

# Delivering a WOW User Experience: Do Academic Librarians Measure Up?

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In 1991 Joseph Pine and James Gilmore published the book *The Experience Economy*. It started a business revolution by introducing the concept of the user experience, and promoted the idea that products and services could achieve competitive advantage, and even premium prices, by moving beyond mere customer service into a new level of customer interaction referred to as the customer user experience. Twenty years later, the idea of designing a unique experience is an accepted form of business practice. Joseph Michelli, a user experience consultant to industry, in a series of books has documented how Starbucks, the Pikes Place Fish Market, the Ritz-Carlton Hotels and Zappos have all leveraged user experience to create service organizations that offer their customers unique, memorable high-fidelity service that creates loyalty even when newer and less costly competitive products and services are introduced.<sup>1</sup>

Though its origins are less well known, the “WOW” experience has emerged as an approach to “notably great experiences are punctuated by a moment of “wow,” when the product or service delights, anticipates the needs of, or pleasantly surprises a customer.”<sup>2</sup> The rationale for the WOW experience is that as more organizations design better experiences for consumers, to retain their customers and attract new ones it is essential to imagine and implement new and better experiences that are unexpected and remarkable. Of course, there is debate about what a WOW

experience is and whether it is even necessary. Some designers argue that it is impossible to define an experience for anyone since everyone experiences the world in a totally unique way.<sup>3</sup> Others believe that it is essential to design products and services that enable their users to accomplish an intended task as simply as possible, no more and no less, and that experiences are unnecessary and of little use to consumers.<sup>4</sup> Whichever school of thought individual librarians choose to follow, there is no denying that the interest in studying user experience and applying that knowledge to designing better library experiences is on the rise as indicated by a growing number of libraries creating “User Experience Librarian” positions, and the addition of user experience interest groups to library associations.

## **A Library WOW Experience?**

While the debate about the value of designing a user experience will likely continue there is no arguing that multiple iconic businesses, from Disney to Apple, have built immensely loyal followings by delivering uniquely systemic experiences. Therefore, academic librarians should find value in examining and achieving an understanding of how a designed user experience could help to create a better library user experience. One challenge is actually defining or even accurately describing the components of a WOW experience. “I’m not sure how to define it, but I know

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what it is when it happens to me.” That statement may help to describe a WOW experience. We may lack the words to accurately describe it, but we all know when it’s happening to us however we might define it individually.

The most dominant use of the term “user experience” in the field of librarianship is to describe the usability of online interfaces, as demonstrated by the large number of articles on this topic published in the library literature. This usage of the term is narrower, and refers to the experience a library user has when he or she uses the library online public catalog or a database search system. Many libraries conduct usability studies to learn how to improve the user experience, but interface usability has only a limited connection to the WOW experience. A holistic WOW experience that encompasses every user touch point is much less discussed in the literature. The lack of discussion about this holistic library user experience is owing to a general unawareness about the field of user experience as it applies to an entire organization and the services and products it delivers.

What many academic librarians might be surprised to learn is that there is an effort made to better capture and describe the qualities of a user experience. What is referred to as the *Study of Great Retail Shopping Experiences in North America*, a survey of over 1,000 shoppers in the United States and Canada, conducted in 2009, provided insight into what goes into creating a WOW experience.<sup>5</sup> The survey respondents pointed to 28 different elements of a great experience. The study team learned that a typical WOW experience consists of a mix of at least 10 of those elements all in one retail transaction. Most important perhaps is that there are five major areas that contribute to a WOW experience. They are:

1. engagement: being polite, caring and genuinely interested in listening and helping;
2. executional excellence: outstanding knowledge of the products and ability to explain them;
3. brand experience: appealing design and atmosphere making customers feel they are special;
4. expediting: helping speed the process to save customers time and sensitivity to their time constraints;
5. problem recovery: efficiency in resolving problems and compensating customers

This paper describes a research study that sought to explore both student and academic library worker

perceptions about the library user experience. The research objective was to determine if students would describe their library experience as a WOW experience, as defined in the *Study of Great Retail Shopping Experiences in North America*, and to learn how library workers would perceive the students’ experience. That is, how do library workers respond when asked how they think students will describe their library experience; do they believe the students will say they have a WOW library experience? Little is known about how students and librarians perceive the library user experience, and an objective of this study was to gain insight into the factors that would constitute a WOW academic library user experience.

### Research Design

The *Study of Great Retail Shopping Experiences in North America* is based on a questionnaire that consists of approximately 75 questions aimed at ascertaining the qualities of a positive retail experience. A smaller set of those questions, those most specific to a service experience, was selected for use in this study. The purpose was to present to students a set of questions that would help the author to determine if students would describe their library experience as a positive one with results similar to the WOW study. To accomplish this, a survey was created with two sets of responses for each question. Students were asked to answer each question for their library experience and then a second time for a retail shopping experience. Any student visiting the library on a survey day was eligible to participate, so the survey population does include both undergraduates and graduates. This design would provide a capacity to compare how the students perceive their library experience to their retail experience. In addition the students were asked to identify what characteristics were most important to them in defining an outstanding library and retail experience. See Appendix A for a copy of survey questionnaire.

