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## **Do You See the Signs? Evaluating Language, Branding, and Design in a Library Signage Audit**

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*Signage represents more than directions or policies; it is informational, promotional, and sets the tone of the environment. To be effective, signage must be consistent, concise, and free of jargon and punitive language. An efficient assessment of signage should include a complete inventory of existing signage, including an analysis of the types of signs, its location, language, and its design. This article outlines the steps involved in a comprehensive signage audit, which along with a literature review, provides the foundation for creating a signage policy, best practices guidelines, and a branding strategy for future signage.*

**KEYWORDS** *library signage, signage audits, branding, public relations, marketing*

### INTRODUCTION

Signage embodies a valuable part of the user experience in the library and is an essential component of its infrastructure and brand identity. Signage represents more than a cell phone policy, library hours, or directions to the circulating stacks; it is promotional, educational, and navigational. To be effective, signage must be consistent, concise, and free of jargon and punitive language. When a library resolves to overhaul its signage, it must first assess existing signage. This study reviews a comprehensive signage audit,

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which, along with a literature review, provides the foundation for creating a signage policy, best practices guidelines, and a branding strategy for future signage.

The signage audit is first composed of an inventory of all signs on all three floors of the library. The signs were then divided into permanent signs (those professionally designed and mounted) and temporary signs (those produced in-house and mounted provisionally). A content analysis of the language used in the signs was performed, as well as an evaluation of design and branding. As a result, the authors discovered an array of mixed messages, styles, and formats. To complement the signage inventory, this study also includes a student survey regarding permanent library signage. The survey indicated that by and large, students understood the simple language used in the permanent signs, and the location of service points to which they referred was clear. The authors concluded that developing policies and best practices related to signage, as well as a library brand in alignment with the college, will help bring uniformity and clarity to library signage, increase its effectiveness, and improve the overall aesthetic of the library.

This study focuses on the steps involved to conduct a thorough and valuable signage audit. Signs were inventoried and classified into three categories: directional, policy, and informational. The authors also conducted a content analysis of signage across all three floors of the library. Signage was divided into permanent and temporary signs and then analyzed for language, branding, and design. As a result of this audit, the authors uncovered a multitude of issues relating to language, design, branding, and overall aesthetic.

In addition, the authors administered a survey to 255 students regarding permanent library signage. After the survey analysis, the authors discover that students understood the simple and straightforward language of the ceiling boxed permanent signage. However, the signage audit of the entire library revealed that some signs were outdated, confusing and contradictory, used punitive language, lacked consistency in design and branding, and did not comply with American with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines. The authors conclude that developing a signage policy, a library brand that aligns with the College, and developing best practices guidelines will help bring consistency and clarity to library signage and other promotional material.

## INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

The College of Staten Island (CSI) is a four-year, senior college of the City University of New York (CUNY). Established in 1976 from the merger of Richmond College (1965) and Staten Island Community College (1956), CSI offers programs in the liberal arts and sciences leading to degrees from the associate to graduate level. The college has been located on the grounds of

the former Willowbrook State School since 1993. The 204-acre campus represents the largest campus grounds in New York City.

The college's sole library is housed in the 1L Building in the South Quadrangle, opposite the Campus Center, which together comprise the focal points of campus. The building, often referred to as "the Library," also occupies the Cyber Café, Academic Support, the Office of Information Technology, as well as a Public Safety satellite office. These additional offices are located in the front of building and therefore affect the signage in the entrance. The 30,000 square foot, three-floor library, whose entry is past the lobby and separated by two sliding glass doors, opens into a rotunda featuring a dome. The Circulation/Reserves Desk, Reference Desk and Collection, and administrative offices are also located on the first floor. The second floor consists of the Library Learning Lab, where library instruction takes place, as well as the Archives and Special Collections, five individual study rooms, the K-12 Text Collection, and additional office space. Both of these floors contain ample computer terminals, printers, photocopiers, and reading areas. The third floor houses the circulating book collection, printed periodicals, computers, individual study carrels, and reading alcoves.

