

The Emperor's New Clothes? Problems of the User Survey as a Planning Tool in Academic Libraries

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Despite their potential as strategic management tools, user surveys are rarely used to identify needed services. Such in-house research often either fails to provide data relevant to prospective planning or is neglected altogether. Problems with user studies can include difficulties in the design of proper studies, difficulties in translating the results into concrete management decisions, and the distrust of survey research on the part of many librarians. However, the accelerating entry of private-sector information providers into the realm of services traditionally provided by the academic library will demand a substantial change in attitude toward user input into the planning process.



Planning and evaluation are not independent processes. Analysis of users' needs and measurement of the effectiveness of programs and services provide the data upon which rationalized future plans of the library must be based. In fact, the only alternative to such studies, according to Gail Schlachter and Donna Belli, is to hope for divine guidance. Yet in their study of 122 public libraries in California, these researchers found that 94% of the libraries surveyed had not carried out an evaluation of their programs or services in the last three years. Moreover, of the libraries that had conducted such studies, 78% had failed to initiate any changes in response to the findings obtained.¹ This study and many others suggest that the relationship between internal library studies and the planning process is, like the emperor's new clothes, highly illusory.

It might be expected that academic libraries, presumably more research-oriented than public libraries, would engage in self-evaluation more readily and more often and would rely more heavily on statistical data for their planning. However, as recently as 1985, Charles McClure and Alan R. Samuels, reporting on a survey of the professional staff of eighteen large academic libraries, summarized the results as indicating that the current library decision-making process placed very little value on research, either for assessment of the needs of the users or for evaluation of the effectiveness of programs and services.² In the same year, John W. Berry found in a study of twenty-two academic libraries that, despite concerns over the quality of reference services, most had no plans for any form of systematic evaluation.³

The results of a 1990 search of the ERIC database using "academic libraries,"

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"library planning," and "use studies" are suggestive. Of the forty-five references retrieved covering the years 1969-1988, only five items decidedly imply an intent to apply findings to a planning process. Most "use studies" reported are primarily descriptive snapshots of how matters stand at the moment with little apparent view toward use in future directions and planning.

This lack of rigorous attention to users' needs on the part of academic libraries is surprising in view of the increasing emphasis on the customer-driven characteristic of private industry.⁴ Particularly since, as JoAnn Stefani points out:

The functions of collection, storage, organization and retrieval of information, which have customarily been performed by librarians have become the basis of a vast information industry outside the domain of the library, and the librarian must now compete with private interests . . .⁵

Most academic librarians are aware of increasing extra-library end-user searching, assistance to faculty from information brokers, computer-assisted document delivery services, scholars' workstations with CD-ROM capability, commercial photocopy services selling to students faculty-determined readings formerly found only on library reserve, the accelerating use of the "invisible college" to counteract the ponderous nature of the bibliographic cycle (i.e., publication to indexing to library acquisition), and so forth. These more recent trends, along with traditional problems with faculty ineptitude in library use and generally low faculty use rates, are certainly ominous.

Why, when the importance of user surveys as a planning tool is widely acknowledged in the library literature,⁶ are so few libraries willing to invest the time and expense necessary to carry them out? And why do the studies that are done have such a surprisingly small effect on strategic planning? Analysis of the subject literature in academic librarianship suggests that three main problems contribute to the reluctance of librarians to undertake such analyses and to their low impact on planning. These problems are:

(1) difficulties in the design of user studies; (2) difficulties in translating the results of such studies into concrete management decisions; and (3) the lack of acceptance of survey research as a valid tool by many librarians.

DIFFICULTIES IN THE DESIGN OF USER STUDIES

User studies should be an assumed element in the strategic planning of libraries in order to allow them to "shape the future rather than merely reacting to it."⁷ In fact, the literature contains many excellent articles that cover the technical aspects of conducting user surveys.⁸ Despite the wealth of technical information available, however, the actual results obtained from user surveys frequently prove less useful than expected.

The problems in the proper design of such studies can be subtle and have also been extensively analyzed. However, the analysis has been more effective in pointing out the problems than in outlining proper solutions. Lowell A. Martin emphasized that a survey must focus carefully on exactly the information desired in order to provide data useful for planning, but the design of a survey that assesses precisely the parameter it was intended to is sometimes not straightforward.⁹ For instance, data on retrieval success can be distorted by self-selection; i.e., users may pick articles for retrieval primarily from sources they already know are accessible in the library. Surveys of material availability, then, may actually be measuring the skill—or lack thereof—of the user rather than the adequacy of the collection.