The second part of the research design involved the staff members. Staff working in any public service department was invited to complete the same survey questionnaire that the students completed. However, staff was instructed to complete the survey from the perspective of a student. That is, they were not to fill it out acting as themselves, but as the students. The goal was to determine if there were significant differences between the student and staff responses. The ex-

pectation is that staff would perceive the service as a much better experience than would the students. The phenomenon of staff overrating their service is not uncommon. In one often cited study from 2005, the consulting firm Bain & Company surveyed U.S. businesses, asking employees if they delivered superior customer experiences. Eighty percent of the surveyed companies said they did. However, when the customers of those same companies were asked if they received a superior customer experience, only 8 percent replied in the affirmative. Staff members will typically rate the quality of their service higher than do community members.<sup>6</sup>

This research was conducted at two academic libraries, both member of the Association of Research Libraries. The first library, on the east coast, collected 106 usable student surveys and 19 usable staff surveys. The second library, on the west coast, collected 98 student surveys and 18 usable staff surveys. Two libraries were included in the study to achieve a more reasonable number of completed surveys, but also to see what differences, if any, might occur between the libraries. The two libraries used somewhat different approaches to identifying respondents. At the east coast library a daily randomized schedule was created to invite students to participate at different times of the day on different floors of the library. This approach gave students an equal, random chance to participate. At the west coast library the primary approach to gathering data was to ask students to complete the survey as they came to the library’s front entrance.

### Data Analysis

The actual *Study of Great Retail Shopping Experiences in North America* contains approximately 75 questions, and depending on responses the question structuring becomes complex. In order to keep the survey instrument simple to encourage student participation, only nine questions were selected. Each question in the survey used wording fairly close to that found in

the actual survey. A tenth question was constructed to gauge which factors presented in the questions were most or least important to the students for a WOW library or shopping experience. In this section the responses to each question are presented. All of the data presented in the figures is for both the east and west coast institutions, as well as for all students and staff.

There are many reasons for making the trip to a library or retail store. If the reason is to find something you need or want, the most critical and fundamental test of a great experience must be finding and acquiring that desired item. If it’s not there, that’s going to detract from the experience; if it is there, but finding it was an incredible challenge, that’s problematic as well. The first two questions in the survey were directed to this element of the experience. The first question asked: Was the book / journal or retail product that you wanted on the shelf or in stock?

Though library users often report missing items, three-quarters of the respondents indicated they successfully find items on the shelf. Students will complain when they the book they want is not on the shelf, but the results suggest that the vast majority do find what they want. That librarians hear more failure than success stories clearly impacts their perception about the degree to which this problem exists. Staff thought many more students would answer “no” to this question. On this dimension of a WOW experience we can see that the student respondents have a better experience with finding things in their location at the library than when retail shopping.

Not only do library workers hear complaints about items that cannot be found, but the general perception is that library catalogs and book stacks are difficult to use and navigate, adding to the frustration of library users and detracting from their user experience. To improve this element of the library experience, considerable time and money is spent on interface design, stacks navigation and signage. In what may come as a surprise to many academic librarians,

**TABLE 1**  
**Was the item you wanted on the shelf?**

<b>1A. LIB–on shelf</b>	<b>Student</b>	<b>Staff</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>1B. Retail–on shelf</b>	<b>Student</b>	<b>Staff</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Yes	76%	65%	12%	Yes	67%	65%	2%
No	10%	35%	-25%	No	17%	30%	-13%
Can't Remember	4%	0%	4%	Can't Remember	6%	0%	6%
N/A	9%	0%	9%	N/A	10%	5%	5%

**TABLE 2**  
**Was the item you wanted easy to find?**

2A. LIB–easy find	Student	Staff	Difference	2B. Retail–easy find	Student	Staff	Difference
Yes	71%	49%	22%	Yes	61%	62%	–1%
No	21%	51%	–31%	No	23%	30%	–7%
Can't Remember	2%	0%	2%	Can't Remember	5%	0%	5%
N/A	6%	0%	6%	N/A	11%	8%	3%

the vast majority of the student respondents indicated they easily found what they were looking for on the shelf. Students indicated they found it easier to find things at the library than at retail stores. Showing their misperception, staff respondents thought only half of the students would say it was easy; they were off by 22 percent. They thought many more students would answer “no” than actually did.

Consumers have become more accustomed to being acknowledged when they enter a retail store. Whether the store has a greeter in place or simply expects employees to acknowledge and greet customers, some form of acknowledgement is becoming more the norm and consumers take notice. Taking action to acknowledge a student arriving at the library is a matter of some controversy among academic librarians; many do not see it as their role.. When asked “Were you ever acknowledged by having someone say hello to you or otherwise welcome you?” 58 percent of the students responded “no” for the library but 69 percent responded “yes” for the retail store. As seen in Table 3 below, the staff response was almost identical to

the students’ response for the library, but was off by a wider margin for the retail store part of the question. Only 51 percent of staff thought students would say “yes” to being acknowledged at a retail store, a full 17-point difference. The results should cause library staff that sees no value in acknowledging users to rethink their position on this matter.

