

## The Things We Will Learn from LibQUAL+™

David W. Lewis  
Dean of the IUPUI University Library  
2002

LibQUAL+™, for those of you who have not yet encountered it, is a survey instrument designed to measure user satisfaction with library services.[1] It is based on SERVQUAL an instrument used in a variety of business contexts. LibQUAL+™ was developed at Texas A & M University with the assistance of the developers of SERVQUAL (Valarie A. Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman, and Leonard L. Berry)[2] and was supported by the Association of Research Libraries and a U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant. It is an important application of a solid and well-developed methodology to academic libraries. It promises to tell us whether users of academic libraries are satisfied with what they are getting, and by implication, whether or not academic libraries are doing a good job of providing value to these users.

The LibQUAL+™ project is still in development and the results are still very preliminary. The LibQUAL+™ developers are being understandably cautious about what they will say about what they have learned to date. They have yet to say much about whether America's academic and research libraries are doing well in the eyes of their users. Their caution is, I think, justified, as the results of LibQUAL+™ could be powerful stuff. One thing though is clear, libraries want to know. The participation in the LibQUAL+™ program has far exceeded expectations. There will be 170 academic libraries participating in the program in the spring of 2002.

I need to state right from the start that I have had nothing to do with LibQUAL+™. I have attended a presentation or two, but that is it. I have though worked in academic libraries for a while and based on this experience, and the too often forgot or ignored research on libraries, I am prepared to predict what the results of LibQUAL+™ will be. It is my hope that this exercise will give us pause and cause many academic librarians to be reflective about our practice. It is my further hope that as the LibQUAL+™ data begins to come in it will do the same.

As the LibQUAL+™ results begin to come in I predict we will find:

Library users are generally satisfied with what we give them because they don't know any better. An important part of LibQUAL+™ is "gap analysis." Users indicate, on a nine-point scale, their minimum, desired, and perceived ratings for a variety of services. The "zone of tolerance" is the space between the minimum and desired ratings. LibQUAL+™ will show that in nearly all cases satisfaction levels fall in the bottom quarter of the zone of tolerance. This will happen because most academic library users, especially undergraduates, have very little experience with more than one academic library – the one they use and the one they are rating. This library and their experience with it has conditioned their expectations. Users will rate their minimum expectation on their worst experience with this library. Since most of the time this experience is all right, but not great, users will define minimum service as what they are getting, but because for the most part library staff are friendly people they will cut us some slack and rate their perceived experience a bit above minimum. We should take no comfort in this rating. While most academic libraries do not yet have serious competition, some day soon they may. Then like most other service organizations the zone of tolerance will be defined by a variety of real experience, which will raise expectations, but not perceptions of the service we are providing.

As Yogi would say, "Nobody goes there any more. It's too crowded." LibQUAL+™ will show that libraries that are heavily used will have users that are dissatisfied. This dissatisfaction will turn out to be a good thing. Better to have heavy use generate dissatisfaction than to be unused. This is an example of a general principle that is very significant: "importance" as measured either by asking users what they think or by observing their actions, is a much more critical measure of library effectiveness than "satisfaction". If your library has a high satisfaction rating, but nobody comes to your building or uses your services, you have a problem. It is easy to be satisfied with things you don't care about.

Overall satisfaction will correlate with high student/faculty ratios and with freshman SATs scores. This is because students at institutions with strong academic programs know that libraries are complex and that the difficulties in managing them are part of what it takes to be a good student. Their expectations are different from less successful students. Exceptions to this rule should be studied. Pay particular attention to outliers who have high satisfaction with low student/faculty ratios and SATs. These libraries have the programs that work.

Ohio libraries will have higher satisfaction than the national norm. So will Georgia libraries and libraries in other states with large collaborative systems, especially when those systems purchase large amounts of electronic content. In fact there will be a statistically significant correlation between the dollars spent

on collaborative purchases of electronic content to which the library has access and overall satisfaction with that library.

If there were any libraries that regularly bought duplicate copies, especially if this was done based on previous use of the title, then these libraries would have high levels of satisfaction. Sadly, no academic libraries do this.

People of color and those for whom English is a second language will be found to have a higher level of satisfaction than the norm. This is partly an issue of expectations, but it is more than that. These populations will be found to use academic libraries more. It will turn out that they are more likely to appreciate the long-standing, but often unacknowledged, role libraries play as an alternative source of information and as places of refuge from the prevailing intellectual and social norms and conventions.

ARL has stated that one of the reasons for developing LibQUAL+™ is that there is no demonstrable relationship between expenditures and service quality. This will prove not to be true. LibQUAL+™ will show that there is a relationship and that it is inverse. This result is easy to predict because libraries that spend a lot, spend it on collections. As everyone who has studied collection use knows, the marginal value of collection spending decreases very quickly when what you are buying is more unique materials. This is of course what research libraries do. LibQUAL+™ will demonstrate clearly that libraries that spend more on research collections have less satisfied users.

My final prediction is that ARL will not publicize this finding.

Notes:

[1] See the Association of research Libraries website at [www.arl.org](http://www.arl.org) for a variety of information on the LibQUAL+™ project.

[2] See, Zeithaml, Valarie A., A. Parasuraman, and Leonard L. Berry, *Delivering Quality Service: Balancing Customer Perceptions and Expectations*, New York: Free Press, 1990, or their many other publications.