

Going the Distance? Determining Whether the Columbia State University Library Distance

Liaison Is Adding Value to the Distance Learners' Library Experience

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### **Abstract**

At the imaginary Columbia State University Library, the administration will administer two surveys to determine whether the distance liaison program and training with the circulation and reference staff has improved the services that distance-learners who are enrolled in online classes receive from the library. This paper discusses the methodology that will be used and critiques surveys as an instrument and discusses in general focus groups and interviews as other options. Finally, this paper describes how the data will be analyzed and used to modify programs at the imaginary library and it makes some predictions as to some of the possible results of the data that will be gathered by the surveys.

*Keywords:* Columbia State University, surveys, distance liaison, distance learners, distance education.

## **Going the Distance? Determining Whether the Columbia State University Library Distance Liaison Is Adding Value to the Distance Learners' Library Experience**

### **Introduction**

In the fall of 2010, the imaginary Columbia State University Library, located in Portland's urban heart, underwent a community needs analysis. As a result, several changes were made to the physical and virtual branches and programs were added, including the addition of a liaison who would work with distance learners. Yet it is not enough to merely make changes in hopes that users' needs are met. The library must assess whether their changes and new programs are accomplishing their goals. "Remember, if you can't measure it, you can't improve it!" [punctuation is sic] (Plosker, 2002, p 65). Because the library is responsible to its community, to its users, and to the Oregon taxpayers that fund it, the library administration proposes this assessment of the distance liaison program.

### **Distance Liaison Goals**

The imaginary Columbia State University is based on but is very different than Portland State University. Almost 28,000 students attend Columbia State and of the 21,560 undergraduate students, 88 percent live off-campus (Portland State University, 2010, Profile: Snapshot of Portland State, and Ibsen et al., 2010). An estimated 40 percent of Columbia State's students have taken at least one class remotely. Although not all of those roughly 11,200 students meet the definition of a distance learner, who live farther away from campus than is commutable, any change to the library's virtual branch, such as the addition of the distance liaison, will have an impact on a significant proportion, if not majority, of the university's population. The authors of the needs analysis grew concerned that distance students often feel disenfranchised by the library (Ibsen et al., 2010).

Following the fall 2010 community needs analysis, the responsibility of distance liaison was added to the interlibrary loan librarian, making her the point of contact for distance students who had an issue in need of resolution. This change was made because “(d)istance students need resources that are directed to their distinct information needs and modes of access” (Ibsen et al., 2010, p 8), and the ILL librarian was already advocating for distance learners and resolution of the issues they were having. Additionally, the distance liaison has helped train circulation and reference staff to be more sensitive to the needs and information queries from distance users and the virtual branch has undergone changes with the intent of improving the information architecture to make it easier to use. (The assessment of improvements to the web site will be addressed in another paper by needs analysis co-author Serenity Ibsen.) The goals of the distance liaison program include improving the relationship between library staff and distance learners by increasing customer-service skills and providing liaison to act as an ombudsman who responds to issues and advocates for distance learners within the library administrative structure.

The imaginary Columbia State University is not the only academic institution grappling with increased demands from distance learners. Library users’ expectations and behavior have dramatically changed with the increased online access in recent years, and the number of online courses have jumped dramatically (Plosker, 2002). Expectations built by the 24/7 access to the internet have caused a new service paradigm to emerge at a number of academic libraries, especially in regards to their virtual branches and their reference departments. The paradigm has prompted improvements to libraries’ web sites, such as 24/7 chatting with reference librarians, changes in information literacy instruction, and the posting of virtual toolkits to help students conduct research using the library websites (Mayo, 2004). Additionally, academic librarians’ professional standards require that distance users receive service that is equivalent to that of

students and instructors on campus (Association of Colleges and Research Libraries, 2008).

More importantly, this shift and the recent community needs analysis have prompted an intense focus on serving users needs, a perspective that is embraced by Columbia State Library staff.

