

**Student Perceptions of Social Ethic Supports in Higher Education Academic Library
Collections: An Action Research Study**

by

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Abstract

Academic libraries in the United States are designed to serve all students within their institutions; however, as student populations become increasingly diverse, many libraries have not been fully structured to meet the needs of varied demographic groups (Chen, 2018). This study investigates student perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion within academic library collections.

Guided by an action research framework, it explores how students—particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds—perceive their university library’s efforts to foster equity and belonging through its collections. Data was collected through a student survey administered at a medium-sized public university in northeastern Pennsylvania, providing localized insights into the inclusivity of the institution’s collection development practices. Findings revealed both strengths and gaps in the library’s approach to supporting diverse student needs. Based on these results, the study proposes actionable recommendations to enhance equitable representation, strengthen students’ sense of belonging, and inform future collection development and academic library leadership practices.

Keywords: academic libraries, diversity, inclusion, equity, student perspective, belonging, action research, uses and gratification theory

Digital Location

This dissertation can be found in full on ResearchGate:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/398447357_Student_Perceptions_of_Social_Ethic_Supports_in_Higher_Education_Academic_Library_Collections_An_Action_Research_Study

It can be found in part in the ProQuest Dissertations Database.

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Dedication

This is for Mike and Kara. Chase your dreams.

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Student Perceptions of Social Ethic Supports in Higher Education Academic Library Collections: An Action Research Qualitative Study

In recent years, higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States have made significant strides toward addressing systemic issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Carlson, 2022; Chun & Evans, 2018, 2019; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2018; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). This shift is essential, as higher education institutions were historically designed to primarily support high- and upper-middle-class European American students, often neglecting the needs of other demographic groups (Chun & Evans, 2018; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021).

Given the realization that systematic cultural changes must occur, academic libraries must also turn their focus to their social ethic support practices, here incorporating modern sensibilities, diversity, equity and inclusion into their systems, collections, and practices. In the United States, each higher education institution (HEI) serves a uniquely diverse student body—varying in ethnicity, race, socioeconomic background, and lived experiences—preparing them to become engaged citizens both nationally and globally. As central hubs of campus life, academic libraries play a crucial role in reflecting and fostering the cultural values of their institutions. As African American author Andrea "Vocab" Sanderson aptly states, “Representation is so important. Empowering people to share their narratives with the largest audience possible will be the most impactful for all generations” (Fight for the Future, 2022). This sentiment underscores the importance of ensuring that library collections and initiatives authentically represent the diverse identities and perspectives of the communities they serve (Carlson, 2022; Chun & Evans, 2019; Gorman, 2015; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2018; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2020).

Many small and medium HEIs only have one library for their campus, meaning that libraries must both be hubs for everyone on campus as well as for DEI. They cannot only represent the needs of one department or philosophy but need to represent the entire college community. Collections that support every academic major, minor and elective course must be available, and additional materials to support understanding of these subjects are necessary to provide support to students seeking to not only succeed academically but also seeking to learn about historic and cutting-edge subjects (Carlson, 2022; Chun & Evans, 2019; Gorman, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2020).

To be a citizen of a culturally diverse nation and a holistic global citizen, multicultural education and viewpoints are necessary. A diverse library collection to support these educational goals is imperative (Carlson, 2022; Chun & Evans, 2019; Ely, 2021; Gorman, 2015; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2018; Leung Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2020; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). It should be noted that authors across different backgrounds – ethnic, racial, gender, sexuality, socioeconomically, etc. and in the many ways these intersect, have much to say on the subject on libraries. These perspectives enrich the discourse by highlighting diverse experiences and challenges faced by underrepresented and marginalized groups. Furthermore, authors from varied backgrounds contribute valuable insights into how libraries can better serve their communities, foster inclusivity, and promote equitable access to information and resources. By acknowledging and amplifying these voices, we can create more inclusive and responsive library environments that truly reflect the diversity of the populations they serve.

Libraries provide access to resources, knowledge, and a supportive environment that fosters creativity and intellectual growth. Author Chris Tilly said: “Libraries are a cornerstone of

democracy. They are at their best when they introduce people to new ideas, so it is critical that they present diverse views and experiences and provide a wide range of published work” (Fight for the Future, 2022). As this quote demonstrates, many view libraries as guardians of knowledge, inclusion, and democratic values, making them vital spaces for learning, discussion, and societal progress. For numerous individuals, libraries are a gateway to new ideas, diverse perspectives, and a wealth of information that might otherwise be inaccessible. They serve as sanctuaries where budding writers can explore their interests, hone their craft, and find inspiration from a multitude of voices. By offering a space for learning and exploration, libraries play a crucial role in shaping the lives of individuals, enabling them to express their unique stories and contribute to the broader literary landscape. Without this vital support, the literary world would be much less rich and diverse.

Multicultural and multi-viewpoint collections are especially vital as studies have shown that reading builds empathy, making it imperative that diverse characters, viewpoints, and cultures are represented in library collections (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Brown, 2016; Coplan, 2004; Hoyer, 2013; McCreary & Marchant, 2017; Oatley, 1999; Singer & Fehr, 2005). If students are shown only one set of viewpoints, they may think the HEI only possesses or respects those viewpoints (Carlson, 2022; Chun & Evans, 2019; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). It also limits the education a student can receive through limiting given perspectives (American Library Association, 2007; Au et al., 2016; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021). Students who feel very uncomfortable with perceived opinions of the HEI may transfer or drop out (Tinto, 2015). There are examples such as libraries not providing current materials on new scientific or medical discoveries which would be disadvantageous for scientists or medical professionals trying to

ensure employment after graduation. A library could also choose only nursing materials or only chemistry materials and ignore the rest of the academic areas of the HEI, leaving those students at a disadvantage. The lack of materials, lack of perspectives, or lack of knowledge can have real-world impacts on students and the HEI itself (American Library Association, 2007; Au et al., 2016; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Tinto, 2015). This is demonstrated in a public library setting by non-binary author Kate Bornstein who states:

I grew up in the 1950s and 60s. There was no internet, but there was the Asbury Park Public Library. That's where I discovered books about the Weimar Republic, Magnus Hirschfeld, and American ex patriots living in Paris. I learned the word invert, and I knew that was me. It was a public library that laid open my horizons. With today's attacks on LGBTQ people, we need libraries now more than ever. (Fight for the Future, 2022)

Bornstein believes libraries act as lifelines for self-discovery, education, and representation, particularly for marginalized communities (Fight for the Future, 2022). Libraries can be transformative by expanding an individual's knowledge and helping them shape and define their identity.

The number of perspectives presented is an issue for every HEI campus, as one of the core goals of HEIs is to prepare students to be world citizens once they graduate. A diverse collection includes multiple viewpoints, multiple cultures, variety in types of materials, and reflects various ethnic, racial, religious, gender, political and socio-cultural outlooks (Alexander, 2013; Anaya & Maxey-Harris, 2017; Carlson, 2022; Chun & Evans, 2018; Gorman, 2015; Gulati, 2010; Junisbai et al., 2016; Kennedy et al., 2018; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). Through representation of multiple viewpoints, particularly underrepresented and marginalized viewpoints, all students are empowered, particularly underrepresented and marginalized students

(Chun & Evans, 2019; Ely, 2021; Fúnez-Flores, 2017; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2020; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016; Spring, 2020).

The population of the USA is changing rapidly, with the United States Census (2018) estimating that ethnic groups other than European American comprise approximately 39.6% of the USA population. Current underrepresented and marginalized populations, with particular increases in Latinx, Asian and multiracial students, are expected to comprise 55% of the student body by 2027 (Chun & Evans, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). This shows that the demographic makeup of HEI students is undergoing constant change. Historically, student populations are always in a state of change, however American schools are not changing to meet diverse and equitable needs (Spring, 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

There is also an increase in “nontraditional” students in higher education with up to 40% of enrolled students being outside the traditional ages of 18-22 (Rubin & Rubin, 2020). In the 2015-16 academic year, 19% of all enrolled undergraduates reported having a disability, and 12% of all enrolled graduate students. Considering the mission of the academic library is to “support and expand the educational mission of the university” (Rubin & Rubin, 2020, ch. 2), it is evident that this is becoming more challenging, as the needs of its patrons become increasingly varied and diverse. The needs of these changing student populations differ from those of traditional students, and HEIs must ensure they are supporting these various student groups. A major support for these students is the academic library.

Libraries engage diverse students through the services and collections they offer, and representation is important to this endeavor (Au et al., 2016; Chun & Evans, 2018, 2019; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). Diverse

collections help increase a student's sense of belonging (Alexander, 2013; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2018; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016; Spring, 2020). James Baldwin, the internationally renowned author who wrote about Black life in America through the Civil Rights Movement, said: "I went at least three or four times a week [135th Street branch of NYPL] and I read everything there. I mean, every single book in that library. In some blind and instinctive way, I knew that what was happening in those books was also happening all around me. And I was trying to make a connection between those books and the life I saw and the life I lived" (McBride, 2023). Here we see that Baldwin used the library to make sense of the world he lived in. This is even more imperative at institutions with populations which may tend towards a majority of upper-middle class, European American male students (Chun & Evans, 2018). Representation for underrepresented and marginalized groups in the collection and encouraging learning empathy and diversity of thought in all students is critical. Diverse collections that provide multiple viewpoints are also equitable (Au et al., 2016; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021). The American Library Association (ALA), the loose governing body for libraries in the USA, has a set of standards which libraries should strive to follow called the ALA Key Action Areas (American Library Association, 2007). Without the budget to ensure purchase of diverse collections, or staff to curate diverse collections, these areas decline in quality and students may feel unwelcome. If students feel they cannot use libraries, one of their academic supports, their engagement and retention may decrease or halt altogether. What libraries accomplish in building DEI and belonging in their environments has an opportunity to change and affect the HEI, its culture, and its success.

Background of the Study

Academic libraries exist to educate, support, and equitably serve all users. However, do their collections truly reflect diversity? If not, librarians should identify where needs are unmet and take action.

To effectively support diverse student populations, it is especially important to gather insights from students in underrepresented and marginalized groups (Chun & Evans, 2019; Gorman, 2015; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021). Research in this area can provide valuable guidance to library professionals, helping them better serve diverse student communities.

Since students are the primary users of academic libraries, their voices must be heard to ensure libraries fulfill their mission of equitable service. Understanding student perspectives can reveal gaps, foster a greater sense of belonging, and inform improvements that better meet their needs. Meaningful change is only possible through thoughtful research and informed action.

Statement of the Problem

Librarians must identify gaps in academic collections, particularly in relation to diversity and equity. Over the past decade, Mountain University's (MU) student body has become more diverse, with increasing representation from various socioeconomic backgrounds, gender-underrepresented groups, and marginalized communities.

MU's River Library is committed to assessing whether its collections effectively meet the needs of all students, particularly those from underrepresented and marginalized groups. As a faculty librarian at MU since 2015, department chair from 2017 to 2022, and interim director from 2022 to 2024, this researcher has witnessed firsthand the university's shifting demographics. These changes align with national trends and demographic predictions (Carlson,

2022; Chun & Evans, 2019; Gorman, 2015; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2018; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore student perceptions of diversity and equity support within academic collections. Specifically, it examines how patrons engage with River Library's collections to determine whether their needs are being met and to identify areas for improvement that could enhance library usage. This includes analyzing collection usage trends and uncovering potential barriers that may prevent students from accessing resources. A particular focus is placed on underrepresented and marginalized student groups to foster a sense of belonging and ensure they feel welcomed in the library space.

As technology, student demographics, and academic trends continue to evolve, understanding current user needs is essential. Through ongoing assessment, this research aims to inform necessary updates to the collections and refine the research process to better serve an ever-changing student population.

Significance of the Study

In the United States, academic libraries are designed to serve all students, yet institutions often fall short in adequately supporting increasingly diverse student populations (Chen, 2018). This study employs an action research approach to evaluate the academic library collections at Mountain University (MU), a mid-sized Carnegie-classified public institution in the Northeast (Carnegie, 2023). The focus is on understanding how current students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, perceive the library's collections in terms of diversity and equity support.

This research works to address one of the aspects raised in a recent local climate study, 'acceptance and belonging,' through a particular lens (PASSHE, 2022). By seeking to

understand if River Library is meeting belonging and equity needs from the student perspective, this research can be used as a guide for other HEI institutions. Action research is used to identify, address and resolve immediate issues (Mertler, 2020). This can lead to new improvements in library operations, collection development and management such as selection and deselection process changes, as well as other currently unimagined changes. These potential outcomes could become standard best practices in the field depending on the results (Mertler, 2020).

Research Questions

This research seeks to answer the following questions from the student perspective.

1. What are the perceptions of underrepresented students on their specific needs for an academic library collection that is diverse and equity based?
2. How is the library currently supporting the diversity and equity of its students through its collections?

Collecting and analyzing this data will determine if River Library is meeting the needs of their students, particularly their underrepresented and marginalized students. This research will inform the academic library community if and how academic libraries are meeting their mission of equitable educational empowerment, and what changes may need to be made.

After survey data is collected, it will be analyzed and coded by one individual. Using a combination of the survey software Qualtrics and Microsoft Excel, data will be anonymized and analyzed to review if surveys were completed in full or partially completed. If the majority of responses are completed in full, only those responses will be used.

Definition of Terms

BIPOC: stands for Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Pronounced “bye-pock,” this is a term specific to the United States, intended to center the experiences of Black and Indigenous groups and demonstrate solidarity between communities of color (Davidson, 2024)

Culture. Culture is learned and shared human patterns or models for living; day-to-day living patterns; these models and patterns pervade all aspects of human social interaction...mankind's primary adaptive mechanism (Lindsey et al., 2005; Lindsey, et al.2009).

Diversity. The practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, etc. (Oxford Languages, 2022).

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion. Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI or EDI) “is a conceptual framework that promotes the fair treatment and full participation of all people, especially populations that have historically been underrepresented or subject to discrimination because of their background, identity, disability, etc. (American Psychological Association, 2022).”

Gender: Gender is a multidimensional social and cultural construct that includes gender roles, expressions, behaviors, activities, power dynamics, and/or attributes that a given society associates with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time (National Institutes of Health, 2024).

LGBTQ+: An acronym that collectively refers to individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, sometimes stated as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) or, historically, GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender). The addition of the

Q for queer is a more recently preferred version of the acronym as cultural opinions of the term queer focus increasingly on its positive, reclaimed definition (see Queer). The Q can also stand for questioning, referring to those who are still exploring their own sexuality and/or gender. The “+” represents those who are part of the community, but for whom LGBTQ does not accurately capture or reflect their identity (National Institutes of Health, 2011).

LibQUAL: LibQUAL is a tool that libraries use to solicit, track, understand, and act upon users’ opinions of service quality. “The protocol is a rigorously tested web-based survey that helps libraries assess and improve library services, change organizational culture, and market the library. The survey instrument measures library users’ minimum, perceived, and desired service levels of service quality across three dimensions: Affect of Service, Information Control, and Library as Place” (Association of Research Libraries, 2018). MU’s LibQUAL was distributed November 1 – 19, 2021.

Race and/or Ethnicity. Race is not a biological category but a social construction that is given meaning and significance in specified historical, political, and social contexts. Historically, race has been predicated on phenotypic characteristics that mark "racial differences" in order to legitimate prejudice and discrimination based on these supposed differences (Lindsey et al., 2009). Ethnicity is commonly associated with membership in a non-dominant group (not of predominantly European ancestry) and is perceived as constituting a different culture in terms of language, style of dress, political consciousness and worldview, foods, music and so on, different than that of the dominant group (Lindsey et al., 2009).

Sexual Orientation or Sexuality: Sexual orientation describes sexual attraction, behavior, and identity. Use sexual orientation rather than sexual preference. Preference suggests that non-heterosexuality is a choice, a concept often used to discriminate against the LGBTQI+

community. Preference also suggests a selection from two or more choices, excluding bisexual people and pansexual people, among others (National Institutes of Health, 2024).

Underrepresented/Marginalized Groups. Non-majority groups, such as individuals who identify as BIPOC or LGBTQ+. A relatively small group of people, especially one commonly discriminated against in a community, society, or nation, differing from others in race, religion, language, or political persuasion (Oxford Languages, 2022).

Weeding or Deselection: Weeding is sometimes thought of as selection in reverse because it removes resources from the collection when they are no longer useful. It involves evaluation of the collection in order to determine which resources need to be removed from the collection. This process has been described as retirement, pruning, reverse selection, deselection, relegation, and discarding (Doll & Barron, 2002).

Summary

This research aims to help librarians identify gaps in academic collections by examining student perceptions of diversity and equity support. By addressing these gaps, librarians can develop solutions to improve collection management at local, national, and potentially international levels. Additionally, the study may uncover barriers to implementing these changes. Ultimately, this research could raise awareness of DEI in academic libraries, provide valuable insights for better fulfilling their mission, and pave the way for future improvements in student support.

Chapter 2

This chapter examines the history of libraries, existing literature on academic libraries, and the physical challenges they face. It also explores the challenges confronting higher education students today, including issues of racism and LGBTQ+ inclusion within academic libraries. This context helps frame the specific challenges River Library is facing. Additionally, the chapter introduces belongingness as a key framework for evaluating academic library collections, recognizing its critical role in student retention. River Library has been actively working to enhance belongingness for several years and now seeks to assess its progress. By exploring these facets, this chapter establishes the foundation for the action research study at River Library.

Background

While conducting a project to review the library's entire physical collection, this researcher observed that many materials were predominantly from the 1970s and reflected majority cultural perspectives (OCLC Local Report, 2017). River Library had minimal diversity, equity, and inclusive (DEI) content, prompting a more intentional approach to purchasing both physical and digital materials.

However, this shift also raised a critical question: Is River Library truly meeting the needs of all students, or only those already familiar with using libraries for support? This concern extends to first-generation students, racially and ethnically underrepresented and marginalized students, individuals with visible and invisible disabilities, and those who identify outside traditional gender and sexuality norms. As Carlson (2022) notes, "libraries are distinct among campus facilities in that they serve at least three functions: as a place, as a collection, and as a

source of human expertise” (p. 4). This study seeks to explore whether River Library fulfills these roles equitably for all students.

MU is like many other HEI institutions, a state funded Carnegie medium sized public institution (Carnegie, 2023). River Library is facing the same DEI challenges that academic libraries are facing nationally. However, this awareness is currently supported by minimal academic content, so this researcher decided to not only do the internal research but publish it to help others in similar positions.

Brief History of Libraries

Libraries are known to have existed since at least 2000 B.C. (The Library of Congress, 2017). Originally, libraries were meant to house and store documents, and over time they have become cultural and community centers which seek to meet the needs of every community member (Gorman, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2020; The Library of Congress, 2017). Since each community is unique with distinct needs, every library must also be uniquely tailored to serve its patrons.

Since each library is an individual entity that seeks to meet the needs of every patron, they each contain different physical and digital collections and provide non-identical services and programming to meet the needs of their local community. This necessitates that resources and support be available for a wide range of diverse individuals at each library (Alexander, 2013; American Library Association, 2007; Gorman, 2015; Gulati, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2020). As a type of cultural heritage institution, libraries are a locus for their communities (Rubin & Rubin, 2020). Before the Civil Rights Movement, Richard Wright (1945) describes what using the library was like for him in *Black Boy*. This is Wright’s (1945) memoir that follows his experiences growing up in the Jim Crow South. Here he depicts a scene that explains how he

could only go into the library to get books for white men. To check out books for himself he had to borrow a white man's library card. When others saw him reading, they questioned why. Below is Wright's (1945) insight into what reading afforded him:

That night in my rented room, while letting the hot water run over my can of pork and beans in the sink, I opened *A Book of Prefaces* and began to read. I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weaknesses of people, mocking God, authority. What was this? I stood up, trying to realize what reality lay behind the meaning of the words.... Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon? No. It frightened me. I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it...

I forged more notes and my trips to the library became frequent. Reading grew into a passion. My first serious novel was Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*. It made me see my boss, Mr. Gerald, and identify him as an American type. I would smile when I saw him lugging his golf bags into the office. I had always felt a vast distance separating me from the boss, and now I felt closer to him, though still distant. I felt now that I knew him, that I could feel the very limits of his narrow life. And this had happened because I had read a novel about a mythical man called George F. Babbitt.

The plots and stories in the novels did not interest me so much as the point of view revealed. I gave myself over to each novel without reserve, without trying to criticize it; it was enough for me to see and feel something different. And for me, everything was something different. Reading was like a drug, a dope. The novels created moods in which I lived for days. But I could not conquer my sense of guilt, my feeling that the white men around me knew that I was changing, that I had begun to regard them differently. (Wright, 1945, Chapter 13)

Access to libraries and literature changed his life and made him a writer. Today, he is still a seminal African American writer, but he had to trick the system to get access to literature.

American libraries began a systematic effort to serve diverse racial and ethnic groups in the 20th century, and inclusiveness and equality are core tenets of these cultural institutions (ALA, 2022; Alexander, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2020). This drive towards equity became particularly relevant during and after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s (Chen, 2018; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021). Considering the current social justice tensions that still exist in the US, this set of values is just as relevant today.

The American Library Association (ALA) also holds “diversity” and “equitable access to information and library services” for all people as two of their eight key action areas (ALA, 2022). The ALA is the premier professional librarian association in the United States of America for all types of libraries and has chapters for public and academic libraries, as well as further specializations. With the guiding professional organization prioritizing these values, it is inevitable that these then become ingrained social mores in the libraries they represent. However, this process can take decades, especially across institutions that span the United States of America (Alexander, 2013; Chun & Evans, 2018; Gorman, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2020).

Currently research is just beginning to emerge that examines if libraries are mindful of aiming their services in a way that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive to all individuals who may use their services. These DEI provisions may include materials and/or services for those with disabilities, low-income individuals, underrepresented and marginalized groups, etc. It may also include special processes such as adding or editing catalog records to make specific items more discoverable, training staff on DEI practices, hiring diverse staff, collection development, programming, or other practices (Alexander, 2013; Anaya & Maxey-Harris, 2017; Carlson, 2022; Gorman, 2015; Gulati, 2010; Kennedy et al., 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2020; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). This awareness of DEI is growing nationwide, particularly in the academic community (Carlson, 2022; Chun & Evans, 2019; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2018; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). As with other areas of American culture, libraries have intrinsic, systematic racism models in place from the cultural norms of several decades ago that need to be addressed (Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021) – such as updating language and terms in the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). Additionally, collections are based on selectors’ opinions, and depending on each library’s collection management policies and individual workers, this could lead to very slanted collections (Gorman, 2015; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021).

