Policies and Perceptions of Community Users in the Associated Colleges of the South

A Research Proposal

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Abstract

As subsidiaries of their parent institutions, academic libraries give priority to the needs of their “primary clientele” of students, faculty, and staff. Community users, those outside this clientele, face fragmented access to academic library resources and services in the digital age, despite movements to more relaxed policies in recent years. A content analysis of institutional mission statements, library mission statements, library policy documents, and responses from an online survey to public services librarians will reveal the relationship between policies and perceptions of these users within the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS). This consortium of small, liberal arts colleges represents a subject group largely absent in library and information science (LIS) literature on this topic.

Keywords: academic libraries, community users, policy
Policies and Perceptions of Community Users in the Associated Colleges of the South

Academic libraries in the United States traditionally view students, faculty, and staff as their “primary clientele” – that is, the user base receiving the most attention from the library in terms of resources and services (Courtney, 2001). In addressing the information needs of these users, academic libraries support the teaching and research missions of their parent institutions. In some cases, other key stakeholder groups such as alumni and “friends of the library” receive library privileges, but specific policies related to these groups differ among institutions. Indeed, determining the appropriate type and level of service for those “outside” the primary clientele poses many challenges for today’s academic libraries.

Library and information science (LIS) literature reveals a tradition of negative perceptions by academic librarians toward these “outsiders,” as illustrated by the stark title choices “Barbarians at the Gates” and “Welcome or Not, Here They Come” (Courtney, 2001; Jansen, 1993). However, contemporary scholars no longer debate whether community users should be allowed access to academic libraries and their resources. Rather, they seek to determine how academic libraries can address their needs in the face of twenty-first century challenges, such as seating space, computer availability, and access to electronic resources. Additionally, the professional obligation of librarians to provide access to everyone frequently clashes with the realities of addressing the needs of the primary clientele. As a whole, the literature on this topic is sparse, and no study specifically covers the policies and perceptions of community users within libraries at small, liberal arts colleges and universities. This research study asks: how do libraries of the Associated Colleges of the South institutions perceive community users, and how do library policies reflect these perceptions?
Three concepts are essential to this study: community users, policies, and perceptions. Community users are defined as local residents who seek the services of an academic library with which they are not affiliated. This term emerges as the best choice from a broad vocabulary found within LIS literature. “Unaffiliated users” is most prominent term, but assumes that these users have no affiliation with any academic institution. “Public users” and “external users” also denote a status of non-affiliation with the desired library’s parent institution (Weare & Stevenson, 2012). The term “community users” removes a presupposition of affiliation, defining a more ambiguous (and wide-ranging) user group.

Policies for community users differ among institutional settings. In many cases, academic libraries shape specific categorizations to define community users within the scope of their policies, like “friends of the library,” alumni, or consortia members. Policies, or guidelines for action or inaction of services, may be explicitly stated on library policy documents or informally practiced by public services personnel. Universities funded through tax support often experience pressure to provide library resources and services to community users (Josey, 1967). In contrast, private institutions do not have this explicit mandate, and the relationship between community users and academic libraries of small, private colleges and universities has yet to be explored. While policies provide guidance for library services, perceptions (for the purposes of this study) are less tangible: they are the tacit attitudes, thoughts, and feelings held by librarians, both explicitly stated through interviews or implicitly inferred through public policy documents.

**Literature Review**

Higher education experienced a great expansion following World War II as those previously participating in war efforts returned to civilian life. Academic libraries, as a reaction
to increased student enrollment and visitors from outside the university, established the notion of
the “primary clientele” to inform policy decisions and ease the burden on limited staffing and
facilities (Courtney, 2001). The Association of College and Research Libraries formed an ad hoc
committee on Community Use of Academic Libraries in 1967, initiating the first large-scale
survey of library policies toward community users (Josey, 1967). Rationale behind restrictive
policies centered on notion of a “legitimate” user (Jansen, 1993). Individual academic libraries
began to form subcategories of community users (e.g., friends of the library, high school
students) in an effort to define justifiable uses within the context of their institutional settings and
to lessen the impact of community users on staff, collections, and services.

