What Is the SPEC Survey Program?

ARL has gathered and disseminated data on “hot topics” related to research library policies and practices through the SPEC survey program for more than 40 years. Each year ARL works with librarians in the US and Canada to develop four new surveys of the ARL membership that will assist libraries in the continuous improvement of their management systems.

ARL issues a call for proposals for survey topics in May and in July selects four topics for the following year’s survey cycle. Criteria for a topic’s selection include its currency and insightfulness; its strategic importance to managing research libraries; its relevance to an ARL focus area or an ARL program promoting diversity, inclusion, and leadership; its relevance to the initiatives emerging from ARL’s strategic thinking and design process; and whether documents that illustrate current policies and practices can be gathered from survey respondents.

Who Can Author a SPEC Survey?

Typically, SPEC survey authors are librarians in one or more of the ARL member libraries, but this is not a requirement. Authors may work alone or with one or more partners. Authors are expected to be familiar with the issues surrounding the proposed topic and to have conducted a preliminary review of the literature to help focus the scope of the survey. They are also expected to be familiar with the ARL strategic initiatives and the SPEC Kit format.

How Do I Participate in the SPEC Survey Program?

Watch for the call for proposals in the spring. Follow the instructions for submitting a brief proposal (two to five pages total) that includes the following elements:

• A short bio of the author(s) indicating qualifications to carry out research on the proposed topic.
• A brief overview of the topic with a discussion of why it is important to examine it at this time and a description of what you hope to learn from the survey data. Include a statement such as “The purpose of this survey is to...” (This text will be used to introduce the survey to respondents.)
• A paragraph indicating the strategic relevance of the research topic to ARL members.
• A list of the main categories of survey questions—reflecting your description of what you hope to learn—along with a sample question for each category.
• A list of the types of supporting documentation you would request from survey respondents.

What Are SPEC Kits?

Each SPEC Kit contains an executive summary of the SPEC survey results; survey questions with answer tallies and selected comments; the best representative documents submitted by survey participants, such as policies, procedures, handbooks, guidelines, websites, job...
descriptions, brochures, and statements; and a selected reading list of both print and online resources that contains the most current literature available on the topic.

The information contained in SPEC Kits is valuable to a variety of users, both inside and outside the library. Readers use the documentation found in SPEC Kits as a point of departure for research and problem solving because they lend immediate authority to proposals and set standards for designing programs or writing procedure statements. SPEC Kits also function as an important reference tool for library administrators, staff, students, and professionals in allied disciplines who may not have ready access to this kind of information. Originally established as an information source for ARL member libraries, the SPEC Kit series has grown to serve the needs of the library community worldwide.

How Long Is the Process from Survey to SPEC Kit?

The process to complete a SPEC Kit—from drafting the survey to publication—takes approximately 18 months. Authors must commit to complete the work within that time frame. Typically, authors begin work on their draft surveys as soon as they are notified that their proposal has been selected. They work with ARL staff through the fall to polish their surveys. The online surveys are announced and run sequentially in January, March, May, and July. Authors analyze their data and begin submitting the draft sections of their SPEC Kits about six weeks after they receive their survey data. The completed SPEC Kits are published in May, July, September, and November. Following the publication of each SPEC Kit, ARL will host a 45-minute webcast where the survey authors can present the most interesting findings from their survey and then answer questions from the webcast participants.

What Support Does ARL Provide to Authors?

ARL staff provide considerable help throughout the process from survey design, to publication of the completed SPEC Kit, to webcast preparation. ARL staff work with survey authors to prepare a concise, well-focused survey. ARL staff design the online survey response form, announce the new survey to the SPEC survey liaisons, collect and tabulate the responses, gather the representative documentation from respondents, and deliver a package of data and documentation to the author for analysis. ARL staff and the author work collaboratively to edit the text of the executive summary and survey questions and responses, and to review and select the representative documentation. ARL staff assemble and format the pieces of the SPEC Kit and prepare the files for print and online publication.

Who Do I Contact for More Information?

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