



LibQUAL+ 2007: Benchmark Observations

Executive Summary

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GVSU LibQUAL+ Benchmark Observations

Summer-Fall 2007

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The measure of a library's quality is much more than simply the size of its collection. In addition to the breadth and appropriate strengths of its collection, a top-notch library also provides high quality services to its constituents. In a setting such as Grand Valley State University, constituents include undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, and members of the surrounding community. In assessing service quality, one prominent assessment model is based on the premise that, "only customers judge quality; all other judgments are essentially irrelevant" (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, Berry, 1990, p. 16). In 2007 the University Libraries at GVSU undertook a first administration of the LibQUAL+ survey, modeled on the SERVQUAL service-quality assessment tool developed by the authors of the previous quote. Administration of LibQUAL+ gave us the opportunity to glean insight into our users (and non-users) concerning the extent to which they *perceive* the Libraries as meeting their expectations. Our goals were to learn how to administer this major "total market" survey, to gather an initial set of benchmark service-quality assessment data for comparison with future iterations of the survey, and to evaluate the data generated toward application to planning and decision-making.

- Administering LibQUAL+

LibQUAL+ has been developed, and is made available to libraries through, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). ARL's LibQUAL+ staff members have developed an excellent support program, including a detailed procedures manual, extensive web information and survey management site, and a series of orientation and training sessions. Taking advantage of these resources, preparing for our first administration of LibQUAL+ was straightforward and proceeded with few obstacles. Having now done the preparation, survey setup, administration, and initial data evaluation one time, future iterations should be relatively routine and easily accomplished.

- Benchmark data

Our initial plan was to gather and establish benchmark, or baseline, data in a first administration of LibQUAL+ at GVSU by inviting all employees (staff and faculty in all categories), and representative random samples of undergraduate and graduate students to complete the survey. We eventually opened the survey beyond our original student sample to any students who wished to participate. The set of valid responses at the end of the survey period (six weeks) was, in round numbers, approximately 10% of the GVSU community, and reasonably well reflected the proportions of undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and staff comprising GVSU. We are satisfied that as a baseline, our 2007 LibQUAL+ data contains useful information about current user perceptions of service quality, and will serve as valid comparison data with other academic libraries' LibQUAL+ results and with results from future iterations at GVSU. We tentatively expect to administer LibQUAL+ every three years, with Fall 2010 being our next projected survey date.

- Initial data evaluation

Within less than a month of closing the survey to respondents, we had a summary of analyzed quantitative data, the raw quantitative results, and raw qualitative data in the form of open-ended comments submitted as part of many of the valid submitted surveys.

The summary of analyzed quantitative data is delivered by ARL to each participating LibQUAL+ site in a given semi-annual cohort shortly after its survey period concludes, in the form of “The Notebook.” GVSU’s LibQUAL+ Notebook for Fall 2007 provides a summary of the survey response group with respect to the overall GVSU population based on the demographic data collected in the survey. In general, the response group was reasonably representative of the general GVSU population with respect to user sub-groups; somewhat less so with respect to discipline, which is in part almost certainly related to the category names we applied.

The notebook summarizes the mean scores on the 22 core survey questions for the entire response group, and for each of the major user group categories (undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, staff, library staff) in the form of so-called radar charts, tables of mean scores, and tables of standard deviations. In taking the survey, respondents were asked to indicate their score on a 1-9 scale three times for each question: their minimum acceptable service-level score, their desired service-level score, and their perception of current service level. The radar charts represent this visually by labeling the spokes of a wheel for each of the core questions, and placing 1 at the origin and 9 at the outermost of a series of concentric circles; connecting the mean “minimum acceptable” scores for each question forms a line around the origin, as does connecting the mean “desired” scores, and the mean “perceived” scores. Ideally, the “perceived” scores fall into the “zone of tolerance” in the space between “minimum” and “desired,” preferably tending toward the upper end of the range, near “desired.”

The overall GVSU response group results approached the ideal: the “perceived” scores all fell easily within the “zone of tolerance.” This was true for just the undergraduate student group as well. For graduate students “perceived” only exceeded “minimum” by a small margin, especially for certain questions (those comprising the “Information Control” dimension, and to extent, the “Library as Place” dimension). For faculty, “perceived” consistently fell *below* “minimum” on most “Information Control” and “Library as Place” questions; staff and library staff mimicked this pattern to an extent. A superficial analysis of this result would be that the University Libraries are essentially meeting the services needs of students (both undergraduate and graduate) at least minimally; but there are significant issues among faculty and staff regarding services expected of the libraries which we must investigate and understand better if we are to improve perceptions of service quality among those users.

Approximately 40% of the valid surveys submitted included comments from the respondents in an open-ended comment box – anything from 1-2 words to several lengthy paragraphs. This qualitative data is deceptive: on the one hand, it is immediately readable text, and reading through pages of accumulated remarks provides insight into some recurring themes; on the other hand, an accurate, quantifiable analysis of nearly 1300 pieces of free text takes time, tools, and skills that have not yet been applied to the task. Therefore, only the most cursory observations can be made about what the comments data reveals.

Perhaps the most obvious trend in the comments was criticism of physical facilities: Zumberge Library is confusing, dark, uncomfortable, ugly, unaesthetic, too few computers, too few outlets, too little quiet study, too little group study; Steelcase Library doesn't have enough seats. Additional criticism was offered regarding books and collections: need more books in my subject, need more current books, need more books on the shelf, dislike books in storage or retrieval unit, online full text for journals is great (want more!) but want print for books. On the other hand, "helpful," "friendly," "courteous" service was also consistently mentioned and complimented. Many comments were in the general form of, "Library staff are very friendly and helpful, but....," where the rest of the comment expressed one of the criticisms or lacks listed previously.

- Conclusion

Our initial administration of LibQUAL+ went smoothly and resulted in a generous quantity of data. Upon initial inspection, we can quickly determine some areas where we should focus attention in the short term (or have already); we can also discern areas of focus relevant to planning for a new building, and other areas which might become focal in a next strategic planning cycle. We have a benchmark to use as we choose questions to compare against other institutions' LibQUAL+ data; and we have a baseline for future iterations of LibQUAL+ at Grand Valley. We have tentatively proposed a 3-year cycle for administering LibQUAL+ at GVSU, giving us time between each set of data-gathering to review, analyze, interpret, experiment, and grow.

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References

Zeithaml, V.A., Parasuraman, A., Berry, L.L. (1990). *Delivering quality service: Balancing customer perceptions and expectations*. New York: Free Press.