A Study on Mental Health Services in Chinese and American University Libraries (Postprint)

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Abstract

Mental health services in university libraries are crucial for meeting the psychological needs of readers. This study employs literature research and web survey methods to systematically compare the current state of mental health services in libraries of Ivy League universities in the United States and "Double First-Class" universities in China. It finds that both share commonalities in constructing mental health information resources, establishing healing spaces, and developing leisure reading activities, but exhibit differences in service planning, content emphasis, implementation methods, and guarantee mechanisms. Based on content analysis, the study proposes strategies such as strengthening positioning, cultivating professional librarians, building specialized collections, establishing healing spaces, developing specific services, enhancing collaborative cooperation, and constructing service support and evaluation systems, aiming to provide theoretical and practical references for related services in China.

Full Text

Preamble

Mental health services in academic libraries are essential for addressing the psychological needs of readers. This study employs literature review and network survey methods to systematically compare the current state of mental health services between Ivy League libraries in the United States and "Double-First-Class" university libraries in China. The findings reveal that both groups share commonalities in constructing mental health information resources, creating healing spaces, and developing leisure reading activities. However, significant differences exist in service planning, content focus, implementation methods, and support mechanisms. Based on detailed analysis of these similarities and differences, the study proposes several strategies for strengthening mental health services in academic libraries. These include clarifying service positioning, cultivating professional librarians, building specialized collections, establishing therapeutic

spaces, developing targeted services, fostering collaborative partnerships, and constructing robust service support and evaluation systems. These recommendations provide theoretical and practical guidance for improving mental health services in Chinese university libraries.

Keywords: Mental health service; Leisure relaxation service; Bibliotherapy; Academic library

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1. Introduction

Mental health represents a state of complete well-being in which individuals realize their own potential, can cope with normal life stresses, can work productively, and can contribute to their community. The psychological health needs of university faculty and students are increasing, yet existing support systems require strengthening. Academic libraries, as vital campus facilities, have unique advantages in supporting mental health through creating leisure and relaxation spaces, building curated reading collections, and organizing other wellness activities. Developing healing spaces and wellness services in university libraries has become a major trend.

Academic library mental health services are not a new concept, but improving service quality remains a critical question. International research suggests libraries should design daily services according to different dimensions of mental health, adopt proactive measures, and expand health-related collections. Domestic research has primarily focused on bibliotherapy services, with less attention to holistic perspectives such as service planning and support mechanisms, reflecting a lag in theoretical research and insufficient practical development.

This study compares the current state of mental health services between Chinese and American university libraries to provide insights for Chinese institutions. Based on academic reputation, comprehensive educational resources, library investment levels, and mature experience in providing health services, this research selected Ivy League universities in the U.S. and Double-First-Class universities in China as survey subjects. Using literature review and network survey methods, the study systematically examined authoritative sources including academic journals, professional reports, and official library websites to identify best practices and provide references for Chinese libraries.

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2. Current Status of Mental Health Services in Chinese and American University Libraries

2.1 American University Library Practices

The survey covered 23 Ivy League university libraries, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Cornell, University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, and

Brown, as well as other prestigious institutions such as MIT, Stanford, University of Chicago, and Johns Hopkins. These libraries have implemented comprehensive mental health services including:

Information Resource Navigation: Establishing specialized guides for mental health resources, such as Harvard Library's Black Self-Care Resource Guide during COVID-19, UCLA's Healthy Campus Resource Navigation, and Columbia's Mental Health Policy Research Guide.

Healing Space Creation: Developing multi-functional wellness spaces equipped with comfortable furniture, healing collections, and therapeutic tools. Examples include Yale's Morse Health Room renovation with light therapy equipment, Carnegie Mellon's meditation spaces, and Penn Engineering Library's collaboration with the School of Public Health to establish relaxation areas.

Leisure Reading Activities: Organizing reading weeks, stress-relief resource guides, and curated bibliotherapy collections. Harvard recommends fiction reading for emotional regulation, while Penn provides collections for daily stress release and cognitive restructuring.

Wellness Literacy Education: Offering mindfulness meditation courses, therapy dog visits, creative workshops, and mental health awareness months. Libraries collaborate with student organizations and health services to provide comprehensive support.

Digital Health Services: Vanderbilt's Digital Lab creates digital stress-reduction guides and online interactive activities, expanding services into the digital realm.

