Clemson University Libraries: Users' Perceptions of Current and Desired
Services

Report of the Library Subcommittee:

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Clemson University Libraries: Users' Perceptions of Current and Desired Services

The Libraries Subcommittee of the University Assessment Committee was given the task of investigating alternatives to the traditional methods of assessing the success of a university library. Traditional assessment measures center on the size of the library collection, such as the number of volumes housed in the library. Clemson's libraries fall far short of what would be expected of a "top twenty" public institution when evaluated by these traditional standards. However, the nature of the university library has changed significantly since these traditional measures were developed. With the advent of electronic access to many kinds of library resources, simply counting the volumes housed on campus does not accurately reflect the quality of services provided by the library to its users. These traditional measures also may not allow assessment of the library's broader function as the center of scholarly community.

The subcommittee reviewed the Clemson University Libraries Assessment Plan, vision and mission statement (http://www.lib.clemson.edu/vismis.htm), Association of College and Research Libraries Effective Practices (http://www.ala.org/acrl/effectivepractices.html), and Association of College and Research Libraries Guidelines (http://www.ala.org/acrl/guides/index.html).   Newer approaches to assessing the quality of library services focus on **access to materials**, including electronic access, interlibrary loan, and response time to requests for information, rather than the size of the in-house collection. The library **environment**, including noise levels, food service, and the quality of user space are additional targets for assessment. **Services** such as instruction, photocopying, and security should also be addressed by assessment measures. Library **usability**, including computer access,

signage, advertising of services, and facility maintenance also contribute to user satisfaction with library services.

Review of the Clemson University Libraries Assessment Plan indicated that, although many of these issues were being considered in the current assessment strategy, that basic data regarding users' perceptions of the performance of the university libraries was missing. The subcommittee decided that determining users' sources of dissatisfaction with current library services was a necessary first step toward suggesting alternative assessment techniques. **It should be noted that only sources of dissatisfaction were directly addressed. Therefore, there was no attempt to produce an outcome balanced between strengths and weaknesses of current library services**. It was not the intent of the subcommittee for the data to appear overly negative, but it was judged that these data would provide the best assistance to the library for strategic planning.

Method

The subcommittee used focus groups to address user perceptions of current library services. Faculty were represented by departmental library liaisons. Graduate students were invited from a randomly selected list, from student organizations, and from the Graduate Student Association. Every undergraduate student organization was invited to send a representative to a focus group. A total of eleven faculty, five graduate students, and three undergraduate students attended the groups. Two subcommittee members were present for each focus group, with one designated as the primary moderator.

Focus group participants were asked three questions:

1. What are you most dissatisfied with regarding current library services?
2. What services do you expect from the library?

3. If you could add one service to current library offerings, what would it be?

The Clemson University Libraries provided recorders for the sessions, which were held in the second floor conference room of Cooper Library. All responses were reported anonymously.

Results

Transcriptions of each session are appended to the end of this report. Responses to the first question generated many comments about adequacy of resources. Faculty and graduate students, in particular, were concerned that library holdings are not adequate in at least some areas. Discontinuations of journals over the years frustrate users, who find some issues on the shelf, but not the particular volume they need. It appeared that electronic access to such materials would be acceptable, but that access needs to be reliable. Users are not happy with shifts from one format to another, which makes it difficult to locate materials or to know whether a resource is actually available. Undergraduate students expressed dissatisfaction with the library hours, stating that it needs to be open 24 hours a day. Both graduate and undergraduate students complained about the environment in Cooper Library, that it is hot and has a bad odor. All user groups mentioned the uninviting atmosphere of Cooper.

The second question generated as many positive comments about current services as perceived shortcomings of library services. There were a number of comments from all user groups about how friendly and helpful library faculty and staff are. Interlibrary loan and document delivery services also garnered praise from users. The new food service in the library was seen as a nice offering, unless it came at the expense of improving library holdings. There was an overall sense of relatively low expectations regarding the

libraries, that it is understood that library resources are limited and that, in fact, the libraries do a good job with those resources. The strongest overall statement regarding user expectations was that users expect to have access to resources when they are needed.

Responses to the third question reflected sources of dissatisfaction in the first question. Suggestions for adding services included journals and other resources for research, vending machines, additional staff, additional space, computers, on-line account access, and additional open hours. Faculty particularly wanted to emphasize that library faculty and staff are underpaid. Graduate students want increased access to journals, suggesting that they be allowed to check journals out of the library for longer than three days.

An interesting finding from the focus groups is that there were a number of comments regarding need for services that are actually provided by the libraries. For example, one undergraduate complained that he could not bring water into the library, although rules regarding food and drink have already changed. Other respondents complained about lack of access to materials that are accessible, or desire for training that is already being provided.

Conclusions

Although the purpose of this project was to recommend new assessment techniques and measures for the Clemson University Libraries, one obvious conclusion from the study is that users are, in fact, concerned about access to resource materials. Part of the problem appears to be user knowledge of the electronic databases, as well as the transition from one format to another (e.g., PsycLit to PsycInfo). For faculty and graduate students, library support of research areas is a critical issue.

