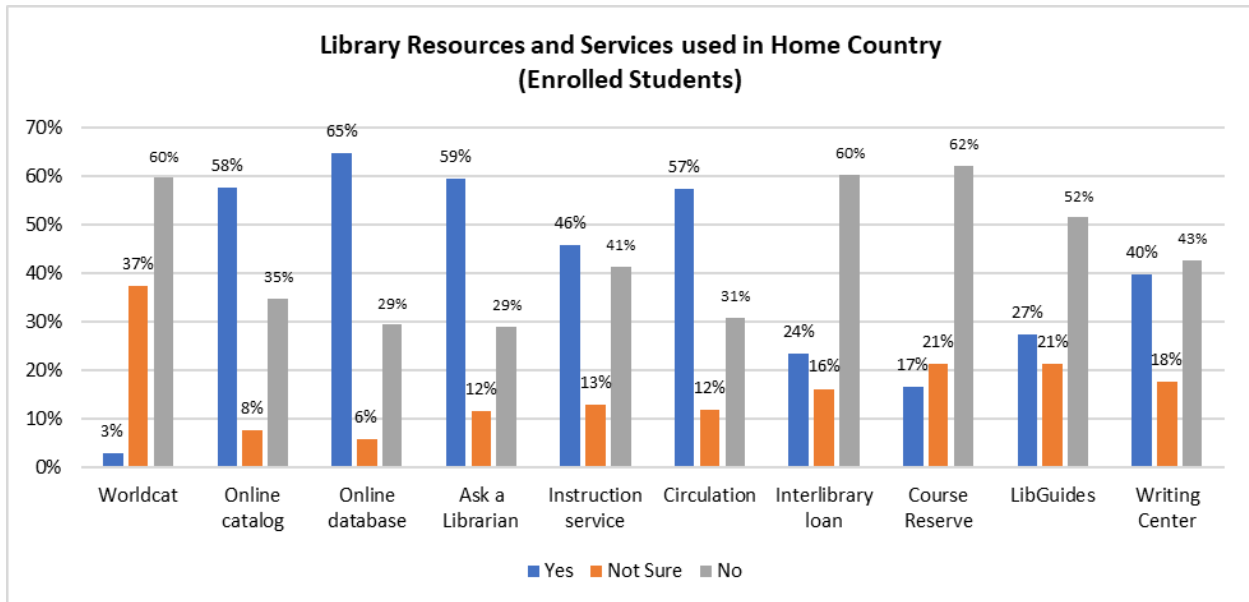


Figure 4. Library resources and services incoming international students use in their home country.

