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Perceptions Of The Library: A Key To Planning Effective Services

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Prologue

In an era of accountability in education, we are increasingly concerned with the question, "What are our students getting for their tuition dollars?" A 2003 article in *Change* about the objectives of accountability pointed out that effectiveness and accountability are the only topics emphasized consistently from year to year in a survey of State Higher Education Executive Officers.[1]

Introduction

For years, libraries have kept track of activities such as questions answered, books cataloged, and dollars spent. Now we are called upon to measure the impact of those services on our clients. Stakeholder demand for accountability, changing accreditation standards, and state and federal concerns over student outcomes have driven a real concern for measurement from the client's perspective. This will become increasingly important as demands for accountability and competition from other sectors increase. "Assessment and evaluation are intended as means to demonstrate institutional effectiveness, foster institutional improvement, and demonstrate accountability."[2] Programs such as the *New Measures Initiative*, from the Association of Research Libraries, have been developed to strengthen the role of the library vis-à-vis learning and research. This program was created to respond to increasing demand for outcomes measurement and increasing pressure to maximize use of resources. It is designed to help investigate strategies for assessing the library's value and exploring the library's impact on learning, teaching, and research.[3]

A recent *Measuring Up* report from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education is another example of this focus on assessment, providing a state-by-state report card for higher education. It says, in part, "Higher education has become a virtual prerequisite for full participation in the economic, civic, and social benefits of our nation. Moreover, nations, states, and communities now require a college-educated populace in order to compete in the global economy. These are the realities of the knowledge-based global marketplace…"[4] Demand for higher education continues to increase and participants want value for their investment. Reports such as *Measuring Up* will continue to be an important part of the educational terrain. In order to provide relevant services, the library, as a vital component of a quality education, must understand what its audience needs, how best to deliver those services, and how to assess their effectiveness. As Peter Hernon stated in an editorial recently, the question for libraries has moved from "how many?" to "how well?".[5]

Background

In 1993, following the completion of a university accreditation review by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the Walker Library at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) created an Effectiveness Committee. This standing committee, composed of librarians and reporting to the Library Administrative Council, was charged with managing the effectiveness program. Duties of the committee were defined as follows:

1) Maintain ongoing evaluation of the collection management and user services programs;
2) Relate the library effectiveness program to the overall university;
3) Solicit suggestions from the staff concerning aspects of the program that need review and attention;
4) Inform the Administrative Council of committee activities and accomplishments through the submission of a semi-annual report and minutes of meetings; and

5) Serve as the liaison group to the Director of Institutional Effectiveness.

In 2001, SACS adopted new standards which moved from statistical measurement, such as the number of books in the collection, books checked out, and dollars expended per student, toward an emphasis on how effectively libraries serve their users. Evaluation is now focused on the impact of library services and resources on students. The new accreditation standards, combined with recent demands for public sector accountability, will make the focus of the upcoming accreditation review at MTSU quite different from the one that took place in 1993.

With a new academic master plan in effect, we needed to know if the library programs were helping to support the mission and goals of the university. Was the library adding value to the education of its students? Were we providing the materials and services actually needed by our users? As part of the Effectiveness Committee's charge, a project was undertaken to survey users about library services and programs. If we could get a more accurate picture of user needs, we would be in a better position to fulfill those needs effectively. We would be able to put our resources at the real point of need rather than at the perceived point of need. Limited funds would be expended in the most effective manner.

The Walker Library mission statement reads, in part, "To provide a collection of materials and services that adequately meets the needs of students and faculty." We wanted to know how well we were fulfilling our mission. Assessment would give us a map of our strengths and weaknesses and allow us to delineate the effectiveness of the library to the university administration and the SACS review team. Through assessment, we would be able to use the assets of the library to address more fully the needs of our users. With this map, we could make plans to focus our time and resources more directly on student needs. If we knew, for instance, that many of our users do most of their research from off-campus, we would be able to emphasize the electronic resources they need to learn most effectively. Assessment would provide important information about student need and library services and allow us to consider changes where they would be most effective.

