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What Do Faculty Want?: a Focus Group Study of Faculty at a Mid-sized Public University

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Introduction

This study presents the findings of a series of focus groups conducted at Kutztown University, a medium-sized public liberal arts institution serving approximately 10,000 students and over 500 faculty members. The focus groups consisted of faculty members and centered on the informational needs of the faculty and how those needs are met by Kutztown University's Rohrbach Library. Personal research, teaching needs, and recommendations were also addressed.

As faculty librarians we were keenly interested in providing excellent library resources and services to our constituents, and we were interested in identifying new services and resources. With this in mind we setout to develop a study that would ascertain the effectiveness of our current services, the strengths of our collections, and the direction the library should take concerning new information delivery systems and products. The library had participated in the LibQual survey, but we were interested in conducting a more in-depth, open ended assessment of our faculty users. We quickly realized that a survey would be too static and would limit the creativity of the participants. Ultimately we decided that a faculty focus group would be the best method to accomplish our goals.

We decided to focus on the faculty for the following reasons: 1) The faculty conducts in-depth and very specific research, making them heavy library users and expert searchers in their focused subject areas. Although Kutztown University is primarily a teaching university, not a research institution, in recent years publishing expectations for tenure candidates has dramatically increased. The university now has a dedicated core of researchers and the faculty expect more research and publication from their colleagues for both tenure and promotion. This means that faculty members should be an expert library users in their specialized areas of research. Insight into information needs for specific subject areas is valuable. 2) Faculty members direct their students to the library through classroom assignments. Many faculty give assignments that can be accomplished using library services and resources. If a professor champions the library and uses the library resources, it is much more likely that his or her students will have a good initial impression of the library and be encouraged to use it. In short, a faculty member serves as a vital intermediary by directing students to the library and its services.

Methods

Powell and Connaway (2004), McNamara (1999) and University of Texas at Austin (2005) all give advice on focus groups. In accordance with the literature, we developed seven broad questions to ask each focus group. The questions are listed below.

• Where do you go to meet your professional information needs?

• Is the library useful to you? Why or why not.

• How can/does the library help you with your classroom work?

• Do you use library resources for your own research? Please explain how and what.

• What do you think is the single most important service for the library to provide?

• In the age of the Internet, what do you see as the role of the academic library on campus?

• In your opinion, how can the library be improved?

We decided to offer eight 45-minute sessions. This 45-minute format made the session fit into our class schedule and offered faculty adequate time. Next, we recruited faculty by personal contact and via email. We intentionally sought out a group of both regular library users as well as those who use the library infrequently. We also tried to get faculty representation from a broad array of disciplines. Faculty from the social sciences, business, history, English, education, biology, and library science took part in the study. We were able to arrange a total of six sessions with eleven faculty members. All participants received a notice that explained the purpose of the study and signed a consent form. All responses were kept confidential. Responses were recorded by taking notes and using a tape recorder.

Results and Discussion

Faculty use of library resources

The first question posed was very open ended: where do you go to meet your professional information needs? We had expected a variety of responses, some of which would touch on the information services offered at the library. Most professors, however, started out by saying that the library was useful and then they quickly modified it by saying the library and the library website were useful. Many interviewees listed the electronic resources they accessed. This response made it clear that our professors had thoroughly embraced the Internet and remote access to resources. Since we recruited professors from a variety of disciplines, a variety of electronic resources were mentioned, including EbscoHost databases, Criminal Justice Abstracts, PsycINFO, Social Science Index, AccessPA, Biological Abstracts, JSTOR, American History and Life. During the discussion every professor stated that he or she used the library.

A few faculty members followed up by mentioning their regular use of interlibrary loan, making it clear that the library was not the primary repository for the research needs of many of our faculty members. One professor stated that his students also routinely needed ILL. There was also discussion on the need high quality graphic materials, including pictures, artwork, diagrams, and drawings. The delivery of high quality graphics became a continuing theme for one graphic art professors, and a total of three interviewees mentioned that access to high quality graphic materials was very important to them. (Kutztown University has a nationally recognized art school.) One professor pointed out that ILL

photocopy services gives adequate legibility for text, but is inadequate for supplying graphic information.