The building's construction was completed in 1993, marking the first stage of permanent signage. The permanent signs installed during this initial phase were primarily those identifying office space and service points in the facility, as well as directional signs. The second phase of permanent signage installed in 1998 related to library policies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of recent articles, including those by Barclay and Scott (2012) and Serfass (2012), discussed the legacy of bad signage in libraries. "Better None Than Bad" by White (2010) underscored that no signs are better than poor ones (p. 23). Collectively, these articles offered suggestions to correct this unfortunate tradition, by stressing the value of consistency and the need to establish guidelines for font, language, color, design, and installation. Humrickhouse (2012) elaborated on developing signage that is ADA compliant by providing guidelines to make signs more accessible for those with visual disabilities. Suggestions include creating tactile signs for those who read Braille as well as using high contrast for greater visibility. Also stressed was the avoidance of lamination, and too much light or glare on signage.

Serfass (2012) provided valuable guidelines for developing effective signage. In addition to consistency in font type, and color, Serfass recommended using a logo to establish a unifying theme (p. 5). She emphasized the importance of using positive language to create a user-friendly atmosphere and discussed how signage can be a helpful marketing tool. She also pointed out the need for signs to be accurate, such as the case with many

signs that indicate no cell phone use is allowed. This is misleading, as it is only cell phone talking that is prohibited (p. 6). Serfass also wrote that the overuse of signs leads to ineffective signs that may be ignored.

A great deal of signage deals with the user experience and signs' overall aesthetics and design. Schmidt (2011) paired good signage with good design, thus improving the user's overall experience in the library (p. 17). He advocated for signs that are friendly, nonthreatening, and nonpunitive (p. 17). Bosman and Rusinek (1997) outlined a basic inventory they performed in order to evaluate student perceptions of signs in their library. They believed that one of the components of a user-friendly library is effective signage (p. 72). They argued that proper signage may lower directional questions and may alleviate student anxiety (p. 73). Further, they argued that consistent signage would create a more aesthetically pleasing environment (p. 73).

White (2010) wrote in line with Serfass and Schmidt. She advocated for avoiding all negative language and asserted that no signage is better than bad signage (p. 23). She claimed that some signs are so unwelcoming that they may victimize users. She also argued that some sign makers create passive aggressive signs to exhibit their frustrations to library users (p. 23). Poorly designed signage represents poor visual communication (p. 23), thus communicating a negative image of the institution. An insulting or punitive sign may do more damage than good (p. 23). She concluded on a positive note; to keep signage simple and positive (p. 23).

Like Serfass, Schmidt, and White, Barclay and Scott (2012) suggested avoiding terms such as "no," "forbidden," and "prohibited," as they may be viewed as punitive and uninviting (p. 37). They argued that informational signage can also be directional. Ceiling boxed signage can also be informational as it guides the user to the specific service point in the library. They addressed directional signage as "wayfinding" (p. 37) and coined the term "bump points" (p. 37) to identify the location to mount directional signs where users stop to make decisions. They also provided visual examples of good signage (p. 38) and a "Bad Signals" chart to outline mistakes to avoid such as negative language, as well as overuse of text in bold, italics, underlined, or red, exclamation points, and crooked or poorly mounted signs. They concluded by suggesting that donor-recognition signage, which is informational in nature, should never hinder directional signage (p. 38). Similar recommendations are echoed in previous articles. Yeaman (1989) offered very detailed guidelines, particularly a helpful chart for reading font size from distances (p. 24), as well as a set of visual criteria, color considerations, letter size, font type guidelines, and use of contrast (p. 25). He argued that ineffective signs constitute visual clutter and "noise," and often distract users from meaningful signs (p. 26).

Verostek (2005) discussed various marketing strategies used in college libraries to observe user behavior. She argues that developing effective signage is one of the many strategies that should be employed in the overall

marketing of library services and resources (p. 119). Verostek found that there was a need for improved signage (p. 130), having discovered variations of signs created over the years with different designs, fonts, and colors (p. 130). She determined that signage was ineffective due to the fact that students continued to ask the same questions (p. 130).