2.2 Chinese University Library Practices

The survey examined 37 Double-First-Class university libraries, including Peking University, Tsinghua University, Renmin University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and others. Services primarily include:

Bibliotherapy Services: Developing symptom-specific reading lists for common psychological issues among college students, organized by the Reading and Mental Health Subcommittee of the China Library Society. Libraries conduct themed reading promotions, book sharing sessions, and mental health lectures.

Healing Space Construction: Establishing relaxation areas such as nap zones with lazy sofas (Huazhong University of Science and Technology), reflection rooms (Nankai University), music stations (Beijing Institute of Technology), and sensory game spaces (Shandong First Medical University). Some libraries have reconfigured spaces to separate reading and rest areas.

Themed Book Exhibitions: Organizing exhibitions on topics like freshman mental health, exam stress relief, COVID-19 psychological adaptation, and ex-

pressive arts therapy. Many libraries create specialized shelves for mental health collections.

Information Literacy: Providing guides on psychology databases and information retrieval competitions to help users access mental health resources.

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3. Comparative Analysis

3.1 Service Planning and Positioning

American libraries integrate mental health support into strategic planning, with explicit goals to enhance inclusivity and support marginalized groups. Harvard and Yale have established wellness as a core strategic priority. In contrast, Chinese libraries generally lack systematic planning, with mental health services not fully incorporated into overall library strategy, resulting in less proactive service delivery.

3.2 Service Content and Characteristics

American libraries emphasize comprehensive support across emotional, spiritual, and mental health dimensions, providing specialized collections for stress management and university adjustment. They combine traditional services with innovative experiential activities. Chinese libraries focus more on bibliotherapy through themed book recommendations and reading promotions, with fewer interactive and entertainment-based wellness activities.

3.3 Service Space and Functionality

Both countries recognize the importance of comfortable physical environments. American libraries emphasize multi-functional healing spaces with entertainment facilities, while Chinese libraries primarily provide basic rest areas. U.S. libraries more extensively repurpose existing spaces and integrate wellness into spatial design.

3.4 Personnel and Collaboration

American libraries actively collaborate with campus health services, student affairs, and professional organizations like NAMI and MHA. They employ health sciences librarians and diversity officers. Chinese libraries primarily rely on individual librarians' initiatives, with limited formal collaboration with psychological counseling centers, though some exceptions exist (e.g., Sichuan University's collaborative operation of the "Moxin Xiaowu" healing space).

3.5 Evaluation and Support Systems

American libraries benefit from professional organizations providing standardized toolkits, activity planning guides, and evaluation frameworks (e.g., ACHA's

Healthy Campus Framework). Chinese libraries lack systematic evaluation standards and support mechanisms, with policy guidance still developing.

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4. Implications for Chinese Academic Libraries

4.1 Strengthen Value Positioning for Sustainable Development

Libraries must recognize mental health support as a core function, not an optional add-on. Strategic planning should explicitly incorporate wellness goals, positioning the library as both an information provider and a wellness partner.

4.2 Cultivate Professional Librarians

Given widespread personnel shortages, libraries should train specialized staff to identify mental health needs, develop appropriate collections, and collaborate with professionals. Continuing education in health information services is essential.

4.3 Build Specialized Collections and Resource Navigation

Expand acquisition of healing resources beyond generic psychology books. Develop comprehensive resource guides integrating digital and print materials. Break traditional subject classification barriers to create accessible mental health collections.

4.4 Establish Healing Spaces for Relaxation

Designate specific areas for relaxation and mindfulness, equipped with appropriate furnishings and resources. These spaces should support both individual reflection and group activities, promoting a culture of wellness.

4.5 Develop Targeted Services Through Collaboration

Partner with counseling centers, student organizations, and health services to provide referral pathways and comprehensive support. Co-designed programs ensure professional quality and expand reach.

4.6 Construct Support and Evaluation Systems

Develop clear service frameworks and assessment criteria to measure impact. While subjective wellbeing is difficult to quantify, feedback mechanisms and usage data can inform continuous improvement. Policy-level support and resource allocation are necessary foundations.

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5. Conclusion

University libraries possess unique resources, spaces, and service advantages for providing accessible mental health support. This comparative study reveals that while Chinese libraries have made progress in bibliotherapy and space creation, they lag in systematic planning, professional staffing, and evaluation mechanisms. By strengthening strategic positioning, developing specialized collections, creating healing spaces, and building collaborative networks, Chinese academic libraries can better address the growing mental health needs of their communities. Future research should expand sample sizes and methodological approaches to further explore this vital service area.

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