



*Column: A New Generation in Librarianship*

## Information Literacy Experiences: A Conversation Between a Librarian and an International Graduate Student

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### ABSTRACT

This column details a conversation between an early career education librarian and an international Ph.D. candidate from China who was studying information literacy as part of her Doctoral studies. The aim of this discussion was to explore and reflect on her experiences as an international graduate student and growing expert in the field of information literacy, as well as to report lessons learned and recommendations for academic librarians working with international student populations.

### KEYWORDS

information literacy, international students, interview, graduate students, education librarianship

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## Introduction

Information literacy consists of the knowledge, dispositions, and skills that support students' success during their academic careers (ACRL, 2016). Being able to effectively search for, critically evaluate, and produce information results in stronger research and completion of assignments (Catalano & Phillips, 2016; Jones & Mastroiilli, 2022; Najmabadi, 2017). Societally, being information literate also combats the spread of mis- and disinformation (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). The ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries') Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education defines information literacy as "the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning" (ACRL, 2016). However, many students do not arrive at higher education institutions with this knowledge or have experience with the type of search strategies needed for higher level research. Information literacy skills are not innate; they need to be taught in a way that students understand, can engage with, and can relate to what they are working on in their courses and/or experiencing in their everyday lives (Catalano, 2013; Kline, 2022).

Graduate students are expected to conduct research during the course of their studies, and while they have complex needs related to these expectations, they may have little or no formal instruction in information literacy when they arrive at their institutions (Andres, 2021). Many graduate students struggle with the transition to graduate level coursework, research, and academic writing expectations, but the skills and knowledge of information literacy and the research process can be especially challenging for international students who sometimes struggle with unfamiliarity, information overload, and differences in access (Heng 2023; Hughes, 2013). The Institute of International Education (IIE) reports that, on average, 1,000,000 international students are enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities every year (Institute of International Education, 2024). This large population of students brings unique academic experiences from their home countries, which may be markedly different from what domestic U.S. students acquired in their prior schooling. Educators should not dismiss their wealth of knowledge, but instead utilize and build on the educational understanding, cultural experiences, and research and information literacy skills that these international students do bring from their home countries (Rodriguez, 2013).

To begin exploring how the experiences of international students affect their transition to conducting research in the United States and how a U.S. academic library could better support these students, Dr. Xiaoman Wang, an international student from China who was studying information literacy as part of her Doctoral studies and, Dr. Brittany Kester, a then-early career Education Librarian, met to discuss Wang's experiences and brainstorm recommendations for information literacy instruction. Kester first met with Wang and two other Ph.D. students from China as part of a focus group, then observed Wang conducting research for

a course assignment, and interacted for a third time for an in-depth interview. Below are a few detailed excerpts and stories from these discussions, as well as lessons learned and recommendations for academic librarians working with international student populations.

### **Brittany Kester, Education Librarian**

I am the Education Librarian at a large research institution in the southeastern United States. In my position, I work with a very diverse group of students, many of whom are considered international students—meaning those students who have chosen to attend an institution of higher education in a country different from their home country, where they may return post-graduation (Carroll & Ryan, 2005).

The discussion shared in this column was inspired by my experiences as a, then, early career librarian teaching information literacy and working regularly with this population. During these interactions, I could see that there were improvements that could be made in how information literacy is taught to make it more accessible—not just for this population, but for all students. However, with this specific population I acknowledge that as a natural-born American citizen and native English speaker, I am an outsider. I will never have firsthand knowledge of being an international student nor as an English language learner studying at a U.S. institution. I recognize that, as an outsider, I need to learn and understand more about the experiences of international students studying in the United States, how to discuss concepts when there might be cultural and linguistic differences, and what challenges may arise when speaking and teaching across cultures.

Wang and I had known each other for two years when this discussion took place, and we have since worked together on other academic projects. I also assisted her with her research in my role as a librarian. We both have a goal of studying ways to improve information literacy instruction, so I was excited to hear about her experiences and perspectives, and to gain her expert advice as an international graduate student studying information literacy as part of her graduate studies.

### **Xiaoman Wang, Ph.D. Candidate in Educational Technology**

At the time of these conversations, I was an international graduate student at the same institution as Kester. I received my bachelor's degree in China in 2007 and worked in the education industry for about eight years. I came to the United States in 2015 to pursue my MBA. With my passion in education as both a parent and an educator, I then joined the Ph.D. program in Educational Technology from the same institution, aiming to support people navigating the digital world.

My own experience as an international student made me realize how important information literacy is for students who are in a transition process to a new environment. My academic journey is not typical. When I first started my master's degree program, I had not

attended school for almost a decade, and the U.S. higher education system was completely new to me. At the same time, I needed to adjust to my new living environment as a foreigner. There were only a couple of international students in our cohort, and the faculty and staff had limited experience in supporting international students. I spent a lot of effort getting basic infrastructural information during my first several months in the United States—e.g., how public transportation works, where I should go if I am not feeling well, what a tax return is, and how I should file taxes. While I was trying to locate this needed information, I found that using English here was completely different from passing English tests while learning it as a subject in my home country. The barrier was not only the language, but also the completely different societal context and higher education structure. Interestingly, when I started my Ph.D. journey and worked as a teaching assistant for an undergraduate course, I noticed that new college students had similar frustrations to what I had experienced. Although they are local and do not have a language barrier, they still need support in navigating the higher education environment. Most of them can cope emotionally and academically, but prompt support and scaffolding may make the process smoother and more efficient for them.

