

Academic Library as Place: Users and Uses

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Introduction

During the past decade academic research libraries have seen substantial changes in use. A number of recent studies have documented wide-ranging declines in physical library use while others have focused on the widespread use of online library resources and services from locations outside the library. However, one measure of physical library use that generally has remained stable or increased is the overall number of in-person building visits, seemingly at odds with the declines seen in on-site resources and services. Has the nature of library as place changed during this period, and, if so, how? This paper endeavors to clarify this issue by focusing on who is coming to academic libraries, the activities they engage in while there and what users see as important to library as place.

The University of Washington Libraries developed and employed an In-Library Use survey to obtain more information about users and uses of our physical libraries. The survey was first run in 2002 and has been used on a three year cycle since then. This paper reports on survey development, implementation, results, and ensuing actions for two academic research libraries: The University of Washington in Seattle, USA and the University of Haifa in Israel. While both are research libraries they operate in different institutional and national cultures. The libraries administered the survey in 2008. Complete survey forms and results for each library are available at:

Washington: <http://www.lib.washington.edu/assessment/>

Haifa (in Hebrew): <http://lib.haifa.ac.il/libinfo/assessment/>

Academic Library Space

The role of the academic library as physical space is being reassessed due to changes in scholarly communication and information technology during the past 10 to 15 years. In North America, the rapid expansion of online content has seen a consequent reduction in the use of print resources and most on-site services (Martell, 2008) along with a noticeable decrease in faculty visits to the library. Access to and use of information resources has become increasingly decoupled from a physical place. Today, academic libraries in North America have become primarily student places, especially for undergraduates, where on-site collections often play a relatively minor role.

Here, the physical library is in the process of a transition from a collections space to a learning one where students study alone, work in groups, use networked technology, take classes, socialize (virtually and in-person), and sleep, eat and drink. In short, academic libraries are becoming a “third place” for many students (in addition to residence and the classroom).

The change in the nature and use of the academic library has led to different methods for designing library space and tracking use. User-centered design has become an integral part of renovating existing space or constructing new facilities, especially “learning commons”, which endeavour to integrate library and educational technology. Techniques employed in user-centered design include a variety of qualitative and observational methods. Bennett (2006), Lippincott (2006) and Foster and Gibbons (2007) have written about user-centered design and assessment from a library perspective, including ethnographic methods. Freeman’s (2005) chapter in the influential 2005 CLIR publication *Library as Place: Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space* approaches the issue from an architect’s and space planner’s perspective. A number of recent studies have examined space utilization and design at specific libraries (Applegate, 2009; Bryant *et al.*, 2009; Webb *et al.*, 2008; Dotson and Garris, 2008; Antell and Engel, 2006) with many using a mix of qualitative methods, including detailed observation. Gayton (2008) argues that moving towards a “social” model of the physical library may threaten the perception of the library as a shared, communal scholarly space.

While these methods provide valuable spatial snapshots of use and individual user (or group) input through interviews, focus groups and other user-centered qualitative techniques, they do not provide data that ties user demographics to uses during a specific visit nor can some of their findings be generalized to the larger population. Although general user surveys can provide demographic and other use information, responses to those surveys usually represent an amalgam of perceived uses over time.

A simple but effective method of determining who is using the library, what activities they’re engaged in, what’s important to their use, and satisfaction with library facilities and on-site services can be accomplished with the use of a one-page In-Library Use survey. The survey, distributed to those entering the library during designated sampling periods, asks respondents to provide information on their visit. The survey also collects demographic and other information that can identify user groups and their academic programs. Space can be provided for user comments. Such surveys are not new and were seen before the shift to remote online usage when most library services required a physical visit (Van House *et al.*, 1990).

