



# The Kids Are All Right: How Libraries Can Best Serve Transfer Students

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**abstract:** Librarians were concerned that transfer students' information literacy skills lagged those of their peers because transfers did not receive the library instruction that other students got in first-year classes. The investigators conducted semi-structured interviews with transfer students to answer two research questions: (1) How do transfer students look for information? (2) From the students' perspectives, how can the library best assist them? These interviews revealed that transfer students were confident researchers, largely because of their experiences before moving to their new institution. Transfer students were most interested in learning more about the library services and resources at their new university.

## Introduction

Asked how the university could best meet the needs of transfer students, one student said, "There's not so much where you have to explain everything to transfer students. Because like I said, we've had most of the information before, it's just figuring out how it's done here, and just getting a new mind-set essentially." To give incoming first-year students a strong foundation in information literacy, librarians at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, provide library instruction in nearly all English 201 and First-Year Seminar courses. Transfer students do not take those courses and thus do not receive this foundational information literacy instruction. Nor does Pepperdine require that incoming students from other colleges have library instruction. Therefore, librarians were concerned about a potential gap in the information literacy skills of transfer students compared to undergraduates who had enrolled as first-year students.

To better understand the needs of the transfer student population at Pepperdine, the researchers interviewed 12 such students. Our goal was to provide the transfers

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with an opportunity to share their stories and tell us how the library could best meet their needs. These interviews provided insights into the information literacy skills of students who came to Pepperdine from other colleges, their familiarity with library resources, their perceptions of their research abilities, and how we might better market our services to them. After analyzing the results of these interviews, we concluded that the transfer students have a solid understanding of research and confidence in their skills. The interviewees are most interested in building on their existing knowledge to learn more about the specifics of the Pepperdine Libraries. They expressed primarily a need for institution-specific skills, such as learning about library databases that their previous institutions did not have, identifying their subject liaisons, and navigating the physical layout of the library.

### Background

Pepperdine University is a racially diverse, Christian liberal arts institution nestled in the hills of Malibu, California. It has 3,400 full-time equivalent undergraduates, the majority of whom receive library instruction during First-Year Seminar and English 101 courses. Most students subsequently have more library teaching in capstone and “research intensive” classes. Approximately 12 to 13 percent of Pepperdine’s undergraduate population are transfer students.

### Literature Review

A growing body of literature discusses library services for transfer students, with the majority of articles published in the last few years. The earliest library literature on transfer students focused on the challenges these learners face and describes them as an underserved population. An article by Julie Still bemoaned the low percentage of community college students who obtained bachelor’s degrees, and she encouraged libraries to help alleviate “transfer shock” by maintaining reserve reading of articles that discuss the difficulties transfer students experience.<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Cox and Ralph Johnson continued this theme by referring to such students as a “forgotten population” who had not enrolled in first-year English at the University of Arizona in Tucson and therefore missed out on library instruction.<sup>2</sup> In collaboration with the university’s Center for Transfer Students, librarians sought to remedy this situation by offering informational workshops to transfer students.<sup>3</sup>

### Surveys of Library Support for Transfer Students

In a groundbreaking 1996 article on library support for transfer students, Gail Staines surveyed and interviewed librarians at both community colleges and four-year institutions in the State University of New York (SUNY) system.<sup>4</sup> She sought to explore attitudes toward library instruction and how any differences might impact transfer students.<sup>5</sup> According to her research, community colleges provided remedial instruction that focused on the nuts and bolts, while four-year institutions taught higher-level conceptual research skills.<sup>6</sup> This difference in instructional approaches often resulted in frustrated learners returning to their community college libraries for assistance.<sup>7</sup> John



Phillips and Thomas Atwood updated Staines's research in 2010 by surveying Ohio community colleges and four-year institutions about information literacy for transfer students.<sup>8</sup> They discovered that only 13 percent of the librarians thought it necessary to offer separate instruction to students coming from other colleges.<sup>9</sup> To address the transition of students from two-year to four-year colleges, librarians were surveyed about the interchangeability of skills, and 75 percent responded that the skills they taught were adaptable to other academic libraries.<sup>10</sup> In 2019, Lindsay Roberts, Megan Welsh, and Brittany Dudek continued the research on the continuity of library instruction for transfer students by surveying librarians at two-year and four-year colleges in Colorado.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to Phillips and Atwood's findings, Roberts and her colleagues determined that 83 percent of respondents at four-year college saw a need for separate transfer student library instruction.<sup>12</sup> In addition, all the librarians polled agreed or strongly agreed that librarians should teach students carry-over research skills.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, Roberts and her team concluded from 30 years of surveying services to transfer students that such learners "continue to be largely ignored as a distinct population by academic libraries."<sup>14</sup>

