# Editorial

# A Closer Look at User Services

Is there anything performed by an academic library that is more important than service for its users? Because service encompasses nearly all aspects of the academic library, it is difficult to argue the importance of high-quality service. The students, faculty, administration, staff, and library staff all expect excellent library service. Moreover, user expectations continue to rise each year.

> **Technology has been the central thrust to many of the changes in academic libraries and it will be likewise in the future.**

A few years back, when I was dean of university libraries at Arizona State University, the university administration regularly conducted a campuswide survey focusing on the satisfaction level of the users (i.e., students, faculty, administration, and staff) of various campus units (e.g., bookstore, computing services, food services, libraries, different units of student affairs). The ASU libraries always received the highest score on the survey; that is, more users responding to the survey were satisfied or very satisfied with the services received from the libraries than any other unit included in the survey. Naturally, the results of this survey were well received by our dedicated library staff. When I mentioned this high satisfaction level to a colleague at a major research university library, he gently reminded me that libraries, in general, tend to get high ratings from their users. Thus, I concluded that users of academic and other types of libraries apparently expect a high level of service from their respective libraries and normally receive it.

## Changes and More Changes Coming

On our campuses, the library has undergone some dramatic transformations in re-cent years. Perhaps it has changed more in the past five years than any other unit on the campuses of America's higher education institutions. And as the expression goes, "And you ain't seen nothin' yet, baby!"

Technology has been the central thrust to many of the changes in academic libraries and it will be likewise in the future. Today's, and even more so tomorrow's, students hold/will hold much higher expectations of libraries. Common questions that students are asking or thinking about include: "Why aren't more books accessible online?" "When is the library going to have all of its journals in electronic format?" "Why is the teaching faculty so uninformed about the library's electronic resources?" Even though we librarians understand the issues involved with copyright and other obstacles standing in the way of a total electronic library, students express little patience with our explanations of the real world. Notwithstanding their lack of knowledge of many of the technical and barrier issues, they know the technology capabilities exist for their perception of the "ideal" library world.

## Virtual Libraries

The virtual library matches the expectation of our students and some of our faculty. These users nod favorably when they listen to the possibility of accessing the services and contents of other libraries via a technological infrastructure. Some faculty are obviously worried about the existence of a virtual library due to their lack of interest in or ignorance of the new technology. The virtual library serves to fulfill that oft-spoken goal of "bringing together human beings and recorded knowledge regardless of place or time." What new user

expectations does the virtual library bring? Greater access to the global resources, faster document delivery, and the librarian with more in-depth knowledge of informational resources are a few of the challenges imposed by the virtual library.

### Distance Library Services

For many years, the academy has delivered instruction in the traditional classroom setting. However, this practice is changing significantly. All types of institutions of higher education (from community colleges to the ivy leagues) now are engaged in distance education. As expected, accrediting associations are insisting that sufficient library services be provided at these distant sites. Generally speaking, it is practically impossible to offer library services of equal quality to those received on the local campus. However, comparable library service must be provided to the distance education students. These users must be provided access to paper and online resources, dependable and fast document delivery, and bibliographic instruction of the highest quality. Librarians who participate in distance library services for the first time will quickly realize that extra effort is required if high-quality service is to be provided to these distance users. It is quite common for librarians to travel to distant sites to teach students how to use/access the home-based library. Agreements are established with academic libraries where the distance education courses are taught; these include access to collections and may include library instruction for distance education students. Effectiveness and efficiency are two key words that must be kept in mind while providing library services for distance education students.

### Evaluation

All library services, including distance library services, must be evaluated. The assessment process may include questionnaires, interviews, observations, focus groups, or other survey methods.

As Peter Hernon and Charles R. McClure reminded us:

> Evaluation embraces change and encourages libraries to treat change as a positive force. By engaging in planning and research, librarians have a better idea of the future and they can meet that future with relevant, effective, and efficient services.[1]

The library must know what its users think of the services being offered, know where it is on its planning cycle, and be certain that the future will continue to focus on the needs and expectations of the users.

### Conclusion

Academic libraries will continue to play a significant role in supporting their respective institutions' missions. Traditional user services will continue and innovative services will be added. The library will be judged principally on how well it is serving its users. Many challenges must be addressed by the "value-added" services brought forth by the evolving technology. We can expect user expectations to expand, and we should never get in a reactive stance regarding user needs. In closing, I share with you Harry I. Forsha's perspective on users' expectations:

> People want what they want when they want it. They don't want something else, they don't want less than they want, and they certainly don't want it at some other time.[2]

**DONALD E. RIGGS**

*Editor*

---

### Notes

1. Peter Hernon and Charles R. McClure, *Evaluation and Library Decision Making* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1990), 238–39.

2. Harry I. Forsha, *The Pursuit of Quality through Personal Change* (Milwaukee: ASQC Quality Pr., 1992), 3.