



*Research Article*

**African American Undergraduate Students' Perceived Welcomeness at a Midsized University Library**

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**Abstract**

**Objective** – This project assessed African American students' feelings of comfort and belonging about engaging with library resources and services at a public regional comprehensive university in the midwestern United States.

**Methods** – This study used an explanatory sequential design. First, we surveyed degree-seeking African American undergraduates on their perceived welcomeness regarding the library's collections and spaces, staff and users, and atmosphere and marketing. We then recruited focus group participants from the survey, and in focus group sessions, participants expanded on

feedback provided in the survey, with particular emphasis on their feelings about their interactions and experiences with the library.

**Results** – Most students who participated indicated the library is a place where they felt safe and welcomed, although the library felt to some like a neutral space rather than a place that actively supported them. Focus group participants shared several easily implementable suggestions for making the library a more attractive campus space for African American students.

**Conclusion** – Student recommendations will shape the services we provide for an increasingly diverse student body. Changes to make the library as physical place more welcoming include exhibiting student artwork and featuring African American themes in displays. The library as a social space can become more welcoming in several ways. Hiring a diverse staff and providing staff training on diversity and equity topics, offering engaging student opportunities for congregation in the library, and collaborating with African American student organizations will help to foster a sense of belonging among these students. Facilitating opportunities for connection will contribute to African American undergraduates' academic success.

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## **Introduction**

Eastern Illinois University (EIU) Booth Library's mission is to collaboratively empower the intellectual and creative growth of our diverse campus and community. To do so, we must seek input from voices representative of all our users. Understanding what African American students need from their academic library is an understudied topic in the library literature. While some university libraries have utilized surveys or interviews to garner student input, far fewer have held focus groups to understand the needs of their underrepresented student populations (but see, for example: Borrelli et al., 2019; Schaller, 2011). The project summarized here builds on such work, with attention to our local African American undergraduate population. Results from this project will help direct library efforts to support student engagement, retention, and graduation.

EIU is a public regional comprehensive university with a campus enrollment of just over 6,500, located in a semi-rural town with a population of 17,286 in which at least 80% of people identify as White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Booth Library is EIU's only library, situated centrally on campus. One of the seven core strategies of Booth Library's 2020–2025 strategic plan is to "Build a culture that supports diversity and inclusion," with a goal of emphasizing intentionality in our efforts (Booth Library, 2020). The demographics of student enrollment at EIU have shifted over the past 15 years and are projected to continue becoming more diverse alongside national trends. In the fall of 2021, 35.4% of degree-seeking undergraduate students were from underrepresented racial groups, as compared to 11.9% of students in 2006 (Eastern Illinois University, 2021). EIU students identifying as African American have more than doubled in that time: 7.8% in 2006 to 21.0% in 2021 (Eastern Illinois University, 2021).

Since African American students comprise our largest underrepresented racial group, we focused our study on their experiences with Booth Library. To narrow our scope, our study included only students of African descent from the United States rather than a more comprehensive range of Black students from

around the world, whose experiences vary due to differences among libraries internationally. Similarly, we sought input only from undergraduates, whose needs differ from those of graduate students.

Specifically, our study investigates these students' perceptions of the library as a welcoming environment. We adopt the definition of *welcomeness* used by Stewart et al. (2019), as drawn from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in which a library user "is 'gladly received' and feels 'allowed/invited to' make use of academic library spaces, without microaggressive acts from staff and fellow library users" (p. 20). This study broadly examines several factors that may influence students' sense of welcomeness, from providing resources to meet their information needs to offering a friendly and safe space for studying and congregating. Insights gathered from this study will not only enable the library to improve services to this specific user base but also lay the groundwork for replicating the study with other defined populations.

## Literature Review

Meeting user needs has long been a focus of librarians, but understanding the needs of underrepresented populations has only been studied more recently. Whitmire (1999, 2003) conducted some of the earlier research on the experiences of African American and other undergraduate students of color in academic libraries. She found that African American undergraduates use academic library services and resources more than White undergraduates, which may be facilitated by library support programs for minority students. External factors influenced student perceptions, as well. Undergraduate students of color expressed, more so than White undergraduates, the value of increasing campus diversity both among employees and students as well as in the curriculum; however, students of color had a more neutral view of the academic library compared to their White peers (Whitmire, 2004). Whitmire (2004) encouraged further study on how libraries can provide a welcoming environment for underrepresented students. Elteto et al. (2008) surveyed students' perceptions of the physical library as a welcoming space at their urban university, with particular interest in gauging the feelings of students of color. They found that students of color felt less safe in the library than their White peers and were less likely than White students to ask for specific improvements to the library, though access to technology and technical and writing assistance were of more importance to students of color.

Research is mixed in reporting African American students' perceptions of welcomeness in academic libraries and may depend on the unique history and culture of a university. In a national survey, Black students indicated a general sense of feeling welcome at their academic library (Stewart et al., 2019), but campuses that are or have been predominantly White institutions, and libraries in which professional staff are primarily White, contribute to an atmosphere in which African American students may not feel as welcomed and supported as White students (Chapman et al., 2020; Folk & Overbey, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019). These researchers noted the historical framing of the academic library often as a White space (Chapman et al., 2020) and that library employees may carry implicit biases that influence their interactions with students (Folk & Overbey, 2019).

