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Learning from Degree-Seeking Older Adult Students in a University Library

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"Older adult graduates could become our nation's best advocates for
attainment of post-secondary education and the corresponding benefits of increased economic
opportunities and improved quality of life" ---- (Schaefer, 2010, p. 88).

Introduction

Throughout the world, older adults, particularly baby boomers (individuals born between 1946 and 1964), garner new interests and activities in later life, and more than ever before, many are finding numerous opportunities to pursue formal and informal educational activities (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2012). Over the past 40 years, despite economic challenges, the participation in American higher education by midlife and older baby boomers has increased (Lakin, Mullane, and Robinson, 2008). With the proliferation of both credit and non-credit educational programs, coupled with the growth of distance learning and online instruction, higher education has become more easily accessible. Researchers expect the pursuit of education to stabilize or diminish slightly as students get older and their educational activities decline as a result of poor health, inadequate income, and transportation problems (William and Asla, 2009; Hooyman and Kiyak, 2011; Huston, 2011). Although their enrollment figures in university and college credit courses remains modest, some researchers suggest that this age cohort of students will seek more degree-credit courses (Thompson and Foth, 2013; Short, 2004; Schaefer, 2010; Sheard, 2009; Wardley *et al.*, 2013; Cruce and Hillman, 2012; Kressley and Huebschmann, 2002; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2013). To date, the vast majority of older adults are enrolled in community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013; Laanan, 2003; Kim *et al.,* 2010), are mostly baby boomers, female (Taniguchi and Kaufman, 2007; Hughes-Tutas, 2009; Freedman, 2007; Kennedy *et al.*, 2004), and prefer taking classes on campus (Lakin, Mullane, and Robinson, 2008; Eduventures, Inc., 2008).

The literature focusing on older adult students enrolled in credit-bearing classes at colleges or universities is fairly new, and it is not always easy to identify overall trends in this postsecondary education sector. U.S. postsecondary enrollment data generally only covers up to about age 45 (Arun Mathur, e-mail message to author, February 27, 2014). In addition, students age 50 and over are often included within the vast range of other age cohorts of non-traditional students (typically 25 years or older) by the U.S. Department to Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2012). Consequently, little national data and few studies have examined how these older adult students access, participate and benefit from college credentials (e.g., certificates) or degrees (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012; Bragg, 2013; Fishman, 2010).

In addition, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), there are over 8.2 million non-traditionally aged (25 years and older) students at degree granting institutions of higher education, and over 800,000 are 50 years or older, which comprises 3.9% of all college and university students at degree granting institutions. Students who are aged 25 or older are a minority on campus and older (age 50 and over) non-traditional students seeking post-secondary

degrees are a minority within a minority. It is reasonable to expect participation in post-secondary education of older adults will continue to expand. In fact, non-traditional student enrollment in colleges and universities is growing, and this trend is expected to continue. By 2020, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, enrollment of students age 25 and over will have risen by 20% since 2010 compared to an 11% increase for students under 25 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

If students age 50 and older are not a majority in many college campuses, why should academic librarians consider targeting services for this population? Libraries are already reaching out to selective groups of students such as first-year, international, and graduate students. As a whole, the authors of this study theorize the consideration of library services for this non-traditionally aged group will also benefit other student groups (e.g., minorities such as ethnic minorities, disabled, and students with lower rates of graduation) (Sander, 2008). Research by Scala (1996) suggests that older adult students who are taking credit courses use college facilities (including the library) and attend college events. Moreover, when the role of the academic library or its impact was documented in these qualitative studies, the majority of participants reported a positive perception of the library but they indicated a need for additional guidance on using the library (Newberry, 2013; MacKenzie, 2007). By enhancing service models and reconsidering ways to support older adult students, librarians can also demonstrate the value of the library in retention and recruitment efforts for these diverse students in an increasingly competitive environment for campus resources.

This study aims to address the gap in the LIS literature on older adults taking classes towards a degree or certificate. It centers on a sample of non-traditionally aged (50 years or older) students who are enrolled as degree-seeking (as opposed to non-degree-seeking) in a postsecondary institution; this age group is representative of returning baby boomers. This study is also informed by an increase in library staff interactions with older adult students at the library of a public metropolitan university in the northwestern United States.

