Academic libraries have a history of complex relationships with their surrounding communities. Since the core mission of many American colleges and universities emphasizes the teaching and research needs of students and faculty, the kinds of collections and services provided by their libraries tend to support the needs of the so-called “primary clientele” over those of unaffiliated members of the campus’s surrounding locale.

This is not to say that academic libraries do not transform their services to open up campus resources to broader user groups. Rather, they face a continuous struggle to meet the ever-rising needs and expectations of community users as well as their own affiliated constituents. Terms for these users abound in LIS discourse, from “unaffiliated users” to “external users.” In this article, “community users” describes local residents who seek the services of an academic library at an institution with which they are not affiliated.

The dichotomy between the primary clientele and community users gives serious implications for librarianship as a profession. As service-oriented professionals and proponents of intellectual freedom, librarians generally accept equitable services and access to information resources among all library users as part of their calling to the vocation.

In fact, offering “the highest level of service to all library users” remains the first principle of the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association. However, academic libraries strive to further the mission and goals of their parent institutions, which include the provision of services directly related to the teaching and research growth of their students, faculty, and staff. A greater attention towards their own affiliated users may then lead to a restriction of services towards community users.

Are academic librarians shortchanging their mandate to help all users, regardless of their identities and information needs, by privileging those affiliated with their parent institutions? On the other hand, how can academic libraries keep up with the expanding needs of community users, while also fulfilling the expectations of their parent institutions?

A study of institutional and library policy documents serves as an advantageous way to attain a sense of how this issue operates in practice.

PERCEPTION EVOLUTION
Library and information science literature reveals a tradition of negative perceptions by academic librarians toward community users, as chronicled in E. J. Josey’s 1961 symposium, which debated the “grievous” nature of the interactions between librarians and the community.

The feelings were further exacerbated by subsequent stark articles choices, such as Nancy Courtney’s “Barbarians at the Gates” and Lloyd Jansen’s “Welcome or Not, Here They Come.” Jansen attempted to identify “legitimate” and “not-legitimate” uses of library services to allocate assistance towards users with what library staff conceived as appropriate uses of their available resources. In particular, high school students pose a challenge to library facilities, staff time, and collections, LIS literature is full of discussion about policies for high school students, most resulting in restrictive measures.

Contemporary scholars, however, no longer ask the question of whether community users should be allowed access to academic library resources. Rather, they seek to determine how academic librarians can address the needs of community users in the face of twenty-first century problems, including seating space, computer availability, and issues of copyright and intellectual property.

Nancy Courtney’s 2001 landmark study tracks LIS literature on this topic from the 1950’s through the 1990’s. During higher education’s expansion and the large influx of students following World War II, academic librarians established the notion of “primary clientele” to form policy decisions...
» Services to those outside the primary clientele still continue to pose a challenge to academic librarians when vendors control licensing agreements that restrict usage to only affiliated users.

in response to limited staffing and facilities. Typical restrictions to community users during this period included fee-based borrowing systems, limitations on seating, and, in some cases, barring the general public from entering the library building.

Later studies show that many of these restrictions persist in academic libraries today. As universities purchased new computer technologies in the 1980s, inflated costs of printing and scarce workstation space caused libraries to discourage community users.

During the 1990s, Internet access became a major feature of all libraries, and the general public began using academic libraries as an avenue to access resources on the web. In response, academic institutions issued “authentication” features on library computers, limiting access to certain materials to only affiliated users. Services to those outside the primary clientele still continue to pose a challenge to academic librarians when vendors control licensing agreements that restrict usage to only affiliated users.

Courtney followed up this literature review with a 2003 survey of unaffiliated user access to academic library resources and services. The questionnaire results from 814 academic libraries affirmed the typical restrictions to library access described in previous studies, including security, staff shortage, and impact on library materials, seating space, and facilities.

Several studies following Courtney’s work used similar survey methods, although none reached the scope of her 2003 survey. Tina Schneider conducted a survey of libraries belonging to “regional campuses,” institutions that serve as the only form of public higher education within a region. Addressing institutional mission statements, library mission statements, and community service programs, Schneider’s survey revealed a need to make community involvement publicly acknowledged by the institutions.

Michael Shires explored the nature of public access in Florida academic libraries through an online survey, also noting the need for libraries to make these policies public.

academic librarians to give their attitudes about assisting distance students from unaffiliated institutions. The resulting study revealed few overtly antagonistic attitudes yet a high level of concern for the impact on collections and staff in addressing the needs of these unaffiliated students.