When Kester shared her idea of doing research to improve how librarians can support international students, I was so touched, since for the first time I felt that I was being heard. I believe that information literacy is crucial for everyone. We will always face changes and new challenges, but properly locating and interacting with information, especially online information, will help us adjust to new environments—whether it be a new country, school, workplace, etc. I was excited to share what I have experienced and learned during the time I have spent here as an international student.

### **Cultural Differences Influence Research Processes**

During the discussions between Wang and Kester, references to cultural differences related to education and libraries, using information literacy skills in everyday life, and specific challenges emerged throughout. It was evident that there are information literacy skills and experiences that international students bring with them to their abroad institution that educators can tap into, instead of thinking that most of the information is brand new to the students. Cultural differences and a variety of lived experiences should be thought of as benefits to classrooms, but that does not mean the transition and novel situations are always easy for new international students to navigate. International students may face language barriers, differences in academic expectations, disparities in social nuances, etc. but meeting these challenges is part of the learning process and adds to the experience of being an international student.

### **Education and Libraries**

In their focus group session, as well as in the individual interview with Wang, Kester inquired what they might share with a brand-new international student. Wang discussed

examples of knowledge that she brought with her from China that easily transitioned to searching for information here in the United States. An example of one of these funds of knowledge (Rodriguez, 2013) includes having a search engine similar to Google (called Baidu in China) with many of the same features—such as image, video, and general information searching, as well as a storage platform. For new international students, Wang highlighted that they need to be aware that general resources like search engines might be different from what they are used to, and while the information they find may not always be reliable, there are supports in place to help them.

*Wang stated:* I would suggest to them to be aware of the power of different tools. To locate information, the most basic one might be Google. Besides, YouTube could be a powerful tool beyond just for entertainment purposes. We learned so many things from YouTube, like fixing things, or even course-related content. There are also many resources available through the institution. For example, in our institution, we have full access to LinkedIn Learning using our institution credentials. I feel like at the very beginning, we need to be aware that we are not alone, it is a very developed system already. There are so many people willing to share all that useful information, and we just need to know which specific tool we need to locate that information. So, I would suggest new students talk to senior peers, talk to their advisor, and talk to librarians, to learn about different tools that are available to them, so from there, they can use their critical thinking and explore to find the reliable information that they need. I also hope that librarians can provide more support in evaluating information online, not only for international students but for all college students.

According to Wang, she noticed there were different formats of support in the United States compared with her undergraduate education experience from 2003-2007 in China. In her experience, the library at her undergraduate institution was thought of only as a place to check out books or find certain research articles. Wang shared that they did not learn information literacy skills as they are defined here in the United States. Considering the digital information environment of 20 years ago, the focus for them at that time was on retrieval, not on how to effectively find information, evaluate sources, nor the value of information. The students did not conduct online searching very often and were mainly passive receivers of information, meaning they were not taught this skill set.

Wang emphasized that although her personal experience was not representative nor generalizable, it can lead to some understanding of the digital divide issues that some international students experience as they transition to institutions in the United States, and the corresponding challenges these might bring. Additionally, Wang shared that a significant portion of the support provided in the libraries in her Chinese undergraduate institution was carried out by staff, such as department student advisors, whereas in the United States these

supports are performed by librarians. This might differ across other Chinese institutions; however, it does provide an example of where cultural differences might originate.

*Wang explained:* What they [new international students] need to be aware of is the cultural differences. Such cultural differences might even exist between different parts within the same country, let alone between different countries. This is part of the learning process, and this is part of the challenges that international students have to face, which does not necessarily need to be a negative thing. All the experience we have accumulated during this process can be transferred to future challenges we will face in other new environments. However, although these are something we have to deal with, I do hope that we can receive more support from the orientation at the beginning of our first semester here in the U.S.

Wang's comments demonstrate that U.S. academic libraries could be clearer about the services they provide and try harder to reach out to new students after orientation—when they are usually introduced to the library but are also overloaded with other information.

### **Everyday Life**

Another area of discussion focused on how, for some graduate international students, their first encounter with information literacy skills after arriving in the United States is in completing everyday tasks. This could include finding information to locate housing, to access healthcare, and to get around a new town.

*Wang's response:* It will be challenging for people who do not have anybody helping them to look for information, since the whole system of the society sharing the information is quite different from my home country. There were many things that were quite shocking to me. Take the healthcare system as an example, in my home country if you are not feeling well, you just go to the hospital. However, here in the U.S. if you are not feeling well, you talk to your primary care provider first. So, things like this were quite new to me and it took a while for me to learn. I asked peers, I asked advisors from my department and searched for information online. Interestingly, I noticed immediately that the English I learned in school is actually not completely the same as the English I need here. Passing the English test and using the language could be two quite different things. Sometimes, I relied on my mother tongue while I searched for information online about the life here, which I believe is common for international students. The point I want to make here is that international students actually have double barriers here, both the language and the cultural differences.

