

Student Satisfaction with Library Services: Results of Evaluation Using Focus Groups

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings of focus group survey of Athabasca University students. Using teleconference, three sessions with students across Canada were conducted. Students report a high level of satisfaction with current library services and stressed the need for more information about the Library and services available to students. Students reported that there is a need for instruction on how to access library services and how to access and use information in electronic format.

Introduction

Athabasca University (AU) is Canada's Open University, and specializes in distance education at the post-secondary level. At the undergraduate level, the admission requirement is that applicants be 18 years of age. Students may take courses leading to a number of certificates and degrees; AU offers 13 certificate programs, 13 undergraduate degrees, 2 graduate degrees, and 2 graduate diploma programs. The number of AU graduates is increasing each year and there is an increasing number of students who enroll in a course at AU with the intent of transferring the credits to their home institution. Visiting students may come to AU due to a course not being offered at their home institution or because there are timetable difficulties at their home institution. A large number of students come to AU because a distance education course can be fit into a difficult schedule, and there are students who wish to take a course for their own interest.

Since its inception in 1970, AU continues to experience growth: total registrations in 1996-97 increased by more than 15 per cent over registrations in 1995-96. At the graduate level, registrations in the Master of Business Administration program increased by nearly 85 per cent while registrations in the Master of Distance Education program increased by about 22 per cent. Such unprecedented growth is largely attributed to the quality of the learning experience of the student. It is believed among the units that provide support services to students, that quality service contributes to the growth and success of Athabasca University. A survey of AU students in 1997 revealed that 98 per cent of AU students would recommend Athabasca University to a friend or colleague.

Prior to the 1997 study referred to above, the idea of a qualitative research project emerged. The Student Satisfaction with Non-academic Student Services project began as a proposal prepared by the Student Services Group at Athabasca University. The aim of this project was to survey the student satisfaction with services provided by AU to its students. Student Services Group (SSG) includes the Registry, Computing Services, Counseling and Advising, the Learning Centres, the Course Materials/Bookstore, and Library Services. While all AU courses include an evaluation form for students to complete and submit upon completion of a course, it was the collective thinking of SSG that there is a need to evaluate more in-depth the services that the University provides to its students. The proposal was prepared in the Fall of 1996 and submitted to the University for inclusion in the AU's submission to the Alberta Department of Advanced Education, Learning Enhancement Envelope (LEE) fund. The University, however, decided to fund the project regardless of LEE funding.

Process

The Library Services focus group study is one facet of the Student Satisfaction with Non-academic Student Services project; the project remains to be completed in its entirety. The aim, however, of the Library focus group was to assess the level of student satisfaction with the library services and determine the speed, knowledge, and efficiency of the library services to AU students. It was anticipated that students would discuss their experiences and ideas regarding the level of awareness about library services, the need for information about library resources, and the need for instruction on using resources (in both traditional and electronic formats). The Library at the time of writing this paper has been the only department in SSG to complete its survey of student satisfaction with library services.

Initially, contact was made with the University's Institutional Studies Department (IS) to discuss whether focus group research was indeed an appropriate methodology. The Library and IS discussed how to proceed. Focus group research was selected because it was felt that this methodology would provide more opportunity for respondents to discuss aspects of library services. Discussion would be preferred, and indeed richer, than simply "tabulating scores on a scale of 1 to 5", or from "poor to excellent". Focus groups would provide opportunity for orderly and moderated discussion. With AU students across Canada, it was decided that teleconference sessions would be held. This would provide opportunity for students beyond the immediate vicinities of Edmonton and Calgary to participate. Teleconference sessions also, it was felt, would be the least disruptive to the schedules of the participants. Finally, all costing considered, teleconference sessions would be the least expensive and most efficient.

Two other departments were involved in this project and provided extensive support. Media Services operated the teleconference bridge and provided excellent support. Institutional Studies provided the administrative support for the project, identifying and securing a moderator/facilitator, assisting with the translation of library issues into discussion items, and securing the approval of the Ethics Review Committee to conduct the focus group research project.

