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# Drilling the LibQUAL+R Data for Strategic Planning

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# DRILLING THE LIBQUAL+R DATA FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

BY E. STEWART SAUNDERS

## **Abstract**

When the Purdue University Libraries decided in 2004 to work on a strategic plan, it was recognized that realistic planning required reliable assessment data. The assessment data needed to be reliable not only at the university level but also at the college level. The colleges reflect discipline areas. We wanted to be able to drill down into the data, i.e., to break it out into subgroups, to see differences and variation by college and library, or for that matter, any subgroup that we might choose to investigate. To support this, the sampling of students was based on a stratum for each of the 10 colleges. All faculty were included in the survey design.

1. Drilling Down. Radar charts were created for undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty in each of the 10 colleges. It became apparent that certain themes were consistent across colleges and user groups, but the charts also revealed basic differences among colleges and other user groups. Use patterns, satisfaction patterns, and outcome patterns were also broken out by user groups.

2. The Strategic Plan. The LibQUAL+R data, and more specifically its detailed analysis, had an impact on the strategic planning process. This conclusion is supported by a questionnaire filled out by the 30 participants in the Strategic Planning Group. This survey asked the participants to assess the specific areas in which the LibQUAL+R data affected the planning process. The LibQUAL+R data that most influenced them were the data that surprised them. This data was not visible at the general level. It surfaced as we drilled down to lower levels. Others believed that LibQUAL+R data had a negative effect on strategic planning. I will discuss 1) how this happened, 2) how it led to the scrapping of the first draft of the plan, and 3) the birth on a second draft which folded in what was of value from the LibQUAL+R assessment.

## **Introduction**

How might an assessment of overall library quality effect the writing of a library's strategic plan? Or, to put it differently, what would be missing from a strategic plan if an assessment were never carried out? The answer is not obvious. A strategic plan is not an operational plan. The purpose of a strategic plan is to look over the horizon at the next 5 to 15 years to see where the library should go and what the library should be at some point in the future. Assessments, on the other hand, look at satisfaction levels of patrons with the state of the library as it is and with library operations.

The above introductory paragraph actually represents post hoc thinking about assessment and strategic planning. When the Purdue Libraries decided to carry out the LibQUAL+R survey as a precursor to strategic planning, it was with the firm belief that the data from the survey would greatly inform the strategic planning results. Did this happen? Yes, it

did, but the impact was not a one to one relationship. The impact evolved as the planning progressed. The Strategic Planning Team had to wrestle with the definitions of “strategic” and “operational” before real progress could be made. For this reason the rest of this paper is organized along a progressive chronological line rather than by subject categories in order to show how the impact changed over time.

### **Planning the LibQUAL+R Survey**

The Purdue Library administration determined that a strategic plan would be written during the winter and spring of 2006 and that a LibQUAL+R survey should precede that planning. At this point in time the Library staff and administration had an impressionistic knowledge about the quality of the libraries, based mostly on hearsay and casual interaction with patrons, but there was no really “hard” data. A sound strategic plan, it was thought, should be rooted in statistically credible data for various populations and subpopulations of the university. That is, we wanted to be able to drill the data to find what was happening at the micro level. The LibQUAL+R survey must, therefore, be planned in such a way that (1) patron satisfaction could be measured at the level of colleges and schools as well as at the university level, and (2) some statistically valid assessments could be made at this micro level as well as at the macro level. We decided to survey the entire faculty and to survey stratified random samples of students in each college. If stratified samples had not been used, several of the smaller colleges would have been almost absent in the data. Stratum sizes were based on expected response rates. The survey was conducted for three weeks in Oct/Nov 2005.