Executorial excellence is one of the top five qualities of a WOW experience, and executing properly requires a clear understanding of the user’s need. With their skill at reference negotiation, you would expect academic librarians to excel at getting the student’s question right. The next question in the survey dealt with the asking of questions, not answering them. Students were asked if the person helping them asked the right questions when they were trying to explain what they wanted? Unexpectedly, the difference between the library and the retail store was minimal; both are rated nearly the same. For the library, in Table 4 below, 69 percent of the students indicated that, yes, they were asked the right questions. For the retail store it was 61 percent. While the staff called it nearly

**TABLE 3**  
**Did someone acknowledge you at the library/retail shop?**

3A. LIB–acknowledge	Student	Staff	Difference	3B. Retail–acknowledge	Student	Staff	Difference
Yes	33%	38%	–5%	Yes	69%	51%	17%
No	58%	54%	4%	No	24%	35%	–12%
Can't Remember	5%	0%	5%	Can't Remember	3%	5%	–2%
N/A	3%	8%	–5%	N/A	4%	8%	–4%

**TABLE 4**  
**Did the person assisting you ask the right questions?**

4A. LIB–right questions	Student	Staff	Difference	4B. Retail–right questions	Student	Staff	Difference
Yes	69%	65%	4%	Yes	61%	46%	15%
No	8%	11%	–3%	No	11%	22%	–10%
Can't Remember	3%	0%	3%	Can't Remember	8%	5%	2%
N/A	20%	24%	–4%	N/A	20%	27%	–7%

**TABLE 5**  
**Did the person assisting you appear genuinely interested in your question?**

5A. LIB-staff interest	Student	Staff	Difference	5B. Retail-staff interest	Student	Staff	Difference
Yes	43%	51%	-9%	Yes	43%	38%	5%
No	36%	35%	1%	No	37%	57%	-20%
Can't Remember	6%	3%	4%	Can't Remember	8%	0%	8%
N/A	15%	11%	4%	N/A	12%	5%	7%

perfectly for the library, they were much less accurate for retail stores, where they responded that only 46 percent of the students would answer “yes”. Staff appear to underestimate the quality of the question asking at retail stores.

Retail stores operate in a much more highly competitive environment than libraries. So it is necessary for retail store employees to make the customer feel that his or her questions or needs are important. Achieving a high level of attention beyond the initial acknowledgement is a customer expectation for a WOW experience. Given the importance of providing attention for competitive advantage, library workers should be giving more thought to the amount of attention they pay to community members. When asked about the level of interest staff showed in their research or retail interests, student respondents, as shown in Table 5 below, reported nearly identical levels of interest at both the library and the retail store. For both, 43 percent of students answered “yes” to indicate they recalled staff showing interest in their questions, while 36 percent answered “no” for the library and 37 percent for the retail store. The fairly low level of “yes” responses is somewhat surprising given the importance of this factor in the retail study. Staff anticipation of what the students would answer was off slightly for “yes” to the library response, with staff thinking that more students would say “yes” than actually did. A much larger disparity occurred with 57 percent of staff thinking that students would say “no” for the retail store.

To execute exceptionally, retail store staff must demonstrate deep knowledge of their services and products. Every WOW experience depends on a customer receiving accurate information about services and products, and staff must also apply their knowledge so that customer transactions complete successfully. Encountering a worker who seems to know little about the products or who provides incorrect or incomplete information makes for a bad experience. Again, as skilled subject specialists and with great experience answering tough questions, academic librarians should perform well in this area, and the results confirm that. When the students were asked if the employee demonstrated a thorough and complete knowledge of the subject or service inquired about, nearly 25 percent more answered “yes” for the library, as shown in Table 6. Only 50 percent of the students answered “yes” for the retail store, but 75 percent said “yes” for the library. Staff responses were only significantly different in that staff thought more students would respond “no” for the retail store than actually did.

When it comes to providing service of almost any type, being fast and efficient is another critical component (expediting) of the WOW experience. Even Starbucks found it necessary to take action to reduce the length of their lines despite wanting their baristas to engage with customers and build relationships, and more retailers have introduced self-checkout stations to speed things up. Given the amount of time it can take to conduct a proper refer-

**TABLE 6**  
**Did the person assisting you have a complete/thorough knowledge of the product of service?**

6A. LIB-knowledge	Student	Staff	Difference	6B. Retail-knowledge	Student	Staff	Difference
Yes	71%	76%	-5%	Yes	50%	41%	10%
No	8%	16%	-8%	No	29%	46%	-17%
Can't Remember	5%	0%	5%	Can't Remember	5%	3%	3%
N/A	16%	8%	8%	N/A	15%	11%	4%