Because of the difficulty of creating a survey that measures the benefits of information obtained from a library, Douglas L. Zweizig suggested that measuring user satisfaction with the library is probably the best alternative.¹⁰ However, several studies in which user satisfaction was measured have yielded either contradictory or no significant results. Barbara F. Schloman, Roy S. Lilly, and Wendy Hu, in a 1989 survey of the attitudes of the Kent State University faculty toward the library, found a high

reported level of satisfaction with the library but a paradoxically low awareness of the library's programs and services, particularly on the part of less senior faculty members.¹¹ Similarly, using a questionnaire "dealing with satisfaction or adequacy of the collection, policies, and staff" to survey the faculty of three small colleges, Jinnie Davis and Stella Bentley found that for many questions neither subject area, academic rank, nor length of time at the institution made any significant difference in the reported level of satisfaction with the library.¹²

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Both Davis and Bentley and Vernon E. Palmour have suggested that measurement of user satisfaction may not be genuinely informative since many users have low expectations for library resources and services to begin with and will often report satisfaction with whatever they think is available.¹³ Martin also points out that most studies rating user satisfaction with libraries result in high marks,¹⁴ which might indicate that such questions are not actually a valid parameter by which to evaluate adequacy of a library's collection or services. In view of this, Palmour suggests that evaluating awareness of services and programs may be more telling than measuring user satisfaction; in fact, Schloman, Lilly, and Hu did find in the survey they conducted that questions about satisfaction with services and those about awareness or use of available services yielded incompatible results.

Another frequent problem with surveys is that they are directed at the user of library services and neglect the non-user, who is far more difficult to reach but who, even in a college or university environment, represents a significant portion of the population. This can result in an overemphasis on the perceived needs or interests of one group, such as

bibliophiles, and does not produce data representative of the overall information needs of students and faculty. Martin states that telephone or personal interviews, while requiring a considerable investment of staff time, represent the only viable way to reach nonusers, and that these studies of nonusers are more likely to have a significant effect on library planning and marketing initiatives than surveys of frequent users. Faculty and departmental liaison programs have also been suggested as a way to reach nonusers of the library.¹⁵

Interestingly, although librarians at the twenty-two academic libraries surveyed by Berry responded to questions about the equality of service afforded to student and faculty by maintaining that there was no distinction in the type or extent of services provided, very few of those surveyed reported any attempt to determine student satisfaction with the library. This bias may result from the fact that, while students are numerically superior, faculty expectations drive student use of the library. Although the problems discussed above could perhaps be avoided by designing more carefully rationalized surveys and questionnaires, a number of authors have pointed out that there are limitations inherent in the creation of such surveys that cannot be easily overcome.¹⁶ The tendency of both designers of library surveys and of those who respond to them is to limit their ideas about information needs to those that a library is traditionally expected to fulfill. Rather than address information needs broadly, the resulting studies are inescapably library-oriented, may be designed to meet a preset agenda, and cannot analyze the total "information environment" of the user no matter how desirable that goal may be.¹⁷

PROBLEMS IN THE TRANSLATION OF SURVEY RESULTS INTO MANAGEMENT DECISIONS

Many authors emphasize the necessity for long-range planning by libraries, and increasingly recognize the need to apply strategic planning techniques even to non-profit organizations.^{18,19} As McClure

pointed out, however, "planning assumes that librarians can measure the degree to which change takes place, the degree to which objectives are accomplished, and the impact of various programs on the environment . . . the needs assessment process is input for the development of goals and objectives."²⁰

In general, the literature has little on methods of planning for academic libraries. Unfortunately, as Butler and Gratch note, much of the available literature on library user surveys is descriptive and not easily transferable to the planning process.²¹ The user studies carried out by libraries are most frequently intended for evaluation of existing programs and are very rarely employed for the planning of new programs and services, despite the fact that many decisions made by librarians must be made in anticipation of future needs.²²

While libraries are not alone in their resistance to changes in strategy, the widespread lack of attention to the kind of systematic environmental scanning²³ represented by ongoing user studies further isolates the library from its customers and may encourage the persistence of a self-serving bureaucracy and ineffective programs.²⁴

It is likely that part of librarians' reluctance to use survey data for future planning derives from the traditionally bureaucratic organization of libraries.²⁵ Most academic libraries, like the 122 public libraries studied by Schlachter and Belli, operate as "classic bureaucracies" with very little significant input either from users or lower levels of staff. Cage has hypothesized that libraries that have settled into a rigidly bureaucratic mode of management are particularly resistant to the kind of innovation hypothetically associated with user studies.²⁶ In fact, Schlachter and Belli's survey also revealed that 78% of the libraries which did carry out some type of evaluation failed to use the results to initiate changes in programs.

In addition to problems resulting from bureaucratic resistance to environmental input, the design of most user surveys results in data inappropriate or ir-

relevant to management decisions. Martin remarked that "disillusionment sets in when a library laboriously gathers extensive data and then wonders what to do with it" and emphasized that surveys, to be effective, must be directed at "concrete management problems."²⁷ (There is some doubt that datum intended to impress the office to which the library reports is, of itself, directed at a legitimate management problem.) The same point is addressed by Palmour who finds that most user surveys have a number of problems that prevent them from being useful in planning. These problems include a failure to collect baseline data for comparison with later results, the tendency to collect too much data, most of which are not useful for management purposes, and the difficulties involved in the measurement of real needs, as noted above.

