

“But Where Are You Really From?": Multiracial Students, Sense of Belonging, and Academic Libraries

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Academic libraries need to have a stronger understanding of how to best support multiracial college students. The purpose of this study was to learn if multiracial students viewed their academic library as a place that increased their sense of belonging. Through interviews and a focus group with multiracial undergraduate students at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), the author learned that the interviewed students viewed the library in a positive manner but did not feel like it increased their sense of belonging on campus. Suggestions on how to increase their sense of belonging from students are included in the discussion.

“In America, you don't get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you.”
~ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*¹

Introduction

In 1967, the Supreme Court officially legalized interracial marriage in the case of *Loving vs. Commonwealth of Virginia*. Although there were interracial couples and multiracial individuals well before 1967, the legalization of interracial marriage was certainly a contributing factor in American society becoming to become less monoracial—a trend that continues today. However, “multiracial” as an identity often remains unacknowledged. For example, it was not until the year 2000 that the US Census allowed citizens the option to select more than one racial category,² and there are still official documents today, in 2024, that restrict users to select only one race. However, the US Census shows a substantial increase in individuals identifying as “multiracial” (categorized as “two or more races” in the census).³ In 2010, nine million people selected “multiracial,” while in 2020, the percentage increased by 276 percent, meaning 33.8 million people selected multiracial.⁴

Although the multiracial identity is still not commonly recognized, individuals who identify as multiracial still experience daily reminders that much of society views them as outsiders. Questions and statements such as: “What are you?”; “Where are you from?”; and “I never saw you as...” are common experiences for people from multiracial backgrounds. These questions

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make it clear to the person on the receiving end that they are racially ambiguous and that others will decide what race they are for them. Niall Singh, an artist of mixed Indian and Scottish heritage, said in an interview with *Mixed Messages* (a weekly newsletter about the mixed-race experience) that, “often my perspective of how I see myself has been defined by white people, because they’re the ones who most frequently tell me what they think I look like.”⁵

The author of this article identifies as multiracial and believes there needs to be a better understanding and awareness of the multiracial population, particularly since more people are identifying with this demographic. The author conducted a series of one-on-one interviews, and also led a focus group of seven undergraduate students who self-identified as multiracial at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). The purpose of the interviews and focus group was to learn if the interviewed students viewed their academic library as a place that increased their sense of belonging at UIUC, and to learn more about ways academic libraries can support multiracial students.

For the purpose of this article, the term “multiracial” can be defined as a person who identifies with two or more racial groups. Other terms commonly used are biracial, mixed-race, and racially mixed. Although “multiracial” is the predominant term used throughout the article, other terms are used interchangeably. Sense of belonging, a term categorized as a social need in Abraham Maslow’s work “A Theory of Human Motivation,”⁶ can be defined as a human emotional need to feel accepted and supported by members of a group; it contributes to one’s physical and mental well-being.

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign is a public, land grant institution, and is in the twin cities of Urbana and Champaign in southeast Illinois. UIUC is the flagship institution of the University of Illinois system and is an R1 research university. The University Library is one of the largest academic libraries in the United States. The undergraduate student body makeup at UIUC in the fall of 2022 is 38.87 percent Caucasian, 21.73 percent Asian American, 13.49 percent Hispanic, 5.81 percent African American, .03 percent Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, .03 percent Native American, 15.2 percent International, and 1.3 percent unknown.⁷ Starting in 2010, students at UIUC could select “multiracial” as their racial identity; in 2010, 560 (1.6%) undergraduate students selected multiracial for their racial demographic, and in 2022, the number increased to 1,233 (3.53%).⁸ With the continual increase in students identifying as mixed-race, there is a need for academic libraries to have a better understanding of how to better support the students of this demographic.

