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Listen to What They Have to Say! Assessing Distance Learners' Satisfaction with Library Services Using a Transactional Survey

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This paper examines the evolution and findings of an on-going longitudinal study that is assessing the satisfaction of distance education students with library reference services through the use of a transaction-level survey. The survey's purpose is two-fold: first, it is used to garner valuable input from these students; and second, it also serves as a communication device that encourages students to seek further assistance. Survey requests are emailed to distance education students following individual reference transactions or clustered transactions. After submitting the survey, students are immediately taken to a linking page encouraging them to contact the library whenever they need research assistance. Findings thus far have been quite positive overall; however, the negative comments have been just as telling, and have allowed us to make some real changes to how we provide distance education-related reference services.

KEYWORDS distance education, library services, satisfaction surveys, user feedback, quality assurance

BACKGROUND

The University of North Carolina at Pembroke (UNCP) is a master's degree-granting institution in rural Robeson County. Although its student body comes from across the United States, as well as from many countries around the world, the majority of the students live in the surrounding five counties. As a dedicated enrollment-growth institution within the North Carolina

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state university system, UNCP recently saw a doubling of enrollment—from a little more than 3,000 students in fall 2003 to almost 7,000 students (6,166 undergraduate students and 778 graduate students) in fall 2010. The university offers 41 undergraduate programs, 17 graduate programs, and 1 certificate program.

Along with the overall enrollment growth of the university, UNCP has also seen a steady rise in the number of enrollments at off-campus instructional sites and in online courses. With the increased off-campus and online enrollments, one of the problems faced by Mary Livermore Library has been in the identification of distance educations students. UNCP's students are highly transient, meaning they take necessary courses no matter where the courses are being offered and no matter the modality (e.g., face-to-face, hybrid, or online); this is especially true of our graduate students. A student may be taking on-campus courses, off-campus courses, as well as online courses, simultaneously during any given semester.

Individual UNCP students are not specifically designated as on campus, off campus, or online. Of course, the university does track all enrollments by type. In the spring 2011 semester, there were more than 8,200 unique enrollments. Of these, 553 were at off-campus instructional locations, and there were more than 2,300 online enrollments. This indicates that 37 percent of all enrollments were either off campus or online, which is fairly significant given the size of the university.

Mary Livermore Library has been outspoken in its dedication to students no matter where or how they complete their coursework. In May 2003, they created the position of Outreach/Distance Education Librarian to provide dedicated services in response to the anticipated growth of distance education programs given the university's enrollment growth status. The library's administration was adamant from the start that services for off-campus and online students should attempt to mirror the breadth and quality of services for on-campus students.

Dedicated services include instructional services, where the Outreach/Distance Education Librarian travels to various off-campus instructional sites to provide information literacy instruction sessions upon the request of individual instructors. Instructional services also include the creation of course-specific robust interactive online instructional modules that are placed into the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) site for any given course. Dedicated services also include one-to-one reference transactions, which occur via email, instant messaging (IM), phone, and Web form. Requests are received by the reference desk, as well as by the Outreach/Distance Education Librarian, who monitors all DE-related transactions and follows up as necessary. This librarian also expedites other library services, such as rapid document delivery, where print items, such as microforms, print journal articles, entries and chapters from reference books, etc., are scanned and emailed directly to distance education
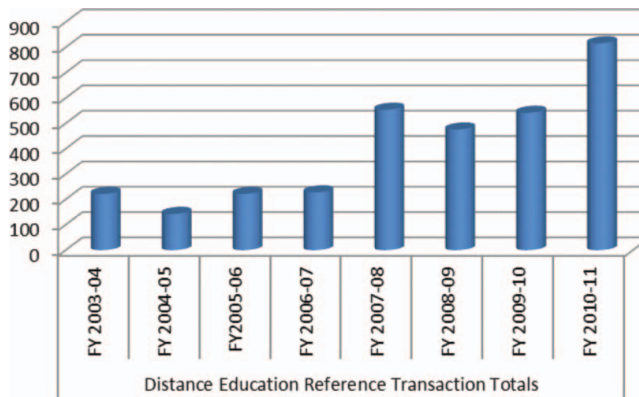
FIGURE 1 Total distance education-related transactions by fiscal (academic) year.

students. We also provide in-depth face-to-face research consultations with distance education students and will meet them at night and on weekends.

