

Creating a Culture of Sustainable Relational Student Consultation in Support of Library Service Assessment

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Introduction

In Fall 2023, as part of a broader range of assessment and engagement activities, UVic Libraries began a program of low-threshold, sustainable, relational consultation with student groups and student leaders. In the years prior, students and student representatives told us that they wanted to know more about what the libraries offered, and to have more opportunities to provide input into the libraries' programs and services. In turn, the libraries wanted to build stronger relationships with students and student groups, and to gather more qualitative data that would inform us about students' library needs and perceptions in a sustainable way. To meet all of these goals, we took the approach of a simple two-question survey delivered multiple times in face-to-face settings.

Our initial findings helped to confirm and deepen our understanding of students' experiences with and awareness of library services. All students (but particularly undergraduates) tended to volunteer the most information about their experiences with self-serve resources like bookable spaces, digital collections, and equipment loans, and less about their experiences of mediated services like research help. At the same time, we found differentiated perceptions across

user groups like international, Indigenous, and graduate students. Due to our modest two-question approach, we found it sustainable to conduct several consultations each term, and to review the qualitative data that resulted. Students responded positively to our consultations and asked for more communication and engagement, signaling the success of our efforts to take a relationship-building approach to consultation.

This paper describes our methodology, findings, and the concrete actions we have taken so far in response to what we learned. These actions include new engagement strategies and service offerings, adjustments to core student services, routinized outreach, and ongoing funding for student positions. The paper also describes the initial impact of this work, including improved relationships with student leaders and groups, improved relationships with the International Centre for Students on our campus, improved social media engagement with students, and improved communication with students.

Key findings from our review of the consultation data include insights into general and differentiated student awareness and uptake of library services and resources; greater understanding into barriers and gaps for students using the library; greater understanding of how students prefer to receive library communication; and contributions to the growing field of work on relational (rather than transactional) approaches to library outreach and consultation.

Literature Review

The literature on student outreach in academic libraries is too substantial to review in its entirety here. Blummer and Kenton's 2019 thematic review of 174 articles on student outreach in academic libraries shows the popularity of this topic.¹ Porat provides another overview, similarly grouping user feedback studies from academic libraries into different topics such as place, satisfaction, and student experience.² Much of the literature in these overviews reports on the implementation and results of practical one-off consultation or outreach projects, often with the goal of assessing or improving a specific service such as reading and writing services,³ physical spaces,⁴ or meeting the needs of one

specific group of students such as international students,⁵ transfer students,⁶ or postgraduate students.⁷

Fewer articles focus on longitudinal consultation across student demographics (rather than to a single targeted demographic) with the goal of improving a broad range of library services and programs (rather than an individual, predetermined service or program.) Many do report on large-scale standardized surveys like LibQual+, which is a very different approach to consultation and assessment than we have taken. Still fewer articles address the relational aspects of developing a routine practice of student consultation.

Some articles share key relevant characteristics with our work. Rysavy et al. reviewed eight years' worth of student satisfaction surveys to gather longitudinal, broad-demographic feedback from students about library services and collections.⁸ Their method was simple, yet the qualitative data they collected was rich and helped to inform library decision-making and improve library programs. Chapman and Daly described a multi-year, mixed-methods project consulting with students from multiple underrepresented groups, to determine where improvements could be made to a wide range of library services.⁹ Their project did not take a specific relational approach, but care was given to the implicit power dynamics of consulting with underrepresented students, and their conclusions recommended including students from underrepresented groups in future consultation projects. Farrell and Mastel discuss the sustainability challenges of gathering and using qualitative data from students, as well as the need to assess the effectiveness of any outreach or consultation program.¹⁰

Lantzy, Limberg, and Quinonez outline a process for reimagining student learning assessment in a care-based relational framework, arguing that quantitative learning assessment is insufficient, and offering a richer approach that prioritizes students' voices and contributions.¹¹ This approach resonates with our goals for designing student consultation as a relational activity that

contributes not only to bettering library service but to strengthening relationships with students over time.

Purpose & Goals

As part of a 2022 reorganization, UVic Libraries created two new units: Engagement and Learning, and Organizational Analysis. These two units have been natural collaborators in developing, coordinating, and implementing assessment related to student-facing programs and services.