Literature Review

Libraries have been viewed, or strive to be seen, as safe spaces for their users. The American Library Association has a “Code of Ethics” that, when practiced, strives to make libraries a safe space where censorship is resisted, information is accessible, and patron privacy is upheld, among other principles. In the summer of 2021, a ninth principle was added to the code, stating that libraries, “work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases [and] to confront inequity and oppression.”⁹ Libraries can contribute to fulfilling these principles in different ways, such as implementing different book displays, programs, initiatives, and resources that represent the different backgrounds and needs of library users.¹⁰ While there is an abundance of literature that discusses different ways that libraries attempt to be more inclusive, there is a definite research gap about the role of academic libraries in their support of multiracial students, particularly regarding these students’ sense of belonging.

The majority of literature involving mixed-raced populations references the groundbreaking and foundational work of Maria Root and Kristen Renn; the author drew upon these works in some of their interview and focus group questions for this study. Root, a leading expert on mixed-race people, has conducted research on multiracial identity and experiences, providing a spotlight on the complexity—and always evolving identity development—of mixed-race people, as well as the need for society to have a much stronger understanding of multiracial experiences. Through her work with mixed-race individuals, Root established that racial identity development for multiracial individuals is fluid instead of rigid.¹¹ Her “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People,” a document written to affirm mixed-race identity, also acknowledges this by stating that mixed-raced individuals have the right, “to identify...differently in different situations,” and “to change my identity over my lifetime—and more than once.”¹²

Similar to Root, Renn has researched the racial identity development of biracial and mixed-race people, but focuses specifically on college students.¹³ Renn drew on Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of human development¹⁴ for its flexibility of identity development, stating that, “...the attempt to explore the cumulative, interactive influences of overlapping social settings, some or all of which may be sending contradictory messages regarding racial identity and identification, calls for more theoretical flexibility than the racial identity development models...”¹⁵

For the literature review, the author focused on how higher education institutions supported mixed-race students, and then looked at the role academic libraries play regarding a sense of belonging for students. Lastly, she looked at the literature to learn more about the programs and research conducted in academic libraries, so these institutions have a better understanding of the sense of belonging for multiracial students.

Multiracial Students, Higher Education, and Sense of Belonging

There is a large body of research that focuses on multiracial students in higher education. Many of these articles focus on the mental health and well-being of multiracial students. Michael T. West and Cara S. Maffini discussed how college is a normal time for students to explore their identity more, continuing that students also, “may begin to question and reflect on how their previous or current identity, which has been shaped by their past experiences (e.g., family, hometown), can be integrated with their new experiences.”¹⁶ Some articles investigate ways to provide coping strategies and therapy exercises to mixed-race students, such as venting sessions to process their emotions that stem from the complexity of a multiracial identity.¹⁷ Samuel D. Museus, Susan A. Lambe Sariñana, and Tasha Kawamata Ryan suggested that providing more learning opportunities on college campuses, “might simultaneously serve as a productive way to educate campus communities about multiracial issues and an effective coping strategy for mixed-race students.”¹⁸ Other articles focus on a particular student demographic, such as Black and white individuals,¹⁹ or students of Asian descent.²⁰

Research on multiracial students is especially prevalent in student affairs literature.²¹ There is also literature on different experiences that multiracial students encountered in their college campuses. Haley K.M. Okamoto analyzed the challenges and identity development multiracial college students experienced, highlighting the need of work like this because, “while racial identity has certainly made its way into higher education curriculums, racial identity is still often conceptualized as singular and static.”²² Some higher education institutions, such as Stanford University and Yale University, are starting to include the topic of multiracialism in their curriculum; however, this is still a field that is missing from most institutions.

Academic Libraries and Student Sense of Belonging

While many academic libraries aim to be seen as a safe place for students, they are not always successful in this endeavor. This is especially true for marginalized students since libraries have a history of whiteness in their profession, buildings, collections, policies, and treatment of users. Myrna Morales, Em Claire Knowles, and Chris Bourg argue that, “academic librarians are perhaps uniquely equipped and empowered to define and redefine systems of knowledge that convey ‘truths’ about what we know about the world and how that knowledge is organized and evaluated,”²³ yet diversity initiatives often fail to consider how their own policies, standards, and practices impact their students and colleagues.

