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Measuring the Transfer Experience: Assessing and Improving Information Literacy Skills for Transfer Students and First-Year Registrants

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Introduction

It is not difficult to imagine that transfer students might have specific experiences and needs when it comes to information literacy (IL) and the library, but it may not be obvious to libraries what those experiences and needs are. Rather than rely on our assumptions, we undertook an assessment project intended to investigate the IL skills and library experiences of transfer students. This allowed us to uncover the ways in which the transfer students at our institution can be better supported by the library.

In this chapter, we will describe our process for collecting information about the transfer student experience, which included assessing student work with an IL rubric and surveying students. We will share what we learned from the information we collected, how we applied this to our library's practices, and ways that the library can work with academic programs to assist in supporting transfer students.

This investigation took place at California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB), a public, comprehensive, Hispanic-Serving Institution with an enrollment of just under 7,000 FTEs. In Fall 2019, 46 percent of our undergraduates were transfer students, with 93 percent coming from community colleges and the remainder transferring from other types of institutions. Our student population is 51 percent first generation, 50 percent underrepresented minorities, and 32 percent low income.

Literature Review

Although transfer students have been studied in higher education for decades, it has only been in the more recent past that scholarship has focused more specifically on the role of the library and the transfer student population. In order for libraries to support the increasing number of transfer

students on campuses, it is important to know that transfer students are not one homogenous group with the same needs, but rather unique individuals with a variety of different perspectives and experiences (Sandellini 2017; Heinbach et al. 2019; Roberts, Welsh, and Dudek 2019). They vary in age and may transfer from either community colleges or four-year institutions.

IL instruction received at previous institutions does not necessarily translate well to transfer students' new institutions (Robison 2017, 521; Robison, Fawley, and Marshall 2018, 864; Roberts, Welsh, and Dudek 2019, 97). This is not to say that transfer students do not have IL skills, but that they may not interact with a librarian early in their transition or know the resources and services specific to their new library, causing them to overly rely on resources mentioned by their professors (Robison, Fawley, Marshall 2019, 2). They may also resort to using resources already familiar to them from their previous institutions (Robison, Fawley, Marshall 2019, 6).

A study at UNLV specifically chose not to compare their transfer students to first year registrants (FYRs), meaning students who initially enrolled as freshmen, because they did not want FYRs to be considered the norm by which to compare all other students. Additionally, these authors wanted to focus on the “experiences, challenges, and barriers” of transfer students so that libraries can better serve them instead of focusing on their perceived deficits. Transfer students “are not significantly lacking in information literacy instruction compared to similarly credited undergraduate students,” and although they may have problems transitioning, “they also have previous experiences that they draw upon to meet those challenges” (Heinbach et al. 2019, par. 3, 39).

There is no one approach that libraries can harness to uniformly support transfer students, as they have a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and needs, just like their FYR counterparts. That said, libraries have opportunities to provide specific outreach and support to their transfer students. Blummer and Kenton looked at 174 papers on library outreach between 2008 to 2019, and of those, sixty-seven targeted specific groups. Only nine of these papers dealt with outreach to a combined classification group of veterans, athletes, college staff, along with adult, transfer, and distance learners (Blummer and Kenton 2019, 182).

Previous studies on transfer students and libraries have led to the articulation of some recommended practices. These include student preference for receiving information about the library either in small groups or private settings (Robison 2017, 522). The optimal timing for reaching out to transfer students with information regarding the resources and services of their new library is within the first couple weeks of classes (Robison 2017, 522; Robison, Fawley, and Marshall 2018, 864). Additionally, transfer students stand to benefit from collaboration and relationship building among local institutions (Roberts, Welsh, and Dudek 2019, 113).

Methods

In spring and summer 2019, our campus undertook an assessment project using direct and indirect methods to gauge student performance in IL and student experiences with libraries and library instruction. The questions guiding this assessment were how transfer students and first-year registrants (FYRs), who enrolled at CSUMB as freshmen but are now primarily juniors and seniors, might differ in these areas, and whether either group would benefit from additional library support. Our campus' IRB designated this project as exempt from human subjects review.

Measuring student performance in IL is something we do regularly on our campus, so we were able to use a rubric (see Appendix A) that we had previously adapted from AAC&U's Information Literacy VALUE Rubric (AAC&U 2013) and incrementally modified over several years of use. We recruited a group of eight faculty members from various disciplines to work on this project, and they received a small stipend for their work from the campus assessment budget. The group met five times in Spring 2019 to discuss IL and plan the assessment, and then spent three days in Summer 2019 reading and scoring student work.

