

## A Library Looks at Itself

*In attempting to evaluate its service The Ohio State University libraries in May 1966 designed a questionnaire to determine: (1) the characteristics of library users; (2) the ways in which users avail themselves of the facilities; (3) the users opinions of the library and its services. The results indicated that: (1) 55 per cent were using the library only for study purposes; (2) this group was more dissatisfied than those seeking service or information; (3) history majors and faculty were the heaviest users followed by students in education, business, political science, and English; (4) the questionnaire is effective for measurement of library-campus relations.*

**L**IBRARIES EXIST for two fundamental reasons. As repositories of man's recorded knowledge they seek to build representative collections of significant materials and preserve them for future generations. The Folger, Huntington, and Newberry libraries are obvious examples of libraries where these roles of collection building and preservation are dominant. To be sure, libraries of this type are in the minority. The majority of libraries have information dissemination as their predominant function. In this role the libraries' holdings are organized and controlled for maximum availability. For the majority of libraries, effectiveness is not determined entirely by size of the collection but rather by the success with which they are able to provide the user with the information he seeks.

The library fulfills this function best by pursuing a policy of constant self-evaluation in order to keep alert to the changing needs of its users. The usual methods of evaluating performance are by internal criteria. Criteria frequently

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considered include size and growth of the collection, circulation and reference statistics, new services added, and number of library users served. Appraisal may also be concerned with the speed at which books are procured, processed, and made available to the public. These criteria are satisfactory for comparing library with library and present with past performance, if the library is considered only as a repository. How successful are they in determining whether the library is providing the information its public needs and wants? In this respect, these traditional methods of appraisal are perhaps weak. At best, appraisal by internal criteria measures only indirectly a library's success as an information disseminating unit.

How then is a library to determine the degree of success with which it serves its public? The ultimate authority, the library user, is the most logical source of an answer. Libraries are the constant recipients of compliments, suggestions, and complaints. These unsolicited comments have formed the basis for passive appraisals to which libraries respond haphazardly. There are, however, many dangers in attaching credence to such random observations. In the first place,

a library has no way of knowing whether or not the comments received are representative of all patrons. It may be that the library has heard from a small, but vocal, minority. Also to be considered is the propensity for people to verbalize complaints more frequently than compliments. It is possible that some areas of the library could be overlooked completely because no one happens to comment, while other areas could be so susceptible that they would receive continual and, perhaps, unwarranted attention. Therefore, there is probability that this type of appraisal is not representative, is negatively biased, and is haphazard in areas of coverage. It would seem more logical to seek users' opinions and measure their attitudes in an active and systematic manner.

Ohio State University libraries has attempted to take such an active approach to the measurement of user attitudes. With a system that includes a main library and twenty-two departmental libraries, The Ohio State University libraries have a book collection of over 1,700,000 volumes, and serve a student body of 31,604 and 2,857 faculty. The effectiveness of its service to the campus could not be determined by the sporadic feedback that it received from students and faculty. It was decided, therefore, that it was necessary to develop a method of actively determining library users' opinions. The technique employed to secure meaningful data was an opinion survey.

#### HOW THE STUDY WAS PERFORMED

The study performed by The Ohio State University libraries was designed to evaluate main library performance from the point of view of its users. Specifically it was designed to gather information about: (1) the nature of individuals who use the library; (2) the ways in which they make use of its facilities; (3) their opinions about the library and its services.

A printed questionnaire was designed to be handed out to users as they entered the library with a request that they complete and return it at the guard station before leaving the building. Such an approach, using a questionnaire containing written instructions for its completion, permitted reaching a large proportion of those using the library at a minimum cost.

The questionnaire was designed for ease and economy of tabulation. Closed-end questions, requiring only that the library user check one of a predetermined series of responses, were used for gathering most of the information. Such a format has the advantage of permitting machine tabulation of the data which again minimizes manpower costs. This type of question also has the advantage of requiring a minimum amount of the respondent's time, which probably increases the over-all return of usable questionnaires. An open-ended question which permits the respondent to write a full paragraph if he so wishes was used as the last item on the questionnaire. This was used to probe an area where there was considerable doubt as to the nature of the responses which might be expected. It was hoped that such a format would minimize chances of distorting or concealing important aspects of the information requested. Provision was made, however, for numeric classification of the responses to this question so that machine tabulation techniques might be applied to them.