### **Analyzing the Data**

As the LibQUAL+R administrator, I analyzed the survey results. Briefly stated, the analysis used the raw data from the Excel files. Data were broken out by each of the 10 colleges and again subdivided by undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty. These data were used to make 30 radar charts for the 22 core questions. The data from the demographic questions, the use questions, and the general satisfaction questions were converted into bar charts. Having completed this part of the analysis, it was evident that 1) the faculty from most of the 10 colleges had issues with information resources, or “information control” as LibQUAL+R calls it, and 2) faculty and graduate students from two colleges had issues with the quality of staff services, or “service affect” as LibQUAL+R calls it. It was also clear that students and faculty had very different patterns of using library services. The evidence was so dramatic and clear that there was no question about where the issues lay. For the rest of my analysis, I drilled down into the data represented by these issues, creating more radar charts and bar charts.

### **Communicating the Results to the Strategic Planning Team**

How is it possible to communicate the results of the analysis to the Strategic Planning Team? There was a great deal of detail; do they need all of this detail? This is, on the one hand, a logistics problem; on the other, a question of aiding the comprehension of the team members.

The solution was in a sense a compromise. I prepared a Powerpoint presentation of 73 slides. The slides consisted mostly of the radar and bar charts. For each slide I recorded my voice onto the Powerpoint in order to explain and point out noteworthy features of each slide. The Powerpoint presentation was burned onto CDs, and each member of the team received a CD for review two weeks prior to the first meeting for strategic planning. This was a compromise in the sense that a great deal of data was communicated, but the explanation of each slide reduced the effort needed by each team member to interpret the charts and data.

### **Reading the Results of LibQUAL+R**

I spoke with several members of the Strategic Planning Team after they had looked at the PowerPoint presentation. They found the charts and data absorbing, even transfixing in a negative sort of way. They were also deeply impressed with the comments from the open question. They had expected some negative results, but they didn't expect them to be so obvious.

The results from the directed questions might best be summarized as follows:

1. Undergraduates in all 10 colleges were reasonably satisfied with the Library.
2. Faculty overall were dissatisfied with information control but reasonably content with service affect and facilities.
3. Faculty in 9 out of 10 colleges were dissatisfied with information control. In these 9 colleges the average gap between perceived information control and minimally acceptable information control was negative for every one of the 8 questions dealing with information control. Confidence intervals for the gaps of 5 of the questions were calculated. Even allowing some margin for bias in the estimators, intervals were in the negative range for most of the colleges.
4. Graduate students showed some dissatisfaction with information control, but not to the same degree as did the faculty.
5. Faculty in one college and graduate students in another college were dissatisfied with library staff. This was reflected in negative gaps for a number of the 9 questions dealing with service affect.
6. Faculty over 45 years of age were more satisfied with information control than were their younger colleagues.
7. Faculty who were satisfied with service affect were marginally satisfied with information control. On the contrary, faculty who were dissatisfied with service affect were extremely dissatisfied with information control.
8. Faculty visited the Library web pages much more frequently than did undergraduate students.
9. Undergraduate students used the physical library facilities much more frequently than did faculty.

This level of detail would not have been possible without drilling the LibQUAL+R data. We would have been totally unaware that we had a problem with service affect if we had not broken out the data at the college level. Everyone on the Planning Team was aware

that our information resources did not always meet faculty needs, but they were caught by surprise to find dissatisfaction with staff abilities and performance. This led to a search for possible links between service affect and information control.

The results from the open ended question very much mirrored the sentiments from the directed questions. The most common comments dealt with insufficient online journals and the difficulty of navigating the library's web site. There were also a number of comments about staff, both good and bad, with certain libraries being singled out for either their good service or their poor service. Comments on facilities ranged from good to bad. This reflects the fact that some departmental libraries have been renovated and others have not. Specific suggestions included the reinstatement of a campus book delivery system and the overhaul of the library's web site. Some were opposed to the consolidation of departmental libraries; one other person stated that the numerous separate libraries inhibited interdisciplinary research.

### **Constructing the Strategic Plan: Draft One**

The idea of strategic planning is very simple. First, you establish library core values and purposes or first principles. These are the essentials of your library operation, the things you would never change. Second, you scan the horizon to see where the world of academic instruction and research is going. Then you plot a course of library changes to meet the changes you see on the academic horizon, but without violating your core values and purpose.