Computerization and the rise of the Internet, beginning in the 1980s and continuing
today, deepen the complex relationship between academic libraries and community users. While
the availability of technologies is a major draw for the general public, cost constraints result in
fragmented access. Academic libraries limit equipment use to primary clientele when facing
inflated costs of printing and scarce workstation space. Restrictions in licensing agreements
require institutional authentication to access electronic resources, and the rapid shift from a print
to electronic environment leaves community users without access to material that was previously
available in print (Courtney, 2001; Courtney, 2003).

Several LIS studies perform content analysis of academic library policies regarding
community users, exploring issues of building access, in-house use, borrowing privileges,
interlibrary loan, security, recovery of overdue materials, and fee requirements (e.g., Josey,
1967; Barsun, 2003; Courtney, 2003; Shires, 2006; Dole & Hill, 2011; Weare & Stevenson,
2012). Many institutions charge fees to community users for library services, citing student
enrollment-based funding and the unique, time-consuming demands of community users (Russell
et al., 1992). Others remove monetary barriers by experimenting with free borrowing privileges, claiming increased donations and a return on investment from a more satisfied local community (Dole & Hill, 2011). Both practices attempt to define community users as stakeholders within the institution, giving legitimacy to their needs and uses of academic library services. Lenker and Kocevar-Weidinger (2010) encourage librarians to periodically reconsider policies relating to community users in order to ensure clarity and the fair treatment of all users and the library staff.

In general, academic libraries no longer question whether community users should be allowed access to their resources and services. Rather, librarians voice reservations about how this access can be granted to community users and the impact they might have on staff, resources, and facilities. Tunon, Barsun, and Ramierz (2004) examined attitudes of academic librarians toward distance students from unaffiliated institutions, revealing few overtly antagonistic attitudes but a high concern for the impact on collections and staff in addressing their needs. These concerns extend into virtual library services as well, requiring librarians to serve as “intelligent mediators” of information: knowing when to refer users to external information sources and keeping pace with changes in electronic access rights (Kibbee, 2006).

An academic library’s relationship with the local community is largely reflective of the institution’s commitment to community engagement and service. However, recent studies note that these commitments are rarely made explicit within mission statements, policies, and websites. In a study on “regional campuses,” or institutions that serve as the only form of public higher education with a region, Schneider (2001) found that most libraries maintained some involvement with the local community (e.g., cooperation with public libraries, programs for local schools) but did not always make these actions or goals clear within their marketing efforts. Shires (2006) discovered that many Florida academic libraries offer access privileges to the
general public but did little to actively promote these services. Even libraries with restrictive access policies and no mention of community users within their mission statements may still regard community service as important to their overall mission and purpose (Weare & Stevenson, 2012).

Academic libraries and their parent institutions do not always mention community service within their mission statements, policy documents, and other information listed on their websites. Virtual access to this information, as well as any discrepancies between policies and practice, remain unresolved in LIS literature (Barsun, 2003). Most studies discussing community user issues pertain exclusively to large, public institutions. The few studies that do study smaller institutions typically examine a particular region or consortia with many different types of institutions (e.g., Shires, 2006; Weare & Stevenson, 2012). Furthermore, small, private liberal arts institutions are missing within LIS literature on this topic. These perspectives are important to understanding community users within the contemporary American academic library because they: 1) traditionally hold smaller library facilities and staff, which may struggle to accommodate community users, and 2) do not rely on tax support for their funding, which may factor in not perceiving community users as key stakeholders within their institutions.

Methods

Research Design

This study will take a two-phase, qualitative approach. Both phases will use an action research design. Punch (2014) describes action research as a marriage between research and practice, an attempt to “design inquiry and build knowledge for use in the service of action to solve practical problems” (p. 136). This study’s investigation stems from a needed evaluation of
the community user policies of Rhodes College, a member of the Associated Colleges of the South. By assessing peer institutions, Rhodes College will reflect on the trends and challenges faced by their counterparts and make any necessary changes to their library policies in order to more closely align with the consortium. The nature of action research (i.e., practice-driven inquiry and the cyclical process of research and reflection) both satisfy the research question and suit the project’s larger goals of policy assessment.

