

## Library User Surveys

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## **SURVEY RESULTS**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Introduction

In an environment of tight budgets, increased calls for accountability, and a seismic shift towards electronic information, academic and research librarians are prompted to critically analyze and evaluate the services and resources provided to their constituents. User surveys such as paper-based and Web-based surveys and personal interviews are tools commonly used to evaluate and assess library services.

In January 2004, ARL member libraries were asked to complete this SPEC survey on *Library User Surveys*. The survey sought to collect information concerning current survey activities and also to update Elaine Brekke's findings that were published in SPEC Kit 205, *User Surveys in ARL Libraries* in 1994. The results contained in this document address survey frequency, goals, and evaluation; survey development, promotion, and administration; survey implementation and effectiveness; and the analysis of survey results. Sixty-six of the 123 member libraries (54%) responded to the survey.

### Background

All of the responding libraries reported how systematically and frequently they conduct user surveys, including LibQUAL+™. Only one respondent does not survey library users. The majority either occasionally (47 or 71%) or systematically (30 or 46%) survey users. These surveys primarily target academic faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students. Walk-in

users, non-library personnel, other researchers, and distance education students are somewhat less usual targets of occasional surveys and are rarely included in systematic surveys. A handful of respondents conduct ongoing surveys—such as point-of-use and pop-up Web surveys—across most categories of library users but these are usually in addition to systematic surveys. The frequency for conducting systematic surveys ranges from one to four years with both a mean and median of about every two years. In their comments, respondents indicated that narrower, more focused surveys, including point-of-use, surveys on particular services or resources, focus groups, and comment cards are popular tools.

Seventeen libraries had only participated in LibQUAL+™ while four others had not conducted a library-wide survey at all. One library commented that, over nearly the past 20 years, it has relied heavily on focused surveys (e.g., usability studies, focus groups, etc.) rather than a major library user survey. Forty-five respondents (68%) reported they had conducted a library user survey other than LibQUAL+™ within the last five years. These respondents were asked to complete this SPEC survey and answer the questions based on the most recently conducted user survey.

Of these 45, almost half had conducted their survey within the previous year. Eighteen, or 40 percent, identified the survey scope as encompassing general, organization-wide questions. Surveys with transaction-specific questions placed second (20%)

followed by those with department-specific questions (11%). Some respondents checked “other” and explained that their responses fell into two or all three categories.

The SPEC survey presented a list of potential goals of a library user survey and areas of library operations to evaluate through a survey. The vast majority of respondents identified assessing library service strengths/weaknesses and assessing users’ perceptions of library services as the most frequent goals (34 each or 76%). Assessing how user populations access library services and resources followed closely (30 or 68%). Developing proposals to request additional library funds was at the bottom of the list. From the list of ten potential goals provided, seven respondents indicated one goal for their survey, twenty had two to four goals, and eighteen had five to ten goals.

When a survey was used to evaluate library performance, 78% of respondents ranked evaluating access and collections as their top priority. Evaluating service points ranked second (71%) followed by patron awareness of services and resources (60%), staff/patron interactions (56%), facilities (49%), and library instruction (40%). The majority of respondents targeted academic faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students when evaluating library services and resources, though all categories of users were equally represented in all types of surveys.

### **Survey Development**

Respondents were asked who was responsible for guiding the planning, design, implementation, and/or analysis of the library user survey. From among the choices provided, about half of the respondents selected an ad hoc task force (14 or 31%) or a standing committee (9 or 20%) as the responsible party. Job responsibilities served as the main criteria used to assign staff to the task force or committee. Volunteers for these assignments placed second. At about a third of the responding libraries, task force or committee members represented a specific library department. Membership ranged from three to twelve individuals with a median of five members.

Another nine respondents indicated the task fell to an individual with specific job responsibility

for assessment. One respondent remarked that the library redeployed staff to create the position of Evaluation & Assessment Librarian in recognition of the importance of evaluation in library decisionmaking. There were a variety of other parties identified, as well. One library employed the services of the university’s Business and Research Methodology marketing class. At other libraries the type or purpose of the survey determines who is responsible, particularly when there is not a single position that has responsibility for assessment.

About half of the respondents (22 or 52%) employed survey experts to assist in defining the final survey questions and developing measurement scales. Of these, 12 used consultants and 11 used a campus research center for these tasks. Twenty-nine respondents had individual contact with the survey’s target audience during survey development, thirteen by using a pilot survey and twelve by pretesting questions. Only six libraries reported reviewing the literature for books or journal articles dealing with surveys.

One library reported they worked with both a consultant and campus research center. In that case library staff collaborated with information technology staff from the university. In three other cases the consultant was a faculty member from the parent university. The other consultants were from outside agencies. (These are listed under question 9 in the Survey Questions and Responses section of this SPEC Kit.)