The first group of questions was aimed at gathering information about the nature of individuals using the library. These questions, all of which were closed-end in format, were designed to determine the respondent's classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate student, faculty member, or other); his major field of study; and the frequency with which he made use of library facilities. Information as to time of day (morning, afternoon or evening)

was also obtained through the use of color-coded questionnaires. The information obtained from these questions was put to a dual use. First, it provided a basis for classifying opinion responses so that certain ideas about which groups would show the most favorable reactions to library services could be tested. Second, it was valuable in itself, since it provided the first organized information about library users.

The second set of questions concerned the use made of library facilities by the respondents. These questions, which were also closed-end in format, determined whether the respondent visited the library in search of some specific information or service or whether he came for general study purposes. They also indicated, for those individuals seeking information or service, where they sought and where they found the information or service.

The final group of questions dealt with the opinions of the respondents about the library and its services. Two closed-end questions permitted respondents who were seeking information or service to rate on a five-point scale ranging from very satisfactory to very unsatisfactory the ease of location of the information or services sought and the helpfulness and courtesy of staff members encountered. A third question, identical in format to the two preceding ones, permitted all respondents, regardless of whether they came to study or in search of information or services, to rate the over-all "satisfactoriness" of their visit to the library. An additional question, for those individuals seeking service or information, asked for the amount of time spent waiting. The final question, which was open-ended in format, permitted respondents to express in their own words what made their visit satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

The questionnaires were passed out to every fifth individual entering the library on a Thursday near the middle of Spring quarter 1966. This rate was determined

by the ability of a single individual to hand out and explain briefly the purpose of the questionnaire. No attempt was made to restrict the number of questionnaires to that which would provide only an "adequate sample size." Pre-tests had revealed marked variations in the rate of return and thus, since there were minimal variations in the cost involved, it was considered best to obtain the maximum number of responses. No attempt was made to stratify the sample, since no data existed on which to base the classifications.

A total of 1,230 questionnaires were handed out, of which 687 or 55 per cent were returned in usable form. This was considered an acceptable response, though somewhat lower than that obtained in the pre-tests of the questionnaire. The data obtained was tabulated on an IBM 1620 computer. The program permitted the classification of data along the different dimensions discussed in regard to the "nature of users" questions. It provided frequency distributions as well as means and other parameters.

Preliminary examination of the results revealed two facts which led to a change in the original plans for analysis. First, high correlations were found among the answers to the three questions dealing with ease of obtaining service, courtesy and helpfulness of staff, and over-all satisfactoriness of the visit to the library. This led to the conclusion that the data from the question on ease of service was redundant, and it was therefore not included in the final report. It was also found that, in contrast to pre-test respondents, a relatively small percentage of individuals filled in the figures on waiting time. Therefore these figures were also omitted from the final report.

The analysis of the data and the writing of the final report were performed in the light of several cautions. First it was recognized that the sample taken was, in all probability, somewhat biased. Practical considerations made it impos-

sible to sample from all days of the week and from all weeks in the quarter. Further, follow-up oral questioning of the non-respondents in one of the pre-tests revealed that there was a higher proportion of faculty members among the non-respondents than among the respondents and that the non-respondents were slightly less likely to have a favorable over-all opinion of the library than were the respondents. Taken together, these things led to a decision to make no statistical test of the differences found. It was felt that the presentation of such tests would lend a spurious sense of certainty to the data. The analysis presented in the final report was, therefore, limited to the presentation of the frequency distributions and associated means.

#### WHO USES THE LIBRARY?

In interpreting the information presented in this and in following sections, the reader should keep one important point in mind. These data concern one library on one university campus. Though there is some evidence available indicating that similar patterns may occur in other libraries,<sup>1</sup> there can be no guarantee that the results obtained in the Ohio State University Study can be generalized to all libraries on all campuses.

