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## **What Do Students Want? A Focus Group Study of Students 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, consisting of almost fifty undergraduate students, centered on how students are meeting their information needs, how they use the library, and how the library could be improved.

We are keenly interested in providing excellent library resources and services to our constituents, with this in mind we set out 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 student users. We quickly realized that a survey would be too static and would limit the creativity of the participants. Ultimately we decided that a student focus group would be the best method to accomplish our goals.

### **Methods**

In accordance with the literature (Powell and Connaway, 2004; McNamara, 1999; University of Texas at Austin, 2005a; University of Texas at Austin, 2005b), we developed seven questions to ask each focus group. The questions start out broad, then narrow, and finish by focusing on the primary concern of the study. By modifying questions from a previous study (Weber and Flatley 2006), we constructed a set of queries aimed at student library use.

- Where do you go to meet your 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 and interest? 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?

Focus group set-up included scheduling sessions and recruiting a diverse population of students. We created a varied schedule for our session times to allow for the wide-ranging class and activity schedules of our undergraduate students. We included “open hours” (e.g. times when no classes are scheduled at the university) and late afternoon times. We were then faced with the challenge of recruiting a group of busy undergraduate students. Other researchers have relied on various incentives including food and prizes to induce participation (Becker and Flug 2005). Given our lack of a budget we had to develop other means to recruit students. Our recruitment centered on three diverse pools of students. First of all, we were able to induce a number of our student employees to participate by offering them one-hour of paid time (e.g. they would work their regularly scheduled hours but one of those hours would be spend in a focus group). Secondly, we had the good fortune that one of our student workers was also the president of a campus organization dedicated to involving students in Greek life in service projects. This student was able to recruit other students to do the focus group as a service project. Our third pool consisted of students from two library science classes for non-majors. We asked a library science professor if we could interview his research methods class. We felt that participating in a focus group was an appropriate learning lesson for a research class and he agreed. Altogether we were able to arrange a total of 11 sessions with 49 students. In accordance with University policy, 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. Our study encompassed a diverse pool of students in the areas of race, gender, and years of enrollment. All participants were undergraduate students. Tables of diversity are listed below.

**Table 1. Sex of Participants**

Number of respondents		Percentage	
Males	Females	Males	Females
25	24	51%	49%

**Table 2. Majors Reported by Participants**

Accounting	1
Business	9
Computer Science	3
Early Childhood Education	1
Electronic Media	2
English	3
Finance	1
Library Science	1
Management	1
Marketing	3
Professional Writing	2
Psychology	7
Public Administration	1
Secondary Education	1
Social Work	1
Special Education	3
Speech / Communications	1
Speech Pathology	1
Theatre	1
Undeclared	5
Did not respond	1
Total	49

**Table 3. Academic Year of Participants**

	Responses	Percentage
Freshman	0	0
Sophomore	16	33
Junior	15	31
Senior	16	33
Continuing Ed.	1	2
Did not report	1	2
Total	49	101

**Table 4. Reported Library Use of Participants**

	Responses	Percentage
Every Day	17	34
Once a Week or more	25	51
Once a Month or more	5	10
Once a Semester	1	2
One a Year	0	0
Did not report	1	2
Total	49	99

**Table 5. Reported Ethnicity\***

	Responses	Percentage
White	23	66
African, African-American, or Black	7	20
Latino	4	11
Asian	1	3
Total	35	100

\* Note: this information was listed as optional on the form. Only 35 of the 49 participants reported it.

In general sessions lasted about 50 minutes, the duration of an average class. Six of the eleven sessions were moderated by both co-authors. The two of us would have liked to have participated in all sessions, but time and other restraints made this difficult. Four of the remaining five sessions came about because we had to split the above mentioned research classes into two groups. Each class was simply too large to use as one focus group.

## **Results and Discussion**

Our results were grouped according to four distinct topic questions: where are students going for information; how are they using the library and its services; what do students view as the primary purposes of the modern academic library; and how can the library be improved? These four questions are discussed below.