University of Washington Libraries and University of Haifa

The University of Washington is a large, comprehensive university which ranks among the top five North American universities in external research funding, with more than US\$ 1 billion research money received in 2008. Programs in the sciences and health sciences are highly ranked both nationally and internationally. In 2008, 40,000 students were enrolled and approximately 4,000 faculty engaged in teaching and research. The University of Washington Libraries ranks among the twenty largest academic libraries in North America and operates 13 facilities on the Seattle campus, including three large libraries – Health Sciences, Odegaard Undergraduate, and Suzallo-Allen (“main”). The library has a long-standing assessment program that makes extensive use of surveys, transaction data, and qualitative methods to better understand user behavior and demonstrate the value of the library to their work. Although the UW Libraries have used such methods as interviews, focus groups, wayfinding, and observation to better understand facility use and user needs, only surveys will be discussed in this paper.

The University of Haifa is a fast growing research institution with a focus on the social sciences, humanities, health sciences, and law. The primary language of instruction is Hebrew, with some Arabic and English, although academic materials are primarily in English. In 2008, there were 1,300 faculty and the student body consisted of nearly 18,000 students with a substantial number of native Arabic speakers. The central library houses over 2 million items and provides a wide range of electronic and print resources and services as well as many digital projects. It began a systematic process of assessment in 2006.

University of Washington development of the In-Library Use survey

The University of Washington Libraries first developed and implemented an exit survey in 1993 to acquire information about non-affiliated visitors and their use of library services. An elaborate sampling procedure was established that consisted of random two hour survey periods at the then 20 campus libraries. Those exiting the library during these periods were asked their status and, if not University affiliated, were given a short survey to complete. This method provided data on the percent of non-affiliated users exiting the library as well as their activities in the library. Similar surveys were conducted in 1996 and 1999 but were limited to the 5 largest campus libraries due to the relatively small numbers of non-affiliated users in most branch libraries (and consequent large number of sampling sessions needed). There were some changes in questions between the surveys to capture new information, especially related to technology and use of online resources.

Prior to 2002, information about University of Washington student and faculty use of library facilities came from transactional data and also through use of mailed general user surveys (the “triennial survey”) that asked specific questions about library visits. This survey began in 1992 and has been conducted on a three year cycle since then (the “triennial survey”). Significant changes in-library use patterns were observed among both non-affiliated users and the University of Washington community during the 1990s. The 1998 triennial survey showed the first decline in the percentage of faculty who stated they visited the physical library at least weekly and in 2001 the frequency of graduate student visits also decreased. The 1999 exit survey revealed a continuing decline in the proportion of non-affiliated users in the largest libraries.

Surveying users in library facilities was seen as a more precise method for acquiring information about who was using our libraries, why they visited and what they did during their visits, regardless of affiliation. The decision was made to survey all users entering all libraries at designated times in 2002, with an additional survey session for smaller libraries in order to receive a minimum of 50 completed surveys from each library. Survey methodology and distribution remained reasonably consistent in 2002, 2005, and 2008. One page surveys (In-Library Use Survey) were distributed to those entering the library during two hour time periods in May (academic session ends in June) and completed surveys were dropped off as users exited the library. The 2002 and 2005 surveys had 1 or 2 weekend sessions, but in 2008 weekend sessions were eliminated. Usage during that period is lower and the percentage of non-affiliated users is somewhat higher then but otherwise there were no statistical differences in the proportion of UW affiliated respondents by group between weekdays and weekends.

The University of Haifa Library learned about the survey through its participation in the “Effective, Sustainable and Practical Library Assessment” service offered by the Association of Research Libraries (Washington, D.C.). This survey, along with other assessment methods, was discussed during a two day site visit by ARL program officers in April 2008. Haifa was interested in collecting baseline information about library users and use and decided to translate the survey into Hebrew and run it in July 2008.

2008 survey methodology, distribution and response

The 2008 survey sessions at the University of Washington were conducted in selected two hour mid-day blocks from Tuesday to Thursday during May 2008 to maximize the number of potential respondents and minimize the number of survey sessions. 2008 was the first time the University of Haifa ran the survey and 10 two hour sampling periods were held during the first two weeks in July. For the University of Washington, aggregate results are presented only for the three sampling sessions held in common while results for specific units use all survey session responses. The number of two hour surveys sessions, surveys distributed and returned, and response rate are shown below in Figure 1. The response rates were similar at both institutions – 58% at Washington and 62% at Haifa. At the University of Washington, the 58% response rate was consistent with surveys done in 2005 (57%) and 2002 (62%).

