African American Undergraduates Use of Academic Libraries

Rebecca Davis, Ph.D., Principal Investigator, Assistant Professor of Library and Information Science, is applying for a Laura Bush 21st Century Early Career Development Grant of $111,499 to investigate African American undergraduate students' experience and use of academic libraries. Project Role: The PI will oversee the research efforts and ensure that the project benchmarks and deliverables are successfully executed.

Statement of Need

Issues of diversity, equity and inclusion are strategic priorities throughout the field of library and information science. Libraries, and academic libraries specifically, serve diverse populations and work to create spaces, resources and services that are inclusive to all populations. However, providing meaningful services to historically under-served and marginalized populations like African Americans presupposes a deep understanding of the information needs and experiences of those populations. Unfortunately, African Americans have not only been under-served but under-studied within LIS. Current research focuses on the Latinx population while research on African American undergraduates is nearly non-existent, suggesting that these libraries may not have the knowledge and understanding they need to adequately serve this population. The literature that does exist on undergraduate African American students and academic libraries focuses on how they navigate the academic landscape, race, electronic resources, and time constraints when seeking information. Katopol (2012) found that African American participants in her study were frequent users of electronic media and rarely visited the library. Palmer (2015) attributes poor help-seeking behavior to an "unhealthy masculine identity for Black men", which leads to a lack of inclination to engage faculty and other professional members in the university community (p.40). These studies suggest that African American students are likely underutilizing and under-served by academic libraries, and point to the need for additional research. This study addresses a gap in literature by seeking to explore two research questions:

> RQ1. To what extent do African American students use academic library resources?
> RQ2. Which services and resources (e.g., collections, reference, space, etc.) are African American students most and least likely to use?
> > a. If they choose not to use the library resources and services, what factors influence that decision?
> > b. If they choose to use the library, what knowledge, experience, and understandings do they bring to their interactions? How can academic libraries work with these students build on those experiences to provide more meaningful services?

The PI's previous research focused on the use of academic library resources and services by undergraduate women in the STEM fields and found that they primarily use the physical space in academic libraries. In this project, she will build on that previous research, using tested methods and an asset orientation to explore African American students' use of and experience with academic libraries.

Project Design

The research framework for this two-year project will include traveling to four academic libraries at three types of four-year universities: Liberal Arts, Research Intensive, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) in four U.S. geographical regions (Northeast: Boston, South: Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill, Midwest: Chicago and the West: Los Angeles). The variety of universities will provide a broader sample of students which will give the PI an opportunity to compare the results. The PI will contact Student Life Services, Provost's offices, and student groups for minorities at each institution to recruit eight African American undergraduates from each institution (32 students total) to participate in the study. A graduate assistant will assist with the organization of schedules for interviews and creating flyers to post on each campus to aid in recruiting participants. The PI will create an interview guide that will be used to conduct semi-structured interviews with the students. The interviews will be conducted in a quiet meeting room at each institution. Students will be asked to sign an informed consent form prior to the interview and the PI will digitally record the interviews. The students will be compensated with $25 gift cards.

Year 1
- Create interview guide
- Recruit 16 students total from two institutions to interview

- Travel to the institutions to conduct interviews
- Transcribe and analyze the data

Year 2

- Build on work from year one and make revisions to interview guide if necessary
- Recruit 16 students total from the remaining two institutions
- Transcribe and analyze the data
- Develop and disseminate a guide, model, or framework for developing responsive services to better meet the needs of African American undergraduate students.
- Present findings at practitioner conferences (ACRL and IDEAL) and

Analysis of Data

Grounded theory principles will provide a basis for analysis of the interviews. This is one of the most common approaches used by interpretive researchers. After the interviews are completed and transcribed the PI will analyze the data. The data in a qualitative study are the participants' actual words; thus, measures must be taken to correctly record what participants say and understand what those words mean to them. Such analysis involves studying the transcripts of conversations with participants, looking for themes important to participants' understanding of reality. The themes will be labeled using an emic approach.

Dissemination

After the PI analyzes the data, she will write a paper to submit to the ACRL conference where the focus is academic libraries. Additionally, the PI will write a paper to submit to IDEAL where diversity in libraries is the main focus. The PI will also expand on the conference papers and submit a journal article to be published in a peer reviewed journal for academic librarians. The conference presentations and journal article could reach a wide audience of current and future academic librarians. The PI could also be available to consult with academic librarians who would like to implement her findings to develop more responsive services.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

This research project directly supports diversity, equity and inclusion in academic libraries. African Americans have been a marginalized and under-served group and there is astounding lack of research on their needs and perspectives. My research will begin to fill that gap. Once their needs and perspectives are better understood, academic librarians will be able to design services and resources to better serve that community and engage in outreach that resonates with the community. This project could result in academic libraries developing or updating their diversity, equity and inclusion plans and implementing more responsive services.

Impact

As a workplace development project, my research findings will help academic librarians create services and resources to better serve their African American communities. This will lead to the development of a better community for that group, and perhaps identify skills or tools to develop the academic library workforce to be better prepared to serve that community. The findings from this project will make libraries and librarians more aware of how and why African American undergraduate students use or don't use academic libraries. Furthermore, the project seeks to make long-lasting changes in academic libraries, ultimately creating stronger connections to African American communities.

Budget Summary: The proposed total cost is $111,499. Support for personnel (2 course buyouts for PI, summer support for PI and MLIS graduate student + fringe benefits ($63,100); travel for PI to collect data ($3,106); travel for PI conference attendance ($5,000); incentives for participants ($800); digital recorder ($200); flyers ($1000); transcription services ($10,000); indirect costs @ 51.5% salaries and wages ($28,293).

References

Katopol, P.F. (2012). Information anxiety and African-American students in a graduate education program, *Education Libraries, 35*(1-2), 5-14.

Palmer, R.T. (2015). Examining the prevalence of poor help-seeking behavior among black men at historically black colleges and universities, *Culture, Society & Masculinities, 7*(1) 33-44.