The last thirty years, since the arrival of the internet in particular, have seen increasing change in how libraries serve their communities (Aldrich, 2018; Carlson, 2022; Gorman, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2020). Libraries are struggling to change in this era of “amplified disruption” (Aldrich, 2018, p. 5) and break many of these systematic DEI barriers. While 69% of Americans still find the library to have importance to themselves and/or their community, 30% of people no longer know what functions a library performs (Aldrich, 2018). To meet needs, libraries must

address this lack of knowledge, as they continue to adapt and try new services, programs, and ideas to meet community needs (Aldrich, 2018; Carlson, 2022; Gorman, 2015; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2020). Libraries are community centers, and they build community through increasing understanding, respect and empathy, which in turn builds social equity (Aldrich, 2018; Gorman, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2020). Increased sense of community and social equity builds resistance, which is a useful trait in these increasingly disruptive times (Aldrich, 2018).

There has been an increasing number of material bans and challenges in libraries as reported to the ALA with the highest reported total in 2023, and constantly increasing (ALA Banned, 2024). Material bans and challenges are when a community member attempts to see a book, movie, program, etc. removed from a library. These can be done for any reason but the most common reasons over time are racism and homophobia, with the majority of books featuring diverse protagonists or underrepresented and marginalized authors (ALA, 2024). These bans and challenges have prompted the creation of the ALA's Banned Books Week to bring attention to the national issue of these materials and the national issue of censorship and freedom of speech, leading librarians to be social justice warriors on these topics (ALA, 2024). As patrons push to have certain materials and programs banned, it can reveal a lot about mindsets and values held in communities, and shows that as a country, America has a long way to go to be equitable to all of its citizens.

Physical Challenges

Reviewing how other academic libraries have approached physical building and collection challenges, there are a variety of approaches. Some researchers develop unique frameworks that work solely at their institution (Arua, 2011; Nelson, et al., 2020; O'Neill, 2016),

some researchers share their collection management policies (Kimmelman, 2018; Luo, 2021; Murphy, 2013), and others give general advice while sharing the broad strokes of their unique challenges (Metz & Gray, 2005; Nelson, et al., 2020; O'Neill, 2016; Shen, 2012 ; Sapp & Watson, 1989). All share the reasonings behind the changes, which are frequently space management (Burke & Kilb, 2019; Kimmelman, 2018; Metz & Gray, 2005; Murphy, 2013), budget (Kimmelman, 2018; O'Neill, 2016; Sapp & Watson, 1989), and ensuring the collection is relevant (Arua, 2011; Kimmelman, 2018; Metz & Gray, 2005; Nelson, et al., 2020; O'Neill, 2016; Shen, 2012). Libraries that performed successful deselection processes had less crowded shelves which led to an increase in circulation (Kimmelman, 2018; Murphy, 2013).

Library information usage behavior of print material is also researched, such as how the shift to electronic resources has changed both how patrons use print collections and how libraries manage their collections (Branin, et al., 1999; Luo, 2021). Book collections are seeking ways to be more targeted at patron usage patterns and curricular needs (Branin, et al., 1999; Luo, 2021). It is imperative that a library collection, particularly an academic library that actively aids in the education of students, have a collection that is topically current, with materials in good repair. A good state of repair ensures students will want to use the materials, as well as maintain a clean and healthy environment for students and new physical acquisitions (Arua, 2011; Branin, et al., 1999; Burke & Kilb, 2019; Kimmelman, 2018; Luo, 2021; Metz & Gray, 2005; Murphy, 2013; Nelson, et al., 2020; O'Neill, 2016; Shen, 2012; Sapp & Watson, 1989). The currency of the collection is dependent upon the topic, for instance history books cover all known data. However, other subjects require materials be current within a shorter time span, such as within ten years, for topics like medical volumes, computer programming and security, etc. Current information is preferable for most subjects to stay relevant to emerging discoveries in various

fields (American Library Association; 2017b). Keeping a collection in the desired status requires periodic review, frequently termed “weeding” as undesired items are “weeded” or discarded (Doll & Barron, 2002). This, depending on the unique circumstances, may result in the item being deaccessioned and sold in a book sale which may create more acquisition funding for the library, or disposing of the item if it is in disrepair.

All found studies concerning library usage center on user needs. While the approaches may differ, each study is patron driven and seeks to address changes to their physical collections and spaces to reflect current user needs (Arua, 2011; Branin, et al., 1999; Burke & Kilb, 2019; Kimmelman, 2018; Luo, 2021; Metz & Gray, 2005; Murphy, 2013; Nelson, et al., 2020; O’Neill, 2016; Shen, 2012; Sapp & Watson, 1989).

Broughton (2019) states that academic libraries may be one of the most inclusive environments on campus in response to changing student needs, however due to a lack of research on library spaces libraries still fall short on their intention. More research is necessary on how space can be “welcoming” to people of color (Broughton, 2019). Some research has begun in this area, but it is usually bundled into campus studies (Blunk, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Gopalan et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2020).

In Murphy et al. (2020), they found that HEIs struggle with the persistence and completion of students, particularly from historically disadvantaged student groups. Through a focused intervention that worked to increase first-year students' sense of belonging they increased the persistence in racial and ethnic underrepresented and marginalized and first-generation students across control groups and improved core academic outcomes (Murphy et al., 2020). In Gopalan et al. (2022) they compare student reported levels of belonging in pre- and post- COVID and compare these feelings of belonging to mental health. The authors found

correlations, and a sense of belonging to campus is an important facet of mental health pre, during and post the pandemic, further emphasizing the importance of an inclusive climate to lower social isolation, anxiety and depression (Gopalan et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2020). Gopalan and Brady (2019) found in a national sample that ethnic and racial underrepresented and marginalized and first-generation students report lower belonging than peers at 4-year schools, where belonging predicts better persistence, engagement and mental health. There is no clear or single answer on how to make spaces more “welcoming” to traditional ethnically underrepresented and marginalized groups, just a general consensus that they “need to be”. These studies tracked if students felt they belonged and if they persisted but did not go into depth about the factors that contributed to the feelings of belonging and how to build them (Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Gopalan et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2020).

Ethnic Challenges and Racism in Libraries

When researching inherent racism and ethnic challenges in libraries, most commonly found are articles relating to racism and ethnic prejudices originating in staff members (Alabi, 2014; Espinal et al., 2018; Galabi, 2015; Giulietti, et al., 2019; Gohr, 2017; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Nataraj, et al.; 2020; Srikanth, 2021; Villar, 2024). Some scholars argue that institutional racism is deeply embedded in libraries, as it is in many social structures (Jones & Murphy, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021), and there is broad consensus that meaningful change is needed. As R. Eric Thomas, an African American authors states:

My parents would take us to the library every week and they would let us borrow as many books as the library would allow which was 40. And then as I got older I would go to the library myself and it was a sanctuary and it was a space of endless possibility and there’s so many ways I feel that different forces in the world will tell you that there are no

possibilities for you or there are limited possibilities. Your outcomes aren't great, you know, because of your zip code, your race, your sexual orientation, your gender, your life. And the fact that I could walk into this space and open up a book and discover characters who were living lives that were just like mine and characters who were so drastically different than mine and know that they promised an escape, they also promised another way out, another universe.” (McBride, 2023)

Thomas showcases the necessity of the library in his life, viewing them as sanctuaries of possibility and showing the transformative power of literature they had on him.

Studies have shown that librarians respond more slowly and less courteously to individuals with names perceived as Black (Giulietti et al., 2019). However, this researcher has not found similar studies examining the experiences of Latinx or other underrepresented and marginalized groups. Despite this gap, existing literature strongly suggests that ethnic and racial prejudice is present in libraries (Alabi, 2014; Espinal et al., 2018; Galabi, 2015; Giulietti et al., 2019; Gohr, 2017; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Nataraj et al., 2020; Srikanth, 2021; Villar, 2024). Additionally, the overwhelming majority of library employees in the U.S. are white women. According to the most recent ALA Demographic Survey (2017), of the more than 37,000 respondents, 81% were female, and 66% were between the ages of 35 and 64. Figure 1 further breaks down these demographics by race.

Figure 1

ALA Members by Race or Family Origin

2
ALA Office of Research and Statistics
Demographic Study Report 2017

ALA Members by Race or Family Origin *% of members self-identifying*

	2014	2017
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1.1	1.2
Asian	3.5	3.6
Black or African American	4.3	4.4
Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.3	0.2
White	87.1	86.7
Other	3.7	4.0

When asked “**How do you describe your ethnicity?**” in 2014, 3.9% responded “Hispanic or Latino.” In 2017, 4.7% responded “Hispanic or Latino.”

Note: The ALA Office of Research and Statistics created this chart of members and their reported racial identity in 2017. This Figure compares 2014 to 2017, there was no more current data available.

The ALA has diversity statements (Anaya & Maxey-Harris, 2017), and many libraries have individual position statements that state they are hiring for diverse candidates and support community diversity. However, statistics show that there is still a white majority in staffing libraries, and that the profession has not changed significantly in racial or ethnic diversity over the last 15 years (Data USA (2024; DPE Research Department, 2024). Following Villar’s (2024) advice, this research is seeking to listen to BIPOC voices and answer Villar’s (2024) questions (slightly paraphrased):

- “What are the experiences of BIPOC entering white-dominant spaces?”
- How can I prepare myself to create more inclusive environments? What privileges do I have to forgo to create more equitable opportunities?

- How do I listen and include BIPOC voices to ensure they have a “seat at the table” and their voices are valued?
- How can I actively listen to and act upon the experiences of BIPOC with empathy, fairness, and compassion?”

DEI content in a library collection can be seen as non-white authors and subject matter focusing on highlighting underrepresented voices, characters and subject material ("Inclusive Booklists", 2020). Poet Yesika Salgado, a Los Angeles born Salvadoran, said: “Without libraries my peers and myself wouldn’t have had the access to literature that we identify with and encouraged us to tell our own stories. To restrict their abilities to loan books is to stifle voices like ours” (Fight for the Future, 2022). Salgado (Fight for the Future, 2022) sees libraries as essential spaces for representation, empowerment and self-expression. The phrase "access to literature that we identify with" emphasizes the importance of inclusivity in libraries, suggesting that books serve as mirrors for marginalized or underrepresented voices. Additionally, the idea that libraries "encouraged us to tell our own stories" highlights their role in fostering creativity, confidence, and a sense of agency. By stating that restricting book loans "stifles voices like ours," the person argues that limiting library access is an act of silencing, particularly for communities that rely on public resources for education and self-discovery. Overall, this quote presents libraries as gateways to representation and storytelling, and any effort to restrict them is seen as a direct threat to diverse voices and opportunities for expression. Ethnically and racially underrepresented and marginalized main characters or histories of their cultures or sub-cultures in America would count as DEI content, as would books written by authors who identify as those from underrepresented and marginalized groups such as those with a disability. LGBTQ+ topics and authors also fit in this category as do multicultural works. Items that educate on religions

beyond the commonly known also fall into this category such as Taoism. In short, any work that has a non-majority view or opposing view could potentially be considered DEI content.

LGBTQ+ in Libraries

Another facet of diversity that should be assessed in regard to collections is that of gender and sexuality. The ALA tracks books across the USA that are banned or challenged in an attempt to censor materials in town, school and college libraries. Over the last twenty years there has been a significant shift from primarily racist content bans to primarily LGBTQ+ bans (American Library Association, 2023). The LGBTQ+ community is currently facing several challenges with collections in libraries across the USA. While many librarians actively work towards promoting resources and having inclusive and LGBTQ+ positive collections, there are also articles with research that suggests there has been no evaluation on if libraries are actually meeting LGBTQ+ patron needs (Altobelli & Lambert; 2022; Betts-Green, 2020).

Torrey Peters, the first transgender woman to be nominated for the Women's Book Award states:

I flat-out owe my career as a trans author to the unimpeded circulation of digital books: the first trans books that inspired me were digital, my own first books were published digitally. Bookstores didn't carry our books at first. Therefore, any readers that have felt their own emotions changed by my published work — no matter in what medium — ultimately also owe that change to digital books. Everybody benefits when digital books are accessible. (EveryLibrary, 2023)

This quote highlights the person's view of libraries—particularly digital access—as vital for inclusivity, representation, and literary innovation. Peters (2023) sees digital books as a crucial tool for marginalized communities, particularly trans authors and readers, who historically faced

barriers to traditional publishing and bookstore distribution. By stating she "flat-out owes" her career to digital books, she emphasizes that without open access to literature, both for reading and publishing, voices like hers might have remained unheard. The phrase "everybody benefits when digital books are accessible" reinforces her belief that literature should be freely available to all, as it fosters personal growth, emotional impact, and broader societal change. Overall, this quote presents libraries (and digital book circulation) as agents of equity and progress, ensuring that underrepresented voices can be heard, shared, and valued in the literary world.

Rigoberto Gonzalez is an American writer and book critic who self-identifies as a gay Chicano. In *Red-Inked Retablos*, he relates how when young the weekly bookmobile and libraries had a great impact on his life. After his family moved to Idaho, he was able to go to a public library building for the first time. Reading was one of his havens where he escaped his reality for fiction and books helped him understand himself and the world around him.

I was stunned after reading *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Not in the way those surprise endings in the murder mysteries left me thinking about how the solution had eluded me. It was a different feeling altogether, as if the book was meant to guide me—the reader—to a discovery about myself. But the book was about Holly Golightly, not me. How, then . . . ?
Well, I never! (Gonzalez, 2013, p.11)

Similar to Peters (2023), Gonzalez (2013) shares a belief that libraries provide more than just books—they provide pathways to self-discovery, emotional connection, and new perspectives on one's own life.

Identity and Intersectionality

Ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexuality are all single facets of individual identities, and individuals may identify as multiple underrepresented and marginalized facets in

these and other areas. Intersectionality acknowledges the diversity within social groups and individuals (Corlett & Mavin; 2014; Dill & Zambrana, 2020; Holvino, 2012; Wijeyesinghe and Jones, 2014). As Weber (2010) writes:

[A]t the individual level, race, class, gender and sexuality are fundamental sources of identity for all of us: how we see ourselves, who we think we are. They are, in fact, so fundamental that to be without them would be like being without an identity at all.
(p.119)

This quote suggests that Weber (2010) views libraries as crucial spaces for identity exploration and affirmation. By stating that race, class, gender, and sexuality are fundamental to how we see ourselves, the speaker implies that access to diverse literature—often found in libraries—helps individuals understand, embrace, and validate their identities.

The present study will focus on each participant's multiple social identities in an effort to better represent the whole person and their intersectionality of identities (Wijeyesinghe and Jones, 2014). This will allow for each individuals unique experiences, positive or negative, to be highlighted (Wijeyesinghe and Jones, 2014). Since this allows for context of both the individual and their identity and the social and institutional processes that determine opportunities given to individuals, this will help in analyzing the systems currently in place and what needs to change (Dill & Zambrana, 2020; Holvino, 2012; Wijeyesinghe and Jones, 2014).

Local Context Challenges

Some of our local challenges mirror national demographic trends, particularly in our staff composition. The author, a European American cis female, acknowledges that she lacks the breadth of experiences necessary to fully inform her decisions in creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for all students, especially those who are BIPOC, queer, neurodiverse,

or have disabilities. While our staff is fairly balanced in terms of gender—comprising male, female, and nonbinary members—and includes several LGBTQ+ staff who can offer insights into various facets of cultural diversity, it remains predominantly white and adheres to Western religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). Despite many staff members striving to be self-aware and mindful of their behaviors, there is often insufficient cultural knowledge to effectively engage with all our diverse students.

Another challenge is the building. Built in 1980, River Library was not made for today's technological needs, and the wiring infrastructure is not there for the many computers and devices necessary for current educational needs. The space was also built for wall-to-wall bookshelves, as there was no internet and all materials were physical. Now, the majority of our resources are online. Many of the bookshelves are being removed to make more open, collaborative spaces for students to work in. Parts of the building that have never been remodeled or updated, such as the bathrooms and elevators, are in dire need of updating. There should be an improved accessible entrance for those with mobility or other issues that prevent them from being able to utilize the main entrance, a concern that was mentioned in the last action research survey but still has not been addressed. Currently anyone who requires the use of ADA door must maneuver in a maze-like fashion to get in and out of the building, which adds even further duress to individuals already dealing with inequity and discourages use of the library. In MU's LibQUAL 2018 survey, there were several comments indicating a desire for building renovations, additional group workspaces, newer materials in the collection, and a need for mold remediation (Association of Research Libraries, 2018). Respondents were unspecific about how they desired these changes to come about. Questions about what specifically patrons wanted to

see changed in the building and physical collections were not asked, requiring further research which led to the 2021 study (Smith, 2021).

Our physical collections are an additional challenge. The main collection has just been weeded (2023) however it is a slow process to identify, locate, purchase, and process new, diverse materials across every subject and discipline. It is also a consistent challenge to be mindful of each academic department's needs for accreditation materials. Each year, the budget for libraries shrinks as well, which is a national and possibly also international norm.

Student Population

“Inequality in education is the most pressing issue in diversity in the U.S.” (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016, p. 18). This quote from Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor highlights a fundamental, systemic problem within the education system, including higher education.

Academic libraries, in their mission to serve diverse student populations, are uniquely positioned to advocate for equity and social justice (Alexander, 2013; Anaya & Maxey-Harris, 2017; Ely, 2021; Jones & Murphy, 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2020). Campus resources and spaces must be designed to support diverse students (Alexander, 2013; Au et al., 2016; Kennedy et al., 2018; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016; Spring, 2020). As Aldrich (2018) states, “Education is a key component to creating a ...world that [is] socially equitable” (p. 20). Academic libraries are ideally placed to both support education and promote equity.

Increasingly, students require their campus library to gain access to materials to complete their assignments (Alexander, 2013; Carlson, 2022; Choi & Carpenter, 2017; Ely, 2021; Fischer et al., 2015; Hilton, 2016, 2020; Ma & Pender, 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2020; Senack, 2014).

These include textbooks, journal articles, and other research materials. This is not true solely for students with financial hardships, but true for all students as few could afford to buy every

research material used to complete their degree. However, many academic libraries have shrinking budgets and staff reductions, making it more difficult to meet the needs of their communities (Aldrich, 2018; Carlson, 2022).

At the core of libraries is the idea of “accessibility” – walking in and finding the exact item or service a patron wants. This may be a book, a computer to search for jobs, help finding the answer to a question, a warm chair, etc. As Venezuelan author, lawyer and human rights activist Marianne Díaz Hernández said:

Libraries are the guardians and the bulwark of cultural diversity and inclusion, particularly for those who don’t have the means to access culture by other pathways. They are the place where people, particularly children, can access books and other materials about the topics that concern them, embarrass them, or that they don’t feel that they can talk with anyone else. The status of libraries as a place free of censorship and surveillance, to seek knowledge we need and stories that reflect us, is one of the keystones of a free, open, and democratic society, and every inch that we lose in this battle contributes to the disintegration of civic space. (Fight for the Future, 2022)

Angie Thomas, African American author says:

Growing up, I was unable to travel because it was simply something my family couldn't afford. Books, however, allowed me to see that there was more to the world than my neighborhood. They saved my life in so many ways, and libraries were the only way I was able to access those books. (McBride, 2023)

Access to these materials can be life changing. While authors are referring to public libraries, academic libraries must still meet these needs and be able to meet needs for students on and off campus (Carlson, 2022; Green & Bowser, 2002; Liu & Luo, 2011).

In the United States, many people still live without the internet, without the means to go somewhere quiet to study, who do not have the resources to pay for internet or materials that libraries provide (Elumalai et al., 2020; Lane, 2022; Reddick et al., 2020; Sunita, 2020; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021; Wood, 2021). As of 2019, nearly a quarter of the United States does not have internet at home (Reddick et al., 2020). When the pandemic hit, we saw that to exist without the internet in today's world is increasingly and incredibly difficult. Libraries helped their communities manage through COVID-19, through loaning technology such as Wi-Fi-hotspots and laptops to help families survive in a suddenly digital world (Carlson, 2022; Reddick et al., 2020; Sunita, 2020; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021; Wood, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic most services went virtual; this was, and in some cases still is, devastating to many households (Alola et al., 2021; Reddick et al., 2020; Sunita, 2020; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021; Wood, 2021).

Academic libraries were part of the effort to support the sudden education shift. Now that quarantine has lifted, some students prefer to only use digital library features and will never enter the physical facilities, but others will prefer the physical space (Carlson, 2022; Gorman, 2015). Part of this is due to mindset and part of this is due to the increase in virtual learning and distance education where some students may not be able to physically visit campus (Carlson, 2022).

In severe cases, students facing severe financial hardship also face food insecurity and homelessness (Choi & Carpenter, 2017; Fischer et al., 2015; Hilton, 2016, 2020; Ma & Pender, 2021; Senack, 2014; Soria et al., 2020; Sunita, 2020; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021). Beyond simply not having access to a computer, or internet, or even course materials like textbooks, there are college students struggling to survive. Students with disabilities were more likely to experience these severe financial hardships than those without disabilities during the

COVID-19 pandemic (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021; Soria et al., 2020; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021). This underrepresented and marginalized group is a vulnerable population that requires more care, but was neglected, much like international students during the pandemic who faced similar challenges during quarantine (Cruz, 2019; Majorana, 2021; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021). Both HEIs and their academic libraries seek to support these groups and their various needs.

MU's underrepresented and marginalized undergraduate students have lower rates of academic satisfaction as reported in our last climate survey (PASSHE, 2022). Observations by the researcher in the local library and regional meetings and conferences suggest this may be due in part to under-utilization of library resources. Existing research shows that this is common for underrepresented and marginalized undergraduates (Blunk, 2020; Bradley University, 2024; Broughton, 2019). Underutilization of university resources has been linked to poorer retention of underrepresented and marginalized students (Blunk, 2020; Bradley University, 2024; Broughton, 2019). These students have been shown to face more barriers than well-presented students when it comes to accessing library resources. The present research's objective is to identify specific diversity-related barriers hindering underrepresented and marginalized MU students from accessing library resources which may demonstrate a potential correlation between library usage and academic satisfaction.

