

Association of Research Libraries

<http://www.arl.org/resources/pubs/br/br221/br221libqarl.shtml>

Using LibQUAL+™ and Developing a Culture of Assessment in Libraries

by Consuella Askew Waller, LibQUAL+™ Program Specialist, ARL, and Kaylyn Higgs, Editorial and Research Associate, ARL

In conjunction with the American Library Association's Midwinter Meeting in January 2002, ARL convened a meeting on "Using LibQUAL+™ Results" for experienced participants in the LibQUAL+™ project. LibQUAL+™ is a research and development effort that is measuring users' perceptions of library service quality across institutions via a Web-based survey. The meeting provided a forum where 44 participants shared and discussed their survey results, shared strategies for using LibQUAL+™ to implement change within their libraries, and identified "best practices" in providing quality library service. It also provided an opportunity for the LibQUAL+™ team to learn more about the needs of the library community for workshops and other activities in support of this assessment and research effort. This article reports on the LibQUAL+™ participants' experiences, challenges, and actions that surfaced at the January meeting and advocates an emphasis on training in qualitative and quantitative research methods for maximizing the usefulness of LibQUAL+™ and other assessment techniques.

Background

Spring 2002 marks the third year of the research and development phase of LibQUAL+™, a project undertaken by ARL in collaboration with Texas A&M University, and the second year of financial support for the project from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. LibQUAL+™ is one of the ARL New Measures Initiative projects, which seek to develop innovative ways for libraries to describe their contributions to their institutions. The LibQUAL+™ survey instrument is a derivation of the SERVQUAL tool created by Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml for measuring service quality in the private sector.¹

LibQUAL+™ has exceeded expectations in terms of the number of libraries participating each year. A diverse community of 12 ARL libraries piloted the first LibQUAL+™ instrument in spring 2000. This version of the survey consisted of 41 questions, incorporating 22 items from the original SERVQUAL instrument plus 19 items specific to the library community. The survey was designed to measure service quality across five dimensions: affect of service, reliability, library as place, provision of physical collections, and access to collections.²

During spring 2001, the survey was conducted again with 43 libraries, including some non-ARL libraries. This version of the survey instrument consisted of 56 items designed to measure service quality across the following eight dimensions: assurance, empathy, library as place, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles, instruction, and self-reliance.

In each of these iterations, the survey tool was refined based on qualitative interviews of library users throughout North America and multiple validity and reliability analyses of the quantitative survey data. Construct-validity analyses of the 2001 data resulted in a reduced set of four dimensions that are measured in the current 25-item spring 2002 survey: service affect, library as place, personal control, and information access.

The work done in the 2000 and 2001 implementations paved the way for the participation of specialized academic libraries, such as health sciences libraries, and research institutions including the Smithsonian Institution and the New York Public Library. The spring 2002 implementation has 168 participating libraries, representing a wide array of academic and non-academic institutions with varying consortial affiliations. The rapidly growing number of libraries participating in LibQUAL+™ attests to the value of this assessment instrument for the library community.

Using LibQUAL+™

The participants in the January meeting on "Using LibQUAL+™ Results" agreed that the service quality dimension that users perceive as needing the most improvement is access to collections, with library as place coming in a strong second.

Access to collections was measured by availability of complete runs of journals, the full text of articles delivered in electronic format to the desktop, speedy interlibrary loan, and easy access to remote storage. To address their users' survey responses, several libraries have already taken actions such as implementing delivery of full text to the desktop, improving interlibrary loan services, and increasing the number of regular trips to remote storage. LibQUAL+™ confirmed for the University of Arizona Library that their users' perceptions of service in electronic delivery of text to the desktop were lower than the minimal levels acceptable to those users. This information contributed to the design of three strategic projects to improve service at the library. (See the article in this issue by Robyn Huff-Eibl and Shelley Phipps on "Using LibQUAL+™ Results at the University of Arizona.")

Library as place is measured in relation to noise levels, cleanliness, personal safety, and space for collaborative work. Several libraries are redesigning spaces as a result of data gathered by LibQUAL+™ and other data-collection methods. For example, one library is creating a digital commons to respond to the need for networked space for collaboration.