The libraries that worked with a consultant frequently pretested the survey questions and held focus groups. Campus research centers were more likely to run a pilot survey or interview the target audience. Those who developed their surveys without outside assistance most often interviewed the target audience either individually or in focus groups or group interviews.

Other assistance came from a campus Total Quality Management program, a Service Quality Improvement Council, and papers from the Virtual Reference Desk Conference. Respondents also relied on their experience from conducting previous surveys and borrowed from surveys from other libraries. At one library a staff member had relevant

course experience.

Only 22 of the 45 responding libraries (49%) allocated specific funds for the user survey. Eight libraries budgeted under \$1,000, eight between \$1,000 and \$5,000, and four between \$5,000 and \$10,000. Only two libraries allocated over \$15,000. Of the 12 libraries that worked with a consultant, one budgeted no specific funds, four budgeted under \$1,000, four \$1,000 to \$5,000, two \$5,000 to \$10,000, and one over \$15,000. Six of the eleven libraries that worked with a campus research center had a budget for the survey. One allocated under \$1,000, three allocated \$1,000 to \$5,000, and two allocated \$5,000 to \$10,000. The rest of the respondents who had a budget developed their surveys without outside assistance. Two of these conducted focus groups, interviews, and a pilot survey. One had a budget of under \$1,000; the other had a budget of over \$15,000.

### Survey Promotion and Administration

Respondents were asked to identify a maximum of three tools that were effective in promoting the survey. Two-thirds used at least two promotional tools; several used four to five. Over half listed the library Web page as the top promotional tool. Contacts made by subject specialists, faculty liaisons, or bibliographers ranked second followed by attaching a cover letter to the survey. Less used were campus/department e-mail discussion lists, posters and flyers, and the campus newspaper. Other comments indicated that personal contact was particularly effective. Examples included e-mail from the library director to the provost and deans, personal contact with users when distributing the survey, an individual e-mail message to each faculty member, and personal contact from *any* library staff.

When distributing the survey to their target population(s), the two most frequently used channels were a Web-based form (23 or 51%) and distributing a paper copy in the library (16 or 36%). Eight respondents used both methods. Fewer than ten respondents distributed the survey either by campus mail, interviews, or in-class. Nine distributed the survey by e-mail and two used the postal service. As with survey promotion, most respondents used at least two different distribution methods.

The survey asked whether the different target audiences received the survey through different channels. This doesn't seem to be the case. Over 50% of the respondents used a Web-based form when administering the survey to the academic faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students. Over 30% provided a self-administered paper form to these three groups. Six provided the survey in both Web and paper formats. When the library administered the *same* survey instrument to their target populations, over 50% of the respondents used a Web-based survey and approximately one-third used a paper-based survey. Clearly, the Web is the preferred channel for conducting user surveys.

When the entire population is being surveyed, respondents prefer Web-based over paper-based surveys by a ratio of 4 to 1. Respondents indicated a slight preference for a paper-based survey when sampling the population (15 for paper versus 10 for Web.) Eight libraries interviewed a sample of the user population. For three of these the interview was their only survey method; the five others also used Web- and/or paper-based surveys. When drawing samples, 19 libraries (70%) used random sampling and eight (30%) used nonrandom sampling. Web-based surveys had a higher response rate than paper-based—a high of about 40% for Web versus 25% for paper. While the time required to complete the surveys ranged from one minute to two hours, on average respondents could complete most surveys in 10 to 15 minutes.

When libraries need to follow-up with the target audience to improve the survey response rate or to clarify answers, e-mail is the most often used method (15 or 44%). Focus groups and individual in-person interviews come next (18% and 16% respectively). Several respondents noted no follow-up measures were taken because the surveys were anonymous.

### Analyzing Survey Results

The survey next asked respondents to identify all parties involved in analyzing the survey response data. At all but three of the responding institutions some combination of library staff, library administrators, and library faculty analyzed the data. Eight libraries indicated that all three groups had a

role. At 15 libraries library staff had assistance from another campus office, a consultant, or some other party. At a small number of libraries library staff or administrators had sole responsibility for this task (seven and five respondents respectively.) In the three cases where someone outside the library was totally responsible for the analysis they were either consultants or the marketing class.

The primary audience for survey results appears to be library staff. Thirty-six of the forty-three respondents (84%) make a report widely available within the library. Twenty-five (58%) prepared an internal library report, twenty-one (49%) prepared a report for public service heads, and seventeen (40%) prepared a report for library faculty. To a lesser extent, libraries share the results beyond the library by preparing reports for parent institution administrators (16 or 37%) and the library Web page or newsletter (11 or 26%). Seventeen libraries (40%) noted that a paper copy is made available upon request.

