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Exercise 3 – Literature Review

Getting the Net Gen Student into the Academic Library:
A Literature Review

It has been widely observed that college students are turning more and more to remote usage of academic library resources. At the Hypothetical University (HU) Library, an undergraduate college library serving approximately 10,000 students, this trend has been obvious as gate counts, circulation numbers, reference desk inquiries, and the number of students accessing databases from within the library has decreased dramatically in recent years. Those students who do come to the library appear to spend more time using library computers for non-research activities than anything else. At the same time, off-site use of online library resources has gradually increased. Despite these trends, the HU Library staff believes the physical library is an important asset to the HU community because it houses an abundance of information and sources not accessible online, not all library users prefer online services and resources or have access to them from home, and students need a physical place to go to study.

Though a library task force for online access to resources exists to continue to improve our online presence, improvements to our facility, services, and programming have largely been ignored in the recent past. Library instruction efforts, consisting primarily of one-shot sessions conducted on the request of professors, have succeeded in introducing some HU students to the library and encouraging them to return for future research. However, this instruction is not having enough impact on student library use, even among those students who participate. Some successes have been reported with the use of embedded librarians, required information literacy

courses, and a first-year experience programs at other libraries, and though they have been explored at HU, the current situation is not conducive to such programs.

Faced with the decline in usage that jeopardizes the library's physical place in the University, HU Library staff has asked, how do we get this new generation of undergraduate students into the library? We hypothesize that initiatives such as updating the physical library space, adjusting services, and adding programs targeted to this generation's needs, desires, and expectations will increase use. The following literature review has been undertaken as an initial step in developing a plan aimed at increasing undergraduate use of the physical library facility and its resources.

The Net Generation in the Library

Much of the literature regarding current undergraduate student needs, desires, and expectations revolves around a generational definition (Abram & Luther, 2004; Becker, 2009; Gardner & Eng, 2005; Ismail, 2009; Sweeney, 2005; Walker, 2006). The generation that encompasses current traditional college-age students is called many names: Net Generation (Net Gen for short), Generation Y, Millennials, Echo Boom Generation, Nexters, or even the Nintendo Generation. Regardless of the specific birth years various sources define as its limits (generally around 1980 through the mid-1990s), this is the generation in which individuals have grown up in a world saturated with technology and the internet. It is widely accepted that this generation values:

- Multitasking
- Collaboration
- Achievement
- Flexibility
- Experiential learning
- Diversity

They expect:

- Customization
- A variety of choices
- Instant results and feedback
- Access to everything online and on the go
- Integration of technology into learning (and all other aspects of life)

Some research has been done on the impact of the Net Generation on libraries. Among the first authors to do so after the first wave of the Net Generation had made its way through college were Abram and Luther (2004). These authors communicated nine aspects of Net Generation behavior and the subsequent impact of that behavior on libraries. Though nearly all of the impacts stated relate to online and remote delivery of services, the discussion of Net Gen behavior provides a framework for brainstorming ways those behaviors impact the delivery of onsite services.

After seven years of discussions with focus groups, Sweeney (2005) found the Net Generation profile reported by Abram and Luther (2004) and others to be accurate. His article, which is one of the most thorough of its kind, clearly outlines the traits, values, and expectations of the generation and relates the impact of those traits on libraries in both the virtual and physical realms. He goes one step further to explicitly state initiatives needed to "reinvent libraries" to make them relevant to the Net Generation. Of his sixteen initiatives, the ones most relevant for the current discussion are:

- Turning libraries into attractive bookstore-like destinations with extended hours and amenities such as food and drink

- Creating a variety of flexible, easily transformed spaces for quiet, individual study as well as noisy, collaborative interaction

- Reorienting and retraining current staff to respond to the needs of current students

- Recruiting members of the Net Generation to the library workplace and for advisory roles (through advisory boards, focus groups, etc.)

- Rethinking current policies and services

Similar to Sweeney, but less thorough or original, is Walker's (2006) article profiling the Net Generation and explaining the ways in which some generational traits translate into library needs. She focused on the generation's emphasis on collaborative learning, orientation toward results, expectation of instant access to information, ability to multi-task, and consumer behavior. Though this article helps reinforce the reader's understanding of the generation by presenting the information in a slightly different way, it contributes little in the way of original ideas.