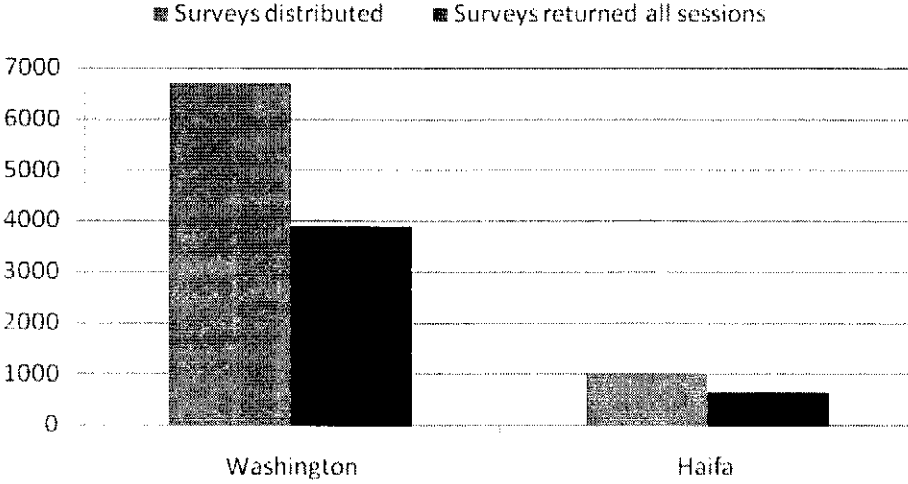


Figure 1. Survey Distribution and Response 2008

The composition of the respondent group was remarkably similar between the two institutions with students comprising 90% of the total (Figure 2). The University of Washington has seen a steady increase in the proportion of undergraduate students over time (59% in 2002, 64% in 2005) with declines in all other groups.

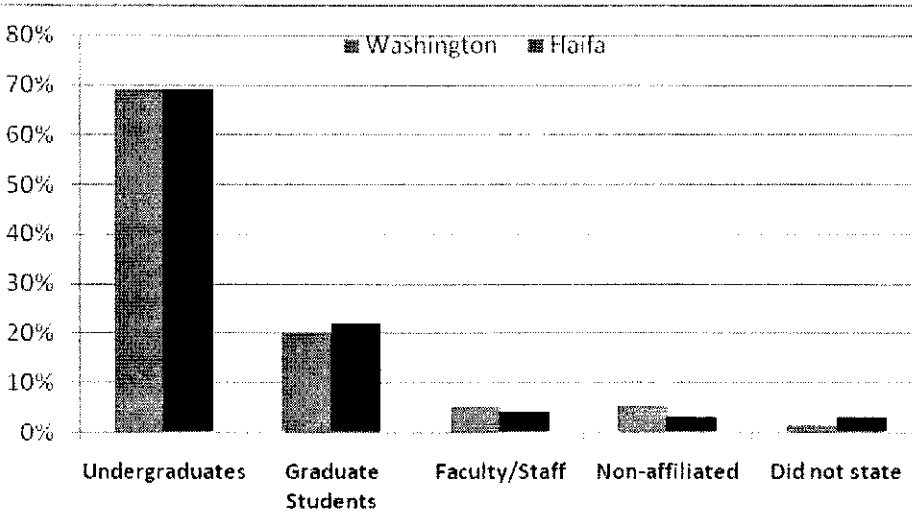


Figure 2. User Groups

The composition of the respondents by broad academic programs tends to reflect the different academic emphases of each institution (Table 1). The University of Washington shows a higher proportion of science-engineering and health sciences students while more than half of the respondents at Haifa were in social sciences, humanities and arts. At Washington, the proportion of undergraduate respondents closely matched actual enrolment figures by academic program. However, for graduate students, science-engineering survey respondents were underrepresented compared to the actual population while those in the humanities and fine arts were overrepresented. This underrepresentation is similar to other data from Washington and other North American research universities where availability of online resources and office workspace is greater for science and engineering students than those in other programs.