### Outreach to Transfer Students

Several articles, primarily firsthand accounts, discuss library outreach efforts to transfer students. Some libraries have assigned personal librarians to students from other colleges to help them identify a librarian who can assist with research and develop a one-to-one relationship with them. Amanda MacDonald and Suchi Mohanty discussed efforts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to create a personal librarian program by assigning 40 librarians to 800 transfer students.<sup>15</sup> Despite e-mail communication and welcome letters sent to incoming students, only 3.9 percent of transfer students utilized the program, falling short of its initial goal of 5 percent participation.<sup>16</sup> Librarians at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California, initiated a similar personal librarian program for transfers. The Santa Clara librarians had a much greater success engaging transfer students than did the librarians at the University of North Carolina: 36.4 percent of Santa Clara students responded to their personal librarians, and 9.6 percent interacted more than once.<sup>17</sup> Lisa Coats and Anne Pemberton described an initiative at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW) to create a position for a transfer student services librarian to handle the library instruction demands of a new Transfer Seminar class.<sup>18</sup> In addition to providing library instruction, the transfer student services librarian was tasked with building relationships with transfer students and creating a library website specifically for such students.<sup>19</sup>

Some libraries surveyed and interviewed transfer students to inform the libraries' outreach efforts. Librarians at Western Washington University in Bellingham attended a transition fair for incoming transfer students and polled them about their background and library needs.<sup>20</sup> Based on the results of these surveys, the library reached out to transfer students by providing information about the libraries in the quarterly newsletter of New Students Services, included contact information for liaison librarians in the packets distributed at orientation sessions, and created a library Web page for transfer students.<sup>21</sup> Linda Whang, Christine Tawatao, John Danneker, and Jackie Belanger interviewed transfer students and the staff who supported them at the University of Washington in



Seattle to better understand those students and offer new services to them.<sup>22</sup> Based on feedback about the time pressures students face, the library abandoned plans to host its own event for transfer students and instead partnered with existing orientation events.<sup>23</sup> The library successfully participated in the new student orientation for transfer students and also worked with the Undergraduate Research Program to offer a presentation in the Charles E. Odegaard Undergraduate Library.<sup>24</sup>

### Information Literacy for Transfer Students

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Some librarians have responded by providing multiple information literacy sessions to transfer students. After three library instruction sessions were offered to transfer students enrolled in an English class at Rutgers University–Newark, the students were more than twice as likely to pass the departmental exam for the course than the departmental average.<sup>26</sup> Other libraries implemented less time-intensive interventions to improve the information literacy skills of transfer students. Librarians at the University of South Carolina Upstate in Spartanburg created an online game called *Agoge: The Spartan's Journey* that tested transfer students'

information literacy skills. By analyzing the test results, librarians became aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the incoming students.<sup>27</sup> Librarians at UNCW initiated a similar approach by creating an online information literacy exam for incoming transfer students tied to the university's student learning outcomes.<sup>28</sup> Undergraduates who began their college career at UNCW met their information literacy general education requirements in their First-Year Seminar classes. Transfer students could fulfill this requirement by passing the exam, and the librarians learned more about the students' information literacy skills.<sup>29</sup>

A few studies have evaluated the information literacy skills of transfer students. While researchers have been concerned about a gap in the competencies of such students, librarians at the University of Central Florida in Orlando discovered that transfer students taking the Project for Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS) outscored students at benchmark institutions.<sup>30</sup> They found, however, that undergraduates in general needed to improve their information literacy skills. While the sample size was too small to make overall conclusions about the information literacy competencies of transfer students, this is a promising area of research.<sup>31</sup>

Librarians from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro conducted a series of studies on the information literacy of transfer students. Surveying incoming transfers, they discovered that older students and those switching from community colleges tended to score lower on an information literacy exam.<sup>32</sup> Learners with prior library instruction, on the other hand, scored higher.<sup>33</sup> A pretest and posttest of students enrolled

in a transfer seminar revealed that library instruction did not improve their scores to a statistically significant level, but the teaching did increase their confidence.<sup>34</sup> A researcher from Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Indiana, investigated the possible benefits to transfer populations of library instruction. Transfer students who had received such teaching had greater research confidence.<sup>35</sup> Library teaching failed, however, to increase transfer students' sense of belonging at their new institution.<sup>36</sup>

### The Transfer Student Experience

A recent trend in the library literature is holistic studies of the transfer experience and the rich and varied backgrounds of the students. In addition to asking students about library usage at their current institution, Erin Richter-Weikum and Kevin Seeber inquired about the students' reasons for switching to Metropolitan State University of Denver in Colorado and their preferences for academic support services.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps most significantly, they discovered that students' previous library usage and research experience are important to their academic success.<sup>38</sup> An article from Chelsea Heinbach, Brittany Paloma Fiedler, Rosan Mitola, and Emily Pattni examined the experiences of transfer students and argued against simplistically assuming that they are struggling and underprepared. The four authors reported on the diverse experiences that help transfer students succeed, such as previous library usage, military service, and time management skills. Most significantly, the researchers discovered that the transfers felt confident in their research abilities and that their previous life experiences were adaptable to their current institution.<sup>39</sup>

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### Research Questions

Our study aimed to answer the following two research questions:

1. How do transfer students look for information?
2. From the transfer students' perspectives, how can the library best assist them?