A second conclusion is that the library is as important as a campus center as it is as a storehouse of materials. The environmental quality of the library contributes a great deal to the users' experience. Creating a pleasing environment might dramatically change users' reactions to the library, as well as user behavior. All user groups consider this issue an important one, but it is perhaps most important to undergraduate students.

Third, part of the issue of access to library resources is the operating hours of the facilities. Undergraduate students, in particular, believe that the library should be open at all times, both to allow research and to provide a suitable study and meeting space. Many students choose to study late at night and research projects as close to due dates as possible, so ready access to library materials is a priority for them.

Fourth, in general, users expressed high regard for the work being done in the library with seriously limited resources. The library faculty and staff deserve a great deal of credit for maintaining a high level of service under difficult conditions.

Recommendations

1. **Continue improving access to materials.** Electronic access is sufficient, but requires the technical support to ensure that access is not lost during "down" times.

2. **Increase operating hours.** Move toward having Cooper Library open 24 hours.

3. **Institute on-line account management** for library users.

4. **Consider environmental quality as the library is remodeled.** Users complained about excessive heat, odors, and lack of light in areas of the

library. Also, as materials are moved to remote storage, accommodate requests for more space for group meetings.

5. **Improve communication with library users.** Users do not seem aware of library services and want better information about materials and training. Better use could possibly be made of departmental liaisons, but students expressed a desire to have regular updates about library services, as well. Additionally, there were complaints about signage in the library.

6. **Consider alternatives to current journal check out policies for graduate students.** Although students suggested a longer check-out period, another possibility would be a 24 hour period with a higher allowance of journals.

7. **Conduct a library usability study.** A usability study could address in detail the issues of user knowledge of resources, ability to locate materials in the library or on-line, and environmental barriers to using the library facilities. The Clemson University Department of Psychology has a graduate program in this area and faculty with a great deal of expertise in conducting such studies.

1. What current library services as you least satisfied with?

- Lack of on-campus gay and lesbian resources outside of the medical, psychological, and political fields (e.g. Fiction); library not serving this community as well as it should. Mention the possibility of donating books to the Library to help correct this inadequacy as has been done at Converse College.

- Lack of graduate engineering resources, such as technical articles and reports; orders these because library lacks most engineering journals.

- Interlibrary loan sometimes too slow; would like turnaround time down to one week or less as compared to two to three weeks.

- Library hours too limited.***

- Library should be open 24 hours a day for studying.

- During exam week open library 24 hours a day for studying, not enough space over in Gunnin for 24 hour study.

- Too hot in library for studying during its peak use hours, particularly on level 1, 2, & 3.

- Shut Gunnin down and only open some levels of library for 24 hours.

- Need better lighting for reading, especially on Level 4; perhaps reading lamps.

- Don't know about resources/services the library has added or has available. Unaware of Uncover and students being able to make book requests.

- Have particular library liaisons and/or student advisory group for students as compared with departments, would improve communications and material selection.

2. What services do you expect the library to provide?

- Open 24 hours a day.***

- Java City open longer hours.

- New books.***

- Electronic resources are ok but the library has too many outdated books and too few current books.

- In order to have space for new books, install mobile shelving.

- As compared with other nearby institutions of higher learning, Clemson's Library is "on the short end of the stick."

- Difficult to find resources in the science and technical fields; library doesn't own many of the items needed, and those materials that are owned by the library are often checked out.

3. If you could add one service, what would it be?

- Resources for international students from their own countries, such as foreign-language newspapers and magazines.

- Open 24 hours a day.***

- Book drops in both the old and new Student Unions.

1. What are you least satisfied with?

- Lack of holdings/small acquisition budgets in the Humanities
- Absence of microfilm/primary sources in the Humanities that are necessary for faculty, graduate, and upper level undergraduate research
- Interior of building is unfriendly
- Weak media collection

2. What services are expected?

- Department representatives/subject liaisons
- High level of service from Interlibrary Loan as a means of filling the gaps in the Humanities holdings
- Staff members knowledgeable of copyright issues
- Reserves/CLE

Some services go beyond what the faculty expected, specifically EDDIE for requesting ILL and orders, Document Delivery, and CLE electronic reserves, especially with the Libraries keeping up with copyright compliance.

3. What service would you add to current offerings?

- Staff member to provide information on copyright issues
- More books/monographs in the Humanities(field cannot withstand the "virtual library"); Clemson will not make the top-20 university list without more books
- Address the space issue—more books means more space

Focus Group
Friday, February 2, 2001
1:30-2:30
Graduate Students

1. What are you least satisfied with concerning current library collections?

- Availability of books and research journals. This is a common occurrence in graduate student research. Would be nice to supply journals beyond "basic", higher quality journals.

- They do not like space; it is not conducive to a good working environment. It smells, it floods, the lighting is poor, and there are other physical problems.