To better understand how the library can support the academic needs of this population, it is necessary to assess their library needs. The purpose of this study was to analyze demographics of older degree-seeing students and to survey their current uses of the library and university services. This data will inform future focus groups, outreach efforts, and investigation into targeted services. The study will address the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of older adult students?
2. How do older adult students seek information?
3. Which library resources and services do older adult students use?

Literature Review

Group Characteristics

This cohort varies in many aspects (e.g., educational level, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, veteran status, and other) and individuals pursue a wide range of educational programs, from doctoral degrees to certificates (Walker, 2012; Hooyman and Kiyak, 2011). Similar to other non-traditional students, older adult students are new or returning students in hopes of advancing their careers and education (Newberry, 2013; Isopahkla-Bouret, 2013). These educational venues are different than those of community-based non-credit classes provided at several universities (e.g., Osher Lifelong Learning Institute) or through local school districts. Most literature about non-traditional students focuses on characteristics of distance and working students.

Information-seeking Behaviors

The literature on information-seeking behaviors of older adults enrolled as degree-seeking students in postsecondary institutions is scarce. Nevertheless, some pertinent information was derived from the literature on the learning preferences of non-traditional postsecondary students that could be applied to older adult students.

In her study, Branch (2003) reported that after the completion of an information literacy course, the perceptions of the non-traditional college students changed, and that they felt more confident in accessing and evaluating online information. Regarding learning styles, Newberry (2013) found that generally, older adult students preferred visual

learning styles, repetition, and the traditional lecture model. Further research on the preferred learning styles of older adult students in university settings is needed (Newberry, 2013). Previous studies also recommend the need to train educators (including librarians) in teaching students age 50 and over (Newberry, 2013).

Challenges of Older Adult Students

It is important to keep in mind that age is the unifying factor in this cohort, but there are other confounding factors affecting this diverse group. There is conflicting evidence in the literature that older adult students appear to be more self-motivated (Cannady *et al.,* 2012; Baptista, 2011; Laanan, 2003) and thus, perform well academically. Alternatively, Bragg (2013) reported that some older adult students are more likely to have lower rates of persistence in their remediation classes.

Several case studies addressing the institutional needs of baby boomers and students age 50 and over suggest that like other non-traditional students, these students face several barriers on campus. Some of these persistent challenges include ageism in the instructor-learner relationship (Levaque, 2012) and remedial coursework (Bragg, 2013). Thereby, the diversity of the older adult student subset, often accompanied by additional characteristics beyond age such as technology proficiency, ethnicity, and differing educational cultures, affects student academic performance in higher education (Stuart *et al.,* 2011).

To improve the experience of these students on campus, most researchers stressed that educational programs need to take into account the students' particular needs, such as self-paced learning and accommodation of hearing and vision decrements (Hooyman and Kiyak, 2011). Additionally, Hooyman and Kiyak (2011) suggested that educational programs need to develop strategies to make them accessible to historically disadvantaged and low-income groups who may have had limited educational experience or opportunities early in life. In a study of non-traditionally aged women enrolled in a university, Pernal (2009) suggested that institutions need to bring more awareness of this subset of the population and train their staff in helping with technological support and human assistance. Wardley and others (2013) claimed that a "combination of social integration and individual attention" is an important factor in the retention of older adult students (p. 94).

Support Services and Their Effectiveness

Despite challenges adjusting to campus life, Schaefer (2010) emphasized that non-traditionally aged students will likely benefit from campus support services. Mackenzie (2007) and Pernal (2009) reported the positive impact that support services can have on students concerning communication and support.

Hughes-Tutass (2009) found that although university administrators acknowledged the importance of their institutions' need to improve services to older adult students, changes were not made as these institutions faced escalating competition for funding resources. Growing research on non-traditional students and student retention and recruitment indicates that educational institutions need to directly address these challenges "with targeted services and outreach to their older learners to help develop academic self-confidence and self-efficacy" (Fishman, 2010, p. 663). Thus, academic units that impact students' academic performance, campus engagement, and professional development (like the library) can have an integral role in enriching students' learning, engagement and perseverance in completing a degree (Soria *et al.*, 2013).