Organizational Analysis works systematically to gather, analyze, and report user feedback about the libraries, in part through administering a large-scale library user feedback survey on an intermittent basis. Through this survey, students expressed a desire for more communication from the libraries, including additional avenues for providing feedback. While the large-scale survey provided rich and valuable feedback about a wide range of library issues, it was not limited only to students and it generated more data than was practical to synthesize on a regular basis. It was also administered completely online, without any relational aspect. As a result, Engagement and Learning sought a nimbler and more personal way to connect specifically with students in an ongoing way.

Our goals in Engagement and Learning were to build and model a more relational (versus transactional) approach to working with students; to sustainably elicit qualitative student response data to support decision-making in the libraries; and ultimately to better understand and document not just outputs, but the impact of student-facing programs and services.

Design & Methodology

Our approach was simple but carefully designed. To keep our data manageable and the burden on students minimal, we took the minimalist approach of asking only two questions. We hoped that despite the simplicity of the approach, asking the same two questions of multiple groups of students over a substantial

period of time might yield interesting results. We also hoped the questions themselves and our approach of repeating consultations with various groups would help us to build or strengthen relationships with students and student groups.

Initially, our two questions were:

How do you most often use UVic Libraries?

How would you like to use UVic Libraries?

After trialing the questions, we found that some students interpreted the first question to mean, “How often do you use UVic Libraries?” and some students interpreted both questions to refer to the physical buildings and spaces only.

After revisions, our two questions became:

How do you usually use UVic Libraries? Please consider both the physical space and the online services.

How would you like to use UVic Libraries? Please consider both the physical space and the online services.

We began using these same two questions for consultations with different student groups in Fall 2023. We asked these questions in various settings, including orientations, academic coaching events, and meetings with student governance bodies. We sought out opportunities to consult with international and Indigenous students, as well as with graduate and undergraduate students generally.

As we continued the program throughout 2023 and into 2024, we refined and streamlined our process. Our usual process was to offer students some initial broad context about library services and programs, and explain that we were consulting with them in order to improve the libraries’ services. We would then ask them to answer our two questions via an online survey. We provided QR

codes and URLs for the survey, and most students used their own phone or device, but we also provided a laptop. This approach allowed students to give us feedback in their own words while providing them with background information and time to think fully about the questions. It also allowed us to gather data via Springshare's LibWizard tool, which offers some basic data analysis features and provides a single consistent platform for hosting the results of repeated surveys.

We found this approach produced qualitative data that was both rich (i.e. permitted depth and variability) and relatively comparable (i.e. structured around consistent prompts.) In situations where it was not possible to offer background information about library services, such as at large academic coaching events, we still offered students a brief explanation of why we were consulting with them.

From Fall 2023 to early Spring 2025, we received responses to our two questions from 131 students in total, over a series of eight consultations. So far, due to the small dataset and our own capacity constraints, we have not taken a formal approach to data analysis. After exporting the open text responses from the survey platform, multiple reviewers independently reviewed the comments to determine themes. We also used a generative AI chatbot to do independent theming, combined with human review and verification of output. We have not yet created a code book or coded the overall data, due to our need for this project to remain lightweight and sustainable. As the dataset grows, we expect to devote more resources to analyzing the data in collaboration with colleagues who have data analysis expertise.

We did not submit this project for institutional research ethics clearance because its primary goal was service improvement, rather than publication or dissemination. As a result, our findings can only be shared at a high level. If our goals change in future and we seek to expand this project beyond its current scope, this is a potential challenge for this project. Introducing research ethics language and clearance into the consultation process would substantially

change the nature of the interaction with students.

Findings

Our initial findings confirmed and deepened our understanding of students' experiences with and awareness of library services. Students tended to volunteer the most information about their experiences with self-serve resources like bookable spaces, digital collections, and equipment loans, and less about their experiences of mediated services like research help.

At the same time, we found differentiated perceptions across user groups like international, Indigenous, and graduate students. Most students responded positively to being consulted, signaling early success to a relational approach to assessment and engagement.

Our two questions were crafted carefully to allow students to provide us with data that suited their comfort level, library knowledge, and needs. The first question asked students about how they usually used the libraries—a very open question and one that we already have a fair amount of knowledge about. Quantitative usage data like gate counts, digital collections usage, circulation numbers, and research help statistics tells us a lot about how students use the libraries. So the data we collected from the first question mainly confirmed what we already knew, with few surprises. In the context of the consultation, its primary purpose was to open with a question that would establish our openness to student input, build students' confidence, and ensure them that they didn't need specialized knowledge to contribute.

