



Classics

McClure and Samuels' Study on Information Sources Used for Decision Making and the Connection to Organizational Climate Still Resonates Today

A Review of:

McClure, C. R., & Samuels, A. R. (1985). Factors affecting the use of information for academic library decision making. *College & Research Libraries*, 46(6), 483-498.

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Received: 1 Aug. 2014

Accepted: 28 Nov. 2014

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Abstract

Objective - To investigate the use of information sources for decision making within academic libraries; specifically looking at what sources of information are used, whether information use is related to organizational climate, and what organizational factors lead to optimal information use in decision making.

Design - Cross-sectional survey on a random sample of libraries.

Setting - 18 medium to moderately large academic libraries from across the United States.

Subjects - 356 academic librarians holding a variety of positions and levels of responsibility within their organizations.

Methods - A questionnaire was mailed to participants in order to measure relationships between four main variables: information acquisition, information dissemination, information evaluation, and library climate. All instruments were validated and tested for reliability. Participants were given 10 library decision situations to consider, together with a list of potential information sources to inform the decision, and then choose which information source they would use primarily in each

situation. Participants' perception of their library climate was measured with five scales covering innovation, support, freedom, democratic governance, and esprit.

Main Results - The study found that academic librarians prefer internal sources of information, such as interpersonal communication with library staff, and library committees, for making decisions. However, paraprofessional staff members were not seen as meaningful sources of information within this grouping. The participants rarely chose to consult external information sources, such as other professionals outside of the library, or library users. Information sources such as conducting research, continuing education, past experience, or personal opinion were not found to be important to the participants' decision making. Written documents such as articles, books, and brochures were also seldom used. Democratic governance was the organizational climate dimension found to be most closely linked to information dissemination.

Conclusion - The authors conclude that the study suggests that academic librarians are not using a full complement of information sources to assist with their decision making, and that the "information that is used tends to be 'opinion-based' rather than empirically based" (p. 495). Proximity of information plays a role, with information that is closer and easier to obtain being used more frequently. The authors strongly stress, with concern, that, "current academic library decision-making processes encourage ineffective activities since they preclude or limit clientele input, empirical research, and additional environmental input" (p. 495).

Commentary

This study by McClure and Samuels, while 30 years old, examines some of the same issues that the academic library community is struggling with today in terms of evidence as part of

decision making, and how organizational climate impacts librarians' use of evidence in practice. This study deserves to be read and recognised as a "classic" by anyone who is interested in these issues within our profession, and to be recognised by the EBLIP community in particular, as its insights, based on a well-designed, large scale, and broadly based study that used validated tools, were precursors to the EBLIP movement that began 15 years later. Unfortunately, the body of research related to decision making theory and organizational behaviour within libraries is still scant today.

The specific study summarized here is but one piece of a wider body of work by McClure and Samuels. McClure led several studies that examined the use of information and data in decision making within libraries. He first reviewed the literature relating to management of organizational information and how information is used for decision making and concluded that when people who are information rich are included in decision making, the organization will be more productive in meeting its goals (McClure, 1978). Later, McClure worked with Samuels to study the utilization of information for decision making in both public (Samuels & McClure, 1983) and academic (McClure & Samuels, 1985) libraries, the academic portion of which is summarized above. Both papers, stemming from the same large study, found that librarians preferred internal sources of information, such as personal communication and internal documents. Patron involvement in decision making was practically non-existent, and very few decisions used information from empirical research.

Samuels and McClure also found that organizations where decision making is shared and the environment is more open with its communication facilitate greater use of information in decision making. McClure (1986) went on to recommend professional and organizational strategies to increase the use of data in decision-making:

1. Review existing management styles and organizational climates within the academic library.
2. Increase the knowledge level of the importance and potential applications of cost and performance measurement data.
3. Develop administrative systems that support the identification, collection, organization, analysis, and reporting of cost and performance measure data.
4. Establish reward structures for librarians who use cost and performance measurement methodologies for library decision-making. (p. 332-333)

The factors raised by McClure and Samuels in the 1980s have come to light again in the 21st century, with evidence based practice and assessment have emerging as topics of interest within library and information studies. Authors have written about the importance of research and data in decision making within libraries, and that such use requires an environment where openness, integrity, and trust are enabled (Lakos & Phipps, 2004; Hiller, Kyrillidou & Self, 2008). Involvement of staff in decision making and developing clear communication systems help to facilitate this type of organizational change where evidence can become part of the culture of the organization (Davies, 2007). Davies also stresses the importance that "evidence is used honestly and that data is acquired and presented in as transparent a fashion as possible" (2007, p.6). Such transparency and honesty allow for staff to participate more fully and contributes to the integrity of the decision making process. Hiller, Kyrillidou and Self (2008) determined that evidence alone is not enough to create a research culture where decisions are grounded in data. Ultimately, organizational culture and leadership within the organization are crucial to

the integration of evidence as a normal part of decision making within academic libraries. The issues raised by McClure and Samuels still resonate today and much can be learned by looking back to their impressive research.

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