With the exception of a slowing in fiscal years 2008–2010 (see Figure 1), there has been a fairly steady rise in the number of distance education-related reference transactions—although bearing in mind that these numbers are probably quite conservative given the fact that the library works with many students who are not identified, or do not identify themselves, as distance education students.

The university and the library continue to use different survey instruments to assess student satisfaction of library services on at least an annual basis. Most notably, the library deploys a 20-plus-question paper-based survey every year during National Library Week. While the returns for this particular survey are very high, it does not provide a real venue for input for distance education students, who spend much of their time away from campus. It also happens toward the end of the semester and the academic year, when there is very little time to immediately act on student input.

In 2006, the library's distance education services personnel deployed a 10-question survey and sent the link to instructors teaching at off-campus sites and asked them to pass it along to their students. The returns were extremely low, and no valuable data was taken away from this initiative, but it was from this experience that a new survey took its formative shape. The goal was to create something that was immediately beneficial to both the student and the library—something that could be sent and hopefully received when there was still time left to do something about any reported issues. The 10-question survey was edited down to 5 basic questions with simple check boxes and one open-ended text field (see Appendix B).

1. The first question was demographic in nature, in that we wanted to know where these students were taking their coursework, so it listed the various major program sites. There were also designations for "online" and "other," which covered instructional sites that were used only sporadically by various programs, such as Montgomery Community College, South Piedmont Community College, and other visiting campuses.
2. The second question asked if distance education students were satisfied with the reference services that they had recently received (they simply needed to select one of the three answer choices: "yes," somewhat," or "not at all").
3. The third question asked if they still required assistance (simply "yes" or "no"). The purpose of this question was to gauge the effectiveness of our services (i.e., if they do not need further assistance, then it is "likely" that our reference services were effective—of course they could have figured it out on their own or received assistance from someone else, such as their course instructor).
4. The fourth question asked if they received the guide to services for off-campus students—this was considered important in the first few years of the survey, because most distance-education enrollments were at our off-campus instructional sites, so this paper-based guide (also available online) was made available at all program sites by both UNCP site coordinators and also by individual instructors. This question was changed in 2008 to one that asked the students to select their academic level (e.g., freshman, sophomore, etc.). This is because we wanted to know more about who we were helping; although we already had an idea.
5. The last question was left open-ended and asked students how we could improve services for distance education students. While we sought their specific input regarding library services, this text box also allows them to vent about anything—within reason.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is no shortage of literature that discusses the history and importance of providing students with a voice through the use of various survey instruments. However, a review of the literature failed to find any similar survey models for assuring quality at the transaction level. Only a few survey models are mentioned in this paper because of the basic commonality of these surveys—they are mostly similar in design and purpose. The closest model was one created by James T. Nichols (2006) at SUNY Oswego, where he developed a monthly "checkup" survey that was sent to a select group of distance education students each semester. This survey sought input on a wider breadth of library services than our model, and the range of questions

would definitely have provided them with valuable information, but it would not necessarily have provided that information in a timely manner at the actual point of need, where library personnel could help or encourage individual students. A number of surveys were used to effect changes in library services, but as with most surveys, they were sent out only once a semester at best. Stephen Dew's (2001) 11-question survey looked at various demographic areas, library use patterns, as well as student satisfaction; however, this survey was being mailed only once each semester to the University of Iowa's distance education students. Hensley and Miller (2010) also mailed their 17-question survey to select University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign students, and they found that most distance education students were not aware of the range of library services that were available (p. 682). McLean and Dew (2004) discovered the need to place library surveys fully online in order to increase response rates (p. 272). Their study compared two library satisfaction surveys—one at the University of Iowa and one at the University of the West Indies.

METHODOLOGY

This transaction-level survey was initially created in late 2006. It was submitted to UNCP's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was exempted from full IRB review, because it would preserve respondent anonymity and use the data only in the aggregate to improve library services for distance education programs.