**TABLE 7**  
**Was the person assisting you sensitive to your time?**

7A. LIB-quick	Student	Staff	Difference	7B. Retail-quick	Student	Staff	Difference
Yes	72%	57%	15%	Yes	51%	46%	6%
No	7%	30%	-23%	No	24%	41%	-17%
Can't Remember	6%	0%	6%	Can't Remember	8%	0%	8%
N/A	16%	14%	2%	N/A	17%	14%	4%

ence interview and locate the correct information, one might expect that academic libraries would be second to retail stores in the dimension of expediency. For Table 7 below, students were asked if the “person assisting you was sensitive to your time and helped you as quickly as possible while still being thorough”, more students indicated “yes” for libraries than for retail, with 72 percent and 51 percent respectively. Not surprising library staff expected the exact opposite. Only 57 percent of the staff thought the students would say “yes” for the library, while 30 percent thought the answer would be “no”, yet only 7 percent of students selected “no” as their response for the library.

As consumers, academic librarians understand the value of being treated with kindness, and no doubt most do their best to treat students with compassion and empathy during library transactions. To what extent we routinely succeed in doing so is difficult to measure, and no doubt every academic librarian could point to a colleague who could improve in this area. Yet when students were asked if “the person assisting you could be described as patient and caring” the library once again emerged ahead of the retail store in the students’ minds. In Table 8 below, the library is described as patient and caring by 76 percent of the students, but only 47 percent answered “yes” for the retail store. Clearly students believe that library workers are more patient and caring, but what about the staff and their perception of how students would respond? By a modest mar-

gin staff underestimated the positive response. By an average 10 percent less, staff thought fewer students would say “yes” about the library. Staff also thought fewer students would answer “yes” about the retail experience, and more would say “no” about both the library and retail experience. Staff may perceive students as being less concerned about the patience and caring factor, and therefore less likely to think about it much.

No one wants to have a problem at a library or a retail store, but on occasion we all do have them and our libraries are no exception in creating them. Consumers anticipate occasional problems, but what matters to their WOW experience is great problem resolution. The final individual question in the survey, shown in Table 9 below, asked students “If you had a problem or something wasn’t right, did the person assisting you solve the issue quickly?” Once again, library staff underestimated themselves. The students’ response reveals that they find the library is the place where their problems are solved most effectively, as 62 percent said “yes” for the library experience but only 43 percent said “yes” for the retail experience. Library staff were close in responding that they thought 59% percent would say yes for the library, and they thought 6 percent more would say “yes” for retail. There was a greater difference for the “no” response between students and staff, with staff responding that 18 percent more students would say “no” for the library and 12 percent more for retail.

**TABLE 8**  
**Was the person assisting you patient and caring?**

8A. LIB-patient / care	Student	Staff	Difference	8B. Retail-patient / care	Student	Staff	Difference
Yes	76%	65%	11%	Yes	47%	38%	9%
No	6%	11%	-5%	No	24%	43%	-20%
Can't Remember	6%	5%	1%	Can't Remember	10%	5%	4%
N/A	12%	19%	-7%	N/A	15%	14%	2%

**TABLE 9**  
**If there was a problem was it resolved quickly and efficiently**

9A. LIB-solve problems	Student	Staff	Difference	9B. Retail-solve problems	Student	Staff	Difference
Yes	62%	59%	2%	Yes	43%	49%	-6%
No	9%	27%	-18%	No	20%	32%	-12%
Can't Remember	4%	0%	4%	Can't Remember	12%	0%	12%
N/A	25%	14%	11%	N/A	25%	19%	7%

For the final question of the survey, respondents were presented with two tables, one each for the library and the retail store, and were asked to rank on a scale of one to five (with five being most important), the importance of eight different factors in contributing to the delivery of a great library or retail store experience. The goal was to obtain a better understanding of what students look for in a library experience, and what factors should be emphasized in developing a WOW library experience. Also, from the students' own perspective, would that experience differ much from their expectations in a retail store experience. Here is a summary of the results shown in Table 10 below:

- Eye contact—Students indicate this is more important in a retail experience, but not by a large margin. Staff underestimates the im-

portance of eye contact as far more of them believe it is not important at all in either the library or retail experience.

- Easy to locate items—This rises to the top for libraries although it's also clearly important for retail stores. This is rated at 4 or 5 for 89 percent of the students for the library, and 88 percent for retail. Library staff thought more students would rate this as a 5, with 92 percent of staff making that selection.
- Staff knowledge—Not quite as high as easy to locate, but also among the top items in importance for both libraries and retail stores. Library staff indicated this would be more important to students than it actually was for the library experience.