The profession of librarianship is also an overwhelmingly white, female-dominated field; in 2021, over 83 percent of librarians identified as white, and 83.2 percent identified as women in 2020.²⁴ This lack of diversity in library staff negatively impacts students not only due to insufficient representation in the programs and collections, but also in the librarians themselves, who may serve as partners and mentors to students. Brook et al. discuss how the library centers whiteness in public services, stating that, “when students cannot see themselves and their values represented in the library, be that in the staff, the policies, the services, or the space, then it is easy to understand why they might not use the library.”²⁵ Lack of diversity in the library profession impacts BIPOC librarians as well as students. Recent library literature highlights the problems of working in predominantly white spaces and discusses steps to decenter whiteness in the library profession.²⁶

Academic libraries play a prominent role in student success, and can help students by providing support and a sense of community during their time in college. This is especially important since college is a time when students—especially underrepresented students—may experience imposter syndrome, which contributes to a lower retention rate. Imposter syndrome, originally called imposter phenomenon, is a term coined by psychologists Clance and Imes in their 1978 study, “The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention.”²⁷ Clance and Imes researched how high achieving women often feel like they are not qualified to belong in a workplace or education setting; however, their study excluded many other groups, “namely women of color and people of various income levels, genders, and professional backgrounds.”²⁸ Tulshyan and Burey argue that this study overlooked how institutions and workplaces cultivate these feelings of inadequacy, and that, “leaders must create a culture for women and people of color that addresses systemic bias and racism.”²⁹

Focusing on academic libraries, Ramsey and Brown argue that these types of institutions can assist students in overcoming imposter syndrome by creating inclusive spaces to, “help enhance a sense of belonging in their students, which can counter the ‘outsider’ feelings inherent in imposter syndrome.”³⁰ Oliveira also presents the different ways that academic libraries contribute to student retention and discusses the themes of social learning spaces, library use, and information literacy, which can assist with the college transition process and increase student retention.³¹

Academic Libraries and Multiracial Student Sense of Belonging

Academic libraries engage with students and attempt to promote diversity and inclusivity in different ways, such as displays, exhibits, relationships, and visibility of collections.³² However, the majority of these initiatives and programs focus on underrepresented groups,

typically through the lens of a singular identity perspective and experience. For example, Bucy's article focused on the Native American student experience in the academic library,³³ and Couture et al. discussed their work with first-generation students.³⁴ While these groups are underrepresented and often misunderstood student populations whose experiences are essential to understand, much of the literature still presents these groups from a homogeneous perspective, which creates a barrier to understanding the complexity and intersectionality that occurs with many students.

Although most library programs and incentives focus on homogeneous groups, some academic libraries have seen the importance of acknowledging and supporting multiracial students. The University of Michigan Library designed a library program specifically geared towards mixed-race students, including a faculty panel titled, "*Multiracial in a Monoracial World: Interraciality Informing Academic Work*," and film screenings on mixed-race experiences.³⁵ There are also several articles that address some of the behind-the-scenes work that libraries can do to become more inclusive. Beall discussed creative ways that the Dewey Decimal Classification system and MARC records can become more inclusive of racially mixed people,³⁶ while Furner discussed using critical race theory as a way to evaluate bibliographic classification schemes.³⁷

Methodology

The study, which was conducted during the spring semester of 2022, was designed in two parts: individual interviews with undergraduate students who self-identified as mixed-race, followed by a focus group of the same individuals. The questions asked in the one-on-one interviews were focused on the participant's individual journey of their mixed-race identity, as well as their experiences in libraries, particularly the University of Illinois Library. The focus group questions pertained to how academic libraries can increase a sense of belonging among their multiracial students. Approval for the study was sent to the campus Institutional Review Board in November of 2021, and it obtained approval in December 2021.