### Methodology

Two researchers, both research and instruction librarians, conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 transfer students at Pepperdine during spring 2018. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be undergraduates who had completed at least one research assignment at Pepperdine that required resources outside their course readings. Based on research from Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson, the investigators limited their study to 12 students.<sup>40</sup> With applied thematic analysis, as few



**Table 1.**  
Demographic information on study participants

Major	Year in school	Previous institution
English Writing & Rhetoric	Senior	Two-year college
Integrated Marketing & Communications	Senior	Two-year college
English Education	Junior	Four-year college
Music	Junior	Four-year college
Sports Medicine	Sophomore	Two-year college
Business	Senior	Two-year college
Integrated Marketing & Communications	Junior	Four-year college
Biology	Junior	Two-year college
Business	Junior	Two-year college
English, Creative Writing	Senior	Four-year college
Political Science	Junior	Two-year college
Business	Senior	Two-year college

as six interviews usually reveal important themes, and after 12 interviews, researchers seldom uncover any additional information. The investigators worked with the associate dean of transfer students to locate participants for the study. Transfer students were sent e-mails describing the project, and the researchers scheduled 12 interviews. Participants in the study received \$20 Amazon gift cards and \$5 Starbucks vouchers as incentives.

The researchers' goal was to interview a mix of sophomores, juniors, and seniors from a variety of majors. They talked with nine females and three males. Eight participants in the survey came from community colleges, and four had transferred from four-year colleges. Table 1 provides demographic information on the participants in the study.

The interviews ranged from a half-hour to over an hour in length. The two researchers conducted all interviews. Each session was audio recorded, uploaded to a Google folder, and later transcribed. Ten interviews took place in the researchers' offices, and two were done by phone. The interviewers asked a series of open-ended questions (see the Appendix) and had the flexibility to ask follow-up queries. Some questions related to the library's student learning outcomes, and others were borrowed from Project Information Literacy, a nonprofit research center that studies how early adults find and use information. The students were asked to describe research assignments that they had completed both at Pepperdine and at their previous institutions. Still other questions inquired about the students' perceived confidence as researchers. The researchers also explored the students' perceptions of how the library could better market services and assist transfer students. In a few cases, participants did not provide complete answers to all the interview questions.

After the interviews were transcribed, the researchers read them to gather an overall impression of the interviews and created a codebook to help organize the transcripts. Thirty-seven codes were applied to the text of the interviews using NVivo, a qualitative software package. After analyzing the coded transcripts, the investigators identified important themes from the interviews using a technique known as applied thematic analysis, in which they reviewed the data and began to sort them into categories. While this technique is most commonly associated with health behavior research, it offered a useful methodology to better understand the attitudes and beliefs of transfer students. According to Greg Guest, Kathleen MacQueen, and Emily Namey, applied thematic analysis is “a rigorous, yet inductive, set of procedures designed to identify and examine themes from textual data in a way that is transparent and credible.”<sup>41</sup>

## Results

The researchers identified the following six themes in the interviews: (1) approach to research, (2) confidence as researchers, (3) role of librarians, (4) library as place, (5) awareness of resources and services, and (6) the transfer experience.

### Approach to Research

To better understand transfer students’ information literacy, the investigators asked questions based on the following Pepperdine student learning outcomes in information literacy:

1. The student defines the research question and determines the scope of the information needed to answer the research question.
2. The student uses discipline-specific tools and search strategies to locate appropriate information.
3. The student evaluates significant and authoritative resources and integrates these sources within the context of the research project.
4. The student gives credit to the ideas of others through attribution.

When asked about developing topics for research papers (learning outcome 1), five students chose subjects that interested them, and four selected topics for which they found sufficient sources. Two students wrote about issues they thought would interest their professors, and one opted to examine a question that made it easy to construct an argument. Moreover, eight students described the suitability of topics in terms of the number of resources available, considering a subject too broad if it overwhelmed them with resources and too narrow if they could not locate enough information. One student explained the problem with topics that were too broad: “You can’t really have a specific argument for it, then you know it’s general.” Given the importance of locating a reasonable number of sources, five participants said they

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searched for resources before committing to topics. Students also discussed changing subjects when they encountered difficulties. Five students would modify their topics, and two would stick with a subject because they had already devoted considerable time to it.

Interested in how transfer students conducted research and how their previous colleges contributed to their information literacy, the researchers asked participants about the use of information sources at colleges prior to Pepperdine (learning outcome 2). Eleven of the 12 students mentioned using library databases or books for research before coming to Pepperdine. However, only two students mentioned library databases by name. One interviewee stated, "There was that one really common database that everybody uses, and I can never remember the name of it offhand, but they had that same one that's used here." Because students had used databases at their previous schools, they likely saw the value of the databases at Pepperdine.

Students were told to think about an assignment requiring outside research at Pepperdine and were asked about the information sources they used for that research (learning outcome 2). All 12 interviewees reported using the library's databases for the work. In contrast to their incomplete recollection of the database at their previous colleges, seven students discussed Pepperdine library databases by name. They had varying levels of familiarity with library resources, and four participants relied on the library's federated search to locate articles. One student explained, "I actually just found out about the individual ones a couple weeks ago." Four students lacked familiarity with the discipline-specific databases for locating materials. For example, when asked where they searched for articles, a senior said, "Definitely just googled for those kinds of things."

