You Asked, We Answered!

By Brad Dennis, Education Librarian

John Ruskin commented in 1866 “What we think, or what we know, or what we believe is, in the end, of little consequence. The only consequence is what we do.” All of us collect data, analyze data, make reports to others, and then begin the cycle again without acting upon our knowledge. Often, we fail to determine what could and should be done, come up with a plan to implement, and most importantly, take action. But, assessment on WMU campus has been elevated in recent years with the focus on accountability to those we serve. Specifically, the University Libraries has been asking those we serve (students, faculty, and staff) to rate the libraries and offer suggestions on how to improve the libraries, whether it is service, the environment, the collection, or access to the collection.

We Surveyed and Analyzed

In 2004, 2007, and 2010, the Western Michigan University Libraries administered the LibQUAL+™ assessment instrument for academic libraries. This widely-used and tested, standardized, web-based questionnaire is designed to measure patrons’ perceptions and expectations of library quality of service in three important areas or domains: (1) Affect of Service (customer service); (2) Information Control (library collections, resources, and access to resources); and (3) The Library as Place (physical environment). The questionnaire portion of the survey asks the respondent to answer 27 questions using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (low) to 9 (high). Respondents are asked to provide 3 responses to each of the 27 survey items: (1) the minimum level of service that the respondent would expect; (2) the desired level of service that respondent would like; and (3) the perceived level of service quality that the respondent believed the WMU Libraries currently provides.

The survey also includes an option for respondents to leave comments in a box with instructions to: “Please enter any comments about library service in the box below.” This open entry comment box was well used by the respondents. In 2004, 2007, and 2010, LibQUAL+™ provided the WMU University Libraries with the summary data set and preliminary analysis. The University Libraries LibQUAL+™ Task Force then analyzed the data and conducted content analysis of the open ended questions using Atlas.TI content analysis software. During each assessment cycle, the LibQUAL+™ Task Force reported several times to the University Libraries administration and staff to explain the survey and distribute findings in an effort to improve library performance.

The University Library Administrative Team and several committees and task forces used the qualitative and quantitative LibQUAL+™ data in order to determine how to provide better library service and a learning environment for the WMU students and faculty. The major goal was to influence improvements in all three domains: Affect of Service, Information Control, and Library as Place. This article is a report on what you (our WMU faculty, students, and community) value, what you asked for, and how the University Libraries implemented your requests in order to serve you, our patrons and users.

You Asked…

One very common feature of all academic libraries around the globe is an intense interest in access to information. In an increasingly online environment, access is especially important and your comments and ratings indicate that this is the most important area to concentrate our efforts. To this end, we have undertaken several measures to make information more accessible. Possibly most obvious to our users, we improved the University Library website several times between 2004 and 2010. Many of the improvements were made after the University Libraries conducted usability studies in an effort to determine what areas needed improvement and just where the ‘bottlenecks’ to access existed. The Libraries also adopted new proxy server access so that faculty and students logging in from home or any off-campus location would not have to download software or change any settings in order to connect to library resources.

And We Answered…

Not so long ago, a student or faculty member would have to search multiple collections for journal titles in the catalog and then again in other related online connections for full-text articles online.

One of the greatest improvements that the Libraries has made since 2004 is the “Find It @ WMU” citation linking software followed by customization of that interface. This software searches all 400-plus databases and collections that the library owns in order to find full-text articles online. “Find It @ WMU” also indicates whether we have a paper copy of the subscription in the University Libraries. This puts the entire journal collection of articles at the patron’s fingertips by retrieving all full-text articles in the collection along with information regarding the location and holdings of all print journals. All of this searching is initiated at the point of need when a patron is searching any index or library search engine and selects the “Find It @ WMU” button in order to locate the article. Moreover, when neither online nor print copies are available, the user can immediately request, through our Resource Sharing office, a copy of the article via interlibrary loan. Requests for the text of the article or other items not available in our Libraries are often answered within a relatively short turnaround time, i.e., you have an electronic copy or the item physically in hand.

You Asked…

Another common request of all academic library users, including WMU faculty and students, is to increase the number of journal subscriptions with full-text online availability.

“Overall, I think the library does well with the resources available. We still need more in the way of electronic journal subscriptions, but the database selection is very good, and the ILL is consistently outstanding — by far the best of the five institutions at which I have been on staff.” 2007 History Faculty.

“Overall, the services that the library provides are very learner-oriented. I particularly like the peer reviewed journal that you make available online — it’s very helpful! If I could offer any suggestions, I would ask that you try to make more journals available online. Otherwise, keep up the good work!” 2007 Social Sciences / Psychology Graduate Student.

“I know that the library just increased the full text online availability, and I greatly appreciate it. I hope we can expand our subscriptions. Knowing that we already have several, I find it frustrating to come across journals I cannot access which seem to have the perfect article but only an abstract available.” 2010 Educational Leadership, Research & Technology Graduate Student.