When library users were grouped according to university classification, a progressive decline in the absolute number of respondents occurred as one moved up the scale from freshman through sophomore, junior, senior, and graduate student to faculty member. For the most part, this can be seen as a reflection of the decreasing total numbers of individuals in the classifications, since the ratio of the number of respondents to the number of individuals in a class re-

mained relatively constant. To a certain extent, however, it also represented a change in the pattern of use of library facilities. While no consistent pattern was found among the variations in numbers of respondents using the library as a source of information, materials, or services, a progressive decrease in the number of individuals using it for study purposes was uncovered.

The study indicated that there was a core, particularly among those respondents using the library for study purposes, of heavy users who made demands on library space and facilities far out of proportion to their numbers. Two-thirds of those completing questionnaires had previously visited the library four or more times during the preceding two weeks. Only 6 per cent of the respondents indicated, in contrast, that this was their only visit to the library during the two-week period.

It is particularly interesting to note that though the proportion of those using the library for study purposes was fairly consistent in the infrequent visitor categories, a marked shift occurred when the group which had made four or more visits was considered. In this group a far larger proportion of the users came for study purposes.

The patterns of utilization of library facilities by respondents enrolled or employed in various departments of the university are some of the most difficult to explain. Though much of the variation can be attributed to differences in relative enrollment, this does not account for all of them. Certain large departments were represented by a relatively small number of respondents, while some small departments appeared in numbers out of proportion to their enrollments. Attempts were made to explain these differences in terms of the availability of departmental libraries, but, though this is doubtless a factor in the differences, it could not account for all of them. Unless these are purely

<sup>1</sup> Results similar in several respects to those obtained in this study were found at the University of Delaware—see Gorham Lane, "Assessing the Undergraduates' Use of the University Library," *CRL*, XXVII (July 1966), p. 277-81; and at Western Michigan University (personal correspondence to author from Katharine M. Stokes, director of libraries, Western Michigan University).

chance variations, as is always possible, further research will be required to explain them.

#### HOW DO THEY USE LIBRARY FACILITIES?

One of the more surprising results of the study concerned the purposes of the visits made by respondents. Though there were marked variations from class to class and during different portions of the day, almost 55 per cent of those completing questionnaires were in the library for general study purposes, rather than in search of specific information, materials, or services. This represents a radical departure from the information disseminating role of the university library and indicates a need for a reappraisal of the planning of libraries and of study facilities. The provision of study accommodations in other facilities, such as dormitories and student unions, could relieve much pressure for space at a cost far below that of constructing and operating additional library facilities.

Heaviest utilization of library facilities came during the afternoon, followed by morning and evening, respectively. Average hourly use remained relatively constant during the day and dropped off during the evening. Marked shifts occurred among these periods in the pattern of utilization of library facilities. During the afternoon hours there was a disproportionately large increase in the demand for information, materials, and services.

Variations in the patterns of utilization by individuals enrolled in the various departments of the university were also discovered. The results indicated that the history department majors and faculty were the heaviest users of the main library. The next four departments in order of usage were education, business organization, political science, and English. Again, however, no ready explanation was available for these variations and thus the understanding of this

aspect of the results will have to await further research.

#### WHAT DO THEY THINK OF THE LIBRARY?

The interpretation of opinion survey data almost always presents problems. Rarely do absolute guidelines exist against which the obtained results may be judged in terms of "goodness" or "badness." Rather, the data have meaning only relative to those obtained for other groups or under other conditions. The Ohio State University Study was no exception to this rule and thus the discussion of this data was limited to comparisons of various aspects of the library operation and of different user groups. Nonetheless, it was heartening to the library staff, who were used to the complaint-oriented passive methods of evaluating library-user attitudes, to see the favorable over-all evaluation of the library and its services.