Negative opinions of the library have a stronger impact than do positive opinions. The first two days of strategic planning bear this out. This is interesting, because on the very first day of planning our strategic planning leader opened with this quote from Marvin Weisbord, "If I could ask one thing of a crystal ball in every new situation it would not be 'What's wrong and what will fix it?' It would be 'What's possible here and who cares?'" But this is not where our thinking was.

The Strategic Planning Team of around 30 librarians and staff met for two full days in February. As required we created a list of core values and purposes. We then got around to listing potential changes. We established five principle goals for the next 3 to 5 years under the following rubrics.

1. Staff Service
2. Collections and Information Resources
3. Facilities
4. Discovery/Research
5. Information Literacy.

It is no accident that the first three draft goals are the same as the three areas of the 22 core questions on the LibQUAL+R survey. This becomes more evident as we look at the objectives and strategies to be taken under each goal.

LibQUAL+R data clearly earmarked staff services as an area needing a remedy. The staff service goal read: “User’s needs are met by consistent, high-quality, user-centered service.” Below are the principle objectives and strategies to be used in meeting the staff service goal. The main measure of success in determining whether this goal is met would be the results of a future LibQUAL+R survey.

The objectives for the service goal include the following:

1. Increase service knowledge, orientation, and skills of all staff groups.
2. Increase consistency in policy, procedures, and enforcement across libraries.
3. Increase user satisfaction across all libraries in specific staff services including website, document delivery, reference, and circulation interactions.
4. Decrease complaints concerning staff and user interactions.
5. Increase approachability of staff.

The strategies for the service goal included:

1. Develop a service-orientation training program.
2. Promote hiring practices emphasizing the need for customer service orientation.
3. Develop a reward system for customer-focused employees.
4. Hire a service expert.

LibQUAL+R data also indicated that the extent of information resources and the channel for accessing these resources through the Library web site were quite inadequate. The Collections and Information Resources goal read: “Increased faculty and student satisfaction with access to and content of collections and information resources.” Again the objectives and strategies for the Collections and Information Resources goal reflect this fact.

Objectives and strategies for this goal included:

1. Increase funding for information resources.
2. Align information resources with research and learning needs of faculty and students.
3. Increase use of collections and information resources.
4. Develop an intuitive, user-friendly portal to the libraries information resources.
5. Increase collaboration with consortial partners.
6. Assess collection fund allocations and redistribute as appropriate.
7. Develop and implement comprehensive collection assessment and management practices.

To measure success in the area of collections and information resources the Planning Team set a goal of reducing the (negative) gap in the next LibQUAL+R survey by 20%.

The third area in the LibQUAL+R survey, the library as a physical space, did not receive much criticism from respondents. Many were quite happy with the physical spaces; faculty as a group did not even use the physical spaces. The average gap scores across all populations and for just about every subpopulation were all positive. There were, however, some negative comments from the open ended question. Some of those negative comments referred to the many libraries one had to visit in order to obtain

necessary materials. Looking at the objectives and strategies in this area we see mainly a concern to consolidate library spaces and find off-site storage. But even so, one of the key measures for success in this area is to improve LibQUAL+R results by 50% in the next survey. This is quite telling in demonstrating how LibQUAL+R influenced the thinking about strategic planning. The LibQUAL+R results were already reasonably good. Yet there was this felt need to improve ratings!

### **The Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG)**

Planning resumed a month later in the middle of March. Members of the Strategic Planning Team had had a month to digest the fruits of their work in February. Our planning leader wanted us to go back and take a look at something we had created called a “Big Hairy Audacious Goal.” The idea is to have a vision of the future with a central unifying goal in mind, a goal so large that it will take 10 to 15 years to accomplish. This goal cuts across all other goals. It should be a unifying goal for everyone in the library, no matter their specific functions; it should catalyze energies and develop a group spirit. The goal should be audacious enough to “stretch” the library. Our planning leader emphasized that there are mega issues more important than other issues. “Mega issues are overriding issues of strategic importance, which cut across multiple goal or outcome areas. They address key strategic questions the organization must answer...” The Team spent a great deal of time crafting a one sentence statement of our Big Hairy Goal. The BHAG reads as follows:

The Purdue University Libraries will achieve preeminence as an innovative and creative research university library in meeting the challenge of the Information Age.