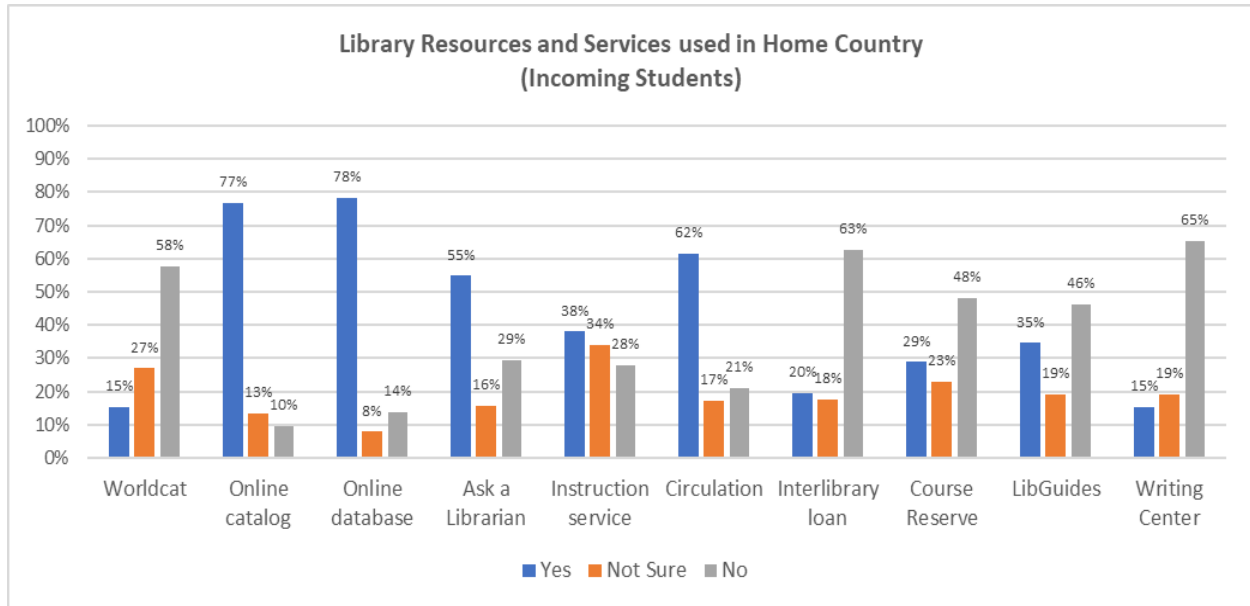


Figure 5. Plagiarism acknowledgement and information literacy class experience of international students at University of South Alabama.

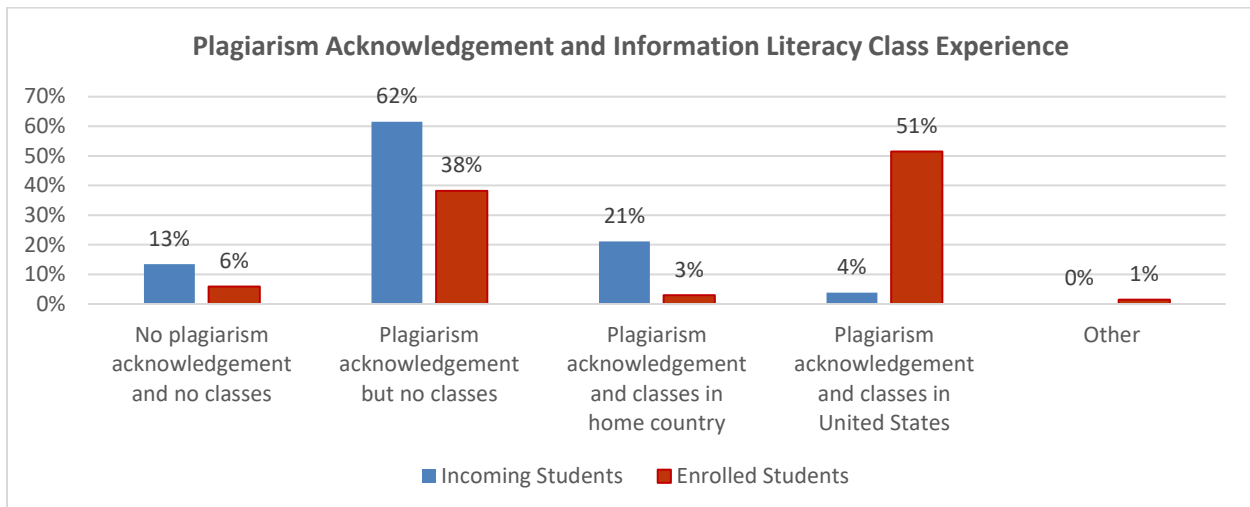




Figure 6. Plagiarism acknowledgement and information literacy class experience of international students' degree type at University of South Alabama.