The Role of Academic Libraries

Past research on non-traditional students and academic libraries has provided some light in regards to the library services and resources used by older adult students in higher education. In a study of mainly commuter non-traditional students, Cannady and her colleagues noted that it is effective to have ongoing customized research consultations for commuter students to assist with library research skills (2012). In addition, providing several communication options (e.g. e-mail, chat, text, and evening office hours for drop-in appointments) and formal instruction were useful in giving students the freedom to choose their most comfortable approach to research (Cannady *et al.,* 2012).

Ismail (2011) describes experiences with embedded librarians in course management systems to support student learning and engagement with library resources. Research was conducted in social work classes that have an older median age. Most literature about non-traditional students focuses on characteristics of distance and working students rather than age.

Methodology

Participants

The population of interest included graduate and undergraduate degree-seeking students aged 50 years and older at a public northwestern university. In the spring 2013 semester, this included 579 students (4% of the student body) with 373 of them designated as undergraduate students. Although this population has slightly decreased in recent years, the researchers had noticed an increase in these students seeking library resources. As a whole, the student body is predominantly Caucasian (77%) with slightly more females (54%) than males (Boise State University, 2013a). It was anticipated that the diversity of the participants would include a similar makeup in gender and ethnicity. Prior to data collection the protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Data Collection

Data was collected from a variety of sources. Initial data for this study was drawn from the university's Data Warehouse, an internal database used for collecting and processing campus-wide data including student records from multiple university systems that can be queried for research/analysis purposes (Boise State University, 2013b). In addition, a survey was developed and administered using the Qualtrics online survey system. The survey was distributed to students via email in March 2013 and remained open for over a month. Questions were asked concerning participant experience with library instruction, use of the university library and other libraries, barriers to use of the university library and suggestions for improvement, and use of other university resources and participation in clubs and organizations. In addition, questions were asked about student status, proximity to campus, and experience with online courses. Finally, data was viewed in context with the institutional LibQUAL+ survey results from 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012. LibQUAL+ is a widely used library assessment instrument which measures user perceptions of service quality (LibQual+, 2013).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were gathered from the Data Warehouse queries, survey results, and LibQUAL+ results. In addition, open-ended survey answers and responses were reviewed for themes and categorized using LibQUAL+ dimensions for analysis.

Results

Demographics and Other Descriptors

All degree-seeking students aged 50 years and older in the Spring semester 2013 were included in the Data Warehouse queries (n = 579). Of those students, 180 were full-time, 399 were part-time, 216 were males (37.31%), and 355 were females (61.31%) with 8 unidentified. The majority of declared majors came from the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the College of Education (see Figure 1). The average GPA was 3.24 and average credit load was 7.44. In comparison, in the same semester in a sample of 1500 students aged 19-25, there was an average GPA of 2.87. In this same sample, the majority of majors also included College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs and College of Arts and Sciences, but the College of Education fell short of the College of Business and Economics (see Figure 2).

[FIGURE 1]

[FIGURE 2]

Surveys were distributed to this cohort, with 134 completed, a 23.14% response rate. The majority (92%) were returning students, with over half being undergraduate students (64%). Very few lived on campus (only 1%), with many living up to 20 miles from campus (66%) and some even outside state lines (13%). More than half (61%) were

employed, with 33% working full-time. Over a quarter (37%) were in an online class and most (66%) did not belong to any clubs or organizations. More than one third reported using other university services, including the financial aid office, the registrar's office, the student writing center, the advising and academic enhancement office, and the office of information technology. Additional services used include those identified in Figure 3.

[FIGURE 3]

Library Use

The majority of respondents (91%) were currently using the library either online or in person. Most participants (83%) indicated that they had participated in library instruction and just over half (55%) had taken an orientation tour of the library. Of the few (9) respondents who reported not using the library, most indicated they did not because their course work did not require library resources.