The group requested student work from six academic programs, including at least one program in each of our degree-granting colleges. In each program, one 300-level and one 400-level class that had an assignment requiring information literacy skills was identified by participating faculty and by the librarian liaisons to those colleges not represented in our group. In asking faculty to share their student work, we emphasized that the results of the assessment would be used to better understand the specific challenges faced by transfer students, and to improve the teaching and learning of IL to all students. Most of the faculty we approached were happy to contribute to our effort. Fifteen courses submitted student work, and six to ten papers were randomly sampled from each class (after separating by transfer/FYR status), for a total of 147 student artifacts assessed. Each artifact was scored according to the rubric by two scholars, and splits of two points or greater were resolved, as well as splits between the "developing" and "proficient" levels.

To collect additional information about student experiences with libraries and library instruction, we asked the same instructors who were approached to submit student work to distribute a survey to their classes. The survey had students self-identify as transfer students or FYRs, and asked a number of questions related to the library sessions they had attended at all institutions. Transfer students were also asked how easy it was to apply what they had learned at previous institutions to CSUMB, and to specify what was difficult about using the library or doing research when they first arrived on our campus. One hundred fifty-five responses were received from eleven classes in five colleges, including eighty-six transfer students and sixty-eight FYRs. We used descriptive statistics to summarize quantitative findings, and qualitative data were coded using NVivo software.

Results

Direct Assessment of Student Work

Our IL rubric measured student work for evidence of IL skills in three areas: supporting materials, use of support, and academic integrity (see Appendix A). In each of these areas, transfer students performed as well as or better than FYRs (see Figure 1). To ascertain whether these differences were statistically significant, we employed a Mann-Whitney U test, which is used to determine whether independent samples come from a population with similar distributions. This is similar to a t-test, but appropriate for ordinal data, including rubric scores, where one cannot assume that the differences between each numeric score have similar meaning (e.g. the difference between a score of 1 and a score of 2 may not be the same as the difference between a score of 2 and a score of 3). The Mann-Whitney U test showed that the differences between the two groups, where they exist, were not statistically significant at $p < .05$. Thus, no evidence suggests different performance levels in IL between transfer students and FYRs.

