User Needs: the Key to Changing Library Services and Policies*

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ABSTRACT

A user survey and a series of faculty interviews are discussed as methods that can be used by a public relations librarian to change library policies and services in the direction of patrons' needs.

A library that exists merely as a storage facility is not the resource potential that it should be. Education, research, and patient care in the health sciences are in a continual state of flux and require that health science libraries must be as dynamic as the discipline they serve. Libraries can progress more readily with the academic community if librarians, through assistance to users, become more familiar with their needs.

A user survey in the Spring of 1973 provided the initial data used in assessing library services. As general use patterns emerged, a plan was formulated for analyzing the needs of library patrons through a public relations librarian, a user survey, and a series of faculty interviews. This plan outlines an outreaching approach to the problem of adapting library services and policies to patrons' changing needs.

THE LIBRARY USER SURVEY: A GUIDE TO THE IMPROVEMENT OF SERVICES

A user survey was conducted at the Medical University of South Carolina Library during the fourth week of April and the third week of October 1973. As the patron entered the library, he was asked to "sign in" by placing a tally mark in the appropriate blocks of a questionnaire resting on an easel near the turnstile. The first question asked the nature of

the user's visit, such as studying class material or asking for reference assistance. The second question asked the class of the user, including such choices as faculty or students. The third question asked for the college or hospital affiliation of the user and included choices of the six Medical University colleges and six area hospitals. In conjunction with each survey, information was collected on circulation of materials, use of the library's photocopy machines, use of Reserve materials, and requests at the Reference and Circulation desks.

The user survey helped to assess generally the services offered by the library, to define present patterns of use, and to identify possible suggestions for change. Results of the survey were analyzed to show relationships between types of use, user groups, and days of the week. Analysis of the data showed general trends by colleges, by classes, and by use of library resources. These trends provided support for continuing or revising present programs, or showed the need for future programs. Library and university administrations were given a summary of the statistics and a list of recommendations inferred from the data.

Where use of the library pointed to potential changes, programs and services were assessed to determine whether they really fulfilled user needs. Data on library use by colleges showed that the College of Medicine accounted for the greatest percentage (Table 1). In addition, data on classes of users showed a high percentage of student use (Table 2). Because these two user groups were so much greater than the rest, weighted analyses were performed indicating per capita use of respective college or class user groups (Table 3). From this perspective, use of the library by the College of Medicine and non-student patrons was much lower than the raw data suggested. Studying class material was the highest percentage of data by specific use of the library (Table 4).

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Inferences made from these data included, for example, the investigation of a need for additional study space inside or outside the library and the examination of ways to encourage students to use the library for more than just studying their class material. A more intensified orientation program for all potential users was an immediate result of the data collected from the survey.

TABLE 1
PATTERNS OF USE BY COLLEGE OF USER

College of User	Percentage of Total Users
Medicine	46.5%
Nursing	12.4%
Pharmacy	8.3%
Medical University Hospital Staff	8.0%
Non-MUSC	8.0%
Graduate	6.8%
Allied Health	4.4%
Dental	3.5%

TABLE 2
PATTERNS OF USE BY CLASS OF USER

Class of User	Percentage of Total Users
Students	64.5%
Hospital Staff	11.6%
Faculty	10.7%
Non-MUSC	6.9%
Research Staff	3.8%

TABLE 3
PER CAPITA USE OF THE LIBRARY BY USER GROUPS

Type of User	Weighted Percentage of Use
Pharmacy	242.0%
Graduate	208.5%
Nursing	205.6%
Medicine	129.5%
Allied Health	53.4%
Dental	49.9%
Medical University Hospital Staff	31.2%
Students	163.2%
Faculty	44.5%
Research Staff	23.0%

TABLE 4
PATTERNS OF USE BY SPECIFIC USE OF THE LIBRARY

Type of Use	Percentage of Use
Studying class material	49.6%
Doing research	19.2%
Miscellaneous	7.5%
Photocopying	6.9%
Seeking information for patient care	6.3%
Meeting friends	4.9%
Asking for reference assistance	3.2%
Returning materials	1.7%

THE FACULTY INTERVIEW

Although a user survey may point to general trends in library use, the faculty interview provides specific user feedback data. Interviews may be considered part of a library's public relations function. Orientation programs for new patrons generally exist, but after that initial interaction, public relations usually becomes more of an intermittent contact when answering reference questions or checking out materials. The follow-up on services and needs, although a reference function, is pushed aside in preference for daily reference duties. The assessment of library services, their effectiveness measured to a great extent by user responses, must not be overlooked.

Faculty interviewing at the Medical University of South Carolina begins with the hypothesis that at least some of the faculty will use the library to better advantage if they know exactly what services the library offers. The hypothesis assumes that not all faculty members are aware of every service provided by the library and that the library staff is not necessarily aware of faculty informational needs or patient care concerns. In addition to regular library users, nonusers are an equally important faction of potential patrons. Their nonuse may be the result of presently inadequate services or of a lack of knowledge of what help the library can give.