Students qualified for the study if they were an undergraduate student at UIUC and identified with two or more races. The study was advertised through: the library's social media accounts, email recruitment to the campus' culture houses, emails to registered student organizations, and the weekly campus newsletter. As an incentive to participate, students received a \$30 gift card to Amazon upon completing both the individual interview and the focus group. Funding was provided for up to twenty students to participate in the study. Since this was a qualitative study, the initial goal of twenty students (which is only 1.62 percent of the multiracial student population at UIUC) was chosen, as it is a manageable number of interviews to work through and sufficient for identifying common themes.

TABLE 1
Study Participant Racial Background

Student	Races Selected
Student #1	Asian/Caucasian
Student #2	Asian/Caucasian
Student #3	Asian Caucasian
Student #4	Asian Caucasian
Student #5	Asian Caucasian
Student #6	Asian Middle Eastern or Northern African
Student #7	Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Black or African American Caucasian Write in your own answer: Multiracial

Interested students first had to complete a pre-screening questionnaire (Appendix A) to ensure that they qualified for the study. Thirteen students originally responded and completed the pre-screening form; eleven students qualified for the study. Those who did not qualify identified with only one race. Students were sent a consent form to sign; several students chose not to participate at that point in the process, resulting in the final number of participants being seven. Table 1 provides information about the racial background each of the students selected on the pre-screening questionnaire (Appendix A).

The seven students represented only .05 percent of the multiracial population at UIUC. Of the seven students, 71 percent selected the racial background of Asian and Caucasian from the pre-screening questionnaire. While the participating students represent a very small sample, themes were easily identified, and similar experiences were described from the individual conversations and focus group with the participants. There are also future plans to expand this study to see if the answers are representative of a larger population.

It is important to note that Hispanic, Latinx, and Spanish are not races, but ethnicities. People who identify as Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish are defined by the U.S. census to be, “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race.”³⁸ However, for the purpose of this study, students could select this as a race they identify with to align with university data as much as possible.

One-on-one interviews and a focus group were chosen as the qualitative research methods for the study. The personal interviews allowed the author to learn more about individuals’ personal experiences and thoughts regarding their multiracial identity, while the focus group helped participants hear other students’ thoughts, and to share similarities or differences in those opinions. Focus groups also allowed participants to work off each other and brainstorm different ways that libraries could be more inclusive of their identities. Since the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, Zoom was chosen as the format for the interviews and focus group to ensure safety. Meeting via Zoom also allowed for more flexibility with scheduling around participating students’ classes, jobs, and extracurricular activities. Study participants also had the choice of having the camera on or off while in the interviews and focus group to help participants feel more at ease while engaging with the author. All participants decided to have their cameras off during the interviews and focus group. Before conducting the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, the author also consulted with some of her colleagues to learn more about best practices for leading these conversations.

Questions for both the one-on-one interviews and the focus group were designed in several different ways. First, the author drew from her own experiences as a multiracial individual and designed some questions that she felt would provide a foundation on how study participants viewed their mixed-race identities, as well as how others may perceive them and how that impacts their day-to-day lives. The author shared these questions with another multiracial colleague to discuss if they felt the questions would help provide information that the author hoped to learn about multiracial students and libraries. Second, the author designed questions that would provide foundational information about students’ usage of libraries to gain a better understanding of ways students utilize, spend time in, and view the library. Lastly, the author incorporated some of the work of Renn and Root into the interview questions, specifically questions number three and four (Appendix B). The author drew from Root’s Bill of Rights to design question three, which asked about being incorrectly identified as a mixed-race individual, as well as Renn’s work on racial identity development to craft

question number four.³⁹ The question preparation for the interview and focus group was conducted over several afternoons, in addition to being revised a few times based on discussion with the author's colleague, as well as the literature review.