Other articles addressed issues to consider or steps to take prior to the development of new signage. Johnson (1993) provided a quiz to determine whether your library needs new signage and proposed a 12-step recovery program (pp. 40–42). Brandon (2002) identified areas and functions of a library and included a checklist of the types of signs needed for those service points (p. 7). Unlike other literature reviews on the topic of library signage, the authors also evaluated literature outside the library environment in order to gain a better understanding of general signage practices. Ng and Chan (2007) examined the cognitive design features of 120 mainland China traffic signs and focused on simplicity, familiarity, concreteness, meaningfulness, and semantics (p. 13). They divided their signs into the following categories: warning, prohibition, mandatory, guide, tourist, road works, and overall. These designations are similar and relevant to library signs related to the categories of policy, informational and directional signs. Ng and Chan argued that meaningful, familiar, and simple signs are most effective (p. 15). A later study by Ng, Siu, and Chan (2011) analyzed user preferences to graphic designs. They focus on graphic public signs; that are typically directional or policy-oriented, and argued that for signs to be effective, they need to be understood by all age groups (p. 147). Ng et al. concluded that effective graphic signs need to be simple with one or two pictorial elements (p. 152). Lastly, the pictorial elements must contribute to their understanding of the sign and must serve a function or the sign will be deemed ineffective.

Akwera (2009) discussed a project by Addison's Information Design for an overall redesign of parking signs in New York City. He noted that the issuing of 9.5 million parking tickets, which resulted in \$600 million paid in parking violations, illustrate a lack of understanding of parking signs in New York City (p. 109). The objectives of this study were to analyze the effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction of these newly redesigned signs (p.110). The findings indicated that participants preferred parking signs that were clearly displayed, with familiar language, consistent color, visual language, and a simple design (p. 114).

## METHODOLOGY

### The Signage Audit

The authors embarked on a signage audit of permanent and temporary signage related to the library's services and resources on all three floors. Permanent signage referred to signs that were designed, fabricated and

installed by professionals under the direction of the college administration, while temporary signage referred to those designed, fabricated, and installed in-house by librarians and library staff. Exceptions to this designation were the signs created in 2008 at the suggestion of the former college president that were produced outside the library but were not mounted in a permanent manner. Reference and circulating stack signage, as well as restroom and exit signs, employee office space, and exhibit areas were disregarded. Thirty-five percent (145) of the signs were determined to be outdated, of poor quality, contradictory, and superfluous and were removed prior to taking inventory.

Upon reviewing the signs, the authors discovered at least five generations of temporary signage, identified by similar form and design. In addition to the phases of permanent signage previously noted, a wide variety of colors, fonts, sizes, language and terminology, imagery, installation, and branding were discovered. There were less permanent signs and variety within, as such signs are typically costly architectural elements implemented at the institutional level. While many permanent signs are no longer accurate and can use updating, the survey addressed below indicated that the permanent signage is generally effective.

Once these signs were inventoried, they were divided by the following three types of signs, directional, policy and informational:

1. Directional signs related to wayfinding, defined as “how human beings orient themselves and choose paths within a building environment,” (Barclay & Scott, 2012, p. 37). These signs provide specific guidance for where a service point or resource is located.
2. Policy signs communicate approved library policies related to noise level, food/drink prohibitions, computer use, cell phone talking, and so forth.
3. Informational signs identify technology and spaces, introduce patrons to new resources, and promote upcoming events and new initiatives. Unlike directional signs, they do not provide guidance for how to find a specific location but are more educational.

### Online Questionnaire on Permanent Signage

In addition to the signage audit, the authors hoped to capture students' understanding of signage at specific service points. The authors selected a group of library service points using the ceiling boxed permanent signage. Ceiling boxed signs are large boxed signage that suspend from the ceiling. It is considered an architectural feature of the building.

The eight signs that were analyzed for this study represent informational signage. Informational signage typically contains a short descriptive phrase and may be promotional or educational. Informational signs convey brief messages. The data from this questionnaire explicitly explore informational

signs and not policy or directional signs. The eight signs that were analyzed represent the original 1993 signs when the library was first constructed.