Most respondents preferred seeking library or research help via an in-person meeting with a librarian (see Figure 4). Other favorable methods included subject guides, email, and via a learning management system. Respondents also indicated interest in texting/chatting, telephone, and other methods. Respondents were able to choose more than one response.

[FIGURE 4]

Participants indicated using the library in a variety of ways. Students were asked if they used the library in person, or online. Over half of the respondents reported using it to search for items, get assistance from staff, study individually, use a computer, print, and check out and return materials. In addition, participants specified their use of the library to study and work in groups, meet friends, photocopy, and scan documents (see Table I).

[TABLE I]

Barriers to Use

Of the participants that indicated barriers to using the library, the majority were unaware of the services and resources the library offers. Other barriers were identified by students that were not on campus, students that did not have time to use the library, students that indicated no need for the library, and students that used a different library. Additional open-ended responses included technical and digital access issues with e-resources. Three respondents expressed a desire for more instruction on how to effectively use databases and conduct library research (see Figure 5).

[FIGURE 5]

Suggestions for Improvement

The last question of the survey asked for suggestions on how the library could improve its services and resources. The comments were categorized using the three LibQUAL+ dimensions for analysis: Affect of Service, Information Control, and Library as Place. Direct suggestions for improvement represented 40% (14) of the 35 comments. The majority of comments, 66% (23) were positive of library staff, services, and resources. Three comments (9%) were critical of library staff or services. Representative quotes were chosen for each category:

Affect of Service

- "I do not have any improvement suggestions. As a non-trad living 40+ miles from campus, I have found [the library] remarkably user-friendly. Thank you and kudos to a well-informed, friendly, professional staff."
- "I need more time to learn how to use the library for research."

Information Control

- "I love the library. It is one of the highlights of being a [university] student. I regularly search for journals and books. This year I discovered the e-book versions that are available for many texts - they are great!"
- "Connection is sometimes a problem . . . seems as if you have to log on multiple times."
- "I find the ways to research the different journals or articles confusing at times."

Library as Place
- "The only thing I can think of is to install more electrical outlets for laptops for those who bring their own computer and need to plug it in. [University] Library does a great job with the resources that it has. Librarians are always helpful."
- "Getting access to the Library was the greatest benefit of returning to [University] - students generally don't know this treasure-trove is right in front of them."

Discussion

The survey findings were consistent with the demographic and academic characteristics of degree-seeking non-traditionally aged students. Although there are mixed findings between the association of age and academic performance, previous studies have found that non-traditionally aged students had a higher final GPA compared to their younger counterparts (Sheard, 2009; Naderi *et al.,* 2009; Laanan, 2003; Wardley *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, Cassidy (2012) concluded that these higher achieving older students are more likely to have relevant prior academic experience. The diversity of educational experiences (e.g., returning or first time enrollees) in the older adult student body population might account for these mixed findings (Read, 2004). The authors' findings were consistent with this research.

Reactions

The survey results render opportunities for the library to enhance services and resources to all users. The majority of respondents preferred seeking library or research help via an in-person meeting with a librarian. About half of the students also indicated they use the library to search for items and to get assistance from staff. Respondents additionally used the library to study individually, use the computer lab, print materials, and borrow items. This suggests that students are still using the library as a physical place of research and information. Another finding of interest is the percentage of respondents using the library for group study and work. The authors have noticed an increased demand for group study spaces at the library suggesting that group study space is important for this cohort.

The higher than expected reported use and awareness of online subject guides (32%) might be due to an increase in library instruction through core curriculum (Moore and Glackin, 2013) and the integration of subject guides in all learning management system courses. Subject guides are often used as teaching tools for the instruction sessions and this may also account for the reported awareness. The inclusion of customized library support within the learning management system also proved successful in a study conducted with adult students by Ismail (2011).

Older adult students who reported not using the library listed some reasons: they were unaware of library resources available to them or they used other libraries or resources. This is consistent with findings in a survey conducted for off-campus students by Ismail (2009). Other barriers to use included not having time to use the library and living off-campus. These findings present an opportunity for the library to develop robust outreach efforts to older adult students.