The one-on-one interviews lasted between fifteen minutes to forty-five minutes; each student was asked the same set of questions, included in appendices B and C. Each interview was recorded with the student's consent, and the audio recording was transcribed using the NVivo transcription service. After all the personal interviews were complete, a focus group with all seven participants took place over Zoom, moderated by the author. The focus group session was fifty minutes long, recorded with the participants' consent, and transcribed using the same software as the personal interviews. While almost all the participants expressed their thoughts verbally, one student participated more frequently using the chat function in Zoom. At the end of the focus group, each participant was sent a \$30 Amazon gift card to their university email account.

After the audio recordings of the personal interviews and focus group were transcribed, the author identified recurrent themes that occurred in the conversations. The transcriptions of the interviews and focus group—along with the chat transcript of the focus group—were printed and read several times in order to find recurring experiences, thoughts, and keywords from the study participants, which were then color-coded into categories. Quotes were also pulled from the interviews and focus group, and were color-coded into the appropriate category that supported the recognized themes. There were some outliers within the identified themes, which are included in the findings section of this article. The outliers, though few, are important to include since they highlight how everyone's multiracial journeys are different, even if there is overlap within their experiences. An afternoon was set aside to conduct and complete the qualitative data coding process of the seven interviews and one focus group.

Findings

Themes of identity challenges, feelings of erasure, and the desire to find community, all emerged from the individual interviews and focus group. Participants discussed how these themes tied into their experiences on campus and in the academic library. Overall, students in this study viewed the University of Illinois Library as a neutral place on campus, which served as a location to study and to provide academic resources rather than a place that fostered a sense of belonging, community, and support. All the participants used the library at a minimum of a few hours a week, and none of them had experiences where they felt unwelcome in the University of Illinois Library.

The author defined the themes from the study as follows:

- *Identity challenges* refers to both challenges experienced internally by mixed-race individuals (e.g. having to “decide” which race they are, or feelings of imposter syndrome), as well as challenges from others of the individual's identity (e.g. “I don't see you as...” or “Let me guess what you are.”).
- *Feelings of erasure* address the experiences many of the study participants expressed with feeling like their identities as multiracial individuals are rarely recognized as an identity in the same way that other groups are recognized. For example, while seeing many displays and resources on sexual orientations or homogenous races, they do not see the same recognition of multiracial identities.

- *Finding community* references the struggle many of the participants described of feeling like they do not belong in a specific community since their identity encompasses several different communities.

Identity Challenges

One of the questions in the individual interviews focused on their journey with their multiracial identity. All participants did have at least one time in their lives where they struggled with their mixed identity. Family relationships, growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood or schools, and misidentification of their identities all contributed to the confusion and difficulties they experienced in their multiracial identity journeys. One participant stated, "If you are multiracial then you are in a constant state of flux in between those ethnic distinctions."

Many participants discussed how people are often confused about how to view them. Several told stories about how it is common for people to guess what they "are." While some of the students said that they understand people are curious and normally mean well, others expressed frustration. One student said, "sometimes it's fine, but sometimes it's kind of weird when they just keep guessing. Like, it's not a game." Another student remarked during the focus group that they wish others knew that "I am many things, right? ...I just wish that people would respect the multifaceted nature and mind of that."

When asked about how the library did or did not contribute to their identity journey, many of the students did not feel like they had resources available to support them or provide more information about their identity. A few participants talked about a time in the library when they stumbled upon a book that told a story about a mixed-race individual, and they were excited to read it because they could hear about someone else's multiracial identity journey. However, these were isolated incidents, and the students discussed how overall there is a lack of resources that could support or assist them in learning more about being multiracial. During the focus group, one student said, "I haven't really seen many materials that do represent multiracial groups, and I think that would be great for increasing our sense of belonging." Others agreed with the statement and talked about how more awareness of the topic and resources could help themselves and other students.

Many of the study participants also described the feelings of imposter syndrome, or having to choose one race over another, on multiple occasions in their lives. However, one student discussed a positive experience of not needing to choose their race describing a non-UIUC library where the library was, "full of people from different backgrounds using different languages...we were all respecting one another...and it made me feel like I didn't have to choose one of my races over the other." This experience highlights the relief from not having to choose between races, and the potential support academic libraries can provide by having a more heterogeneous environment.