Methodology

The Walker Library conducted two user surveys during the spring semesters of 2001 and 2002. The first survey (2001) was developed and conducted by the Library Effectiveness Committee. The second survey (2002) utilized the LibQUAL+™ instrument developed under the auspices of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).

For the 2001 project, the committee surveyed a random sample of students consisting of approximately 5% of the undergraduate and graduate student population via a web-based instrument developed in-house. The University's Office of Institutional Research developed the sample and provided addresses, and the Information Technology Division (ITD) set up a group email account. Clearance was provided through the University's Institutional Review Board to conduct a survey of human subjects. A letter was sent to each student through campus mail asking for participation. One week later, the first email message was sent notifying individuals that the survey was available and providing the web site's address.

Provision was made for the participants to ask for a paper version of the survey if they preferred that format. If there were problems with accessing the site, they could reply to the email message and the response was directed to the Effectiveness Committee's chairperson. Completed survey forms went to a special email address for compilation. Written comments were separated out and survey answers were sent to ITD for analysis. Comments were organized by student status and category. Answers to the data portion of the questionnaire were analyzed and cross tabulated by subject, student major, and year in school. Participant answers were confidential and no identifying information was returned with the completed surveys.

During the spring semester of 2002, the Walker Library participated in the LibQUAL+™ survey. LibQUAL+™ (http://www.libqual.org/) is a research and development project undertaken by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in collaboration with Texas A&M University as one of the ARL *New Measures Initiatives* (http://www.arl.org/stats/newmeas/newmeas.html). LibQUAL+™ is currently supported through financial support from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). The project

is intended to define and measure library service quality across institutions, creating assessment tools for libraries. The goals of the LibQUAL+™ project are:

- To develop web-based tools for assessing library service quality
- To develop mechanisms and protocols for evaluating libraries
- To identify best practices in providing library service; and
- To establish a library service quality assessment program at ARL

LibQUAL+™ is a total market survey; it measures perceptions of service quality. Survey participants indicate their desired level of service, the minimum level they will accept, and the perceived level of services being provided. The 2002 survey consisted of twenty-five items divided into four service areas: ACCESS TO INFORMATION, AFFECT OF SERVICE, LIBRARY AS PLACE, AND PERSONAL CONTROL.

As in the spring 2001 project, a sample of respondents was used. Again, approval was gained from the University's Institutional Review Board. This time, 20% of the undergraduates, 20% of the graduate students, and all of the tenure-track faculty were surveyed. The Instructional Technology Division (ITD) provided a random sample of the student groups and Human Resources provided faculty addresses. ITD set up the group email account for all addresses.

The survey was conducted through email and the LibQUAL+™ web site. The email message included a brief description of the survey project, asked for the recipient's participation, and provided the web address for the survey. A special email address was created for reporting problems, providing comments, or requesting an alternate paper version of the survey. Again, participant confidentiality was assured.

Survey responses were automatically submitted to LibQUAL+™ personnel. The survey management web site allowed us to log in and see the number of participants viewing each page of the survey, the number of surveys completed each day, and the breakdown of respondents (student, faculty, etc.). Final responses with summary data and charts were made available to the participants in paper format at a special meeting during the ALA summer conference, and also through the web site.

Findings -Spring 2001 Survey

The response rate for the survey was 25%. While the committee had hoped for a higher percentage, it was decided that this rate was significant enough to warrant serious review of the results. The University's Information Technology Division provided invaluable assistance by compiling answers and performing cross-tabulation analysis.

