



Making the Connection: Conducting Virtual Focus Groups with Distance Adult Learners



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Overview

How do you reach a completely online population to get insight when you don't have opportunities to communicate with your users in person? Without being able to see people use your resources, how do you know if your improvements worked?

- Used online surveys and additional quantitative measures to assess user satisfaction
- Most beneficial sections of the surveys were the comments. Made decisions based on this feedback
- In 2010, decided to hold virtual focus groups to gather even more in-depth, qualitative data

Assessing library resources and services at a distance holds unique challenges in gathering the data needed for making informed decisions.



Background

The Excelsior College Library is managed by the Entrepreneurial Library Program at the Johns Hopkins University, which creates customized library and information services for clients.

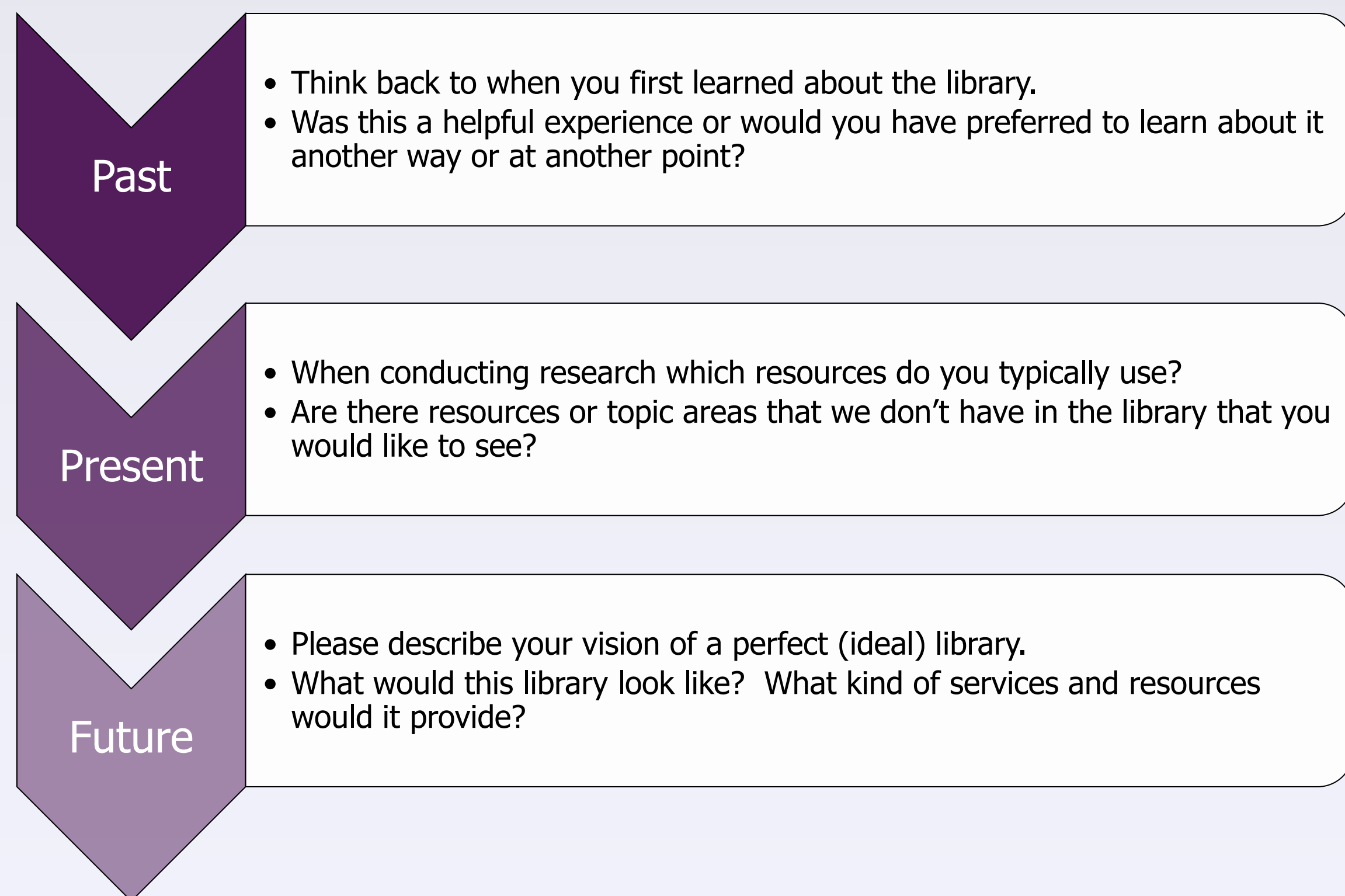
About Excelsior College:

- Fully online and offers courses and exams at a distance
- Mostly adult learners with an average age of 39
- Students located all over the world
- Many serving active duty in the military

Process

- Surveyed literature about virtual focus groups
- Reviewed technology options and chose a toll-free phone line
- Collaborated with Assessment Unit to choose a representative student sample by discipline
- Developed 8 probing questions, with a flow of past, present, future
- Emailed invitations and offered a \$15 incentive
- Sessions managed by an external facilitator and were recorded
- Analyzed transcripts and recordings:
 - identified themes
 - developed a coding schema
 - assessed intercoder reliability
 - quantified results by theme
- Created report - identified comments and potential action items

Sample Questions



Results

Theme	Associates	Associates (2nd)	Bachelors	Masters	Total
Navigation issues	9	6	13	4	32
Marketing/Communication	3	10	11	6	30
Search Tools	2	4	1	16	23
Instruction, Searching	1	0	9	10	20
Collections	9	3	4	3	19
Availability	2	9	3	5	19
Instruction, Overview	5	1	2	4	12
Modes	0	4	2	5	11
Instruction, Point of Need	1	0	7	1	9
Multimedia	1	5	1	1	8
Instruction, Subject	1	0	1	3	5
Personal connection	0	1	2	0	3

Lessons Learned

- Difficult to get students to RSVP and then show up, even with an incentive
- Provide an international phone number for callers overseas
- Medium chosen worked well: easy for participants and produced clear recording
- Time consuming and labor intensive to analyze the results
- Would have been interesting to have participants on Library's Web site

Future Work

- Create hybrid web survey including some of the open-ended focus group questions
- Consider holding virtual focus groups every other year
- Investigate one-on-one interviews
- Continue to use the rich data to improve the library