

Focus Groups

Focus Groups – are group discussions facilitated by a moderator with a group of people who are asked to share their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and/or attitudes on a topic. For example, graduate students may be asked to participate in a focus group to talk about their special resource needs.



Advantages

- Can be used to get in-depth information on issues identified in a survey or through other assessment processes
- Can be used in conjunction with quantitative studies to gain a better understanding of an issue
- Interaction among focus group participants can lead to new insights

Disadvantages

- Can not be used as a substitute for systematic evaluation processes
- Moderators require training
- Data are complex to analyze

How we used focus groups

We used a focus group method called Appreciative Inquiry at the University of Alaska Anchorage to probe deeper into one concern that was raised by faculty and graduate students in our LibQual results. They told us that we did not have the print or electronic resources they required for their work. Four separate focus groups were held with select faculty and graduate students.

We asked two questions:

1. In terms of library resources what does the library have that supports your studies and research?
2. In an ideal world what resources would the library have to support your studies and research?

Appreciative Inquiry is a focus group method that is used to help discover what “gives life to an organization”. Questions are crafted in a positive way in order to elicit answers that are positive, imaginative and innovative.

References

The information contained in this poster was adapted for libraries and based on the following article: Prus, J., Johnson, R., (1994). A critical review of student assessment options. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 94(88), 69-83.

Use Other Library Assessment Methods

Benchmark Studies

Benchmark Studies – are used to compare operations or attributes of libraries that are of similar size and type. An academic library may use data gathered through the National Center for Education Statistics Library Statistics Program to compare budgets, staff size, collection size, etc.

Usability Testing

Usability Testing (Simulations) –is used to evaluate the design of a product or service. It's often used in libraries to test library homepages and other web interfaces. It gives direct input on how users use a page or service. Subjects are given a series of tasks to carry out and a facilitator tracks how the user moves through the system and the length of time it takes to complete tasks. This information is recorded and analyzed.



Behavioral Observations

Behavioral Observations - measure the frequency, duration and context of a subject's actions, usually in a natural setting with non-interactive methods. One might observe a student studying in the library. What kind of space are they using? What materials and equipment do they require for their work? What snacks or other “comforts” have they brought with them?



Exit and Other Interviews

Exit and Other Interviews - ask individuals in a face-to-face dialog to share their perceptions about the target of a study. That target may be the reason for their visit, the resources they accessed while in the library, library hours, reference desk service, etc.



Written Surveys and Questionnaires

Written Surveys and Questionnaires –written documents containing questions, which ask individuals to share their perceptions of their skills, attitudes and behaviors or their perceptions of qualities and/or attributes of library services, facilities, collections, instruction, access, and staff.



Portfolios

Portfolios – are collections of work samples, usually compiled over time and rated using rubrics. Librarians can analyze student portfolios to gauge student progression in mastering information literacy objectives. For example, using a portfolio, one could do a comparative analysis of bibliographies across a student's academic career.

External Examiners

External Examiners – this method uses an expert in the field from outside of your program or institution, yet usually from a similar program at another institution to conduct, evaluate, or supplement the assessment of your services, facilities and collections. This is often done by academic accreditation agencies during campus accreditation visits. Similar evaluations can also be arranged with colleagues and experts from other libraries.

Classroom Research

Classroom Research - uses relatively simple, quick, and easy-to-analyze assessment techniques that provide instructors with feedback on student responses to instruction, including; achievement, interest, skills, and development. For example, the use of clickers in library instruction classes.



Institutional Data Analysis

Institutional Data Analysis (Archival Records) – uses biographical, academic, or other data available from the library or other university department to analyze changes over time. These would include the analysis of circulation statistics, collection development reports, database statistics, National Center for Education statistics, etc.



Advantages

- Libraries already collect some of this data
- Many different types of data can be collected to inform decisions on services and collections
- Data provide objective measuring tools and can be standardized

Disadvantages

- Time-consuming to collect and analyze data; may not be in someone's current job description
- May be subject to misinterpretation by administrators, or other authorities, if used out of context

How we used institutional data analysis

We instituted the on-going use of a number of different data-gathering methods to guide collection development decisions at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Examples include:

- Interlibrary loan title reports are analyzed yearly for frequently borrowed journal titles for potential subscriptions and are provided to selectors for monograph purchases.
- Lists of acquired titles and their subsequent circulation rates are provided to selectors annually, for guidance in developing individual subject areas.
- Reports of unused book titles are used for weeding selection.
- Citation data in the life sciences (most research-intensive area) were examined to create a journal subscription wish list and confirm the continued need for current subscriptions.
- Database cost-per-use figures are used to make cancellation proposals or final decisions.

More study in this area will help us target our collection budget in the most cost-effective and patron-focused way.

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