Libraries exist as a physical place and social space, so we must consider both as we assess students' perceptions of welcomeness. Wiegand (2011, 2015) has written about the historic role of the public library both as a civic institution and community space. Wiegand (2005) encouraged librarians to analyze "the library in the life of our users" to inform the work we do (p. 61). Undergraduate students have described the academic library first as a physical structure, perhaps initially imposing and overwhelming, but they also see it as a productive space to study and socialize (Kracker & Pollio, 2003; Sare et al., 2021). The

academic library might well do more to promote itself as a social space that fosters relationships and community (Kim, 2017).

Perceptions of support and belonging within an academic space and place influence a student's collegiate experience. This feeling of connectedness may be more important for students of color, affecting their grades and selected major (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Those who do not feel welcome are at a disadvantage, academically and socially. Campus initiatives that provide meaningful social connections have been shown to help students develop their sense of belonging and community, influencing academic persistence (Bass, 2023; Brooms, 2018; Murphy et al., 2020). Library services and programs that foster a welcoming environment can be part of the campus initiatives that contribute to students' well-being and academic success.

While previous studies on the experiences of Black students in academic libraries have had a methodological focus on surveying a broad range of students (Elteto et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2019) or interviewing individual students to gain a more detailed understanding of the personalized experiences of students (Folk & Overbey, 2019), focus groups have been suggested as a useful approach to expand research on student affect of library services (Elteto et al., 2008; Whitmire, 2006). Focus groups provide a synergy in which participants can build off of each others' responses, and they allow the researcher the ability to clarify and probe responses (Stewart et al., 2009). Our research combines a survey with follow-up focus groups to explore the question of welcomeness.

### **Aims**

Our research objective was to explore to what extent Booth Library is perceived as a welcoming place for our African American undergraduate students. Through a survey and follow-up focus groups, Booth Library faculty solicited input from this underrepresented population regarding their use of library services. We inquired as to which services are valued by these students in order to ensure our resources are aligned with supporting their needs. We probed to understand our blind spots, where we could provide new or better services and resources to reach unmet student needs. By exploring and responding to the needs of our African American undergraduate students, Booth Library will be curating a culture of sustainability that supports the continuing success of students.

### **Methods**

We employed two forms of data collection for this study. Our intent was to gather input from a wide swath of our campus population through a survey and conduct follow-up focus groups to sustain more in-depth conversations with students, providing a forum to expand on the thoughts they provided in the survey. Focus groups encourage a dialogue among students, with participants able to share new thoughts and ideas after hearing from their peers, and they allow the researcher to have a more extended conversation and ask follow-up questions to facilitate researcher understanding of participant responses. A subset of students who completed the online survey were selected to participate in our focus groups. This research was approved by the EIU Institutional Review Board in December 2021.

### ***Survey***

Initially, we planned to use LibQUAL+ for our survey. Upon closer investigation, we found that LibQUAL+ does not assess user affect at the level of detail for which we were aiming and so would not meet our assessment needs. As has been previously argued, evaluation of library services is often a

nuanced process that must take into consideration the context-dependent nature of the service being assessed (Lilburn, 2017; Seale, 2017). We instead adapted a survey that was developed by Stewart et al. (2019), which was administered to Black undergraduate students across the United States. For our study, we tailored questions to reflect the application of the survey within a single institution and centred questions around three themes: resources, interactions with people (employees and users), and atmosphere and outreach.

The survey was up to 33 questions in length and took about 10–15 minutes to complete (Appendix A). We employed branch logic to create a survey that was responsive to students' experiences. The first question was a screening question to ensure only African American undergraduate students from EIU completed the survey. From here, the first part opened with a screening question to gauge whether the respondent had used Booth Library resources. If so, they were directed to answer five Likert scale questions (strongly agree to strongly disagree) about the library's resources; if not, they were prompted to respond to an open-ended question about why they hadn't used the library's resources. The second part began with a screening question asking whether the respondent had interacted with people in Booth Library (employees or users). If yes, they were asked eight Likert scale questions about their contact with people in the library; if not, they were asked an open-ended question about why they had not interacted with people in the library. The third part asked participants if they had visited Booth Library. If yes, they were asked seven Likert scale questions about the library's atmosphere and outreach; if not, they were asked an open-ended question about why they had not been to the library, along with four Likert scale questions about the library's atmosphere and outreach. All respondents were asked two questions about the amount of time they have used the library along with an open-ended question about their most memorable experience at Booth Library. The survey ended with six demographic questions and an invitation to sign up to participate in our focus groups. For completing the survey, students could opt in to be entered into a raffle for a \$15 Walmart gift card.

Drafts of the survey were reviewed by a social science research expert and a college student affairs research expert, also coordinator of the Making Excellence Inclusive initiative at EIU, and was pilot tested by three African American undergraduate students. The survey was sent in the spring of 2022 to 1,217 African American undergraduate students through an email from EIU's Office of Inclusion and Academic Engagement, as well as emails sent by leaders of relevant student organizations (i.e., the Black Student Union, National Pan Hellenic Council, and EIU's chapter of the N.A.A.C.P.). A promotional flyer inviting participation was posted through the Black Student Union account on Instagram and through Booth Library social media channels (Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter), where relevant campus and student groups were tagged.

### ***Focus Groups***

Focus group sessions expanded on feedback provided in the survey, with particular emphasis on participants' feelings about their interactions and experiences with Booth Library. Our focus group protocol is in Appendix B.

In order to create a safe, welcoming environment for participants, previous researchers have recommended that focus group facilitators and notetakers be of the same race as the population being studied (Chapman et al., 2020; Folk & Overbey, 2019). It can also be helpful for a non-library employee to facilitate focus groups, both to serve as a neutral figure with whom participants can feel open to discuss

their positive and negative experiences and to minimize library employee biases from influencing outcomes (Becher & Flug, 2005; Wahl et al., 2013).

