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Perception of Library Value

By Carol Tenopir

LIBRARIES INVEST A LARGE PERCENTAGE of their budgets on electronic collections and digital services. Although the value is obvious to us, we are often asked to demonstrate value to our funders. Our users' perceptions may not match ours, and some recent studies show that the perception held by the general public may differ from that held by faculty and university students.

Perceptions reports

OCLC has prepared several research reports in the last few years that cover perceptions and value. "Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources" (2005) discusses an international study of the public's perception and use of libraries, while a subset of the report, "College Students' Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources," focuses on both college students and respondents aged 14–17. Both follow up on OCLC's groundbreaking document, "2003 Environmental Scan: Pattern Recognition."

Most respondents to the OCLC reports have recently used both libraries and web search engines. They perceive the web as the most convenient place to go for information, and they value free web resources, even though many recognize that the information is not always as trustworthy as other sources. Convenience, sheer variety, and the amount of solid material on the web outweigh negative perceptions of authority (or lack thereof).

On the other hand, the predominant perception of libraries is as a place to borrow printed books, even as libraries' electronic budgets begin to outpace print budgets. Libraries are perceived as a trustworthy source of valuable information, but few report that the library catalog or library e-collections are a first place to go for online information.

Survey the users

Unlike the OCLC reports, I don't often ask people directly about their perceptions. Instead, I ask what they use and

how that has changed over time, which gives implicit and explicit views of value. I recently surveyed faculty and students at seven universities in the United States and Australia (partially funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services), focusing more narrowly on just journal article readings rather than the whole library (web.utk.edu/~tenopir/research/survey_instruments.html). Electronic journals—most often from the library but also from open access sources on the web—are regarded positively and have direct value to readers.

Most students and faculty conclude that electronic journals have changed the way they work. Common sentiments include, "[My use of journals is] almost entirely online now. The ability to obtain articles online has made [my work] much more efficient and more

and printing from my office computer, takes too long."

Library e-journal collections have increased in value to readers as the price of personal subscriptions has gone up. Faculty say, "I have stopped getting personal subscriptions and rely on the electronic journals supplied by the library," and "I have dropped personal subscriptions as they have become available online. Even the society subscriptions that I maintain are usually accessed through the university e-journals subscriptions." The ability to drop personal subscriptions in favor of the library collection has an explicit value.

Interesting differences

Why the disconnect between the survey results? The different user groups explains one difference—I only surveyed

University users who have tasted great e-collections want more

thorough," and "Finding articles online is so much easier and faster than finding articles in dusty journals in musty corners of the library."

Journal reading on the rise

The number of articles that they report reading has gone steadily up as e-journal collections grow. Over half of all article readings by faculty and up to three-quarters of readings by students are now from library e-collections. This willingness and need to read many articles is one measure of the value of e-collections.

University faculty and students have more time to read more articles because they have saved time by finding relevant articles online. Less time spent in the physical library is balanced by greater use of the virtual library: "I rarely visit the library in person anymore, which, compared with the ease and convenience of doing literature searches, downloading,

university faculty and students who have access to great electronic library collections already, while OCLC surveyed the general public, including nonlibrary users. University users who have tasted great e-collections want more. The general public's attitudes are shaped to a greater degree by the web and search engines.

The focus of our studies is another reason for variation: I only asked about use of journal articles (print or electronic, from the library or from other sources), while OCLC asked for general perceptions of various information sources for both personal and work-related uses. University faculty and students need access to high-quality scholarly information for research, course assignments, teaching, and learning, and library e-collections serve these purposes very well.

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