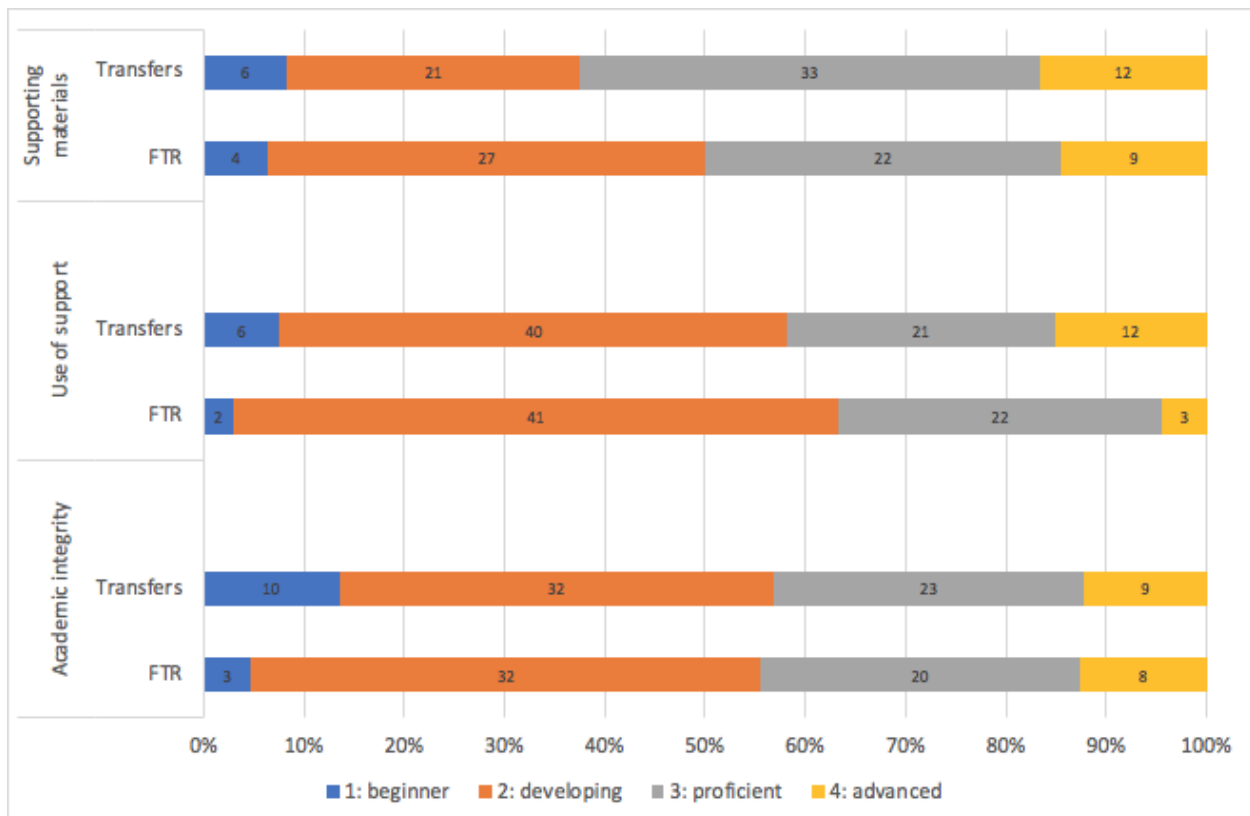


Figure 1. Rubric scores for transfer students and first-year registrants.

Despite the comparable performance of the two student groups, the rubric results indicate that we have room for improvement overall. Our campus has set the “proficient” rubric level as the goal

for students at or near graduation, and for rubric categories “use of support” and “academic integrity,” fewer than half of the students in our sample were meeting this goal.

Survey Gauging the Student Experience

One of our survey questions asked the number of library sessions that students remembered attending at CSUMB and, for transfer students, at all previous institutions they had attended. While transfer students were more likely to have attended no library sessions at CSUMB, they are also more likely to have attended four or more sessions across all of their institutions (see Figures 2 and 3).

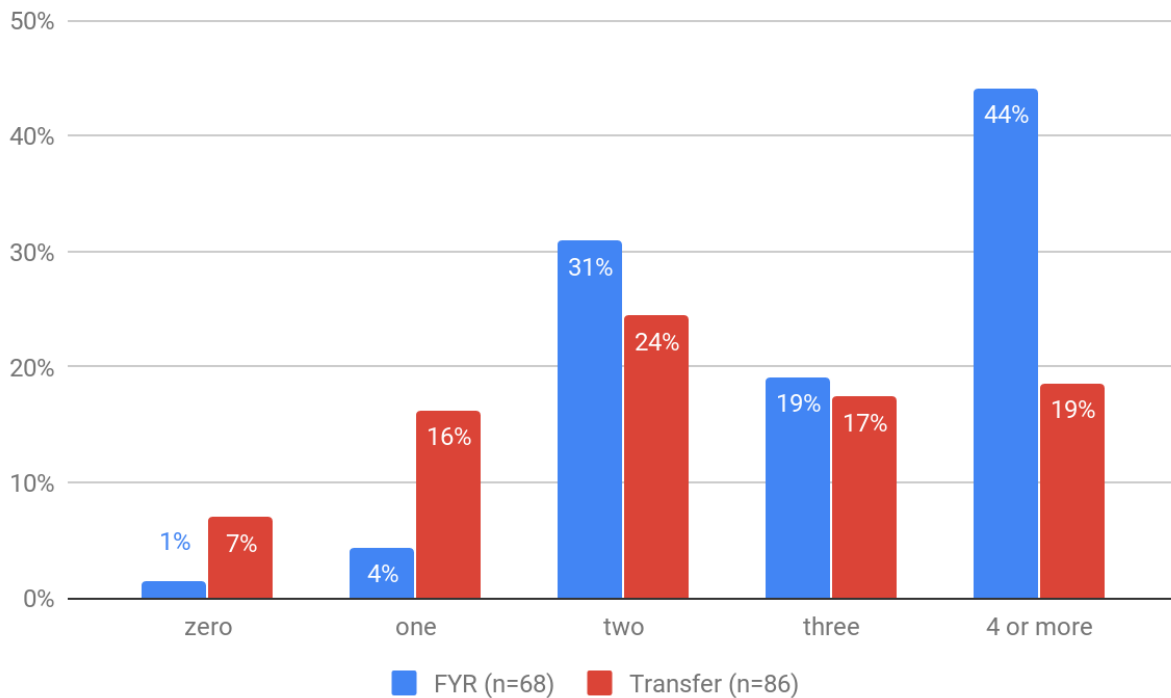


Figure 2. Self-reported library instruction sessions attended at CSUMB.