Highlights
- More than one-half of the survey group uses the library weekly or more often, primarily to perform research.
- Approximately 43% of the group normally uses electronic access.
- More than 60% of the students surveyed find what they need most of the time. However, when asked what they do when they cannot find what they are looking for many respondents said that they leave the building. Also, a number of incidents were cited relating to the availability of material in the catalog which could not be found on the shelf.
- 62% of the respondents found the library instruction classes helpful, although there were a number of written comments from respondents who found the classes inadequate to meet their needs.
- Three-fourths of the students stated that the library staff is friendly, helpful and available.
- When asked how the library could improve services, the most frequently mentioned improvements were: Quicker processing of new materials; Longer open hours; Improved printing and quicker repair of equipment, particularly computers and copiers; Additional books and journals; More materials in electronic format
- The survey group was most satisfied with the group study rooms and general study areas.
- The area of greatest dissatisfaction was library printing capabilities (30.5%).
- For those who had not used the library during the semester, the most common reasons were that they did not need to do so for their studies, parking difficulty (particularly for those who wish to make a quick stop at the library), and limited hours of operation.

Responses were cross tabulated for: a) distance education services and status of student (on-campus vs. off-campus; b) college in which student was enrolled and hours of operation; and c) service satisfaction and college in which student was enrolled. The general breakdown of the survey group by class is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 **Walker Library Survey Respondents**	
Freshmen	27.0%
Sophomores	16.7%
Juniors	16.7%
Seniors	29.8%
Graduate Students	9.8%

Findings - Spring 2002 Survey
The LibQUAL+™ survey was sent to a sample of undergraduates, graduate students, and all faculty. The rate of return for the survey was 15%, representing 51% undergrads, 7% grads, and 42% faculty. This corresponds to the group average of all 4-year institutions performing the survey in spring 2002 in the following manner [Table 2]:

Table 2 **Aggregate Summary - Four-Year Institutions** **- LibQUAL+™ 2002**	
Undergraduates	43.0%
Graduate Students	24.0%
Faculty	25.0%

Although the return rate for students was of concern, the representativeness of the sample was considered more important than the number of responses. Three survey items, *CONVENIENT BUSINESS HOURS, COMPREHENSIVE PRINT COLLECTIONS,* and *COMPLETE RUNS OF JOURNALS*, were identified as the major areas of concern with perceived service gaps, confirming the results of earlier campus surveys. For these items, users indicated that their perceived level of service was below the minimum level they were willing to accept.

Of the three groups of library users (undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty), differences were discovered in their perceptions and expectations for service. For example, undergraduates were generally pleased with library services. The only item with a negative gap score was *CONVENIENT BUSINESS HOURS*. Graduate students and faculty members had higher expectations and found more of a gap between their expectations and their perceived level of service. Graduate students' negative scores correlated with scores for the group as a whole and reflected service gaps for hours, print collections, and journals. Faculty rated these items negatively and also gave negative scores to an additional item in the ACCESS TO INFORMATION area - *INTERDISCIPLINARY LIBRARY NEEDS BEING ADDRESSED*. An item in the AFFECT OF SERVICE area - *EMPLOYEES WHO HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE TO ANSWER USER QUESTIONS*, also received a slightly negative score.

For other four-year institutions conducting the survey in spring 2002, the one gap area was *COMPLETE RUNS OF JOURNAL TITLES*.

Discussion
Responsibility for assessing the survey responses and devising a plan to address service gaps was delegated to the Library Effectiveness Committee. Through planning and execution of the library surveys, a number of things were learned about survey design, user expectations, and library service [Table 3].

Table 3: Construction of the Evaluation Instrument - Points to Consider
1. Know what is being measured. Focus on activities or services that can be measured.
2. Don't just measure: improve. Use the results to make service more effective.
3. Be specific. Make sure that questions are targeted. Ask, "How will I be able to respond when I review answers to this question?"
4. Be concise. In the LibQUAL+™ survey, only half of those who viewed page one completed the entire three-page questionnaire.
5. Neutrality. Use unbiased questions. Avoid a negative or leading point of view.
6. Communicate. Let respondents know the outcome of the survey and steps that have been taken to address problems. (cont'd)

7. Develop a method for review and implementation. Create a schedule to ensure that survey results are not simply filed. Nothing haunts a new survey like inaction from a former one.
8. Plan. Allow adequate time for planning, pre-testing, and conducting the survey, and assessing the results.
9. Do not take survey results personally. The goal should be to offer relevant and efficient services. Keep the focus where it belongs.
10. Do not dismiss results. Honor the validity of each response.