Despite the challenges and complexities that can come with identifying as mixed-race, all the participants said that they felt being multiracial made them more empathetic and understanding of people. They also felt like it helped them learn how to better navigate differences of opinions and backgrounds. One participant of the study said that being multiracial is, "definitely a blessing. It's more like it turns into a blessing once you realize how to manage that in your life. If you want to make it a blessing, you can make it a blessing."

Feelings of Erasure

All the participants discussed how they felt that their multiracial identity is often ignored, or erased, both by institutions and people in their lives. The lack of multiracial options in surveys and forms, the erasure of their identity in conversations with friends and classmates (and sometimes even families), the absence of multiracial topics in educational settings, and the lack of acknowledgment of the multiracial identity in libraries were discussed in the personal interviews and focus group. One student talked about a time they felt ignored when they went to [Library] to find something to read, and found books organized by different race and sexual orientation identities: “But I didn’t see the mixed section, so that was just something that was like...I *am* that, it would have been cool to have at least a few books to look through because [multiracial] *is* an identity.”

This anecdote ties into the recurring theme regarding the visibility of heritage and history months, as well as spotlighting authors from a variety of backgrounds. Study participants discussed seeing library displays promoting different books, authors, histories, or celebrations of specific groups, yet none for multiracial identities. Many of the participants acknowledged that there is no multiracial identity month to highlight, yet it is an identity that libraries can still put a spotlight on; doing so would help them feel more seen. One of the participants did not completely agree that mixed-race identities are erased, but instead were more misunderstood by their peers, remarking, “I think a lot of the time the way it [being multiracial] works is that it’s acknowledged but not necessarily respected.” This response was shared in the focus group and, upon hearing that, many of the other participants remarked on how they feel like the mixed-race experience is misunderstood by many; in an individual interview, a participant said that often people get confused about being multiracial because, “it’s like they only see one side of things.” Several remarked that they felt that with more resources in the library and discussions about the mixed-race experience, others could begin to have a better understanding of the complexity and varied experiences and journeys that occur with that identity. During the focus group, participants talked about when they felt most at home and safe; feelings of acceptance, respect, understanding, and acknowledgment of all parts of their racial background contributed to an increased sense of belonging. One participant said, “I feel most comfortable when people acknowledge both my Polish and Chinese side because I feel like it’s pretty easy...for like other people to kind of dismiss whichever culture or race that you look less like.” None of the participants identified their academic library (or any library) as a place where they felt at home. For participants, the library was viewed as a neutral building to in which to study, find resources for their classes, and receive research support. It was not seen as a support system, nor as campus resource that could contribute to their sense of belonging and/or understanding of their place on campus.

Finding Community

Very few students felt that they had a multiracial community; most participants felt alone in their identity, though some did actively seek out other multiracial individuals. Some students mentioned siblings who they could talk about their identity with, but others remarked on how their families ignored that part of their children’s identity. This would sometimes happen for different reasons; some participants discussed how their parents are immigrants and were told to “Americanize” their children, while others acknowledged family tensions due

to race. One participant said they were, “sort of whitewashed by my dad because he, I don’t know, but he liked to promote my whiteness over anything else.”

When asked about finding community in the library, the students commented on how they found library spaces that worked well for their academic needs, but they did not typically find people or resources that could relate to their mixed-race experience. Regarding library staff, some of the participants felt like they saw themselves represented by the library student workers, but other participants did not feel represented in that sense. As already mentioned, some of the participants reflected on the time they found a library resource about, or written by, someone with a mixed-race background. However, one student thought of a particular example with a book when asked about community and discussed their excitement over finding a book that was about a character with the same racial makeup as themselves. While this student may have not found a multiracial community in person, they did think of one instance in which a library resource provided a small community to them.