Table 1. Student affiliation by broad academic areas

Academic Area	Undergraduates		Graduate students	
	Washington	Haifa	Washington	Haifa
Sciences-Engineering	27%	2%	14%	0%
Social Sciences-Business	26%	32%	19%	32%
Fine Arts-Humanities	14%	36%	21%	34%
Health Sciences	5%	11%	26%	4%
Interdisciplinary/Other	1%	14%	2%	8%
No major/none given	27%	5%	18%	22%

Survey Content and Results

The questions on the 2008 In-Library Use Survey were:

- What did you do in this library today?
- How often do you use this library?
- How important to you are the following services in this library?
- How would you rate this library on the following?

There was also a question on demographics asking respondents to identify their status and academic program. The University of Haifa Central Library and the three large libraries at the University of Washington also asked which areas in those libraries they visited. Each institution included a few categories in these questions that were unique to their institution. Results are not reported for those categories.

What did you do in this library today?

Figure 3 shows aggregate results for each institution and Table 2 displays results by university-affiliated user group. The results show clearly differences in the way libraries are used at Washington and Haifa. At Haifa, in-person uses of library material and staff services are significantly higher than at Washington. Indeed, Washington use of on-site print collections has dropped substantially: the percentage of those who looked for material fell from 33% in 2002 to 17% in 2008, with photocopy use declining from 21% in 2002 to 7% in 2008. However, the differences between the institutions in the library as a place to do work were relatively minor. Use of library computers and their own computing devices were similar as was the percentage who worked in groups. Washington respondents though were more likely to work alone.

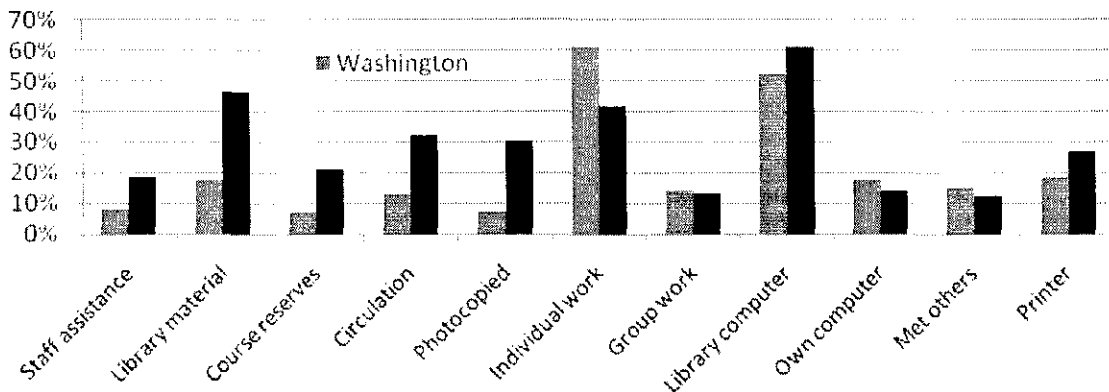


Figure 3: What did you do in this library today

It is interesting to note that differences in use by group were far more pronounced at Washington than at Haifa. At Washington, print collection related use and requests for staff assistance were substantially higher for graduate students and faculty. However, even among graduate students and faculty there was a sharp decrease among those who looked for library material between 2002 and 2008 with faculty declining from 60% to 40% and graduate students from 44% to 23%. Faculty at both institutions tended to focus on collections rather than other services or as a workplace.

Table 2: What did you do in this library today (by group)?