### **Using the Survey Results**

Respondents provided written comments regarding the most important results obtained from their surveys. Two common threads appeared throughout the remarks. Numerous libraries noted the importance of “library as place.” One library’s participants noted the importance of the physical presence and state of the library. Another library reported that their survey showed them that “library as place” still mattered to its constituents. Two schools commented that their users ranked high the availability of group study and quiet study space. Secondly, several libraries commented about their users’ lack of awareness of library resources and services. One respondent wrote, “Users indicated that they were unaware of many library services being currently offered.” Another respondent stated, “Users are often unaware of the richness of electronic and print collections.”

A follow-up question asked respondents to describe any changes made in library services and resources based on the survey results. Some libraries developed user education initiatives such as preparing promotional materials, creating a

marketing committee, and having subject liaisons keep “library hours” in their assigned faculty departments. In addition, libraries expanded library hours, improved physical facilities (e.g., shelving and study space), and redesigned the library Web page.

### **Survey Effectiveness and Other Assessment Techniques**

Survey question 22 focused on how well the collected data met the library’s survey goals as indicated in question 4. Respondents noted the perceived value of the data in meeting the goals by assigning a value from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) for each goal. The goals that received the most responses and were assigned the highest perceived values (either 4 or 5) included assessing library service strengths and weaknesses, assessing how user populations access library services and resources, and assessing user perceptions of services provided and not provided by the library. Of the remaining goals, seven respondents selected developing new library programs and services as having the next highest perceived value. The least important goal was developing proposals to request additional library funds; 16 of the 25 respondents rated this “Not Applicable.”

Respondents also identified tools other than surveys that were used to gather information about users’ assessment of library services and resources. Forty libraries (91%) use comments received at public service points. Comments received by subject specialists, faculty liaisons, or bibliographers ranked second with 38 responses (86%). One-shot instruction evaluations, an in-house suggestion box, and an electronic suggestion box ranked third, fourth, and fifth, respectively.

### **Conclusion**

A closer inspection of the survey data and comments reveal some noteworthy developments. It is clearly evident that ARL member libraries evaluate and assess their operations year-round. The processes vary by type and scope and are executed through various channels. Many libraries conduct comprehensive surveys at regular intervals.

Some libraries rely heavily on the LibQUAL+™ survey. Others depend solely on point-of-use surveys.

Throughout the year, libraries employ a variety of tools such as pop-up surveys posted on the library Web page and comments received from constituents by staff and in suggestion boxes. Assessment and evaluation activities cover both the short term and long term and are integral strategies used by ARL member libraries.

In this survey's introduction, the author stated, "Paper-based surveys predominate, but Web-based surveys are now being used with increasing frequency." This SPEC survey data demonstrates that Web-based forms are the predominate method used to administer surveys. The responses provided to questions 11, 12, and 13 spotlight this trend. Over 50% of respondents use the library Web page to promote a survey, distribute Web-based surveys to participants, and ask their primary target populations to complete a Web-based survey. Including respondents participating only in the LibQUAL+™ survey, approximately 75% of member libraries use Web-based surveys. Clearly, paper-based surveys are becoming extinct.

ARL member libraries may benefit from the experiences of some libraries that participate in evaluations conducted by consortiums or by other campus units. One library commented that its university participates in the Consortium on Financing Higher Education's Enrolled Student Survey. The actual survey contains few library-related questions, but the university's library is given the opportunity "to supplement the core survey with a more extended section on library specific issues." At another library's university, various campus departments inquire if the library is interested

to include library questions in the department surveys. A third library noted that it participates in its university's annual survey of sophomores and seniors. These are excellent examples on how libraries can extend the boundaries of user surveys.

A very strong correlation exists between survey goals (question 4) and the perceived value of the collected data to meet these goals (question 22). The responding libraries confirmed that the survey data was highly valuable for meeting the top three survey goals of assessing library service strengths and weaknesses, assessing user perceptions, and assessing the access of library services and resources. Likewise, respondents had little interest in data about developing proposals to request additional library funds, developing information literacy programs, and assessing library staffing levels—the three goals that ranked lowest in question 4.

Libraries could consider establishing a stronger relationship between assessing marketing and/or public relations initiatives and evaluating patron awareness of library services and/or resources. Only 14 libraries (32%) selected "developing marketing and/or public relations programs" as a survey goal, but 27 libraries (60%) selected "patron awareness of library services and/or resources" as a priority when evaluating library performance. It is possible that libraries may address patron awareness issues through one or all of the top three goals identified in question 4. However, the data and comments contained in this SPEC Kit could easily persuade libraries to work harder to link marketing efforts with patron awareness of service issues.