Many of the participating libraries already knew that these changes were necessary; the survey confirmed those beliefs and provided evidence to justify targeted funding increases. Several libraries used additional data-gathering methods—such as focus groups and local surveys—to supplement their LibQUAL+™ results or investigate them in more detail. Another common action taken by libraries after administering LibQUAL+™ is a stronger investment in communication with users about library services in order to better inform them and manage their expectations.

The greatest challenges libraries experience in using LibQUAL+™ are: a dearth of in-house statistical skills for understanding the survey methodology and working with the data; a lack of organizational culture that encourages assessment; concern about low sample sizes as compared to print surveys (although the LibQUAL+™ response rates are high for a Web survey); negative feedback from faculty about the survey; lack of time and money to work with the results; and the need for more documentation accompanying the data.

ARL is working to remove the barriers over which it has some control. It is offering more training opportunities this year in an effort to strengthen the statistical skills of library staff and to instill assessment into library culture. Additionally, the documentation that libraries receive with their LibQUAL+™ survey data will be enhanced by including

descriptive text. The group provided further suggestions for libraries, including expanding the library's dialog with faculty in the assessment process, educating staff and users about the survey, developing staff expertise in qualitative and quantitative research methods, and working assessment activities into their plans and budgets.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The prevalent challenge cited by LibQUAL+™ participants is library staff's lack of skills in analysis and research methods. This challenge, along with that of gaining the "buy-in" of faculty and staff to support the survey efforts, can be surmounted with additional training for participating libraries. If library staff members are better able to utilize and explain the results and the research methodology, they will be able to improve library service in areas that are important to their users and/or manage their users expectations more effectively. This will also inspire the administration's and faculty's confidence in the validity and reliability of the project.

How will the LibQUAL+™ team respond to this clearly articulated and substantiated need for training? In addition to the training activities and workshops already available to LibQUAL+™ participants, new workshops and programs are in the pipeline. In May 2002, ARL is sponsoring a five-day Service Quality Evaluation Academy (see accompanying article). Additionally, ARL has applied for a grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services to develop a new series of workshops and online courses as part of an assessment program designed especially for libraries. This proposed program addresses the community-wide need for new strategies and methods of library assessment by pursuing the following goals:

- Use in-person and Web-based training to expand the pool of librarians with advanced assessment skills by teaching methods for assessing and improving outcomes and service quality.
- Foster collaborative efforts between academic libraries and university assessment offices, creating an infrastructure for organizational teams to design and develop outcomes-based library assessment programs.
- Build capacity for assessment through advocating its use and providing model programs to the broader library and museum communities.

No matter what efforts are made on a national or international level, it also takes grassroots advocacy to create change. Developing a culture of assessment within libraries is a crucial step toward establishing the importance of assessment tools and projects such as LibQUAL+™ and changing traditional paradigms of assessment measures. The steps that can be taken locally and within libraries to promote such change are key. The LibQUAL+™ instrument may prove to be an effective assessment tool but it will take the committed efforts of the library community to actively enhance library service quality.

Footnotes

1. For more information on SERVQUAL, see A. Parasuraman, Valarie A. Zeithaml, and Leonard L. Berry, "SERVQUAL: A Multiple-Item Scale for Measuring Consumer Perceptions of Service Quality," *Journal of Retailing* 64 (Spring 1988): 12-40.
2. For more information about the dimensions of library service quality measured by

LibQUAL+™, see Colleen Cook, Fred Heath, Bruce Thompson, and Russell Thompson, "The Search for New Measures: The ARL LibQUAL+ Project—A Preliminary Report," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 1, no. 1 (January 2001): 65-74,

http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/portal_libraries_and_the_academy/v001/1.1cook.html.

To cite this article

Askew Waller, Consuella, and Kaylyn Hipps. "Using LibQUAL+™ and Developing a Culture of Assessment in Libraries." *ARL*, no. 221 (April 2002): 10-11.

<http://www.arl.org/resources/pubs/br/br221/br221libqarl.shtml>.