### **Where students go for information**

The first question posed was very open-ended. We simply asked students where they go for information. Not surprisingly the vast majority mentioned the Internet (88%). However the next most frequently mentioned resource was the database vendor Ebsco (41%). We have noted that students refer to all Ebsco databases as simply "Ebsco." To us this translates into the use of Ebsco's flagship academic database – Academic Search Premier. This was followed by "Google" (31%), print resources (14%), and "library databases" (12%). The results are summarized in Table 1. Interestingly none of the students mentioned family, friends or professors as sources of information. In fact, in one session all four students specifically said that they did not seek out friends for information and that they only would go to their professor as a last resort for help. Of course, we must keep in mind that the students were asked this question by librarians within the confines of a library. So they were most likely thinking of information in terms of academic research.

These results confirm our experience that most students go to the Internet first when doing research. Our feeling is that this is not a bad thing instead it is an opportunity to continually market and offer the library's services and resources through channels that are familiar to our students. For example, we recently created an authenticated link for Google Scholar because a student requested it. This now allows students to search for articles online with a very familiar interface and be directed to the library's full-text when it's available.

**Table 6. Resources mentioned by name - # of responses**

Internet	43
EBSCO	20
Google	16
Print (mention of any print source)	8
Library databases (generic)	6
Public library	6
Library web site	5
Lexis-Nexis	4
Reference/library staff	4
Library catalog	3
JSTOR	2
Yahoo	1
Project Muse	1
Facebook	1
AskJeeves	1

## How students are using the library and its services

### The library as study space and a meeting place

One-quarter of the participants specifically mentioned the importance of the library as a quiet place for individual study. They noted the positive atmosphere of the library and commended it as a great workspace and place for study. Two students specifically identified the library as the best study environment on campus. When asked about this in contrast to remote access to resources, the students clearly valued both, but they also were aware that remote access could not resolve the environmental concerns experienced at dorms, residences and other remote locations. Many students expressed a certain futility with trying to study in their dorm rooms or remote locations due to the numerous distractions, interruptions, and other commotions that frequently impact their ability to focus. One student made the following comment concerning the atmosphere of the library: "In the library people are doing their work and this motivates me" . Another student talked about the internet itself as distraction. He commented that he could become easily side-tracked with surfing the web for entertainment purposes. The library's studious atmosphere helps to curb this temptation.

Fifteen students specifically mentioned the importance of group study space. One student referred to the library as "a great place to have meetings". Currently the Rohrbach library has 10 study rooms which hold 60 students. The study atmosphere of the building was again mentioned. In addition the students noted that the library is neutral, public and safe ground. It is neutral because no one person or group will have the "home court" advantage as may be the case in a private residence or other venue. One student noted that the library serves to "even the playing field – especially for commuters". It is public and therefore accessible to all and familiar ground as well. In this sense the library is also important as social space. One student said she feels more comfortable meeting people in the library to work on group

projects or for team studying rather than in her room, which is a different social space. The library is a public place and study place rather than a personal and leisure space. And unlike a private residence or other area it is a known safe place with visible staff that can assist with problems or concerns.

As with any benefits, many students were quick to note some desired improvements. A few students noted that it is sometimes hard to get a study room. It is particularly difficult to find group study space around mid-semester. This is not surprising, because at mid-semester many projects are in full swing and the need to meet as a group is peaking. Another problem is that sometimes only one person is using a large study room. The library's study rooms all feature large glass windows. Two students noted that a fully enclosed room would be a better option especially when discussions become animated or when one is practicing presentation skills. The students did not object to having a small window, rather they prefer it so that someone with a true need could locate an individual in an emergency or other critical situation.

In his enthusiasm, one student expressed his comfortableness with the library and explained how he uses it to check email, surf the internet, do class work, study, and many of his personal communications. He gave the impression that he viewed the library as his personal study space, on-campus den, or personal office away from his home. This is the kind of enthusiasm and positive attitude that we would like all of our students to have.

The general comfortableness of the library was also discussed by various students. Both of our commuter students enjoyed it as an on-campus study retreat. They both used the library heavily as a study place before and/or after their classes meet. One commuter student commented on the comfortable furniture. The other commuter student said that she felt it was easier to do research here than at other places such as home or another library.

The quietness of the library has mixed reviews. In general the library was identified as being quiet, but some students claimed that the library was too noisy. Several students suggested that the library needed to be more diligent in policing and enforcing the quiet study areas. Five students expressed concerns about noisiness due to cell phone use. They noted that it was very distracting to study when someone was having a loud phone conversation nearby. They suggested that the library implement a "cell phone policy" that restricted use to "group study areas." One student said that if the library had a clear policy posted that she would be willing to enforce it by pointing it out to noisy students.