One of the follow-up questions concerned print vs. electronic collections. Librarians know that students prefer the immediate access of full-text electronic journal articles and other web page information. The faculty, however, were split on this subject. One faculty member commented that he prefers a totally electronic library. Another understood that books provide a broad and thorough treatise on a given subject. Others stated that they like the book collection because it is browsable, unlike electronic resources. Another mentioned the higher resolution pictures that are available in a print format. If funding and space were not so limited, one could imagine purchasing both formats to serve the information preference of the both types of users. Current trends, however, preclude this option and favor increasing online access. The challenge is to provide access to high quality web-accessible graphics.

The faculty talked about specific collections. Two faculty members mentioned that they liked our leisure reading section, a rented collection featuring New York Times bestsellers. The books in this collection are rented from McNaughton Books, and the service is funded by the library. Three interviewees noted the importance of our audiovisual collections. They also discussed weaknesses of that collection, including the fact that tey cannot browse it, since our audiovisual collections are in close stacks and arranged by accession number, not LC call number. Other criticisms included:

- One of our criminal justice faculty members noted that some items are dated. Outdated materials would be less useful for researchers and students studying in any field that is undergoing rapid change due to new technological developments and/or an influx of new ideas.
- A third pointed out weaknesses in our multicultural selections. In particular, he commented that the library was weak in foreign music. This faculty member said that some local libraries have better selections in this area.
- Finally one interviewee stated that we need a richer selection of primary source materials. In particular, we need more non-Western and pre-1600 primary source documents.

Two professors mentioned the usefulness of Curriculum Materials Collection (CMC). The CMC is a specialized collection of educational materials for student teachers and local educators. A media professor was interested in the photos and other graphics that are available in this collection. One of our education professors noted that CMC materials were useful for particular assignments. One assignment deals with the comparing and contrasting teaching kits created by various publishers. Typically these kits include a student textbook, the teacher's edition of the text book, and other support materials needed for classroom work in a particular subject. Other collections that were mentioned positively were: children's books, library science collection, and the library's education journals. One professor noted that our journal collection lacks older journals in her discipline, biology.

Using resources outside of the Library

During the course of the interviews many sources outside the library were mentioned. Various websites were mentioned, including Google, Wikipedia, and Google Images. The effect of Google has been well-documented, including Tenopir (2004, 2005), Abram (2005), Conhaim (2002), Zhao (2004), Arnold (2004), Price (2004), and Vine (2004). Google has made a strong impression on our faculty. One professor suggested that the library adopt a more "Google-style" approach to library databases, including the library catalog.

Two professors mentioned that they network with colleagues outside of the United States. One faculty member stated that he uses an Australian colleague to run database searches on the Australian Criminal Justice database. He emails his colleague with the search terms. His colleague searches the database for him and provides him with the results. Another professor discussed his work in the Middle East. He relies heavily on sources from Turkey and the Middle East, and he spends a few weeks each

summer researching resources there. State agencies were mentioned by one person. Another person noted that she often uses the library at her alma mater.

Five professors indicated that they use their own personal or departmental library. These libraries consist of books, subscriptions to trade and scholarly journals, and back issues of journals. Often the materials are very specific to the author's area of research. One person indicated that he personally subscribes to 51 publications!

Technological concerns

Our faculty interviewees were aware of the impact that technology has on library services and the library budget. Most professors felt that the number of computers in the library was adequate. (The librarians know otherwise. Every year we introduce more computers, and every year the line at the computer lab grows. This is due in part to our steady increase in student enrollment and the growing demand of student users for technology based applications to do their classroom work.) Some professors were aware of the difficulties of providing access to information that resides on antiquated formats such as video discs, LPs, filmstrips, etc. Our faculty was also aware of the importance of remote access. One professor noted that there is a limit to the number of computers that one can put in the library, but the world can have access to the resources through remote access. Our library features both PCs and Macs. The difficulties of supporting both platforms were discussed. One Mac user voiced his frustration with the Windows security environment. He doesn't know his Windows passwords, because he does not use them from his office, and therefore has a hard time accessing library resources when he comes to the library.