Sample and Sampling

This study will examine the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS), a consortium of sixteen institutions dispersed across twelve states in the southeastern United States (ACS, n.d.-c). These institutions are:

- Birmingham-Southern College
- Centenary College of Louisiana
- Centre College
- Davidson College
- Furman University
- Hendrix College
- Millsaps College
- Morehouse College
- Rhodes College
- Rollins College
- Sewanee: The University of the South
- Southwestern University
• Spelman College
• Trinity University
• University of Richmond
• Washington and Lee University

All are small, private colleges and universities, with a strong emphasis on the liberal arts curriculum. The mission statement of ACS describes the group as a vehicle for defining the importance of a liberal arts education and strengthening the academic programs among the member institutions (ACS, n.d.-a). A summary of the group’s history includes a statement on the importance of communicating the liberal arts approach: “…the consortium articulates to many publics the nature of liberal learning and the vital role it plays” (ACS, n.d.-d). However, neither the ACS website nor its mission statement directly addresses how or to what extent the libraries of ACS institutions should serve the general public.

ACS institutions make an advantageous participant pool for this research study. While the institutions are similar in size, curriculum, and prestige, they are diverse in terms of location the socio-economic makeup of the surrounding areas. For example, Sewanee: The University of the South resides in a very rural area, while Birmingham-Southern College is in a less affluent area of a large metropolis. This diversity of locality will reveal striking differences among the policies and perceptions toward community users among this sample group. Since the primary investigator (PI) serves as a library staff member at Rhodes College, this institution will be omitted from the participant pool in order to avoid any bias. Furthermore, fifteen total institutions will be studied in this project.

Phase I will examine institutional mission statements, library mission statements, and library policy documents for each ACS institution, except for Rhodes College. Phase II will
investigate policies and perceptions using a participant pool of library personnel working within the public services departments of each ACS library. For the purposes of this study, “public services” describes any interaction with library users in “front-line” services, including reference/research assistance, circulation, user instruction, interlibrary loan, media and technology desks, and, in some cases, administration. Subjects will be invited to complete a web-based survey through a message disseminated via email. Names and email addresses will be acquired through library and/or institutional websites. In the case of missing, outdated, or inaccurate contact information, an electronic message will be sent to a departmental or administrator email account in order to obtain the most current information.

**Data Collection: Instruments and Procedures**

In Phase I of this study, the PI will extract institutional mission statements, library mission statements, and library policy documents from the websites of each institution, located through the ACS member list (ACS, n.d.-b). In some cases, it may be necessary to contact these libraries by phone or email if this information is not located on institutional and/or library websites. Policy documents regarding the following services will be captured and analyzed: user categories; building access; library card requirements; borrowing privileges (i.e., loan periods, item limits, late fees, holds, and renewals) for print books, media items, periodicals, and reserves; reference material access; study room access; computer workstation access; archives and special collections access; consequences for lost or damaged materials; procedures for loss or suspension of privileges; interlibrary loan; electronic resource access; and use of photocopiers, scanners, printers, and fax machines. All documents will be printed for further analysis. Phase I will take place between June 1, 2014 and August 1, 2014.
Phase II of this study will employ a web-based survey, distributed to all public services librarians as defined in “sample and sampling.” The survey will be created in the SurveyMonkey online platform. This instrument will measure both policies and perceptions using Likert scale, multiple choice, and open-ended questions. The survey will illuminate information professionals’ perceptions of community users, and will explore whether any discrepancies exist between the policies listed on institutional websites and the actual practices of public services librarians. All responses to the survey will be anonymous; however, one demographic question will keep track of the institutions and department areas of the respondents (see Appendix C). In order to ensure the reliability of the survey instrument, the PI will conduct a pilot study using colleagues at Rhodes College’s Paul Barret, Jr. Library and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville’s School of Information Sciences as participants. All responses and results from the pilot study will be discarded. Once the survey is finalized, the PI will send a description of the project to all members of the participant pool, along with a link to the survey, via email. The link will also serve as an indication of informed consent (see Appendix B). Phase II will be scheduled and completed following dissemination of results from Phase I (see Next Steps).