While discussing the sources used for assignments, student preferences were evenly split between starting with open Web searches and with library databases. One student said, "I typically start out with open Web Google searches to educate myself more on the topic, and when I think I'm adequately educated, then I move to databases to do my research."

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Students were asked about their methods for evaluating the credibility of sources (learning outcome 3). Six participants identified a resource being peer-reviewed as a measure of trustworthiness. One student warned, however, that peer-reviewed sources might not cover recent topics, saying, "I was [researching] the gymnastics doctor, Larry Nassar, which was

in the news. So I would try and go with news sites that I felt were reliable." Interviewees also discussed the timeliness of sources, and five participants considered the date important. Two students felt that resources were generally credible if they had located the materials from the library's database. One student observed, however, "Even on the databases a lot of times, there's stuff on there . . . it looks good and it sounds good, but it's not as reputable as another source might be." Five students emphasized the importance of the author's background. One student, however, had a nuanced view of backgrounds, explaining, "Just because somebody went to Harvard . . . doesn't mean that their opinion is going to be factual and supported."





Students understood that they should cite any information taken from another source (learning outcome 4), and they articulated the importance of citing ideas and paraphrased sentences in addition to direct quotations. One student summed up the thoughts of all the participants with the statement, “Anything that’s not my original thought, I need to cite it. That’s kind of my rule of thumb.” When asked about the resources they used to create correct citations, eight students consulted the Online Writing Lab (OWL) website of Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, to aid them in formatting their bibliography. In addition, four participants said they used free online tools such as EasyBib to format their citations. One student relied on professors because some faculty have specific citation guidelines. None of the students mentioned using the library’s RefWorks database.

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To better assess students’ ability to utilize appropriate search strategies, the researchers asked students if they used a special technique or workaround on assignments, a question adopted from Project Information Literacy.<sup>42</sup> Interviewees displayed a wide range of sophistication in preferred research techniques. For example, one depicted a basic strategy by saying, “The only thing that I usually do for everything is a broad Google search if I don’t understand the basic term that I’m supposed to be researching, but usually that doesn’t happen.” Another student explained a more advanced approach: “I can only get so many good articles that are relevant by doing keyword searches . . . so I often mine the bibliographies of any good articles to make sure I found everything.” All told, five students mentioned checking bibliographies to find additional sources, but only one student described this strategy as a technique to use for all assignments. Additional methods included approaches to organizing sources, determining if multiple sources had recurring themes, brainstorming effective keywords, and writing the conclusion of a paper before searching for sources.

### **Confidence as Researchers**

When asked to compare their research skills to those of their peers, five students thought their abilities were comparable, and seven participants considered their proficiency superior to that of their classmates. Most notably, none of the interviewees thought their skills lagged those of other students. In fact, two participants mentioned that they used their strong research skills to assist their classmates. One student explained, “I remember when I came to Pepperdine, I do recall helping some other students when we went to the library to do our research.” Another said, “I would have to say that mine are superior. I tutor a lot of students here.” Seven students stated that the research skills they acquired from their prior colleges helped them with Pepperdine assignments. One student explained, “As a transfer student, and coming from a four-year private university, I think I have that good foundation and because of the writing sequence that I took.” Another interviewee summarized the research skills of transfer students as a group by saying, “Transfer students are much more prepared for doing research papers at Pepperdine than freshmen. As far as juniors and seniors at Pepperdine, I’m not positive, but I do

know, I would definitely say that the transfer students know more about researching than the freshmen do." Some of the students' confidence was not always supported by their knowledge of library resources. For example, a senior who rated his or her skills on par with those of his or her peers used Google to search for articles and lacked awareness of any article databases in the discipline.

Students expressed some of the frustrations they encountered that could influence their confidence as researchers. One remarked that it took multiple library instruction sessions to really understand how to use the resources. Three students mentioned they were not sure how to locate books. One reported being unable to find enough articles, and another said that, before understanding the interlibrary loan process, he or she only used articles that were available in full text from Pepperdine library databases. One participant expressed the frustrations of being a recent transfer student, explaining, "Navigating the library is not easy, especially when you just first get here sometimes it could be . . . fearful; if you don't really understand what you're looking for and you don't know where it is, it could be kind of rough."

To better understand the aspects of research that transfer students perceive as the most difficult, the researchers asked a question from the Project Information Literacy initiative about what stages of research were most challenging.<sup>43</sup> Identifying the most demanding parts of research could help the investigators better understand obstacles to students' confidence. The stages were (1) selecting and defining topics, (2) finding information, (3) sorting through and evaluating information, and (4) thinking about the whole process and whether the information they found worked for them. Some students identified multiple stages as challenging. Five participants thought that choosing and defining topics (stage one) was the most difficult. One student articulated the challenges of topic selection by saying, "I've seen so many people who kind of shoot themselves in the foot, 'cause they will pick a topic and they won't research it until after their topic proposal, and then they'll realize, 'Oh, there are only five sources for this topic.'" Four students reported the greatest frustration with locating information (stage two). Five participants had difficulty sorting and evaluating the information they located (stage three). One said, "I'm not sure how much information to [collect] . . . I don't want to overdo it . . . but I don't want to leave out anything that would be helpful in making what I'm writing credible." Only one student considered thinking about the whole research process the most difficult part (stage four).

