

LibQual+™: An international assessment tool for libraries

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Participating in LibQual+™

LibQual+™ participants invite library users to complete a survey by emailing the URL for the library's web form to a sample. Respondents complete the survey and the answers are transmitted to a central database at ARL. The data is then analyzed and compiled into reports that are distributed to the participants. The reports illustrate and describe the users' desired, perceived, and minimum expectations of service.

The planning process begins in early fall for a winter/spring implementation. This is now referred to as Session I implementation. Session II implementation, on a June-December schedule, is under development. Online registration is open from September through December at the LibQual+™ web site (www.libqual.org). Participants join an open forum listserv and have the opportunity to take LibQual+™ related workshops. Generally, the staff within each participating library forms a team to facilitate the process. Each institution may have up to six points of contact, three primary liaisons and three assistants. This team will oversee various functions of the process. One such function is obtaining clearance for human subjects research (if that is a requirement of the home institution).

Participating libraries will also identify the personnel or department within their institution that will be responsible for providing valid email addresses for selected sample populations. This may be library personnel, the campus computing department, etc. Small institutions may choose to have the entire patron base as the sample. Participants also complete forms at this time that will provide ARL with needed information (such as the names and contact information for the primary liaisons, etc).

In December, a preview survey becomes available for testing and additional training opportunities are held at the American Library Association's mid-winter conference. The final email samples are established at universities as soon as spring enrollment records are available.

Each library establishes the exact date that they will begin and end the survey within the time frame of February through May. Generally, the library director or project manager sends a series of email messages to the sample. The first one announces the upcoming survey, an invitation to participate follows, and then several reminder notices are sent. Many institutions provide incentives. These are gifts that are given to randomly chosen participants. These gifts have been such items as iPods, laptops, PDAs, movie tickets, money, gift certificates to stores or campus bookstores, etc. In May, access to the survey closes and, shortly after, the results notebooks and survey data files (including SPSS and Excel files of raw data) are available to participants. A "Results" meeting is held at American Library Association's annual meeting in June or July.

The participation fee for LibQual+™ survey is 2,500 American dollars per library. If individual libraries within institutions wish to distinguish their findings by requesting separate results, data, and materials, then the fee will be 2,500 American dollars per unit of analysis.

The Benefits of LibQual+™ Participation

As with all forms of assessment, the data obtained is useful in evaluating current library services and for planning for the future. LibQual+™ is just one of many assessment tools and may be used in conjunction with other standard methods for a comprehensive assessment. Some of the benefits of using LibQual+™ for assessment are:

- LibQual+™ is the creation of a team of library and assessment professionals. Through rigorous testing and revisions, it has evolved into a refined, concise, and mature model of assessment that is appropriate across institutional types.
- LibQual+™ is an especially effective tool for understanding user perceptions and expectations. In the following section labeled “The Survey”, an explanation of the assessment instrument will show how it collects data regarding the minimum level of service that users expect (what they need), the perceived level that is offered (what they believe they have) and what level of service they desire (what they want). I. e., LibQual+™ can reveal “what the patron really wants.” For each question asked, gap scores indicate if users believe there is a gap between what is needed and what is provided. Gaps also occur when a patron feels there is actually “more” offered than is actually needed. Library administrators may use this information to determine where to place their money. For example, an expensive service that is “more” than patrons say they need may be considered for downsizing. Other areas, where expectations are not being met, may receive additional funding or attention.
- LibQual+™ data allows for comparable analysis with peer institutions. Participants in LibQual+™ have online access to the data of other participating institutions. Aggregate data is also available for consortiums (such as ARL, OhioLINK, etc.). Librarians may use this data to examine the practices of institutions that are evaluated highly by their users.
- Participants in LibQual+™ have found it to be a good value. With minimal effort, participants conduct the survey and then simply await the results. The LibQual+™ suite of services is extensive and ongoing. Once an institution has participated in LibQual+™, they remain part of the online community of professionals who are interested in improving library services.

The Survey

The original LibQual+™ survey in 2000 had forty-one questions in five categories or “dimensions.” By 2003, twenty-two core questions were focused into three areas of interest: affect of service, library as place and information control.

