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Abstract

"What do you value most about the library?" A single open-ended question on a recent San José State University survey of faculty and students revealed a world of difference between what these two groups want from a library. Students valued the library for the quiet space it offered. They commented less on the library collection and more on library services. Faculty, however, valued the variety and quality of the library resources. Their responses focused on the collection, with an emphasis on the print collection's breadth and depth. Not only did student and faculty responses differ, but among the faculty, different disciplines demonstrated different priorities in what they needed from the library. While science faculty almost exclusively valued access to online journals, faculty in the humanities viewed the print collection as their lab space and treasured the serendipity that came from browsing the bookshelves. As resources increasingly move online and circulation statistics for print materials drop, the question of how a library effectively serves all its communities becomes more complex. This paper analyzes the survey responses, examines the ensuing campus debate, and reflects on how perceptions of library value inform the conversation on the library of the future.

In 1998, when San José State University collaborated with the City of San José to form a merged library with a shared collection, the SJSU faculty had concerns about public access to the university's research materials. Would books still be available when faculty and students needed them? How would the safety of the collection be maintained? What resources would remain in place for student-specific needs? To ease these fears, the university and library administration adopted a stringent Library Policy. With regulatory supervision by the Academic Senate, this policy addressed how the newly constructed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library would handle the circulation, security, and maintenance of the library collection.

The Library Policy also addressed governance. In doing so, it created the University Library Board (ULB). Comprised of faculty (from each college and the library), an Academic Senate representative, the Library Dean, and student representatives, the purpose of the ULB is to advise the Dean on library policies and operations. Included in the ULB's charge are periodic reviews of the Library Policy. In May 2014, the ULB decided that reviewing and updating the library policy would be a priority for the board in the coming year.

Coinciding with the policy review was a California State University (CSU) initiative called Libraries of the Future (LOFT). Designed by a task force of provosts, library deans, faculty, and staff pulled from six CSU campuses in the Los Angeles area and the Chancellor's Office, the LOFT initiative "developed recommendations … to leverage technological advances and transform the CSU's library services in support of student and faculty success" (California State University, 2013, p. 2). An important part of the initiative was an analysis of each campus's print collection for the purpose of deselection. Using data generated by GreenGlass collection analysis software, SJSU librarians began the weeding process.

SJSU's collection of 1.3 million print items had not been systematically weeded since the collection was moved into the King Library in 2003. The Library Policy required that lists of titles being considered for deselection be posted for faculty review for a total of eight weeks, and within that period, any faculty member could request that a title be retained (San José State University, Academic Senate, 2003, p. 15). In the late 1990s, during the negotiations between the City of San José and SJSU that gave rise to the joint library, declarations had been made that the nine-story library would have the shelving to house 25 years of continued growth in the print collection. Many of the faculty viewed this as a commitment that no materials would need to be weeded until 2023. So when the CSU LOFT deselection plans were posted, faculty in the College of Social Sciences cited their right to retain titles and requested that all the titles slated for weeding be kept in the collection. The language of the policy was being used to halt any plans for deselection as groups of faculty saw weeding as unnecessary. It was into this heated setting that the ULB began its update of the Library Policy. A subcommittee consisting of three campus faculty and three library faculty was created to draft the policy revision.

Methods

Participants

One of the first orders of business was to gather feedback from faculty and students regarding their opinions about the library. All faculty teaching during the Spring 2015 semester were contacted as were a random sample of roughly 25% of the 29,954 enrolled students.

Online surveys were distributed to both groups, and focus groups were held on campus to collect participants' feelings, concerns, and issues about the library and its future direction. Students and faculty both received the same 16-question survey, which consisted of 13 Likert-scale questions, each with multiple sub-questions, and three open-ended questions that allowed for written responses. One of these open-ended questions was "What do you value most about the library?" It was this question that opened the window into the competing demands that will shape the library of the future. It was also a timely question because the library's attempt at weeding had initiated the conversation on what was the purpose and value of the university library.

Eight focus groups were held over the course of two weeks, and anyone from the campus community was invited to attend. Data was not collected in regards to participants being students or faculty, but the content of the discussions was recorded and analyzed so that areas of significance based on "recurrence" and "spread" could be identified in what was discussed. A third-party mediator led the groups through discussions about the library's value and mission.

Results

Five-hundred forty-six students and 454 faculty and staff responded to the surveys, and the eight forums attracted 86 participants. To assess the perceived value of the library for students, the survey asked a series of questions regarding what resources were seen as important. For these questions, faculty and students provided similar responses. For print books, 96.4% of the faculty rated them as being very or somewhat important to the library, while 90.7% of students felt the same way. For electronic access to journals, magazines, and newspapers, 94.1% of the faculty and 93% of the students rated access as very or somewhat important. Electronic books were also valuable to both groups, having 94.1% of the faculty and 93% of the students rating these items as very or somewhat important.

More diversity in responses surfaced from the open-ended question of "What do you value most about the library?" For students, the top nine responses in order of frequency were: study rooms/study spaces, quiet, electronic resources, amount of materials available, the collection of print books, library access/hours, Wi-Fi access, computer loans, and library staff. For faculty, the top nine responses in order of frequency were: the library's presence, librarian research support, quiet study areas, electronic access to journals, print collection, the books, study/meeting space, and online access.

