

Replication of the OCLC Perceptions Study: The Experience of Two Academic Libraries

Lynn Sutton and Rosann Bazirjian

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Introduction

In 2005, OCLC (Online Computer Library Center, Inc.) published *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*,¹ designed to explore people's information-seeking behaviors and build a better understanding of the "library" brand. Shortly thereafter, academic library directors across the United States began to wonder how their students would compare to OCLC's findings. In North Carolina, two library directors of neighboring academic institutions (for these purposes Institution A and Institution B) designed a study to replicate five main questions from the OCLC study in order to learn how their students' answers compared. Students at the respective institutions were asked the following five questions:

- What do you feel is the main purpose of a library?
- What is the first thing that you think of when you think of a library?

- Please describe your positive associations with the library.
- Please describe your negative associations with the library.
- If you could provide one piece of advice to your library, what would it be?

Research Questions

The two directors sought to answer the following research questions:

Are the student responses of Institution A/B similar to the responses found in the OCLC study? OCLC's data came from 396 participants of the survey who self-identified as currently attending a post-secondary institution. Can findings from the OCLC study be applied to these institutions?

How do student responses from the two institutions compare to each other? Institutions A and B are very different in terms of size, student body, and academic programs. Would this result in substantially different responses to the survey items?

Are there demographic differences in student responses to the survey? Demographic data gathered included age, gender, residency on or off campus, and

Lynn Sutton, Ph.D. is Director at Z. Smith Reynolds Library, Wake Forest University, e-mail: suttonls@wfu.edu; Rosann Bazirjian is Dean of University Libraries at The University of North Carolina—Greensboro, e-mail: robazirj@uncg.edu

year of college. Would these characteristics differentiate the data?

Review of the Literature

A review of *Library Literature* revealed many journal articles that mention OCLC in relation to perceptions of library services since 2005. Of those, 20 actually cite the *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* study. Of those 20, only one article refers to a survey that was done with results subsequently compared to OCLC's responses. That 2006 article by Carol Tenopir² links OCLC survey responses to a recent survey she conducted of faculty and students at seven universities in the United States and Australia.

Other articles focus on certain aspects of the OCLC survey results and relate those findings to the need for branding and to further discussion on the value of electronic resources, web sites and digital content.

Based on this literature search, the authors are confident that no other university libraries have produced a survey and study such as ours. Applying the OCLC findings to individual libraries is untried. Based on a review of the literature, we find that the generic OCLC survey responses are being used for local decision making at libraries across the country. This article will discuss whether or not the OCLC survey results are representative of the findings at two neighboring, yet significantly different institutions.

Sample

The study sample consisted of randomly selected students taken from two institutions of higher learning in North Carolina. Students were contacted by e-mail and asked to participate in a web based survey that elicited information on their perceptions of the library. Subjects were entered into drawings for \$100 gift cards to the campus bookstore as incentives for their participation in the survey. The sample at institution A consisted of 3,504 students with a response rate of 14.4%. The sample for institution B was 4,972 with a response rate of 9.8%. Institution A and Institution B are dramatically different universities. In addition to comparing a small, private institution (Institution A) to a mid-sized public institution (Institution B), (See Appendix A) there are substantial differences between the student populations of the two institutions.

The analysis used for this study was an *a priori* content analysis approach based on coding categories

published in the OCLC *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*. Content analysis is a systematic technique for summarizing any form of communication into fewer elements and is used to identify themes or other characteristics of communications. Communication is analyzed and codes are assigned to each content unit. The unit of analysis for this study was the complete response given by each subject for each open ended question.

Analysis of the Data

Analysis of the data was performed using *Roxanne Content Analyzer*, a Microsoft Access application. The two analysts independently reviewed the content for each question and completed a preliminary analysis using the same category codes that OCLC used in its *Perceptions* document. Analysts were allowed to identify multiple codes for each subject response since multiple themes were often present in the subject's responses. The analysts compared their analysis and refined their analysis approach for any disagreements in coding. The analysts then recoded the content for each open ended question using their refined understanding of the OCLC codes. Following analysis, the results were compared and reliability statistics were calculated. Reliability statistics ranged from 76.4% to 85.8%. Comparisons were made using institutional and demographic data and comparisons were made with the original OCLC study.