For a plan to be truly strategic, the individual goals of the strategic plan should percolate down from “the big hairy audacious goal.” Well, if “percolate down” is not the correct description, then there should at least be a unity of vision between the five specific goals and the overarching goal of the BHAG. As the Team members reviewed the five goals we had devised back in February, we realized a lack of fit between them and our BHAG. Those five goals had been created from the bottom up, not from the top down. Three of them, staff service, collections and information resources, and facilities, were all obviously reactions to the LibQUAL+R survey. None of these three goals proclaim that Purdue Libraries wishes to “achieve preeminence as an innovative and creative research university library.” It dawned on us that we had been “fixing what was wrong,” not “looking to what’s possible,” to paraphrase Marvin Weisbord. As discussion ensued, it also became apparent that the original five goals did not mesh with the university’s strategic plan. At that point we asked, “Do we dare start over?”

### **A New Strategic Plan**

A decision was made to begin again. But in starting over we would not necessarily abandon the useful suggestions found in the old plan. Some of the same themes would still be there, but their relative importance would change. We sought to find a set of

specific goals that blended well with the university's strategic plan and would at the same time be steps toward making Purdue Libraries "preeminent as an innovative and creative research university library."

The new plan retained the original core values and purposes. The five original goals were replaced by four new goals. The rubrics for these four goals were the same as the rubrics for the university's strategic plan. The rubrics are:

1. Learning
2. Discovery
3. Engagement
4. Infrastructure

Service affect, information control, and facilities are no longer the focus of the plan. Learning, Discovery, and Engagement describe the areas in which the library will be preeminent. The Infrastructure goal is a catchall for other necessary functions. Those who thought the library trade was about books and journals might be surprised with these goals. Actually these older concerns reappear as subthemes.

The goal of Learning states: "Purdue Libraries advances learning with information literacy initiatives and furthers the University's learning goal with focused collections and information resources." The emphasis of this goal is to advance the information literacy program on campus, but one objective is to "Increase alignment of collections and information resources in support of a growing and changing learning environment." In addition, one of the means to measure the success of this goal is an improvement in LibQUAL+R results relating to the access and use of information resources.

The goal of Discovery states: "Purdue Libraries furthers the University's discovery goal by providing information resources and applying library science expertise to interdisciplinary research." Here again, the emphasis is on the Library's research agenda and the participation of librarians in interdisciplinary research with teaching faculty. One of the objectives, however, is "Increase alignment of collections and information resources to meet interdisciplinary needs." One of the metrics of success for this goal is increased satisfaction with the collections as measured by LibQUAL+R.

The goal for Infrastructure states: "The Purdue Libraries facilities, services, information technology, administration, faculty and staff will be aligned with the University's learning, discovery, and engagement goals and key overarching strategies." There does not appear to be anything here dealing with the original set of concerns. One objective, however, is to "Increase knowledge, service orientation, and skills of all staff groups within the library." Also, one of the strategies is to "Create and implement a plan to improve the Libraries' website." A measure of success for this goal is to improve LibQUAL+R results relating to service and facilities.

The new strategic plan has lowered the concerns for staff service, information resources, and facilities to subpoints under larger concerns. Collections and information resources

are subpoints under both Learning and Discovery. Staff service issues and facilities are now subsumed under the Infrastructure goal. LibQUAL+R is still viewed as a necessary tool for the future evaluation of these issues.

### **LibQUAL+R and Strategic Planning: A Survey**

At the end of the strategic planning process, I asked the members of the Strategic Planning Team to state their opinions regarding the effect of the LibQUAL+R survey data on their thinking about the strategic plan. Twenty three questionnaires were returned.