Belongingness

Belongingness was first proposed by psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943 as part of his hierarchy of needs, wherein humans possess a need for a sense of belonging and acceptance among social groups – friends, family, teams, religion, or work, etc. (Maslow, 1943). There must be a feeling of belonging in a group. Since the 1940s, the “sense of belonging” has been further

studied, notably by psychologists Baumeister and Leary (1995) who argue that if individuals do not feel that they belong there are severe emotional consequences, indicating that the need to belong is a significant human drive. Inability to meet the need to belong results in loneliness, mental distress, and depression (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Belongingness can be defined as a fundamental, deep need to feel valued, accepted and connected to others within a group or community (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943; Pardede, et al, 2021; Tinto, 2015; Tinto 2017). It is comprised of the need to belong and to be accepted in one's social setting, to feel connected (Pardede, et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2018).

Belonging and Academic Success

Tinto (2015), one of the leading researchers in academic belongingness, shows that HEI students have several different motivations for attending and persisting through college. The range of goals and motivations matters as students with varying goals and motivations for going to college will most likely be differently affected by their experiences in college (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Guiffrida, et al., 2013; Tinto, 2017). Tinto (2003, 2015, 2017) has performed several case studies at HEIs and argues that those who have the strongest sense of belonging are the most likely to persist.

Higher education institutions are always concerned with their student retention rates, as student retention is a huge factor of the financial health of an institution. One of the indicators of retention is a student's sense of belonging to the institution (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Felten & Lambert, 2020; Pardede, et al, 2021; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Tinto; 2015; Tinto; 2017). Relationships are built on interactions, and these interactions must be stable and rooted in concern for each other's welfare (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For college, a sense of belonging "refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling

or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff and peers (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 4).

A strong sense of belongingness has proven significant in predicting academic and psychological adjustment and can help bring in and retain First Generation students (Kafka, 2024; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). The sense of belonging is a key component for late adolescents in college and an increase their academic performance and their self-esteem (Kafka, 2024; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). A sense of belonging on campuses has been found to predict if a student will persist in their education (Hausmann, et al, 2007; Museus, 2014). Entering college is a new and unfamiliar environment for many students and frequently causes anxiety and increased stress, especially for students living away from home (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Felten & Lambert, 2020; Hausmann, et al, 2007; Kafka, 2024; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). If students continue to feel that they do not belong they may drop out, suffer mental and physical illnesses, and may suffer from behavior problems (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Felten & Lambert, 2020; Kafka, 2024). What Hausman, et al (2007) found was that no student background characteristics were associated with the initial status of institutional commitment, meaning that student's sense of belonging is not determined by their background but by supports provided by the HEIs and the sense of belonging they feel at the institution. HEIs must foster a sense of belonging with students immediately and work to keep that sense of belonging, as this will help increase persistence since students with higher sense of belonging have greater persistence (Hausmann, et al, 2007).

Belongingness and Academic Libraries

Academic libraries play a positive role in recruitment, retention and enrollment (Crawford, 2015; Scoulas, 2021). Libraries are a hub of content and atmosphere that reflect the campus and institutional values. One of the few “third spaces” where students can come in and not be expected to spend money, interact with another person if they do not want to, study, hang out, spend free time, be alone or with others – libraries fulfill several roles to many people (Gorman, 2015; Scoulas, 2021). In Scoulas (2021) “the quantitative data revealed that students using both the physical and online library had the greatest sense of belonging, whereas students who never used any library resources had the least sense of belonging (p. 1).” Academic libraries strive to create positive spaces of belonging, but what does that mean and how do you do that for a campus and student body that is in a constant state of change?

It is unclear if the needs of underrepresented students are being met. Research has not shown if students find materials on the shelves not only for classes but also for fun that engage their interests or if they see themselves represented in those materials.

Academic libraries show their care and concern for their students’ welfare through positive social interactions, diverse and inclusive collections, and welcoming and thoughtfully designed spaces to encourage and help build students’ sense of belonging. These efforts must be long term and persistent to create belongingness and inclusion in students (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Felten & Lambert, 2020; Kafka, 2024). Through this community building, academic libraries can contribute to their institutions’ retention and increase student belonging and wellbeing (Gruss, et al., 2020). One of the ways academic libraries can seek to promote belonging, particularly in BIPOC students, is through eliminating and minimizing environmental microaggressions wherever possible (Assensoh, 2020; David, 2014; Nadal, 2013; Reynolds, et al.; 2010; Solorzano, et al., 2000; Steinberg, 2021). Examples of

this include diversity of pictures of students, faculty and staff in materials, literature and marketing materials, and diversity of materials in collections (Assensoh, 2020; David, 2014; Nadal, 2013; Reynolds, et al.; 2010; Solorzano, et al., 2000; Steinberg, 2021).

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) is a communication theory that views media consumers as active participants in the communication process, as opposed to passive recipients of media messages, and these active participants have reasons for why they choose and use media to satisfy their needs (Blumler & Katz; 1974; Mehrad & Tajer; 2016; Ruggiero, 2000). Developed in the 1940s and further refined in the 1970s, this theory emphasizes the active role of users in selecting media that satisfies their psychological and social needs. An individual may choose media to fulfill specific needs such as entertainment, information, personal identity or social interaction (Blumler & Katz; 1974; Mehrad & Tajer; 2016; Ruggiero, 2000). UGT proposes that individuals expect a certain gratification or result, from consuming media (Blumler & Katz; 1974; Mehrad & Tajer; 2016; Ruggiero, 2000).

Individuals use media to fulfill different desires and motivations in their lives. UGT divides these into several categories, including cognitive, affective, integrative, social and tension release needs, all of which play an important role in fulfilling those individuals' expectations.

Applying UGT to Assess Library Collections:

Libraries, as information-rich institutions, provide access to a wide array of resources. The Uses and Gratifications Theory can be a valuable tool to assess and improve library collections by understanding how users interact with and choose materials. There are several

ways that UGT can be applied: identifying user needs, understanding information-seeking behaviors, enhancing use experiences and evaluating resource preferences.

By applying UGT, libraries can categorize the types of resources that users are actively seeking. Are they looking for academic information, leisure reading, or resources that help with personal growth? Identifying these motivations helps in tailoring the collection to serve the community's needs. For understanding information-seeking behaviors, UGT can help libraries recognize the different types of informational needs of users, such as those seeking educational materials, professional development resources, or local history. This understanding can guide the acquisition of relevant, high-demand materials. To enhance user experiences, through the categorization of users' desires for media and what types, libraries can enrich their collections to foster a sense of belonging and support personal development. This is part of evaluating resource preferences in library users, and UGT can assist in identifying which genres, formats (e-books, audiobooks, journals), and subjects users engage with most frequently, allowing libraries to focus on adding and curating more materials that align with these preferences. Through the use of surveys, interviews, and usage data, UGT provides a lens to understand what gratifications users seek from the library and its collection. This feedback can be analyzed to inform decisions about collection development, ensuring the library's offerings stay relevant and valuable to its community. Since libraries are frequently community hubs, UGT can help identify how users use library collections for socializing or community engagement. This then helps inform the acquisitions of the library in ways that will support social cohesion, such as the purchase of local authors or materials for group activities like book clubs.

Uses and Gratifications Theory provides libraries with a framework to better understand the diverse needs and motivations of their users. By assessing library collections through the lens

of this theory, libraries can ensure their resources meet the evolving needs of their community, fostering an environment that supports both personal and social engagement.

Uses and Gratifications Theory as Framework

This author, working under the premise that individuals or users are active agents who control their own media consumption, seeks to understand the motivation for choosing specific types of media and the gratifications they get out of it. Is River Library providing the correct types of media to meet the gratification desires of students? Is River Library getting the usage that the staff and administration are intending and assuming, or do changes need to be made to better meet the UGT of students? UGT provides a framework for aligning the services of libraries with user needs in traditional and digital environments (Mehrad & Tajer, 2016). Through utilizing UGT as a lens, River Library can foster greater user engagement and tailor services to individual needs to optimize user satisfaction and effectiveness (Mehrad & Tajer, 2016). Through this lens, this research effort is seeking to understand their motivation for choosing specific media and discovering what they gain from material usage.

Research Gap

This study addresses the specific gap between listening and acting upon the underrepresented student needs of this library's local community. Belongingness is a crucial indicator of whether these students feel connected to the library and the community, while UGT will assess how library collections affect the belongingness students feel. This is part of the action research cycle to identify and address barriers they may be facing that the library staff may be unaware of so changes can be made to increase their sense of belonging and improve their comfort levels with not only the library but the university. The researcher has not found a study that seeks to perform this function yet in any library, particularly not an academic one.

This research effort will be analyzing library collections to locate gaps and make recommendations in improving belongingness. As a student support service, it is imperative that the library also promote belongingness to all student groups and meet their U&G needs.

1. What are the perceptions of underrepresented students on their specific needs for an academic library collection that is diverse and equity based?
2. How is the library currently supporting the diversity and equity of its students through its collections?

Chapter 3

Organization of this Chapter

This chapter will address the research questions by outlining the rationale and design of the study, detailing the steps involved in the research process. It begins by presenting the research questions, followed by an explanation of the research approach, including the purpose of the research, the selection of action research as the methodology, and a review of previous action research to provide context for the current investigation. Next, the chapter will describe the methodology, including the researcher's rationale, research design, participant selection for surveys, and the methods used to collect data. Finally, it will outline how the data will be analyzed and discuss potential limitations of the current project.

Research Question

In recent years, the role of academic libraries in supporting diversity and equity has garnered increasing attention. Libraries are essential in providing resources that reflect the needs and experiences of diverse student populations. However, there is still limited research exploring how library collections specifically support diversity and equity. This study aimed to investigate how academic libraries can enhance their collections to better serve underrepresented students and promote inclusive learning environments. Specifically, this paper addressed the following research question:

What are the perceptions of underrepresented students on their specific needs for an academic library collection that is diverse and equity based? How is the library currently supporting the diversity and equity of its students through its collections?

Mentality Behind the Research

Purpose of the Study

Through qualitative action research (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Mertler, 2020; Moustakas, 1994), this research assessed and explored student perceptions of diversity and equity support in River Library's academic collections. Librarians need to identify gaps in academic collections to support diversity and equity, so they are able to fulfill the library's mission (American Library Association, 2007; American Library Association, 2017b).

Why Action Research?

By focusing on River Library, this research examined an individual system that had not been deeply or methodically studied previously. Due to the subjective nature of the research, qualitative data collection was deemed most appropriate to explore this topic (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Mertler, 2020). Action research was chosen for several reasons. First, there was a previous study to build from, representing the first phase of action research, which helped in the analysis of River Library's physical collections and reflected action research's cyclic process. The active participation of stakeholders was important to the researcher, and action research allowed them to be directly heard and brought their voices to the forefront. This stakeholder participation resulted in collaborative change and practical action, improving the environment and research topic (River Library) for all (Herr & Anderson; 2014; Mertler, 2020). This also provided an in-depth framework for future cycles of action research for the library and allowed for reflective practice and systematic inquiry every few years as qualitative assessment tools (Herr & Anderson; 2014; Mertler, 2020). One of the appeals of action research was the possibility of quickly usable action plans being created and acted upon (Herr & Anderson; 2014; Mertler, 2020). To answer the research questions, there were several realities being experienced by

different individuals, which made qualitative action research an appropriate research methodology (Mertler, 2020).

Through the implementation of Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) to analyze narrative inquiry practices, this dissertation explored how students' social identities intersect with library collections and how these influence their sense of belonging to the university (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Mertler, 2020; Saldana, 2021). Individual intersectionality is the focus of the research (Corlett & Mavin, 2014; Dill & Zambrana, 2020; Holvino, 2012; Wijeyesinghe and Jones, 2014). This study sought to understand student library needs in the framework of belongingness as their individual sense of belongingness on campus has been shown to help students succeed in college and increase persistence rates (Chun & Evans, 2018; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Felten & Lambert, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2022; Gopalan et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2020; Tinto, 1993). As students are active users in the materials they choose to use at the library and how they use it, uses and gratifications theory provided a useful lens to analyze their responses (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Mehrad & Tajer, 2016; Ruggiero, 2000). A survey was chosen to help participants feel more at ease and comfortable asking questions.

Background to the Research

Previous Study, Phase 1.

In fall 2021, an action research study was completed to evaluate how the community felt about River Library's building and physical collections (Smith, 2021). The results of the 2021 survey can be summarized as a desire for larger collections particularly for journals, and a desire for building renovations and more group spaces. Since this research was completed in December 2021, several changes to the physical facilities and collection have been made in an attempt to generate increased patron use and meet community needs.

The changes made to River Library since the previous study focused on increasing the diversity of collections, equity of resources and equipment, inclusive spaces and creating a space anyone can enter and feel they belong and are welcomed. This research project is a natural follow up to that action research cycle to see if changes made since fall 2021 have been effective in improving user experiences. This research is also a more focused and improved version of the fall 2021 study which will go through IRB review. The 2021 study was used to determine how the River Library spaces could be changed by this author and the local administration only. In the first research project a mixed-methods online survey was distributed in 2021, partly due to COVID-19, and some data was gathered such as how many participants mostly used our online resources and did not physically enter the library. The current research compared the collection data from 2021 to 2025, and three years is considered an appropriate review cycle (American Library Association, 2017b; Herr & Anderson; 2014; Mertler, 2020).

Design and Rationale

This was a qualitative action research case study (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Mertler, 2020), focusing on student perceptions of diversity and equity support in River Library's collections. Through exploring the details of MU students' lived experiences, this study offered an authoritative analysis of gaps and areas of diversity and equity support in the collections that could be improved at River Library.

Several classes were given a fifteen-question survey to gauge student opinions on this topic in spring 2025. The data from the survey was analyzed to answer the research questions. The researcher determined that a survey would grant a higher research sample. The survey was developed by the researcher through research of other surveys studying belonging in libraries, where Scoulas' (2021) survey was found to be the most similar in research goals. Once a survey

was developed, it was pilot tested in February 2025 by three River Library student workers in, edited, then tested again by three additional River Library student workers. This allowed for question refinement and a prediction of how long the survey would take on average.

Qualitative data's ability to provide in-depth understanding of participant perceptions and attitudes was deemed the best method with the goal of the research in mind (Barnham, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This best allowed the library to change practices and policies to meet these needs.

Using the case study model, the most common form of qualitative methodology, this study aimed to answer the how and why of a phenomenon (Yazan, 2015). A flexible, comprehensive, and individualizable approach to a unique program or group, the case study explored specific cases within the issue to work toward understanding the phenomenon through inside observation (Creswell, 2006; Creswell & Plano, 2018; Harrison et al., 2017; Moustakas, 1994; Yazan, 2015). While previous case studies had focused on HEIs as a whole and student persistence and belongingness, this case study went further in examining student belonging as it pertained to perceptions of library collections and how this may have impacted persistence (Tinto, 2012). The student perspective was necessary (Tinto, 2015), and Tinto further showed that a sense of belonging in college was essential for students and that case studies were a prevalent way to examine this behavior (Tinto, 2012; Tinto, 2015).

Action research was selected to move this research beyond the case study so that immediate action could be taken once results were found, improving collections and creating change based on student feedback (Mertler, 2020). This research collected new data using survey responses from a purposive convenient sample (Fraenkel, et al., 2019; Herr & Anderson, 2014; Mertler, 2020).

Survey Structure and Distribution

The survey consisted of 15 questions and took an average of 15 minutes to complete. It was intentionally designed to progress from foundational demographic questions to more complex, reflective inquiries regarding library engagement and perceptions of inclusion. This structure supported both quantitative data collection and open-ended qualitative reflection, aligning with the mixed-methods and participatory ethos of action research.

To distribute the survey, the researcher collaborated with eight faculty members across six academic disciplines: Exercise Science; Modern Languages, Philosophy, and Religion; Sociology, Social Work, and Criminal Justice; Business; Digital Media Theatre; and English. These instructors, many affiliated with the university's Library Advisory Committee (LAC), agreed to circulate the survey among their students (Appendix A). This was a convenient, purposive sample, and respondent demographic data was compared to campus representativeness data and enrollment statistics (Mertler, 2020).

Several also offered extra credit for participation. In these cases, student names were collected via a separate informed consent form—entirely independent of the survey itself—to ensure anonymity. The survey instrument did not collect any personal identifiers, allowing all student responses to remain confidential.

The instrument primarily consisted of multiple-choice questions, employing both single-response and multiple-response formats. Likert-scale items were used to assess student attitudes, perceptions, and library engagement behaviors. Four open-ended questions were included to supplement the quantitative data, two of which asked for feedback on the survey and suggestions for library improvements.

This sample provides a representative example of a medium-sized, public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the US which can be replicated in additional geographic areas. This data could be representative of the area but would need replication to be generalized. All students were undergraduates who have been on campus for at least one semester, so they should be more comfortable with campus and more aware of existing supports. Through the participating LAC members, a survey asked what materials in the library students are using, questions to determine their intersectionality, and gain data on student opinions of diversity and equity supports in the library collections (Appendix A, Fraenkel, et al., 2019; Herr & Anderson, 2014; Mertler, 2020). Intersectionality was used as a lens when analyzing the data in an attempt to view each participant as an intricate entity and embrace their diversity within social groups, as individuals embody multiple identities simultaneously (Wijeyesinghe and Jones, 2014).

Since the researcher is a professor and person of authority, utilizing a survey ensured anonymity for participants and allowed them to think over responses before giving them, standardizing data collection through ensuring the same questions were asked to everyone, and was considerate of student time as they could complete the survey when they were available (Mertler, 2020). Performing anonymous surveys also helped limit researcher bias.

Survey questions investigated how students perceive the diversity and equity of the collections and ask for feedback on supports that would better serve them or make them more comfortable (Figure 2). These questions were designed as a mix of multiple choice, Likert and open-ended queries to allow participants to express their opinions without filters. In this research it is imperative to hear the student voice to know if River Library is meeting their diverse needs.

To create the survey, research was done into belongingness questionnaires, UGT questionnaires, and inclusive demographic surveys. Questionnaires and surveys were

investigated from multiple organizations. The questions that were created attempt to be open, positive and non-polarizing (Muhammad, 2023).

This survey was conducted through Qualtrics software. In the spring 2025 semester it was sent to the participating professors by the researcher and the researcher was the only person to review the results. All data was filtered for privacy, using pseudonyms of people, courses, places, and other identifying information so no statements can be traced back to a specific participant. All private and identifying information was coded and kept separate to reduce risks of breach of confidentiality. All data was kept on a private server requiring a password for security.

Open then axial coding was used to identify and cluster themes by the researcher and research software from the surveys (Dillman et al., 2014; Saldana, 2021). UGT theory was then used to analyze the responses and identify themes, items to further research, and any gaps. The data was displayed visually into charts for ease of understanding.

Figure 2

Original Survey Questions and Rationale

Survey Question Number	Survey Question Text	Rationale for the Question	Question Type
1	Which category below includes your age?	This collects demographic data to help code responses.	Multiple Choice Selection
2	Which of the following identities do you identify with? (Select all that apply)	This collects demographic data to help code responses.	Multiple Choice Selection
3	To which gender do you currently most identify?	This collects demographic data to help code responses.	Multiple Choice Selection
4	How would you best describe your current sexual identity:	This collects demographic data to help code responses.	Multiple Choice Selection

5	Do you identify as a person with a disability? Please select all that apply.	This collects demographic data to help code responses.	Multiple Choice Selection
6	Are you a first generation college student? (A first-generation college student is someone whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree.)	This collects demographic data to help code responses.	Multiple Choice Selection
7	Have you used River Library collections (books, databases, ebooks, journals, etc.) while you attended Mountain University?	This begins to gauge how students use the library	Multiple Choice Selection
8	How do you use the library?	Looking at belonging and UGT and where improvements can be made (Brinkman, 2022)	Multiple Choice Selection
9	What services (if any) do you utilize at the library?	Looking at belonging and UGT and where improvements can be made (Brinkman, 2022)	Multiple Choice Selection
10	You are at the library because...	Looking at UGT behaviors as to the <i>why</i> they use the library	Multiple Choice Selection
11	Next, tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following: (11 categories)	Looking at belonging and UGT and where improvements can be made (Brinkman, 2022)	Selection Likert Grid
12	Please tell us a little about any ideas you have to improve the above categories (location, accessibility of the building or materials, collections, identity, belonging, etc.). What changes or additions could we make to our library services to make them more useful and better meet your needs?	Looking at belonging and UGT and where improvements can be made (Brinkman, 2022)	Open-Ended Response
13	Libraries were created to empower individuals. How could we empower you more as a library?	This looks to see if diversity and equity are being represented in the collection through the eyes of the students and identify gaps (Stanford, 2021) I'm looking at belonging and where improvements can be made (Brinkman, 2022)	Open-Ended Response

14	Please read these four quotes and tell me if any of these resonate with you and why? (See Appendix A for rest of question)	This looks to see if diversity and equity are being represented in the collection through the eyes of the students and identify gaps (Stanford, 2021) I'm looking at belonging and where improvements can be made (Brinkman, 2022)	Open-Ended Response
15	Do you have any additional comments, concerns or opinions that you feel may help the library better meet your needs?		Open-Ended Response

Demographic Section: Capturing Identity for Equity Analysis

The first section (Questions 1–6 in Figure 2) gathered demographic information to provide essential context and support intersectional analysis. Participants were asked to identify their age, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, racial or ethnic background, and whether they were first-generation college students. These categories were selected to reflect the dimensions of identity prioritized by diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) frameworks, which emphasize the importance of understanding how structural barriers impact differently situated groups. Collecting this data also aligned with standpoint epistemology, which recognizes the epistemic value of marginalized perspectives. In the context of academic libraries, these perspectives offered crucial insights into how collection practices and institutional spaces either supported or alienated diverse student populations.

Library Usage: Motivations and Equity-Oriented Engagement

The second section (Questions 7–12 in Figure 2) focused on how students engaged with the library and its services. Participants were asked whether they used the library, how often, and in what specific ways. These questions captured a broad spectrum of activity, including use of physical spaces (e.g., study areas, computer labs), access to digital resources (e.g., databases,

journals, e-books), and engagement with academic support services (e.g., reference consultations, tutoring, workshops). This portion of the survey drew from Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which conceptualizes users as active agents who seek media and information sources to satisfy specific needs—cognitive, emotional, social, or practical. By documenting various modes of library engagement, the survey enabled a needs-based understanding of student-library interaction and surfaced differences across student subgroups. Likert-scale questions within this section assessed perceptions of accessibility, collection diversity, representation, and belonging. These items supported equity-centered evaluation, highlighting whether students perceived the library as inclusive and responsive to their identities and academic needs. An accompanying open-ended question invited students to recommend improvements to the categories assessed in the Likert items—such as accessibility, collections, or feelings of belonging. This prompt further supported the action research cycle by generating grounded, user-informed strategies for institutional improvement.