Because students' confidence as researchers is tied to completing successful research assignments, the investigators borrowed a question from Project Information Literacy that

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asked interviewees how they knew if they did a "good job" with their research.<sup>44</sup> The participants had a wide variety of perspectives, with varying levels of sophistication, on what constituted successful research. Three students simply focused on the quantity of sources, but another student emphasized the credibility of the sources.

Still another stressed the importance of including sources with different opinions, and two participants explained that successful papers combine sources with their own



ideas. While discussing the importance of integrating scholarly research with personal opinions, a student stated, "I feel like when there's a good ratio of your own thoughts in comparison to [cited sources], I feel like that's what research is for . . . [to] deepen your own thoughts about it." Two students thought it important to thoroughly understand a topic. "If I wrote a paper on it, I would want to think that . . . I could give a lecture on this right now and be able to fully explain it to a classroom that's never heard of it," said one student. Two participants declared that their previous success with research assignments justified their confidence that they had written a good paper.

### Role of Librarians

Students were asked about their library usage prior to attending Pepperdine. Because Pepperdine transfer students do not enroll in key classes that receive library instruction, such as First-Year Seminar and English 101, we asked if they had received library training at their previous schools. Seven students described previous library instruction, and five said they did not attend any information literacy sessions. Only half the students arriving from community colleges reported receiving library instruction prior to enrolling at Pepperdine.

The researchers were interested in the help-seeking behavior of students prior to attending Pepperdine. When asked if they sought out librarians for help, four community college students remembered asking for assistance, and four stated that they had never consulted with librarians. However, the four who requested help asked only how to locate books on the shelf rather than seeking in-depth research assistance. Among transfers from four-year schools, two students asked librarians for research assistance. Transfer students would much more likely ask professors rather than librarians for assistance. Seven who came from community colleges and two from four-year colleges mentioned that they depended on faculty.

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Prior interactions with librarians can potentially influence the help-seeking behavior of transfer students at their new institutions. Three students described negative encounters with library personnel prior to Pepperdine. "I've had this experience where librarians aren't as friendly when you ask them to look for something . . . they're a little bit standoffish, and like they don't really want to help," said one interviewee. Another explained that a research appointment with a librarian at the previous institution was not helpful. The student said, "It was extra credit if you went to the library and got help from a librarian with your research paper . . . I wouldn't necessarily say it was helpful."

The researchers were also interested in the help-seeking behavior of transfer students while attending Pepperdine. They asked students to describe a research assignment that they completed at Pepperdine. When asked if a librarian provided library instruction for that assignment, 5 of 12 stated they had received instruction. All students who got library instruction described the sessions as helpful. Four of the 12 students reported consulting a librarian for assistance with the assignment. Of the students who got help from a librarian, two asked directional questions and two received more in-depth assistance.

Asked where they preferred to go for help with research at Pepperdine, four students relied on professors, three students would seek help from peers, one favored librarians, and another was split between librarians and professors. One student described a preference for asking professors for help, saying, "He or she is going to know what the topic is on, why she or he assigned it in the first place, what they've seen in the past with good projects that have gotten A's." Learners might more likely seek help from librarians if they could identify subject specialists. Only one student could name his or her subject liaison, while seven participants could not identify the specialist for their discipline.

The researchers asked students how, with hindsight, they would have looked for information on their Pepperdine research assignment. Three students would have sought assistance from a librarian. One stated, "I tend to do stuff by myself. So, I researched by myself, but if I had the chance over again, I would definitely seek help from a librarian."

### Library as Place

All 12 students described using the Payson Library at Pepperdine as a study space, and half specifically mentioned the study rooms. "I focused much better on my work if I went to the library and was actually in that space rather than trying to focus in my own apartment," said one student. In addition, five participants used services housed in the Payson Library, such as the tutoring offered by the Writing Center and the Student Success Center.

Transfer students less likely viewed the Payson Library as a resource for books, and only half reported using a print book at the library. A lack of familiarity with the library may have prevented some students from using print books. One stated, "I was new here, and I was a transfer. I didn't really know . . . where to look for certain books."

### Awareness of Services

The investigators asked interviewees about their fellow transfer students' awareness of library services and resources. Seven participants posited that most transfer students did

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**... participants posited that most transfer students did not know librarians could provide in-depth research help to students.**

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not know librarians could provide in-depth research help to students. One student explained, "I don't think people would think about it . . . because your teacher is always your first resource . . . They don't know that they can go to the library, especially if they didn't get that session. Because I didn't know before doing that." In addition, six participants thought that transfer students were unaware of many library databases.