Therefore, it is important to determine whether the distance liaison has improved the relationship that distance students have with the library and whether the additional training of circulation and reference staff has increased distance students' ability to obtain what they need from the both the virtual and physical library.

### **Methodology**

The library administration will use surveys to answer the assessment question: Has the distance liaison improved the relationship that distance students have with the library and has her training with staff helped them meet distance learners information needs? Two instruments will be used. One survey will be given to a sample all distance learners and the other will be administered to every student who has sought the distance liaison's services to resolve a problem or an issue.

The first survey, created in Zoomerang (<http://www.zoomerang.com/>) or a similar online survey service, will sent to 1,000 students via campus e-mail. The students can chose to click on the hyperlink and take the survey, which will be confidential and relatively short. The questions will be similar to a customer satisfaction survey.

The instrument will seek to determine the following:

- How often the distance students use the library per week and the time duration of their visits.

- Whether students have noticed any changes in the level of library service in the past several months in regards to accessing the library catalog, databases, interlibrary loans, and help

via chat, e-mail and phone.

- How students rank the services offered by the library in regards to accessing the library catalog, databases, interlibrary loans, and communication with librarians or other staff. (Answers will be limited to greatly satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, greatly dissatisfied, or not applicable.)

- Students' understanding of the distance liaison's role in helping them.

- Whether they have used the distance liaison to resolve a problem and if so, how they perceive the results of that interaction, and

- One or two open-ended questions asking whether the distance students have requests or unmet needs of the library.

The open-ended questions will be coded and analyzed using the sociological software program NVivo, the same program used in analyzing interviews in the community needs analysis.

The second survey will be an ongoing customer satisfaction survey that will be automatically sent to students who are filling out the online request for help from the distance liaison. Reports on this data will be generated each term and annually. The liaison also will be expected to send e-mails with a link to this survey to students who have contact her via phone or e-mail.

This on-going survey will ask students:

- To briefly describe the issue that prompted them to contact the liaison.

- State whether it was resolved.

- State whether they sought another means to resolve the issue before contacting the liaison, and if so, what that other means was and what library department was involved.

- State whether they were greatly satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, or greatly dissatisfied

with the results of their interaction with the liaison, and.

- Make any additional comments about the liaison or library services for distance learners.

If the distance liaison receives more e-mails than using the online form for contact, it may be necessary to apply to use a social science software program to code and analyze the content of those e-mails, but it is too soon to make a determination if that is needed.

In regards to the larger survey, creating a sample that will be generalizable to the population will be labor intensive and require special expertise (Grover, Greer, & Agada, 2010). To obtain the needed expertise, the library administration plans to work with a professor in Columbia State marketing department who has extensive experience with creating surveys in the business world and in the academic world and is considered one of the nation's foremost experts in the use of surveys. This professor will provide an outside look, helping remove bias, but he also will work with a social science reference librarian who has a master's degree in cultural anthropology and experience with conduction this type of research to ensure that the survey instruments will be focused on the research questions the library seeks to address. To reduce bias, the reference librarian involved also was selected because he is not in same chain-of-command that the distance liaison is part of.

It may be determined at a later date that other methodologies, such as interviews, will be needed to follow up on the two surveys. Interviews can offer more in-depth information, especially about hard-to-reach groups (Teitler, Reichman, & Sprachman, 2003; Macias et al., 2008, and Malhotra, Agarwal, & Peterson, 1996). For instance, if the survey revealed that international students were having more issues with library access than other groups, interviews or even questionnaires might be warranted to gather more data to ensure that any changes to the

library's programs would effectively meet the needs of that group. At this point, the library has decided to not pursue these other methodologies because of the expense.

### **Critique of Surveys as Methodology**

Surveys are an effective means to collect data from a large population that cannot be directly observed (Babbie, 2007). With more than 11,000 students taking at least one online course and many of the students taking classes in the privacy of their residences, it is impossible to observe distance students' use of the library and of the distance liaison. As an instrument to gather data, surveys have flaws. When it comes to reliability, surveys are strong, but they are weak on validity because the act of studying an attitude, such as perceptions about the library's distance liaison, may affect the respondents' responses (Babbie, 2007).