Reflective Questions: Empowerment, Identity, and Belonging

The final section (Questions 13–15 in Figure 2) featured three open-ended prompts designed to capture deeper, more personal reflections on students’ relationships with the library. One question asked participants how the library could better empower them, while another invited responses to four quotes from writers and public figures discussing libraries, access, and representation. These questions intentionally centered belonging as a guiding framework. Belonging—understood here as a subjective sense of inclusion, visibility, and emotional connection—was a foundational goal of DEI initiatives. By inviting emotional and symbolic reflections, this section revealed how students located (or failed to locate) themselves within the library’s physical and conceptual spaces. The final open-ended prompt allowed participants to

share any additional comments, ideas, or concerns not already addressed. This question was vital in ensuring student agency and inclusivity, allowing for insights that might not have aligned with predefined categories.

Data Analysis

The researcher was participant as observer and the sole data analyst to ensure participant privacy. All data was filtered for privacy, using pseudonyms of people, courses, places, and other identifying information so no statements can be traced back to a specific participant. All private and identifying information will be coded and kept separate to reduce risks of breach of confidentiality. All data will be kept on a private server requiring a password for security.

Open then axial coding was used to identify and cluster themes by the researcher and research software (Dillman et al., 2014; Saldana, 2021). UGT theory was then used to analyze the responses and identify themes, items to perform further research, and any gaps. The data was turned into multiple figures. After reviewing the data multiple times for accuracy, the results will be presented to the library staff and administrators. Then plans can be made on what changes should be made, and collaborative decisions for the future can be made.

Through collecting this data, analyzing these responses examined if River Library is meeting the needs of their students, particularly their underrepresented and marginalized students. The current project will inform the academic librarian community whether or not academic libraries are meeting their mission of equitable educational empowerment, and what changes may need to be made.

This study employed a mixed-methods action research design, allowing for both the quantification of patterns and the exploration of lived experiences. Action research, with its commitment to iterative improvement, stakeholder involvement, and real-world problem solving,

was particularly well suited to this inquiry. The survey functioned as both a diagnostic tool and an empowerment strategy, seeking to amplify student voices in the evaluation and enhancement of library DEI efforts.

Context of Mountain University (MU) and the Researcher

MU is a four-year public university that focuses on undergraduate programs but also offers multiple graduate degrees. In fall 2024 the university currently enrolls roughly 5,000 students, with 57.3% identified as female and 54.4% identifying as White (PASSHE, 2024). The next highest racial demographic is Black or African American at 18.8% closely followed by 17.9% Hispanic, with 4.1% of students saying they are two or more races (PASSHE, 2024).

In the last decade, complaints about River Library's lack of modernity and the status of physical collections have become frequent, as evidenced in a campus-wide survey conducted in 2018 (Association of Research Libraries, 2018). Built in 1980, library spaces had different needs and had no idea that electrical outlets would be a desired commodity for every user. It was also built with large, open floor plans and no designed groupwork spaces, no presentation spaces and no private spaces for phone calls or videoconferencing. In regard to the physical collections, River Library's book collection has only been reviewed in 2018 to make room for a planned future renovation. Physical collections should be reviewed for content and condition on a regular 2-to-3-year cycle, but this collection had not been reviewed in decades (American Library Association, 2017b). In 2018, the collection was weeded for items that were moldy, in disrepair, out of date and full of misinformation depending on the subject. The collection was also assessed to evaluate how well it was meeting current curricular needs of the university. No internal assessment has been made since the collection was weeded and reorganized to ensure curricular, content and condition needs.

This researcher is a library faculty member who has worked at the MU Library since August 2015 and has served as the department chair for six years, as well as interim director for two years in this time period. Over the past nine years this author provided research assistance and library instruction services to the campus which created a broad network of MU community members and has heard opinions on the Library's building and collections in one-on-one conversations, in meetings, from students, and from reports from various library departments and our triennial survey LibQUAL which gathers responses from every patron group on campus. In this research, the goal is to engage primarily as an observer-as-participant which will be accomplished through deliberately using the third person in writing to help add a layer of consideration in reporting, reviewing result data, and distributing a survey through email and professors sharing the link in class (Mertler, 2020).

Researcher Positionality

My entire life I have been in and out of public libraries and have used academic libraries at every level of my education. They provide necessary resources I would not be able to get elsewhere and support their entire community, not just those who can afford it. As the economy feels to be getting increasingly unstable, libraries continue to provide a wide array of services to those who would otherwise be unable to access them – such as internet access, access to physical materials, access to courses and cultural events, etc.

As both the researcher and a professional librarian at Mountain University's River Library, my positionality is deeply intertwined with this study. I approach this research as a practitioner-scholar seeking to understand whether our library collections equitably reflect and support the needs of all students, particularly those from underrepresented groups. My role as collection manager and interim library director has afforded me an intimate understanding of

institutional processes, collection policies, and the barriers that may unintentionally perpetuate inequity in academic libraries.

My professional identity as a librarian informs a strong commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). This perspective shapes my interpretation of student responses and my engagement with the data. At the same time, I recognize that my insider status—being both researcher and staff member—introduces potential bias. To mitigate this, I maintained transparency in survey design with my dissertation chair, and incorporated participant-driven perspectives through open-ended questions and faculty collaboration to add depth to the data.

I identify as a European American, cisgender woman working within a predominantly European American academic institution. This positionality inherently shapes how I perceive issues of representation and power within library systems. Acknowledging this privilege, I intentionally foregrounded underrepresented student voices and experiences in the analysis, drawing upon intersectional and critical library frameworks (Chun & Evans, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021). My commitment to participatory action research stems from a belief that libraries must not only serve their communities but also co-create knowledge and change alongside them.

Ultimately, this study reflects both a professional and personal journey toward understanding how libraries can foster belonging through equitable collections. My dual position as insider and advocate enables me to translate findings into actionable improvements while remaining critically aware of the influence my background and beliefs have on the research process.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations included generalizability and the absence of a validated survey instrument. Results would need replication to be verified. The study focused on collections rather than services and spaces, though feedback on these areas surfaced in responses. As the former interim director (2022–2024), the researcher also acknowledged potential bias in evaluating recent changes to collections and spaces. A full study on services and spaces needs to be conducted at a future date.

As the former interim library director during August 2022-2024, several changes to library spaces and collections over the last two years were made under this authority. The researcher has a bias as the one not only performing the research but also as the former director to think that these changes were largely positive. This will be something to be aware of during analysis of the data.

The current research was designed to focus on psychological needs and implications, not sociological factors. The usage and representativeness of electronic collections should be studied in future studies. Physical and electronic collections are both vitally important aspects of library services but are used and purchased differently. This researcher determined they should be studied separately before they are studied together to find commonality and differences in how participants perceive each aspect.

However, this research is being done to identify gaps that are beyond library employee awareness. As a leader, and a collection management librarian, action research makes a tremendous impact in how purposeful planning and research can positively impact the workplace through positive change, quickly and decisively.

Summary

This qualitative action research case study sought to assess and understand student perceptions of diversity and equity support in River Library's academic collections (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Mertler, 2020). By surveying various classes of students across departments, the research aimed to identify gaps in the library's collections that hinder diversity and equity. This study offers an authoritative analysis of River Library's students' lived experiences, highlighting areas for improvement. The findings informed the proposed action plan for River Library. The case study model, a common qualitative methodology, was used to explore and understand the phenomenon through specific cases and inside observation (Creswell, 2006; Creswell & Plano, 2018; Harrison et al., 2017; Moustakas, 1994; Yazan, 2015). The research also examined student belonging and its impact on persistence.

The methodology outlined in this chapter established the framework through which the study was designed, implemented, and analyzed. By employing a mixed-methods action research approach, the study intentionally centered student voices to evaluate how River Library's collections supported—or failed to support—diversity, equity, and belonging. The survey instrument, grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory, belongingness theory, and standpoint epistemology, provided both quantitative measures and qualitative narratives that illuminated student perceptions from multiple angles.

The following chapter presents the findings of this research. Quantitative results summarize demographic data, patterns of library engagement, and Likert-scale responses that measure perceptions of accessibility, representation, and belonging. These results are then complemented by qualitative analysis of open-ended responses, which highlight the lived experiences of students and provide nuanced insights into the library's role as both an academic

and psychosocial space. Together, these findings create a multifaceted picture of how River Library served its students and where gaps remained in promoting equity-centered collections and inclusive environments.

Chapter 4

Chapter four presents the findings of the student survey designed to assess how River Library supports DEI, representation and belonging through its collections, services and spaces. Using a mixed-methods, action research framework, the survey combined Likert-scale items with open-ended qualitative questions to add depth to the collected data. To explore these questions, this chapter details the outcomes of each question. The chapter next explains the results of the open-ended questions. Together, these data sets provide insight into how students perceive the library's role in empowerment, its areas for improvement, and their connections to broader narratives of representation, democracy and inclusivity.

This section examines student responses to a recent survey about their experiences with River Library. It includes an exploration of participant demographics, an analysis of Likert-scale responses with cross-tabulations by race, and a thematic review of open-ended feedback. During the review of the cross-tabulations by race, the percentages were over 100% for each, likely due to participants being able to select more than one. As the researcher was unable to account for the percentage being over 100%, this data was not included to preserve the research integrity.

For each question, the majority of respondents answered but not all respondents answered each question. The goal of this research is to uncover how students use the library, how they perceive its inclusivity and resources and where there are opportunities for improvement.

Results

In question 1, the demographic profile of survey respondents shows that the largest age group was between 18 and 20 years old, followed by those aged 21 to 23 (Figure 3). While the survey captured some diversity in racial and ethnic identity, 73% of respondents either skipped these questions or identified as 'White or European American' (Figure 4). Black or African

American and Hispanic or Latino/a each had a 15% respondent rate with 1% each for American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Asian American, and Middle Eastern or North African. This totals roughly 33% identifying as an underrepresented and marginalized groups. This section allowed for selected multiple identities, leading to some crossover of numbers with multiracial individuals. In fall 2024 Mountain University reported a 45.2% student population of underrepresented and marginalized groups.

Figure 3

Which Category Below Includes Your Age?

Q1 - Which category below includes your age?

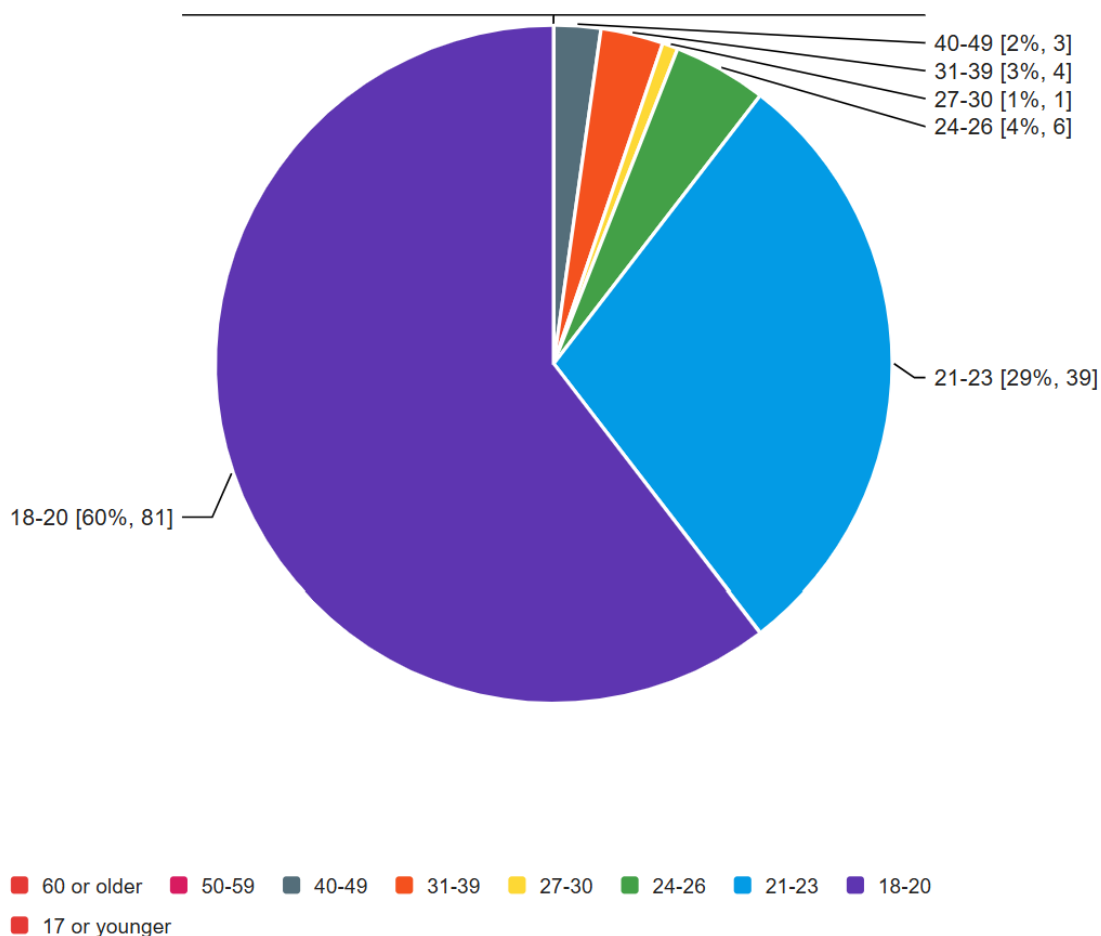
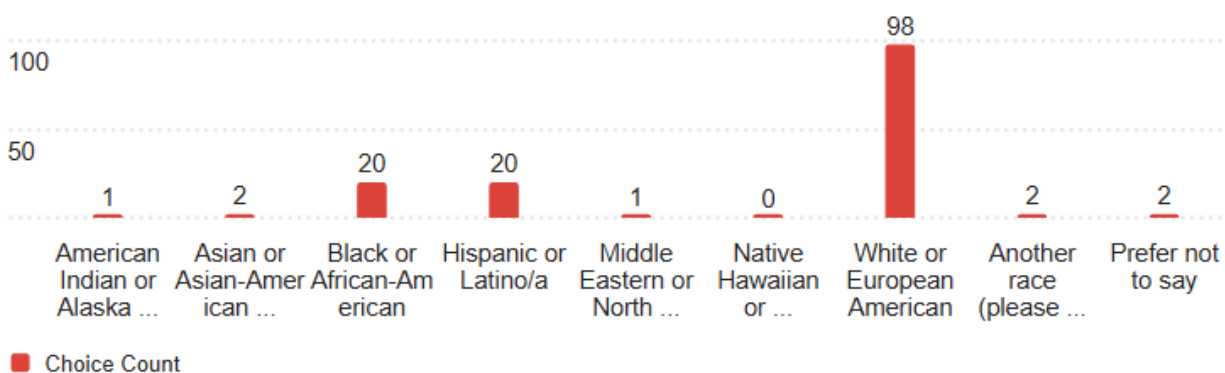


Figure 4

Which of the following identities do you identify with?



The question on gender identity showed a majority of participants, 67%, identifying as female (Figure 5). Mountain University's fall 2024 freeze showed a 57.3% female majority.

Figure 5

To which gender do you currently most identify?

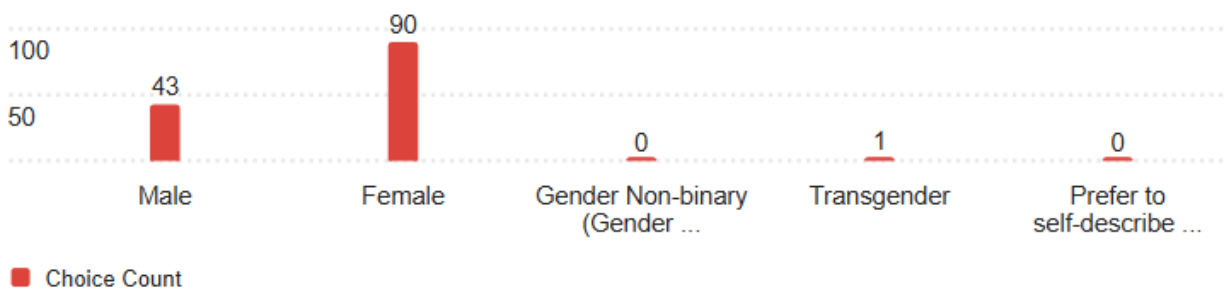
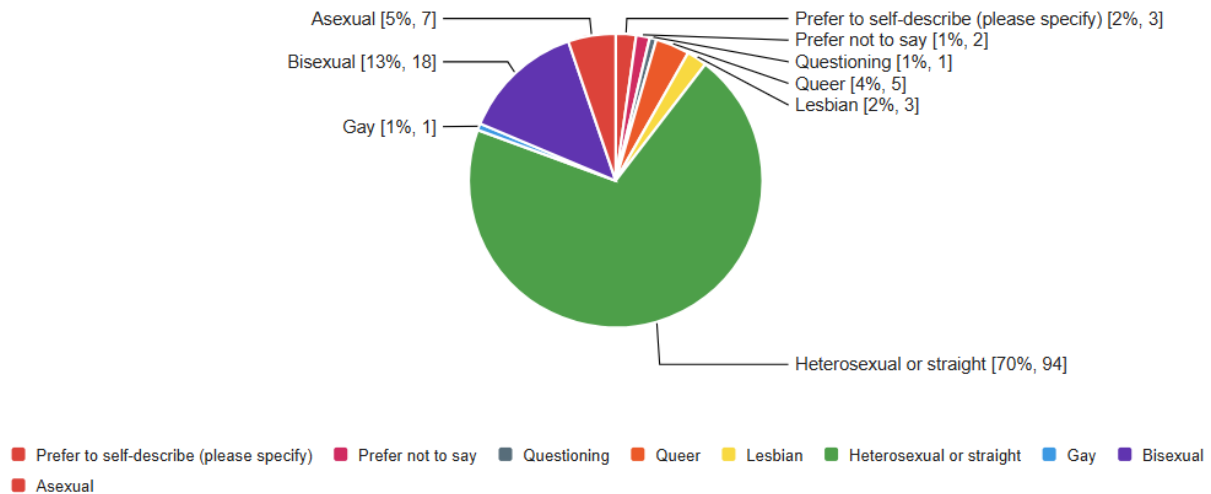


Figure 6

How would you best describe your sexual identity



In terms of sexual identity, 70% identify as heterosexual with 30% identifying as a variety of LGBTQIA+ (Figure 6). The majority of respondents (85%) did not identify as individuals with disabilities but 14% identified as having physical and/or mental disabilities with one participant preferring not to say (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Do you identify as a person with a disability?

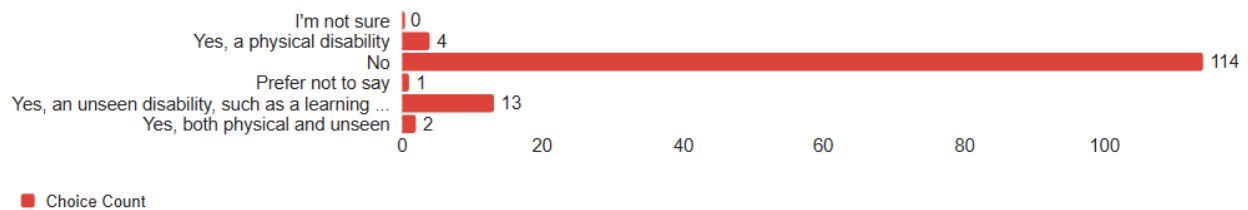
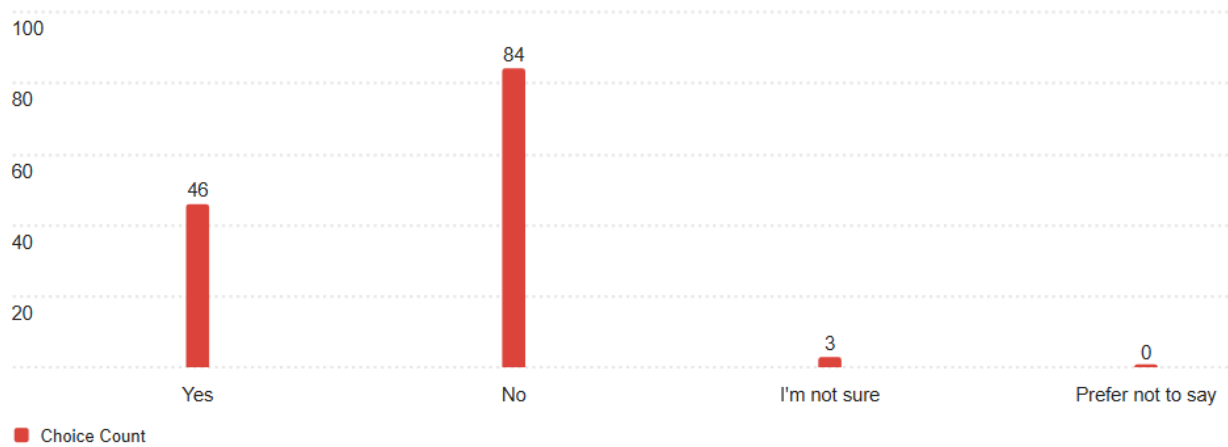


Figure 8

Do you identify as a first-generation college student?



In Figure 8, 35% of participants identified as being a first-generation college student, with 2% reporting they were unsure. Here 63% of respondents indicated they had at least one parent who went to college (Figure 8).

Figure 9 summarizes the demographic breakdown of survey respondents.