Another student felt that there was a need to organize the space better to facilitate quiet and social usages.

### **Information Services**

In general our students focused more on resources rather than information services. Comments on information services were overwhelmingly positive, but discussion was rarely initiated by the students. Rather the students needed to be specifically questioned about public services in order to get appreciable feedback. None-the-less eleven students praised our public services, and many of these students were strong in their support. As we expected, our students did not distinguish between services provided by professional librarians and support staff. Five students identified the staff as being helpful. The importance of the reference staff, information literacy classes and interlibrary loan was mentioned. One student said: "the interlibrary loan service is amazing; you can get any article that you want."

### **Special Centers**

The library has three specialized centers for students: the AV Center, the Assistive Technology Center and the Curriculum Materials Center . All were praised highly by those students that used their materials and services.

Twenty-two students had found their way to the AV center and their services. They used the Center to check out DVD's, videos, and audio CDs. Other AV Center services include: the sale of blank CDs, DVDs and other supplies, die-cuts for bulletin boards and posters, poster printing, and lamination. Two students used the die-cuts in the Center. One student suggested that the AV center could sell a greater variety of supplies such as poster board, glue, etc. and offer photo printing services. The AV Center also loans equipment to students. Equipment includes digital cameras, laptop computers and camcorders. Eight students stated that they have taken advantage of these services. Despite its popularity with many students, a few students had never used it. Some of these students stated that they had no idea that the AV Center even existed. Others were unaware that the Center purchased popular DVDs. Judging from these comments it is evident that the AV Center services are valuable to our students and need to be promoted.

We were fortunate to have one sight-impaired student in one of our groups. She was most grateful for access to the Assistive Technology Center . She prefers to use online resources because assistive technologies help her access materials electronically. When she finds materials online she can use magnifying functions on the computer to help her read the material. The process of obtaining print materials is tedious, because it involves a number of steps. First the OPAC must be searched, which is not a problem using assistive technologies. But after that she must rely on physical signage to get her to the book. Book call number signs tend to be hard to see, because they are small and posted high on the stacks. After she finds a book she must take it to a reader to magnify the text. Her one criticism concerned the use of the Center by non-impaired students. She often sees other non-impaired students using the facility. They tie up machines that are vital to her work. She suggested that the ATC should be either restricted to visually impaired students or expanded.

### **Purpose of the library – what students see as the role of the academic library**

The sixth question we asked concerned the purpose of the library. It was important for us to understand how the students viewed the library. Did they see us as a dinosaur that was about to become extinct or a vibrant, necessary, and active component of the information age? Opinions varied. Ultimately the students identified the following important roles: 1) an electronic gateway and repository; 2) a centralized resource providing information, technology and informational services for academic and leisure pursuits; and 3) a space for individualized and group study.

### **Library as electronic repository or gateway – including web page**

In our first question “where do you go to meet your information needs” almost all of our students immediately answered: “the internet”. When we asked them follow up questions it became apparent that many were using the library's webpage as a gateway to information and library databases to fulfill there needs. Clearly they see the library web page as a portal to the electronic world. One student noted that she doesn't have internet access at her apartment. For her the campus access is essential. Another said that she would like to be able to do all her research without leaving her dorm room. A third student commented: “the library web site saves a lot of time; it directs you where you need to go efficiently”. Five students talked about the need to improve access to items on the web site. They felt that the layout was not intuitive. They suggested a redesigned page that was built around resources and services, not departments and library lingo. One student suggested a “Google style” interface where students could just enter a keyword and get directed to the appropriate area of the library's web site. Related to this was a comment from a student that the library's catalog was “clunky” and “not visually pleasing.” This student suggested that the library get “Google to redo the catalog.”

Another suggested that new DVD's and books should be a prominently displayed on the web site. One said the “website is tedious”. Another suggested that the website needs to be a powerful marketing tool implying that it needs to be more inviting and exciting. In one session a student made the ultimate disturbing comment: “the website is boring, as library website should be”. Her colleagues all nodded in agreement. Despite the appalling negativity of the last comment, it is none-the-less obvious that the



students are using the library webpage as an important means of accessing information, and that they expect it to be functional and state-of-the art.

### **Library as warehouse of books**

Ten students thought it was good to have a strong book collection, and praised our library in this area. Many students praised the book for its portability, durability, and easiness on the eyes. One student said: "There is nothing better than to have a book in hand". Another student recognized the importance of the library serving as an archive of older materials.