Our second question asked students how they wished they could use the libraries. This question tended to elicit more information about what they wanted from us, while providing implicit assurance that their opinions and ideas were valued and welcome. It is important to note that in asking students what they wished they could in the libraries, we clarified that while all suggestions were welcome, we were not able to guarantee implementation of every idea.

Our review of students' survey responses so far has produced the following general findings:

Library Knowledge

Students had the most knowledge about resources and services with a self-service component, like bookable spaces, digital collections, and equipment loans. They volunteered less information about their knowledge about more mediated services like research help appointments. This suggests that they are most familiar and comfortable with self-serve elements of the libraries, which aligns with other studies, as well as our own larger-scale user feedback survey.

Barriers to Library Use

Our early findings confirmed that many students experience significant library anxiety, especially when it comes to interacting directly with staff. This aligns with the broader literature on students' academic library anxiety. Library anxiety may be a factor for some students choosing to use remote-only services. Some students also expressed a lack of knowledge about the libraries' services. At the same time, many students expressed positive feelings about using the libraries.

Increased Communication

The students we consulted were generally receptive to communication from the libraries and to the opportunity to share feedback. This was expected, as the project was based on an initial desire from students to share more with us about their library experiences. Graduate students tended to be more self-aware and articulate about their library needs, though it is still important to work with undergraduate students to understand their needs and desires for library use.

Our early success in gathering rich qualitative data confirmed an overall need for continued outreach and consultation.

Action & Impact

Several of our findings helped us to make decisions about new and existing services.

Communicating our services

We learned that many students see value in library services and that they respond well when we communicate them in proactive, targeted, and intentional ways. Our consultations provided us with specific feedback that we used to make concrete improvements in our communication.

We adjusted our website language to make it clear that librarian appointments could be booked for brief increments, not just the 30–60-minute increments that our scheduling software displays. We also clarified that librarians were available outside of the booking windows in the calendar, via email and phone.

Because of our strong finding that students are least-informed about staffed services like research help, we decided to target this service for promotion. Research help is one of our most important student services, in terms of its benefit to students across many disciplines. Given the success of our two-question approach, we trialed an even more minimal “one-question survey” to promote research help. We charged student employees with visiting high-traffic locations on campus to ask students a single question: “Did you know you can book a research help appointment with a librarian?” If students answered no, they were provided with a QR code bookmark linking them to the service.

This promotional strategy has been extremely effective. Between the fall semesters of 2022 and 2024, we spoke to almost 2,000 students and saw awareness of the service increase by over 300%. Research help appointments increased over 120% during the same period. We have made this survey a routine part of our fall activities.

Addressing library anxiety

Our strong finding about students' library anxiety, particularly in interacting with staff, led us to re-examine our services and programs and to take a number of actions.

A major focus was our newly renovated main service desk area. This was a major renewal of a highly visible and primary student service area of our library, which presented an obvious opportunity to try to address students' library anxiety. However, while our two-question surveys told us that students often felt anxious, we needed more information to understand how their anxieties played out in this specific context.

With the help of a Young Canada Works (YCW) graduate student, we surveyed students about their perceptions of the new desk. In particular, we asked students who both had and had not used the desk recently to tell us how welcoming they found it. In addition, we interviewed staff who provided service at the desk about their experience helping users at it, and we observed how users approached and used the desk.

We were pleased to find that most students found the redesigned desk welcoming, and that many students offered unsolicited positive feedback about the staff at the desk. Based on feedback from both students and staff, we added privacy screens on monitors and more wayfinding tools to help users approach the desk. We also leveraged the new desk and its surrounding area to trial more ways to provide friendly welcome to students. We use half of our prominent new book display area to showcase popular and leisure books, similar to what students might see at a public or school library. Staff at the desk offer "mystery book dates," board game nights, and low-stress bring-your-own-book club events. We also offer a wide range of handmade pronoun pins at the front desk—a project that has gained traction with student service units campus-wide.

The two-question survey helped us to identify the broad issue of students' library anxiety, and provided a jumping-off point from which we could dig deeper and try to address this issue.

Service changes

Some students recommended new services or changes to existing services. We have made a number of changes in response, ranging in size and impact.

Concrete, small-scale changes include purchasing more lendable chargers of the types that students specifically mentioned wanting—a change that has few strategic benefits but helps support student success. Slightly more substantial changes include scheduling bespoke Excel and other workshops for incoming student board members—a change that more strategically targets student leaders and helps build our relationship with them.