The survey was deployed in the spring 2007 semester. To keep data collection simple, we divided the fiscal (academic) year into two large semesters. All surveys received from the start of the spring semester would run up to June 30th (the end of the fiscal year) and be designated as being from the spring semester. All surveys received after July 1 through the end of the fall semester in December would be designated as being from the fall semester. In other words, the summer sessions were incorporated into the larger semesters—returns during the summers were minimal at best anyway.

Distance education students are identified in a number of ways. On all library Web forms, students can select the "distance education" designation, as well as indicate the various campuses at which they take courses (or if they are taking courses online). Students will sometimes indicate that they are distance education students in their emails sent directly to library personnel. It also comes out during reference interviews, even those that take place on the phone. All UNCP librarians who provide reference services are encouraged to note the name and email address of any student that they have identified as being a distant education student. This is necessary in order to send them the survey.

Each individual interaction is counted as a reference transaction (we also denote the transaction type—e.g., account-related, simple reference,technical, or fully instructional, etc.). Surveys, on the other hand, are only sent to students who are interacting with the library for a distinct transaction—in other words, some students may have a "cluster" of transactions, where there are several communications back and forth between the library and the student; all stemming from an original question. As long as the transactions are clustered, we wait before sending the survey message to the student until the related communications calm down somewhat.

A survey message is sent directly to each student (see Appendix A). The message is stored as a Microsoft Outlook template and includes all necessary text and carbon-copy email addresses (to me and a colleague). The sent messages are counted and then deleted. As each student completes the survey (see Appendix B), they will then see a confirmation message that includes redundant contact information, encouragement to seek additional help if necessary, and a direct link to our help resources (see Appendix C).

As surveys are received, they are stored electronically in a Microsoft Outlook folder until they are both printed and entered electronically into a Microsoft Excel workbook. The students' comments are copied and pasted into a Word document. A number of students will include their names and contact information. We use that information to follow-up with them immediately, but it is omitted from the comments document.

INITIAL FINDINGS

This data is presented only in the broadest aggregate (see Table 1) and covers spring 2007 through spring 2011. Over the first four years, there were 1,930 survey requests sent to distance education students, and there were 420 responses (this is an overall response rate of 21.7 percent). Of

TABLE 1 UNCP Distance Education Programs Library Services Student Transaction Survey Selected Results

Semester	S 07	F 07	S 08	F 08	S 09	F 09	S 10	F 10	S 11
Surveys Sent	52	109	212	156	194	140	404	247	416
Surveys Received	30	16	53	26	30	36	96	63	70
Satisfied?									
Yes	24	14	48	25	28	34	92	60	66
Somewhat	3	2	5	1	1	1	1	2	2
No	3	0	0	1	1	1	3	1	2

the responses, only 12 students indicated that they were "not at all" satis-fied with our services. Another 18 students were "somewhat" satisfied with our services. There were 391 students who were satisfied with our services (this is a satisfaction rate of 93 percent). A clear majority indicated that they did not require further assistance, although there were several students that indicated that they still needed help. The range of program sites varied from semester to semester, because UNCP's programs go through various fluctuations and change location from time to time. Most students indicated that they were online students, which is in keeping with the growth of on-line courses and programs at UNCP. Also, as stated above, the focus changed from assessing receipt of the guide concerning available distance education library services, and we decided to look more closely at the students' aca-demic classification. It turned out to be mostly graduate students who were taking advantage of our services. There were also 194 comments provided. Many comments praised our services, as well as individual librarians—some even suggested raises for distance education services personnel (which were not forthcoming in these austere times). However, some comments provided negative feedback concerning not being responded to by the library. Some expressed frustration with access to various electronic resources, and a few of the comments provided suggestions for change, such as students not hav-ing to pay for return postage of books (when no drop-off location is close by).