Data Analysis

Both phases of this study will utilize content analysis techniques. The PI will code Phase I data, extracting manifest content about each service policy listed in Data Collection: Instruments and Procedures and entering them in an Excel spreadsheet. This will allow for a comparison of policies among institutions within the subject pool. In Phase II, frequencies will be tabulated using the analytics feature of SurveyMonkey for all multiple choice and Likert scale questions. These responses will be reported as tables within the final research report. The PI will
code all manifest and latent content within the responses to the open-ended questions of the survey. This coding will reveal themes about policies and perceptions of community users by public services librarians within ACS, contributing to the resolution of the research question. An Excel sheet will be used for comparison of survey results across institutions.

Limitations

This research studies only one group of institutions: the Associated Colleges of the South. Therefore, the external validity of this project is limited. The institutions within ACS are not the only small, private liberal arts colleges within the southeastern United States, nor are they the only ones in the nation at large. Moreover, findings from this subject pool will not fully reflect the policies and perceptions of community users at across all American institutions of similar types. Another limitation of this study is the reliability of the coding. At this stage, only the PI will be coding the data collected in Phases I and II. In order to enhance consistency, it may be necessary to recruit a colleague or research assistant to perform a separate round of coding for each data set. This will enhance the inter-coder reliability of the data analysis, ensuring that the themes and categories generated from the data accurately reflect the policies and perceptions of the institutions represented in this study.

However, while not necessarily providing conclusive evidence about this topic, the study will reveal the general kinds of issues faced by smaller institutions in providing information services to community users. No study in LIS literature exclusively examines the particular issues faced by small, private liberal arts institutions on this issue. This study will fill a gap within the literature, and spark new research at similar institutions and consortia. Additionally, the study will fulfill its primary role as action research, providing insight into the experiences of
peer institutions so that Rhodes College may reassess their policies and stances regarding community users.

**Next Steps**

Findings from this study will be reported in two stages: first, upon preliminary results from Phase I data analysis and second, upon analysis of Phase II survey data. Both rounds of reporting will use an academic conference to “workshop” the study alongside peers within the LIS community. Since a strong component of this project focuses on access to library collections and resources, the Charleston Conference is the primary target venue for presenting this research project. This conference focuses primarily on collection development and acquisitions, but usually contains a diverse pool of attendees within the information sciences field. Two additional possibilities for conferences include the competitive ACRL Conference and the more recently established Access Services Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

Following presentations at academic conferences, the PI will submit, at each of the two stages, a final report at a high-impact scholarly journal. The PI will target *The Journal of Academic, Reference & User Services Quarterly*, and *College & Research Libraries* for publication of these reports. These publications are prestigious in the field of academic librarianship, each containing vital works on the topic of community users in past issues. Any of these journals would be an advantageous forum for dissemination of this study.

Finally, this study could reach beyond the scope of ACS institutions, feeding into future studies on similar consortia in other regions of the United States. Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM), Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA), the Seven Sisters Colleges, the Claremont College Consortium, the Five Colleges Consortium in Western Massachusetts, the Little Ivies, the Tri-College Consortium, the Five Colleges of Ohio, and the Associated Colleges
of the Twin Cities are groups with the same or slightly smaller numbers of member institutions as ACS. Larger consortia for consideration are the Annapolis Group, Oberlin Group, Women’s College Coalition, and the Consortium of Liberal Arts Colleges. Many of these groups include institutions with more than one consortium membership. By replicating this research project using these consortia as participants, future scholarship could reveal a more holistic understanding of the relationship between academic librarians and community users within small, private liberal arts institutions across the United States.
References

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http://doi.org/10.1016/S0099-1333(01)00260-9


Appendix A

FORM A

Certification for Exemption from IRB Review for Research Involving Human Subjects

A. **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(s) and/or CO-PI(s)** (For student projects, list both the student and the advisor.): Andrew R. Grissom, Dr. Rachel Fleming-May

B. **DEPARTMENT**: Information Sciences

C. **COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS AND PHONE NUMBER OF PI(s) and CO-PI(s)**: Andrew R. Grissom: 259 S McLean Blvd., Memphis, TN, 38104; Dr. Rachel Fleming-May, 1345 Circle Park Dr. Suite 451, 451 Communications Bldg., Knoxville, TN 37996-0341.