Understanding this as the ideal scenario, we had discussed employing two African American graduate assistants as our moderators with the director of our university's Office of Inclusion and Academic Engagement. After receiving a solicitation from a professor seeking opportunities for graduate students from the College Student Affairs (CSA) program's research methods course to gain experience in applying methodology to a real project on campus, we switched gears. Seeing a chance to directly advance students' academic and professional goals, we offered to take on a team to assist with our study. We were then assigned a group consisting of one African American and two White students. Because their course objective was to conduct a qualitative research project, these students developed the focus group protocol with our recommendations. In reviewing the survey results together, we collaboratively agreed to focus on students' socio-emotional experiences with Booth Library to elucidate participants' perceptions of the library as a welcoming place and how the library can be improved to be more welcoming.

The research team planned four 60-minute focus groups, with the aim to have 3–5 students in each group. Potential participants were identified from self-selected volunteers in the pool of survey respondents. In an attempt to boost participation, sessions were offered mid-semester in spring of 2022 across multiple days at different times of day. After considering several spaces around campus, these sessions were held in the faculty reading room of Booth Library, because it provided a semi-private space with ample lighting. All participants received a \$25 Walmart gift card. Demographic information was collected as a written questionnaire at the start of the focus group. To ensure confidentiality, all participants chose a pseudonym for themselves. Focus group discussions began with questions about how participants currently use the library. Questions then explored participants' perceptions of representation within the library. The final questions sought recommendations for improvement of library services.

Sessions were audio recorded with participant consent. A CSA graduate student created full transcripts of the recordings using the free online transcription service Temi and corrected by hand. CSA graduate students independently reviewed the transcripts using in vivo coding, a method of qualitative data analysis using the actual language and terminology spoken by the participants as opposed to researcher-derived codes. With input from the graduate students, the librarians identified major themes based on the frequency with which concepts came up in discussion. Repetition is a common theme-recognition technique (Guest et al., 2012; Ryan & Bernard, 2003), and we used it to identify recurring topics that emerged between participants within a focus group and across focus group sessions.

## **Results**

### *Survey*

We had 70 respondents to our survey. Of those, 52 were fully completed surveys; 11 were completed through either Part I (Library resources), Part II (Interactions with people in the library), or Part III (Library atmosphere and outreach); six were only completed through the initial qualifying question (Are you an EIU undergraduate student who identifies as African American/Black?); and one responded "no" to the initial qualifying question. We included in our analyses the 52 fully completed surveys and the 11 surveys that were fully completed through Part I, Part II, or Part III, for a response rate of 5.2% (63 of

1,217 students to whom the survey was sent). Responses overall were favorable, with a few areas noted for improvement.

### *Demographics*

All respondents were traditional-aged college students between the ages of 17 and 25, with a spread across student classification—freshmen (19%), sophomores (25%), juniors (25%), and seniors (31%)—and an almost even distribution among a range of majors (grouped by college and discipline), with slightly higher responses from STEM majors and just one Education major. By comparison, about 90% of all undergraduate degree-seeking students at EIU are of traditional college age. Our participants were of slightly higher student classification than the average EIU undergraduate identifying as African American. Participants in our study were slightly more likely to be an Arts & Humanities or Business major and slightly less likely to be an Education, Social Science, or STEM major as compared to the overall population of EIU undergraduate students who identify as African American (Eastern Illinois University, 2021).

More women than men responded to the survey (83% vs. 17%), and just below half (46%) were first-generation college students. This compares to 58% women and 42% men overall at EIU who identify as African American undergraduate students (Eastern Illinois University, 2021). First-generation enrollment of African American undergraduates at EIU overall (52%) is slightly higher than our participant demographic (Eastern Illinois University, 2020). The respondents were frequent library users, with 92% visiting the library more than once a month (48% reported visiting weekly and another 25% visiting even more often), and the most common duration of visit being 1–2 hours (55%) followed by 3–4 hours (39%). Most EIU students, faculty, and staff responding to our latest patron satisfaction survey reported physically visiting Booth Library once a week (54%, or 93 of 171 respondents), followed by once a semester (21%) and once a day (15%); “more than once a month” was not a response option (Booth Library, 2022).

### *Library Resources*

For this set of questions, the library scored highest on meeting students’ needs for study spaces and course-related information (93% rating either strongly agree or somewhat agree on each question), closely followed by technology and non-course-related information (Figure 1).

Notably, in response to the open-ended question about their most memorable experience at Booth Library, 49% stated that studying in the library, individually or in a group, was particularly memorable for them. Instruction programs (e.g., orientations, workshops, and class visits) received the lowest score, with 67% of those surveyed finding the library’s instructional offerings sufficient for effective use of its services.