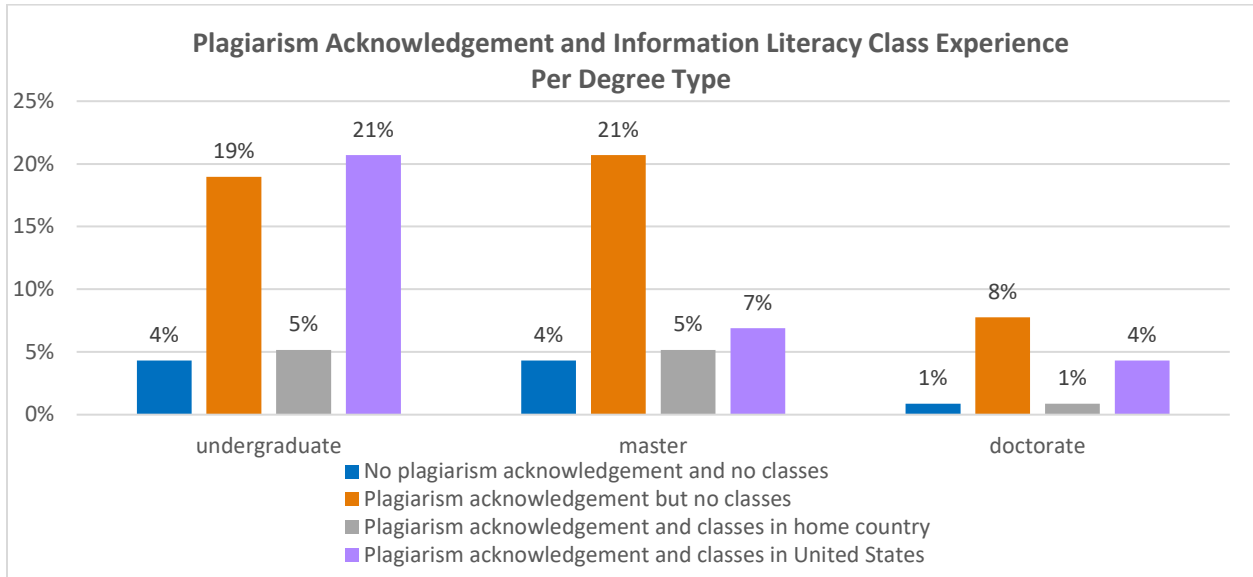


Figure 7. Usefulness of library resources and services for incoming international students at University of South Alabama.

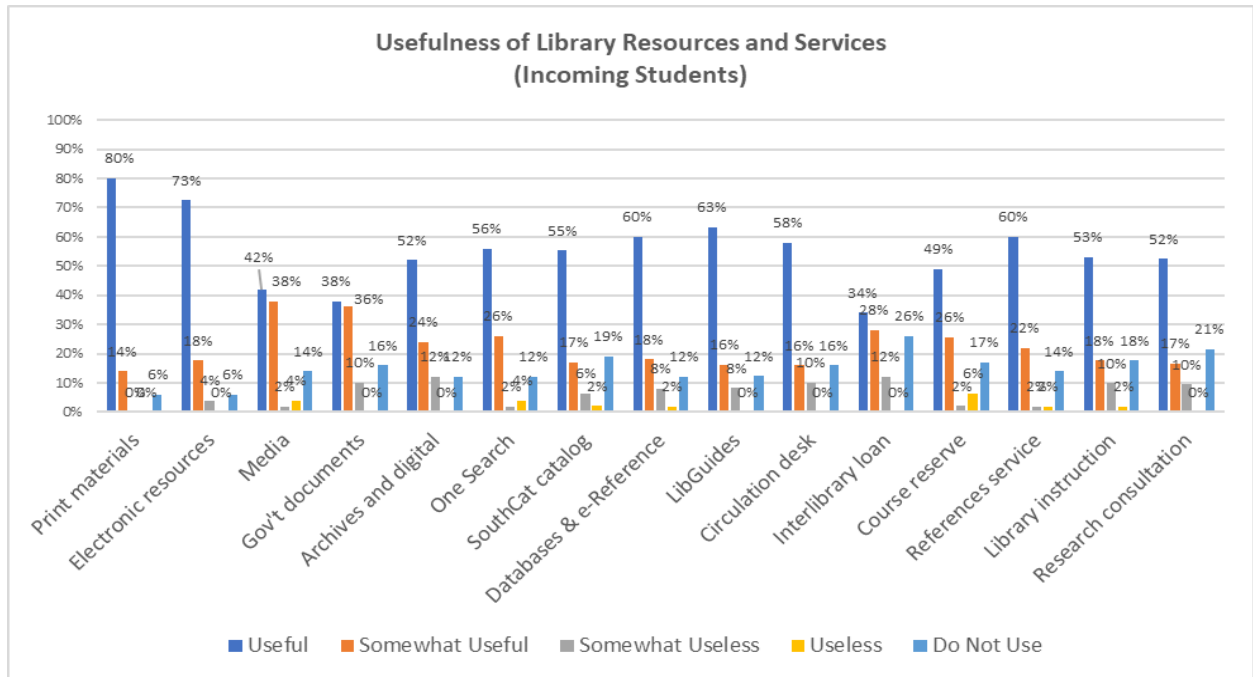


Figure 8. Usefulness of library resources and service for enrolled international students at University of South Alabama.