In the focus groups, the driving topic was that print books are the "life-blood" of the library. Books were discussed as being the resource that reflects what the University Library is and that they fulfill the mission of the library. The library as a space for students (study space/meeting space) was not discussed in the forums. While much of the discussion was dedicated to the importance of print books, the most positively framed adjectives were used when discussing the library's laptop lending program ("helpful," "amazing," and "supportive").

Discussion and debates within the ULB also provided insight into faculty perceptions of the library's value. With a representative from each college seated on the board, distinctions between disciplines quickly emerged. Those from the sciences said that the library should focus

more on electronic access to current research, while the humanities representatives made the case that the library's purpose was to act as an archive for printed material.

Discussion

In planning for the future of the library, "What is the value of the library?" frames the core of the debate. The surveys, forums, and ULB discussions raised different aspects of library value. There were competing priorities as some faculty wanted the library to preserve and expand the print collection; students valued the study and collaboration spaces; and college representatives highlighted the different preferences for types of access. There were also the university system's priorities to consider. The vision for CSU libraries focused on the library as a network, place, and educational partner, not as a repository. The library was then challenged to identify the most controversial points and attempt to appease the values of all the groups.

Navigating these issues required sensitive diplomacy. Each group of patrons needed to feel that their concerns were heard and that their needs were addressed. Because of the competing nature of their values, however, no one was likely to be completely satisfied.

Best Practices: Dealing With Challenges in Outreach and Public Relations

Throughout the process, the importance of transparency was paramount. By holding forums, circulating surveys, and presenting the updated language of the policy to the Academic Senate, the debate about priorities was out in the open. Everyone felt they had a voice and a chance to be heard. It was equally important, however, to frame the conversation. The surveys began with Likert-scale questions that walked survey takers through the various aspects of the services and resources the library provides and allowed them to rate their importance to them. By doing this, students and faculty had specifics in mind and were better prepared for the open-ended questions that closed the survey. With these write-in questions, they were able to express in their own words what they valued most. At the forums, moderators were also prepared with a set of questions that helped guide the discussions and make them productive. Responses to the surveys and focus group meeting reports were also posted to the library website and discussed in the ULB meetings.

Best Practices: Mediating Values

While science faculty almost exclusively valued access to online journals, faculty in the humanities and social sciences viewed the print collection as their lab space and treasured the serendipity that came from browsing the bookshelves. Humanities faculty were also concerned about the historical record, losing books off the shelf that were not available digitally. Science faculty were less concerned and viewed the availability of these titles through Interlibrary Loan as sufficient. Another concern expressed by humanities faculty, which is also shared by librarians, is the library's reliance on electronic subscriptions and the vulnerability of the collection to decisions made unilaterally by vendors.

Librarians already saw the library as serving multiple disciplines, but the teaching faculty seemed to only see the library from the perspective of their own colleges. After collecting and analyzing the feedback, the data from the surveys and forums was immediately shared with the entire campus. Each group needed to recognize what the other groups valued. Conversations had

to keep returning to the fact that the library was there to serve multiple needs. Faculty who valued the library as a repository had to see that students were using the library space more than the collection. Science faculty had to understand that a stricter weeding policy was necessary for the humanities and social sciences. The library had to assure the Humanities faculty that rare or old titles would not be removed from the collection.

There was also an educational component to this conversation. Librarians found it necessary to explain that weeding was a natural part of maintaining a collection. It was also helpful to direct faculty attention towards the published literature on weeding in academic libraries. The survey response data was used to shift the conversations away from being discipline-focused to a more university-focused discussion. For the Library Policy itself, the biggest change was to the weeding policy. The new policy was designed to explicitly recognize the interdisciplinary nature of many subject areas and to provide time for all interested parties to weigh in on the weeding decisions.

Best Practices: Serving Immediate Needs and Preparing for the Future

A driving force behind the discussions of the library's future was the issue of print versus electronic books. Faculty had to accept the circulation data showing the decline in use of the print collection and that some of the collection budget would be spent on electronic copies of titles that were more economical than an unused print collection. At the same time, the library also acknowledged the differences between disciplines and assured departments that how they valued the library was recognized.

Student values were a bit easier to address. Students wanted better Wi-Fi, more study spaces, and upgraded collaboration areas. In response, the library upgraded its existing network of routers to boost speeds and access points. New technology was added to student areas, and student representatives were included in the designing of new floor plans so that parts of the library were shaped around their needs.

Conclusions

The library policy went through nine drafts during the 2014-2015 academic year, but the lengthy, collaborative process helped ensure the policy's success. It gained Academic Senate approval with a vote of 42 ayes and 3 nays. Although this policy is unique to the King Library, it highlights a debate that affects every academic library, demonstrating the tensions between the use of space, the format of the collection, and the competing demands of different stakeholders. There are no easy answers and the answers may be different for each library, but having the conversation and listening to all sides will make the decisions and the process more acceptable to faculty, students, administrators, and librarians.

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