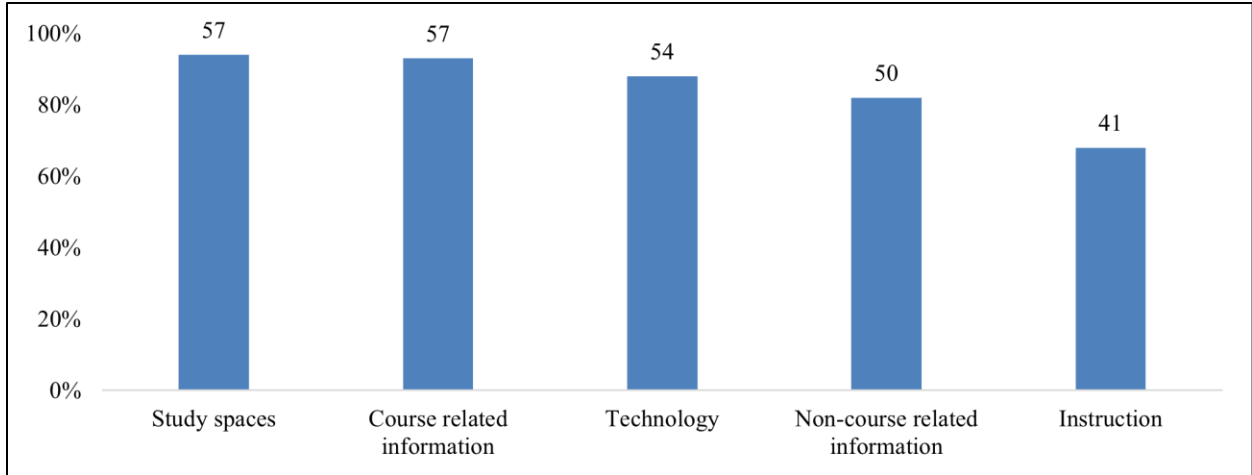


Figure 1  
 Survey results for library resources. Percent and number of responses strongly or somewhat agreeing that needs are met.

*Interactions with People in the Library*

Responses to questions asking about interactions with people in the library were mostly positive. Library employees were found to be welcoming (84%) and able to provide assistance (84%, Figure 2). Six of 47 students in the survey mentioned research and other help from staff as a memorable experience.

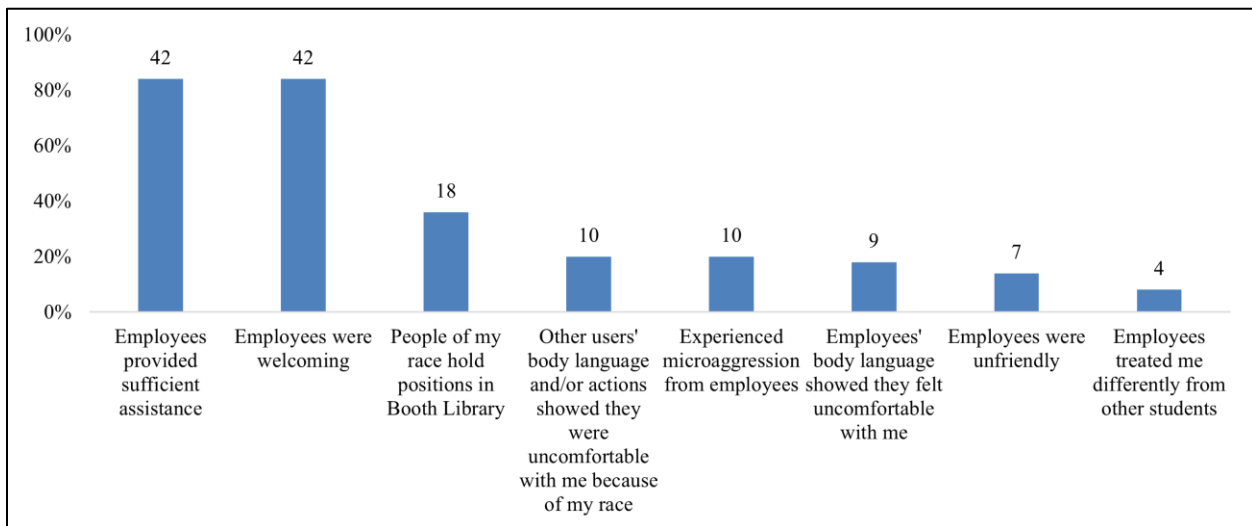


Figure 2  
 Survey results for interactions with people in the library (employees and users). Percent and number of responses strongly or somewhat agreeing.



Sixty percent of respondents also indicated that library employees did not express discomfort in their body language or treat them differently from other students. Another question addressed microaggression, using the Merriam-Webster (2023) definition of “a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group, such as a racial minority.” Twenty percent of those surveyed indicated that they had experienced microaggression from a library employee; 66% reported not experiencing microaggression. Most interesting is the range of responses to the question of representation: While 36% agreed that people of their race held positions in the library, the same percentage of respondents disagreed with the statement, with the rest neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

*Library Atmosphere and Outreach*

In terms of environment, respondents perceived the library as a welcoming place; between 80–90% reported feeling personally comfortable, safe, and that they have a sense of belonging when in the building (Figure 3). Sixty-seven percent viewed the library as being friendly to African American students as a whole.