	Undergraduates		Graduate students		Faculty/Staff	
	Washington	Haifa	Washington	Haifa	Washington	Haifa
Asked for staff assistance	6%	18%	10%	19%	19%	11%
Looked for library material	12%	45%	23%	53%	40%	57%
Used course reserves	8%		8%		3%	
Borrowed/returned material	9%	28%	22%	44%	24%	46%
Made photocopies	6%	30%	8%	37%	8%	18%
Studied/worked individually	66%	45%	56%	37%	26%	18%
Studied/worked in groups	15%	17%	17%	5%	3%	11%
Used library computer	58%	63%	42%	63%	33%	36%
Used own computing device	16%	16%	21%	10%	7%	7%
Met friends/someone else	17%	15%	9%	9%	8%	0%
Used a printer	20%	29%	13%	27%	4%	0%

The much higher percentage of humanities' undergraduates at Haifa did account for some of the higher use of collections there compared to Washington (Figure 4). Although humanities' undergraduates at Washington looked for material at a somewhat higher rate than other Washington undergraduates, it was still substantially below Haifa.

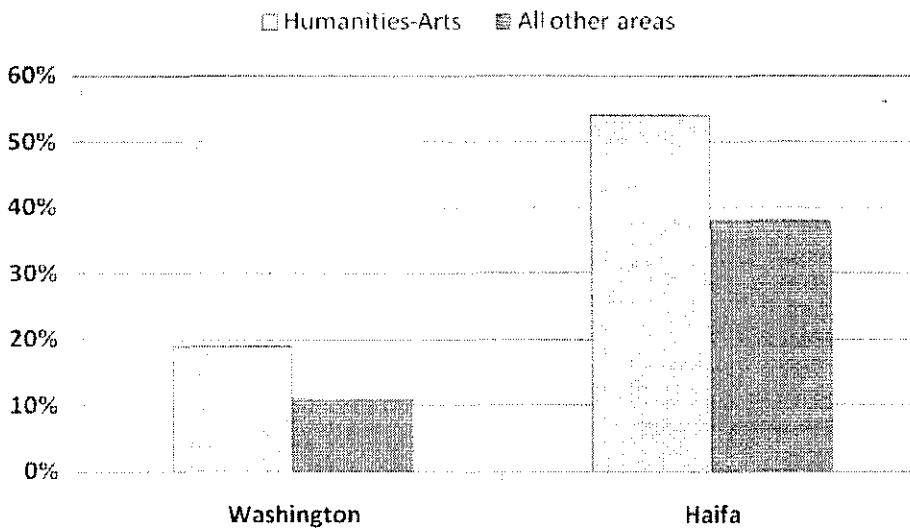
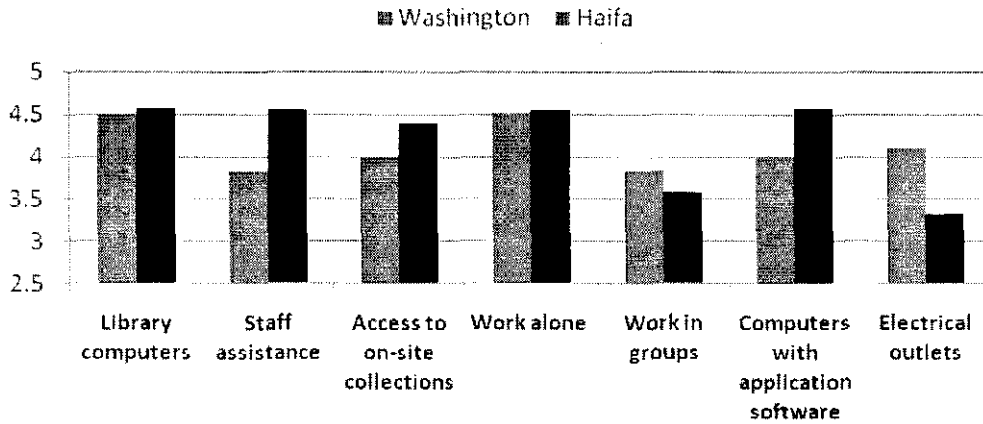


Figure 4: Looked for library material by undergraduate academic area

How important are the following services to you in this library?