- They are frustrated with constant changing of database formats (PsychLit/PsychInfo). They find shifting between electronic/print difficult. Very hard to figure out how to acquire information. Would like to see more standardized formats.

2. What services do you expect library to offer?

- To be able to get journals to write a decent paper, get them at reasonable times, doesn't have to be 24/7. They expect to be able to check out journals, get minimal hassle in how long you can keep them (they think that's pretty good now). They don't think the general grad student population needs 24/7 access to the library building, especially if you can access journals electronically from home.

3. Would you be happy w/electronic access to journals?

- They say YES. It would be a pain if computers were down, they would have little patience for technical difficulties. It is critical to have reliable access.

4. If you could add one service to what the library currently offers what would it be?

- Looking at your account, renewing online, seeing what you have/owe, etc.

- Would rather see money spent on books than on Java City.

5. Other things we should know about how library is doing/what they're doing:

- One student gives library a "C." He wants to read, check out books, can't always find what he wants, and the collection is not as big as he'd like. For leisure reading, he'd rather buy a book than do ILL.

- Would like to see more computers on level 4 (more CU explorer workstations). The number of workstations gives the impression that the library is small and very un-electronic.

- There is lots of passivity in front desk staff (circulation). Side desk (reference) staff is fantastic. But student help at circulation desk is not very helpful. They like the service window in the photocopier room and say that the staff member there is always really nice.

- Bathrooms cleanliness is generally high.

- One student likes classical Latin section, finds it pretty good. They like the political science collection and screenplays, but find the industrial/organizational psychology section average.

- The library has potential to be an "inviting" space. These students see the library as doing the best it can with limited funds.

6. What do you like best about current library services?

- Reference desk is an incredible resource. They are really good with individualized help. They show people exactly how to do stuff (undergraduates learn how to do their own searches). The reference desk is one of the library's biggest strengths.

- The location of the library on campus is good.

- The library has good resources for ILL. They also appreciate full-text resources such as CARL/Uncover.

- Grad students would like to have document delivery and pick up available to them.

- Graduate students would like to be able to check out more journals but they recognize the problems this can cause with availability. Esp with departments with lots of students and not very many journals. Sometimes graduate students need to make copies of articles from more than 3 journals. Would it be possible to take an unlimited number for overnight or 24 hours?

- Graduate students LOVE the booksale. Think it's great. Want it more than once a year. Like the cheap prices, especially the all you can carry for $2.00!

- These students requested more than 4 simultaneous users for PsychInfo. They like being able to get to it from outside the library.

Recorded by Suzanne Rook Schilf and Sarah McCleskey

Library Focus Group – Faculty – 2/2/01

Summary: The overriding concern here was about access. Electronic databases are incomplete, dropped, or contain recent information only; items are not shelved in a timely manner; orders are not received in a timely manner; and the collection is simply lacking in general. Some of the ordering issues, I believe, could be traced back to the departmental liaisons, and some to vendors.

Another concern raised was that the funding of the library is insufficient to bring us in line with other top-20 institutions. We are losing our collection because we can not buy books, and are losing librarians because of poor pay.

Question 1: What are you least satisfied with regarding current library services?

The overriding concern was that the collection needs a great deal of development to be competitive as a serious academic library. We need to provide access not only to new materials, but also to older materials that are used by researchers and Ph.D. students. Our collection is severely lacking in all areas of study represented. Online access is changeable and incomplete at best. Concerns were raised about navigation in CU Explorer – the interface could be more intuitive.

Another concern was that of the time lag between ordering and access, both for journals and monographs. There seems to bee too long a time between the two, and no one seems to know precisely where things are in the process.

Quotes:
"A lot of our faculty don't even bother ordering any more"
"It's about a 70's library"

Question 2: What services do you expect the library to offer?

Electronic access to materials not represented in the library. ILL is too slow.

Delivery of articles to the office

Completion of journal sets – gaps in sets are frustrating, and it seems sets are being pulled for the bindery too soon after receipt of latest issue. Also, the point was made that perhaps the Journal Use Study should be named as permanent so that people will take the signs seriously and not shelve their own journals. Finally on this issue, this group would like to see more timely shelving of journals from the photocopy room.

Courteous staff

Quotes:

"For what we pay these people, they're amazing"
"I'm very grateful for that service" [delivery of articles to a professor's office]
"Maybe we expect a lot because we're used to getting it"

Question 3: If you could add one service what would it be?

More comprehensive databases

Quote (unanimously supported):
"I think we would rather see what we're doing now supported better, rather than try to add anything new"

General additions to comments:

Compliments to Reference and Resource Sharing for making do with very little.

One professor expressed deep concern about Acquisitions' serials check-in process. "Things are stacked up there, but no one seems too concerned by it"

No one seems to know if the Library Liaisons ever meet. Those in this group who had been liaisons recently could not recall ever meeting with the library or one another.

"These librarians are getting lousy pay. Write that down, three times. LOUSY PAY, LOUSY PAY, LOUSY PAY."