CARL LRI Paper: Deciphering Customer Perceptions of Academic Library Features

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Abstract: This paper describes a qualitative analysis of comments made by respondents of a LibQUAL+ survey administered at McMaster University Library by a research team comprising a librarian and a faculty member. The qualitative analysis sheds light on quantitative findings from the survey about customer perceptions of academic library features.

Résumé:

1) Introduction

One of the most well-known assessment tools used by academic libraries to measure service quality in their organizations is the LibQUAL+ [TM] standardized test instrument administered by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL)[i]. The test polls library users, via the convenience of a Web survey, about the services a library provides. One of the advantages of the instrument is the ability for a library to compare its own aggregate scores with those from prior years, and with scores from peer libraries as well. Another is the relative ease with which the survey is administered. An individual library provides its library users with a URL to the survey; from there, survey results are collected and stored in a centralized ARL LibQUAL+ database, and then analyzed and presented back to the library in individualized reports describing their users' desired, perceived, and minimum expectations of service.

Though this test is popular and has been widely used by over 1,200 institutions across five continents to date, LibQUAL+ is not without its critics. For example, Roszkowski et al. (2005) found that LibQUAL+ respondents do not fully understand the three service levels asked in the survey (i.e., minimum, desired, and perceived) and that gap scores calculated based on these service level scores are moving targets since respondents' expectations change with more experience or new developments. Hunter and Perret (2011) agree and caution the difficulty of interpreting quantitative measurements alone when assessing library user satisfaction, and recommend that libraries consider their own particular situations and contexts when doing so.

In response, McMaster University Library was interested in examining the qualitative comments captured in the LibQUAL+ Lite survey that was administered in Spring 2013 in order to better understand and interpret the quantitative results provided by the survey. For example, quantitative results showed different top priorities for faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students. It was hoped that analysis of the qualitative comments would lead to better understanding of what these top priorities entailed and better recommendations on improvements to the services offered to library users in ways

that better matched library cohort needs and expectations. Senior library administrators supported the study as they felt the analysis would help the library identify ways to offer better service to its constituents in the future.

Importantly, the research team comprised an academic librarian who attended one of the past Librarians' Research Institute (LRI) sessions offered by the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) and a faculty member interested in library research. The academic librarian's involvement on the project was pivotal in that her participation was crucial in interpreting the meaning behind several of the qualitative comments made in the survey. The interpretation of several of the comments could not have been properly made by a person who worked outside the library. The professor's involvement was beneficial in helping formulate a conceptual framework based on a review of the literature in this area to serve as the study's codebook used in the analysis of the qualitative data. The professor also served as a key resource person for the librarian to turn to concerning the use of software that was utilized to analyze the data.

2) Methodology

The LibQUAL+ Lite survey administered in Spring 2013 by McMaster University Library served as the study's data set. The survey was conducted between March 4 and March 29, 2013. Approximately 3,000 undergraduate students, 1,000 graduate students and 600 faculty members were invited to complete the survey. In total, 620 valid surveys were received. This compares to 473 completed surveys in 2010 when the same survey was last run at McMaster. In terms of representativeness, undergraduate students were under represented, while graduate student and faculty responses formed the majority. Overall, a fair representation across various academic disciplines and programs occurred.

To assess the qualitative data from the survey, a conceptual framework was formulated from a literature review of prior studies in the area. Specifically, theoretical insights from Oliva (2013) and Moroni (2013) of customer perceptions towards the importance of, and satisfaction with, library features informed the development of the study's conceptual framework. Oliva (2013) and Moroni (2013) identify six library features (i.e., opening times, spaces, staff, collections, services and communication) and four characteristics by which to assess those library features (i.e., satisfaction, importance, knowledge, and use). Additionally, Oliva (2013) and Moroni (2013) provide a list of 14 library services that can be assessed with respect to the six library features identified.

The conceptual framework was beneficial in setting the boundaries of investigation and developing a codebook by which to categorize the qualitative data. The final version of the codebook comprised three main divisions: i) *library features*, and user perceptions of the ii) *satisfaction* and iii) *importance* of those library features. In terms of *library features*, six discrete types were identified: i) *collections*; ii) *communication*; iii) *hours of operation*; iv) *personnel*; v) *services*; and vi) *space*. The majority of these library features were then further categorized in the codebook as comprising both an *attribute* (e.g., "quantity", "ease of use", "usefulness", "accessibility") and a *type* (e.g., "e-book", "catalogue", "website", "interlibrary loan"). Coders were instructed to identify both a *type* and an *attribute* for each comment that pertained to a *library feature*.

All 275 qualitative comments provided in the response from the 620 completed surveys were coded using this conceptual framework. Most comments in the survey contained multiple statements and expressions from library patrons on their perceptions of the library features provided at McMaster University. This yielded many more coded statements concerning the satisfaction and importance of library features than 275.

3) Findings

At the time of writing of this paper in January 2014, a first round of data analysis has been conducted and preliminary results have been produced. In terms of preliminary findings, the qualitative analysis shows an undergraduate student population more highly concerned with the physical spaces and resources of the library than graduate students and faculty members. Greater preferences for making library electronic resources available remotely was indicated by undergraduate students and faculty members. Graduate students expressed better access to print and electronic journals to do their work. Both graduate students and faculty members indicated a greater preference for the library website to enable self-service of library resources than undergraduate students did.

Further rounds of data analysis will occur over the next several months. This analysis will utilize the demographic characteristics of survey participants to compare and contrast the coded survey responses to yield differences and similarities. Demographic characteristics that will be utilized in the analysis of the data will include age categories of survey respondents, the specific library to which survey respondents had the strongest affiliation, the academic discipline of survey respondents, the gender of respondents, and the status of participants at the institution in terms of faculty, graduate student and undergraduate student status. It is expected that this type of analysis will lead to recommendations for improvements of library features that meet specific user demographic needs.

By the time of the CAIS conference in May 2014, all rounds of data analysis will be complete and a final set of detailed findings and recommendations will be available for dissemination.

4) Concluding Remarks

The research team's intent is to complete the qualitative analysis of the LibQUAL+ 2013 dataset by the time of the CAIS 2014 conference. After that, the team plans to replicate the same analysis on the last 5 years of data it has in its possession from other LibQUAL+ surveys to identify trends and patterns longitudinally. Results will be disseminated in both academic and library practitioner outlets.

Importantly, at the CAIS 2014 conference, the research team plans to communicate and avidly discuss the benefits and challenges of creating librarian/faculty member research collaborations. The team feels the benefits certainly outweigh the challenges, and hopes to rally interest among academic librarians and give advice on ways to foster such joint librarian/faculty research partnerships at their own home institutions.

5) References

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[i] www.libqual.org/home