It was noted that while the Walker Library matched other four-year institutions in the concern about complete runs of journals, the library also received negative scores for *convenient business hours*, and *comprehensive print collections.* In addition to negative gap scores, it was determined that those categories which were in the positive range, but barely so, should receive attention. These included concerns in the AFFECT OF SERVICE category, including such things as knowledge of staff, courtesy, and willingness to help. Through this review process, it became evident to the committee that a clearer focus on the distinct needs of our user groups would be required to lower the service gaps and improve service. We might need to consider more tailored services focused on specific user groups. "Our challenge may be to learn how to tolerate, and even encourage, thoughtful service exceptions for our users if we want to deliver exceptional services in some particular areas."[6]

The LibQUAL+™ survey results were only a beginning in the process of identifying gap areas, and the committee quickly realized that it would need to pinpoint the problems more precisely in order to effectively address them. For example, the survey respondents indicated a dissatisfaction with library hours. Before allocating library resources toward this problem, we needed to identify and answer some questions: when are the hours needed, week-end or evening; are extra hours needed all semester or just during exams; do students have a clear picture of the current operating schedule; who needs the extra hours, undergraduates, graduates, faculty, distance education students; is the need discipline specific; what services do these students need, reference assistance, circulation assistance, a quiet study area, a group study area, computing capability, a copy center?

A number of strategies were initiated to deal with the issues identified in the two user surveys:

- Increase hours from 11:00 p.m. – 1:00 a.m. during finals. Increasing library hours was a high priority and this timeframe was identified as the most desirable for increasing hours.
- Add metered parking spaces near the library with one hour limits allowing students to easily access the library building for short periods to accomplish such tasks as picking up books, finding quick information, returning materials, or paying fines.
- Continue to focus on the need for expanding resources. This priority from the student survey should help bolster the library's case for additional support in this area.
- Review operation and maintenance of computers, copiers, and printers. A number of students were concerned about equipment malfunctioning.
- Review library instruction program. Hold focus groups to determine effectiveness of current offerings and consider experimenting with other methods of providing instruction.
- Reduce the number of students leaving the building without finding what they need. Host focus groups to discuss this issue more broadly and obtain more specifics. Consider a brief list of exit questions as students leave the building.
- Review the issue of items listed as "available" in the catalog but not found on the shelf.
- Host focus groups or pursue other means to investigate further the dissatisfaction with the online catalog.
- Reduce length of time for processing of new materials so that materials appear sooner on the shelf.
- Continue to expand access to resources at other libraries as one solution to expanding resources.
- Assess impact of electronic books for possible expansion of this service.
- Consider expanding electronic reserves.
- Work with faculty to increase use of the library within the curriculum. The most common reason for not using the library was that students did not need it for their studies. The library should be a priority resource in the curriculum.

- Promote the library's services more broadly. Many students are unaware of services the library offers.
- Investigate the possibility of workshops or other types of training for library employees to improve the scores in the AFFECT OF SERVICE section of the LibQUAL+™ survey. A number of users voiced reservations about the staff's ability to address their needs.