Answers to Research Questions

The first research question in this study asked whether the student responses of Institution A/B were similar to the responses found in the OCLC study. The answer to this question is a surprising no. The top ranked response was different in every category for OCLC and the combined Institution A/B results. *Facility/environment*³ was top ranked for all five questions from the two institutions and never higher than second in any of the OCLC questions. This is a startling finding. OCLC has convinced librarians that "books" are the library brand, undifferentiated by age or type of user. OCLC had only a small sample of 396 survey participants who self-identified as currently attending a post-secondary institution. These could have been students in community colleges, trade schools, liberal arts colleges, or research universities anywhere across the globe. This study provided a total sample of 964 students, 478 from Institution A and 486 from Insti-

tution B. These larger samples on individual campuses resulted in a much different response than the small, but broad sample from the OCLC study. "Library as place" is much more important to students on these two campuses than in the general OCLC findings. To learn the cause of these surprising results, it is necessary to probe deeper into the data.

The second research question asked how student responses from the two institutions compare to each other. The data show that responses from the two institutions were actually quite different. Institution A's students placed *facility/environment* in first place to every question, clearly an affirmation of the library as place. At Institution B, *facility/environment* placed fourth, second, second, first and second, respectively in answers to the five questions. Library as place was less valued here, for reasons we sought to identify. But when combined with the overwhelming emphasis on place at Institution A, it became the most prevalent combined answer in every category. Institution B responses much more closely resembled the OCLC set. In four of the five categories the top Institution B response was the same as the top OCLC response. What is it about these two neighboring sets of students that make them answer so differently? It could be local factors such as the physical condition of each library or the composition of each student body. We need to look at demographics for other possible clues.

The third research question asked if demographics matter. Here the answer was a definite yes, or at least for some categories of demographics. Gender was the least differentiating factor as males and females agreed on almost every question with a high degree of similarity. There was much more variability by residency. On-campus and off-campus students answered the questions quite differently. In four of the five questions, on-campus students continued to list *facility/environment* as their top answer, but off-campus students had other priorities. The first thing off-campus students thought of when they thought of a library was *books* followed by *facility/environment* and *research*. For the main purpose of a library, their top three answers were *materials*, *research*, and *information*. Off-campus students had the most positive associations with *products and offerings*, followed by *facility/environment*, and *staff*. Off-campus students provided more pieces of advice on *products and offerings* than on *facility/environment* or *customer/user service*. Looking at the characteristics of on-campus

students, they are more often in the first two years of their undergraduate careers and are in the 18-24 age group. The majority of students at Institution A live on campus. A majority of students attending Institution B live off campus.

The Age and Year in Class variables are closely linked. 18-24 year-olds are most often undergraduate students, especially at Institution A. Both the 18-24 age category and Years One through Four in school show *facility/environment* as the top rated response at both schools to each question. Even in questions where the overall Institution B response was something other than *facility/environment* (all questions except negative associations), when only Institution B undergraduates or students from 18-24 were considered, the top-rated answer was *facility/environment*. Looking at demographic data for each school, 18-24 year-olds are 85% of all Institution A participants and 42% of all Institution B participants. Together, they are 63% of the total combined participants. Looking at the Year in School demographic, students in all undergraduate years are 73% of the Institution A respondents and 40% of all Institution B respondents. Given the much lower percentage of undergraduates at Institution B, it is evident why total responses begin to differ from the overwhelmingly undergraduate student body at Institution A and why they begin to more closely resemble the broader global sample of OCLC.

Given this demographic analysis, it is reasonable to conclude that it is the age and year-in-school factor that is driving the place-centered answers of the overall sample. This validates perceptions that library staff have had for years, namely that undergraduates use the library most often to study. Conference halls and library literature in recent years have been filled with the phenomenon known as library as place. The recent boom in renovation that is transforming academic libraries into inviting, comfortable places for individual and collaborative study, complete with coffee shops, soft seating and places for group study is the physical manifestation of this phenomenon.

Graduate students demonstrated a difference from undergraduates in their values, as their answers indicated that *information* is the main purpose of a library for Master's students and *materials* are the main purpose for Doctoral students. Both Master's and Doctoral students say that the first thing that they think of is *books*, ironically the same response as the

broad, global OCLC study. Both Master's and Doctoral students say that *products and offerings* hold their most positive associations, although interestingly both Master's and Doctoral students go back to *facility/environment* in their negative associations. Again, it is *products and offerings* that both Master's and Doctoral students have in mind when they offer advice to the library.

