

SERVQUAL: Measuring Service Quality in Academic Libraries

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The traditional orientation of measuring the quality of an academic library in quantifiable terms of its collection and use no longer offers attainable goals; nor does it adequately address the campus community's demands for information. New ways to conceive of and measure quality in libraries are needed--and alternate approaches emerge in the business sector where organizations are increasingly evaluated in terms of their service quality.

The primary focus of a library is service, and service quality is the most studied topic in marketing research during the past decade. A repeated theme in the marketing literature is that service quality, as perceived by consumers, is a function of what customers expect and how well the firm performs in providing the service.

Among the most popular assessments tools of service quality is SERVQUAL, an instrument designed by the marketing research team of Berry, Parasuraman, and Zeithaml (PB&Z)¹. Through numerous qualitative studies, they evolved a set of five dimensions which have been consistently ranked by customers to be most important for service quality, regardless of service industry. These dimensions are defined as follows:

Tangibles: appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials;

Reliability: ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately;

Responsiveness: willingness to help customers and provide prompt service;

Assurance: knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence; and

Empathy: the caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers.²

Based on the five SERVQUAL dimensions, the researchers also developed a survey instrument to measure the gap between customers' expectation for excellence and their perception of actual service delivered. The SERVQUAL instrument helps service providers understand both customer expectations and perceptions of specific services, as well as quality improvements over time. It may also help target specific service elements requiring improvement, and training opportunities for staff. Analyzed at the item level, data drawn from application of the SERVQUAL instrument are rich with practical implications for a service manager.

Introduced in 1988, SERVQUAL has been used in replication studies in a wide range of service industries: health care, banking, appliance repair, and several other professions. It has been introduced explicitly to the library field through several empirical studies undertaken in public, special, and academic libraries, as well as through descriptive articles and conference presentations.³

From extensive research, PB&Z concluded that customers ranked the importance of two SERVQUAL dimensions consistently, regardless of service industry. Reliability is the most important contributor to service quality and tangibles is the least important. Within the library setting, similar patterns were found. Preliminary research on the applicability of the SERVQUAL dimensions to measure reference, interlibrary loan, and reserve services in an academic library also support these patterns. One exception may be among users of reference services where there is a possible shared importance between Reliability and Responsiveness.⁴

PB&Z's customer-based approach for conceptualizing and measuring service quality offers an

alternative for defining the quality of library services. It emphasizes the service nature of libraries, in which the traditional collection-based criteria of quality may be part of, but not the entire component, of excellence. Service quality contributes to value experienced by customers. Value becomes an outcome of excellent service. The SERVQUAL instrument, modified for use in library service settings, provides an outcome measure for managers to gauge their service activities. It should not be a measure of comparison among libraries; there are no normative data nor is the instrument designed for ranking different service settings. Its usefulness to improve service management in academic libraries is only beginning to be discovered.

With encouragement from the ARL Statistics and Measurements Committee, efforts are being explored to extend research on the applicability of the SERVQUAL to both measure and manage service quality in academic libraries.

1. Raymond P. Fisk, Stephen W. Brown, and Mary Jo Bitner, "Tracking the Evolution of the Services Marketing Literature," *Journal of Retailing* 69 (1) (Spring 1993), 61-103.
2. Valarie A. Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman, and Leonard L. Berry, *Delivering Quality Service: Balancing Customer Perceptions and Expectations*. (New York: The Free Press, 1990), p. 26.
3. Publications describing empirical research on the application of the SERVQUAL in libraries include Susan Edwards & Mairead Browne, "Quality in Information Services: Do Users and Librarians Differ in Their Expectations?" *Library and Information Science Research* 17 (1995), 163-182; Francoise Hébert, "Service Quality: An Unobtrusive Investigation of Interlibrary Loan in Large Public Libraries in Canada," *Library and Information Science Research* 16 (1994), 3-21; Danuta A. Nitecki, "User Expectations for Quality Library Services Identified through Application of the SERVQUAL Scale in an Academic Library," in *Continuity and Transformation: The Promise of Confluence. Proceedings of the 7th Association of College and Research Libraries National Conference*, March 29-April 1, 1995, edited by Richard AmRhein (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1995), pp. 53-66; Danuta A. Nitecki, "Changing the Concept and Measure of Service Quality in Academic Libraries," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* (May 1996), 181-190; Marilyn D. White, "Measuring Customer Satisfaction and Quality of Service in Special Libraries" (Unpublished Final Report to Special Libraries Association, September 1994).
4. Nitecki, "Changing the Concept."

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