A series of faculty interviews was begun in September 1973. The objectives of the program were to acquaint faculty members with library services and to establish a basic library-faculty communication pattern that could be contin-

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ued. The interviewing librarian consulted with library staff members to enlist their aid in working toward these program objectives and to gather information about specific procedures for such services as binding faculty journals. A concise list of services was prepared for distribution to each faculty member. The interviewing librarian made appointments with individual faculty members at their convenience. Newer faculty members were contacted first since it was assumed that they would know the least about this particular library's services.

At the interview each faculty member was given a library handbook and a list of the library services offered. Every faculty member was told about the objectives of the interview. Each was assured that the library staff members were genuinely interested in facilitating faculty research.

The interview consisted of a series of questions and an explanation of library services. Notes were taken so that comments made during the interviews could be analyzed later. Each faculty member was asked about his specialties and projects so that the interviewer could explain services in terms of his interests. Library policies and services were discussed as long as necessary to familiarize the faculty member with them. The faculty member was asked to make any suggestions or complaints regarding library service. A photocopying service and the use of microfilm to fill gaps in the library's journal holdings were discussed to see if the faculty member thought they would aid him in his work. Each was told that the library could serve him better if he helped the staff in return by assisting in the selection of new books or journals in his specialty and by returning or renewing library materials on time. An attempt was made to end each session on a positive note with the interviewer requesting that the faculty member use library and librarian resources more often.

Analysis of notes taken during the interviews showed that those with whom discussions were held responded very positively to the interviews. For ten of the faculty, the interview was their first contact with the library; for the others, the interview helped to acquaint them with unfamiliar services. During the interview, all faculty members expressed an increased interest in making suggestions for changes in the library and in bringing their research needs

to the library staff. In every case, faculty were unaware that they could request that library staff give lectures to their classes concerning reference materials in specific subject areas. Most of the faculty were also unaware of such services as MEDLINE'S monthly SDILINE and the binding of faculty journals. They were interested, however, in making better use of present services, in beginning a photocopy service, and in utilizing the Learning Resources Center for self-instructional purposes.

Preliminary results show that there has been an increase in the number of computerized MEDLINE and SDILINE searches requested by the faculty who were interviewed. In addition, many special tours or lectures have been arranged by these faculty for groups of their faculty colleagues or students. Although these are preliminary results, they indicate that an increase in demand for specific services may be directly related to user awareness of these services.

Faculty interviews help to assess user needs by providing user responses to present and potential services. In addition, the interviews help to establish faculty-library rapport by opening lines of communication concerning change and service. The analysis of interviews is just the beginning in a critical assessment of library resources leading to changes beneficial to users.

THE PUBLIC RELATIONS LIBRARIAN

Use studies reveal a need in libraries for a regular and enthusiastic public relations program to foster frequent library-faculty interaction and to encourage library-student discussions as part of the educational process. The need is even more important in the health sciences where change is the only invariable.

Haro states that "the primary consideration of a library seeking to serve its patrons is its ability to seek out both users and nonusers in a continuing attempt to systematically discern their library needs and information requirements, earnestly attend to them, and then anticipate future ones (1)." If use is low, it is the library's responsibility to find out why and to seek a solution. All library staff members must be capable of promoting good public relations; however, the specific tasks are more likely to be performed regularly if a public

relations librarian is hired with the sole responsibility of serving as a liaison between the library and its potential patrons.

The concept of the "floating librarian" originated by Bundy and Welbourne (2) can be applied to a health sciences setting. A public relations librarian can help to familiarize members of the academic community with library resources so that patrons can use their limited library research time more effectively. A public relations librarian might work toward improving service and library-patron communication by advising students in their educational or research programs and by talking with faculty through a regular interviewing program. A public relations librarian might begin a communication cycle with patrons by acquainting them with the library through orientation tours, courses in bibliography, user surveys, interviews, or an active newsletter. This cycle will help library patrons recognize that there are many librarians with varied skills to whom they can come for assistance and from whom they can expect reasonably prompt service. To complete the cycle, however, the librarian must constantly seek out feedback and must continue to make suggestions for revisions in services as patrons' needs change.

How can the library improve its services to fulfill user requirements? The answer to this question is perpetually changing because users' needs are never static. The question, however, helps the librarian to set objectives for the public relations program. Although one librarian may be responsible for assessing user needs regularly, other library staff members are not relieved of their obligation to promote good public relations.

The usefulness of library services must be critically assessed through a teamwork effort. A public relations librarian can lead library staff members in regularly scheduled "brainstorming" sessions to seek improvements in library services. In addition, surveying library literature and discussing services with colleagues in other libraries may generate new ideas. Inferences from user feedback data can be compared with present or potential services. A list of possible changes may be submitted to library and university administration for approval. Some of the suggested changes may be studied in a trial period and some may be adopted immediately.

If the public relations librarian is effective, better communication and service can result from the library-patron rapport and from more regular working relationships. In this respect, a regular communications program headed by a dedicated public relations librarian is an excellent investment in the future of the whole academic community. The public relations librarian becomes the person responsible for reaching all potential users and for listening for their feedback. Through an active communication cycle, research, professional contacts, and ingenuity, the public relations librarian may discover new ways of serving patrons so that the library may continue to change in the direction of its patrons' needs.

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