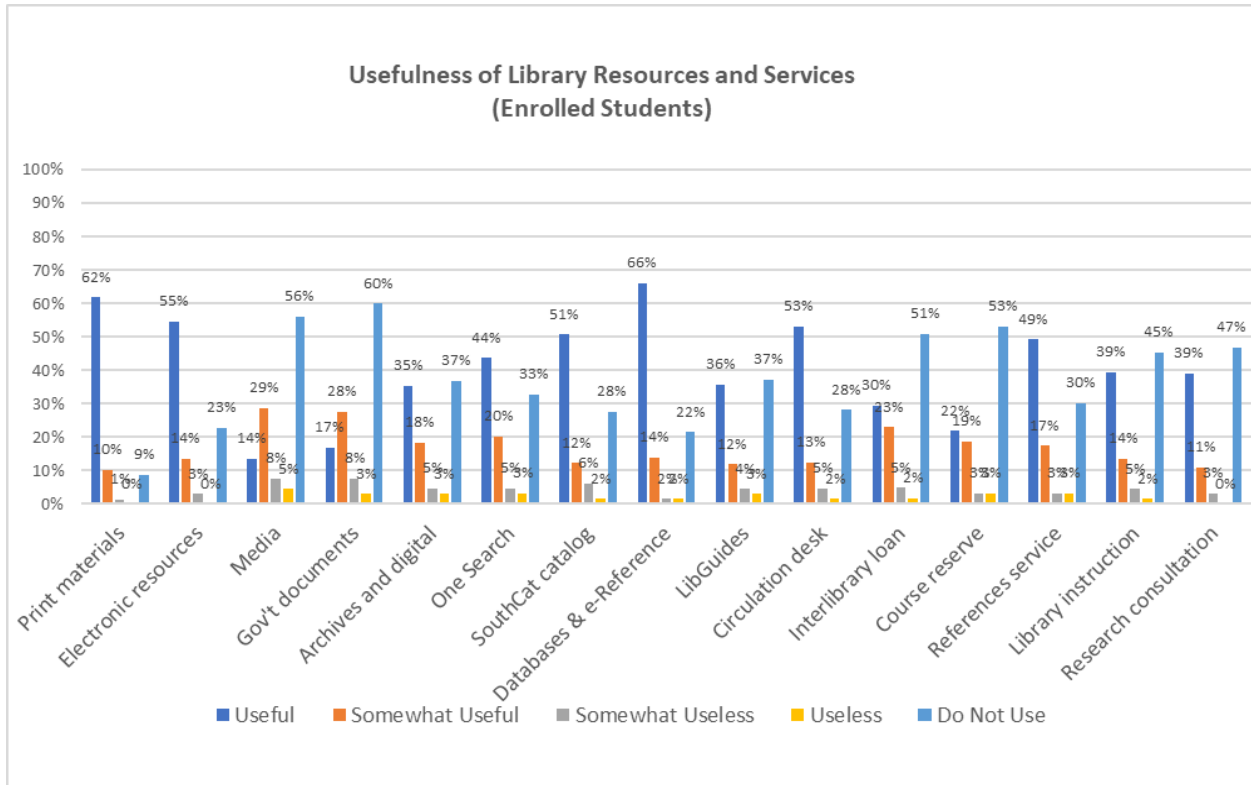


Figure 9. International students with English difficulties at University of South Alabama.