**TABLE 10**  
**Rank the factors for a great library experience**

10A. LIB-eye contact	Student	Staff	Difference	11A. Retail-eye contact	Student	Staff	Difference
1	19%	35%	-16%	1	9%	32%	-24%
2	22%	22%	0%	2	13%	14%	-1%
3	30%	19%	11%	3	28%	22%	7%
4	19%	11%	8%	4	24%	16%	7%
5	10%	14%	-3%	5	26%	16%	10%
10B. LIB-easy locate	Student	Staff	Difference	11B. Retail-easy locate	Student	Staff	Difference
1	2%	3%	0%	1	2%	8%	-6%
2	2%	0%	2%	2	1%	0%	1%
3	7%	0%	7%	3	8%	3%	6%
4	15%	5%	9%	4	19%	14%	6%
5	74%	92%	-18%	5	69%	76%	-7%
10C. LIB-staff knowledge	Student	Staff	Difference	11C. Retail-staff knowledge	Student	Staff	Difference
1	2%	0%	2%	1	1%	11%	-9%
2	4%	3%	1%	2	4%	0%	4%
3	6%	0%	6%	3	14%	0%	14%
4	21%	19%	2%	4	23%	32%	-9%
5	67%	78%	-11%	5	58%	57%	1%

**TABLE 10**  
Rank the factors for a great library experience

10D. LIB-feel important	Student	Staff	Difference	11D. Retail-feel important	Student	Staff	Difference
1	21%	27%	-6%	1	17%	27%	-10%
2	24%	11%	13%	2	12%	11%	1%
3	32%	43%	-11%	3	30%	32%	-3%
4	14%	8%	6%	4	20%	14%	6%
5	10%	11%	-1%	5	22%	16%	5%
10E. LIB-sensitive time	Student	Staff	Difference	11E. Retail-sensitive time	Student	Staff	Difference
1	2%	0%	2%	1	1%	8%	-7%
2	4%	3%	2%	2	6%	0%	6%
3	21%	24%	-4%	3	19%	14%	5%
4	35%	35%	0%	4	29%	43%	-14%
5	38%	38%	0%	5	45%	35%	10%
10F. LIB-caring	Student	Staff	Difference	11F. Retail-caring	Student	Staff	Difference
1	3%	11%	-8%	1	2%	14%	-11%
2	12%	5%	7%	2	8%	11%	-2%
3	27%	16%	11%	3	24%	27%	-3%
4	31%	46%	-15%	4	30%	30%	1%
5	27%	22%	5%	5	35%	19%	16%
10G. LIB-give advice	Student	Staff	Difference	11G. Retail-give advice	Student	Staff	Difference
1	1%	8%	-7%	1	3%	11%	-8%
2	5%	5%	0%	2	6%	11%	-4%
3	14%	19%	-5%	3	22%	14%	8%
4	27%	16%	11%	4	24%	30%	-6%
5	52%	51%	1%	5	46%	35%	10%
10H. LIB-fix problems	Student	Staff	Difference	11H. Retail-fix problems	Student	Staff	Difference
1	1%	3%	-2%	1	2%	8%	-6%
2	3%	0%	3%	2	3%	0%	3%
3	12%	8%	4%	3	10%	5%	5%
4	29%	30%	-1%	4	24%	19%	5%
5	54%	59%	-5%	5	60%	68%	-7%

- Feeling important—WOW experiences often aim for making the customer feel that he or she is the most important person to the store employee. The response is mixed for both libraries and retail stores, but clearly it is not as important to the library experience with only 24 percent ranking it a 4 or 5, but 42 percent ranked it a 4 or 5 for a retail experience. Staff responses were fairly close to the student responses, with even fewer staff thinking this was important for a library experience.
- Sensitive to time—Students want to avoid having their time wasted, and that is reflected here. There is only a percentage point difference between the library and retail in the 4 and 5 ratings. Staff also recognized the importance of being sensitive to student time with nearly identical responses, except for the retail store where staff thought it would be less important to students, but not by much.
- Demonstrate caring about me—Another mixed bag with answers across the board, but

it's slightly less important for the library experience with 58 percent ranking it a 4 or 5, but 65 percent ranking it a 4 or 5 for retail. In general, staff thought this would be less important for students for both the library and retail.

- Provide advice and recommendations—This is one of the main reasons students seek out librarians, and the value of it for their experience is reflected in the response. The majority ranked it a 4 or 5 (79 percent) for the library, but somewhat less (70 percent) for the retail store. Staff responses were not significantly different.
- Problem resolution—This is also considered quite important for both the library and the retail store with 83 percent ranking this a 4 or 5 for the library and 84 percent ranking it a 4 or 5 for the retail store. Staff recognizes the importance of problem resolution for the quality of the experience as more of them, by a slight margin, gave it a 5 ranking than students.

### Discussion of Findings

Student responses to the questions about their library and retail store experiences should please academic library staff because on the majority of the dimensions of the WOW experience students indicate their library experience outperforms their retail store experience. While the survey responses by themselves do not confirm that the academic library does indeed deliver a WOW experience, it does suggest that for multiple WOW factors academic librarians are perceived as doing good work and paying attention to what matters for a good library experience. A number of worthwhile observations emerge from the data analysis that provide ideas for ways in which academic librarians can focus their efforts to design and execute a library experience in a more intentional way.