Using library services

Faculty members were asked to elaborate on library services that were important to them. By "services" we meant the interaction provided by library staff members through the teaching of information literacy, interlibrary loan activities and the like, rather than the allocation of moneys for books, periodicals and other items. To our surprise, several faculty members noted that befriending a librarian and developing a personal connection is a very important "service" librarians can provide. One faculty member noted that he felt that this was the single most important thing librarians could do to improve services to faculty. Another stated that developing this type of relationship helped him overcome barriers such as feeling embarrassed that he did not know how to use the library's resources. He felt comfortable enough with one of the librarians to express his feelings and ask for help. He noted that he would have avoided the library, if this type of relationship had not existed.

Other important services used frequently by faculty included interlibrary loan and document delivery services, e-reserves, accessing the library's resources in their offices and off-campus, and using the library's instruction program. Two faculty members noted that they felt that providing instructional technology training and support to faculty was very important to them. The library features an in-house "Learning Technologies Center" that offers trainings to faculty and staff on everything from Blackboard to Microsoft Word.

Several faculty members commented that they used the library's physical space both for themselves and their students. A couple of users noted that they liked the self-service provided through our open stack areas, because this arrangement allows them to browse the stacks for ideas for classes and projects. Another faculty member noted that she likes to send her students to the library to use the study rooms and frequently assigns library scavenger hunts to familiarize her students with the library's various collections and service desks.

The role of the academic library

Our sixth questions focused on what faculty saw as the role(s) of the academic library in the "age of the Internet." Three major themes evolved from this question including empowering students to be information literate; serving as student space; and continuing in the traditional role as a repository for print materials. Almost all the faculty members noted the importance of providing information literacy instruction to both students and faculty. Participants noted the following specific information literacy skills that the library should be teaching: the difference between library databases and Google, how to use interlibrary loan, and, most importantly, how to evaluate information and find "good information."

The second theme was that the library should serve as a place for students to study together and socialize. One faculty member noted that students will always need a place to go and study and work on group projects, socialize and use computers and books. Another mentioned that the library should serve as a safe, sociable, intellectual space, a place for a "meeting of minds."

The third common theme was that the library should continue to serve as a central repository of printed materials. All but one faculty member felt that this role was critical and that it was important for the library to continue to maintain print volumes and bound periodicals. Only one faculty member differed with this opinion. He felt that the retention of print materials was no longer important. He felt that print items would eventually become obsolete and that the library would come to serve as a digital repository of information. He also championed the merging of the library with the campus information technology department. He recommended dispensing with shelves and replacing them with computers and work areas for students. He sees the library building of the future as a place having only a few thousand books but many computers and printers, and abundant study space for student and faculty research.

Areas for improvement and recommendations

Our final question was open-ended and solicited input on making the library better. We asked: "in your opinion, how can the library be improved?" The comments centered on several topical areas including collections, services, training and outreach, and space.

The majority of faculty members felt that the library was doing an adequate job developing the collection for student research, but that it was lacking for their research. One faculty member mentioned the need for more primary source material and the limited amount of material on non-western topics. These comments are not surprising, considering that Kutztown University is a public liberal arts institution focused on teaching rather than research. Another noted that he would like access to high quality digital photos and images. Another comment was that the library should provide more electronic access to older materials.

The faculty members had more suggestions for the library in the area of services. A common theme that emerged was that the library should work toward bringing services to faculty and students. Three faculty members suggested or expressed interest in the development of a mobile librarian program where the librarians have "office hours" in the academic buildings. One recommended that the reference librarians circulate the library with a laptop computer and ask students if they need help, or provide a "help wagon" or cart, which would carry a computer, books available through our approval plan, and other pertinent materials. A personal connection with students was seen as very important, since libraries are associated with research and this can scare students. The same faculty member suggested that the library should provide the excellent "go out of your way" service for students that he felt faculty receive. Changes in policies and loan periods were suggested. One suggestion was to limit faculty check out times on audiovisual materials to two weeks instead of the normal six months. One faculty member suggested that the library has gone too far in converting to electronic formats, and should incorporate more print indexes and bibliographies.