Changes that are medium in scope include improvements to our relationships with student groups. Because of our consultations with the undergraduate and graduate student groups on campus, the libraries have been invited to offer skill workshops to incoming student board members, and to co-sponsor the graduate student society's annual research symposium. We have also been offered cross-promotion for the libraries on student group social media sites.

A change with more substantial strategic benefit is partnering with our Organizational Analysis and User Engagement colleagues to help develop a user engagement pool. This is an ongoing project that allows us to maintain a continuous pool of library users willing to be contacted for future assessment and usability projects. We launched this group in early 2023 and have drawn on it for a number of projects already.

The two-question survey helped surface specific library issues that students cared about, allowing us to focus our energy on meaningful initiatives and improvements at all scales. These in turn helped us build positive relationships with student groups.

Practical Implications & Value

This work contributes to the overall body of work in library assessment by exploring the outcomes of a sustainable, low-threshold approach to conducting student consultations and gathering and evaluating qualitative data about students' library experiences and library feedback.

Qualitative data may be preferable to quantitative data for many libraries seeking to understand and incorporate student feedback into service improvement. Qualitative tends to be richer than quantitative data, especially when it is open-ended. This makes it desirable, but can also make it copious. Because student opinions and experiences are diverse and may change regularly, it may also be important to collect qualitative data about them on an ongoing basis. For these reasons, a common challenge of qualitative data is finding resources and capacity to gather and analyze it. Our own library continues to offer a large-scale user survey, which has very different costs and benefits in terms of the qualitative data it provides.

Limiting our survey to two questions and conducting it repeatedly with distinct student demographics has allowed us to find a reasonable middle ground for soliciting qualitative data from students. The questions we have adopted allow us to both solicit information and build relationships, because of their open-ended nature. Data is generated instantly through the use of in-person surveys delivered face to face, and the amount of data generated from any single interaction is within our ability to analyze. We are able to use the high-level data that we receive in response to these questions to identify areas that merit different or more in-depth exploration, such as our examination of student experiences at our renovated service desk.

In addition, our two-question in-person approach to student consultation allows us not only to gather data but to build relationships with students in a sustainable way. Returning on a regular basis to ask students about their experiences with the libraries helps to create continuity and mutual

understanding between us and them. We have the opportunity to develop our activity from simple surveying and data collection into a more dynamic social process characterized by empathy and connection.

As we continue to conduct these surveys with the same student groups over time, we will gather longitudinal data that will help reinforce our learning and highlight trends. As our data set grows it will support deeper analysis, allowing us to identify consistencies and gaps, and use it to support good decision-making about our programs and services. We see this approach as highly sustainable, effective, and repurposable for other libraries or service units. The data that we gather from this process complements data produced from other assessment methods in our library, such as quantitative usage data and broader user experience surveys.

In future we will continue to use these questions with different student groups. As our data set grows and becomes more complex, we may perform more analysis using NVivo or similar tools. We expect to continue to gain insights into how student experience the library, and to build our understanding of the barriers and gaps that students face in using library services. We will continue to use what we learn to improve our messaging and communication to students and to improve our relationships with student leaders and groups.

As we make decisions and take actions based on these initial findings, we expect to continue to assess our work, to determine our success in understanding and meeting students' library needs, and to continue to share our findings. We are launched on a second year of this project, with continued funding for student positions to support our consultation and engagement work.

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⁷ Shiobhan Alice Smith et al., "Listening and Learning: Myths and Misperceptions about Postgraduate Students and Library Support," *Reference Services Review* 47, no. 4 (November 28, 2019): 594–608, <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-03-2019-0019>.

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⁹ Joyce Chapman and Emily Daly, "Understanding the Experiences and Needs of Diverse Student Populations," in *Everyday Evidence-Based Practice in Academic Libraries* (United States: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2023). pp. 13-42.

¹⁰ Shannon Farrell and Kristen Mastel, "Considering Outreach Assessment: Strategies, Sample Scenarios, and a Call to Action," May 4, 2016, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/185437>.

¹¹ Tricia Lantzy, Jerry Limberg, and Torie Quiñonez, "Student Voices at the Core of Assessment: One Academic Library's Approach" (Library Assessment Conference, Portland, OR, 2024), <https://www.libraryassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Limberg-Student-Voices-at-the-Core-of-Assessment.pdf>.