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How Well Do We Know Our Students? A Comparison of Students' Priorities for Services and Librarians' Perceptions of Those Priorities

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ABSTRACT

Perception gaps measure the disparity between the current state and the expected or desired state for a particular phenomenon. This research study examined the perception gaps between how undergraduate students at the University of Mississippi prioritized adding prospective services and how librarians at the University of Mississippi thought students prioritize those services. Card sorts completed by students during a prior study were compared to cards sorts completed by librarians to calculate the perception gap for sixty different services and spaces. The perception gaps for technology-related services were analyzed based on findings from the authors' prior study. The perception gaps revealed several services that librarians either notably underestimated (extended hours, natural lighting) or overestimated (3D printing, removing bookshelves to add study space). The perception gaps for items which students had the most and least interest were also analyzed.

Perception gaps measure the difference between how a population or sample believes something to be (perception) and how it actually is (reality). For example the newspaper *Guardian* used perception gaps to demonstrate the disparity between survey participants' responses and actual statistics about the participants' country (Duncan, 2016). Researchers sometimes frame the conversation about patron-driven acquisitions as a comparison between what librarians think students want (i.e., books they order) and what students want (i.e., books they trigger). Librarians, too, can experience perception gaps in relation to new services, which can help explain why implemented services may not always be as well received by students despite librarians' best intentions.

This study seeks to identify perception gaps between librarians and undergraduate students at the University of Mississippi (UM) in relation to potentially new or expanded library services and spaces. We previously used Q methodology (Kelly & Young, 2017) to examine undergraduate students' priorities. In that study, we statistically analyzed card sorts which revealed four distinct points of view: the Environmentalists, the Space Advocates, the Ideological Traditionalists, and the Weekenders. However, we expected a point of view related to technology—specifically Technophiles—to emerge, but it did not. At the same time as we were collecting data, our library was adding and/or investigating the addition of various technologies. These two converging events prompted the question: Are we confident that our students want more technology instead of other services?

In this current study the authors investigated this question by analyzing the perception gap between students and librarians in relation to the services and spaces depicted in the card sort. Librarians at our university were asked to complete the same card sort (see Appendix A) completed by the students in the previous study. Librarians sorted the cards based on how they thought students responded, not based on how they personally would rank the services. By analyzing the student and librarian responses using descriptive statistics—instead of Q methodology—we seek to answer two research questions:

RQ1: What is the perception gap between librarians' perceptions and students' opinions related to adding technology to the library relative to other service additions?

RQ2: For all services and spaces, do the perception gaps suggest that the library should take action – such as implementing a new service or further investigate why a disparity exits?

Literature review

Academic librarians readily support undergraduate and graduate education. At times, however, librarians advocate for particular new services or spaces on behalf of students while forgetting to consult their actual constituents – the students themselves. The literature is rife with examples of promising new offerings in academic libraries that were seemingly developed without knowing if students needed or wanted the service. The limitation of this approach is the underlying assumption that librarians' perspectives serve as an adequate proxy for those of students'. This common assumption is not a fair one without empirical

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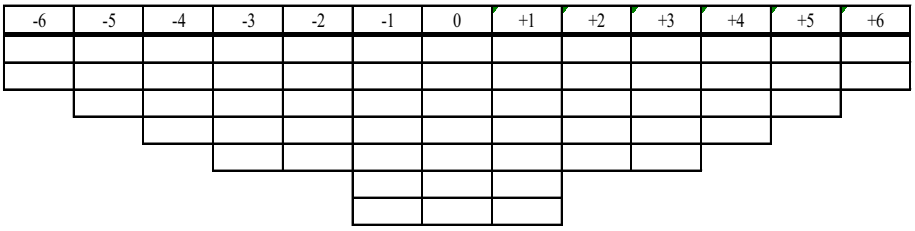

Fig. 1. Card Sort Grid.

evidence supporting whether alignment actually exists between student and librarian perspectives.

Although there is limited research literature comparing librarian and student perspectives prior to implementing a particular service, the extant literature does examine librarian and student perspectives more broadly. Most recently, Kim and Sin (2016) administered a survey on social media usage to undergraduates at a public university, and then compared students' responses to those from academic librarians contacted through professional listservs. Kim and Sin's analysis unveiled similarities between these groups in terms of social media usage, but divergence in how these groups evaluated that content. In an earlier study, Aharony (2014) found significant differences between LIS students and librarians as it related to another technology: mobile devices. Continuing the trend, Osborne and Cox (2015) revealed differences among LIS students, post-graduate students, and academic librarians in relation to next-generation OPACs. In 2016, Butler and Byrd (2016) published findings comparing librarian and student perceptions of research consultations. As with the aforementioned studies, the Butler and Byrd article demonstrated that students and librarians have different perspectives, even as it related to an event experienced by both parties.