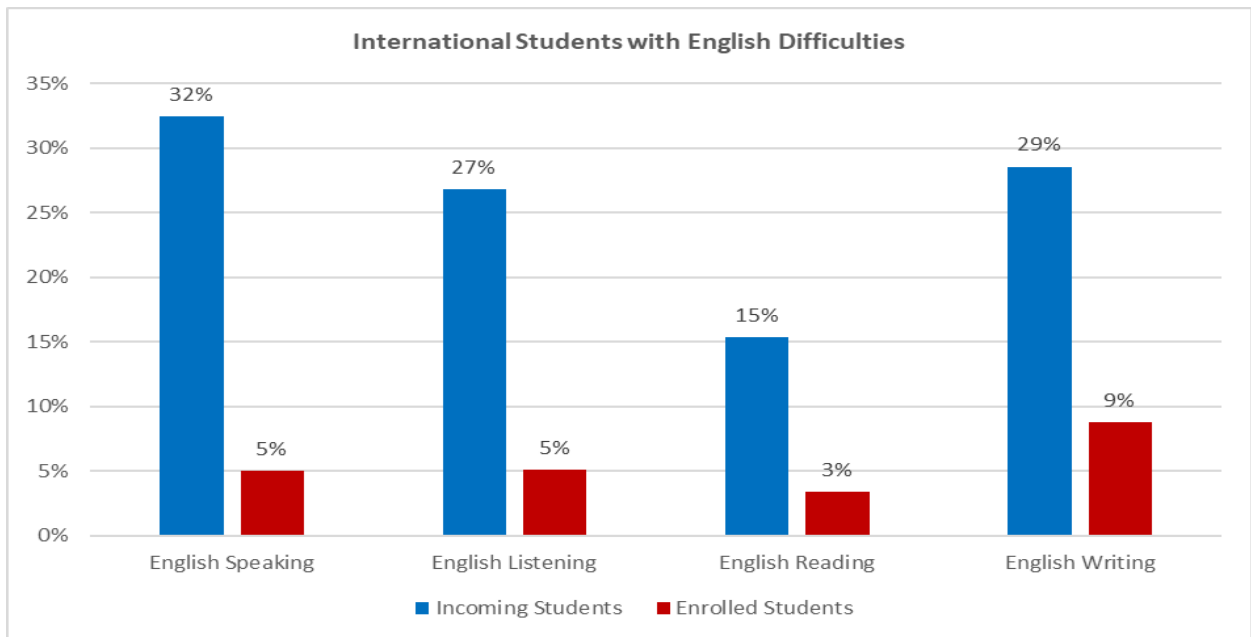


Figure 10. Enrolled international student satisfaction with library layout and facilities at University of South Alabama.

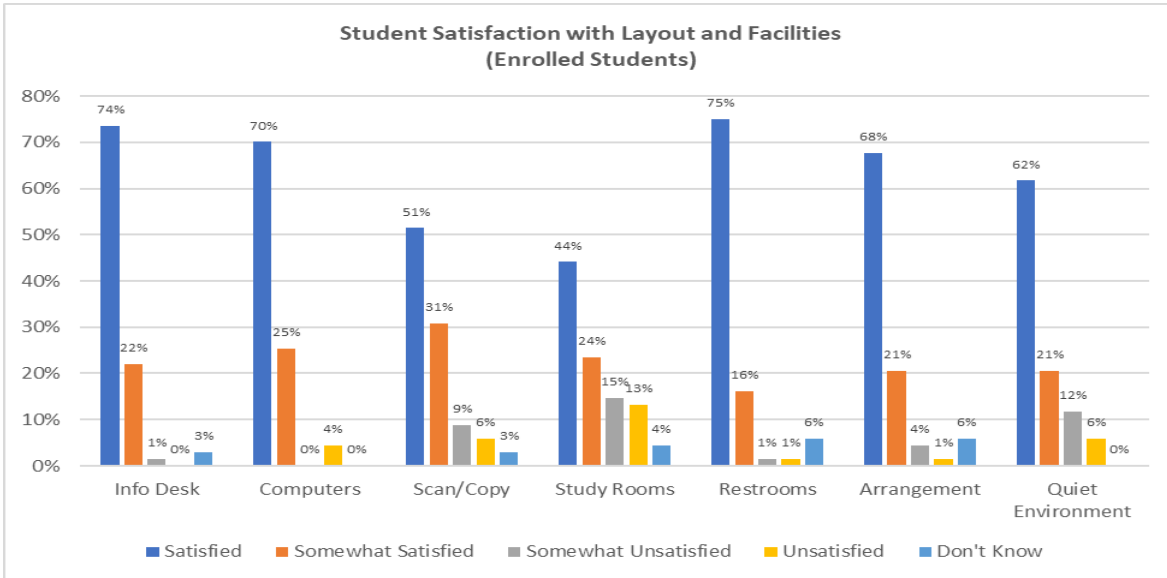


Figure 11. Incoming international student satisfaction with library layout and facilities at University of South Alabama.