Other articles in LIS literature use a case study approach to examine these issues. Jo Kibbee examines virtual reference services for community users via usage statistics from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, finding that most inquiries relate to a library’s holdings, policies, or the beginning stages of a research project. Dole and Hill report on a two-year experiment at the Ottenheimer Library at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock to extend free borrowing privileges to community users. The authors explore the costs, benefits, and potential return on investment (ROI) from inviting community users to have free access to library materials.

Finally, some scholars sought policy documents directly from institutional websites, collecting data to make generalizations on access policies across institutional settings. Weare and Stevenson examined twelve institutions with similar urban settings, enrollment sizes, and instructional programs as their home institution, Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), to determine if their library needed an update in policy regarding unaffiliated users. Bar- sun studied 100 libraries with membership to ARL, attempting to determine whether access policies addressing community users existed on their websites.

These articles use subject pools primarily consisting of large, public institutions, or of consortia consisting of wide-ranging types of institutions. No study currently examines this issue within the context of small, private liberal arts colleges and universities.

ANOTHER APPROACH
My research project attempts to close this gap in LIS literature. The study asks: how do library policies reflect perceptions of community users, within the contexts of small, private liberal arts institutional settings? To investigate this question, the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS) was selected as the subject pool. ACS is a consortium of small, private institutions, dispersed across the southeastern United States. ACS maintains a strong emphasis on the liberal arts curriculum and the undergraduate student experience.

This study pursued a collection of institutional mission statements, library mission statements, and library policy documents from the website of each ACS member institution. These types of documents are advantageous for this particular study, since they often contain information about an institution’s vision for its relationship with the local community. An exploratory analysis of these documents revealed interesting, and often surprising, themes regarding institutional outlooks on local communities as well as library services for these types of users.

The documents indicated both welcoming and restrictive levels of service toward community users. The language used within policies of borrowing and facility usage reflect real concerns by institutions opening up their doors to members of the local community—namely, the security of their students and staff, the availability of study space to students, and the possibility of community users accessing objectionable material on library computer screens.

Borrowing policies not only reveal loan periods and fine structures that indicate the level of “trust” libraries will afford to give to community users with their materials, but they also give insights into the taxonomies of user categories that institutions use to describe community users, such as alumni, area college students, and Friends of the Library. The accompanying Exhibit shows the variety of terms given to community users by ACS libraries.

IMPLICATIONS
The methods employed in this project are advantageous for all academic libraries belonging to a consortium or larger library system. Studying the policies and organizational structures of those in your cohort may illuminate strategies for providing services and support for community users. By replicating the methods in this study, you can:
To make informed policy decisions, academic libraries must examine the needs of these users and how their facilities, staffing, and resources may best accommodate these needs while also addressing the research and teaching missions of their parent institutions.

- Examine the role of community service within institutional and library mission statements of your consortium members, locating areas of consistency between your institution’s policies and those of your peers.
- Observe the library policies of your peers unobtrusively, without needing to conduct a questionnaire, focus group, or other type of survey instrument using human subjects.
- Initiate courses of action from the information you learn from these documents.
- Start discussions about revising library policies. Do other institutions within your consortium have creative or innovative approaches to serving community users? Is it feasible to adopt these within your own setting? What are the potential costs, benefits, and ROI of these ideas?
- Make these policies publicly accessible. Are they available on your library’s website? Can anyone with an Internet connection find and read these policies?
- Create forums for dialogue with other members of your consortium regarding community users and community service. What does your consortium’s mission statement or goals say about the role of community service in higher education? In what ways should the library embody these ideas?
- Seek cooperative efforts and partnerships with local libraries, businesses, and interest groups. How might community users meet their information needs in different settings while also addressing the research and teaching missions of their parent institutions?

PROS AND CONS

Inviting community users into an academic library brings advantages and disadvantages. Providing services such as borrowing, computer access, research assistance, study space, and interlibrary loan may foster beneficial relationships between an academic institution and its surrounding region.

However, concerns about offering these services to community users still remain. Security issues, damaged or lost materials, loss of study space and computer workstations, time-consuming assistance—all have been referenced with LIS literature as well as in the policy documents recorded in this study.

To make informed policy decisions, academic libraries must examine the needs of these users and how their facilities, staffing, and resources may best accommodate these needs while also addressing the research and teaching missions of their parent institutions.

By observing the library policies within one’s consortium or cohort, a library can compare decisions of institutions of similar sizes, user demographics, and missions. These comparisons may help to strike a balance between our professional obligation to assist all library users and the realities of institutional needs and initiatives.

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FOOTNOTES

5. Jansen, 10.
7. Ibid.