In 2012, Sinkinson, Alexander, Hicks and Kahn published a study in which the authors compared undergraduates, graduate students, and librarians' perspectives on research guides utilizing a card sort technique (Sinkinson, Alexander, Hicks, & Kahn, 2012). The use of card sorting and the direct comparison between students and librarians on a particular library service (i.e., online research guides) parallels this current work. Additional studies have used card sorting, most often in relation to website content, (Hepburn & Lewis, 2008; Lewis & Hepburn, 2010; McHale, 2008), but to this date, no other published research has used card sorting techniques to compare librarian and student preferences on technology offerings.

Most academic libraries provide a variety of technologies, but a very specific service – technology lending programs – has become increasingly prevalent during the past ten years. The majority of these programs originated with laptop checkouts to students (Anderson & Weatherbee, 2012; Munson & Malia, 2008); and now, libraries have started offering progressively complex, novel technologies: Oculus Rifts, GoPros, Makey Makeys, and even Arduino microcontroller kits (Wang, Kimberley, & Wang, 2017). According to the literature, academic librarians have been less proactive in soliciting student feedback prior to implementing technology lending services, and have been more inclined to gather student input and evaluate these programs after implementation (Chapman & Woodbury, 2012; Le Ber, Lombardo, Honisett, Jones, & Weber, 2013; Wang, Dermody, Burgess, & Wang, 2014). However, given libraries' limited funding for technological purchases and staffing support, it is suggested that additional research is needed to understand if differences exist between what librarians consider to be students' technological preferences and students' actual preferences. This study seeks to contribute to this area by comparing student and librarian perspectives on technology prior to creating a technology lending program.

Method

Q methodology, previously used by the authors to investigate UM undergraduate students' preferences and priorities for services, requires research participants to complete card sorts based on a prompt. The cards were developed based on student feedback from previous library surveys, informal conversations, and listening sessions; cards were also developed based on services available at a random sampling of academic libraries that are members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). In the previous study 40 students responded to the prompt: *How do you, as an undergraduate, prioritize the library's services and spaces*?

In this study librarians (n = 17) from various areas of the library—eight from public services, five from technical services, three from special collections and two from administration—were asked to respond to a similar prompt: *How do you, as a librarian, believe undergraduate students prioritize the library's services and spaces*? Some librarians were aware of the study with students, but no librarians had seen the results from that study prior to participating in the study.

Librarians were asked to divide the cards into three piles based on the following criteria:

- MOST IMPORTANT: Undergraduate students would want the library to do this.
- LEAST IMPORTANT: Undergraduate students would not want the library to do this.
- NEUTRAL: Undergraduate students would be indifferent to this idea.

After dividing the cards, each librarian placed the cards on a grid with thirteen columns with sixty spaces corresponding to the number of sorted cards (see Fig. 1). First, librarians were instructed to rank their *most important* cards and place the two items undergraduate students would most want in the +6 column. They continued the process for each column, moving right to left, until all cards were exhausted. Librarians then repeated the process for the *least important* cards starting at the −6 column—moving left to right—and the *neutral* items. Librarians then reviewed the grid to verify the card placements reflected their perceptions of students' least important to most important services.

The authors then flipped all of the cards, which were numbered on the back. Each number corresponded to the item depicted on the front. The authors recorded the numbers on a paper grid and repeated the procedure for all librarian participants and transferred the data from paper to an Excel spreadsheet. Excel was then used to calculate the average placement for students and librarians, as well as compare the average placements between the two groups.

Results and discussion

In the previous study, we analyzed the student card sorts using Q methodology with the intent to determine distinct user points of view within our population. In this study, though, we use descriptive statistics to compare librarians' and students' average rankings of each item in order to calculate the perception gap—the difference between how students responded and how librarians thought the students responded—for each item.

Each participant's card placement was determined by noting its arrangement on the grid (Range −6 to +6, see Fig. 1). The average card placement for each item was calculated by determining the mean

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