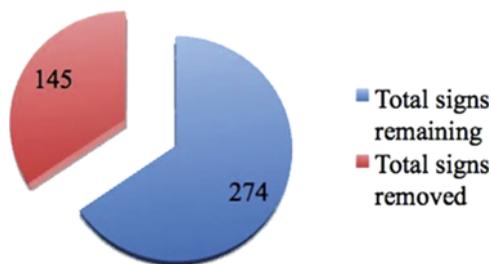
The authors selected eight library service points for analysis:

1. circulation/reserves desk
2. reference services
3. interlibrary loan
4. microform
5. group study rooms
6. library administration
7. printers
8. photocopiers

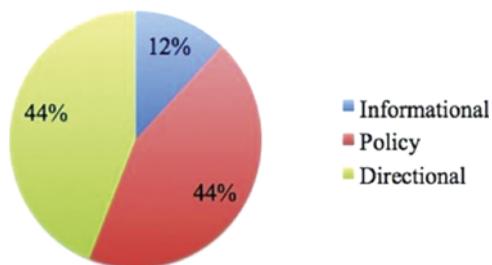
These terms were selected because the signage related to these service points is prominently featured, and their location was frequently questioned at the reference desk. The authors excluded the permanent signage to the Periodicals Area on the second floor of the library because, at the time of the study, the periodicals were being moved to another floor. A questionnaire was developed to evaluate students' understanding of signage, and their language preferences. After obtaining clearance from the college's Institutional Review Board in fall 2009, the authors administered an online questionnaire to students in a select number of library instruction classes. Over the course of two months, 255 students responded to the questionnaire. Since 17 respondents were under the age of 18 years of age, their data could not be included; resulting in a final sample size was 238. The authors used convenience sampling as their sampling method. The authors understood that their sampling method was not representative of the student population of College of Staten Island. Respondents were questioned about their basic understanding of signage in the library and were asked to rate signage based on their past experiences and interactions. Respondents were not shown signs at the time of the questionnaire. Questions included age range, gender, category of student, and students' major. It should be noted that most respondents were freshman (47.5%), as the library instruction program at the CSI Library specifically targets freshmen courses and most instruction classes are delivered to freshmen students.

## RESULTS

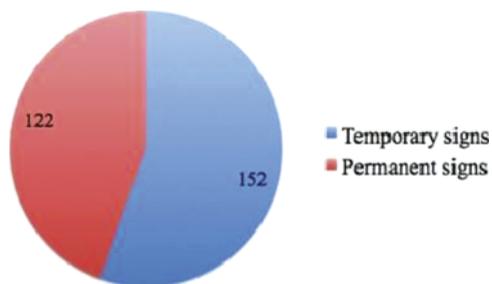
Figure 1 indicates the number of signs weeded at the beginning of the audit. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the percentage of permanent and temporary signs, and the distribution of information, policy and directional signs, respectively. Although both policy and informational signs made up the same high percentage of signs (44%), directional signs only made up 12% of signage. This result is not surprising, given that the vast majority of directional signs are permanent and require more time and expense to execute. Figures 4 and 5



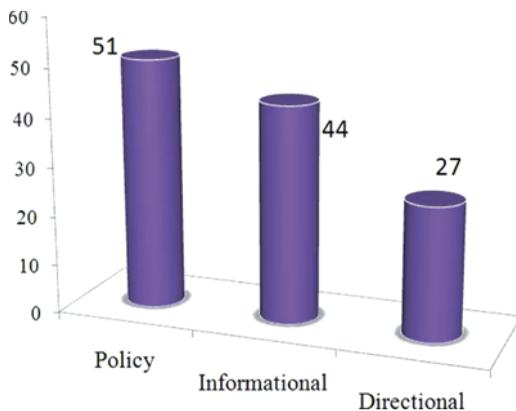
**FIGURE 1** Initial sign inventory ( $N=419$ ). (Color figure available online.)



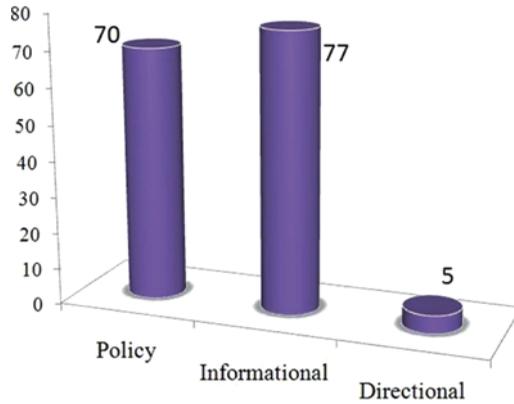
**FIGURE 2** Percentage of signs by type. (Color figure available online.)