Focus group sessions were held on 26 June 1997, 18 September 1997, and 25 September 1997. Each session was about an hour in length. The first session included the widest range of participants: undergraduate and graduate students, and from both rural and urban areas. After this initial session, which was in a sense a trial one, it was decided to conduct at least two more sessions of participants at the undergraduate level. In the first session, it became obvious that there was a distinct need among graduate student participants for, and concern about, interlibrary loan (ILL) provisions. ILL was an important but less of a critical concern among undergraduate students. The following two sessions of undergraduate students were divided into rural and urban students. The rationale for this was simply on the basis of the assumed differences inherent in whether a student resided in a rural or urban area. It was assumed that particular areas of discussion might be more relevant to one group or another. For example, the use of other university or college library facilities may relate more to students in an urban area. Likewise, the timeliness of delivery of materials may be more of a significant factor among rural students rather than urban students. Nonetheless, as different as the groups were respecting geographic location, there were threads of commonality among all three focus group sessions. At the conclusion of each teleconference session a brief report was prepared.

Participant selection

To have meaningful discussion, it was essential to have users who were aware of, and knowledgeable about, the services provided to students by AU Library; it would be essential to select participants from a pool of "informed users". The population of students from which focus group participants would be taken, it was decided, would be those who had recently used the Library -- it was paramount that discussions with students were with those who were informed users. A list of potential participants was created by simply going through request forms that had been filed at the Library Information Desk over the previous few

weeks. Student names and ID numbers were compiled by the Library. The moderator of the focus groups, who also served as the administrator, contacted each potential participants to determine their willingness to participate in a focus group project about AU Library services. Each potential participant was told the aim of the study, that participation was voluntary, and that they could terminate at any time. Participants were told that attempts would be made to ensure confidentiality, and that the focus group session would be audio-taped through the teleconference bridge. A list of nearly forty potential participants was required to solicit at least 10 participants. Each participant was offered an honorarium.

It was decided that the Library would compile a list of issues that it wanted to discuss with students. Following the crafting of the list of issues, the Director of Library Services and the Director of Institutional Studies met to determine how to translate the issues into questions that would result in discussion and, in the end, provide meaningful data. It was expected that the data would confirm areas in which library services were satisfactory, identify those areas in which services needed improvement, and identify areas to development respecting the provision of library services to students.

The issues: discussion items for each of the three focus group sessions:

1. Providing direct support to AU students by supplying materials from AU Library holdings
2. Providing indirect support by suggesting appropriate material, by mediating literature searches, and making databases available on-line
3. Providing library instruction
4. Providing Interlibrary loan service

Comments

The following sets of comments are typical of those made by the focus group participants. The comments that follow are organized on the basis of the issues listed above.

1. Providing direct support by supplying materials from AU Library holdings
 - It was agreed that material was sent quickly and that the library was satisfactory.
 - It was clear that there is a high level of satisfaction with material supplied from AU Library. Helpful staff provide an efficient and exceptional level of service.
 - Library staff are found to be knowledgeable and helpful; service is satisfactory, as is the range, variety, and quality of materials.
 - It was suggested that there be a limit on the number of books that can be borrowed at a time.
2. Providing indirect support by suggesting appropriate material, by mediating literature searches, and by making databases available on-line
 - Most participants were satisfied with the available on-line services and thought that the services were good.
 - There is much satisfaction with the support received from AU Library staff; it is excellent.
 - It was unanimous among one group that library staff "go the extra mile" to help students find what they need.
 - Some students are unaware of services available on-line.
 - Most students were unaware of the AU Library web page.
 - Graduate (and other students) indicated that they need more instruction and explanation techniques to access the services that are available.

3. Providing library instruction

- Library staff are very helpful in explaining on-line services and getting obscure material.
- Some participants said that they were not aware of on-line services available to them.