Figure 9

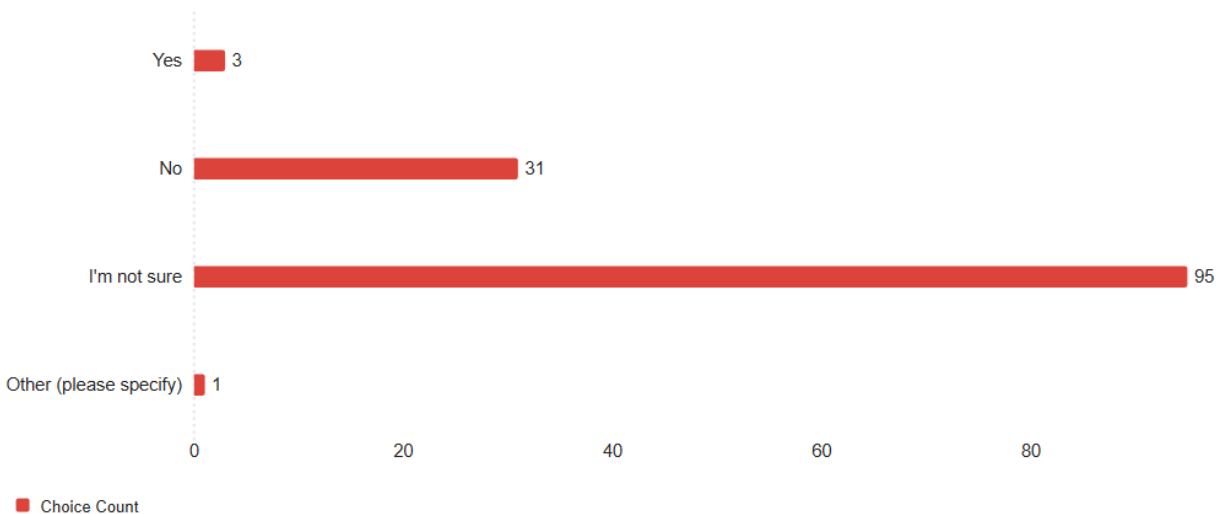
Demographic overview of survey respondents

Demographic Category	Most Common Responses	Notes
Age	18–20, 21–23	Younger students made up the majority
Race/Ethnicity	White/Caucasian/European American at 73%	Underrepresented and marginalized groups identities underrepresented
Gender Identity	Female Majority	67% female, 32% male, 1% transgender
Sexual Identity	Mostly Heterosexual	70% heterosexual, 30% LGBTQIA+
First Generation Status	35% Identified as First Generation	2% were unsure and 63% are non first-generation
Disability Identification	14% Reported Having Some Type of Disability	3% physical, 10% unseen, 1% both physical and unseen

To assess students' perceptions of River Library, the survey included a series of Likert-scale statements addressing topics such as accessibility, location, inclusivity, and satisfaction with collections. On average, respondents rated these aspects between "Agree" and "Strongly Agree." This indicates generally positive experiences with the library's physical setup and services.

Figure 10

Have you used River Library collections (books, databases, ebooks, journals, etc.) while you attended Mountain University?



The responses in Figure 10 indicate that the majority of students, 73%, were not sure if they had used library resources. However, the next question, Figure 11, indicates most respondents *do* use the library with only 7% indicating they do not use library resources.

Figure 11

How do you use the library?

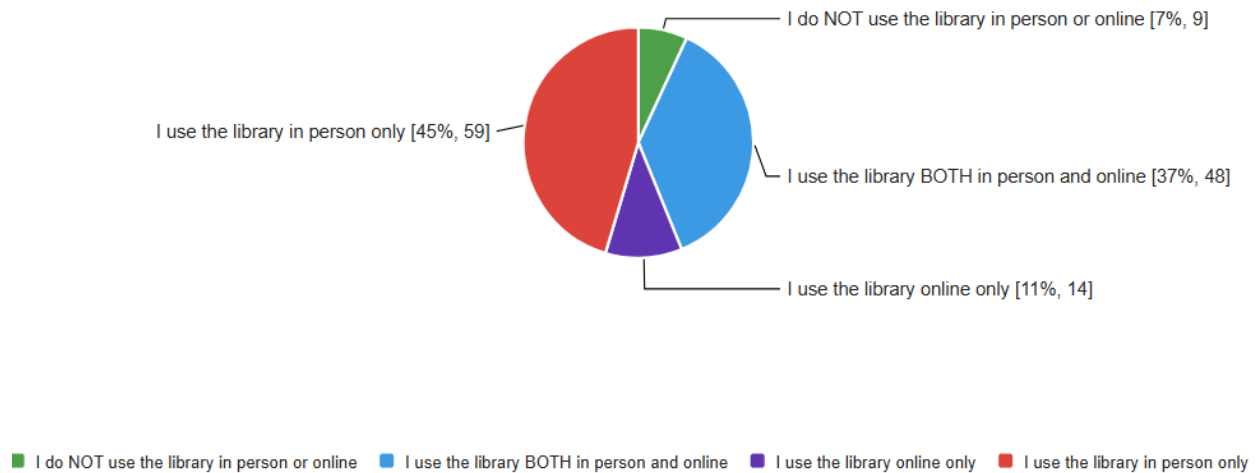


Figure 12

What services (if any) do you utilize at the library?

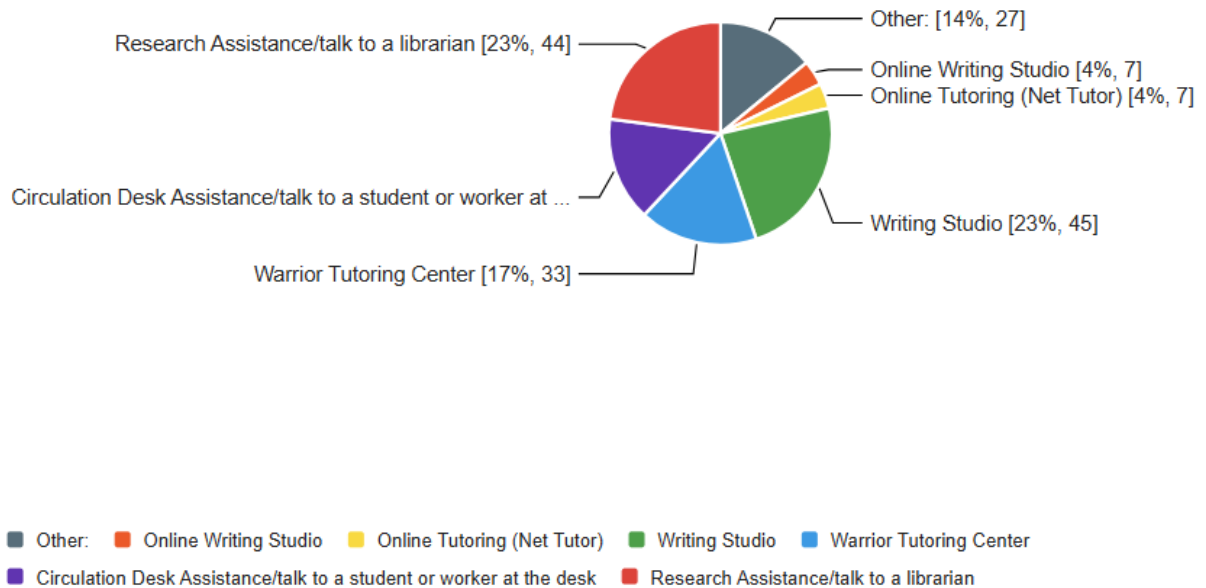
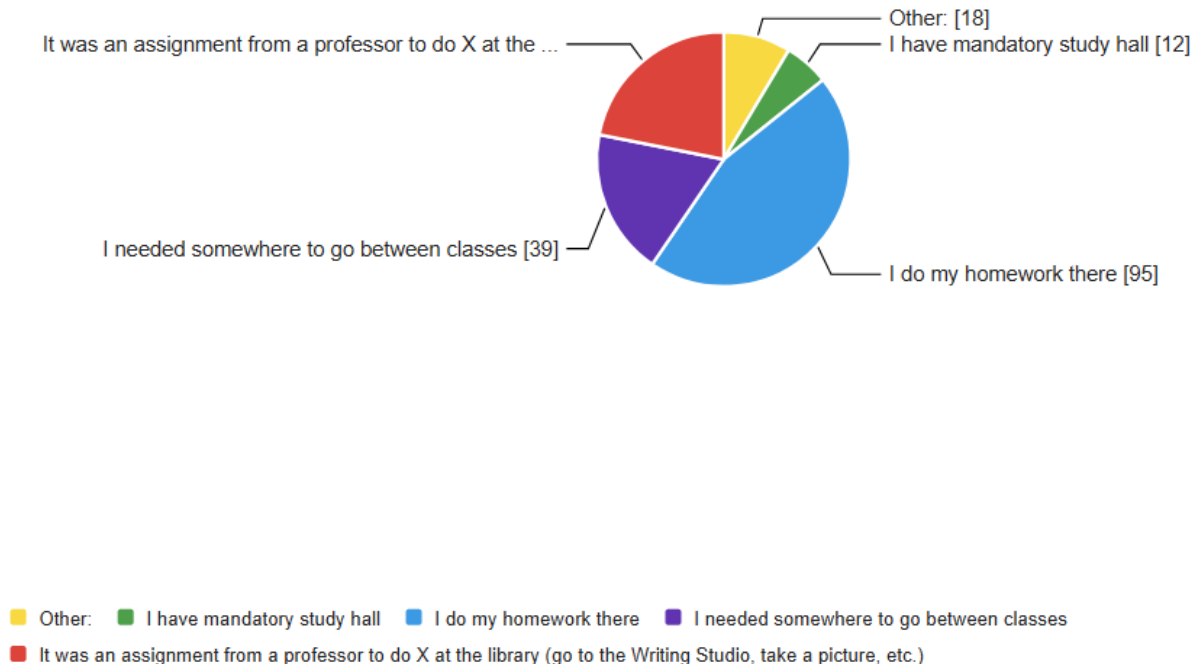


Figure 12 allowed each respondent to select multiple fields, and it shows that students use all library service functions, but primarily those physically in person. Research assistance and the Writing Studio were both highly used at 23% each with Tutoring and the Access Services desk being the next highest used services. “Other” services include using the library as “quiet space”, using online databases, desktops, the physical collection/books, doing homework in the building, using the printer and using EZ-Borrow an interlibrary loan service.

Figure 13

You are at the library because...



The majority of participants in Figure 13 are at the library to do homework (78%) with the second highest category indicating it’s a course assignment to be at the library (38%). A close third is “I needed somewhere to go between classes” (32%). Other reasons to come to the library are printing, studying singly or in a group and to see if a textbook is available.

The next section of questions was asked in a chart Likert scale format. As seen in Figure 14, for each question, participants were first asked to “Please indicate how each statement makes you feel” rating between strongly agree and strongly disagree. In the second part for each question participants were asked: “Is this a category you want to see improved? With “Yes/no/I don’t have a preference” as the possible answers. Ten questions were asked in this format.

Figure 14

Sample of multipart chart question

Next, tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following:

	Please indicate how each statement makes you feel.						Is this a category you want to see improved?		
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable / I don't know	Yes	No	I don't have a preference
River Library is located conveniently for my needs.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The library is accessible for individuals with mobility challenges.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

When asked if the library is located conveniently in Figure 15, the majority of respondents answered yes with a minority wanting the convenience improved. While only four respondents disagreed that the library was convenient, eleven commented that they would want its convenience improved (Figure 15, Figure 16).

Figure 15

River Library is located conveniently for my needs – agreement scale

Q11#1_1 - Kemp Library is located conveniently for my needs.

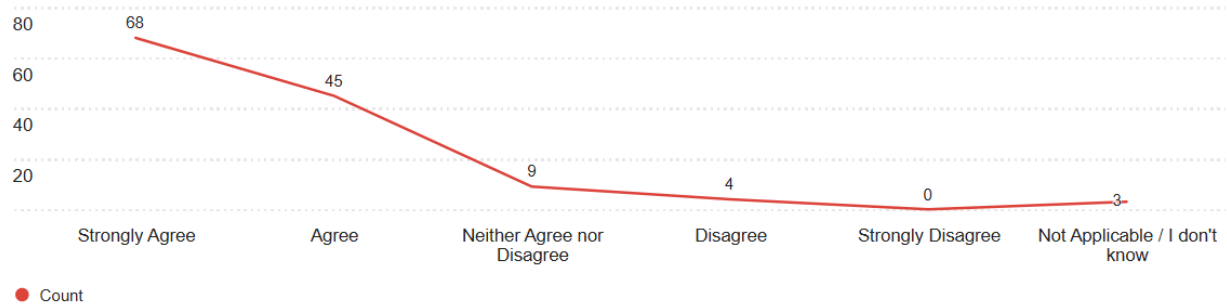
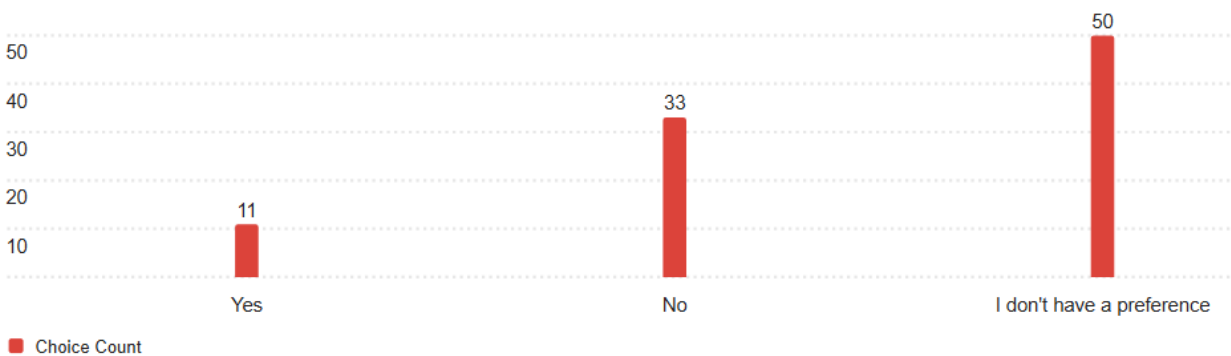


Figure 16

River Library is located conveniently for my needs – improvement scale



A similar pattern emerges when asking if the library is accessible for those with mobility questions (disagree 6) with twenty-five saying they want it improved (Figure 17, Figure 18).

Figure 17

The library is accessible for individuals with mobility challenges -agreement scale

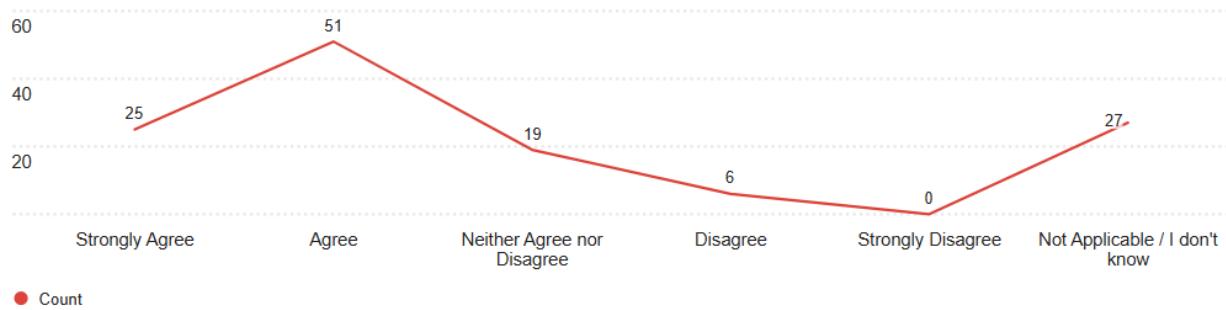
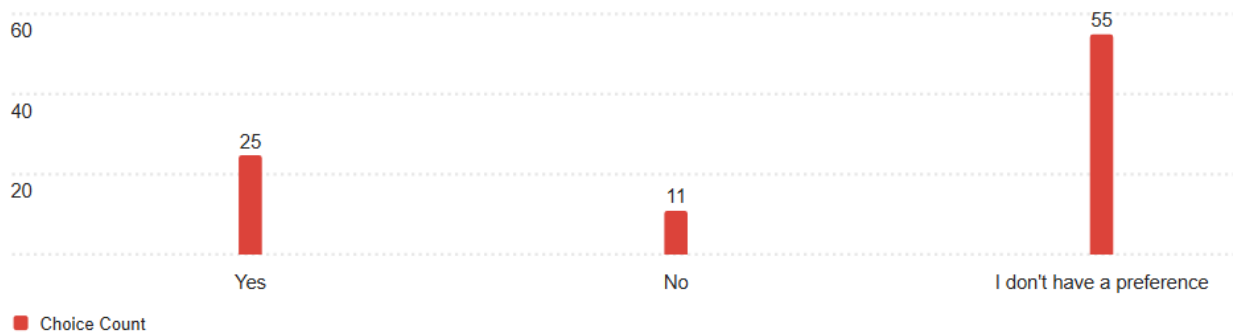


Figure 18

The library is accessible for individuals with mobility challenges -improvement scale



Thirteen participants disagree or strongly disagree with the operating hours meeting their needs, but twenty-two want them adjusted (Figure 19, Figure 20). This is also one of the most popular comments in the open-ended questions with students voicing their desire to alter the building hours.

Figure 19

The current operating hours of the library meet my needs -agreement scale

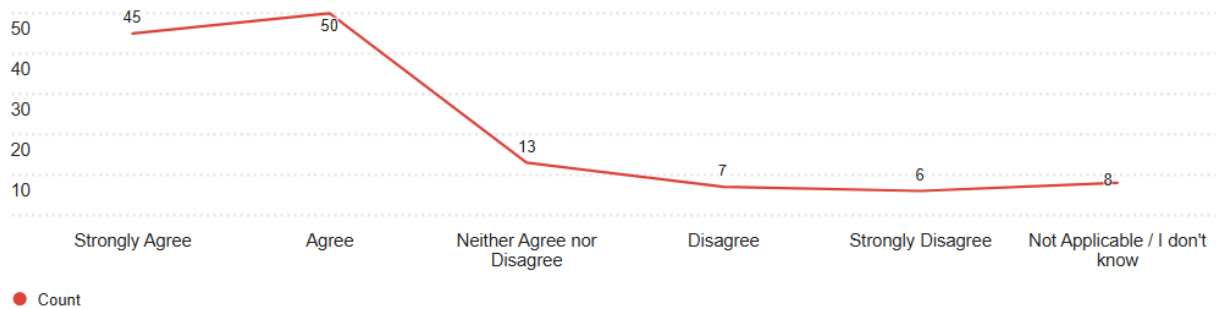
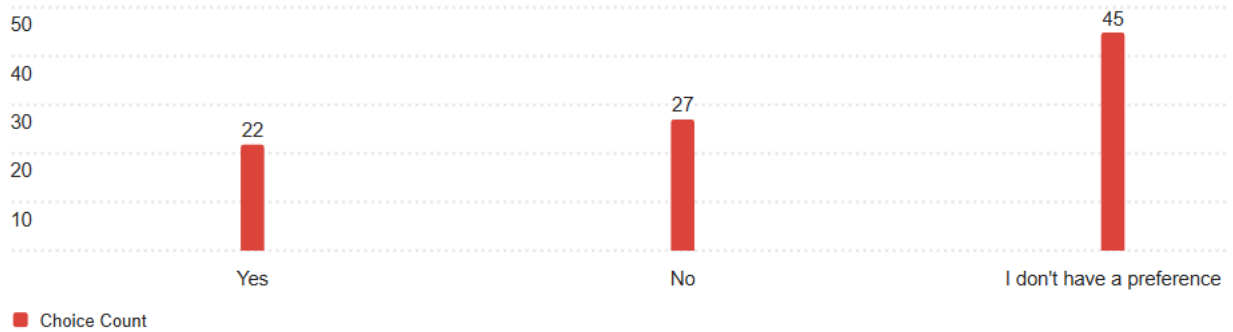


Figure 20

The current operating hours of the library meet my needs -improvement scale



When discussing the collections of the library, for physical needs students seem mostly satisfied with the physical book collections (Figure 21, Figure 22).

Figure 21

The library BOOK collections meet my needs (books in the building) -agreement scale

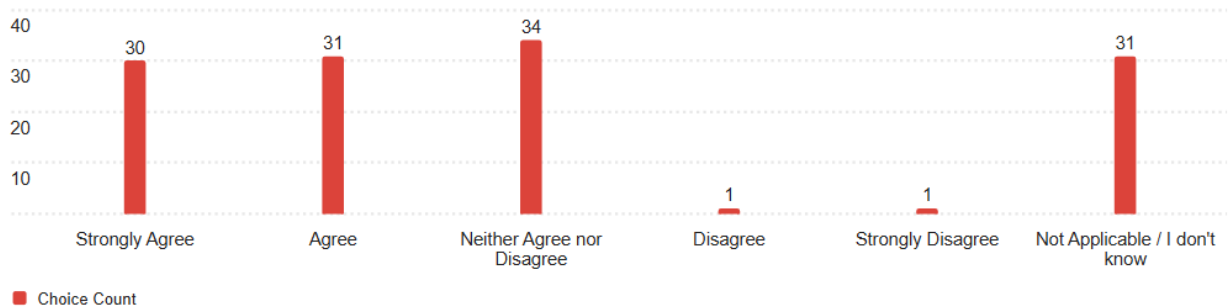
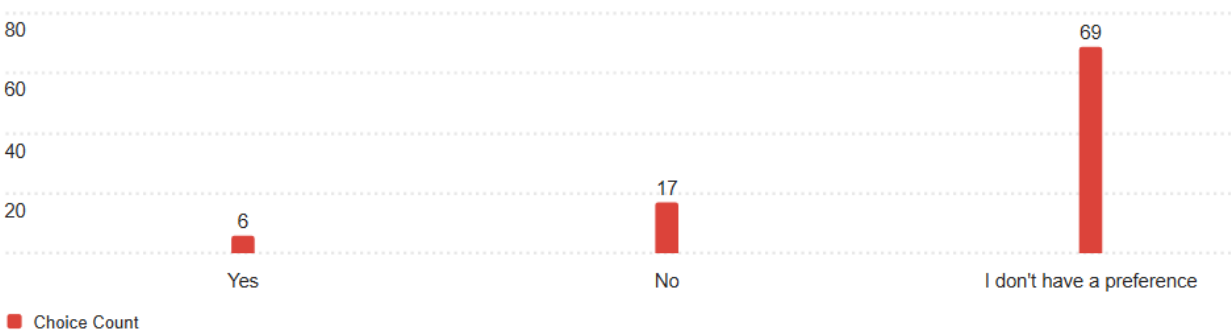


Figure 22

The library BOOK collections meet my needs (books in the building) -improvement scale



For online collections including databases, students indicate they are mostly satisfied in the first part of the question, but once again additional respondents want it to be improved (Figure 23, Figure 24). There are also several open-ended responses which indicate that this is an area they would like to see expanded in certain areas.