Gardner and Eng's (2005) survey found that the widely accepted Net Generation traits, including some of those identified by Abram and Luther as well as Sweeney, were clearly present in the undergraduate student population at their university. Specifically, the authors investigated the extent to which students held high service expectations, desired customization, were comfortable with technology, and used new modes of communication. The authors also explored how those traits manifest themselves in expectations for library service and the implications of those expectations for libraries. Again, many of the expectations and impacts discussed are in line with those found in Sweeney's research. Students expect space to study both alone and in groups, extensive hours, flexible spaces that can be easily transformed according to current need, access to food and drink, and access to flexible technology within the library. Though the 2003 survey is a little older than is ideal for incoming freshmen in 2010, it is still highly relevant as a case study of Net Generation students.

Unlike other authors who emphasize the uniqueness of the Net Generation, Becker (2009) argues convincingly that the differences between generations are overemphasized, as many Net Gen traits are in fact currently seen in other generations, including consumerism, a sense of entitlement, and a desire for experiential learning. Modern culture has changed every

generation living today. He further argues that the concept of Net Gen students as digital natives

is a "dangerous myth" because the computer and internet skills of most individuals of this

generation are useful primarily for entertainment purposes and does not translate into "academic

or real-world skills" (pp. 350, 361). Individuals within the group exhibit a wide variety of

behaviors, traits, and values, and though there may be an overall trend, libraries must cater to a

variety of needs. After reading other articles on the subject, this article brings the reader back to

the reality that assumptions made about members of a generation and emphasizing differences

between generations can be problematic.

<u>Your</u> Net Gen Students

Even among the articles discussing the importance of looking at the traits and

expectations of the new generation of students, many either imply or explicitly state the need for

libraries to determine the needs of their own students rather than designing programs and

services based on the general Net Generation profile. Though it is not explicitly stated, Becker's

article (2009) cautioning against a reliance on generational descriptions seems to present an

argument for determining the needs of local undergraduate students prior to selecting and

implementing initiatives. Since members of the Net Generation are unique with a variety of

needs, it is possible that students' needs at one university may vary from those of another.

Ismail (2010) bases her argument for the need to determine local needs on the results of a

localized survey that revealed the students at her library did not fit the Net Gen profile in all

ways. Surprisingly, that survey showed her students responded negatively to receiving research

assistance via Facebook, MySpace, and IM/chat. Though the responses to Ismail's survey were

so low as to prevent conclusions of any kind – not even for the author's own university – at the

very least it shows that not all members of the Net Generation fit the profile and libraries must

cater to a variety of needs. Though Gardner and Eng (2005), unlike Ismail, found their students'

traits and expectations consistently in line with the Net Gen profile, they nonetheless insist that

each library must determine its own students' needs. Prescott and Veldof (2010) similarly argue

that a local needs assessment is necessary for responding effectively to the changing needs and

expectations of students. Their article, which describes a process for determining student needs

and developing initiatives based on those needs, is discussed in-depth in the following section.

Johnson's (2009) research shows the consequences of implementing initiatives without

first conducting some sort of needs assessment. She relates several sets of initiatives and changes

made at her library in an attempt to increase on site usage of library resources. The first plan,

which was developed by librarians and library staff without any formal assessment of their

undergraduates' needs, failed. Taking what they learned from that initial process, they spent time

and energy determining what the students wanted before undertaking the second set of

initiatives, which was ultimately successful. Similarly, Ismail (2010) briefly relates a similar

experience of her library getting "hit or miss" results with initiatives implemented prior to

surveying students.

Determining Needs and Developing Initiatives

Researchers clearly agree that an assessment of the specific needs of the undergraduate

students served by a particular library is essential prior to selecting and implementing services.

But how should libraries go about determining the needs of the undergraduate students they

serve? Subsequently, how can libraries translate the needs of students into targeted initiatives

that will succeed in bringing undergraduates into the library?

Prescott and Veldof (2010) outline a thorough and ultimately successful process for

determining student needs, translating those needs into relevant and feasible initiatives, and

implementing the targeted initiatives. That process includes assessing needs; analyzing data;

determining core themes; brainstorming and evaluating possible initiatives; gathering feedback;

seeking funds; and implementing new programs and services. Not only is the article

exceptionally complete in its discussion of the overall process, it is also remarkably complete in

its discussion of the varied ways they collected data during the needs assessment stage, including

through targeted independent and LibQual+ surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Any

institution with enough staff time could replicate the process in its own library. This is the most

comprehensive and detailed article of its kind as it leads libraries through the entire process,

making it essential reading for those exploring the topic.