In both the interviews and the focus group, participants brought up other campus resources which could serve as possible places of community and/or increase a sense of belonging, such as culture houses and student organizations. However, several of the participants still struggled with finding a community within culture houses because they felt the houses did not relate to their multiracial experience, and better served students who identified with one racial background. Several students also discussed the various student organizations on campus that are for students from different racial and ethnic groups, but felt that one’s appearance and skin tone impacted whether a multiracial student could participate and feel welcomed in these groups. One student reflected on their experience in the focus group and said that, “even though my lived experiences are not necessarily indicative of my ethnic background, it still exists.” The focus group discussed whether there was a student organization for multiracial students; the majority of the students believed one did not exist on the campus, but several other students said there used to be one, but that it had disbanded for unknown reasons.

The struggle of not belonging to any specific group was discussed by almost all the participants. One participant said, “I feel like even though I say I can connect to more people I still feel like there is some disconnect, and I don’t belong in a particular group.” This feeling was brought up several times regarding library displays, with one student noting, “all of these displays are for specific cultures and I’m just feeling like I didn’t really fit into any of those categories.” Several participants stated that, even among mixed-race individuals, it is rare to find someone else with the same exact background as you, or with the same lived experiences. However, the one commonality of the multiracial community is the shared experience of not belonging to one single racial group. One study participant said that, “even if you come from a different background, you still have this one shared identity of being multiracial, multicultural.”

Discussion

All the participants of this study use the UIUC libraries to support their academic needs. All of them spent at least a couple hours a week studying in the library, while others spent close to fifteen hours a week. Several of the participants used their hometown’s public libraries, and one student mentioned using their high school library. While the results of this study were not a negative reflection of the University of Illinois Library, or of libraries in general, it

was discovered that the participating students did not view their academic library as a place to increase their sense of belonging at UIUC.

Overall, students described using libraries for research and scholarship, although several participants did go to the library to find leisure books to read. Similar to other experiences in their lives, participants did not feel like their multiracial identity was acknowledged within the library, especially in ways that other cultures and races have been acknowledged, such as through various displays and collections. Many of the participants talked about specific library displays. The library's display for Black History Month frequently came up, and another student talked about a display that highlighted Arab women authors. While the students were not surprised about not finding a display about multiracialism, several expressed a desire to see that part of their identity acknowledged in that specific way.

An unexpected perspective that emerged with several study participants was the belief that libraries are neutral. Because of this belief, many of the participants felt that the library did not have a responsibility to support their sense of belonging; one participant said, "I have no problems with them [libraries] because they take such a neutral stance on everything. And that's fine...but if part of their goal was to be more inclusive, then, you know, I probably expect a bit more." Another student remarked that, "libraries aren't political places," and many participants stated that, while they did not see their own representation in the library, they did not believe it was part of the library's responsibilities to increase their sense of belonging. Several of the study participants said that they had a very neutral stance on the library, and many participants reflected on how they associate the library with a physical space to study in. These observations from the interviews and focus group are important because they show that the University of Illinois Library is not as inclusive as it—according to the library's mission statement—strives to be.⁴⁰ Instead, the study participants believe that the mission of the library is to solely provide resources and services in an unbiased way.

There has been a great deal of criticism of the idea that libraries are neutral institutions⁴¹ because libraries uphold white supremacy; this relates back to the issue of whiteness in academic libraries, and how the systemic inequalities in library policies and structures need to be addressed for academic libraries to become more inclusive. While the University of Illinois Library mission statement has language that communicate the necessity and importance of supporting student needs through library collections and services, it does not include active language against neutrality in libraries. By adopting more active language against neutrality in its mission statement, as well as continuing to include more services and collection items that are more inclusive and accessible, the library may begin to change students' perspective of the library from a neutral space to one that is more inclusive space.

Academic libraries are a place where students can grow not only through scholarly resources, but through the programs, space, staff, and exhibits offered. It is important for academic libraries to explore ways to reach out to, and connect with, students who have intersectional identities and who are seeking places and communities that make them feel less alone.