Questions one and two provide a good example of this very thing. Academic library staff spends considerable time on matters related to making sure books and other materials are easily located. What the survey indicates is that we're doing better than we think when it comes to the experience of finding materials. Students indicate they are finding items on the shelf, and the process for finding those items is manageable, perhaps even easy. The problem with our spending too much time re-engineering this part of

the experience, when it seems to be working well for the students, may derive from the occasional negative comments we do receive. In our minds we amplify this problem and spend inordinate amounts of time, energy and resources improving catalogs, signage, and more. Given that our experience is far weaker in other areas, it makes sense to re-allocate our energies to other aspects of the library experience

We should exert more effort on the acknowledgment of community members in the library. Whether it happens when they arrive, when they approach the service desk or when they visit the café, being acknowledged is part of the WOW experience and it should be happening more often. The results indicated that students aren't being acknowledged at the library the way they are at retail stores, and that library staff underestimate the extent to which students take notice of being acknowledged. None of this tells us to what extent student like or dislike being acknowledged. Given what we know about the impact of WOW experiences on shoppers, that it breeds loyalty and return visits, library staff have more to gain than lose in making more effort to acknowledge community members.

When students need help, whether at the library or a retail store, they indicate that they are being asked the right questions. That's good news for library staff because students have a better experience when their search gets off to a good start. What should concern us is that students don't see library staff doing a much better than what they experience at retail stores. Given the even lower numbers for the question on staff interest in students' research interests, we have an opportunity to improve the experience students have when they seek our help. This is particularly important because library staff think they do a better job of showing interest than students think they actually do, and they also significantly underestimate the quality of the experience students receive at a retail store. So while we may think showing an interest in the student's interest is important and that we are better at it than retailers, in fact we are not.

One area where students and library workers tend to agree on the quality of the library experience is in the demonstration of knowledge. Executional excellence is a critical element of the WOW experience, and staff must be fully familiar with all the products and services their organization delivers. The majority of the students responded "yes" for the library experience which was considerably higher than the num-

ber for the retail experience. It's good to know that academic library staff are perceived as being more knowledgeable than retail store workers. We need to continue to emphasize the importance of executional excellence in delivering a WOW library experience. Libraries are in no position to do or offer everything that potential competitors can, but being knowledgeable is the WOW dimension where we can excel.

An area of surprise was the student response to the question on the importance of being sensitive to their time. The results are unexpected because the students think the library is where the staff is quicker and more sensitive to their time. Staff thought that far fewer students would respond "yes", so to some extent we are doing a better job than we think. One possibility may be staff's assumption that when we assist students we consume more time and go slower in answering more complex questions. When asked, what students may be recalling are directional questions or standard circulation desk transactions that are actually handled quite quickly. Or perhaps the students have recently had bad retail experiences, ones that were quite slow and time consuming, and that somehow affected their response. We may not fully understand the response, but we should appreciate that students think we are doing well in this area, and pay attention to make sure we don't slow down.

Just as library staff underestimated their sensitivity to student time, we also underestimate the importance of being patient and caring as factors in the quality of the library experience. However, library staff did accurately respond that students would be more positive about the library experience than the retail experience. The student response suggests that they believe library staff is patient and caring, and there is a considerable difference between the library and retail experience in this component of the WOW experience. The results not only point to the importance of being patient and caring, but that we can tap into this in a way that commercial enterprises may be less capable of doing. The library has no profit motive. If library workers are patient and caring it's because they want to help students succeed academically. It's not surprising that students may feel less cared for in a commercial setting. So this is an area where library staff can exceed what students experience elsewhere. More and better training opportunities focused on soft skills like patience, caring and empathy, should allow us to improve in this area.

Compared to retail stores, according to the student respondents, library staff are actually doing pretty well at problem resolution with 62 percent of the students indicating that library staff effectively resolved problems. The number for retail stores was considerably lower at only 43 percent. It may be that because library services are free to students, whereas retail transactions involve "real" money, that they are more forgiving of the problem resolution in a library. Absent of monetary consequences in the majority of transactions, it may be easier for library staff to resolve problems than for retail workers who may have less authority to make on the spot resolutions. Although the students found their library experience with problem resolution better than their retail experience, we shouldn't be satisfied with over 35% of the students responding "no" or anything other than yes. We need to excel at problem resolution.

There are a number of interesting findings in the final question in which student indicated which factors are important to them for a good library or retail experience. This question, more so than the others, provides insight into those experience dimensions where academic librarians should focus their efforts. Of the eight items listed, several fall into what we might call the "soft skills" category. Items such as eye contact, caring and patience, providing advice, and making them feel important are things that students experience but that are less tangible. On the other hand, making physical items easy to locate, knowledgeable staff, and resolving problems are more concrete functional areas. While all are important to the overall experience, from the perspective of the students, the functional items are the most important to them, judging by how they ranked items with a 4 (important) or 5 (very important).