**FIGURE 3** Distribution of signs. (Color figure available online.)



**FIGURE 4** Number of permanent signs by type. (Color figure available online.)



**FIGURE 5** Number of temporary signs by type. (Color figure available online.)

break down the types of permanent and temporary signs. There are 51 policy, 44 informational, and 27 directional signs contained in the permanent signage. Seventy seven and 70 signs relate to policy and informational temporary signage, respectively, while only five signs were temporary directional signs.

The highest category of signs was temporary informational signs, followed by temporary policy signs, and then permanent policy signs. Therefore, policy signs have the most representation. While policy signs are necessary, they typically refer to prohibitions. To create a more user-friendly atmosphere, such signs, in such large numbers, are not recommended. These three types of signs also account for the unnecessary clutter and redundancy found in the signage.

Issues of contradictory messages were primarily found in policy signs, both permanent and temporary. Often temporary signs were inconsistent with older permanent signs, but messages were also contradictory among temporary signs placed near each other. This issue needs to be addressed. It is recommended that in the future, fewer permanent policy signs be created, as issues such as acceptable noise level change as a library's space transforms.

Handwritten signs, perhaps the most egregious of all types of signs to avoid, were almost exclusively informational signs indicating that a service point location has changed. This type of sign is entirely avoidable once templates based on a signage policy and best practices guidelines are made readily available.

Issues of taped-up and taped-over signs were exclusively temporary informational signs. This can be avoided once a signage placement map is designed as part of a best practices document. The issue of clutter and redundancy would also be addressed once signs have designated placement.

Outdated signs, primarily temporary informational signs, would be addressed once a signage policy instituted an annual inventory of signs and a signage committee or point person was in charge of ensuring such signs were removed.

## Questionnaire Data

Although the authors garnered a sample size of 255 respondents, there were 17 respondents under the age of 18 years old. Thus, only 238 responses were counted for this study. Table 1 illustrates the breakdown of the respondent age range. The data show that 81.2% of respondents were 18–25 years of age while all other age groups constitute between 3% and 6% of all respondents. Table 2 illustrates the gender breakdown of the respondents. It can be shown that 61.6% of respondents identify as female while 37.6% identify as male. Only 1% of respondents identified as transgendered.

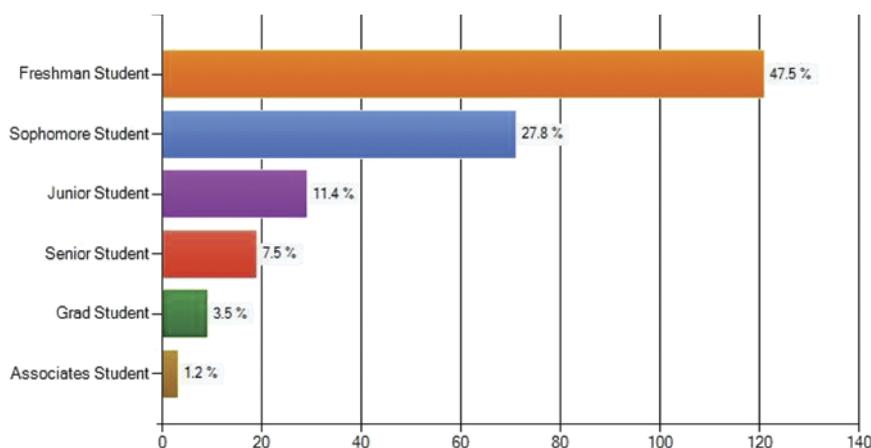
Figure 6 indicates that 47.5% of respondents were freshmen and 27.8% were sophomores. Figure 7 illustrates that 52% of respondents visit the