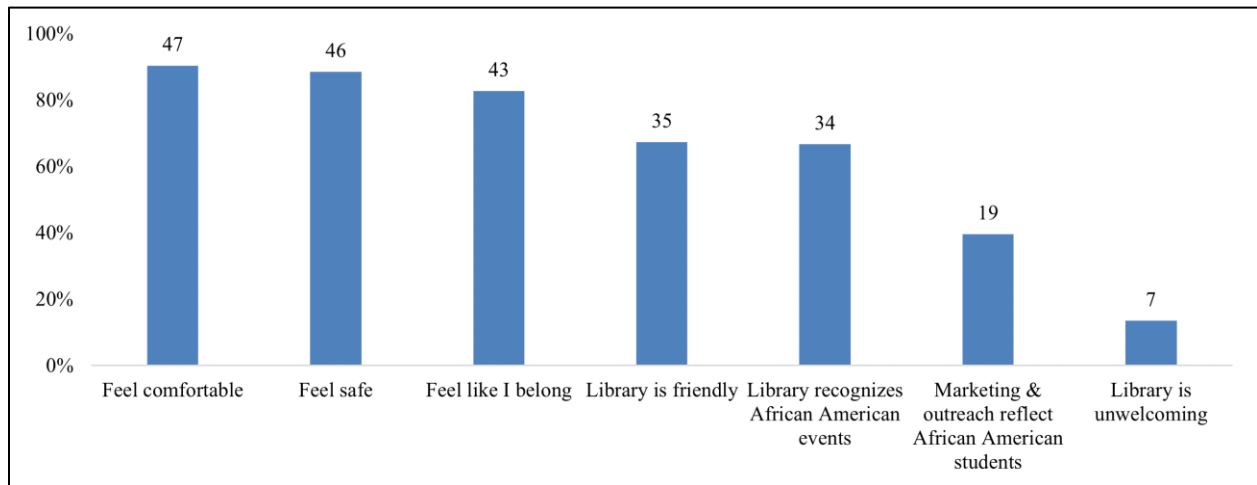


Figure 3  
Survey results for library atmosphere and outreach. Percent and number of responses strongly or somewhat agreeing.

The library fared less well on outreach to the African American community on campus. More respondents agreed (67%) than disagreed (14%) that the library recognizes African American students through displays and programs, but only 40% saw themselves reflected in marketing efforts, with 23% finding the library less than adequate in this regard.

*Focus Groups*

Of the 40 survey respondents who indicated willingness to participate in follow-up focus groups, a total of 9 self-selected students attended across 3 sessions. After gathering demographic data, participants

were asked to discuss six questions probing their perceptions of welcomeness, delving deeper to illuminate responses from each of the three sections in the survey.

### *Demographics*

Participants were traditional-aged college students, ranging between 18 and 24 years old. More seniors (4 of 9 participants) attended, along with 1 freshman, 3 sophomores, and 1 junior. Focus group members represented all academic areas of our institution: Business (3 participants), STEM (2), Allied Health and Human Services (1), Arts and Humanities (1), Education (1), and Social Sciences (1). Eight women and one male student participated, and about half were first-generation students (5 of 9). Our focus group members were frequent library users: one visited the library building more than once a week, five visited weekly, and three visited more than once a month. Participants most commonly reported staying in the library for 1–2 hours each visit (8 of 9 students); one participant typically spent 3–4 hours.

### *Themes*

The findings from the focus group sessions largely supported and expanded on our survey results. From these interviews, five themes emerged.

(1) Use of Booth Library by participants was chiefly for studying and access to technology.

Participants used the library primarily for studying and printing. Five of the nine participants came to Booth Library for quiet, independent study. Tiffany explained, “I like to sit [downstairs in the stacks] because I don’t like being seen in the library.... I just like to be [in] my own zone and, plus, distractions as well.” Two participants indicated they studied in a group when they came to the library. One didn’t study in the library but used the library’s study rooms for student club meetings.

Several of the participants who used Booth Library almost exclusively as a place for quiet, focused study occasionally experienced issues related to noise levels with other users. One student attempted to participate in an online class and realized her speaking up in class bothered another group studying nearby in the library. She has since joined class from the more social floor of the library and has found that to be a solution to her noise volume dilemma.

Access to technology was another significant reason for coming to the library. Participants used the computers and, even more so, the printers. Some mentioned that they or a friend of theirs benefited from the laptop checkout service available through the library’s Center for Student Innovation, especially when their personal laptop was malfunctioning and they had an assignment they needed to complete.

Despite high ratings in the survey, focus group participants made little to no mention of information resources. Only one participant talked about her experience with library instruction. Two participants in separate focus groups mentioned regularly using the library’s book collection for non-academic reading. Two participants across our focus groups were appreciative of the snacks that the Office of Civic Engagement and Volunteerism provided in the library and would like to see snacks continue to be offered here.

- (2) Interactions with library employees were primarily positive, while feelings surrounding Booth Library were neutral.

Participant comments were overwhelmingly positive regarding the assistance they received from library employees, including student workers. Some mentioned instances of exceptional help from employees. Michael stated, "The staff members went above and beyond. If they couldn't find a book in the system, they would even go, still, check the shelves to see if the book was there." Suzy, another participant, mentioned library instruction:

One of the librarians for our class came in [and] gave us a tour and showed us how to use the resources in the library. And I've spoken to some other friends...and they said that never happened for them. So they didn't really know how to use it, but that's helped me personally.

While participants had generally positive experiences, their overall attitude was neutral in that they didn't feel actively supported by the library. Ophelia observed:

Compared to my other experiences on campus, I would say that I feel safe in the library, cuz I've had bad experiences out there. But in here it's just, it's neutral I'd say. But it's still better than bad experiences.

Royal shared the sentiment, noting, "I haven't experienced anything negative because of my race while I'm here. But it's just like, there's nothing really to show that support. There's no actual, like anything to show appreciation."

Participants went on to share ideas for making the library feel more welcoming to African American students, and these suggestions are explored in the remaining themes from our focus groups.

- (3) Seeing African American employees and students in Booth Library will attract more African American students to use the library.