Figure 23

The library ONLINE collections meet my needs (articles, databases, etc.) – agreement scale

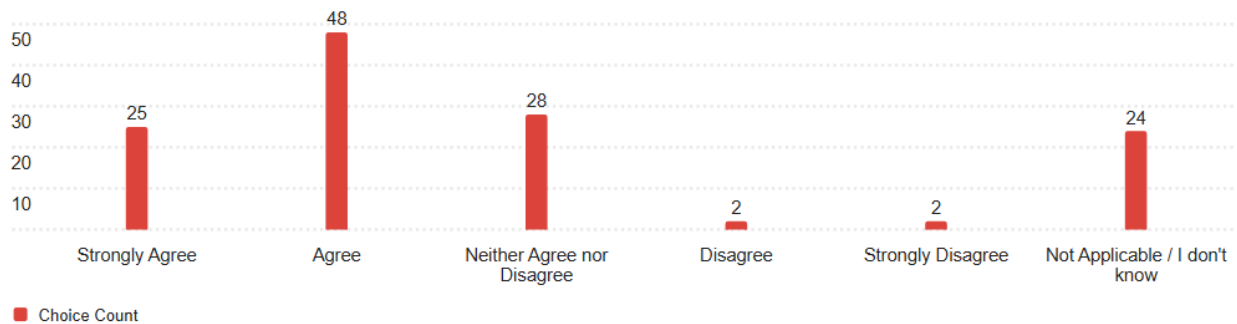
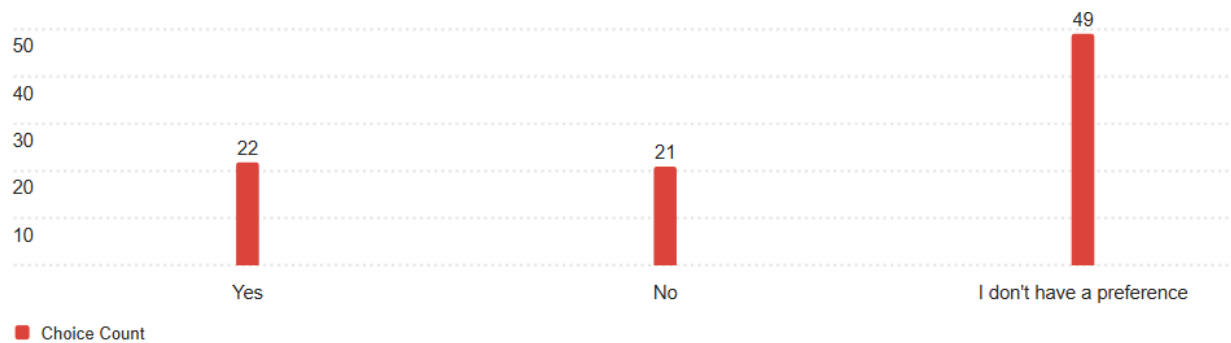


Figure 24

The library ONLINE collections meet my needs (articles, databases, etc.) – improvement scale



When asked about identifying with characters they can identify with in Figure 25 and Figure 26, a cross-tabulation was conducted as well to identify which identities were unsure (neither agree nor disagree), disagreed, and strongly disagreed. Several underrepresented and marginalized groups indicated they were in these categories.

Figure 25

I feel that I can find books about characters who are similar to me at the library – agreement scale

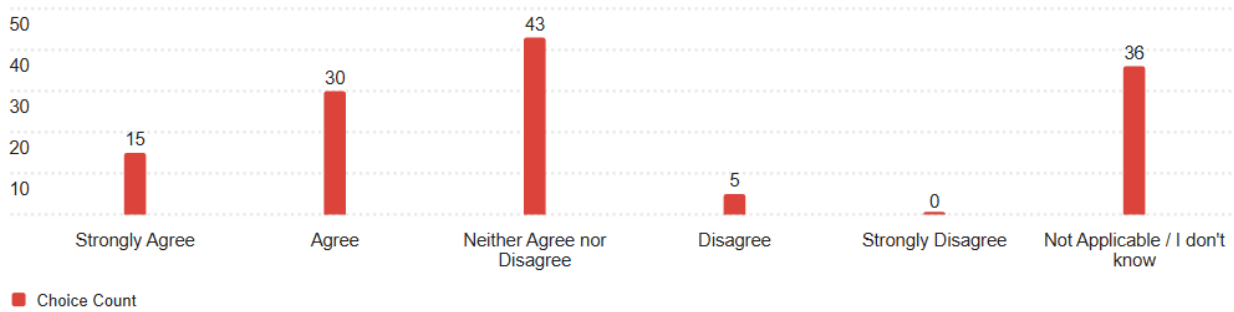


Figure 26

I feel that I can find books about characters who are similar to me at the library – improvement scale



For a similar question aimed at authors not characters, results indicated most had no preference (Figure 27, Figure 28).

Figure 27

I feel that I can find books with authors who are similar to me at the library – agreement scale

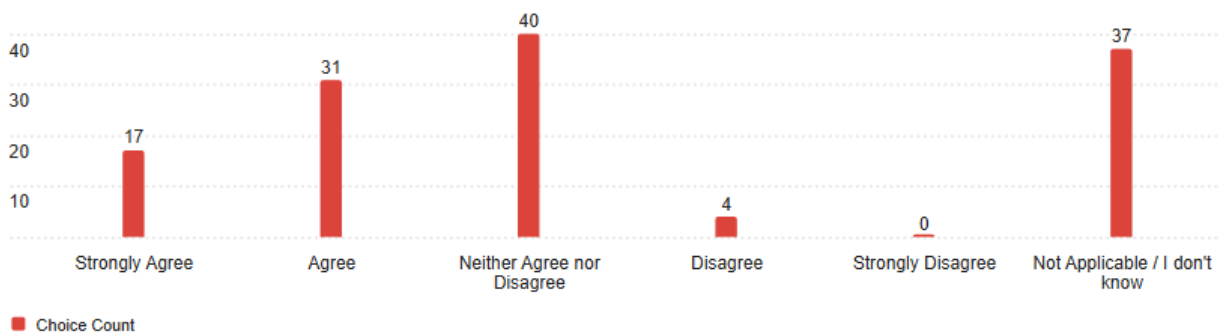


Figure 28

I feel that I can find books with authors who are similar to me at the library – improvement scale



In Figure 29, one hundred and five students agree they feel welcome with twenty-four answering neutrally or being unsure. Three students would like this to be improved (Figure 30). When asking about their sense of belonging, most students agreed or strongly agreed, across underrepresented and marginalized groups (Figure 29, Figure 30).

Figure 29

I feel welcome and that I belong at River Library – agreement scale

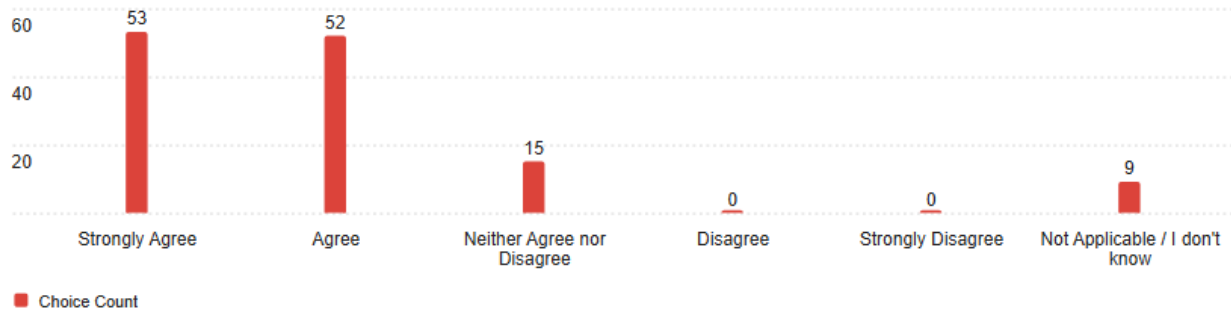
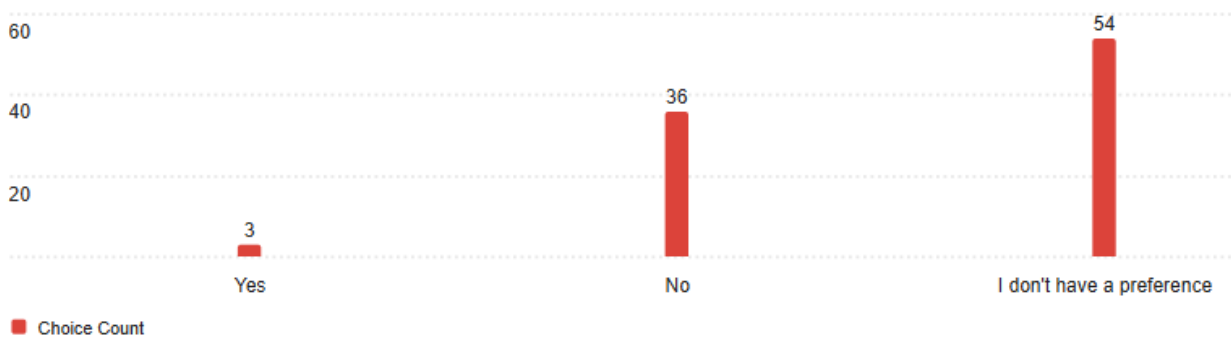


Figure 30

I feel welcome and that I belong at River Library – improvement scale



A similar pattern is found when asking about participant intersectionality. There are several underrepresented and marginalized groups and LGBTQIA+ community members who are unsure that the library respects them in totality (Figure 31, Figure 32). While no participants disagreed, they were unsure or neutral.

Figure 31

I feel that all aspects of my identity are respected at River Library – agreement scale

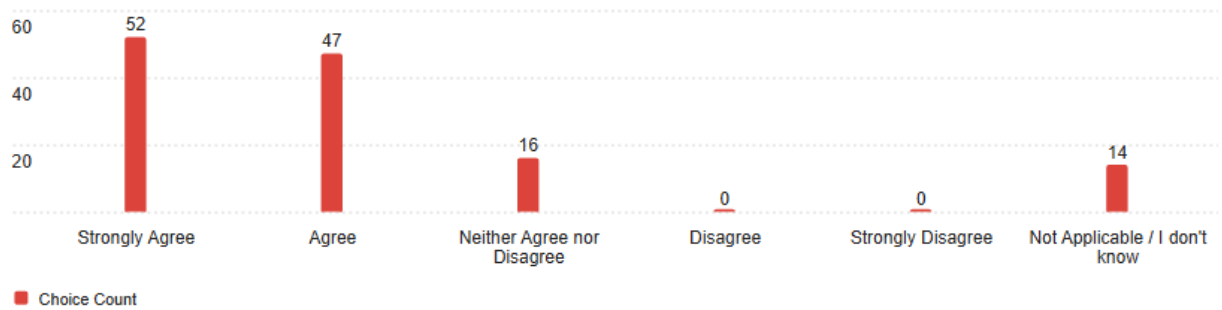
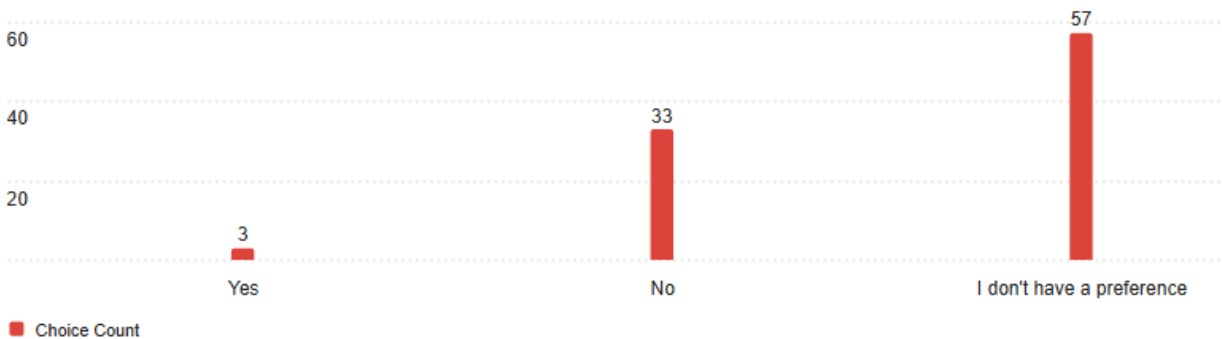


Figure 32

I feel that all aspects of my identity are respected at River Library – improvement scale



In Figure 33 and Figure 34 participants indicate strongly that they see diverse cultural values represented at the library. However, there are twenty-eight respondents who are neutral and twenty-four who are unsure or do not know, indicating room for improvement.

Figure 33

I feel that materials at River Library reflect diverse cultural identities – agreement scale

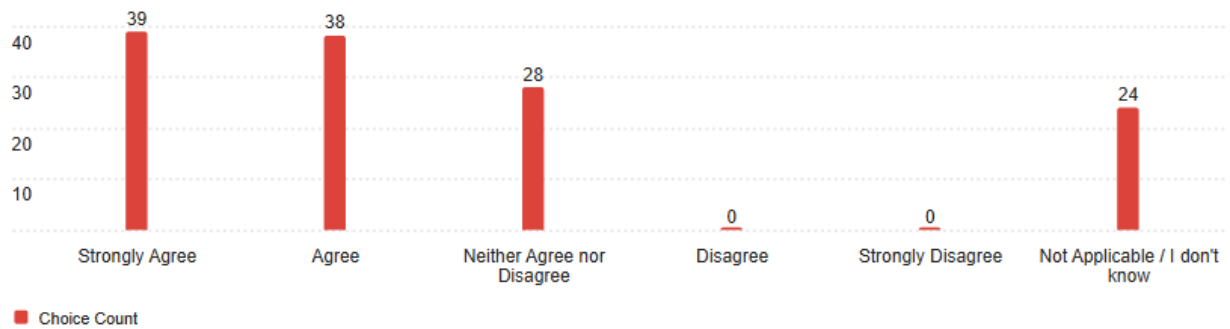
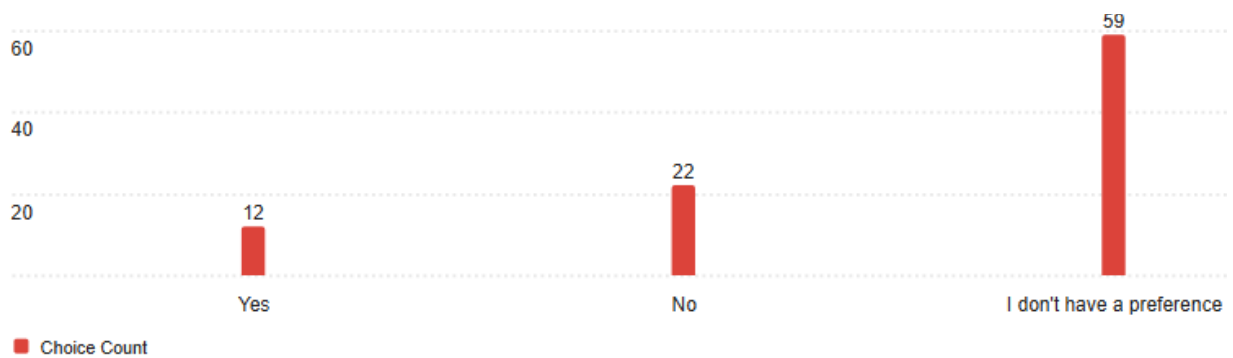


Figure 34

I feel that materials at River Library reflect diverse cultural identities – improvement scale



When reviewing the comments, many students struggle with the ADA entrance to the building when they require it and some do not know that there is an ADA door at all. Figure 35 and Figure 36 show the least amount of agreement.

Figure 35

If you required any accommodations due to a disability, were your needs met – agreement scale

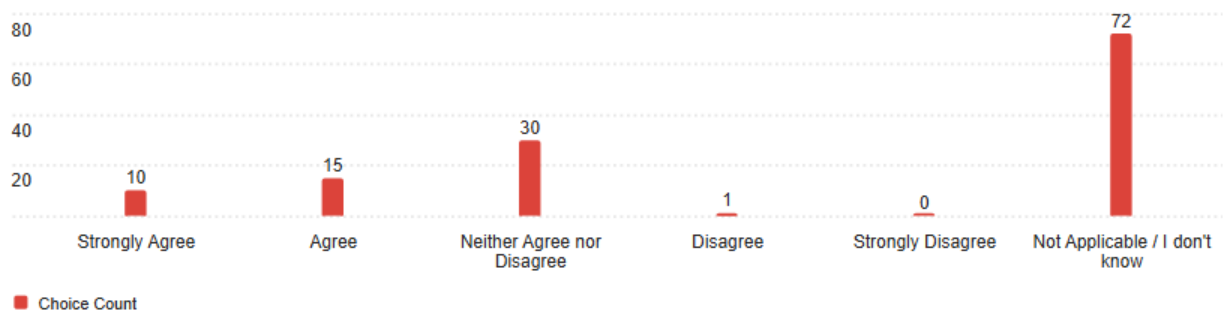
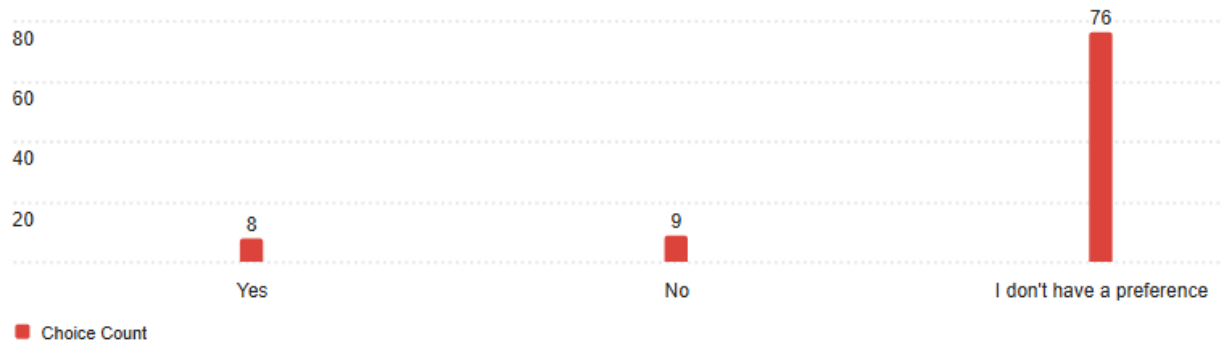


Figure 36

If you required any accommodations due to a disability, were your needs met – improvement scale



Overall, a comparison between students identifying as White and those from underrepresented and marginalized groups revealed broadly similar satisfaction levels. This is also true for students identifying as LGBTQIA+ and those identifying as heterosexual.

Open-Ended Responses

To further understand student perspectives, the survey asked four open-ended questions. These responses were analyzed for thematic content using topic modeling and qualitative coding. For the question about improving library services, four dominant themes emerged:

1. Students suggested enhancements to physical space and amenities, including more comfortable seating, better signage, and opening a cafe. (Sample keywords: "coffee," "location," "students")
 1. “I wish it was more in the center of campus, rather than the edge.”
 2. Multiple students state “have a coffee shop.”
 3. “While I used a scooter to transport myself due to an ankle surgery, the library would be hard because I needed to hop up the stairs while carrying the large scooter in my hands so a ramp going the whole way up would have been nice.”
2. Many respondents called for extended operating hours, particularly on weekends, late nights, and very early mornings. (Sample keywords: “night,” “Sunday,” “weekend”)
 1. “I would like the library hours to be extended. More specifically on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.”
 2. “Being opened during weekends. I’m a person that needs to do my work in the morning.”
 3. “... staying open longer for the longer late-night study sessions.”
3. Several students expressed interest in more personalized academic support and guidance. (Sample keywords: "help," "people," "hard")
 1. “I wouldn’t be able to just walk in there and find what I need, I would need a librarian.”
 2. “The library online databases are a little hard to use, possibly make them easier to navigate”.
 3. Several students have difficulty finding resources and could use further instruction: Some admit they need it/their friends do: “for students who need extra help”.

While others run into paywalls not knowing about library services that would get them the articles they need: “Many times I’ve found pretty solid articles only to be paywalled” and “I cannot access journals online. It asks me to pay for it.”

4. A recurring request was for greater diversity in library collections, including books and displays reflecting different cultures and identities. As one student states: “Expand resources that reflect diverse identities and backgrounds”. Another “...found the variation of the selection was lacking”.
 1. “One idea to improve the library would be to expand resources that reflect diverse identities and backgrounds, ensuring more inclusive collections... Additionally, hosting events that promote a sense of belonging for underrepresented groups would make the space feel more welcoming.”
 2. “Expand resources that reflect diverse identities and backgrounds.”
 3. “...found the variation of the selection was lacking”.

In responses to the question on how the library could empower students more, themes centered around communication, inclusivity, space, and staff. Students wanted the library to be more proactive in promoting its services, they want to know more about what the library offers in terms of resources, events and services. Several students described empowerment as tied to opportunities for connection and creativity. One explained, “Maybe having more events happening there,” while another emphasized, “Create more opportunities to bring people in for activities or motivation for school.” Engagement was also associated with smaller, low-cost initiatives: “I enjoy the little pop up events that happen at the library; coffee, therapy dog, food, free things.” Empowerment was also framed as awareness of resources. A student suggested, “Advertising it more, make sure people know more about the writing studio or the tutors. If more

people knew about the resources to help us, I think that would empower more individuals.”

Others emphasized better communication about borrowing policies: “My only suggestion is let the information about borrowing nonacademic books be more known.”

Participants also asked for additions to be made to the collections that reflect a broad range of identities and voices. “It is important for students to be able to read books and see authors that are like them!” Another respondent explained, “You could empower me more by creating spaces and programs that reflect the diversity of the community through inclusive events, multilingual resources, and opportunities for storytelling.” Respondents suggested improvements to the library as a physical space such as more flexible and welcoming study rooms, more quiet areas, more comfortable chairs and additional furniture, etc. One noted, “Make the library feel more comfortable. Making more cozy spaces in the library would certainly help.” Another simply added, “More comfy chairs upstairs would go a long way.”