Academic librarians should exert less effort on the ease of use of locating items in the library, except where there are recognized weaknesses based on student complaints or failures. Otherwise, this may be one functional area where the experience is already acceptable to students. The weakest functional area of the user experience is time sensitivity. Academic librarians should look for ways to improve processes to make using the library more seamless, convenient and time saving. Are there ways to reduce waiting times at service desks? What can be done to get special request items to community members more quickly? While academic librarians are doing well in other functional

areas such as knowledge (executorial excellence), advising and problem resolution, all could certainly use improvement since we see evidence that students consider them essential to their WOW experience at the library. That said, all library staff should discuss the value of improving in the soft skill areas, such as eye contact, caring, patience and making students feel as if they and their questions are important. Excelling in all these areas can only help to contribute to a far better library experience.

### Other Observations

What about the two libraries at which students were surveyed? Were there differences in the results? The author sought to determine if there would be any significant difference between the east and west coast libraries. The results for both the student and staff surveys showed amazing similarity for both libraries. There were few questions where the differences between respondents at each institution were more than 10 percentage points apart. For the vast majority of the questions the average difference was typically 3 to 5 percentage points. The lack of difference helps to confirm that despite the geographic difference, the respondents saw things much the same way in terms of how they perceive the library experience and what is important about it to them. There is no clear cut evidence to allow the author to state that one library or the other had staff whose responses were closer to or farther apart from the students' responses.

It is also difficult to detect, given the simplicity of the research design, if it is possible that response bias impacted the results. Is there a potential for bias when the survey is administered in the library by a librarian? What if the questionnaire was distributed at a shopping mall or some other entirely neutral ground? Does being in the library and in the midst of librarians somehow skew the students' perception of the library experience in favor of the library? Students were randomly selected, and all students who responded did not know the library staff member distributing the survey. It is possible that the location could introduce some bias, but this is difficult to confirm without re-executing the survey in different locations. Admittedly, it would be of great interest to conduct the survey away from the library, and potentially include students who may not make regular use of the library, as did all those who participated in the survey.

### Conclusion

The goal of this research was to gain insight into what would comprise a WOW experience for student members of the academic library's user community, and better understand in what ways and which areas academic librarians are succeeding or failing to provide the WOW experience. While some academic librarians will no doubt scoff at the idea of designing a unique experience for an academic library, the results of this research suggest that there are steps librarians can take and strategies they can put into place to create a better library experience for their user community members. While academic libraries are not retail stores, good ideas for how to turn traditional transactions into WOW experiences may be possible by studying and learning from reports like the *Study of Great Retail Shopping Experiences in North America*.

This research is valuable to academic librarians because it suggests that on some dimensions of the WOW experience, students already perceive their library as providing an experience that meets or exceeds their expectations for a retail store experience. That means academic librarians could already be well on their way to designing an even better user experience for user community members. Joseph Michelli, user experience consultant, often remarks that while it is important to study other organizations to better understand the ways in which a user experience may be designed, each organization should resist copying another's user experience. Each should instead design an experience based on the unique culture and needs of its own community. It is hoped that academic librarians will use the information from this study to examine their own library user experience, and take the initial or next steps to elevate that experience into one that truly WOWs their community.

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### Notes

1. Joseph Michelli Home Page (see: books by this author) <http://www.josephmichelli.com/books.html>
2. Brandon Schauer, "The Long WoW" *Adaptive Path Blog* <http://www.adaptivepath.com/ideas/essays/archives/000858>. php October 25, 2007. Retrieved December 4, 2010.

3. Oliver Reichenstein, "Can Experience be Designed?" *iA* <http://www.informationarchitects.jp/en/can-experience-be-designed-2/> September 17, 2010. Retrieved December 10, 2010.

4. Matthew Dixon, Karen Freeman, and Nicholas Toman. "STOP Trying to Delight Your Customers," *Harvard Business Review* 88, no. 7/8 (July/August 2010): 116–122.

5. For an introduction to the *Study of Great Retail Shopping Experiences in North America* see the article "Getting to 'Wow': Consumers Describe What Makes a Great Shopping Experience" at: <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=2275>

6. Peter Morville, Todd Wilkens, Brandon Schauer and David Verba (*Subject to Change: Creating Great Products and Services for an Uncertain World*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, Inc. p. 104, 2008).

## Appendix A: Survey Instrument

### Academic Library Experience Survey—Fall 2010

Thank you for participating in this survey. You will be asked a series of questions about your recent experience using the **Paley Library** and a similar experience in a **retail store** (think GAP, not 7-Eleven). Please respond with your typical encounters at both service locations.

At the completion of the survey, if you would like to be entered into a drawing for a **\$50 bookstore gift card**, please complete the final page of this document. This is a completely anonymous survey (the final page with your information will be removed before the data is compiled), so your answers cannot be linked to you individually.

#### **Sample question:**

Please place an X in the box that best correlates with your most recent experience.