And We Answered…

In response to these and many similar requests, the University Libraries has steadily increased journal collections, especially electronic full-text online col-
collections. Other access improvements include an improved New Catalog to search for books and other materials and PowerSearch, an inter disciplinary library search engine that locates any and all types of material in the collections, e.g., print and eBooks, DVDs, newspapers, magazine and journal articles, dissertations, etc. using a single search box. Many of the new databases now use relevancy ranking with the option to limit by date. This is an approach similar to other search engines like Google and Yahoo. Every time WMU students take the LibQUAL survey, they have identified the survey statement “modern equipment that lets me easily access needed information” as one of their most important desires. In response, the University Libraries has installed workstations fully loaded with Microsoft Office software. However, in the first surveys, students were quick to point out a flaw: “It’s annoying to have a separate card to pay for copies. It would be easier if we could just use our Bronco ID for copies, especially since we have Bronco Bucks and get 500 copies at the computers (in the labs).” 2007 Education Undergraduate Student

And We Answered ...

Beginning September, 2011, the University Libraries was pleased to announce quietly that this service need has been addressed and resolved. Students, faculty, and staff can now print from their University print accounts in the University Libraries. As a result, students [and faculty] have flooded the Libraries to work on and print their assignments. Moreover, the presence of helpful staff nearby means that more one-on-one assistance is available—and being used.

Other ongoing student service requests have also been addressed. Fines and fees have been lowered and the means to place hold requests for items on reserve and retrievals from storage have been introduced and improved. Other comments requesting a book retrieval and hold process were addressed.

“With I recall a book, I can choose where I wish to pick it up, but for a book that hasn’t been checked out, I wish there would be something like “Book pick-up request”. The book I need is in Waldo, then when I put a request, the book could be delivered to Ed library for me to pick up.” 2007 Education Graduate Student

Patrons can now request books to be placed on hold for pick-up at any library branch location. This semester one of our most popular services, inter-library loan, has expanded to include book delivery through intercampus mail to faculty and staff. This responsive service is clearly and consistently valued by our users. In addition, the University Libraries has introduced additional service training for all library employees and training manuals have been created to help train new employees so that the user with concerns can be accommodated effectively and in a timely fashion.

You Asked ...

Another consistent request has been for extended library hours: “Keep the library open late. We need to be able to work all night.” 2010 Psychology Graduate Student

This request and others like it have prompted the libraries to extend open hours at Waldo Library until 3 AM from Sunday through Thursday. Today’s library user is also accustomed to an atmosphere that includes comfortable seating and different study environments from quiet areas to team discussion areas. The University Libraries has added comfortable seating in lounge areas in Waldo Library and more comfortable seating has been planned for the Sangren Hall Education Library scheduled for completion in fall of 2012. Atmosphere is more important than we realized as shown in the following comments:

“I like the section in the basement [lower level] where you can eat, relax, and still study. There should be more areas like these because it helps me stay in this environment. Therefore, I can take a break and eat lunch and then get back to my studies. It helps a lot that I do not have to leave to eat. I can bring a lunch and eat it here. Before, I was not aware of this area, therefore I would not come to the library, but I do now!” 2010 Sociology Graduate Student

“Simply coming down to the library to sit in quietness to study has greatly affected my grades, mainly because there is nothing to get distracted in here with.” 2010 Engineering & Applied Sciences - Interdisciplinary 1st Year Undergraduate

Another research facilitator is the provision of the RefWorks citation management software that stores citations imported from databases and is capable of creating bibliographic references for the user that can be copied and pasted into word processing software like Microsoft Word. The citation style can be selected from major styles for any discipline (APA, MLA, etc.) The University Libraries also offers workshops on using the RefWorks and Write-N-Cite software that imports in-text citations and creates a reference list in the Word document as the user is composing his or her manuscript or paper.

On to 2013...

As the Libraries responded to the LibQual surveys on three different occasions, it was obvious that the user respondents were positive about the success of the Libraries’ improvement efforts. A review of our data shows the steady increase of the perceived quality level of the University Libraries for all groups (faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students) between the years of 2004, 2007, and 2010.

The lowest scores were in the information control domain, actually falling below their minimum expectations in 2004 for faculty users in the Information Control Domain. We then compared our 2010 results with those in the past years to the results of peer institutions and found that our users, especially faculty, assessed our information control as highly valued. The University Libraries received minimal negative responses to questions and respondents rated our collections, service, and space closer to the desired expectations than the ratings that peer institutions received.

The WMU Libraries will again participate in administering LibQUAL+™ in the spring of 2013. Every response to the assessment that is described above has brought a good response even as we fine-tune our actions. The Libraries’ administration, faculty, and staff anticipate that the University Libraries will again experience an increase in the mean of all three domains for all three user groups. Based on the comments already received, it appears that the University Libraries has made significant contributions to making information more accessible, improving access to research, and thus contributing to student learning and faculty research and teaching at WMU. We cannot say it more eloquently than one of our alumni:

“The library system at WMU is phenomenal! I completed my comprehensive examinations using library resources and successfully defended my doctoral dissertation and will be graduating May 1, 2010. I used the interlibrary loan quite often and the materials that I ordered were always prompt, often the next business day. The majority of my searches were conducted online from a remote source and I was always able to gain access to the information that I needed. The different search engines (e.g., PsycINFO, ERIC) are invaluable and the online library is extremely user friendly. I have no suggestions for the library because all of my needs were amply met through the Education Library in Sangren Hall, Waldo Library, and online access to journal articles and information. One last issue, thank you soooo much for the Find it @ WMU feature. I was able to gain access to many of the journal articles that I needed by using that option. My doctorate is accomplished because of an excellent library system here at WMU.” 2010 Counselor Education & Counseling Psychology Doctoral Student

[For questions, please contact Brad Dennis at brad.dennis@wmich.edu.]

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