Many value the staff and want more opportunities for one-on-one help, academic support, and workshops and continued positive engagement with the staff. “Have more tutoring services,” is a specific ask. Still, a large number were satisfied with the current state of the library: “I already am empowered by it, it’s a great library.” Others echoed this sentiment, “You guys already do a wonderful job!” The responses underscore that students view empowerment holistically, extending beyond books to include space, staff, services, representation, and comfort. The findings align with belongingness theory (Strayhorn, 2018), where representation and affirmation foster institutional care, and with uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), as students identify the gratifications of academic support, inclusivity, and social connection.

When students were asked to reflect on which of four selected quotes about libraries resonated most with them, four key themes emerged. These themes are the importance of seeing their identities and experiences reflected in the library's collections, that libraries provide "the freedom to learn", how the library introduces students to perspectives they might not otherwise encounter, particularly those of historically underrepresented communities, and how students view libraries as essential democratic institutions. These qualitative responses reflect the library's significance as both a site of personal belonging and a space that advances the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Students frequently emphasized the importance of seeing their identities and experiences reflected in the library's collections. The most commented theme was the tie between representation and empowerment. This theme aligns closely with DEI principles, particularly the role of cultural representation in fostering equity and inclusion. The ability to encounter materials that mirror one's racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural background was described as affirming and empowering.

This quote "3. African American author Andrea "Vocab" Sanderson said:

"Representation is so important. Empowering people to share their narratives with the largest audience possible will be the most impactful for all generations" (Fight for the Future, 2022)." is what resonated me because it had an emotional impact on me because it is empowering people to share their narratives and that's what I feel as if helped me.

Also "Number 3 resonated with me the most because as a Black Woman being represented in the best way possible is the most important thing to me and I appreciate being seen and heard". This student's comment makes it clear that positive portrayals are important. Another student on Vocab's quote states "[this] resonates with me the most because in today's society representation

is so important, especially for students of color”. This sense of recognition contributes to a broader feeling of belonging, as students reported that such representation helped them feel acknowledged, valued, and intellectually safe within the academic environment. Students strongly identified with representation, empowerment and visibility in literature.

Amy Tan’s quote, “My first library gave me the freedom to exist in private, to choose and even be greedy” (Twelve, 2018), deeply resonated with many respondents, as did Chris Tilly’s: “Libraries are a cornerstone of democracy. They are at their best when they introduce people to new ideas, so it is critical that they present diverse views and experiences and provide a wide range of published work” (Fight for the Future, 2022). Students echoed their sentiments and emphasized that libraries provide “the freedom to learn”. One student wrote “...When libraries are accessible, they are able to tell the stories of many different kinds of people”. Another succinctly states “Knowledge is power”. Multiple students write that the library is or always has been their “safe space”. These reflections suggest that students view the library as a rare space in higher education where they can exercise autonomy and exist without judgment, which from a UGT and belonging lens is very important. Several participants described the library as a place where they could “not worry about anything,” reinforcing the idea that the library serves as a psychosocial sanctuary. One particular student writes: “If the concept of libraries was introduced today, it would never be allowed. It is a miracle that we have access to history and literature”. From a belonging perspective, this theme underscores how spatial and intellectual privacy can foster a sense of personal safety and self-determination. From a DEI standpoint, it highlights the need for environments where all students, especially those from underrepresented groups, can freely explore ideas and identities.

Many students noted that the library introduces them to perspectives they might not otherwise encounter, particularly those of historically underrepresented communities. These comments mostly resonated with Yesika Salgado's quote "Without libraries my peers and myself wouldn't have had the access to literature that we identify with and encouraged us to tell our own stories. To restrict their abilities to loan books is to stifle voices like ours" (Fight for the Future, 2022). Salgado (Fight for the Future, 2022) and students valued the opportunity to explore books, media, and resources that reflect a wide range of racial, cultural, gender, and ideological viewpoints. "...It shows how libraries can be lifelines for some individuals." This theme reinforces the library's role in promoting intellectual diversity and equity of access. "Knowledge is crucial in a time where misinformation is spread at an alarming rate". In relation to DEI, these responses demonstrate the transformative potential of inclusive collections in cultivating empathy, challenging bias, and expanding worldviews. In terms of belonging, encountering unfamiliar voices in a supportive context enables students to navigate both sameness and difference in meaningful ways.

Several students articulated an understanding of libraries as essential democratic institutions. Comments highlighted the library's role in upholding intellectual freedom, social inclusion, and informed citizenship. These reflections align with DEI values by framing the library as a vehicle for equity—not only in access to knowledge but also in shaping an informed and inclusive academic community. From the perspective of belonging, participants recognized the library as a shared civic space that affirms their place within the university and the broader society. One student remarked, "Having knowledge at one's disposal is what I believe is necessary for a society that wants to continue to grow and prosper," reinforcing the perception

that libraries contribute to collective empowerment and social progress. Several students also selected multiple quotes and themes as “...they are each so important in their own way”.

The final open-ended question invited students to share any additional comments or suggestions regarding their experiences with the library. While the majority of responses expressed appreciation for the library’s existing services and resources, many also reinforced earlier feedback related to hours, space upgrades, accessibility, cultural representation, and institutional responsiveness.

A significant portion of respondents emphasized the need for longer operating hours. Several commented in this vein: “I would like the library hours to be extended. More specifically on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. I think that is when most people want to study...” or “Not having library hours on Saturdays is a little rough...” or “Keep hours of the library open longer into the night. I do my best studying late at night” or “A lot of schools have open hours 24/7 which is something I think we should look to do”. Students acknowledged the varied demands of academic and personal schedules and requested more flexible access to study spaces and resources. As one respondent noted, “Everyone has different schedules,” suggesting that broader availability could promote equitable access to the library’s services. The call for extended hours also underscores the library’s role as a central support hub for non-traditional and commuter students, whose availability may not align with standard daytime hours.

Students frequently mentioned the need for more comfortable and quiet study environments, with one linking it to sensory sensitivities. “Provide more quiet study zones for students with sensory sensitivities”. Requests included the addition of whiteboards, improved temperature regulation, and the reinstatement of the library’s coffee shop. Several respondents noted that the library is consistently too warm throughout the year, which affects their ability to

concentrate. Others advocated for more study rooms that are “less isolated,” reflecting a desire for semi-private spaces that offer both quiet and a sense of safety and community. There is also a desire for more comfort in the space such as “more comfortable spaces like couch corners and lounge areas”. These suggestions highlight the library’s function as both an academic and social space, where physical comfort significantly influences perceived belonging and productivity.

Multiple comments addressed the importance of cultural inclusivity and representation within the library’s collections and programming. One respondent offered a comprehensive vision for improvement, writing:

One idea to improve the library would be to expand resources that reflect diverse identities and backgrounds, ensuring more inclusive collections. It would also be helpful to improve signage for accessibility features and provide more quiet study zones for students with sensory sensitivities. Additionally, hosting events that promote a sense of belonging for underrepresented groups would make the space feel more welcoming. This comment speaks to several intersecting elements of diversity, equity, and inclusion: the need for collections that reflect a variety of lived experiences, attention to neurodiversity and sensory accessibility, and the intentional cultivation of welcoming spaces through targeted events and programming. Another student writes: “Offer more diverse books, create inclusive events, and provide quiet, welcoming spaces for all students. More student input opportunities would also help the library grow with our needs”. These suggestions align with best practices in academic librarianship, which emphasize culturally responsive collection development and community-centered engagement.

Concerns about accessibility were also present in the feedback. Several students expressed the need for clearer signage indicating disability access points and suggested the

addition of a ramp at the building entrance. “The only thing I would add to the library is a ramp just in case there is someone in a wheelchair” and “There is no ramp to get into this building... The building definitely needs to be brought up to ADA code” both emphasize the need for a ramp entrance and exit. There were also multiple calls for better signage: “More noticeable disability access points. They can be hard to see” and “Improve signage for accessibility features...”. These observations indicate that while some infrastructure for accessibility may exist, it is not always intuitive or well-publicized. Improving visibility and ease of access can help foster a more inclusive environment for students with mobility or sensory needs.

One student’s comment highlighted the challenges posed by linguistic marginalization, noting:

River Library provides my needs as a student being English the primary language spoken and taught at ESU, so I feel as I cannot ask for much because my native language (Spanish) is not in the main scope and interest of ESU or the majority of students, unless you are a Spanish major/concentration. Overall, if you know English, I want to say that River Library delivers and meets my needs as a student.

This reflection raises important questions about linguistic equity and suggests that monolingual environments may inadvertently alienate multilingual or international students. While the library was still viewed positively, the student’s hesitation to advocate for services in their native language underscores the potential for expanding multilingual resources and outreach to better serve the full campus population.

Additional feedback included requests for an expanded selection of online databases, more centralized library placement on campus, and continued enhancement of study spaces.

These comments reflect a student body that values the library's current offerings but seeks a more responsive and inclusive physical and digital infrastructure.

Figure 37 summarizes the top themes across all open-ended questions and aligns them to the belongingness and UGT frameworks. This figure creates priorities based on frequency and estimated student impact.

Figure 37

Frequency of Open-Ended Response Themes by Priority Level with Theoretical Alignment (Belongingness & UGT)

Theme	Theoretical Alignment	Description	Priority Level	Freq (n)
Extended Hours and Flexible Access	Belongingness Theory: Access and availability shape students' ability to "belong" in institutional spaces. Limited hours create exclusionary barriers. UGT: Students use the library to satisfy academic, social, and environmental needs; hours directly affect their ability to gratify those needs.	Requests for longer hours, including late nights and weekends, to accommodate diverse student schedules.	High impact, high need	28
Comfortable, Inclusive Study Spaces and Amenities	Belongingness Theory: Welcoming, comfortable spaces foster social and psychological safety, prerequisites for belonging. UGT: Students choose environments that meet emotional and functional needs; comfort and usability increase library "gratifications."	Need for quiet, comfortable spaces with better furniture, temperature control, signage, a café, and social safety.	High impact, high need	23

Culturally Inclusive Collections	Belongingness Theory: Representation affirms identity and signals inclusion; absence of mirrors/windows undermines belonging. UGT: Students seek materials that meet personal, academic, and cultural needs; collections that reflect identity increase relevance and engagement.	Requests for greater cultural, racial, gender, and LGBTQ+ representation across materials.	High impact, high need. Long term enhancements	23
Communication and Awareness	Belongingness Theory: Transparent, proactive communication builds trust and reduces uncertainty—key precursors to belonging. UGT: Students cannot seek gratifications (help, spaces, resources) they do not know exist. Awareness increases use.	Requests for better outreach, awareness of services, and proactive communication.	Moderate Impact, Actionable	23
Personalized Academic Support	Belongingness Theory: Supportive relationships and guidance foster a sense of being valued and connected. UGT: Students use library staff and tools to fulfill academic needs; more visible support improves usefulness.	Requests for tutoring, research help, workshops, or personalized academic guidance.	Moderate Impact, Actionable	20
Inclusive Programming and Events	Belongingness Theory: Community-building opportunities create social integration and peer connection. UGT: Students attend events for social, educational, and entertainment gratifications.	Suggestions for inclusive, engaging library events and programs.	Moderate Impact, Actionable	9
Wayfinding and Navigation	Belongingness Theory: Confusing spaces generate anxiety and reduce a sense of welcome. UGT: Efficient navigation supports task-oriented	Comments about difficulty finding materials or navigating spaces.	Long term enhancements	11

	gratification; poor signage obstructs use.			
Staff Capacity and Visibility	Belongingness Theory: Human relationships are core to belonging; inability to locate staff diminishes relational warmth and support. UGT: Students rely on staff to satisfy informational and academic needs; limited staffing reduces access to gratifications.	Concerns about staff availability, presence, or difficulty locating assistance.	Long term enhancements	5
Linguistic Inclusion and Multilingual Support	Belongingness Theory: Linguistic inclusion validates students' cultural identities and reduces feelings of otherness; multilingual cues increase psychological safety for international and multilingual students. UGT: Students seek information in formats they can understand; multilingual signage, services, and materials increase informational access and gratifications.	Requests for multilingual signage, resources, communication, or culturally/linguistically accessible support.	Long term enhancements	2 [Emerging theme]

For the first three themes (Figure 37), they are marked as high impact/high need as they demonstrated the highest frequency requests of students. These also require buy in from administration to implement. For the moderate impact items, while “communication and impact” has the same frequency as two of the high impact/high need items, this is a constant, ongoing effort that is frequently assessed and revised. This, “personalized academic support” and “inclusive programming and events” are all subject to the same internal review process and are actively being worked on year-round, making them medium impact and actionable in house, without needing leadership to necessarily be involved. The long term enhancements will require

staff training, longitudinal assessments, space studies and arrangements to become viable.

Administration will need to be brought in to advise on “wayfinding and navigation” and “staff capacity and visibility” specifically.

Summary

Overall, the survey indicates that most participants perceive River Library positively. Respondents feel generally respected and supported, but they also identify specific areas where the library could improve: better communication, extended hours, expanded cultural representation, and enhanced spaces for study and community engagement. These insights can help guide future improvements to ensure the library meets the evolving needs of Mountain University's student community.

Chapter 5

This study examined student perceptions of social ethic supports in academic library collections, with a focus on how the library serves underrepresented and marginalized populations. Guided by a mixed-methods action research design, the study sought to determine whether River Library at Mountain University meets the needs of its diverse student body. Central to this inquiry were two research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of underrepresented students on their specific needs for an academic library collection that is diverse and equity based? and (2) How is the library currently supporting the diversity and equity of its students through its collections? The findings contribute to the academic library community's understanding of how institutional practices affect equity, inclusion, and the student experience.

Chapter 5 presents an integrative discussion of the study's findings in relation to the scholarly literature reviewed in Chapter 2. It subsequently outlines a proposed action plan for enhancing library practices and identifies key implications for both academic and library leadership. The chapter concludes by addressing the study's methodological and contextual limitations, offering recommendations for future research and institutional practice, and providing final reflections on the broader significance of the findings.

Comparison to Existing Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The findings of this study align strongly with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, particularly in the areas of representation, belongingness, and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). Survey data revealed several key patterns. Quantitative responses to Likert-scale items indicated generally positive perceptions of River Library's physical resources and collections. However, students consistently identified areas for improvement—particularly in accessibility,

operating hours, and the breadth of cultural representation. Demographic analysis showed that while the survey captured a diverse range of student identities, underrepresented and marginalized group students appeared slightly underrepresented compared to university-wide enrollment data.

Qualitative responses added depth to these quantitative trends. Students emphasized the need for physical comfort, inclusive collections, personalized academic support, and a stronger sense of welcome and belonging (Appendix C). Many called for longer hours, clearer signage, more representative materials, and library events that reflect diverse cultural narratives. This convergence of qualitative and quantitative feedback points to general satisfaction with existing services, while also highlighting specific opportunities for strategic, equity-driven enhancement.

The findings from this study reinforce and extend the theoretical frameworks that guided this study. Belongingness theory, as proposed by Baumeister and Leary (1995) and expanded by Tinto (2015, 2017) and Strayhorn (2018), offers a powerful lens for understanding how students emotionally and symbolically experience the academic library. Many students described River Library as a supportive, safe, and inclusive space—but emphasized that emotional connection and psychological safety are strengthened when they see themselves reflected in collections and services (Figure 29, 30). Since some students are neutral or unsure if they feel a sense of belonging, efforts need to continue in this area. In question 11, (Figures 25-28) we see that diversity of characters appears more important to participants than the author's identity. A similar pattern is found when asking about participant intersectionality. There are several underrepresented and marginalized groups and LGBTQIA+ community members who are unsure that the library respects them in totality (Figure 31, Figure 32). While no participants disagreed, they were unsure or neutral.

Similarly, DEI principles surfaced strongly in student responses. Students of color, LGBTQIA+ students, first-generation students, and multilingual learners repeatedly emphasized the need for collections, signage, services, and programming that reflect their lived realities. These perspectives mirror scholarly calls for equity-centered collection development, as articulated by Chun and Evans (2019), Leung and Lopez-McKnight (2021), and the American Library Association (2007, 2022). These scholars argue that libraries must actively dismantle systemic inequities embedded in traditional collection practices and reposition themselves as spaces of empowerment, not erasure.

UGT proved particularly relevant to understanding the dynamic ways students engage with library resources. Consistent with the work of Blumler and Katz (1974), Ruggiero (2000), and Mehrad and Tajer (2016), students in this study acted as intentional participants in their academic journey. They used the library to fulfill a range of needs—not just academic, but also emotional and social. Some sought a quiet space for focus and reflection, others searched for resources that affirmed their identities or exposed them to new worldviews. When these gratifications were met, students expressed satisfaction and trust. When they were not, students reported disengaging or seeking alternative resources outside the institution—an outcome that can exacerbate inequity and further alienate marginalized learners.

Importantly, this study also extends existing literature by emphasizing the importance of intersectionality. Students expressed layered and overlapping needs based on their identities—race, gender, language, disability, and more. This reflects the insights of Dill and Zambrana (2020), Holvino (2012), and Wijeyesinghe and Jones (2014), who emphasized that institutional support must account for the complexity of lived experience. MU students voiced a clear need

for materials and services that are culturally nuanced, linguistically diverse, digitally accessible, and reflective of their multifaceted realities.

The present findings also echo the concerns raised by Alabi (2015) and Espinal et al. (2018), who documented the persistent marginalization of non-dominant identities in library collections and services. Students in this study confirmed these patterns, noting a lack of culturally responsive materials. In Figure 33 and Figure 34, participants indicate strongly that they see diverse cultural values represented at the library. However, there are 28 respondents who are neutral and 24 who are unsure or do not know, indicating room for improvement. Their responses support the conclusion that authentic representation within the library significantly shapes their academic engagement and overall sense of inclusion.

Ultimately, students widely perceive River Library as a supportive and functional institution. However, they also clearly articulated a need for greater intentionality in supporting underrepresented populations. They want to feel genuinely welcomed and reflected—not merely accommodated. Their feedback suggests that the most effective libraries are those that anticipate diverse needs, affirm a range of identities, and foster empowerment through inclusive, equity-driven practices. River Library has the opportunity—and responsibility—to become not just a center of knowledge, but a model of representation, inclusion, and belonging.

Proposed Action Plan

After analyzing all the data, an action plan was created to address specified concerns (Figure 38). A loose timeline was created to keep River Library on track for a sustainable implementation and research cycle with current levels of staffing. The following table outlines an action plan for addressing the core themes and needs identified in this study. Focus areas include operating hours, study environment, collection development, accessibility, multilingual

inclusion, outreach, academic support, and digital resources. Each action item is grounded in student feedback and aligned with the values of DEI, belonging, and UGT.

Figure 38

Action Plan for River Library Based on Findings

Focus Area	Student Need Identified	Proposed Action	Timeline
Library Hours and Access	Desire for extended hours on evenings and weekends to accommodate varied schedules	Better promote extended hours during finals and midterms and survey usage; assess demand for permanent extension	Spring 2026 Pilot; assess for Fall 2026 expansion
Study Space and Physical Comfort	Need for more comfortable, quiet, and flexible study environments	Add whiteboards, varied seating, improved HVAC, and semi-private group rooms as budget allows, bring to administration	Begin procurement in Spring 2026
Diverse and Inclusive Collections	Desire for broader representation of identities and cultures in books, displays, and events	Audit collections for representation gaps and expand DEI-themed displays and materials	Complete audit in Spring 2026; implement updates by Fall 2026
Accessibility Enhancements	Feedback on unclear signage, lack of ramps, and sensory-sensitive space	Improve ADA signage, ensure ramps and elevators are clearly marked, and assess sensory needs	Accessibility audit and signage updates by Spring 2026
Linguistic and Multicultural Inclusion	Concerns from multilingual students about limited native language support	Offer multilingual signage and outreach; explore translated guides for core resources	Develop materials in 2025-2026: Fall 2026 launch pilot
Communication and Outreach	Need for better promotion of library services, events, and academic tools	Implement semester-long campaign via email, social media, and in-building screens. Work with faculty to blend curriculum and library resources	Begin campaign Spring 2026; review engagement each semester
Academic Support Services	Add more personalized support and workshops	Further develop drop-in tutoring and research help. Brainstorm and begin new academic workshops and programs	Launch pilot series Spring 2026; evaluate and expand 2026-2027
Digital Resource Expansion	Calls for more databases and online resources across disciplines	Audit current holdings and compare usage and enrollment statistics. Collaborate with	Ongoing review; annual report to guide future additions

		faculty and consortia to expand digital offerings and access tools	
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This action plan is a living framework designed to evolve in response to ongoing assessment. Implementation should be collaborative and iterative, involving librarians, students, and campus stakeholders.

There is clearly a need to advertise and engage with students, educating them on what library resources entail and the many ways in which they use them. In question 7, 73% of students did not know if they were using library resources but in the following question the majority indicate they *do* use the library with only 7% indicating they do not use library resources (Appendix A). This indicates that question 7 needs to be reworded and both questions looked at and reworked with a focus group (Appendix A).

Academic Leadership Considerations

Institutional and academic leadership must recognize library collections as active components of DEI work. Campus administrators such as deans, provosts, and those overseeing library services should mandate regular equity audits of academic materials and collections, provide funding for collection development aligned with student demographics and stated needs, consider prioritizing librarian voices on DEI committees and institutional planning groups and include library DEI goals in campus-wide strategic plans (Chun & Evans, 2019). Leadership should also examine and develop assessment tools that center student voices, particularly from underrepresented populations.

Leaders should also apply action research findings to support evidence-based interventions that empower marginalized student populations. This may include reallocating resources, adjusting curricular partnerships, or facilitating campus dialogues about representation

and scholarly access. As student expectations of inclusivity rise, campus leaders must support libraries in becoming not just academic hubs, but equity-centered spaces that reflect and affirm diverse identities

Library Leadership Considerations

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for academic libraries to adopt intentional, equity-centered collection development and service strategies. River Library, like many academic libraries, has made progress in offering diverse materials and digital resources. However, the survey results reveal that students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, still perceive gaps in representation, accessibility, and inclusivity. To remain relevant and impactful, libraries must move beyond traditional, passive acquisition models toward proactive and participatory approaches that center student voices and diverse perspectives.