Training and outreach received considerable attention. Specific suggestions included more outreach and training for specialized student populations such as commuters and non-traditional students. Another suggestion more advanced training sessions for students (e.g., how to use interlibrary loan and document delivery services, how to do advanced research, how to use specialized databases and tools such as RefWorks). One faculty member noted that he is very concerned by the number of juniors and seniors who have never used any interlibrary loan services. This same faculty member went on to ask whose responsibility it is to make sure students expand their research repertoire beyond Google. He has not been happy with the level of student work he receives and suggested that the library should teach workshops on how to conduct research. A couple of faculty members also recommended that the library expand training opportunities to include information on library services and resources that they may not know much about, such as the library liaison program.

The faculty had specific suggestions about the library as a space. A common theme was that the building should serve as a safe study space for students by providing long hours, a quiet environment, and more computers. In particular a few faculty members recommended an increase in weekend library hours. One faculty member went as far as to suggest that the library be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. He felt that this would show students that academics are very important on campus. Another complained that he felt that the library was too friendly and too conducive to socialization. He felt that the library should work to create a more studious environment where serious studying and research takes place. Lastly, an interviewee felt that an anti-intellectual sentiment existed on campus and that the library should play a major role in combating this by providing more private study space for students and faculty and more quite areas.

Other suggestions included: actively marketing the library to faculty members; pursuing more collaborative projects with other library systems to increase resources and services; get more input from faculty on library decisions (e.g. discarding books and periodicals) and for purchases; provide more private study space for faculty. Finally, one faculty member suggested that the librarians review honors papers and senior portfolios to analyze the types of resources students are citing to evaluate if the library is doing its job.

Conclusion

The goal this focus group study was to gather information from faculty in an effort to improve library' services and resources and aid us in planning. The focus group accomplished this goal. We learned that most of our faculty felt that the library was doing an adequate job of meeting the information needs of the students, but not their research needs. Three of the eleven faculty members mentioned the importance of developing a personal relationship with a librarian. Specifically, they were interested in face-to-face, sit-down meetings with librarians, not electronic communications. They noted that this made them feel more comfortable using the library and requesting service. This should serve as a warning about constant push in libraries to offer online, distance, and electronic services. These modes of service will never replace personalized human service.

The role of the academic library was examined. Three important roles emerged: the library as space, the importance of information literacy, and repository of information resources. Faculty felt that the library as a public space for the university community was very important. One of the critical roles of the library was to serve as a place where students and faculty could come to study, do research, browse the stacks, and socialize. The library has been well aware of this role. In recent years we have expanded the amount of study space, added a coffee bar, and increased the number of computer workstations for student use. This traditional library role appears to be in no danger of disappearing. Almost every faculty member mentioned the importance of information literacy instruction. Although it was not expressed this way, faculty see an important role for the library in teaching students how to find and evaluate information. Many noted the "googlization" of college research and felt that the library had a central role in teaching students to evaluate what they find. The last theme was that the library continues to serve as a traditional repository of printed

information. Several of the older faculty members were uncomfortable with online resources and felt a sense of security in the library's print collections. Technology has a long way to go to replace the convenience and reliability of a book and we see the library continuing to fill this role in the future.

A service that was mentioned more than once was the concept of bringing library services to faculty. They were not referring to electronic services. Instead they would like personalized service such as a "mobile librarian" program. An outreach program in which librarians travel to various buildings and department offices has worked successfully for a number of large institutions, most notably Virginia Tech (Seamans and Metz 2002). Although the library is not opposed to the concept, we currently do not employ enough librarians to develop a full service program. However, it may be possible to provide mobile services on a limited basis such as having office hours once a month in a faculty department. The library is currently doing this with two departments on campus. A reference librarian has been spending one hour a week in the social work department and the multicultural center providing reference service. This pilot program has had mixed results. The librarian noted that while the faculty were enthusiastic and used the service most of the students did not.

Although the focus group accomplished the goal of learning about faculty use of library services, there were several areas for improvement in the study itself. First, we would have like to have a larger sample size. Faculty are very busy and it is difficult to persuade them to give up an hour of the day. Another weakness was that we often had only one representative from an entire college. An improvement would be to do focus groups based on college or department affiliation.

We recommend further research into the role of the academic library. Libraries have undergone great changes in the last ten years, although the importance placed on the library as a place and a print repository are interesting. Both these roles could change drastically in the next ten years. Finally, we feel it would be beneficial also to conduct a focus group of students. This would give us a well-rounded view of our primary service community.

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