The focus group discussions elucidated the mixed response to the question of representation on the survey: Some see student workers of their race, but the absence of African American faculty and staff is noticeable. In one focus group, the participants speculated that the applicant pool might not be very racially diverse for full-time employees in this semi-rural Midwestern community. They also commented on how seeing more African American students as users in the library would make the library feel more welcoming. Alice said, "I would probably come here more, maybe, if I had seen more Black staff here.... Cuz most of the time when I come here, I don't really see many Black staff." Tiffany also commented:

...I know some people, they be intimidated to go to the libraries. When I meet some students, I mean us Black students, it's because they see there's not people that look like them in the library...that's studying and doing work, as well. So I feel like we just get that. We bring more of us in the library. And like I said before, it just make a more comfortable environment.

- (4) African American culture should be celebrated regularly with displays and programming throughout the year, not just during Black History Month.

Displays for Black History Month were identified as the library's chief or only acknowledgment of their race. One student commented on the survey that the scarcity of recognition aside from Black History

Month is “another reminder that our history and culture is tolerated, not welcomed.” Focus group participant Alice added:

It would be nice if they would just do all through the year and not just only for Black students, but everybody.... It doesn't have to be a month in order for them to put out stuff and really show they support.

These students would like to see displays celebrating African American culture throughout the year, or a permanent collection of African American authors that students could browse. One participant suggested incorporating more modern, possibly student, artwork in the library. Participants suggested several interactive social activities to make Booth Library feel more inviting, such as bringing in comfort animals, having competitions that utilize technology available in the library, hosting book clubs, partnering with African American student groups to facilitate study tables, or organizing events on African American culture for the greater campus community.

(5) Continual partnerships with African American student groups will help the library gain input on student needs and interests.

Participants suggested collaborating with student organizations on promotional efforts and visiting them where they are, for example at residence hall meetings and student organization meetings. Participants said they would like to see more advertising of library resources and events, especially via social media. Snapchat and Instagram were the most frequently mentioned by name as being regularly used by students. Social media is preferred over email and flyers posted in the campus union and residence halls, although they recognize the usefulness of multiple modes of communication. They also recommended advertising on portable A-frame sidewalk signs outside the library's entrances.

## **Discussion**

Similar to the findings of recent studies (Chapman et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2019), our participants reported generally positive experiences with their academic library. Interestingly, despite our efforts to cast a wide net with recruitment for our study, participants were chiefly heavy library users, which aligns with participant profiles from previous research in this area (Folk & Overbey, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019). Due to a low response rate, our findings cannot be generalized to our campus population of African American undergraduates. We also were unable to explore causal connections between feelings of welcomeness and how those perceptions influence whether and how students use the library. Instead, these findings can begin to inform future work in continuing to seek feedback from this student population, as well as shape outreach to additional underrepresented groups. Participant suggestions—such as for the library to regularly seek student input, host engaging collaborative events, and diversify employees—will help to improve a sense of welcomeness for this subset of students in their use of the library.

Predominant use of the library by our study's participants was for meeting personal academic needs. A subset of participants did indicate, however, that they would benefit from more instruction on using library resources, a finding in line with previous research exploring the library needs of students of color (Elteto et al., 2008). This outcome can serve to embolden our liaison librarians in their outreach to disciplinary faculty and student support groups, which will help with library messaging in communicating the value of and need for information literacy instruction. Like Shoge (2003), students in our study primarily used the library for studying and accessing technology. Many came for quiet,

focused study, but some felt safest when going to the library with other African American undergraduates, which mirrors Whitmire's (2006) finding that African American students will study with fellow African American students for companionship, but with White students primarily when they have a study group or study partner. While libraries have evolved in recent decades into more social spaces of engagement (Seal, 2015), feedback from participants in our study underscored the value in continuing to maintain quiet spaces that students can use for focused study.

In addition to feeling safer when there was visible diversity among our library users, students in our research noted that the lack of diversity among library employees detracted from feelings of welcomeness. Limited racial and ethnic diversity in the library profession has been reported in earlier studies (e.g., Elteto et al., 2008; Stanley, 2007; Welburn, 2010). The Whiteness of the library profession has implications for the quality of library services, such as with librarian approachability, responsiveness, and objectivity in reference transactions as we consider the needs of users of color (Brook et al., 2015). Despite a growing awareness of the problems associated with the embedded nature of race in our profession, even with aspirations by many to effect change, the LIS field has much work to do to course-correct the impact of racism in libraries and library systems (Crist & Clark/Keefe, 2022; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2017).

Students mostly reported having affirming interactions with library employees, although a noticeable minority reported experiencing microaggression while at the library, a finding not unique to our study (Folk & Overbey, 2022; Stewart et al., 2019). However, while participants in our study indicated their experience with microaggression in their interactions was with library employees, other researchers reported on microaggression stemming primarily from interactions with other library users. Our study did not ask specifically about microaggression from library users, only by library employees. To address this feedback, our Staff Development Committee organized a staff retreat on privilege. By providing such trainings within the library, rather than turning to opportunities open to the campus at large, the discussion can focus on the unique position of the academic library in students' lives.

Since the time of this study, our library hired a First-Year Experience/Student Success (FYE/SS) Librarian. This new position allows us to better leverage relationships with students beyond their academic pursuits, an area where the traditional subject liaison model can fall short. A significant role of the FYE/SS Librarian is to foster connections between student groups with an emphasis on promoting diversity and inclusion in our library services. Our FYE/SS Librarian is collaborating with student groups to develop book displays that are relevant to our students. We have incorporated feedback from this study to develop library events that are more welcoming to African American students, such as creating events that are team-based and competitive, which have attracted racially diverse participation. As well, supported by the recommendation of our study's participants, our FYE/SS Librarian has launched our first formal student advisory group, comprised of members representing our diverse student population, in order to seek continuous input from our stakeholders.