Conclusion

The author learned from the discussion with the participating students that, while they viewed the library in a positive manner, they did not feel like it increased their sense of belonging on campus. Instead, they viewed it as a physical space to study in, with several of them viewing

libraries as neutral spaces whose purpose is meant only to provide academic support. While none of the students felt unwelcomed in the University of Illinois Library, they did acknowledge that they felt erasure of their multiracial identity in the library as they did with many other places on campus.

With the population of the United States continuing to become more diverse, there needs to be more attention on, and awareness of, multiracial identities to combat the erasure of this demographic. Being multiracial brings about a wealth of complexities, including identity challenges and a lack of a sense of belonging. Mixed-race individuals have unique experiences that all contribute to their sense of self, but the complexity of this identity also allows for more empathy and support for others.

Themes of identity challenges, erasure, and finding community all emerged from conversations with participants, and will be used in guiding questions and discussions for the next steps of this study. Additionally, the idea of academic libraries as neutral places will be explored more in-depth to gain a stronger understanding of how students view the purpose of academic libraries. This study is only a small sampling from one university, and it will next be expanded to explore the experiences of a larger sampling of multiracial students in higher education on a national level. With a larger sample size, more information, experiences, and reflections will be gathered, which will provide a stronger understanding and will continue the conversation of how academic libraries can best support this group of students and increase their sense of belonging on their campuses.

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Appendix A. Pre-screen Questionnaire

1. Full name
2. University of Illinois email
3. Please select what year you are:
 - a. First-year
 - b. Sophomore
 - c. Junior
 - d. Senior
4. Please select the racial categories in which you identify. There is also an option to write in your own identity if you do not feel like the options presented accurately reflect you. These categories are adapted from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign from the [identifiable information].
 - a. Asian
 - b. Black or African American
 - c. Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish
 - d. Caucasian
 - e. Native American
 - f. Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
 - g. Middle Eastern or Northern African
 - h. Provide own answer
5. Are you an international student? We ask this to help us with the gift card process. Participants receive a 30\$ Amazon gift card; since there are different processes for gift cards dependent on student status, it helps us to know ahead of time if you're an international student.
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Appendix B. Individual Interview Questions

1. What does it mean (to you) to be multiracial?
2. Do you feel like you have a multiracial community, or do you feel alone? How so?
3. Have people ever classified your race incorrectly? If so, how have you responded and how did it make you feel? Have you experienced identity issues as a multiracial person? If so, how? If not, what has helped you feel secure in your identity?
4. How much time do you normally spend in the library? Why do you like spending time there AND/OR what would make you spend more time there?
5. What has your library experience been like, not only at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, but other libraries as well?
6. Do you feel represented in the library? On campus? How so, or how not?
7. Can you tell me about a time when you really didn't feel like you belonged at the library?
8. Was there a time or times where you felt like you *were* "seen" in the library? Like your identity was acknowledged in some way, directly or indirectly? Do you feel it's important for multiracial experiences to be better understood? If so, why? If not, why not?

Appendix C. Focus Group Questions

1. What are some ways that libraries can contribute toward increasing a sense of belonging on campus? You identify as multiracial students, but do you feel like your identity as a multiracial/biracial person is a valued identity? In particular at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign?
2. Have you ever felt “erased” in the library? As if your identity does not exist? If so, how?
3. What would you like to see more of in the library for this part of your identity to feel acknowledged?
4. What does it mean to feel ‘at home’ in a place? Do you feel like that feeling applies to your experience in the U of I libraries? How so?
5. Taking what you just described, in what ways is the library responsible for making you feel at home?
6. Can you tell me about a time when you felt a real sense that you belonged in the University of Illinois libraries? What was that like for you? Can you describe it?
 - a. Which library do you feel most at home at and why?
7. What do you want others to know about your experience/identity?

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