As stated in the section above, it will be labor intensive and require special expertise to create an effective survey and administer it so that it will be generalizable to the larger population (Grover, Greer, & Agada, 2010) of distance learners at Columbia State University. Another concern about using a survey is that the questions must be carefully crafted ensure they avoid bias, are relevant, and will elicit information (Babbie, 2007; and Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009) that will aid library staff in assessing the distance liaison program and determining whether changes are needed. For survey data to be useful, the students who are sent the survey must be willing to respond and must be honest in their responses (Babbie, 2007). A survey also must be pretested (Babbie, 2007; and Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Additionally, at least 50 percent must respond for adequate analysis, though 60 percent or higher is preferable (Babbie, 2007). One issue with surveys is they rarely can communicate the context of the respondents' experiences and if a new variable is added that will impact responses the survey will not be able to account for it (Babbie, 2007). This is one of the reasons that the library may determine at a

future date to following up on the surveys with interviews or another instrument.

The other options for gathering information include interviews and focus groups. Interviews are extremely expensive and their results are too limited for the purposes of this assessment (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Macias et al., 2008; and Malhotra, Agarwal, & Peterson, 1996). When dealing with students who may live more than 50 miles from campus, the logistics makes focus groups a cumbersome option (Higa-Moore et al., 2002). However, developments technology used to hold virtual meetings may in the near future become an acceptable means for holding a focus group of distance learners. At this time, focus groups are not workable and information from focus groups is not generalizable to the larger population.

Compared to the other possible instruments available to the library, surveys will result in data from two groups of distance students, those who have had issues and a sample of the general population. "Surveys and audits become increasingly effective if targeted to smaller groups, becoming more focused, more precise, and elevate the dialogue to actionable specifics (Plosker, 2002, p 65). As a result, surveys are the best option at this time to gather data that will help the library determine whether the liaison program is helping the library to meet the community's information needs.

### **Using the Survey Data**

The data from the surveys and the interviews will be used to determine whether the experience that distance students are having with the library have improved, both in terms of perception and actual service. It is hoped that the general survey will have a response rate of at least 60 percent, which would allow the researchers to make generalizations about distance learners' perceptions about the library's virtual branch, services to distance students, and the distance liaison service. It may be that the survey reveals either a group or needs that the

researchers and the library administration determine needs to be investigated by use of another instrument, such as interviews.

The ongoing customer-satisfaction surveys of students who directly contact the distance liaison with problems or issues will reveal whether the liaison position is successful in regards to resolving distance learners' issues. The satisfaction surveys should also reveal whether other departments were faced with the problem or issue before the liaison was contacted. This will show places where the library can work to close gaps with the goal of resolving distance learners issues before the student feels the need to contact the liaison. The survey results should reveal any patterns or trends in the issues experienced by distance learners. It may be that non-distance students are using the liaison service, potentially resulting in the library having to make some adjustments to how it handles student issues.

It is expected that both surveys, including the social science program analysis of the open-ended questions, will yield data that will reveal are issues with the library's virtual service and opportunities to resolve them, identify user needs that are currently going unmet, and ideas for improvements to the library's services (Plosker, 2002). It also is expected that the survey will reveal issues that may not be associated with the distance liaison or virtual branch.

It is the library administration's intention to respond quickly to the problems and issues identified by the surveys. Research in private businesses indicates that when problems exposed by surveys are quickly resolved customers will return to the business (Plosker, 2002). It may be that budget constraints will impact some of the responses, but the library administration hopes to be timely in solving problems and modifying the new programs that were put in place to meet the community's needs as determined by last fall's analysis. "Remaining relevant to users is critical to library survival" (Plosker, 2002, p 64). Although one might think that distance students

are forced to use the university library, students are very resourceful and can use search engines or local public libraries if faced with issues caused by Columbia State Library. For Columbia State Library staff, our mission includes providing our users with excellent customer service whether it is through the virtual or physical branch.

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