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A Low-Hassle, Low-Cost Method to Survey Student Attitudes about Library Space

Jennifer Poggiali and Madeline Cohen

Introduction

In late April 2013, the Chief Librarian of Lehman College, City University of New York, was invited to present a proposal for the redesign and renovation of the library's first floor and basement (known as the concourse). This wonderful news was quickly tempered by a daunting reality: we had very little time to write a proposal. The Assistant Vice President for Campus Planning and Facilities needed a draft by midsummer, leaving the library with less than three months to assess needs, research solutions, and gain consensus among library faculty. We would have to move fast.

To undertake this proposal, the Chief Librarian appointed a space planning committee comprised of three library faculty, one information technology staff person, and one administrative assistant. The committee realized that data on student attitudes towards the existing library space would lend credibility to the proposal while also steering it in the right direction. Unfortunately, there was little time for focus groups or large-scale surveys—let alone the kind of ethnographic research appearing in the library literature. We required a practical alternative that could generate genuine student feedback, however imperfect.

This article discusses how two members of the space planning committee created a brief paper survey, distributed it to students in the library, and designed a Google spreadsheet to enable the committee to work as a group to compile results. We provide our survey tool as an example; explain how we simplified data compilation through a “quick and dirty” coding process; outline step-by-step instructions on how to design a Google spreadsheet that enables many librarians to input survey results consistently; and describe our mistakes and “lessons learned.” We believe our practical approach could be easily implemented in any number of libraries—even those with small staffs and budgets.

Student-Centered Design

Our research process was influenced by the ethnographic research done by Foster and Gibbons at the University of Rochester in 2007 to design a student-centered academic library. We advocated for gathering student input at the start of Lehman's redesign planning, so we would have some data on students' perception of library spaces. Otherwise, we would be working from our own assumptions as librarians, which might be wrong. We were inspired to collect data by two of Foster and Gibbons' lessons from their research: “One is that gathering student input need not be a burdensome, time-consuming process...The second lesson is that we, as librarians, cannot assume we know how our students do their academic work or what

they need.”¹ We hoped that involving students from the outset would set the tone for a collaborative process going forward in the library redesign.

Quick Space Survey

In order to complete our survey quickly, the co-authors of this article created a three-question paper survey to distribute to students in the library [see Appendix A]. We wanted the survey to take no more than five minutes to fill out, so our first two questions targeted students’ strongest negative and positive feelings about the library’s physical space. Our third question, which asked where students were at the time of the survey and why they chose to be in that location, was designed to obtain data on student perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of particular sections of the library. We were aware that students select a place to work based on the task at hand: whether they needed to work alone or in a group, and whether they were writing papers, doing research, or studying for exams. We were curious to see whether our perceptions of where students might choose to do group work, for example, aligned with their actual behavior. We also wanted to know what made a location attractive or appealing to them—for example, privacy for group work, or natural light for reading and studying.

By necessity, the survey was conducted during the first two weeks of May, when the semester was drawing to a close. We distributed surveys Monday through Thursday during peak hours (12:00-2:00 p.m.; 4:00-6:00 p.m.) covering two of our four floors each day. We also distributed surveys on at least two evenings during the week, and one Saturday and Sunday, covering all four floors each evening or weekend day. We hoped this plan would allow us to take a “snapshot” of the students in the library at a variety of times of the week.

Distribution was extremely low-tech. We copied the survey on 3 x 5” paper and enlisted the most outgoing of our faculty and staff to help. We approached students as they studied or worked on computers, introduced ourselves, and asked if they were willing to respond to a brief survey designed to help the library plan for a renovation. To our delight, students were overwhelmingly positive and many happily took the paper survey. The fact that the survey was short and printed on a half sheet of paper, made for an easy “sell.” We returned after ten minutes to collect the surveys, but students were also instructed to drop them off at the main entrance if they preferred. In total, we collected 130 completed surveys in a period of two weeks.

Compiling Survey Results

As the surveys came in, the authors began to recognize that many students were commenting on the same dozen or so issues. These included the quality, comfort, or suitability of our furniture; the need for group work and quiet areas; the age, condition, and quantity of our computers; the number of power outlets in a given location; WiFi access points; heating and cooling; spaciousness; and artificial or natural light. We weren’t planning to code and quantify our results, but as these commonalities emerged we changed our minds.