The online survey is formatted as such:

- Page one begins with the library’s logo, a welcome to participants, and instructions.
- The twenty-two core questions are next. Consortiums may add five questions of their choosing.
- “General Satisfaction and Outcomes” is a section of eight questions regarding information literacy and general satisfaction.
- Several questions ask participants about their library use habits as well as their use of non-library gateways (such as Google).
- The “Demographic Questions” section is customized by each institution and includes questions regarding gender, age, user group, etc.
- A box is provided for comments.
- A space is provided for the participant’s email address. This is for the institutions that choose to participate in a random drawing for incentives.
- Page two offers thanks to the participant and gives the LibQual+™ home page URL and the library’s webmaster’s address. (<http://www.libqual.org/Information/Timeline/index.cfm>)

For each of the twenty-two core questions, participants answer by identifying their minimum expectations, the perceived level of service, and the desired level of service. The following is a sample question:

| When it comes to: | My Minimum Service Level is Low - High | My Desired Service Level is Low - High | Perceived Service Performance is Low - High | N/A |
|---------------------------|---|---|--|-----|
| Willingness to help users | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 | N/A |

Survey respondents select a number between one and nine on the radio buttons to indicate their answer, with nine being the highest and one being the lowest. Therefore, for each of the twenty-two questions, three answers are obtained (minimum, desired, and perceived). Questions in the affect of service dimension focus on empathy, responsiveness, assurance and reliability of the staff. Information control questions cover scope, timeliness, convenience, ease of navigation, and condition of equipment. The library as place dimension poses questions regarding the library as a utilitarian space, symbol, and refuge. The dimensions are not segregated: all questions are intermingled.

The Results

The institutions results notebook begins with a review of LibQual+™ and instructions and suggestions on how to read the charts and graphs. LibQual+™ participants will find radar and bar charts, which demonstrate gap analysis, a quick method of summarizing aggregate results.

Radar charts are circular charts in which each spoke represents a question on the survey. The mean score for each of the three perceptions is plotted along a spoke. The chart uses color to indicate these scores and show a zone of tolerance. When viewing a chart in which the respondents have rated the services as being “adequate,” the desired score will be the upper boundary of an irregular circle and the minimum score will be the lower boundary. The perceived score will be somewhere in the middle. This service adequacy is considered to be “positive” because the users’ perceptions are higher than their minimum expectations (although lower than their desired expectations). Positive scores are indicated in blue on the radar charts. A negative score, which is indicated by red, occurs when the users’ perceptions fall below the minimum expectations. A positive “superiority” gap, indicated by green, exists when the users’ perceptions exceed their desired level of service. Dimension summaries are also charted on bar graphs in the Results Notebook. See Figure 2 for an example of a radar chart and bar graph. (http://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/60_ARL%20LibQUAL%20Poster.pdf)

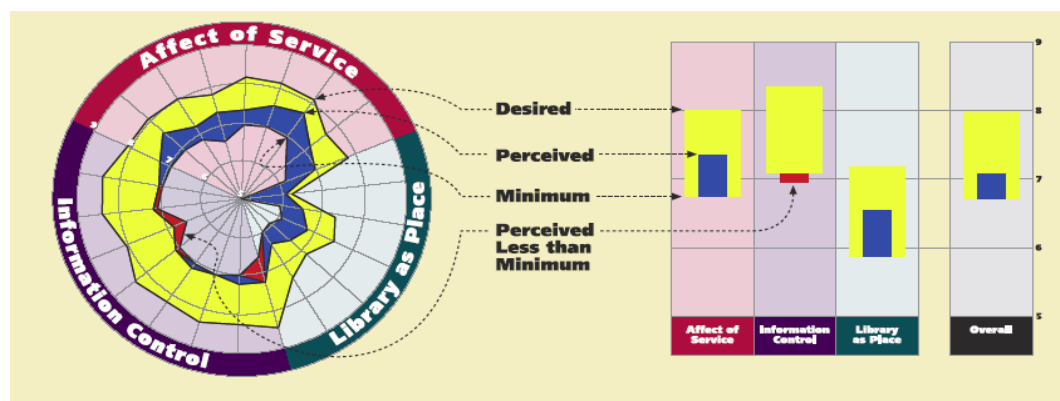


Figure 2

An important and informative component of the survey is the results from the comments box. Respondents are eager to share their thoughts and often enter library specific comments. Participating libraries have the ability to view the comments during the open time for survey completion, a survey feature that many staff members have found to be addictive and entertaining! The comments are available only to the home library and are not included in the aggregate results of consortiums. Some institutions later code the remarks and categorize them for further study. Examples of comments from the Kent State, East Liverpool Campus survey are:

- Everyone in the library is very knowledgeable about the equipment and how to access the information that I need for assignments and research.
- I would really appreciate longer weekend hours, even if only 2 – 3 hours on a Sunday.
- More quiet please
- ...whenever I have had a question or needed anything, they have been very helpful. I found this little bit of assistance very comforting since I have been out of school for over 15 years.

In additions to the printed reports (which are also online), raw data in SPSS or Excel files are provided electronically for additional analysis.

LibQual+™ in Greece

In June of 2005, the Technological Educational Institution of Thessaloniki held a seminar to examine the need for, and international developments in library assessment. The Conference was organized under the auspices of the European Social Fund "Operational Program on Education and Initial Vocational Training" and in cooperation with the ARL. LibQual+™, MINES (Measuring the Impact of Networked Electronic Services) and DigiQUAL (LibQual+™ for the networked environment) were among the assessment tools that were presented.

