Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

University Students Are Unaware of the Role of Academic Librarians

A Review of:

Bickley, R. & Corral, S. (2011). Student perceptions of staff in the information commons: A survey at the University of Sheffield. *Reference Services Review, 39*(2), 223-243. doi:10.1108/00907321111135466

Reviewed by:
Kirsty Thomson
Subject Librarian
Heriot-Watt University
Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom
Email: k.s.thomson@hw.ac.uk

Abstract

Objective – To discover students' perceptions of information commons staff, and to determine how these perceptions influence the use of library resources.

Design – Post-experience survey with one follow-up interview.

Setting – The University of Sheffield, a post-secondary institution in England.

Subjects – All undergraduate and postgraduate students were invited to take part. Just over 1% of the student population, or 250 students, completed the survey.

Methods – Information about the survey was sent to students' institutional email addresses. One follow up interview was carried out via email using the critical incident technique.

Main Results – Students do not understand the academic roles of librarians. They are unlikely to approach library staff for academic support, preferring to turn to instructors, other students, friends, and family. Most students had positive opinions about assistance received in the Information Commons, but a small number reflected on previous bad experiences with staff, or on a fear of being made to feel foolish. The vast majority of students who did not seek help in the Information Commons stated that this was because they did not require assistance. Most

students do not perceive a difference between Information Commons staff and library staff.

Conclusion – Students have positive views of Information Commons staff at the University of Sheffield, but have low awareness of the roles of professional librarians. Librarians need to develop partnerships with academic staff and strengthen their presence in both physical and online learning environments to promote their academic roles.

Commentary

This is a well-written paper reporting on findings that have serious implications for professional librarians, especially those working in post-secondary education.

Most of the data for the paper was gathered via an online survey. Researchers used email to contact university students since the survey was conducted during the summer vacation. The paper does not explain the decision to implement the survey when many students were away from the university, but the lead author was undertaking a Master's degree and is likely to have been restricted to this time period due to the structure of her course. Just over 1% of potential participants completed and submitted survey responses, a very small sample size. This may result in sample bias, as students with strong opinions (positive or negative) may have been more motivated to complete the survey. Unfortunately the article does not include key details about the survey design and methodology, e.g., whether reminder emails were sent to encourage

completion. Also, post-experience questionnaires can be problematic if there is a time gap between the activity and the survey. In this study students were asked about the previous academic year, and may have provided inaccurate data about experiences from earlier months.

The authors refer to a copy of the survey provided as an appendix (p. 229) but this is missing from the e-journal. Therefore it is not possible to review the exact wording used in the survey questions and it is unclear if students were asked about online contact with the Information Commons, or only about physical visits. Respondents did not correctly identify the activities carried out by academic librarians, but there may have been confusion around the different job titles of library employees: were job titles clarified in the survey design, or did some participants think all university library employees were academic librarians?

The findings of the survey clearly demonstrate that university libraries are not effectively communicating the roles of academic librarians. More than half of the survey respondents did not know the identity of their academic librarian, and many did not understand the academic support role of library staff. Though researchers made attempts to arrange follow-up interviews with respondents, only one interview was conducted, and this interview is not fully described in the paper. Further interviews and alternative methods of gathering information, such as focus groups, could prove helpful in future studies in this area.