The researchers asked the participants about the best methods of marketing library services to help increase transfer students' awareness of library services. Eleven interviewees stated that librarians should take part in the new student orientation for transfer students to advertise library services and resources. One student offered advice on the best way to promote library resources, suggesting, "It should be subtly integrated into one of the NSO [new student orientation] events because I think that if it just says 'library' . . . people might [not] show up because they might think, 'Oh, I know how to



use a library, I don't need to go to that.' But some people don't realize what they don't know." Two students thought the library should reach out to resident advisers in the transfer students' residence halls, and two recommended that the library publicize its services on Pepperdine's transfer students' Facebook page.

### The Transfer Experience

Some interviewees talked about the struggles they faced as transfer students. For example, six students were frustrated that some of the credits they earned from other schools failed to count at Pepperdine. "The other darker side of the coin coming in as a transfer student is you lose a lot of credits," stated one student.

Six participants discussed the social challenges that transfer students experience and said they were not integrated into the larger campus community. One explained, "Even the social aspects. The transfers are always grouped together, and the freshmen are grouped together . . . It would be better to assimilate the transfers." Another student made a similar point, saying, "They put transfers in one house, it really makes it hard to meet people who aren't transfers."

All but one interviewee shared rich and varied experiences outside their coursework at Pepperdine that increased their confidence and helped them succeed academically. For example, two students had been enrolled in the honors program at their community colleges and wrote several research papers. Another had earned a bachelor's degree in business prior to working on a creative writing degree at Pepperdine. Still others served as mentors who helped other transfer students succeed at Pepperdine, and yet another participant worked as a tutor at Pepperdine's Writing Center. One student claimed to understand the value of the library databases because of knowing how much these resources cost.

While discussing their thoughts about orientation sessions, five interviewees explained that transfer students were already experienced learners who knew about academic expectations. They were most interested in advice specific to Pepperdine. A student stated, "With NSO . . . there's a lot of unnecessary stuff that could be cut out and some necessary stuff that could be put in, especially for transfer students. The NSO is trying to show new students how to do well in college . . . but for transfer students, we've already had two years of succeeding in college."

Students were asked about other campus departments that were helpful to them as transfer students because the researchers wanted to identify departments with which the library might collaborate. Four students mentioned the associate dean of students, and four referred to the transfer mentors.

The librarians asked interviewees what knowledge of the library they thought most important to their academic success. Seven students were most interested in learning practical information specific to Payson Library, such as the location of books and key personnel or how to print from the library computers. One participant summed up the desire of the transfer students to learn skills particular to Pepperdine University, saying,

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**... interviewees explained that transfer students were already experienced learners who knew about academic expectations.**

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This mss is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication portal 20.2.

“This is how you do research at Pepperdine.’ And make it more individualized to the school. And the quirks in the system. And how you guys work.” Six students asked for more assistance with the physical layout of the library and how to locate print books.

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**... students asked for more assistance with the physical layout of the library and how to locate print books.**

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Describing the need to find books, a student explained, “Because I think a lot more people would be using the books and stuff if they knew how to check them out.” Another student emphasized the importance of identifying subject librarians, saying, “The very fact that there’s different specialist librarians, that’s key and huge.” Six students wanted to learn more about the specialized databases available at Pepperdine. One explained, “The course-specific databases, because I’ve had a lot of experience with broad . . . databases that apply to everything, but I think that’s been one thing with Pepperdine that I’ve realized is really good here.” One emphasized the similarities between libraries, saying, “I knew a lot of the stuff about the library because of Moorpark College . . . It was kind of just going from one college library to another one . . . They were not that different in the ways in which a library could be used.” Two students wanted a deeper understanding of the overall research process, such as evaluating sources and locating information.

### Limitations

This study had several limitations. Pepperdine is a private liberal arts campus, and the results might not be applicable to a larger public university. In addition, only one of the study participants could be classified as a nontraditional student above the age of 24. Also, by requiring that participants had completed at least one research assignment requiring resources outside their course readings at Pepperdine, the study may have skewed toward students more likely to have used the library.

### Discussion and Conclusion

One of the research questions of this study was to learn how transfer students approach research, and the investigators specifically wanted to know about transfers’ familiarity and experience with the information literacy skills listed in Pepperdine Libraries’ student learning outcomes. Other researchers have also expressed interest in assessing

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**The students interviewed overwhelmingly articulated a strong familiarity with information literacy skills and gave specific examples demonstrating their skills.**

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transfers’ proficiency with their institution’s student learning outcomes.<sup>45</sup> The students interviewed overwhelmingly articulated a strong familiarity with information literacy skills and gave specific examples demonstrating their skills. These findings align with research from Heinbach and her colleagues, who concluded that the majority of the transfer students they interviewed were familiar with library databases, knew how to cite sources, and used sophisticated techniques such as bibliog-



raphy mining.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Min Tong and Carrie Moran discovered that transfer students had higher scores than the benchmark of similar institutions for the SAILS test, but Tong and Moran hesitated to generalize about the information literacy skills of transfers.<sup>47</sup>