But the book collection was clearly the loser when it was pitted against electronic resources. Many students championed the book for leisure reading, but preferred electronic resources for their academic work. They reasoned that they really only want snippets of text from here and there to complete their work, not the whole treatise. They also noted how easy it was to search electronic works for particular ideas. One student said that she only uses a book as a last resort. In one session, all eight students claimed they would be happier without any print books; they wanted everything in electronic form. And five of those eight students had had some experience with e-books.

With the exception of the group noted in the above paragraph, it was staggering to learn that many students had never used an electronic book. Even our sight impaired student never used an electronic book. Admittedly our e-book collection is weak; we have only one collection of computer books. Our students know about e-books, but they have been slow to getting acquainted with them.

### **The library as a central information resource**

Responses to our first question about "where students go to fulfill their formation needs" indicated that our students use the internet and our library almost exclusively as information resources. Only four students including both of our commuter students used their hometown library. And, in general, these needs did not include leisure activities; our students use the library to do their academic work.

### **Technology and Services**

When asked what they like most about the library, the response was almost unanimous: free printing and access to technology. Our library currently absorbs all the printer printing costs for our students. It is a huge expense, which cost our library about \$4,500 per year. The students do appreciate it. They talked about the convenience and economy afforded by free printing in the library. Often other lab printers are down or out of paper in the evening or during weekends. In contrast, the library printers that are up and running during the time that the library is open.

Access to computers was second most often cited benefit. At least 15 students stated it and 11 of those students specifically championed access to laptops that can be checked out. One student praised our wireless networks access in conjunction with the laptops. As with every popular service there were complaints like "we don't have enough laptops". Eight people said that we either don't have enough computers and/or they are antiquated. In our current configuration many computers do not have Office on them in order to encourage students to use them for searching our online databases and the web, rather than writing papers. Twenty-two students recommended that we put Office software on all of our computers. Students like to be able to multitask when they are on a computer – checking email, using library databases, and writing a paper or creating a PowerPoint presentation. One student summed up the situation with computers in the library by simply stating: "Computers are vital".

Students felt that the library's computers should be used for research. Surprisingly three students suggested that the library should block social networking sites. They felt that it was wrong for students to be using a computer for Facebook when another needed it for legitimate research. Another suggestion was to include a tech support desk in the library.

## **Information Literacy, Reference and Access Services**

As was stated above in the section on information services, these services were not foremost in the student's minds. The few students who brought up these services on their own, however, were most appreciative. A few others realized their importance once they were asked about them. At least six students stated that the library had an important role to play in helping patrons find information. One student said that it was important for the library "to help you find academic sources, critically evaluate sources, [and] help you sift through information. Another said: "One role of the modern academic library is to help students find reliable information"

### **The library as place and the coffee shop**

From the response noted above in the section on studying and meeting space, it is obvious that the students see the library as an important place for studying, meetings, and group projects. When asked if they use the library for personal research interests or leisure activities, most students responded that they did not. Only two students explicitly said they did. None-the-less many students did mention reading email at the library, socializing, and surfing the internet. From these responses we can deduce that the student's view the library as a place for academic work. Obviously some socialization and recreational activity occurs as well, but they primarily view the library as a study and academic work space. As one student put it:

Libraries are all about atmosphere – that's the most important thing. People come to the library because of the atmosphere and to interact with others. There will always be a need for a place for people to interact and work on research. Libraries fill that role.

The library strives to provide our patrons with an inviting and hospitable work space. One way we endeavored to accomplish this goal was through a coffee shop, which opened in 2003 . Our coffee shop has been a huge success; everyone loves it! There is no going back and we can barely remember what life was without it. In our focus groups, our coffee shop was always mentioned as an overwhelmingly positive experience by the students. No student was against the coffee shop. In fact many urged us to expand its operation. Currently our coffee shop is run by an outside vendor. It is not open the entire time that our library is open. It has neither seating nor computers in it. Seating is available immediately outside of the coffee shop, which is enclosed in glass. Many students pressed us for longer coffee shop hours. Other students suggested that we increase the number and variety of purchasable items offered at the shop. One student went so far as to suggest that we serve meals or sandwiches, so students do not have to leave the library to go for dinner. A supplemental vending area was also discussed as a possible way of providing services. One student suggested that the coffee shop be turned into a cyber-café with a seating area and computers.