1. Of the 23 respondents, 21 had viewed the Powerpoint presentation about LibQUAL+R and had also read the selection of comments from the open question.
2. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree, “The result(s) of the LibQUAL+R survey directly influenced my thinking about issues for the Strategic Planning sessions.” The possible responses were a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing “disagree strongly” and 7 “agree strongly.” The average response was 6.1.
3. Respondents were asked, “What result(s) from the LibQUAL+R survey, in your opinion, were most influential in developing the strategic plan?” Allowing more than one answer the results were: (1) Dissatisfaction with staff service or knowledge – 14 respondents, (2) Dissatisfaction with information resources – 13 respondents, (3) The granularity of the data, i.e., having different results from different colleges – 3 respondents. One respondent mentioned the degree to which the faculty and graduate student responses drove the thinking about problems. Another respondent said that it divided the plan into what is strategic and what is ‘catch-up.’

In an open ended question about the relation of the LibQUAL+R results to the Strategic Plan, there were several enlightening responses.

“LibQUAL+R was so helpful to have had prior to strategic planning. It gave us an objective, hard look at ourselves, especially our areas of weakness. It set the framework for positive thinking about change!”

“The resulting strategic plan will reflect what we learned and will be integrated into the plan, but it will also be used in the upcoming year to establish priorities in accomplishing our strategic plan.”

“Provides valuable and useful data on which to base evaluation and make projections.”

“I don’t believe that as we got further into the plan, ... that it has much relation. We already had our assumptions and are ...to build the strategic plan around these assumptions with or without LibQUAL+R.”

“I think we tried to remember to keep it in mind, but in actuality it ended up not being there [in the plan].”

“Certainly, LibQUAL+R results pointed to areas that needed to be addressed. Not all of the strategic plan comes from LibQUAL+R results, however, [the plan] also relates to the university strategic plan.”

“Regardless of what is done in the next few years to improve services and resources, the same type of comments will be generated in the next LibQUAL+R survey. Dissatisfied people write comments when surveyed.”

“While there is some debate about the overall quality of LibQUAL+R as a contemporary survey instrument, it has been helpful to have some points of departure for the strategic plan that were gleaned by LibQUAL+R results.”

“The responses to the open-ended question on LibQUAL+R raised several themes in regard to user satisfaction which were corroborated in interviews and focus groups conducted by our consultant. Both qualitative and quantitative portions of the LibQUAL+R resulted in useful information for our strategic plan.”

“It may have distracted us from the innovativeness and new projects we were trying to project into the future.”

## **Conclusion**

The assessment data from the LibQUAL+R survey had a very important influence in the creation of the Purdue Libraries’ strategic plan.

1. Drilling the data, e.g., breaking it out at the college level, made the team aware of issues that it would not have known about otherwise. This was particularly true of the data relating to service affect.
2. Prior to the survey the library staff and administration had hunches and intuitive knowledge about patron opinion. The survey moved these hunches from the realm of a probable truth to a certain truth. They were no longer a debating points. We were able to move from debate to action plans. As one planner stated, “LibQUAL+R has been wonderful in helping inform our thoughts. We are basing our directions on actual facts, not hunches.”
3. In the first two days of planning the survey data confused the issues involved in strategic planning. We conflated strategic planning with operational planning. To quote yet another planner, “LibQUAL+R limited the thinking of the planning group resulting in a rather narrow focus. This situation led to goals less robust and confused the process. Immediate operational needs were emphasized instead of strategic goals.”
4. Having to deal with these operational needs had a beneficial effect on the planning process. Working through these issues forced us to better understand the nature of strategic planning, what it is and what it is not.
5. The resulting strategic plan is a balanced document. The emphasis is on the future directions and goals of the library. It is in every sense of the word “a big hairy audacious goal.” Yet balancing the “audacious” part are elements and subparts which face up to the deficiencies of the existing operation. It recognizes that existing “operational needs” must be addressed if one is to envision a more daring future.