D. **TITLE OF PROJECT**: Policies and Perceptions of Community Users in the Associated Colleges of the South

E. **EXTERNAL FUNDING AGENCY AND ID NUMBER** (if applicable):

F. **GRANT SUBMISSION DEADLINE** (if applicable):

G. **STARTING DATE** (NO RESEARCH MAY BE INITIATED UNTIL CERTIFICATION IS GRANTED.): Upon IRB Approval

H. **ESTIMATED COMPLETION DATE** (Include all aspects of research and final write-up.): August 1, 2016

I. **RESEARCH PROJECT**

1. **Objective(s) of Project** (Use additional page, if needed.):
   This qualitative study addresses this question: how do libraries of institutions within the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS) consortium perceive community users, and how do library policies reflect these perceptions? Here, “community users” are defined as local residents who seek the services of an academic library of an institution with which they are not affiliated. A triangulation approach will collect data from two sources, institutional websites and an online survey of public service librarians, to resolve this question. This research study will fill a gap in LIS literature and contribute to the ongoing discussion of community users, their information needs, and their means of access to information in academic libraries. Additionally, this study will determine whether a change of policy regarding community users is necessary for Rhodes College, one of the member institutions of the Associated Colleges of the South consortium.

2. **Subjects** (Use additional page, if needed.):
   The subjects for the online survey portion of this study will consist of library and information professionals working within public service departments of each ACS library. “Public service” describes any regular interaction with library users in “front-line” services, including reference/research assistance, circulation, user instruction, interlibrary loan, and, in some cases, administration. I hope to attain responses from librarians in ACS institutions working in any public service capacity. Once my survey is finalized, I will send an email message to each potential participant introducing myself and this research project, and containing a link to the survey. By clicking the link to the survey, the subjects will give their informed consent to participate in the study. Locating contact information on library websites will be necessary to find the names and email addresses of potential participants for this study. In the case that these websites do
not list contact information, or that they display inaccurate or outdated information, I will reach the library through their departmental email address, telephone number, or an email address of a library administrator in order to obtain the most current contact information of potential participants. Since this study is limited to ACS institutions, the participant pool will consist of library professionals employed in the following schools:

- Birmingham-Southern College
- Centenary College of Louisiana
- Centre College
- Davidson College
- Furman University
- Hendrix College
- Millsaps College
- Morehouse College
- Rollins College
- Sewanee: The University of the South
- Southwestern University
- Spelman College
- Trinity University
- University of Richmond
- Washington and Lee University

3. **Methods or Procedures** (Use additional page, if needed.):

   Upon IRB approval, an online survey regarding policies and perceptions of community users will be disseminated to library professionals in public service positions in each ACS institution listed above. The online survey will consist of ten questions, and will be designed through the SurveyMonkey online survey software. Before sending the survey to my participant pool, I will pilot the study enlisting my colleagues at Rhodes College’s Paul Barret, Jr. Library and fellow students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville’s School of Information Sciences as participants. A pilot study will allow me to uncover design issues before disseminating the final version of the survey to the fifteen ACS libraries in the participant pool. All responses and results from the pilot study will be discarded.