Respondents answered this question using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). In general, importance was tied to the activities people did in the library during their visit. Library computers and a place to work alone were clearly the most important at Washington, while at Haifa these two services were joined in importance by library staff assistance, access to on-site collections, and library computers with application software. At Washington there were notable differences in importance rankings between undergraduates and other respondents, while at Haifa the differences were most pronounced in library as workplace.



Mean scores on a scale of 1(not important) to 5 (very important)

Figure 5. How important are the following services to you in this library?

Table 3. How important are the following services to you in this library?

	Undergraduates		Graduate students		Faculty/Staff	
	Washington	Haifa	Washington	Haifa	Washington	Haifa
Library computers	4.62	4.58	4.26	4.68	3.80	4.44
Library staff assistance	3.74	4.55	3.94	4.60	3.99	4.31
Access to on-site collections	3.93	4.32	4.12	4.49	4.18	4.92
Place to work alone	4.62	4.64	4.39	4.39	3.59	3.92
Place to work in groups	4.01	3.80	3.61	3.23	2.69	3.23
Computers/application software	4.24	4.16	3.59	3.68	2.72	3.12
Electrical outlets	4.19	3.48	4.10	2.93	3.25	3.23

Mean scores on a scale of 1(not important) to 5 (very important)

Rating library services

The lowest rated services at Washington were hours of opening and group work space, especially among faculty and graduate students. At Haifa, individual and group work space were rated lowest by faculty and graduate students, while undergraduates ranked group work space and ease of finding things lowest. Interestingly, service quality received the highest rating at both institutions and either ranked first or second among all groups (Figure 6).

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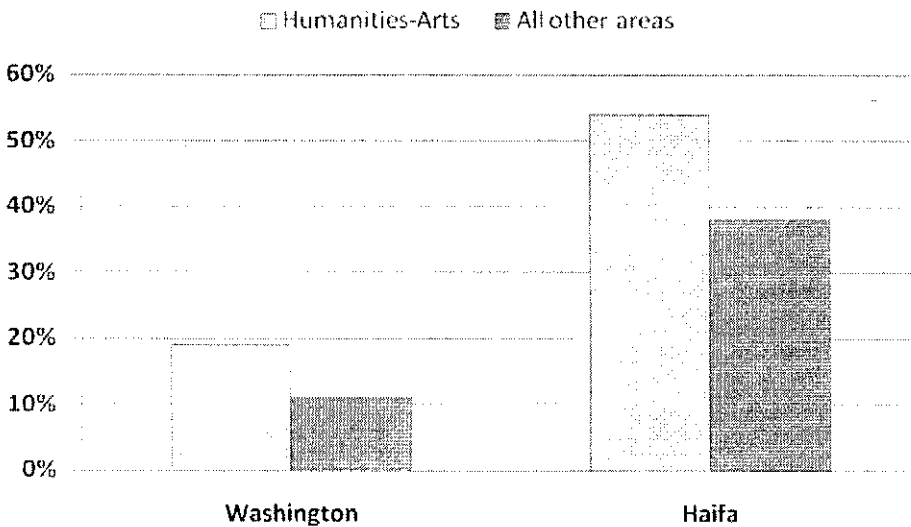
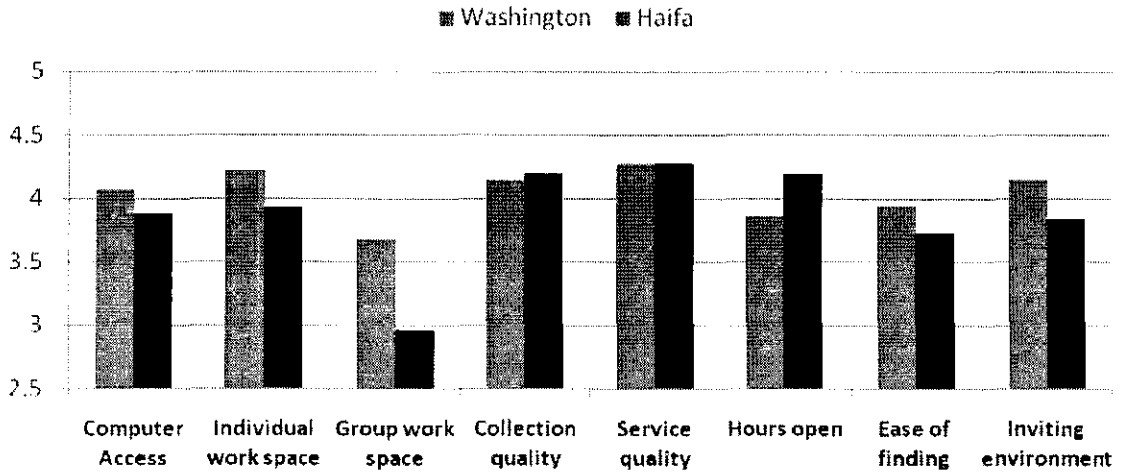