4. Providing Interlibrary loans

- Comments were generally positive and service reported as very satisfactory
- Extensions on loans from other institutions would be helpful

Issues arising

The following points are issues that arose during the focus group session.

1. Providing direct support by supplying materials from AU Library holdings

- Delays may be caused by materials sitting over weekends and holidays
- Canada Post is slow
- Confusion with terminology on the library's on-line catalogue
- Lack of awareness or information that AU Library will courier materials to students with a rush request, at the student's expense
- Quality of some video materials is substandard and outdated

2. Providing indirect support by suggesting appropriate material, by mediating literature searches, and by making databases available on-line

- Lack of awareness regarding on-line services available to student
- ERIC is cumbersome and not practical to use
- Some students indicated a need for a reciprocal borrowing arrangement at other university libraries

3. Providing library instruction

- New students felt they need more information available on-line and they need a more detailed list of such services.
- A majority of students were unaware of AU Library's Web page.
- Some participants were unaware of services available on-line.
- Students in general need more information explaining how to use the library system.
- Students commented that more information was needed to make students aware of the different ways to access AU Library services by computer.

4. Providing Interlibrary loans

- Among undergraduate students, there is much satisfaction with ILL service.
- Graduate students need materials quickly; sometimes materials were received past the deadline.

Recommendations for the Library

The following recommendations are those that were made by the focus group participants.

1. Providing direct support by supplying materials from AU Library holdings

- Provide detailed information regarding the services available to students from the Library.
 - Provide information brochures clarifying how to request materials from the Library.
 - Continue to respond to e-mail requests within 24 hours.
2. Providing indirect support by suggesting appropriate material, by mediating literature searches, and by making databases available on-line
- Provide information detailing databases, on-line features, and techniques to access the information.
 - Provide pamphlets or newsletters giving clear information regarding services offered by the Library.
 - Provide clear instructions to access the information.
3. Providing library instruction
- Provide a pamphlet or newsletter giving clear and detailed information to students regarding the services offered by the Library.
 - Make available clear instruction about how to access information.
 - Provide a clear outline of on-line services and databases available for literature searches that are accessible to students.
 - Provide graduate students with information packages explaining on-line features and techniques to access that information.
4. Providing Interlibrary loans
- Increase the staffing level to handle requests to ensure speed of delivery and continued satisfactory service.
 - Special considerations need to be made for graduate students and their requirements at the thesis level.

Recommendations for other areas of the University

The following recommendations for areas other than the Library were made by focus group participants.

- AU should be more cost-effective and environmentally responsible. For example, send each student only one information package and reduce the number of texts for certain courses.
- AU should improve the technical quality of video material and ensure that the information and content are current.
- AU should offer a service to enable students to cut costs respecting course texts. For example, allow students to resell their books and providing a bookstore service to find and buy books.
- AU should increase the awareness about the availability of AU student computer accounts, through which the Library catalogue may be searched and materials requested.
- AU should include in the course materials package more information about services (including library services) available to students.

Additional findings of the focus groups

Participants in the last two focus groups were asked whether they had a computer, whether they had an AU student computer account, and whether they had an Internet account. Of the seventeen participants, all had a computer. More than half, eleven of seventeen, had an Internet service account. Only one student of the seventeen had exercised the entitlement to an AU student computer account.

This indicates that AU students are well-equipped on their own to participate in learning methods that incorporate computers and on-line information services. The above finding suggests that it will be essential for AU to provide processes what will authenticate AU users and allow users to access in a seamless fashion on-line information services to which the Library subscribes.

With a large proportion of AU students having computers and wanting to access on-line services, it will be essential that the Library provide information about such services and provide instruction regarding access to and efficient use of such information services.

Conclusion

The focus group sessions, it was concluded, were most helpful and informative; helpful in terms of identifying areas in which the Library is effective in its provision of service to students, and helpful in terms of identifying some needs. It became clear that there is a need among students for more information about the services available to students, a need for library instruction, and a need for the Library to upgrade its automated systems to accommodate more students wanting to use resources and tools on the Internet.