

Understanding student populations key to tailoring library instruction and outreach

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Librarians commonly work with students who are grouped in a variety of ways, such as by course and by major. Another typical way that universities, and libraries, distinguish student groups is by class year. Increasingly, academic libraries have librarians dedicated to first-year student programming, often working closely with first-year experience programs at their local campus. This is not surprising, as higher education has emphasized a student's first year experience as a high impact practice and foundation for student success (Kuh, 2008). First-year experience programs can take a variety of forms such as first-year seminars, peer mentorship programs, common readers for all freshman, and first-year living learning communities. At the programmatic level, many universities focus on providing students with a shared or unified experience for all incoming freshmen.

At our campus, we have been increasingly called to provide library instruction and outreach to first-year students. Although standard lesson plans can make it easier to deliver instruction and outreach at scale, we wanted to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach. The designation of 'first-year' student can come with assumptions about what the student knows, what they have been taught, and what they need to learn. As described in our recent article (LeMire et al., 2021), we conducted a survey to test the hypothesis that first-year populations may vary in significant ways. We surveyed students pre- and post- library instruction to determine their perceptions of the library as well as their confidence in conducting research.

What we discovered through our research has greater applications not only for our local information literacy program, but also for the profession. Our research showed that different groups of students enter college with a variety of perceptions about the library, their past experiences with research differ, they have significant anxiety about college preparedness, and they have varying perceptions of librarians. Furthermore, library instruction reduced library anxiety, increased research confidence, and increased students' willingness to ask questions. The degree to which these increases occurred varied amongst different groups of students. These insights were incredibly valuable to the construction of our local first-year programming. While assessment is commonly understood as a best practice in the library profession, we suggest that it be applied to understand differences in groups that belong to the same larger population - in this case, first-year students.

Value of assessment

When librarians work with groups of students, typically the librarians do not participate in determining how those students are grouped. Instead, those decisions often happen outside the library, by the institution or an external department. To understand the library knowledge, skills, and experiences of those student groups, librarians often have to ask the students directly.

- Conducting assessment prior to library instruction can be a helpful way for librarians to better understand the differences in the student populations at the local level.
- Librarians can use their knowledge of discrete groups to better design instructional interventions while acknowledging students' previous experiences with libraries.
- Activities can be scaffolded to meet different levels of experience and confidence in conducting research.

Limitations of assessment

Although assessment can be a useful tool, it is not a panacea. Librarians should take care not to over-generalize assessment results or take them out of context.

- Students don't fall into neat categories and may belong to multiple student populations.
- Assessment happens at a fixed moment in time. Students may be having a rough day, or they may have just learned something in another class the day before. Where possible, assessment should be administered close to any scheduled library sessions and should not be generalized to reflect student knowledge out of that particular context.
- Assessment doesn't always tell us *why* students are different. Don't make assumptions, just meet students where they are. Don't assume that one group's characteristics apply to other groups (e.g. that assessment results for a student population one year also apply to the next year's students).

We encourage librarians not to view their first-year student population as a monolith. Rather, librarians should make an attempt to assess first-year students at a local level to determine differences in research confidence, library anxiety, and other characteristics pertinent to library instruction. Avoiding the one-size-fits-all approach allows librarians to design intentional library instruction that takes into account each group's unique perspective, and indeed the varying perspectives even within a particular cohort such as first-year students.

References

- Kuh, George. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- LeMire, S., Graves, S. J., Bankston, S., & Wilhelm, J. (2021). Similarly different: Finding the nuances in first year students' library perceptions. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 47(4), 102352. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2021.102352>