While library experiences were primarily positive, focus group participants shared that our library felt like a neutral place for them, and they expressed a desire for more proactive efforts to affirm the library's support and appreciation of underrepresented students. This is in line with past research in which Black students identified the academic library and its services as neutral territory (Chapman et al., 2020; Folk & Overbey, 2022), an outcome that marks libraries as "complicit in their silence" (Chapman et al., 2020, p. 12). Displays and programming celebrating African American culture, along with more diverse representation in the library's marketing materials, will foster efforts to make the library a "third place" in the lives of these students (Oldenburg, 1997; Whitmire, 2004). Affirming this study's results, the library has contributed to the development of, and now hosts, Race Chat events, which are open forums for the

campus community that use reflective structured dialogue to discuss lived experiences and better understand participants' views.

We thought we might hear more mixed feedback from participants, since it is common to hear both strong positive and strong negative feedback when soliciting suggestions for improvement, so we felt encouraged that participants had considerably more positive experiences to convey. Our study did not have the reach we were hoping, and it is possible that students who have significant negative perceptions of the library did not contribute to our study. As we formulated this research project, we were eager to be able to implement any recommended changes, in order to instill trust between participants and their library. We were concerned that the suggestions we would receive would be resource prohibitive to implement. Instead, students offered very achievable solutions to make the library more welcoming. Future outreach to African American students who are non-library users, alongside continuing conversations with users, will enrich library progress toward serving as a welcoming campus resource for our African American students.

This study adds to the existing literature on African American students' perceptions of feeling welcome in academic libraries by detailing the experiences of undergraduates at a semi-rural, regional comprehensive university. Our use of focus groups as a methodology builds on previous studies that have explored African American student experiences with their academic libraries via surveys or one-on-one interviews (Elteto et al., 2008; Folk & Overbey, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019). Focus groups allowed our participants to consider the experiences of their peers and develop shared recommendations to improve library services.

### *Limitations*

Sample size was a limitation of both the survey and the focus groups. For the survey, only 63 complete or partial responses were received from soliciting a potential audience of more than 1,200 African American undergraduate students. Of the 40 survey respondents who indicated willingness to participate in a focus group, only 18 volunteered when contacted by our CSA graduate students, and of those, only nine attended the sessions. Also, with only one survey respondent indicating they had not used Booth Library resources or services, we were unable to solicit representative feedback from non-library users in this study.

In all aspects of these limitations, a higher rate of participation might have been achieved by developing stronger interpersonal relationships between the study's researchers (us) and campus leaders we identified to help recruit participants. Our primary line of connection with many of our campus leaders was via email. While all were willing to share communications about our study, they may have taken a more active role in recruitment had we met each leader in person during the early stages of our outreach. This might assist, in particular, with recruiting non-library users. Indeed, non-library users were a group from whom we had hoped the most to hear, to gain their valuable perspectives as to how the library can be made a more welcoming place for their academic and personal pursuits.

### *Future Research*

The results from our study establish a starting point for future research. We recommend involving and collaborating with members of the relevant student organizations from the start and throughout the process to achieve a richer outcome. Building relationships with these student groups would also help

with promoting participation. As we largely relied on email and flyers to reach prospective participants, we further recommend making greater use of social media to publicize the study.

## **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the growing body of research on African American student experiences in the academic library. While the response rate to our survey was low, participants reported mostly positive feelings associated with their use of Booth Library. Focus group discussions allowed participants to share their experiences and build off one another's ideas in providing input. The academic library can become a more welcoming physical place for these undergraduates by featuring student artwork and spotlighting African American themes in displays throughout the year. The academic library as a social space can be more welcoming in several ways. Hiring and retaining racially diverse employees will improve visible representation, and ensuring employees are trained on topics of diversity and equity will increase staff awareness. As well, the library should host events that celebrate African American culture and create opportunities for congregation such as through competitive and group activities. The library should be proactive in developing relationships with African American student organizations, collaborating with them in developing exhibits and events and continuously seeking their feedback. Facilitating these opportunities for connection will improve the overall college experience for African American undergraduates and encourage their academic success. Future studies should begin by building strong relationships with leaders of African American social groups on campus in order to increase the recruitment of research participants.

By involving students in the library's planning process, academic libraries are better able to strategically address the voiced desires and unmet needs of their African American student users. While making strides to resolve the more systemic issues of racism in the library field, not the least of which is helping to create opportunities to diversify the profession, academic librarians can endeavor to make the library a more welcoming space for African American students.

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## **Author Contributions**

**Kirstin Duffin:** Conceptualization (equal), Funding acquisition (lead), Investigation (equal), Methodology (equal), Project administration, Visualization (supporting), Writing – original draft (lead), Writing – review & editing (equal) **Ellen Corrigan:** Conceptualization (equal), Funding acquisition (supporting), Investigation (equal), Methodology (equal), Visualization (lead), Writing – original draft (supporting), Writing – review & editing (equal)

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## Appendix A Survey Questions

### African American/Black Undergraduate Perceptions of Booth Library as a Welcoming Place

Are you an EIU undergraduate student who identifies as African American/Black?

“Yes” – Move on to survey.

“No” – Thank participant for their time and exit survey.

Your responses will be kept anonymous. If you wish to participate in further research on this topic, you will have the option to add your name and e-mail at the end of this survey.