In other instances, the cultural differences between Wang's home culture and U.S. culture were discussed as something that would just need to be learned. As evidenced from Wang's statement about information literacy in everyday life, one of the challenges that she highlighted was the

language barriers, but other challenges included generational differences and lack of institutional support.

## **Recommendations**

### **For Academic Librarians**

When Kester began this research, she wanted Wang and the other focus group participants to know that she acknowledged her position as an outsider in this situation, that she valued their experiences, and hoped to learn from them how information literacy instruction could be improved for future students. To help address this possible gap for herself and other academic librarians, Kester asked, “how I could connect more with the international student population?”

*Wang’s response:* I think you can share what you learned about international students’ perceptions from your daily practice, like how other students you have been interacting with shared with you how different the systems are from like their home country. I do not think it’s just about between China and U.S. It should be the same in other countries versus U.S., and I believe there will be all kinds of differences. Just let them know that you are aware of such differences, and you are here to help. I think they will feel that they are heard, and that their difficulties are understood, then they will be more open-minded and actively seek support from you.

From Wang’s answers, recommendations were discussed for other academic librarians working with international students, such as it is important that librarians 1) acknowledge the differences between their and their students’ experiences, 2) share stories with the students about these experiences and/or about working with other students that have shared experiences, and 3) that they value and validate the students’ experiences.

### **For Information Literacy Instruction**

Wang directly provided many recommendations for enhancing the current information literacy instruction at her U.S. institution, but Kester also noticed that embedded within the challenges that Wang discussed there were issues that needed to be addressed to improve instruction. Though Wang detailed her experiences as an international student, many of the recommendations and advice she shared could improve information literacy instruction for, and benefit, all new students.

These suggestions included creating resources such as an “Everyday Basics Handbook,” containing information about the town’s resources, housing, healthcare, transportation, etc. This resource could support international students in their transitions to their new town, which can be a whole different process than transitioning to their academic institutions, as well as provide this information to any new student arriving on campus.

More specifically related to library resources, Wang and the other focus group participants recommended developing an asynchronous library module that would give detailed explanations of:

- Library basics
- Determining source credibility
- Search techniques
- Reading literature
- Writing citations
- Citation management tools
- Technological tools and applications
- Library terminology glossary
- A “Where to Go for Help With...” chart

For Wang and the others, the asynchrony of the module was important because students could revisit the information at any time and take their time learning it—unlike in an orientation or workshop where the information is only given in a specific timeframe and the students are unable to revisit it. Having this resource readily available may also relieve stressors for students and help them gain confidence in their information seeking. While many libraries may already have some instructional modules available, ensuring that the content is accessible for all audiences, and culturally responsive and sustaining, is especially important for this population (Gay, 2018; Paris, 2012).

Wang and the others also recommended offering workshops or recording videos covering topics such as:

- An introduction to the library and librarians
- Examples of when/how to ask for help
- Experiences of senior international students
  - Peer learning
- Welcome and stories from domestic students

*Wang’s response:* Hearing from senior international students would be nice. It would also be nice to hear from local students welcoming the international students and sharing their experiences, that they collaborate with international students. Speaking of this, I think maybe we should hear more from local students about their perspectives of international students too. New international students might be shy to ask for help, but

local students could share what they can do to help, so that we could build a welcoming community here.

One of the biggest patterns across the focus group, observations, and interview was the benefits gained from learning and collaborating with senior peer international students, and the recommendation for librarians to include these senior students when working with new international students. Wang explained the importance of being able to learn from the senior students and that many want to act as a “go-to person” for incoming international students after having been in the program for a few years.

*Wang’s response:* Like for me, I learned a lot from the senior students in my program, and I would love to help new incoming students too, both domestic and international students. For example, in this semester, we have a new international student from India, and this is her first year here in the U.S., in our program. My advisor talked to me, and he hoped that she can be under my wing, so I will be the “go to” person if she has any questions. Another new international student from another lab sat next to me in our graduate students working area. I’ve been talking to her and letting her know that she can ask me any questions too. I’m glad that I can provide support to them while they are adjusting to the new environment.

Finally, Wang and the other focus group participants suggested embedding librarians in Learning Management Systems (i.e. Canvas, Blackboard, etc.), placing a weekly library- or research-related tip in the college newsletter, and making current and new resources more visible and accessible, including offering information in multiple formats.

### **Conclusion**

Information literacy skills are not innate; they are learned and sharpened throughout a student’s time in school and, sometimes more often, through interactions online with everyday information. Through learning about Wang’s experiences and observing her research process, Kester began to understand the challenges students may come up against when transitioning to a U.S. higher education institution, and the benefits that come from having different experiences and perspectives on information. If educators can tap into students’ funds of knowledge and offer accessible, culturally relevant information literacy support, international students can have a smoother transition and gain more confidence in their research earlier in their programs.

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