**TABLE 1** Percentage of Respondents by Age Range

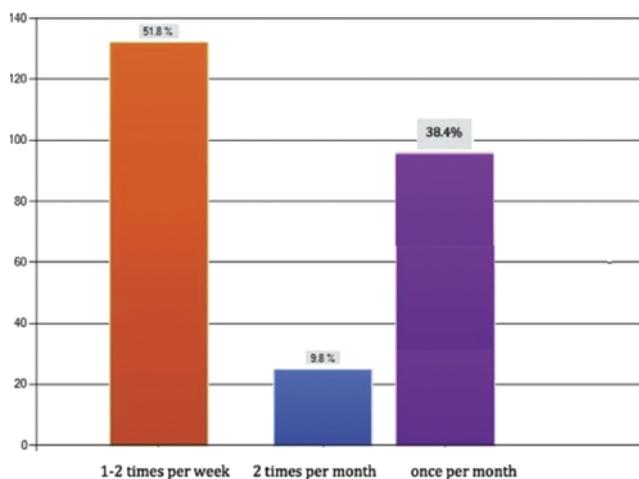
Age range ( <i>N</i> = 238)	Percentage of respondents
18–25	81.2%
26–34	5.9%
35–44	2.4%
45–60	2.7%
61 and over	1.2%

**TABLE 2** Percentage of Respondents by Gender

Gender ( <i>N</i> = 238)	Percentage of respondents
Male	37.6%
Female	61.6%
Transgendered	1%



**FIGURE 6** Category in the college. (Color figure available online.)



**FIGURE 7** Frequency of library visits. (Color figure available online.)

library at least twice a week, while 39% of respondents visit once per month. Table 3 illustrates that most respondents understood circulation desk and reference desk signage (92.5% and 95.7%), and most respondents thought Interlibrary Loan (56.1%) and Microform (35.2%) were the least user friendly terms. Table 3 also illustrates that circulation and reference was understood by 93% and 96% of respondents, respectively. Table 4 relates the level of user friendliness. The most user friendly signs were for printers, photocopiers, the reference desk, and circulation. The least user friendly signs were for group study rooms, Interlibrary loan, and Microform. Approximately 50% of respondents identified the eight service points signs as “good” in terms of how user friendly.

Although most respondents were freshmen and sophomores, the data from this study are not representative of those cohorts from CSI. However, based on the data, it may be inferred that permanent signage is easily understood. Most respondents found the signage in the library to be “good” or “excellent” in terms of how user friendly it was. The only two service points with the least amount of “excellent” scores were Microform and Interlibrary

**TABLE 3** Student Understanding of Signage

Library term on permanent signage (N= 238)	Library term is understood	Library term is not understood
Circulation/Reserves	<b>92.5%</b>	7.5%
Reference Reading Room	76.5%	23.5%
Reference Desk	<b>95.7%</b>	4.3%
Interlibrary Loan	42.7%	<b>56.1%</b>
Microform/fiche	63.9%	<b>35.2%</b>

**TABLE 4** “User-Friendliness” of Sign

Service point ( <i>N</i> = 238)	Excellent	Good	Needs improvement	Not sufficient
Circulation/Reserves	<b>42.1%</b>	50.4%	5.0%	2.5%
Reference Services	37.2%	<b>53.0%</b>	8.1%	1.7%
Microform/Microfilm	29.7%	53.4%	<b>14.2%</b>	2.6%
Group Study Rooms	33.2%	48.9%	<b>16.2%</b>	1.7%
Interlibrary Loan	28.7%	50.0%	<b>14.8%</b>	<b>6.5%</b>
Library Administration	<b>42.0%</b>	50.0%	6.3%	1.7%
Printers	38.2%	49.0%	10.4%	2.5%
Photocopiers	31.8%	<b>53.6%</b>	11.3%	3.3%

Loan. This response score may be due to the number of participants in the questionnaire (47.5% of respondents were freshmen) and they may not be familiar with Microfilm/fiche. In addition, Interlibrary loan may be a relatively unfamiliar concept for newly admitted college students since it may not have been offered in their high school libraries. Further, Interlibrary loan may be more heavily used by upper year students, graduate students, and faculty. See the Appendix for the full questionnaire.

## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

While the library is only three floors, the authors believe this signage audit is large in scope and breadth. However, the authors are aware that this study was limited to the signage audit and assessment. The study was also confined to the library’s public areas, not the entire building. The authors purposely excluded nonlibrary signage such as restrooms, office room numbers, and emergency exits. In the future it may be useful to analyze all signage within the entire building. It would also be beneficial to collaborate with other campus departments and investigate whether they face the same challenges. The College’s Media Relations Department and Graphic Design Services Department were not involved in this study. It would be worthwhile to have such departments consulted, as signage strongly relates to marketing, public relations, and graphic design.