Developing an ad hoc coding scheme was surprisingly easy, even for two novices. We read through many of the surveys together and drew out common themes. Our analysis suggested that we should code each comment by three components: location, action, and issue. We broke locations down by floor and by any area on each floor that we felt was distinct enough to warrant its own code (for example, a media lab on the second floor had its own location code). Actions were the “verbs”—the step that students were requesting. With very few exceptions, these easily fell into one of three groups: replace or improve, add or expand, or keep the same. This last category became the catch-all for any comment that was praising or in favor of a given feature. Lastly, we defined each comment by what we called “issue codes” [Appendix B]. Because we had already defined the actions requested, we kept the issue codes non-evaluative. They were nouns like “Outlets,” “Furniture – upholstered,” “Group Study,” and “WiFi,” rather than phrases like “more outlets” or “old furniture.” We thought identifying the issue regardless of opinion would speed up the coding process and provide more flexibility in sorting and analyzing the results.

Of course, in practice the data coding process was more complicated than this suggests. For example, a typical student comment went something like this: “I’m working on the third floor because it’s quiet, but I wish there were more power outlets up here.” That response would be broken down by location (third floor), action (keep the same), and issue code (quiet). However, this comment—and many real ones just like it—contains more than one implied request for action. The same comment would also have been entered as follows: third floor (location), add or expand (action), and power outlets (issue code). However, if a survey repeated the same request in answer to a single question, these subsequent requests were ignored.

Given our time restraints, it was not feasible for the coding to be done by two people, nor did we believe we had time to undergo a formal, experimentally valid norming process. Instead, we decided to enlist the space planning committee to code the responses as a group. If we were all in a room together, we thought, we could quickly come to a common understanding of our standards and ask each other questions as we proceeded through the surveys. To facilitate this process, the authors designed a spreadsheet in Google Drive that we used during the committee meeting. Fortunately, Google’s spreadsheets have a handy feature that allows users to create drop-down menus for columns. This feature restricts the data that may be input into a given column to only those choices in the drop-down menu [Figure 1]. To create a drop-down list, first highlight a column, then go to the “Data” menu and select “Validation.” For “Criteria,” select “List of items.” [Figure 2]. We created drop-down lists from which committee members could select locations, actions, and issue codes. This turned out to be a great way to simplify the process and maintain a reasonable amount of consistency.

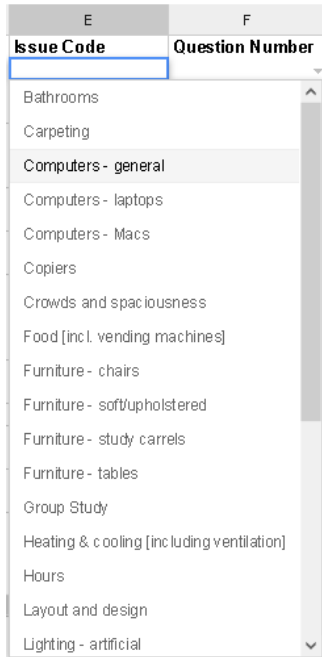


Figure 1. When compiling survey results, committee members selected appropriate codes from drop-down menus in Google Drive.

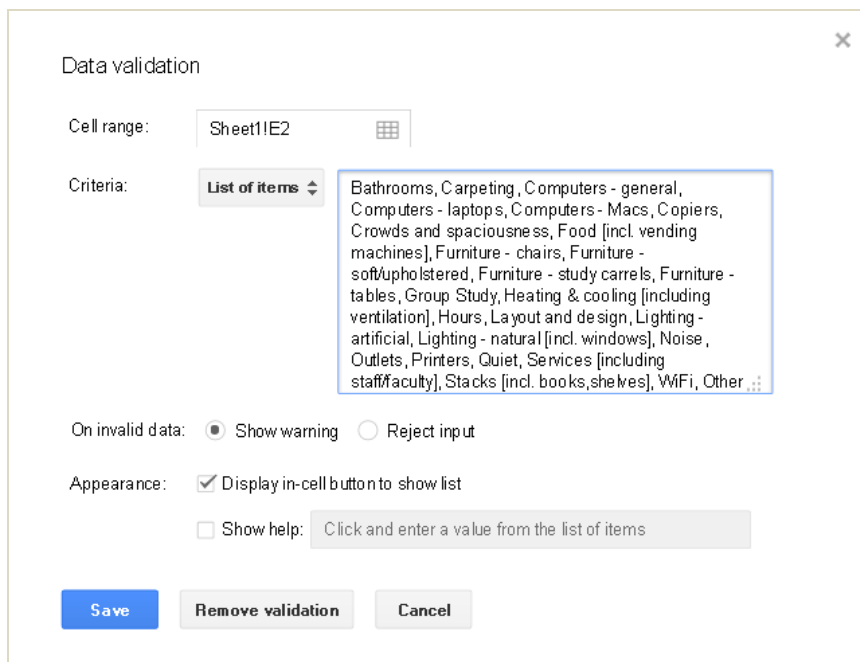


Figure 2. The Data Validation menu in Google Drive allows users to easily create drop-down menus for columns.