Figure 4: Looked for library material by undergraduate academic area



Mean scores on scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent)

Figure 6: How would you rate this library on the following?

Table 4. How would you rate this library on the following? (By group)

	Undergraduates		Graduate students		Faculty/Staff	
	Washington	Haifa	Washington	Haifa	Washington	Haifa
Access to computers	4.01	3.85	4.19	3.98	4.32	4.00
Individual work space	4.28	4.06	4.01	3.72	4.03	2.96
Group work space	3.69	3.15	3.63	2.79	3.61	1.81
Collection quality	4.12	4.13	4.15	4.31	4.21	4.58
Service quality	4.23	4.29	4.35	4.42	4.53	4.42
Hours open	3.95	4.19	3.56	4.18	3.76	4.15
Ease of finding things	3.89	3.69	4.01	3.78	4.12	4.04
Inviting environment	4.19	3.90	4.01	3.65	4.22	3.69

Mean scores on scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent)

At the University of Washington, the nearly 4,000 responses also allow detailed mapping of library use by group and academic program as well as for each of the 15 separate libraries. This was especially true for the more than 2,000 undergraduate respondents.

Survey comments

Survey comments added context and understanding to the survey responses. At the University of Washington, about 50% of respondents added comments, many of them quite detailed. The primary concern was with the suitability of the library as a work place, especially with such environmental issues as noise, lighting, temperature, and cleanliness in the Undergraduate Library. Other issues raised were hours of opening (outside of the Undergraduate Library), access to library computers, and lack of suitable group work space. Students wrote that they liked the ability to choose between quiet work areas (Suzzallo-Allen Library) and the more social ones in the Undergraduate Library.

At Haifa, 40% of respondents added comments with facilities and computers also accounting for the majority of comments (Figure 7). However, corroborative of the heavier use of on-site collections and services, there were also a higher proportion of comments about circulation-access services and signage. Comments also were useful for identifying specific problems especially with facilities.

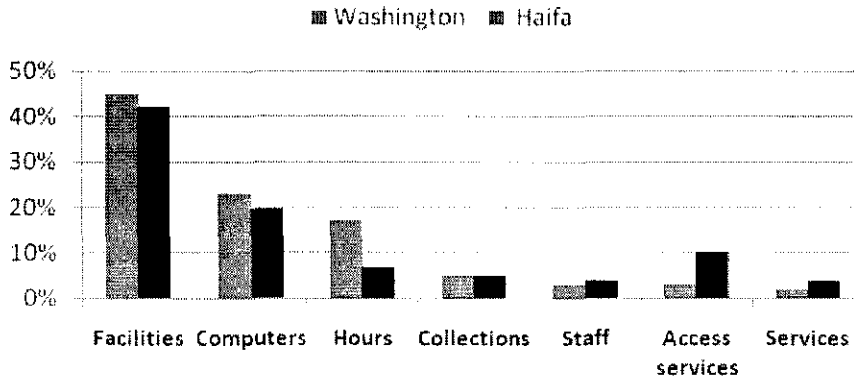


Figure 7: Comments by Category

Findings and Action

University of Haifa

The results from over 600 respondents at Haifa confirmed the concept of “library as place”, with users working in the library alone or in groups, [but also] making extensive use of physical and electronic collections, and requesting help from the service desks. In addition to the overall high rating of the library, participants provided useful and actionable information on their perceptions of environmental conditions, library computers, and the difficulty of finding items on the shelves.