Analysis of Comments

Comments were overwhelmingly positive. Students described library staff as helpful and knowledgeable. Positive library satisfaction results could also be due to strong library outreach efforts on campus. For example, the library worked together with departments in piloting the use of iPads with nursing and social work classes. The library was also an integral member of a mobile learning initiative on campus. Another factor may be the library's strong department liaison program, where individual librarians are paired with departments to provide targeted and subject specific instruction.

Even though a large majority of respondents indicated they had participated in library instruction, there was an expressed desire for more targeted instruction in the comments. One respondent expressed the need for instruction that moved at a slower pace with less complicated steps to getting to information. This provides opportunities for librarian liaisons to partner and work closely with departments that may have a larger proportion of older adult students and to provide tailored instruction for that cohort.

In the information control category, several respondents mentioned off-campus access and technical issues regarding proxy servers and authentication, password issues, and items not available electronically. On all the comments, the most common suggestion for the library to improve services/resources regarded information control, in particular with how students are able to access e-content through the website. Many of these issues are beyond the control of the library and are dictated by vendor licensing or database user agreements. Other academic libraries have found that the area of information control often receives lower satisfaction levels than other library services (Carlson, 2012).

In library as place, a few respondents noted that they would like longer hours during the weekend, more electrical outlets, and a quiet computer lab. These recommendations are helpful as the library continually evaluates space planning needs for all students. These comments were consistent with case studies conducted by MacKenzie (2007) where students described the librarians as excellent but reported need for improvement in the physical library environment (e.g., noise, operating hours).

Limitations

The study consisted of a convenience sample at only one university. The survey was researcher created and not a standardized instrument. Due to the anonymity of the study, individual participant data was not linked to the survey response. According to Matthews (2012), additional data about the students would have contributed to the validity of the study giving a more "holistic" picture of the students' responses. For example, student characteristics (e.g., GPA) are not linked to the individual student responses providing potential associations to library usage (Nackerud *et al.*, 2013). This data would also provide the opportunity to track specific users through time if the survey was distributed more than once. Regardless, this exploratory study provides implications for future studies and insights into this population. Future studies may look at comparisons to traditional and older adult students at the same time. Comparisons to other universities and conducting focus groups or interviews would also be beneficial.

Potential Partnerships

Because the authors wanted to find potential partnerships in cross-promotional efforts with other campus units, students were asked about their usage of other university services. The library seeks ways to foster student engagement by partnering with other campus units. For example, in spring 2013, a math department tutoring lab was located in the library. Currently, this space is being used in conjunction with the advising and academic enhancement office to provide tutoring space to classes across campus and from several different disciplines. With information about the use of other university services, the library can be more proactive in collaborating with additional campus units to identify strategies for reaching this population. For example, many respondents indicated use of the student writing center (see Figure 3). This may indicate the potential for a symbiotic relationship, such as partnering library faculty with writing tutors.

Recommendations

To support this student population the authors recommend academic libraries consider the following actions:

- Conduct an environmental scan of older adult students and their use of the library.

- Organize focus groups of older adult students to get detailed information of these students' experiences and information seeking needs (Harrell, 2002).

- Provide training for library personnel on older adult students including university services and resources available to them.

- Coach public services staff on basic instruction and service techniques when working with older adult students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013).

- Identify departments and colleges with large numbers of older adult students for targeted outreach activities by library liaisons.

- Establish a dedicated library staff member who acts as an advocate/representative for non-traditional students (Parks *et al.*, 2013).

- Participate in campus-wide orientations that may include these students (e.g. non-traditional student orientation, transfer students) to promote library resources and services (Parks *et al.*, 2013; MacKenzie, 2007).

- Provide referrals to academic support units (e.g., writing center, tutoring services, advising, and veteran services).

- Contribute to the LIS literature by conducting research on older adult students.

Conclusion

The increased enrollment of non-traditional students (including older adult students) in postsecondary institutions is expected to continue to grow, and may even supersede the enrollment rate of traditional students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012; Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.; Eduventures, Inc., 2008). This study was influenced by the anecdotal evidence of library interactions with these students and the lack of LIS literature on degree-seeking older adults. This expected increase, although not substantial, translates into the likely increase of library usage.