**Thinking about your most recent library/store experience, was the library/store open when you wanted to visit:**

	Library		Retail Store/ Service
	Yes, it was open	X	Yes, it was open
X	No, it was closed		No, no it was closed
	Not Applicable		Not Applicable
	Can't recall		Can't recall

Begin the survey.

#### **1. Was the book / journal or retail product that you wanted on the shelf or in stock?**

	Library		Retail Store/ Service
	Yes, it was on shelf		Yes, it was on shelf
	No, it was not on the shelf		No, it was not on the shelf
	Not applicable		Not applicable
	Can't remember		Can't remember

#### **2. Was the book / journal or retail product that you wanted easy to find?**

	Library		Retail Store/ Service
	Yes, it was easy to find		Yes, it was easy to find
	No, it was not easy to find		No, it was not easy to find
	Not applicable		Not applicable
	Can't remember		Can't remember

#### **3. Were you ever acknowledged by having someone say hello to you or otherwise welcome you?**

	Library		Retail Store/ Service
	Yes, I was acknowledged by staff		Yes, I was acknowledged by staff
	No, I was not acknowledged by staff		No, I was not acknowledged by staff
	Not applicable		Not applicable
	Can't remember		Can't remember

**4. Did the person helping you ask the right questions when you were trying to explain what you wanted?**

	<b>Library</b>		<b>Retail Store/ Service</b>
	Yes, they asked me the right questions to know what I wanted		Yes, they asked me the right questions to know what I wanted
	No, I was not asked the right questions for what I needed		No, I was not asked the right question for what I needed
	Not applicable		Not applicable
	Can't remember		Can't remember

**5. From the moment you walked into the library/store did you find that staff were interested in your re-search/retail interests?**

	<b>Library</b>		<b>Retail Store/ Service</b>
	Yes, staff were interested in what I was doing		Yes, staff were interested in what I was doing
	No, staff did not seem particularly interested in what I needed or wanted		No, staff did not seem particularly interested in what I needed or wanted
	Not applicable		Not applicable
	Can't remember		Can't remember

**6. Did the staff member or sales representative have a thorough and complete knowledge of the subject or service you inquired about?**

	<b>Library</b>		<b>Retail Store/ Service</b>
	Yes, the staff was very competent and knowledgeable		Yes, the staff was very competent and knowledgeable
	No, staff did not seem particularly knowledgeable about the services I needed		No, staff did not seem particularly interested in what I needed or wanted
	Not applicable		Not applicable
	Can't remember		Can't remember

**7. The person assisting you was sensitive to your time and helped you as quickly as possible while still being thorough.**

	<b>Library</b>		<b>Retail Store/ Service</b>
	Yes, the person helping me was sensitive to my time and saved it		Yes, the person helping me was sensitive to my time and saved it
	No, the person helping me didn't pay attention to my time and used more of my time than I wanted		No, the person helping me didn't pay attention to my time and used more of my time than I wanted
	Not applicable		Not applicable
	Can't remember		Can't remember

**8. The person assisting you could be described as patient and caring.**

	<b>Library</b>		<b>Retail Store/ Service</b>
	Yes, the person helping me can be described as patient and caring		Yes, the person helping me can be described as patient and caring
	No, the person helping me cannot be described as patient and caring		No, the person helping me cannot be described as patient and caring
	Not applicable		Not applicable
	Can't remember		Can't remember

**9. If you had a problem or something wasn't right, did the person assisting you solve the issue quickly?**

	<b>Library</b>		<b>Retail Store/ Service</b>
	Yes, the person solved the problem quickly		Yes, the person solved the problem quickly
	No, the person was not able to solve the problem		No, the person was not able to solve the problem
	Not applicable		Not applicable
	Can't remember		Can't remember

**10. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being very important and 1 being not important at all, how would you rank the following factors in helping you have a great experience at your university library?**

	1	2	3	4	5
Being immediately acknowledged with a greeting or eye contact by staff member					
What I want is available and is easy to locate					
If I need help the staff are competent and knowledgeable; they know the answers to my questions					
Make me feel like I am the most important person					
Are sensitive to my time and get me what I need fast					
Demonstrate they care about me and my needs					
Provide great advice and recommendations					
If I have a problem they fix it quickly and hassle free					

**11. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being very important and 1 being not important at all, how would you rank the following factors in helping you have a great experience at a retail store?**

	1	2	3	4	5
Being immediately acknowledged with a greeting or eye contact by staff member					
What I want is available and is easy to locate					
If I need help the staff are competent and knowledgeable; they know the answers to my questions					
Make me feel like I am the most important person					
Are sensitive to my time and get me what I need fast					
Demonstrate they care about me and my needs					
Provide great advice and recommendations					
If I have a problem they fix it quickly and hassle free					

**12. Can you recall a shopping experience that you had in the past year that was especially great, in that it created delight and surprise for you in any way? What were the most important qualities?**

**13. Is there anything you would like to share regarding your experience using the Paley Library?**