First, conducting collection diversity audits should become a routine and intentional component of academic library practice (Chun & Evans, 2019). Through systematic evaluation of holdings for representation across dimensions such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and socioeconomic experience, librarians can more effectively identify and remediate gaps that hinder equity and inclusivity. As one participant noted, “I found the variation of the selection was lacking.” Another respondent recommended, “One idea to improve the library would be to expand resources that reflect diverse identities and backgrounds, ensuring more inclusive collections.” A third emphasized the significance of representation, stating, “It highlights the power of seeing our own stories. I’d like to see the library diversify its collections.” Another comments: “Having access to stories that reflect an individual's identity can help validate them and encourage them to tell their own stories to feel seen.” These

reflections align with existing scholarship that advocates for continuous equity assessments in collection management (Chun & Evans, 2019; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021). Collaborative partnerships with faculty and student organizations—particularly those centered on cultural, identity-based, or affinity initiatives—can further ensure that new acquisitions align with evolving social contexts and institutional priorities. Their comments affirm the idea that academic success and persistence are tied not only to access, but to a sense of genuine belonging.

Second, digital inclusivity must remain a top priority. Students indicated that gaps are particularly apparent in digital collections and course reserves (Figure 23, Figure 24). Students ask for “online support”, “[engagement] with students outside their physical space”, and “improvement to digital access” to journals, ebooks (pleasure and academic), and databases. One participant notes this is particularly important for those with no reliable technology at home: “More digital access for students without reliable internet or devices at home”. Expanding electronic resources that highlight underrepresented voices, as well as ensuring accessibility for students with disabilities (e.g., screen reader–friendly formats), will help libraries meet a broader range of user needs. As Peters (2023) emphasized, digital access often plays a critical role in ensuring equitable representation and availability of marginalized authors.

Third, visible representation and marketing of inclusive resources are vital. Several students reported that they were unaware of existing resources or felt the library’s collections did not reflect their identities (Figure 25, 26). One participant states:

To make it more welcoming to foster a higher student population, I would suggest a comfortable environment. Personally, I believe if more students were aware of your resources it can help foster an educated guideline. Maybe posting this on social media or the ESU library page will be effective.

Another comments

I think empowering us more with the library could include advertising it more, make sure people know more about the writing studio or the tutors. The many resources that are available to help us and make sure we succeed. If more people knew about the resources to help us I think that would empower more individuals to go to River Library.

Displaying culturally relevant materials, curating DEI-focused reading lists, and hosting themed exhibits or book spotlights can reinforce the library's role as a welcoming and inclusive space. Publicizing these efforts through social media and campus-wide communications can increase engagement and visibility.

Fourth, space design and environmental inclusivity play a key role in student perceptions of belonging. Students noted the need for improved signage, more collaborative study spaces, and comfortable seating. These concerns echo findings in the literature that library spaces can either support or hinder feelings of inclusion (Broughton, 2019; Murphy et al., 2020). “It would also be helpful to improve signage for accessibility features and provide more quiet study zones for students with sensory sensitivities”, “provide quiet, welcoming spaces for all students”, and “more comfortable seating” are examples of comments made on this theme. Participant concerns particularly came up with responses about ADA and accessibility of the building (Figure 17, Figure 18, Figure 35). One thorough respondent states:

There is no ramp to get into this building, which I imagine is very difficult for people with mobility issues. Yes, there is a door in the basement to come in, but the lip is difficult to traverse with a wheelchair. The building definitely needs to be brought up to ADA code.

Another comments: “More noticeable disability access points. They can be hard to see and might deter physically disabled people from using River Library resources”. Accommodations for those with disabilities had the least amount of agreement among respondents, meaning that accommodations for those with disabilities should be thoroughly examined. By updating physical layouts to prioritize accessibility, comfort, and cultural inclusivity—such as incorporating multilingual signage and gender-inclusive restrooms — libraries can create environments where all students feel welcome.

Fifth, library programming and outreach should actively promote diverse voices. Several participants asked for additional events to highlight their identities as well: “...improve the library [by] ... hosting events that promote a sense of belonging for underrepresented groups would make the space feel more welcoming”, “You could empower me more by creating spaces and programs that reflect the diversity of the community through inclusive events, multilingual resources, and opportunities for storytelling. It would also help to provide mentorship programs and workshops on self-expression”, and “host events celebrating diverse narratives”. Hosting author talks, panel discussions, and cultural events in collaboration with student groups can foster stronger connections between the library and underrepresented communities. These events also signal that the library values and celebrates diverse perspectives.

Finally, staff development and training must remain ongoing. Representation in collections must be paired with a culturally responsive approach to service. Professional development opportunities focused on DEI, cultural competence, and implicit bias can equip staff to better engage with students from diverse backgrounds. One comments: “be up to date with the latest” in reference to staff, without other details. Another called with a question about services the library offers and “... the answer was that they did not know and did not think so”,

which is not the answer the patron should have received. More research should have been done by the staffer. This is particularly critical given research showing that staff interactions shape user experiences as much as collections themselves (Alabi, 2015; Espinal et al., 2018).

In sum, while this chapter focuses on what can be currently improved, there were many positive comments that are not included such as “you guys already do a wonderful job!”, “I love that the collection has recently become so diverse in the selections of books available in the library. So many DEI, LGBTQ, etc. Even diversification across genres like romance and graphic novels”, “I enjoy the little pop up events that happen at the library”, and “I really appreciate River Library’s focus on inclusion and empowerment”. The findings of this study reveal that River Library is well-positioned to become a leader in inclusive library practices. By embedding equity considerations into every aspect of collection development, space design, and outreach, the library can move from being a neutral service point to an active catalyst for belonging, academic success, and community connection.

Library professionals must take intentional steps to enhance cultural responsiveness, promote equitable access, and maintain open communication with students. Enhancing visibility, improving comfort, and diversifying collections are not superficial changes—they are equity strategies rooted in student voice.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The survey relied on voluntary participation, which may have introduced self-selection bias. Some demographic categories were underrepresented relative to the university’s population. In contrast the majority of respondents, 60%, identified as age 18-20. This could be indicative that younger students have not yet learned about library resources and various supports available to them. Additionally, certain survey items

(e.g., questions on resource usage) were confusing to some respondents and require revision. The entire chart in question 10 used to gauge current satisfaction and ask if improvement is desired (Appendix A) as well since there was frequent discrepancy in reported satisfaction and desire for change. Future research should consider using cognitive interviews or focus groups in combination with the survey to refine survey tools.

Finally, this study focused on a single institution. While the findings offer valuable insight, their generalizability may be limited. However, the methodology and thematic findings can inform similar assessments at other institutions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building on this study, future research should include qualitative interviews or focus groups to deepen understanding of student experiences. Longitudinal assessments could measure the impact of implemented changes over time. Comparative studies across institutions could help identify systemic trends and best practices.

Additional research should explore the intersectionality of race, gender, disability, and first-generation status in shaping library engagement. Further studies that focuses better on age of participants may also be of use to determine if students who have been enrolled for multiple semesters have a better understanding of library resources. Research should also investigate how libraries can develop multilingual and transnational resources to better serve international and multilingual students.

Final Reflections

This study underscores the transformative potential of academic libraries to act not only as information hubs but also as inclusive, identity-affirming, and empowering spaces. When students feel seen and supported, they are more likely to engage, persist, and thrive. The

feedback gathered through this research should not sit idle—it must inform the policies, practices, and culture of the library moving forward.

By centering student voices, this research affirms that belonging and equity are not abstract ideals but actionable, measurable goals. The student narratives collected here serve as a compass for institutional change, reflecting both the successes and silences of current practices. True inclusion arises when institutions listen actively and respond authentically. By positioning student perspectives at the heart of decision-making, libraries can move from transactional service providers to transformational partners in student success. Acting on this feedback allows River Library to continue evolving as both a democratic institution and a sanctuary for learning. Through reflection, collaboration, and sustained commitment, the library can fulfill its promise as an agent of empowerment for all students.

The findings of this study carry implications that transcend a single institution. As higher education faces growing calls for equity, libraries can model what inclusion looks like in practice: transparent resource allocation, participatory decision-making, and continuous self-assessment. In doing so, they reaffirm their central role not only in academic success but in shaping the moral and cultural fabric of the university.

This research also emphasizes that inclusion is not a destination but a sustained commitment. Sustainable equity work demands that reflection be institutionalized, not optional. Regular assessment, open dialogue, and transparent communication must guide River Library's continued evolution and future action research initiatives. Equity must be embedded in everyday practice—through policies, partnerships, and professional development that keep the library responsive to the diverse realities of its users.

Finally, while this study focused on a single departmental library, its implications are broad. Meaningful change often begins locally. River Library's journey demonstrates that even within modest institutional contexts, much can be achieved through intentional listening, collaborative problem-solving, and a commitment to equity as a shared responsibility. In this way, River Library can serve as both a model and a reminder—that the work of inclusion begins where we are, with the resources and relationships we already hold.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument

Student Survey: River Library

Q1 Which category below includes your age?

☐ 17 or younger

☐ 18-20

☐ 21-23

☐ 24-26

☐ 27-30

☐ 31-39

☐ 40-49

☐ 50-59

☐ 60 or older

Q3 Which of the following identities do you identify with? (Select all that apply)

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

☐ Asian or Asian-American (Includes Far East, Southeast Asia and Indian

Subcontinent)

- ☐ Black or African-American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino/a
- ☐ Middle Eastern or North African
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ White or European American
- ☐ Another race (please specify) _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Q3 To which gender do you currently most identify?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Gender Non-binary (Gender nonconforming, Genderqueer, Nonbinary)
- ☐ Trans
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe (please specify) _____

Q4 How would you best describe your sexual identity:

- ☐ Asexual

- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Gay
- ☐ Heterosexual or straight
- ☐ Lesbian
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ Questioning
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe (please specify) _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Q5 Do you identify as a person with a disability? Please select all that apply.

Yes, a physical disability

Yes, an unseen disability, such as a learning disability

Yes, both physical and unseen

No

I'm not sure

Prefer not to say

Q6 Are you a first generation college student? (A first-generation college student is someone whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree.)

- ☐ Yes

- ☐ No
- ☐ I'm not sure
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Q7 Have you used River Library collections (books, databases, ebooks, journals, etc.) while you attended East Stroudsburg University?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I'm not sure
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Q8 How do you use the library?

- ☐ I use the library in person only
- ☐ I use the library online only
- ☐ I use the library BOTH in person and online
- ☐ I do NOT use the library in person or online

Q9

What services (if any) do you utilize at the library?

- ☐ Research Assistance/talk to a librarian
- ☐ Circulation Desk Assistance/talk to a student or worker at the desk
- ☐ Warrior Tutoring Center
- ☐ Writing Studio
- ☐ Online Tutoring (Net Tutor)
- ☐ Online Writing Studio
- ☐ Other:

Q10

You are at the library because...

- ☐ It was an assignment from a professor to do X at the library (go to the Writing Studio, take a picture, etc.)
- ☐ I do my homework there
- ☐ I needed somewhere to go between classes
- ☐ I have mandatory study hall
- ☐ Other:

Q11 Next, tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following:

Please indicate how each statement makes you feel.

Is this a
category you
want to see
improved?

	Strongly Agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly Disagree (5)	Not Applicable (6)	Yes (1)	No (2)	I don't care (3)
River Library is located conveniently for my needs. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The library is accessible for individuals with mobility challenges. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The current operating hours of the library meet my needs. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The library BOOK collections	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

meet my needs

(books in the

building) (5)

The library

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

ONLINE

collections

meet my needs

(articles,

databases, etc.)

(6)

I feel that I can

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

find books

about

characters who

are similar to

me at the

library. (7)

I feel that I can

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

find books with

authors who

are similar to

me at the

library. (8)

I feel welcome
and that I
belong at River
Library. (4)

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

I feel that all
aspects of my
identity are
respected at
River Library
(9)

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

I feel that
materials at
River Library
reflect diverse
cultural
identities. (10)

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

If you required
any
accommodatio
ns due to a
disability, were
your needs
met? (11)

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

*This is how question 11 displays to students:

Q11

Next, tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following:

	Please indicate how each statement makes you feel.						Is this a category you want to see improved?		
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable / I don't know	Yes	No	I don't have a preference
River Library is located conveniently for my needs.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The library is accessible for individuals with mobility challenges.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The current operating hours of the library meet my needs.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The library BOOK collections meet my needs (books in the building)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The library ONLINE collections meet my needs (articles, databases, etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q12

Please tell us a little about any ideas you have to improve the above categories (the chart above - location, accessibility of the building or materials, collections, identity, belonging, etc.). What changes or additions could we make to our library services to make them more useful and better meet your needs?

Q13 Libraries were created to empower individuals. How could we empower you more as a library?

Q14 Please read these four quotes and tell me if any of these resonate with you and why?

1. Poet Yesika Salgado, a Los Angeles born Salvadoran, said: “Without libraries my peers and myself wouldn’t have had the access to literature that we identify with and encouraged us to tell our own stories. To restrict their abilities to loan books is to stifle voices like ours” (Fight for the Future, 2022).

2. Author Chris Tilly said: “Libraries are a cornerstone of democracy. They are at their best when they introduce people to new ideas, so it is critical that they present diverse views and experiences, and provide a wide range of published work” (Fight for the Future, 2022).

3. African-American author Andrea “Vocab” Sanderson said: “Representation is so important.

Empowering people to share their narratives with the largest audience possible will be the most impactful for all generations” (Fight for the Future, 2022).

4. Amy Tan, an Asian American New York Times bestselling author said: “My first library gave me the freedom to exist in private, to choose and even be greedy” (Twelve, 2018).

Q15 Do you have any additional comments, concerns or opinions that you feel may help the library better meet your needs?

That's it! Hit submit to send us your feedback.

Thank you for your participation!

If you did not fill out the Informed Consent Form, [please click here.](#) *Submit the survey first or open this in a new tab*

A link to a copy of the survey can be shared on request. Email [msmith130 AT esu.edu](mailto:msmith130@esu.edu)

Appendix B: Proposed Action Plan

Focus Area	Student Need Identified	Proposed Action	Timeline
Library Hours and Access	Desire for extended hours on evenings and weekends to accommodate varied schedules	Better promote extended hours during finals and midterms and survey usage; assess demand for permanent extension	Spring 2026 Pilot; assess for Fall 2026 expansion
Study Space and Physical Comfort	Need for more comfortable, quiet, and flexible study environments	Add whiteboards, varied seating, improved HVAC, and semi-private group rooms as budget allows, bring to administration	Begin procurement in Spring 2026
Diverse and Inclusive Collections	Desire for broader representation of identities and cultures in books, displays, and events	Audit collections for representation gaps and expand DEI-themed displays and materials	Complete audit in Spring 2026; implement updates by Fall 2026
Accessibility Enhancements	Feedback on unclear signage, lack of ramps, and sensory-sensitive space	Improve ADA signage, ensure ramps and elevators are clearly marked, and assess sensory needs	Accessibility audit and signage updates by Spring 2026
Linguistic and Multicultural Inclusion	Concerns from multilingual students about limited native language support	Offer multilingual signage and outreach; explore translated guides for core resources	Develop materials in 2025-2026: Fall 2026 launch pilot
Communication and Outreach	Need for better promotion of library services, events, and academic tools	Implement semester-long campaign via email, social media, and in-building screens	Begin campaign Spring 2026; review engagement each semester
Academic Support Services	Add more personalized support and workshops	Further develop drop-in tutoring and research help. Brainstorm and begin new academic workshops and programs	Launch pilot series Spring 2026; evaluate and expand 2026-2027
Digital Resource Expansion	Calls for more databases and online resources across disciplines	Audit current holdings and compare usage and enrollment statistics. Collaborate with faculty and consortia to expand digital offerings and access tools	Ongoing review; annual report to guide future additions

Appendix C: Qualitative Thematic Coding Tables

Table A

Qualitative Thematic Coding of Student Responses on Library Empowerment

Theme	Sub-Themes	Representative Quotes
Events & Engagement	Programs, community, creative activities	"Maybe having more events happening there." / "Perhaps make more of those blind book date, those were a lot of fun!"
Comfortable, Welcoming Spaces	Comfortable seating, cozy, welcoming atmosphere	"Make the library feel more comfortable. Making more cozy spaces in the library would certainly help."
Awareness & Promotion of Resources	Promotion of tutoring, writing studio, borrowing policies	"Advertising it more, make sure people know more about the writing studio or the tutors." / "My only suggestion is let the information about borrowing nonacademic books be more known."
Representation & Inclusivity	Diverse collections, inclusive programs, representation	"It is important for students to be able to read books and see authors that are like them!" / "I love that the collection has recently become so diverse... So many DEI, LGBTQ, etc."
Academic & Technology Support	Tutoring, extended hours, online resources, digital access	"Have more tutoring services." / "More time to get access to the materials and services available (extended hours)." / "Try to improve the digital access to eBooks and audiobooks."
Food, Coffee, and Perks	Snacks, coffee, social incentives	"Get a coffee machine." / "Have a coffee shop for people who are studying." / "Snacks."
General Satisfaction	Positive feedback, library already sufficient	"I already am empowered by it, it's a great library." / "I feel that River Library already does a great job at empowering individuals."
Critical Reflection on Empowerment	Library as community space vs. individual empowerment	"I don't view a library as empowering. I see it more like a helpful tool." / "The library has always been a safe place for

		scholars and people who are in need of help.”
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Note. This table presents thematic coding of student responses to the open-ended question: “Libraries were created to empower individuals. How could we empower you more as a library?” Themes and sub-themes were identified through qualitative content analysis, with representative quotes included to illustrate each category.

Table B**Qualitative Thematic Coding of Student Responses on Improving Library Services**

Theme	Sub-Themes	Representative Quotes
Hours & Access	Extended hours, weekend availability, late-night access	"I would like the library hours to be extended. More specifically on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays." / "Keep hours of the Library open longer into the night."
Accessibility & Disability Accommodations	Ramps, signage, ADA compliance, sensory-friendly spaces	"The only thing I would add... is a ramp just in case there is someone in a wheelchair." / "The building definitely needs to be brought up to ADA code."
Location & Parking	Central campus access, commuter parking, convenience	"The library is very far from where almost all of the class buildings are at." / "Finding parking... I have definitely not gone in if I couldn't find parking close enough."
Collections & Databases	Expanded databases, pleasure reading, inclusive collections	"I cannot access journals online. It asks me to pay for it." / "Perhaps make a Black stories collection/section for both fiction and nonfiction."
Study Spaces & Environment	Quiet study rooms, reservable spaces, climate comfort	"More access to study rooms to be more isolated." / "Lower the heat because it always seems to be so warm in there."
Food, Coffee, & Amenities	Coffee shop, vending machines, water fountains	"Maybe have a coffee shop inside." / "Get vending machine down stairs, and all water fountains fixed."
Online Services & Navigation	Simplified databases, e-texts, digital lending, chat support	"The library online databases are a little hard to use." / "Online chat with a live librarian... reliability of a great librarian all online."
Programming, Belonging, & Engagement	Diverse collections, DEI programs, community events	"Expand resources that reflect diverse identities and backgrounds." / "Hosting events that promote a sense of belonging for underrepresented groups."
General Satisfaction	Positive feedback, services already sufficient	"I have no ideas, I like the library how it is now :)" / "I wouldn't change anything. I feel the library suits practically all needs."

Note. This table presents thematic coding of student responses to the open-ended question: “Please tell us a little about any ideas you have to improve the above categories.” Themes and sub-themes were identified through qualitative content analysis, with representative quotes included to illustrate each category.

Table C**Qualitative Thematic Coding of Student Responses to Resonant Quotes**

Theme	Sub-Themes	Representative Quotes
Representation & Inclusion (Quote 3)	Representation, empowerment, visibility in literature	“Number 3 resonated with me the most because as a Black Woman being represented in the best way possible is the most important thing to me.” / “Quote #3 resonates with me... representation is so important, especially for students of color.”
Democracy & Access to Knowledge (Quote 2)	Democracy, knowledge as power, diverse perspectives	“Democracy is being threatened as we speak and in times like these easy access to research is more important now than ever.” / “Knowledge is power.”
Privacy, Freedom, & Safe Space (Quote 4)	Safe spaces, privacy, uninterrupted study, freedom	“4 resonates with me because libraries allow me to just come in and sit by myself uninterrupted to do my work.” / “The library has always been my safe space.”
Libraries as Lifelines (Quote 1)	Access to literature, validation, opportunity, lifeline	“#1 resonates with me because when I was young I went to libraries to practice reading.” / “Quote 1 resonates with me the most. It shows how libraries can be lifelines for some individuals.”
Multiple Quotes Resonate	All perspectives important, more than one resonates	“The poems by Chris Tilly and Andrea Sanderson resonated most.” / “All of them. I’m a compassionate reader and read daily.”
Non-Resonance / Neutral	Limited connection to libraries, functional view	“I don’t resonate with any of them.” / “Personally, I don’t feel I can resonate with any of these. I’ve only used the library as a setting.”

Note. This table presents thematic coding of student responses to the question: “Please read these four quotes and tell me if any of these resonate with you and why?” Themes and sub-themes were identified through qualitative content analysis, with representative quotes included to illustrate each category.

Table D**Qualitative Thematic Coding of Student Responses to Additional Comments**

Theme	Sub-Themes	Representative Quotes
Satisfaction & No Changes Needed	Library already sufficient, no changes required	“The library meets my needs to the fullest.” / “I feel as if the library is perfect the way it is!” / “I love the ESU library. I think it’s a great place!”
Hours & Access	Weekend hours, earlier Saturday access	“Open the library at an earlier time on Saturday. Like 1:00pm.”
Comfort & Spaces	Lounge-style areas, private study rooms, whiteboards	“More comfortable spaces like couch corners and lounge areas and less empty bookshelves.” / “More private study rooms with whiteboards would be useful.”
Tutoring & Noise	Tutoring moved to separate rooms for quiet study	“Maybe move tutoring to a certain room and not in the common area, since sometimes it’s hard to focus with people getting tutored.”
Technology & Equipment	Improved scanners, lending flexibility	“The lending option, not being able to bring the book out of the library is not so convenient.” / “We need a better scanner... scanned documents come out upside down every other page.”
Collections, Inclusion, & Engagement	Diverse books, inclusive events, student input, outreach	“Offer more diverse books, create inclusive events, and provide quiet, welcoming spaces for all students.” / “Our library seems to only function one-way; I would like to see our library engage with students outside their physical space.”

Note. This table presents thematic coding of student responses to the question: “Do you have any additional comments, concerns or opinions that you feel may help the library better meet your needs?” Themes and sub-themes were identified through qualitative content analysis, with representative quotes included to illustrate each category.