Other articles, such as those written by Gardner and Eng (2005), Ismail (2010), and

Johnson (2009) offer far more limited advice, generally focusing on the collection of data via

surveys. These authors describe and, with the exception of Johnson, provide the actual text of the

survey they used to determine local needs. Each also describes the process they used to

implement the survey and describes what they would have done differently based on what

learned during the survey process. They barely touch on ways to move from assessing need to

actual selection and implementation, if it is discussed at all. Johnson goes slightly beyond the

presentation of the survey, recommending a literature review and a close look at the collection of

statistics to ensure they are adequate and relevant before deciding on and implementing

initiatives. Gardner and Eng discuss the implications of their survey, which includes some

specific initiatives to consider, but they do not detail the process by which those conclusions

were made or how to implement such initiatives. Though the processes described in these articles

are far from complete, they are certainly useful for libraries wishing to implement the best

possible survey of their students' needs and expectations.

In addition to articles on the topic of determining needs of current undergraduate

students, libraries will find general texts on needs assessment useful as they undertake that

process.

Ideas for Catering to the Net Generation

Keeping in mind that each library must determine the needs of its own unique students,

libraries may find it useful to explore what other academic libraries are doing in an effort to

bring undergraduates into the library. Countless articles have been written with the sole purpose

of communicating a wide variety of initiatives, renovations, service changes, and programs that

libraries have implemented. Some ideas found in these "Look what we did!" style of articles

include:

- Hosting an Amazing Library Race, a creative way to orient students to the library
  fashioned after the popular reality TV show (Banks, 2008; Boule, 2009)

- Implementing a Freshman Class Librarian program, where a librarian is assigned to
  each incoming class to serve as a liaison to that class (Banks, 2008; Starkey & Kern,
  2007)

- Circulating popular technology, such as Kindles and iPods (Boule, 2009)

- Hosting dynamic and fun freshmen library orientation events with a variety of
  popular activities (Boule, 2009; Wasielewski, 2009)

- Using Twitter to keep in touch with students and offer reference help (Boule, 2009)

Most articles of this nature give some explanation of the event or program, discuss the required

resources, and provide some advice for implementing a similar event or program. Many articles

reporting the efforts of particular libraries either do not discuss the successes of each initiative or do not provide sufficient evidence demonstrating that the initiatives actually increased student use of the library. However, since results will necessarily vary based on local needs and situation, this exclusion is forgivable.

Though the initiatives may not be discussed in as much detail, ideas may also be garnered from articles that present research rather than just sharing what initiative a library has implemented. For example, the following ideas were collected from the research articles discussed elsewhere in this literature review:

- Redesigning study spaces to allow for both individual and collaborative study, as well as spaces that can be modified on the fly to meet student needs (Gardner & Eng, 2005; Johnson, 2009; Prescott & Veldof 2010; Sweeney, 2005; Walker, 2006)

- Providing in person reference services at locations outside of the library (Ismail, 2009; Prescott & Veldof 2010)

- Increasing the number of hours the library is open, or adjusting the hours according to the needs of students rather than the convenience of librarians (Gardner & Eng, 2005; Johnson, 2009; Sweeney, 2005)

- Considering the use of peer reference, perhaps using a tiered reference model (Gardner & Eng, 2005)

- Allowing for the consumption of and/or provide access to food and drink (Gardner & Eng, 2005; Johnson, 2009; Prescott & Veldof 2010; Sweeney, 2005)

- Allowing the use of cell phones in the library and otherwise designating areas of the library where noise is allowed (Sweeney, 2005)

A review of these and other "Look what we did!" and research articles, along with a brainstorming session, should generate an abundance of ideas that may evaluated against the needs of a library's undergraduate student potential and actual users.

Conclusions

Though much can be learned by reviewing the profile of the Net Generation, it is vital

that each library assess the needs of its unique undergraduate student body prior to deciding on

or implementing initiatives aimed at increasing student use of the physical library. General texts

on performing needs assessment should be consulted as needed in addition to perusing the

articles reviewed here. Research related to the needs of undergraduates is largely unique to each

institution. However, additional research exploring the processes libraries are using to research

their students, as well as how they are selecting, implementing, and assessing initiatives will be

useful for libraries faced with updating their buildings, programs, and services for Net

Generation students.

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