DISCUSSION

Based on the responses received, we have discovered that this is an ef-fective tool for receiving a steady flow of student input. A 20-plus percent response rate is significant—although we would like to see that become higher in number. From this data, we know a little more about whom our distance education students are—typically online graduate students represent the clear majority. Our reference transactions are for the most-part effective, because of the satisfaction rates and the indications of not needing additional assistance, at least for that particular research paper or project. Most of the students that indicated that they were not satisfied also provided useful com-ments. In each of those cases, they were "lost in the shuffle," meaning their requests were missed and not responded to by library personnel (despite our best intentions). Most of the students that provided negative responses also provided optional contact information and were helped. In response to initial negative feedback, another librarian was brought on board and now acts as the back-up distance education librarian, and he is involved in all aspects of the process and provides additional, and valuable, oversight. We still lose some students in our email in-boxes, but we usually find them

more quickly now. Some of the negative comments concerning access to electronic resources allowed us to make our systems personnel aware of potential problems. There were also negative comments concerning distance education students not being able to have university identification cards, which are necessary to take advantage of accessing resources at other UNC system university libraries and at community colleges where we had cooperative agreements. This information was passed on to the university's distance education administrative personnel.

CONCLUSION

This is our first pause, as it were, to look at this data in a wider sense, and while we find it valuable and quite useful, there is also the need for additional survey instruments. We are planning to triangulate this assessment by adding an end-of-semester survey that is sent to all distance education students that received transaction-level surveys during a given semester. This semester-level survey will have more questions, especially those designed to gather data concerning student use patterns. A third survey will target off-campus and online faculty members, in addition to distance education administrative personnel, in an attempt to see how we can better serve these groups and their students. In the end, we have found that whatever survey model is employed, as long as students are being listened to, the end result should be positive for all concerned—in our case, we believe that through our personalized services that we are actually helping to increase student retention.

It is important to note that this is an on-going longitudinal study, and that future iterations of this survey instrument, coupled with the two other future surveys mentioned above, will hopefully garner new and useful information. Our primary goal is to create a steady feedback loop with the distance education students, so that we can effect rapid change to services or resources as needed. The library's assessment committee has also found this data quite valuable for Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) purposes.

Of course, another important aspect of this survey is the hope that it helps distance educations students feel less disenfranchised from the library (and the university). It has been our experience that distance education students feel like they are bothering the library if they ask more than one question in a given period of time (a day, a week, or even a semester). The survey's confirmation page was designed to encourage these students to continue making contact with us as needed. At this time, we do not know if that is happening, so further study is needed to see if there is some

connection between the survey instrument and increased use of reference services.

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APPENDIX A

Dear Student,

We recently helped you with your research or off-campus access to research resources. Please help us to improve the quality of our services for UNCP distance education students by taking a brief survey.

Thank you,

Michael.

Michael Alewine

Outreach/Distance Education Librarian

Email: michael.alewine@uncp.edu

Phone: 910.522.5743

The survey consists of 5 questions. The survey will take about 1 minute to complete. The survey is submitted anonymously. The data collected from this survey will only be used for quality assurance and research purposes. Consent to participate in this research is voluntary and informed. If you agree to participate, please click the link below. Having consented, you may still withdraw at any time without any jeopardy to you. Please print this message if you wish to have a copy of it.

Click the link if you agree to participate in the survey: Survey URL Here

APPENDIX B

UNCP Distance Education Programs
Library Services Student Transaction Survey

UNCP is committed to providing our students with high quality library resources and services. Please take a moment to answer these questions in order to help us better meet your needs. Select the answer that best applies.

1. Where are you currently taking UNCP courses? (check all that apply)
☐ Bladen CC
☐ Cape Fear CC
☐ Fayetteville TCC
☐ Fort Bragg
☐ Lee County Cohort
☐ Online
☐ Richmond CC
☐ Robeson County CC
☐ Sandhills CC
☐ Scotland Memorial Hospital
☐ Southeastern CC
☐ Southeastern Regional Medical Center
☐ Other
☐ Not a Distance Education Student

2. You were recently helped by library staff; were you satisfied with the quality of service?
○ Yes   ○ Somewhat   ○ Not at all

3. Do you still require assistance?
(if "yes" please use the "Still Need Help" link after you submit this form)
○ Yes   ○ No

4. What is your academic level?
○ Freshman   ○ Sophomore   ○ Junior   ○ Senior   ○ Graduate Student

5. Please share your comments/suggestions on how we can improve library services for you.

APPENDIX C

Thank you for your feedback.

Your feedback for Distance Education Services has been submitted. Thank you.

Click this link if you Still Need Help? Thank You.

Michael C. Alewine
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Return to Mary Livermore Library