When analyzing the transfer students' mastery of the student learning outcomes, the researchers were most concerned with the second outcome, "Uses discipline-specific tools." Four of 12 participants lacked familiarity with the subject-specific databases for their discipline. In a similar vein, Richter-Weikum and Seeber reported that few of the transfer students they interviewed named specific databases.<sup>48</sup>

When asked from whom they seek research help, the transfer students we interviewed preferred to ask professors or their peers, rather than librarians, for assistance. Heinbach's team also discovered that transfer students would more likely ask faculty instead of librarians for help.<sup>49</sup> A noteworthy discovery from librarians at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro University Libraries was that transfer students who received library instruction would more likely ask subject librarians for research assistance.<sup>50</sup>

The other research question sought to discover how the library could best assist transfer students, from their perspective. A consistent theme in the findings was that the participants felt confident in their research skills and mainly wanted to learn more about the specifics of the Pepperdine Libraries. This conclusion is supported by the interviews, which revealed gaps in the students' knowledge of specific databases and a lack of awareness of their subject liaisons. The interviewees also conveyed a desire for more Pepperdine-specific information at the transfer orientation sessions and described struggles with locating print items. Research from Linda Whang and her team indicated that, while transfer students felt proud of their prior academic experiences, they wanted to learn more about the resources and services at the University of Washington Libraries.<sup>51</sup> In addition, a survey of incoming transfer students at Western Washington University revealed that they were interested in institution-specific information, such as physical locations in the library and identifying library databases.<sup>52</sup> Mark Robison's survey of transfer students concluded that 75.7 percent "need information about how to conduct library research at their new universities."<sup>53</sup>

Because institution-specific information is so important to helping transfer students succeed, libraries need to make them aware of library services. Nearly all the students interviewed thought the library should participate in the transfer student orientation sessions. Roberts, Welsh, and Dudek reported that 80 percent of the four-year college libraries they surveyed took part in their institutions' transfer student orientation.<sup>54</sup> Interviews of transfers at the University of Washington also revealed that their transfer orientation sessions were a preferred venue for marketing library services.<sup>55</sup>

Students in the current study expressed confidence in their research skills. Other researchers have also explored the self-assurance of transfer students. Heinbach and her coauthors reported that transfers had faith in their research skills.<sup>56</sup> Richter-Weikum and

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Seeber found that the transfer students they surveyed felt sure of their ability to locate peer-reviewed articles.<sup>57</sup> In addition, research suggests that library instruction improves transfers' self-assurance.<sup>58</sup>

In discussing their academic confidence, the students interviewed conveyed that their experiences prior to Pepperdine were important to their college success. In a similar vein, Heinbach and her colleagues explicitly asked students about prior academic skills and determined that these competencies carried over.<sup>59</sup> Whang and her team also commented on how prior educational and life experiences helped transfer students succeed at the University of Washington.<sup>60</sup> In their survey of Ohio academic librarians, Phillips and Atwood discovered that 60 percent of community college librarians and 47.1 percent of four-year college librarians strongly agreed that transfer students should be taught skills that would carry over.<sup>61</sup> Richter-Weikum and Seeber concluded that previous library usage did influence students' use of the library at their new institutions.<sup>62</sup> In contrast to the current study, which determined that previous information literacy experiences are valuable to transfer students, Robison found that transfers did not receive any attitudinal benefits from library instruction at their previous institution.<sup>63</sup>

The results of this study will inform our outreach efforts to transfer students. Pepperdine librarians learned that the transfer students had a solid understanding of research and felt confident of their skills, but they need more information about the specifics of the Pepperdine Libraries. Specifically, we need to implement outreach efforts that help students gain the following competencies: (1) familiarity with their subject liaison librarians, (2) knowledge of the subject-specific databases, and (3) ability to navigate the library's physical layout and services with an emphasis on the library's print collections.

During the interviews, nearly all the students recommended that the library take part in new student orientation events for transfer students. As a result of this feedback, we

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**During the interviews, nearly all the students recommended that the library take part in new student orientation events for transfer students.**

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worked with the associate dean of transfer students to promote library services to transfer students at the Transfer Student Expo during NSO. A librarian staffed a table and used the results of this study to convey key information to transfer students, such as the library's subject liaison program and the library's numerous subject-specific databases. In addition, we distributed a flier with pictures and contact information for the subject liaisons. Because several transfer students mentioned in interviews that they were not sure how to find print books in

the library, the librarian also explained to students that library staff are happy to assist them with finding books.

Collaborating with other campus departments will help the librarians' outreach efforts with transfer students. Following the success of the Transfer Expo events, librarians will work with the associate dean of transfer students to develop strategies for marketing library resources to transfer students. With their personal connections to the transfer students, the transfer mentors have the potential to help promote library resources to the students. For example, we will develop a two-minute elevator speech on library resources and services for the transfer mentors to deliver to the transfer students.