The Effectiveness Committee decided that a follow-up study would help pinpoint more specific information for areas of concern. The Committee entered into a partnership with a professor in the University's College of Business to determine how best to gather additional information and uncover such issues as when and why students need to use the library, how can we communicate library services to the academic community, what are the specific areas of dissatisfaction with the collections, what specific hours of operation would meet student needs, etc. The Business professor suggested that we could approach this as a student project with a smaller survey targeted to more specific questions. He thought that the project would work well as an independent study with two or three students who would receive credit for their work. Late in the fall 2002 semester, the Effectiveness Committee met with the professor and a group of his students to discuss the project. Committee members shared earlier survey results and a list of areas for which more information was desired. During the spring 2003 semester, the student group worked on survey drafts and methodology in consultation with the Library Effectiveness Committee. The students conducted their survey in April 2003. They selected a variety of classes on campus and administered the survey to 445 students from a wide range of majors. Care was taken to make the sample a representative one. At the end of the semester, they met with the Committee and presented a written report of their findings. The survey revealed more detail about student opinion of operating hours, specific services used by students during certain hours, general feedback on specific services, and awareness of services being offered by the library. The group provided the report in tabular and graph form highlighting trends and making recommendations. The responses generally supported the results of the previous surveys conducted by the library, including overall satisfaction with library services, some concern

over the need for additional training for customer service, continuing desire for additional operating hours, and a need for additional communication with students about hours and services. A marketing campaign was recommended to build awareness.

The project was a learning experience for the students and also provided the Committee with additional feedback about the library's services.

Conclusion

Although the Walker Library Effectiveness Committee was charged with responding to the survey results, the entire library is engaged in meeting the challenges posed by the service gaps. Faculty and staff in both User Services and Collection Management units of the Walker Library have focused on improving services in their annual team goals and objectives. In addition to this initiative, a service team was formed of library student workers to interview students in the library and identify problems or concerns. It was felt that this student-to-student approach might reveal more than any attempt by library staff to gather information. Our expectation is that information from additional surveys, including the service team, conducting the LibQUAL+™ survey again, and other qualitative and quantitative resources, such as user and collection statistics, will allow us to make decisions on how to better allocate library resources and establish performance goals, objectives, and priorities.

The Library Effectiveness Committee has gathered and analyzed information through the targeted survey performed by the College of Business students and the LibQUAL+™ 2003 survey. Results from these instruments are being discussed by the Administrative Council in order to develop a plan for responding to concerns and a timeframe in which to make changes. At the same time, library team leaders are working on lessening the service gaps through our library committee and team structure.   As always, staff, funds, and resources are limited, so prioritization is a must. We may also need to identify stumbling blocks to accomplishing our goals, and unfortunately, one of the stumbling blocks encountered by other libraries is that library personnel often do not take the survey and the identified service gaps seriously. Frequently, library staff and faculty excuse identified service gaps as too difficult to change or even non-existent,

attributing the survey respondent's dissatisfaction to ignorance of how libraries function. Library staff must accept the premise that the user's perception of library service is valid, and proceed from that knowledge. As Joanne Bessler stated, "Where there is user dissatisfaction, it is not the user who is failing the library."[7]

As we continue to work toward shrinking the service gaps, we need to monitor and evaluate our progress, constantly assessing the changing perceptions of our users, and revising services to ensure enduring success. This symbiosis between assessing need and planning service promotes effective services and closer campus ties between the library and its clientele. But we need to do more. We must think creatively about the design of services that increase demand, promote the role of the library, and strengthen education and research on our campuses. In the business world, the surveying of customer need is "old hat." In fact, an article in the January 2002 issue of the *Harvard Business Review* takes service a step further by proposing that instead of asking customers what they want, companies should be asking customers for outcomes – that is, what they want a new product or service to do for them, which, the article asserts, will encourage innovation.[8] This focuses service on the results our users want to achieve rather than on the features of services they might desire.

Assessment can help uncover perceptions but it can also bring us closer to our users and free us to use innovative thinking in creating more effective library services. As librarians from Miami University stated so succinctly, "Academic libraries need to accept their role as experts in information management and not just meet client expectations, but anticipate client needs and help define those very expectations."[9] Assessment needs to become a regular part of our operations so that we can ensure we are providing service that is relevant and meaningful in a changing and challenging information environment.

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