In a lecture titled "Library Assessment: Why Today and Not Tomorrow?," Martha Kyrillidou, Director of ARL Statistics and Measurement Program, told listeners, "Greek libraries need to be vigilant in preserving their relatively newly established position of respect and good service and be on the alert to serve the ever-changing needs of their users and achieving greater levels of service excellence and relevance and impact. It is the support of the users and their perspectives of how valuable libraries are in their lives that will generate the positive attitudes that are needed for continued and increased funding of library activities." (Kyrillidou, 2005). Requirements for library accountability differ among nations. Yet it is a global truth that the Internet, with its multiple information providers and sophisticated networking capabilities, has prompted many (legislators, administrators, library users) to question the need for, and the role of, libraries. Tools such as LibQual+™ can serve the Greek library community by providing institutions with useful data for change. All libraries must be responsive to the needs of the users in order to ensure funding and survival.

Greek libraries could participate in LibQual+™ as a consortium. A consortium obtains valuable service quality information and comparisons across the membership. Group members receive a number of added benefits that are not provided to individual participants, including: 1) Analysis of group results and a group notebook for consortium participants, 2) the ability to add five additional questions to the survey as a unified group; data from those questions will be included in the group notebook, 3) the opportunity for a locally hosted, customized results meeting (depending on the number of consortium participants and the availability of the LibQUAL+™ team). The annual Greek academic librarians conference would be a logical choice for this meeting, and 4) the ability to benchmark results with a group of peer institutions. (<http://www.libqual.org/Information/Consortia/index.cfm>)

The most obvious obstacle to the implementation of LibQual+™ in Greece is, of course, the lack of a Greek language survey. This obstacle has been overcome elsewhere and LibQual+™ is available in American English, British English, Dutch, Continental French, Canadian French, Swedish, and Afrikaans.

Some libraries within Greece, especially the smaller institutions and departmental libraries, may find the cost prohibitive. Yet it is the smaller organizations that are less likely to have the resources necessary to carry out an assessment project of this magnitude. The LibQual+™ suite of resources is extensive and considered by most to be a great value. The cost for a single institution or consortium to replicate the program would be exorbitant and, in reality, impossible.

In conclusion, initiatives such as HEAL-Link and the annual Greek academic librarians conference have already united the geographically dispersed Greek libraries. Choosing “one” assessment tool, such as LibQual+™, for national use would strengthen that union. It would foster the spread of the “culture of assessment” throughout the libraries and strengthen the commitment to excellence in library services.

Bibliography

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4. Martha Kyrillidou, “Library Assessment as a Collaborative Enterprise,” Preprint (9/7/2004) for special issue of *Resource Sharing and Information Networks* on the theme “Creative Collaborations: Libraries Within Their Institutions and Beyond” Volume 18, Numbers 1/2 2005/2006, pp. 73-87. http://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/kyrillidou_haworth_sept72004.pdf
5. See also: Martha Kyrillidou “Globalization in library assessment and the development of LibQUAL+(tm).” (forthcoming)
6. LibQual+™. <http://www.libqual.org>
NOTE: The following papers are forthcoming in a bilingual publication edited by Mersini Kakouri. This publication is a collection of the papers presented at the TEI Conference on assessment, June 13 – 15, Thessaloniki Greece,
7. Colleen Cook, “The Importance of the LibQUAL+™ Survey for the Association of Research Libraries and Texas A&M University,” Paper presented at the Library Assessment Conference held at Thessaloniki, Greece, 13-15 June 2005. <http://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/ColleenGreecePaper.doc>
8. Brinley Franklin, “Measuring the Impact of Networked Electronic Services (MINES): The North American Experience,” Paper presented at the Library Assessment Conference held at Thessaloniki, Greece, 13-15 June 2005. <http://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/BrinleyGreecePaper.doc>

9. Martha Kyrillidou, "Library Assessment: Why Today and Not Tomorrow?," Paper presented at the Library Assessment Conference held at Thessaloniki, Greece, 13-15 June 2005. <http://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/KyrillidouGreecePapers.doc>
10. Terry Plum, "Evaluating the Usage of Library Networked Electronic Resources," Paper presented at the Library Assessment Conference held at Thessaloniki, Greece, 13-15 June 2005. <http://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/PlumEvaluating%20Networked%20Electronic%20ResourcesGreece050527.doc>
11. Bruce Thompson, "Research and Practice: Key Elements of Success for LibQUAL+(tm)," Paper presented at the Library Assessment Conference held at Thessaloniki, Greece, 13-15 June 2005. <http://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/BruceGreecePaper.doc>
12. Stephen Town, "Academic library performance, quality and evaluation in the UK and Europe," Paper presented at the Library Assessment Conference held at Thessaloniki, Greece, 13-15 June 2005. <http://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/StephenGreecePaper.doc>