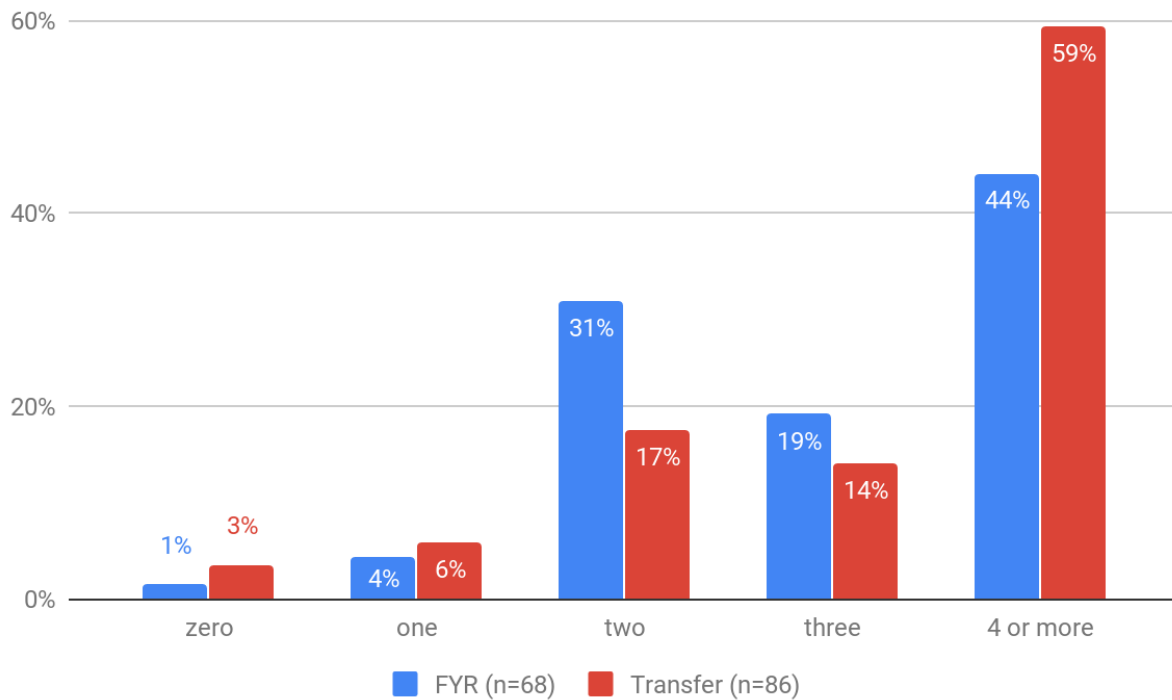


Figure 3. Self-reported library instruction sessions attended at all institutions

When asked what they remembered learning during their library sessions, transfer students' responses indicated a number of areas covered at CSUMB that they did not recall from their previous institutions (see Figure 4). Exceptions to this were tours of the library building, which were more frequently included at other institutions, and avoiding plagiarism and/or understanding copyright, which were nearly equally recalled for library instruction at CSUMB and at other institutions.