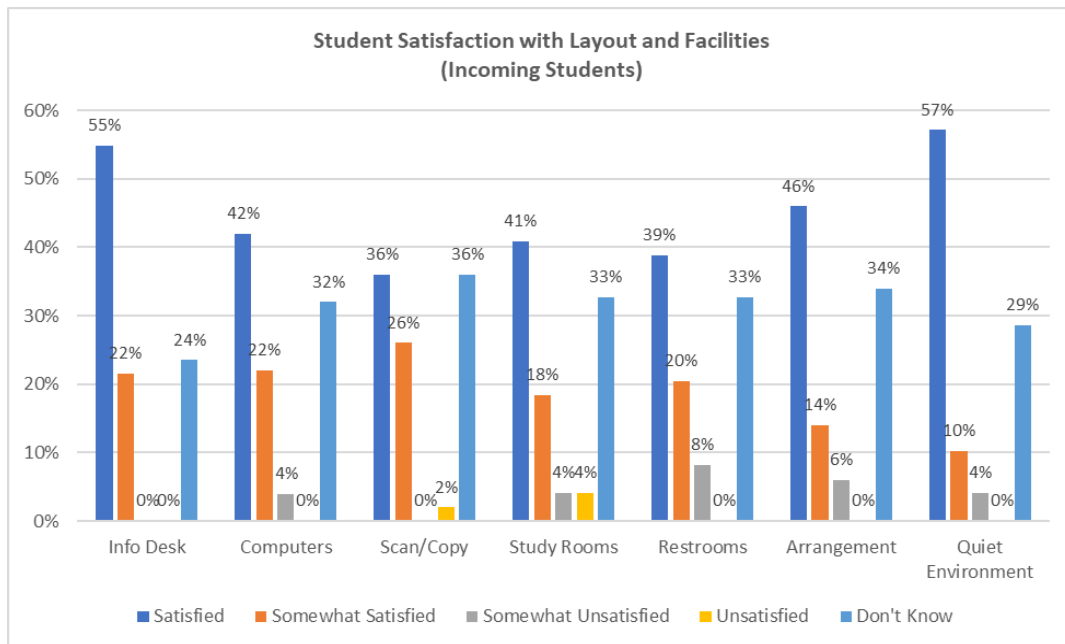
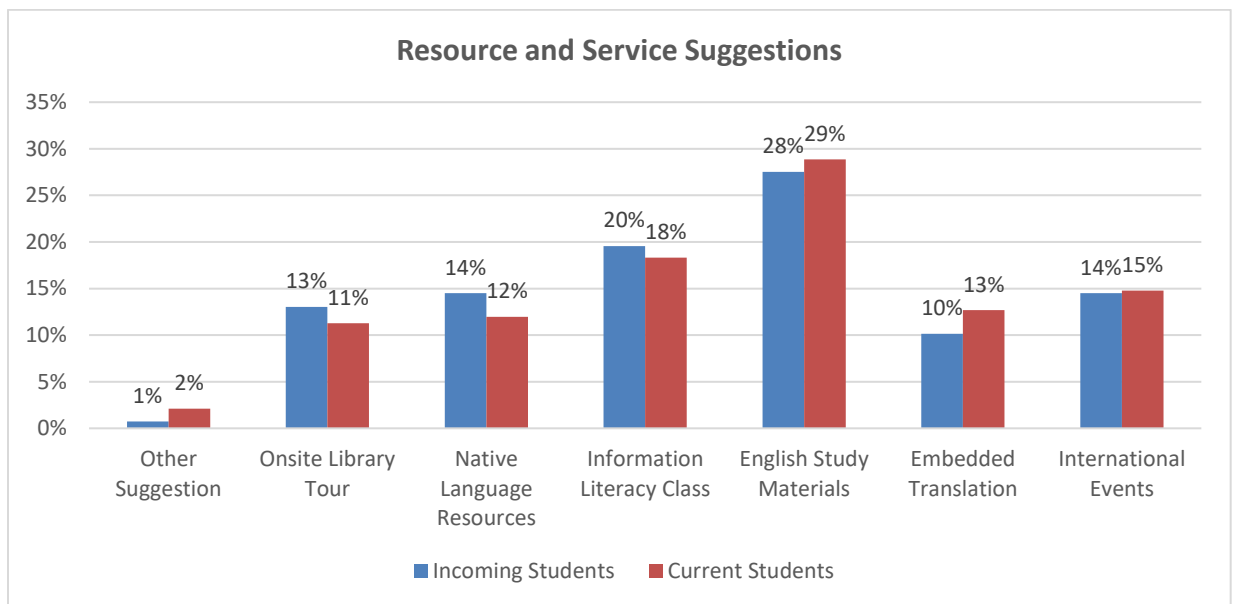


Figure 12. Library resource and service suggestions from international students at University of South Alabama.



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