Another important venue for reaching out to transfer students will be social media. Pepperdine's transfer students have an active Facebook group page, and librarians will work with the associate dean of transfer students to post information about subject databases, profiles of library liaisons, and services housed in the library such as the makerspace facility, tutoring, and the writing center. In addition, the library will launch an Instagram series about the subject librarians to increase the likelihood that transfer students will be able to identify their liaisons.

The interviews revealed that students were unaware of their subject librarians and would more likely seek research help from their professors or peers. To remedy this situation, Pepperdine librarians will implement a personal librarian program for transfer students inspired by similar programs at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Santa Clara University.<sup>64</sup> At the beginning of each semester, the librarians will obtain a list of all incoming transfer students and their majors. Subject librarians will send an introductory e-mail to each transfer student in their disciplines introducing themselves and explaining how they can assist students. Because most of the transfer students we interviewed reported having limited contact with librarians at their prior institutions, it is important to give specific examples of how we can assist them rather than simply stating we can help them with research. In addition, inspired by the personal librarian program from Santa Clara University, librarians will invite the transfer students to a one-on-one meeting to introduce themselves, discuss library services, and offer a tour of the Payson Library.<sup>65</sup> During most fall and spring semesters, Pepperdine has between 20 and 100 incoming transfer students, and we are confident that with eight subject librarians, a personal librarian program is scalable for our library.

Outreach efforts focusing on NSO transfer events, a personal librarian program, and posting on social media will address the library needs of the transfer students that we discovered during the interviews. Transfer students explained that they are confident in their research skills, and they reported that, as experienced students, they had little interest in sessions that provided generalized information on how to succeed at college. Consequently, we should concentrate on outreach efforts that build on the transfer students' existing strengths and educate them about the specifics of the Pepperdine Libraries.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

- I. I'd like you to think back to a time at Pepperdine that you needed to consult sources outside of your course readings.
  - A. Tell me about the assignment.
  - B. What types of information did you need to find?
  - C. Where did you look for information?
  - D. Did a librarian meet with class? If so, tell us about the library instruction.
  - E. Did you need to ask a librarian for help? If so, can you describe for me what the librarian did when you asked for help.
  - F. With hindsight, if you had it to do over again, tell us how you would look for information for this assignment.
- II. Please tell me about your experiences with research at the college that you attended prior to Pepperdine.
  - A. Did you have assignments or papers that required you to consult sources outside your course readings?
  - B. Did librarians meet with your classes?
  - C. Where did you look for information?
  - D. If you needed assistance, who did you ask for help?
- III. Tell me about your confidence in your research skills.
  - A. How would compare your research skills to your peers at Pepperdine?
- IV. Questions linked to student learning outcomes
  - A. The student defines the research question and determines the scope of the information needed to answer the research question [learning outcome 1].
    1. How do you decide on a topic when writing a research topic?
    2. How do you know if the topic is too broad or too narrow?
    3. Does the topic change over time?
  - B. The student uses discipline-specific tools and search strategies to locate appropriate information [learning outcome 2].
    1. Tell me about some of the tools or resources you use to locate information.
    2. How do you know you've done a good job?
  - C. The student evaluates significant and authoritative resources and integrates these sources within the context of the research project [learning outcome 3].
    1. How do you evaluate the quality of information you have found for coursework? That is, what do you consider about a source when you are deciding to use it, how do you know if the information is "good" to use, or not, whatever that may mean to you? (From Project Information Literacy)

- D. The student gives credit to the ideas of others through attribution [learning outcome 4].
1. Which resources or strategies do you use to make sure that you are citing sources in the proper format (e.g., APA [American Psychological Association], Chicago[Manual of Style], or MLA [Modern Language Association])?
  2. How do you know when you are supposed to cite a source?
- V. How do you know if you've done a "good job" conducting research, whatever that may mean to you, given your needs, when you conduct research for finding information?
- VI. What would you say is the most difficult part of course-related research? I'm going to give you four stages to choose from: (1) the beginning, when you choose and define a topic; (2) finding information; (3) sorting through and evaluating information; or (4) thinking about the whole process and what you found and whether it works for you?
- VII. Lastly, think about when you are working on course-related research assignments. Are there certain course-related research routines, techniques, or workarounds you use from one research assignment to the next one with regard to how you research a topic and prepare the final assignment? Do you remember when you first started using these techniques and where you heard about them? Have you adapted and changed them over time?
- VIII. If you are struggling to find information, who would you be most likely to ask for help? Why?
- IX. Can you tell me about how you have used the physical facilities of the Payson Library?
- X. Priorities (based on year in school)
- A. [Seniors] Looking back, what do you wish you knew about the library and research when you first arrived at Pepperdine?
  - B. [Sophomores and juniors] Being new to Pepperdine, what things about the library and research do you think are most important to learn about in terms of your academic success at Pepperdine?
- XI. As a transfer student, tell me how librarians can best assist transfer students.
- A. What skills would you be interested in learning from librarians? How can the library better market its services?
  - B. What library databases and services like research help are transfer students most or least aware of?
  - C. What have other departments on campus done or not done to effectively reach out to transfer students?
- XII. You've been so helpful in talking with me today. Is there anything you would like to add?

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