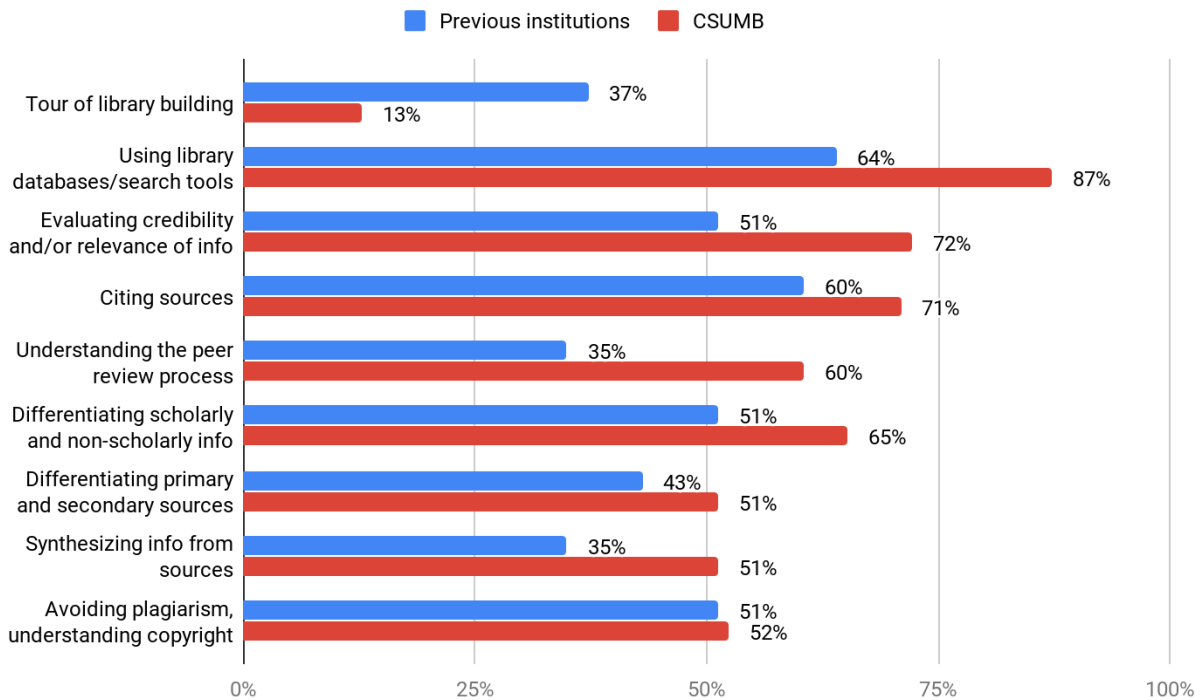


Figure 4. Transfer student recollections of skills covered in library instruction sessions.

When asked how easy it was to apply what they had learned at other colleges/universities to using the library and doing research at CSUMB, transfer student responses varied. Less than half of respondents found it easy or very easy to transfer that knowledge to a new context (see Figure 5).

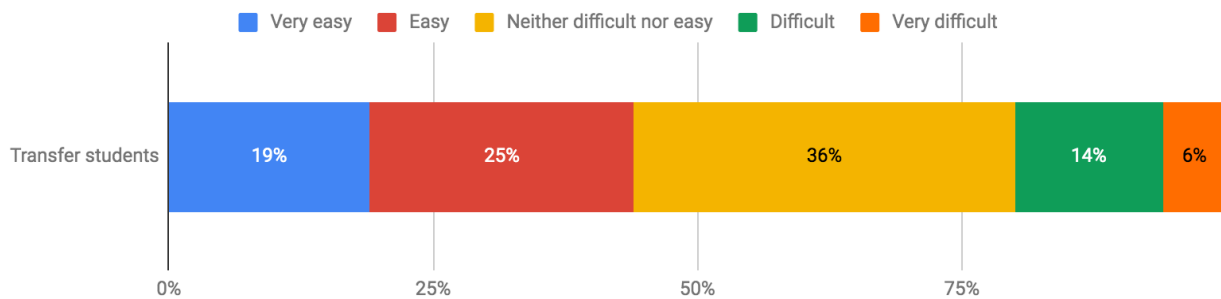


Figure 5. How easy or difficult transfer students found applying IL instruction from previous institutions to CSUMB.

The open-ended follow-up question to transfer students was, “What was difficult about learning to use the library and do research at CSUMB when you first transferred?” While eighty-six transfer students responded to the survey, only forty-seven provided a meaningful answer to this

question that indicated that they did experience difficulty. After coding these responses in NVivo, eleven major themes emerged. Table 1 shows these themes, the number and percentage of students whose responses were coded at each, and a representative student comment.

Table 1. What students found difficult about learning to use the library and doing research at CSUMB when they first transferred.

Area of difficulty	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents	Representative comment
Online library resources	22	47%	[See breakdown in Table 2]
Research	11	23%	“Finding good articles for a specific topic. It was difficult for me to come up with search words that would narrow my search down.”
Sources	5	11%	“scholarly, peer-reviewed articles”
Navigating the library	4	9%	“Learning where everything is since this library is bigger than the one at my other college I transferred from.”
Library services	3	6%	“only having one textbook per class available for check out”
General library differences	3	6%	“It’s just different, so you have to learn a new layout.”
APA format	2	4%	“APA format. I only learned MLA.”
Interlibrary loan	2	4%	“I had no previous experience using the inter-library loan system at my previous college, so I had to learn from zero once transferring to CSUMB.”
Location or parking	2	4%	“Library location, no parking facility close by; parking lots always full”
Asking for help	1	2%	“The most difficult part for me was asking for help to look for a certain book or looking/ requesting for an article.”