An additional unresolved problem in the applicability of data from user surveys is that there is no clear paradigm by which the somewhat nebulous concept of "users' information needs" can be linked to strategic management decisions. V. L. Brember and P. Leggate have examined the use of various sophisticated methodologies (e.g., network modeling, system dynamics, and a "soft system approach") for improving aspects of library effectiveness.²⁸ Few library managers, however, are likely to be willing to undertake analyses of such time-consuming complexity.

The difficulties in applying much research to managerial problems are exacerbated by the lack, in absolute numbers, of trained researchers. In 1989, for example, only 2% of ALA's total membership belonged to the Library Research Round Table, and, according to McClure and Bishop, there is only a comparative handful of active researchers among 150,000 library practitioners.^{29,30} This disparity in numbers contributes to difficulties in communication between practitioners and researchers, so that too often problems are identified "by talking only with other researchers, ignoring . . . the problems to be solved by the practitioners."³¹ Practitioners, then, complain that "research is unable to grapple with the problems of librarianship."³²

PROBLEMS IN THE ACCEPTANCE OF SURVEY DATA BY LIBRARIANS

Problems in the acceptance of survey data can be roughly subdivided into two types: (1) Prejudice against and distrust of quantitative evaluation on the part of many librarians and (2) the tendency to seek the easiest available information sources and to ignore data conflicting with preconceived views.

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The reluctance to use techniques of quantitative analysis in the library setting has prompted several authors to suggest that librarians actually prefer to avoid such evaluation of their services³³ or that they see evaluation as a "threat to their autonomy."³⁴ McClure found, however, in an examination of the use of costing and performance measures for planning in eleven academic libraries, that many librarians appear to be so distrustful of evaluative techniques that they are "unlikely to use such data, even if it is available, for library decision making."³⁵

This distrust of statistical methods led the librarians in McClure's study to assert that political and social connections between library managers and university administration were more significant to library funding than performance measures. Moreover, the librarians interviewed felt that the perception on the part of faculty and students that quality service was being offered was more important than actually evaluating programs and services. Continuing to rely on intuitive and nonrational assumptions seems increasingly out of place in an environment in which the "research librarian" becomes a desirable commodity.

In view of all the advantages to be gained, why is more in-house research and evaluation linked to planning not done? One key to librarians' apathy about research generally may involve a semantic

problem with the term *research*. Many librarians see quantitative research as complex and artificial statistical gobbledegook of interest only to library science faculty with Ph.D.s. Nothing need be further from the truth, however, as most research internal to libraries does not require esoteric methods or elaborate statistical tests to be effective and useful.

Still, most academic librarians have little, if any, formal training in research procedures. All professional librarians have, by definition, an accredited M.L.S., but this is not a research degree, and while many library science programs offer—and some require—a course in research methods, such courses vary widely in definition, focus, and depth. Mary S. Stephenson, for example, found that among the research methods courses offered in accredited schools fewer than half "actually require students to undertake a research project," and that it appears that students "are not leaving school with a real understanding of how to make [the research process] part of their professional lives."³⁶ Encouraging accredited schools with their one- and two-year programs to do more in this area is but part of the answer. Practitioners' own greater commitment to regular continuing education throughout their careers along with continuing education offerings in research skills on a continuing basis from ALA, ACRL, and ARL are also necessary steps.

Practical problems such as a lack of released time and the scarcity of funding are hindrances. In a recent survey of ARL libraries, Shelly Arlen and Nedria Santizo found that approximately 60% did not give released time for research.³⁷ Funding, even in academic libraries, is still more limited, with one study finding only 43% providing any financing for research by their staff.³⁸

Another consideration is that university tenure committees and journal referees knowledgeable in research methods regard basic, especially experimental research more highly than they do applied research. Librarians, however, are concerned with providing greater services with static or declining budgets, and

they need focused, applicable answers to management problems. Unfortunately, the "greater effort researchers make to produce broadly generalizable findings, the less likely the research will have an impact on [local] practices" since each library faces its own set of problems.³⁹

The most satisfactory approach to determine the information needs of both users and nonusers, at least among faculty, seems to be the use of liaison activities.