As the authors illustrate, policy and directional signs may require more updating and maintenance. As policies change and service departments move, directional and policy signage needs to be more current and updated.

The data suggest that the sample size of students, mostly 18–25, appear to be content and understand the basic library service points. The data also suggest that the terms are easily understood since most participants scored them as “excellent” or “good.” Lastly, most participants understood the terms with the exceptions of Microfilm and Interlibrary Loan, which is aligned with the data of signage understanding.

The authors made interesting findings in their signage audit. While many well-intended library faculty and staff developed new signage in order to reflect new policies or services, it was found that outdated signage remained or was often not replaced. The authors also encountered a deluge of irrelevant and repetitive signs throughout all floors. It was concerning to discover conflicting and contradictory messages, handwritten signs with spelling errors, and inconsistencies in branding and design, all left unnoticed. Although 35% of these egregious signs were removed during the signage audit process, a significant number had to remain until they could be appropriately replaced.

The signage audit revealed a plethora of signs containing outdated, long-winded messages, inconsistent design, and confusing, contradictory, and sometimes punitive language. This may result in signs appearing cluttered and inefficient. The literature on library signage discourages these results. However, much can be done to improve temporary signage produced in-house, which comprised the majority of signs. The issues of punitive and inconsistent messages could be circumvented by the creation of best practices guidelines for language, font, design, color scheme, and branding. A signage policy would deter against handwritten, taped-up, or taped-over signs, identified primarily as temporary directional signs created once a service point location had changed. Finally, a signage placement map, outlining specific locations for specific signs, would help in the strategic positioning of signs. In addition, it may help prevent redundancy and outdated signage all too often exposed in this audit process.

A signage redesign needs departmental buy-in before implementation. To adhere to a unified design and brand, all department colleagues need to be supportive of the changes, and a signage committee or point-person needs to enforce the new directives. Moving forward, the authors hope to incorporate their findings from their audit and the literature to develop best practices guidelines, a signage policy, and a brand strategy that will help create a more user-friendly environment. Such documentation may help other libraries increase effectiveness and bring consistency and clarity to library signage, as well as printed literature, online presence, and other promotional material.

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## APPENDIX: PERMANENT SIGNAGE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your age range? Please note: you may complete this questionnaire if you are 18 years and older.
  - Under 18
  - 18–25
  - 26–34
  - 35–44
  - 45–60
  - 61 and over
2. What is your gender?
  - male
  - female
  - self-identify
3. Please identify your category in the college.
  - Freshman student
  - Sophomore student
  - Junior student
  - Senior student
  - Grad student
  - Associates student
4. How often do you visit the library?
  - 1–2 times a week
  - 2 times per month
  - once a month

5. Below is a list of library service points. On a scale below, please rate your level of understanding with the service point sign.

Service Point	Excellent	Good	Needs improvement	Not sufficient
Circulation/Reserves				
Reference Services				
Microform/Microfilm				
Group Study Rooms				
Interlibrary Loan				
Library Administration				
Printers				
Photocopiers				

6. The Circulation Desk is located to the left of the library entrance. Are you familiar with the function of the circulation desk? Should it be called something else?  
 I understand the name and it does not need changing.  
 I do not understand "Circulation" and it needs changing.
7. The Reference Reading Room is located straight ahead when you enter the library. Are you familiar with the function of this space?  
 I understand the types of materials in the Reference Reading Room.  
 I do not understand the types of materials in the Reference Reading Room.
8. The Reference Desk is located straight ahead upon entering the library. The desk is situated in front of the Reference Reading Room. Are you familiar with the function of the Reference Desk?  
 I understand the function of the Reference Desk.  
 I do not understand the function of the Reference Desk.
9. The Interlibrary Loan Department is located beside the Circulation/Reserves Services Desk. Are you familiar with this department?  
 I know the function of the Interlibrary Loan Department.  
 I do not know the function of the Interlibrary Loan Department.
10. The "Microfilm/Microfiche" Room is used for faxing, scanning, and using the Microfilm/fiche Readers. Are you familiar with this service point?  
 I am familiar with this service point.  
 I am not familiar with this service point.

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