Instruction	1	2%	“Teachers all taught it a bit differently”
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The theme of online library resources had by far the greatest number of responses, and several sub-categories emerged. The most comments (n = 17) were related to databases and of these, some (n = 8) described the difficulty with choosing or finding databases, and others (n = 6) related to using or searching in databases. An additional four comments were related to the library website. These are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Breakdown of the aspects of online library resources that students found difficult after transferring.

Specific area of difficulty with online library resources	Number of respondents	Representative comment
Databases (total responses)	17	“CSUMB has a lot more access to databases and I had to learn to find and use them.”
Databases: Choosing and/or finding	8	“Learning how to get to the database was a little more complicated at CSUMB than with my old college”
Databases: Using and/or searching	6	“Using databases efficiently”
Library website	4	“Learning the layout of the library website.”

Discussion

Overall, our results suggest that while transfer students demonstrate IL skills at levels similar to those of first-year registrants, their experiences with library instruction differ in some important ways. First, the transfer students in our study reported attending more library instruction sessions across all institutions than did their FYR classmates. However, the library sessions transfer students attended at previous institutions were less likely to cover certain areas of IL than library sessions at our institution. These areas include using library databases and search tools, evaluating the credibility and relevance of information, citing sources, understanding the peer review process, differentiating scholarly and non-scholarly information, differentiating primary and secondary sources, and synthesizing information from sources. Reinforcing the findings of Roberts, Welsh, and Dudek (2019), less than half of our transfer student respondents indicated that it was easy or very easy to transfer the library skills they had learned in previous institutions to CSUMB, and the primary area of difficulty identified was the use of online library resources, most often databases.

While we recognize that transfer students are not a homogeneous group (Sandellini 2017; Heinbach et al.; Roberts, Welsh, and Dudek 2019), our results suggest some directions for libraries at four-year institutions to consider in best serving this population. One is to provide IL instruction in required courses that students take early in their major, catching transfer students in their first semester post-transfer. At CSUMB, most majors have a “proseminar” course that students typically take in the first semester of their junior year, and librarians provide instruction for many of these courses. This library session is often framed as an introduction to research in the major, recognizing that many students have previously received some library instruction and focusing specifically on databases and searching skills of particular interest to that discipline. The focus on databases, and which might be most useful in their respective fields, addresses our finding that this is one of the areas with which transfer students report the greatest difficulty.

A complementary tactic for best serving transfer students is to work with academic programs to intentionally scaffold IL instruction into the curriculum. Librarians at CSUMB have successfully worked with several programs to implement scaffolding in which IL instruction appears in a few relevant and required classes throughout the program. While it may not always be possible, it is advisable to avoid a haphazard approach in which library instruction is requested for only certain sections or for non-required courses, as this allows some students to fall through the cracks. While also detrimental for FYRs, an uncoordinated approach will particularly affect transfer students, whose shared foundation in IL cannot be assumed.

Following the findings of Robison (2017) and Robison, Fawley, and Marshall (2018) that transfer students appreciate information about the library in their first few weeks on campus, we have also tried to have a presence in the transfer student orientation on our campus. While this event is not required and does not allow for an in-depth treatment of IL, it is an opportunity to address our database offerings, which are more numerous than those at a typical community college, and how to pick the right database(s) for an information need.

Coordination between institutions can be another fruitful approach (Roberts, Welsh, and Dudek 2019, 113), particularly if there are common local or regional transfer pathways. To get a better sense of how the IL skills being addressed at our local community colleges compare to those at our institution, we distributed a survey to librarians at the four local colleges that are our top feeder schools. Survey questions dealt with the type and content of library sessions students receive, as well as whether librarians believe that students receive sufficient IL instruction before transferring. While the results of this survey are beyond the scope of this chapter, such efforts can lay the groundwork for further relationship building and collaboration.

At CSUMB, collecting data about transfer students’ IL skills and library experiences has allowed us to be informed and intentional about our efforts to cater library instruction efforts to the needs of this diverse group. For campuses without the resources to perform a similar assessment, we

hope that our results, and their alignment with previous findings of others, provide potential insights on the transfer student experience.

Appendix A: Information Literacy Rubric

[Insert [Appendix A document](#) in landscape orientation]

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