If librarians largely rule out evaluative data and find little published research that meets their needs, what information sources do they use for decision making? This question was investigated by McClure and Samuels. For this study, the authors surveyed the professional staff of eighteen academic libraries. A part of the questionnaire used consisted of a "list of ten decision situations," which were to be paired with the respondent's preferred source of information chosen from a list that included both internal and external information sources. The results indicated that the librarians strongly preferred internal sources of information, primarily interpersonal communication with other professional staff members. From this, McClure and Samuels concluded that the information employed in decision making in academic libraries is likely to be inward in orientation and "opinion-based" rather than derived from any type of quantitative measurement and suggests that these library managers actually have "little interest in user input to decision making."⁴⁰

Adopting such a stance, however, encourages a closed-system world view, one in which the needs of the external environment (i.e., students, faculty, and citizens as users) are thwarted in favor of a "reality" in which the outer world looks like the inside of a library. The tendency of closed systems to wind down (entropy) ought to be compared often in academic library planning to the dynamic nature of open systems whose

very existence depends on inputs from external energy sources, in this case from the campus and larger community of users.⁴¹

In their preference for easily obtained—though possibly inaccurate—information, librarians seem to resemble other groups. For example, O'Reilly found in a survey of 163 subjects working in a county welfare agency that the "accessibility and not the quality of the source . . . is the critical determinant of its use."⁴² In a model by Taylor of information-seeking behavior and in studies by Voigt of scientists' information seeking, accessibility and least-effort values also predominate.⁴³ It may be too much to hope that information professionals will be different.

CONCLUSIONS

Although conclusions based on a limited analysis of the literature must necessarily be tentative, some clear points have emerged. First, in order to be meaningful for planning, user studies need to be designed carefully and focused, preferably concentrating on information about users' awareness of library services or on a specific and pre-defined managerial problem rather than soliciting general opinions about the users' level of satisfaction with the library. In view of the number of surveys reporting a lack of meaningful results for a number of questions, testing the survey questions with a small sample prior to use seems essential. Obtaining data from nonusers, although it was mentioned less frequently in the literature as a problem, seems like a critical part of a meaningful study since these are the people whose needs the library is clearly not meeting and who represent a major marketing opportunity.

In addition to overlooking nonusers, surveys of academic libraries seem also to neglect student opinion, perhaps because of their turnover and lack of direct influence in budgetary matters. Because students outnumber faculty as current or potential users, a properly designed survey should make an attempt to avoid giving a disproportionate weight to fa-

culty opinion. Mary K. Sellen and Jan Jirouch reported that although 100 percent of the responding faculty at their institution indicated that they required the use of library materials, only 6 percent of the students entered the library during a two-week period.⁴⁴ The viewpoints of the remaining 94 percent of the student body, were they known, might have a significant effect on library strategy.

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The most satisfactory approach to determine the information needs of both users and nonusers, at least among faculty, seems to be the use of liaison activities. While liaison activities are demanding of staff time, they have the potential to increase significantly awareness of the library's services and to generate strong support for the library among the faculty. Also, a liaison program is one of the few available means to reach the faculty nonuser. The approach of Schloman, Lilly, and Hu, despite some problems with the design of their survey, seemed a particularly effective model. The results-oriented program undertaken by them at Kent State involved an initial survey including questions on the awareness of services and then the targeting of liaison staff to those departments or faculty members who seemed the most uninformed about the available library resources and services.

Problems in the translation of survey data into management decisions, while complex in their theoretical aspects, in practice seem to be because of improperly designed user surveys that seek information of a general nature rather than directly addressing specific problems or questions. All data are not necessarily useful data, and studies that do not define and obtain precisely the data required appear to do little more than muddle planning efforts. In order to

"focus available resources on specific research problems," McClure and Bishop have suggested the establishment within each library of an "Office of Research and Development" which would allow "library researchers and library managers to be directly involved together on... daily managerial problems."⁴⁵

The problem of librarians' distrust of evaluative data is significant, and some of McClure's suggested solutions, including increasing "academic librarian awareness of the importance and potential applications of these methodologies"⁴⁶ and training librarians in "information resources management, evaluation of information sources for decision making and broadening their sources as input for decision making,"⁴⁷ hardly seem adequate to the problem. It appears probable that trends such as users' increased demand for customer-oriented services, increased competition from private information sources, and increased demand for justification of the library's portion of the university's budget will ultimately force a change in librarians' attitudes toward user input into library planning.

By 1985, McClure and Samuels were still finding that academic librarians had "little interest in user input."⁴⁸ The need, however, for a change in attitude toward environmental input into library planning is increasingly obvious and urgent. A group of European publishers plan to begin direct marketing of full-text scientific journals on optical disk. In its final form, this service will periodically provide an individual researcher with a disk containing the full text of the 400 journals he has selected as being most relevant to his research along with a retrieval program custom designed to his "research profile."⁴⁹ The potential, then, exists for academic libraries to be relegated to purely archival and depository functions by private enterprises that subsume their services to users and by growing user apathy. What information needs will faculty researchers in the future have that can still best be met by the library? The only way to find out is to ask them—in meaningful ways.⁵⁰

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