Coding the surveys took about two and a half hours of concentrated work by five committee members. Each person worked from a copy of the original Google spreadsheet, so when the last survey was coded, the spreadsheets were combined into a single Excel file.

Results and Application of Survey

At this stage, the authors decided to compile a report that summarized the results of the survey and extracted useful or persuasive data. For our purposes, comments coded as “replace or improve” and “add or expand” served the same function: they were issues we needed address in our renovation proposal. In our compilation of the results of Question 1 (“If you were renovating the Library, what is one thing you would change?”), we grouped all “replace or improve” and “add or expand” results together.

As we further consolidated the results of Question 1, more consistencies emerged. In coding our responses, we had broken out issue codes rather specifically: “Furniture—upholstered,” “Furniture—study carrels,” “Furniture—chairs,” and “Furniture—tables,” for example. This level of detail was helpful for planning, but we realized that all comments about furniture could be grouped together to make a strong argument about the need for renovation. Similar results were achieved by consolidating all responses commenting on computers, noise and quiet, and facility issues such as carpeting and heating and cooling.

This data was compiled in an Excel spreadsheet with graphs to illustrate key results. We also developed a report interpreting the data and providing the Chief Librarian with bullet points he could use in memos and presentations to the administration. We made statements about the percentages of surveys requesting a particular change, and provided a selection of compelling student comments from the surveys. In addition, we used our data to justify some immediate adjustments to library spaces and furniture, which we hope has demonstrated to students that we are responsive to their needs.

Mistakes Made and Lessons Learned

Our quick paper survey presented problems that we were aware of at the outset, but that we decided we could tolerate in order to gather data quickly. One obvious issue is that we surveyed only those students who were in the library during the last weeks of the semester. This excluded students who did not come to the library during this period, and those who never use the library at all. It's quite likely that these students would have had useful feedback, perhaps even shedding light on why they weren't using the library during final exams. We also gathered feedback during only one point in the semester, when most students were studying for exams or finishing papers. Earlier in the semester, we might have received fewer comments about noise or more requests for group study spaces.

Students answering a short response question can only comment on things they've thought about, and will most likely mention things that are immediately apparent to them. One of the advantages of ethnographic research is that it doesn't depend solely on self-reporting by students. Observational data—what students are doing in certain areas of the library or how they used or rearranged a space—might have revealed unexpected information.

Other problems arose during the tabulation and norming process. We discovered minor coding inconsistencies when we compiled the Google spreadsheets used by members of the space planning committee. Some of these were easily fixed, but others had to be eliminated from our results. Although we took time at the start of the meeting to discuss how we would enter the data and to run through a few examples, it would have been wise to take more time at this stage to ensure that everyone was on the same page. We recommend asking committee members to enter two or three surveys, and then review each other's entries as a group to clear up any areas of confusion.

Finally, as we developed our codes we somehow failed to note that many were not location-specific. We did not create a location code for the entire library, so we wound up using the code "other" for these many comments. The lesson here: don't overlook the obvious!

While we acknowledge these problems, our survey nevertheless allowed us to glean useful data that helped us develop our initial renovation proposal. As the process moves forward, we will have time to conduct more refined measurements of student opinion and needs. We hope our example demonstrates that librarians do not have to undertake laborious, multi-year projects in order to gather valuable and actionable student feedback. When a deadline is looming, a quick survey can do the trick.

Appendix A: Survey

We would like to renovate the basement and first floor of the Library.

We need your feedback to make our Renovation Proposal the best it can be!

1. If you were renovating the Library, what is one thing you would change?
2. What would you keep the same if you were renovating the Library?
3. Where are you right now? Why did you choose to study or work in this spot?

Please share any additional comments:

Appendix B: Issue Codes

Bathrooms

Carpeting

Computers - General

Computers - Laptops

Computers – Macs

Copiers

Crowds and Spaciousness

Food

Furniture - Chairs

Furniture - Study Carrels

Furniture - Tables

Furniture - Upholstered

Group Study

Heating/Cooling

Hours

Layout & Design

Lighting - Artificial

Lighting - Natural

Noise

Outlets

Printers

Quiet

Services

Shelves/Stacks

WiFi

Other

References

- ¹ Foster, Nancy Fried and Susan Gibbons, "Library Design and Ethnography," In *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester*, edited by Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2007), 29.

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