One of the most fascinating findings of this study is the phenomenon of professional school students who very nearly replicate the answers of undergraduate students in their approach to the library. Like undergraduates, their top answers to all five questions were *facility/environment*. This could be a local phenomenon since at Institution A, law students are assigned permanent carrels within the library and become quite possessive about their space. Or it could be a more generalized phenomenon that law students, like undergraduates, study heavily out of textbooks and use the library for intense study and classroom preparation. Additional research is needed at other schools to test this finding.

Implications and Further Research

The major point the authors of this study wish to make is that libraries should not rely on the data presented in *College Students' Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* for making decisions in their local environments. Local data should be used for local decisions. Librarians have been led to believe that *books* are the first things that students think of when they think about libraries. Yet the combined survey results indicated that the *facility/environment* was the first thing thought of for the two libraries in this study. The demographics at Institution A are such that *facility/environment* is the first library thought from their students. However, *books* were the first library thought from the students at Institution B, as discussed earlier. Their environment, range of services and varied demography more closely resembles the respondents of the OCLC survey. The lower percentage of undergraduates at Institution B could explain why *facility/environment* was not number one in most categories. In other categories, Institution B more closely resembled the OCLC responses than Institution A. Libraries should compare themselves to the demographic charts in the Appendix to potentially see what their own students may be thinking and then test those suppositions with a local study of their own.

Local factors are likely to have played a role in the answers given by students at each institution. Relationships with students and condition of the physical facilities are seen as factors that may influence student responses in addition to the demographics cited above. Improvements have been made at both libraries since the time of the original study that may bear different results now.

The need for further research is clear. It would be useful to replicate this survey with members of the Association of Research Libraries. In addition, different types of libraries could benefit from conducting this survey, specifically special and public libraries. The authors suspect that the results of the survey taken at a public library would more closely resemble the OCLC survey results because of the range of services and demographics. The authors also strongly recommend that any libraries looking for data to renovate or upgrade local services consider conducting this survey. Both institutions will be sharing these survey findings with their respective provosts as they impact budget, service, and renovation decisions for the future.

Notes

1. OCLC, *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership* (2005). Available online at <http://www.oclc.org/reports/2005perceptions.htm> [Accessed 25 November 2008].
2. Carol Tenopir, "Perception of Library Value," *Library Journal* 131, no. 20 (2006): 36.
3. The OCLC study changed terminology from *building/environment* in questions 1 and 2 to *facility/environment* in questions 3 to 5.

Appendix A - Institutional Profiles

Comparisons Between Institution for Degrees Awarded and Faculty									
2006-2007	Degrees Awarded					Faculty			
	Bachelors	Masters	Doctoral	Law	Medical	Budgeted FTE	Under-graduate Student/faculty ratio	Tenured	Held doctorate/terminal degree
Inst. A	967	533	21	163	106	1,315.3	9.6	62%	81.1%
Inst. B	2,195	908	74			1,003.72	16.1	39.2%	78.3%
2007-2008	Admissions/Retention Rates								
	# 1st time degree seeking Freshman	# 1st time degree seeking Transfer	% of Freshman applicants accepted	% of Freshman enrolled	Avg SAT Scores for Enrolled 1st time Freshman	Retention % of Fall 2006 Freshman returned in Fall 2007	Graduated % of Freshman who entered in Fall 2001		
Inst. A	1,124	47	43%	16%	1316	93.6%	99.5 graduated in 6 years		
Inst. B	2,447	1,368	60%	30%	1039	75%	50% graduated in 6 years		
2007-2008	Institutional Cost Comparisons								
	Costs					Budget			
	Full time Tuition/Fees			Room & Board		Total Institutional Expenses			
Inst. A	\$34,330			\$9,500		\$257,967,000			
Inst. B	\$4,029 in state \$15,297 out of state			\$6,151		\$273,884,654			

Demographics		
Undergraduate Student Comparisons		
Inst. A	White	84.5%
	African American	6.5%
	American Indian	.5%
	Asian/Pacific	5.1%
	Hispanic	1.8%
	Unknown	1.6%
Inst. B	White	66.4%
	African American	21.4%
	American Indian	<1%
	Asian/Pacific	3.9%
	Hispanic	2.7%
	Unknown	5.4%

Demographics		
Graduate Student Comparison		
Inst. A	White	79.7%
	African American	9.7%
	American Indian	.4%
	Asian/Pacific	5.8%
	Hispanic	2.4%
	Unknown	2.0%
Inst. B	White	72.2%
	African American	14.3%
	American Indian	<1%
	Asian/Pacific	5.0%
	Hispanic	1.9%
	Unknown	6.1%