As more older adult students are using academic libraries, library staff will benefit from recognizing and bringing awareness of these students' information-seeking needs. Further research will help determine if those needs are any different than traditional aged students. This study suggested that the library met the informational needs of the students. Comments offered opportunities to develop outreach efforts to this often overlooked group. A list of recommendations from the review of the literature and study results was compiled to help academic libraries expand their impact on reaching this heterogeneous sub-set of non-traditional students.

Existing literature supports that similar to most non-traditional students, older adult students are still not adequately served in the higher education community. Even though the library cannot solve or mitigate the institutional problems many non-traditional students face (e.g., limited course offerings), the library can contribute to the success of students via awareness, staff training, and outreach efforts.

The authors recommend that academic libraries provide a supportive and welcoming environment to help them achieve their academic goals. This includes ongoing assessment and outreach to enhance older adult students' learning and proactively seeking campus partnerships to support these diverse students. Although there are confounding factors among studies about age and student attrition and retention (Wardley *et al.*, 2013), the authors suggest that helping to create an environment of social integration and individual attention will contribute in the psychological attachment for these non-traditional students (Pernal, 2009). The library is an ideal academic unit to provide this personalized service. In turn, this will benefit every student since many of the same issues older adult students face are universal or faced by others including traditionally-aged students. Future research can explore ways that academic libraries may participate in the academic success of older adult students.