### **The future role of the library**

Clearly the students identify the library with resources, study space and information services, in that order. A few students were brazen enough to say, in essence, that the library doesn't have a future. One student stated that he wouldn't mind if the library was taken over by the IT Department. Another noted that he thought that the library would be disappearing in 20 years and said: "students will not need to come to the library anymore for anything". In her paper on the face of librarianship, Stanley (2007) records similar sentiments offered by her focus group participants. She states: "several expressed concern that the profession was dying out because of technology."

In our study only a few students expressed these off-hand and dire comments. Most students, however, were more reflective. Through the focus group many students realized that they were unaware of many library services, and expressed an appreciation for the library's presence on campus.

## **Improvement**

Our final question was open-ended and essentially asked the students for input on how the library could be improved. In addition to the improvements suggested in the above sections four new areas surfaced with this question namely hours, signage, orientations, collections, services, and policies.

### **Hours**

A sizeable number of students (13) mentioned hours as an area for improvement. Students felt that the library should be open longer hours especially on the weekends. Our library currently closes at 5pm on Saturdays and does not reopen until 2pm on Sundays. In addition to the building staying open, students suggested that the library's coffee bar stay open longer. Currently it closes several hours before the library closes.

### **Signage**

Another area that drew a lot of comments was the need for improved library signage. Students felt that the library's current signage was too small, too hard to find, and not in convenient locations. Suggestions included adding larger and clearer signs, including a large map of the library on the web site, and adding a mall-style directory in the main lobby. They noted that students generally do not like to ask where things are; instead they like to try to find it themselves.

### **Orientations**

Students suggested the library offer a more comprehensive orientation program. One student suggested that the library offer an orientation for non-traditional students. Another student suggested a more comprehensive training program for student workers. She noted that students often feel more comfortable approaching a peer rather than a staff member and that often student workers give inaccurate information because they have not been trained thoroughly enough. Lastly, a student suggested that the library develop an online tutorial that provided a general orientation to all the library's resources and services.

### **Collections**

We only received a couple comments with regards to the library's collections. Two students suggested that the library implement a policy to have all collections as open stacks. She referred in particular to our a closed collection of signed, first-editions of children's books and the library's AV Center that features closed stacks for AV materials. Another student suggested that the library purchase more new books. She noted that a lot of the library's print collection was older.

### **Services**

The students had several innovative suggestions for new services. One student suggested that the library put one copy of all current textbooks on reserve for students to review in the building when they needed to refer to something. Two students suggested "on-demand book ordering." This service would allow students to choose books of interest and initiate the ordering process themselves via the Internet.

### **Policies and Policing**

At different times during the study, students expressed some confusion about current library policies and actions that should be taken when infractions occur. Some students suggested that such policies should be succinctly written and prominently displayed on the web and in appropriate library

areas. Areas of concern included quiet areas, cell phone usage, and group study room policies. Some of these students said that they would be more willing to confront students as a first step, if these policies were explicitly posted. Others said that the policies themselves should include information on who to inform when infractions occur.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine how our students are finding information and using the library. Through the research we were able to determine: what services are valuable to the students; how the students view the library; and what library resources and services need to be better promoted. Like Ho and Crowley (2003), we found the focus group methodology useful for identifying areas for improvement. The results indicate that students recognize us as: a provider and gateway of quality electronic information resources; a place for serious study, research, and intellectual engagement for individuals and groups; and an academic center for obtaining information literacy training and other information services. The student responses provide us with a plethora of information that will help us to improve a number of specific services. They have made us realize our strengths and weaknesses. The focus group data will be vital as our library moves to an information commons model. Several areas stand out. For example our data suggests that there is a need to expand study areas, in particular, in quiet study areas; increase our computer areas; streamline and market our resources and services in a more effective manner; and continue adding "convenience services" like food and drink (e.g. the coffee bar) in the library. We also see the need to develop and enforce policies for cell phone use and quiet study areas. Lastly, an interesting added ancillary effect of the study is that it provided an educational opportunity for our students to participate in an actual research study. We feel that this type of service learning collaboration benefits everyone involved – the librarian researchers, the faculty member, and especially the students. Through this study all of our students have been able to reflect on the usefulness of the library in their own academic and personal life.

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