   Responses from the participant pool will remain anonymous. The first question asks for the participant’s position title and department area in their library. The responses to this question will be used for demographic purposes only, and will not be linked back to a particular title or institution in any way. The remaining questions address policies and experiences with community users; they do not ask for identifying information. The anonymity feature of SurveyMonkey will be activated, ensuring that I will not be able to see the name of the subjects participating in the survey. Also, this is a non-controversial study – no questions within the survey ask for sensitive or incriminating responses from the subjects. Therefore, there will be a lack of potential risks for the subjects. I will compile resulting data on an Excel spreadsheet for side-by-side comparison of each institution’s approach to community users and community service. The data will be password protected and stored using the Google Drive cloud storage system. The data will be kept for three years following its collection. Dr. Fleming-May and I will be the only individuals to have access to the data.

4. **CATEGORY(s) FOR EXEMPT RESEARCH PER 45 CFR 46** (See instructions for categories.): 1, 2

J. **CERTIFICATION**: The research described herein is in compliance with 45 CFR 46.101(b) and presents subjects with no more than minimal risk as defined by applicable regulations.

Principal Investigator: __________ Andrew R. Grissom __________

Name ____________________________ Signature ____________________________ Date __________

Student Advisor:

Name ____________________________ Signature ____________________________ Date __________

Department Review Committee Chair:

Name ____________________________ Signature ____________________________ Date __________
Note: As of August 18, 2015, this application has not been submitted for review to the institutional review board at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
Appendix B

Invitation to Participate and Informed Consent

Dear Librarian,

Researchers at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville request your participation in an anonymous survey that is gathering information from librarians working in public service areas within the Associated Colleges of the South about your interactions and experiences with community users. By completing the survey, it is assumed that you consent to participate in the study. There are no identifying questions in this survey. Your responses will be stored as anonymous data. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Click on the link below to begin. The survey will take approximately 5-7 minutes to complete. Your participation in this study is confidential. The results of this study may be published in a peer-reviewed journal. However, any information that could identify you will not be included in any publication. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. If you have any questions about this study or the survey, please contact the Principal Investigator or the IRB Review Board Coordinator (see contact information below). Thank you for your participation and support.

SURVEY LINK: (IF THE LINK ABOVE DOES NOT WORK, PLEASE COPY AND PASTE IT INTO YOUR BROWSER).

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Appendix C

Survey Questions

1. What is your position title and department area in your library?

2. How frequently do you interact with community users (i.e., local residents who seek the services of an academic library of an institution with which they are not affiliated)?
   - Daily.
   - More than once a week.
   - Once a week.
   - Less than once a week.

3. What is the most typical nature of your contact with community members? (Select all that apply).
   - Phone interview.
   - Face-to-face interview.
   - Email.
   - Other (explain).

4. Who are the community users that typically visit your library? (Select all that apply).
   - High school students.
   - Teachers/professors from local schools/universities.
   - Alumni of your institution.
   - Clergy.
   - Students from other local colleges or universities.
   - Distance students from unaffiliated colleges or universities.
   - Family members of current students, faculty, or staff.
5. For each type of community user selected above, how would you characterize your general interactions with them? (Complete for each individual type identified in the previous question).
   - Very positive.
   - Positive.
   - Neutral.
   - Negative.
   - Very negative.

6. Without consulting your library’s policy documents, please indicate which services are available to community users (Select all that apply):
   - Entrance to the library building.
   - In-house access to print materials.
   - Checkout privileges for print materials.
   - Checkout privileges for media materials/equipment.
   - Access to archives/special collections.
   - Access to library materials on reserve.
   - Ability to place library materials on hold.
   - Printing.
   - Copying.
   - Scanning.
   - Computer access.
   - Access to the library’s online catalog.
7. Do certain categories of community users have access to one or more of these services over others? If so, explain.

8. Do you think your library’s policies toward community users are effective? Why or why not?

9. What are the most common questions or information needs that community users bring to your library? (Select all that apply).
   - Reference/research assistance.
   - Requests for books or other library materials.
   - Requests for student space.
   - Directional assistance.
   - Archives/special collections assistance.
   - Technology assistance.
   - Community programs held at the library.
   - Other (explain).

10. What challenges do you face in assisting community users? (Select all that apply).
    - Space.
    - Computer access.
    - Funding.
o Staffing.

o User attitudes.

o Time constraints.

o Returning library materials.

o Security.

o Other (explain).