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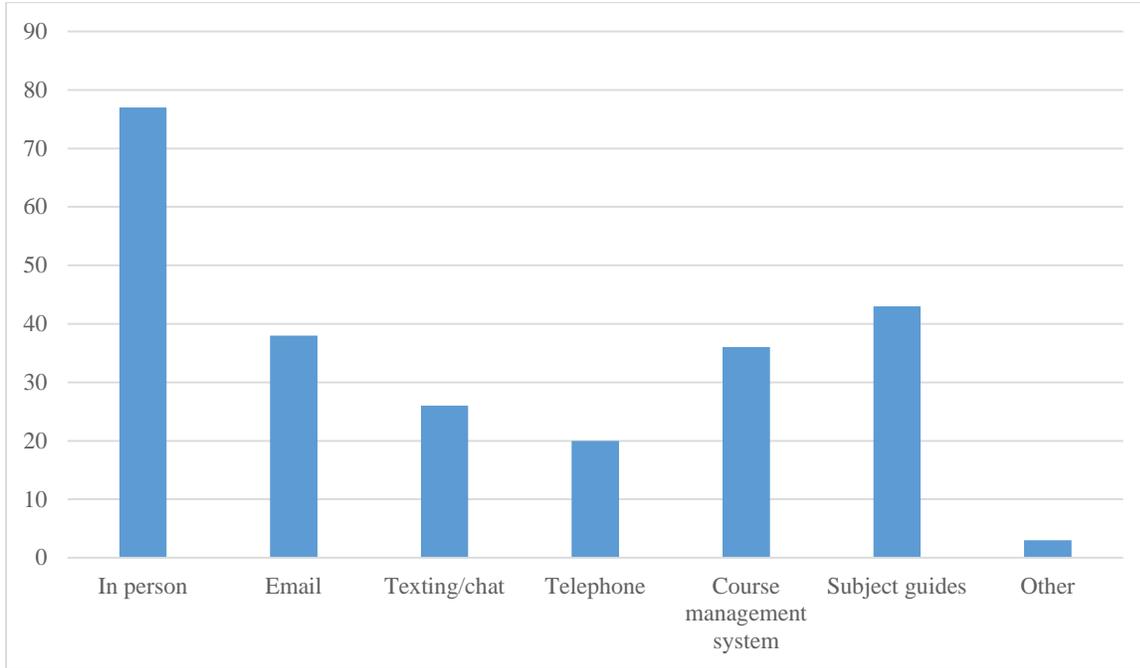
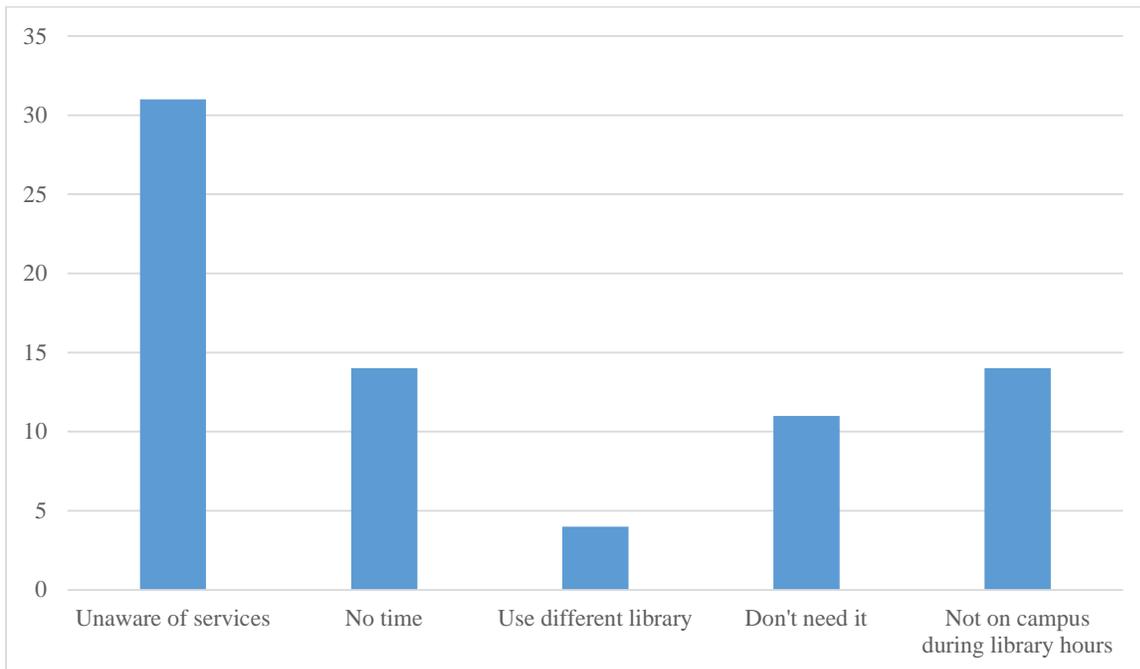**Figure 1.** Students ages 50+ major colleges.
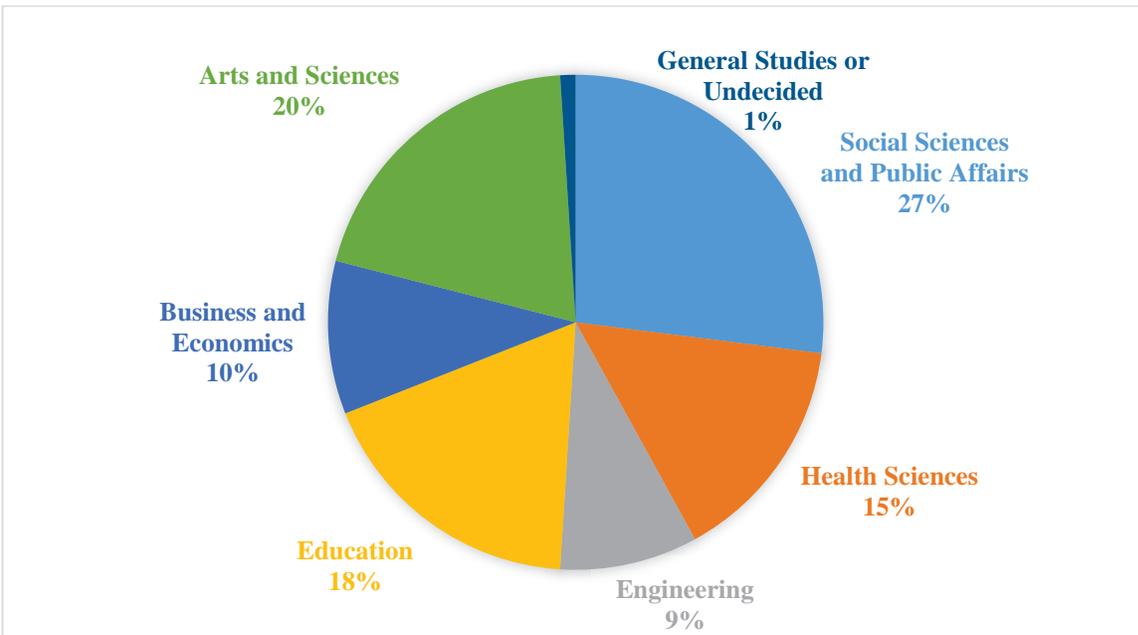
Figure 2. Students ages 19-25 major colleges.
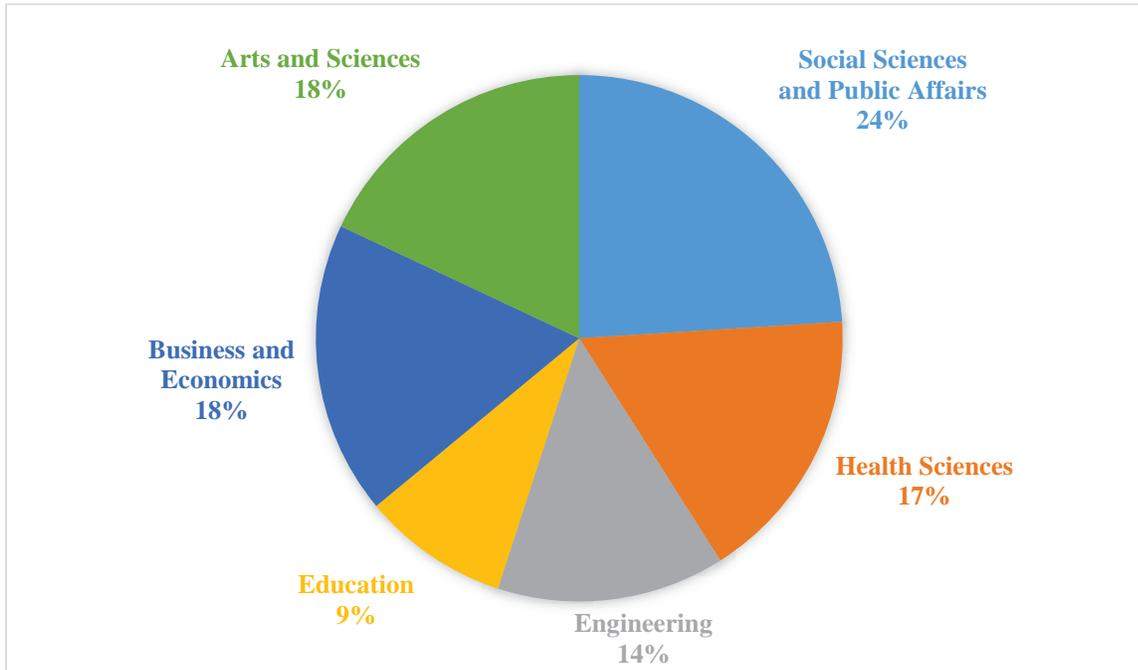
Figure 4. Preferred methods of seeking library/research help. (Respondents able to make more than one selection.)

Figure 5. Reported barriers to using the library.

Table I. Reported use of the library: Resources/Services. (Respondents were able to make more than one selection.)

	IN PERSON	ONLINE
Get assistance from staff	78 (58.2%)	36 (56.9%)
Search for items	60 (44.8%)	93 (69.4%)
Check out/return materials	69 (51.5%)	26 (19.4)
Scan	21 (15.7%)	N/A
Photocopy	33 (24.6%)	N/A
Print	70 (52.2%)	8 (6.0%)
Study individually	76 (56.7%)	15 (11.2%)
Student/work in group	61 (45.5%)	6 (4.5%)
Use library computer	71 (53.0%)	4 (3.0%)
Meet friends	42 (31.3%)	2 (1.5%)
Other	6 (4.5%)	0