The first opinion question dealt with the respondents' evaluation of the satisfactoriness of their visit to the library. Two basic patterns were revealed in regard to this question. First of all, those visiting the library for study purposes felt that their visit, on the average, was slightly less satisfactory than did those who came in search of specific information, material, or service. It is again possible that the provision of auxiliary study facilities in dormitories and student unions for undergraduates would diminish this dissatisfaction with library facilities. Second, though undergraduate students in all four classifications rated the satisfactoriness of their visits at about the same average value, graduate students and faculty members, especially those seeking information, materials, or services, were substantially more favorable in their appraisals.

When respondents were classified according to frequency of previous visits, results were somewhat less clear. While a more favorable average response was

obtained from the frequent users who were seeking specific items, no readily explicable trend was apparent among those who were using the library for study purposes. A number of interpretations of the data are possible. The most logical one is that those who visit the library frequently are more familiar with its idiosyncracies and thus more likely to complete their searches of library resources successfully. An alternate explanation of the results cannot be ignored, however. It may be that the exact opposite is true. It is possible that persons who, for one unknown reason or another, tend to view the library and its services favorably also tend to use the library more frequently than do those who view it in an unfavorable light.

Data were also analyzed for the question dealing with the library users' evaluation of the helpfulness and courtesy of the library staff. Responses to this question were obtained only from those individuals seeking information, materials, or services, since it was felt that those individuals coming to the library only for study purposes would rarely have meaningful contact with the library staff. Again the over-all favorableness of the responses was heartening.

When the respondents were grouped by university classification, no consistent pattern was revealed, though it did appear that faculty members considered the service rendered somewhat more satisfactory than did students. Whether this represents variation in the behavior of the library staff members when in contact with faculty members, or a difference in the perception by the faculty respondents, cannot be determined from the results of this study. No consistent patterns were found where responses to this question were classified according to frequency of previous visits.

The open-ended question dealing with sources of the respondents' satisfaction or dissatisfaction generated a surprising

number of highly detailed answers. As might be expected, these ranged from the complimentary to the critical and from the constructive to the sarcastic. It was generally possible to associate these comments with particular phases of the library's operations, which permitted the discovery of one of the most interesting results. A strikingly consistent set of differences was found between those comments associated with study facilities and those concerning the information, material, or service processing facilities of the library. While the comments associated with the former dealt almost exclusively with the physical environment (temperature regulation, noise, comfort, etc.), those associated with the latter dealt almost exclusively with the quality and courtesy of the personnel staffing the facilities.

#### THE IMPACT OF THE STUDY

At this writing it is difficult to know the full, long-range impact of the study, since consideration of many of its conclusions is still in progress. It is already apparent, however, that a number of important benefits have accrued to The Ohio State University libraries as a result of the study.

First of all, though the questionnaire will doubtless be refined and improved in any future applications, it has been shown to be an effective tool for the continuing measurement of library-campus relations. Library users are willing and able to provide information about their perceptions of the library and its services. It is possible to design a questionnaire in such a way that the information it provides is specific and consistent enough to permit the identification of particular trouble spots and evaluation of the effectiveness of programs designed to minimize difficulties.

Second, the study provided a body of information about present sources of user satisfaction and dissatisfaction with

library service on which such programs might be based. Faculty and students using different areas of the library responded differently to the questions. Variations were found in the ability of groups with different purposes to obtain satisfactory library service. In some respects the information uncovered merely served to confirm suspicions based on passive methods of evaluation, but in other cases it gave a picture of the library and its services different from that which would be drawn from the usual run of "gripes" and compliments aimed at the library staff.

Third, the study provided the library with data which should be of value in both the long and short-range planning and administration of library and related facilities. This information, particularly that dealing with the use of the library as a general study hall, if confirmed in

future studies, could provide the basis for substantial rethinking of the role of the library and that of auxiliary study facilities throughout the university community. The information on variations in usage of library facilities during the day may prove to be an important aid in staffing the various areas and services of the library.

In a broader sense, the data on the nature of library users may have the most far-reaching impact. Certain individuals use the library heavily. Others apparently use it hardly at all. Determination of the reasons for these differences may prove to be the key to understanding where the library is succeeding and where it is failing in its job of disseminating information, and thus provide the basis for making it an even more effective force in the total educational program of the university. ■■