In general, library users had very favorable opinions of the library and frequently used its physical and digital resources. Students sat and worked in the library, looked for items on the shelves, borrowed books and photocopied articles. However, despite the overall high rating of the library, many users’ comments indicated the unreasonable level of noise in the library, the insufficient distribution of computers, and the need for more assistance among the shelves. In the year since the survey was conducted, the library has addressed the issue of noise, the distribution of computers, their quality and awareness of them, and assistance in the stacks.

Actions to reduce noise levels included creating a special room for group work, removing photocopy machines and printers from study areas, asking staff and contractors who worked in the library to do so quietly, and forming an ad-hoc “quiet” committee to look at ways of maintaining acceptable noise levels. Other more recent assessment methods such as focus groups and the LibQUAL+® survey have been used to track patrons’ expectations and concerns about noise levels.

It also upgraded many public computers, put computers into the group work room, and moved computers from low use areas to high use ones. Additional signage was provided that indicated where computers were located and the availability of electrical outlets for laptops. Finally, to assist users the stacks more prominent signage was displayed indicating call number ranges, internal telephones were installed so users can call for help from the shelves, and student employees now wear library t-shirts.

University of Washington

Results at the University of Washington confirmed the long-term trend of the library as work place, especially for undergraduate students. Use of on-site physical collections and in-library service desks continued to show a steady decline. The percentage of faculty and graduate students continued to decline, especially in the sciences and engineering.

At the University of Washington, the In-Library Use survey results played a key role in the recommendations of the Task Force on New Measures. This Task Force was charged with reviewing the Libraries' current service points and collections locations and making recommendations to close or consolidate those which ranked lowest in various use measures. In-Library Use survey results provided complementary information to other types of use data and led to use profiles that could also be tied to groups and academic programs. The Task Force recommended the closure of five branch libraries and the consolidation of several collections and service points within the largest library facility. The print collection in the largest library, Suzzallo-Allen, was integrated into one call number arrangement beginning in July 2009.

The survey results showed an increase in the number of people bringing their own computing devices to the library and the need for better electrical connectivity. The importance of library provided computers to student work also led to computer upgrades at a time when some were questioning whether those computers were still needed. The Libraries' capital budget request listed several potential projects to increase the number of electrical outlets. Repeated concerns about the noise levels and thirty year old furnishings in the Undergraduate Library led to a university initiative to refurbish the library which is the heaviest used facility on the University of Washington campus.

Results Common to Both Institutions

In both Washington and Haifa the library was viewed positively with a focus on its role as a workplace, with differential workspaces for groups and individuals. Despite the increasing use of laptops, many respondents mentioned the importance of making library computers and electrical outlets abundant.

Selected Actions

In both institutions several changes have already been implemented such as: replacement and upgrading of library computers, closing and consolidating smaller libraries and service points, providing more services online, installing better directional signage (in particular for computers and electrical outlets), sending more items to storage and submitting plans for library renovation and refurbishment in high use libraries, providing more space for group work, reducing the noise levels from equipment, staff and other workers, adding or relocating computers within the library to where they're needed, and improving assistance for users in the stacks through phones and student employees identified as library staff.

Practical implications and value

This relatively simple survey tool provided a wealth of valuable information about who uses our libraries and why. It can be applied in different cultures and contexts and is a valid complement to transaction data, qualitative information and other methods. Survey data and comments provided actionable information that can be used to understand physical library use and to make changes that can better support the academic community. The data can also document the continuing high use and importance of the physical library at a time when the value of library facilities is being questioned by university administrators and stakeholders.

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