**Part I:** Have you used Booth Library resources? (For example: books, articles, technology, study spaces)

“Yes” – Move on to question block.

“No” – Why have you not used Booth Library resources? [open text response]

**For this set of questions, think about the resources available at Booth Library in relation to your race.**

*Response options: Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree / Not applicable*

1. Booth Library provides information resources that meet my course-related needs (via books, journals, databases, etc.).
2. Booth Library provides information resources that meet my non-course-related information needs (for example, news/current events, health, career, leisure).
3. Booth Library provides sufficient instruction programs (for example class visits, workshops, orientations) for effective use of its services.
4. Booth Library provides sufficient access to technology for my needs (for example computers, software programs, printers, etc.).
5. Booth Library provides adequate study spaces.

**Part II:** Have you interacted with people in Booth Library? (Library employees or library users)

“Yes” – Move on to question block.

“No” – Why have you not interacted with library employees or library users in Booth Library? [open text response]

**For this set of questions, think about your interactions with people in Booth Library in relation to your race.**

*Response options: Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree / Not applicable*

6. Library employees provided sufficient assistance to meet my needs.
7. Library employees were welcoming toward me.
8. Library employees were unfriendly to me.
9. Library employees' body language showed they felt uncomfortable with me.
10. Library employees treated me differently from other students.
11. I have experienced microaggression\* from library employees.

\*Microaggression is defined as a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority).

12. Other library users' body language and/or actions showed they were uncomfortable with me because of my race.
13. People of my race hold positions in Booth Library.

**Part III:** Have you visited Booth Library?

"Yes" – Move on to question block.

"No" – Why have you not been to Booth Library? [open text response] AND Questions 17–20 (see below).

**For this set of questions, think about the atmosphere at Booth Library in relation to your race.**

*Response options: Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree / Not applicable*

14. I feel like I belong when I'm at Booth Library.
15. When I walk into Booth Library, I feel comfortable.
16. I feel safe when visiting Booth Library.
17. I feel Booth Library, as a whole, is unwelcoming to African American/Black students.
18. I feel Booth Library, as a whole, is friendly to African American/Black students.
19. Booth Library's marketing and outreach materials reflect African American/Black students.
20. Booth Library recognizes African American/Black oriented events and activities (for example: library displays or exhibits around Black History month, #BlackLivesMatter, Black authors and researchers, etc.).

**For this set of questions, think about your use of Booth Library.**

21. How frequently, on average, do you visit Booth Library?

Daily

More than once a week

Weekly

More than once a month

Once or twice a semester

Never

22. What is the typical duration of your library visit?

Less than 1 hour

1-2 hours

3-4 hours

5-6 hours

More than 6 hours

Not applicable

23. What is your most memorable experience at Booth Library?

[open text response]

**For this final set of questions, please tell us more about yourself.**

24. I identify as:

Female

Male

Non-binary

I prefer to self-describe (please specify): [open text response]

I prefer not to answer

25. My age is:  
[open text response]

26. I am a first-generation college student:  
Yes  
No

27. Based on my credit hours, my class rank is:  
Freshman (0-29 credit hours)  
Sophomore (30-59 credit hours)  
Junior (60-89 credit hours)  
Senior (90 or more credit hours)

28. My overall GPA is:  
[open text response]

29. Broadly speaking, my intended major falls within (select all that apply):  
Allied Health & Human Services  
Arts & Humanities  
Business  
Education  
Social Sciences  
Sciences, Technology & Math  
Undecided  
Other/Unsure (please specify): [open text response]

30. If you are interested in participating in a 60-minute group discussion on this topic, please include your name and email below. If chosen, we will reach out to you later this month to schedule the session. Discussion group participants will receive a \$25 gift card as compensation for their time.  
Your name: [open text response]  
Your email: [open text response]

31. Would you like to enter the raffle to win a \$15 Walmart gift card?  
"Yes" – Redirect to raffle survey.  
"No" – Thank participant for their time and exit survey.

Raffle survey:

If you would like to be entered into a drawing to win one of twenty \$15 Walmart gift cards, please include your contact information below.  
Your name: [open text response]  
Your email: [open text response]

End survey.

## **Appendix B**

### **Focus Group Protocol**

Participants arrive and are given a pseudonym, gift card, and directed into the interview room.

Participants are welcomed and made aware that the focus group will be recorded and stored on an EIU password-protected server. Informed consent paperwork is explained and participants are reminded of no penalty to withdraw. Participants are informed of the process if they opt to withdraw from the focus group. Last-minute concerns or questions are addressed, and the focus group begins.

Pre-question:

1. Do we have your permission to record this interview?

Demographic questions (asked via written questionnaire):

1. What are your preferred pronouns?
2. What is your self-identified gender?
3. Are you a first-generation student?
4. What is your current academic classification based on credit hours?
5. What is your current intended major?
6. What is your self-identified ethnicity?
7. Why did you choose to attend this institution?

Booth Library perceived welcomeness questions:

1. Can you describe how you use Booth Library?
2. Can you describe your experiences with Booth Library? Were they positive or negative? Can you identify the causes for that outcome?
3. Can you describe your interactions with Booth Library staff? How did you feel leaving that interaction?
4. Can you describe how you feel when you are in Booth Library? Do you feel represented? Why or why not?
5. Can you describe one area of Booth Library you feel can be improved upon? Why did you pick that area?
6. Do you feel Booth Library supports Black students? Why or why not? Can you provide examples personal to you?

Focus group concludes – Participants are thanked. Recording is saved and filed on password-protected server.