

FOCUS GROUP REPORT (2007)

Site Visit and Focus Group Session Assessment, Ottenheimer Library, University of Arkansas – Little Rock, (7 November – 9 November, 2007)

Lynn Cline
Missouri State University Libraries
(417)-836-4658
lynncline@missouristate.edu

At the outset, let me say how pleased I am to have had an opportunity to participate in one part of Ottenheimer Library's larger strategic planning process. There is clearly present in the Library a significant energy for assessment and its subsequent application to the Library's services for the University community. The feedback received from the focus group discussions, the written responses to the questionnaires, and the data from the session evaluations, when viewed in the context of the four major goals in the *Ottenheimer Library Strategic Plan*, should provide a good framework for subsequent assessment activity.

In reviewing the feedback, there is one caveat that should be mentioned. The research team's preparatory diligence resulted in a turnout of over 35 people distributed among the three focus sessions. While there was certainly no lack of discussion and input from the participants, and while there was a great deal of positive feedback, we should bear in mind that these groups represented people who for the most part had some sort of inherent interest in, and in all likelihood, a generally positive disposition toward, the Library. Such a population can be seen as a positive in that they also probably possessed a more informed view of the Library than a truly randomly selected group. Of the group, 19 were students, nine of which were special students. The faculty was the least represented of the major constituencies. Subsequently, how representative of the entire campus community the focus groups were is unknown. Nevertheless, the degree of positive feedback, particularly regarding Library personnel, should be considered quite heartening.

Major Themes

From the discussion, the questionnaire responses, and the session evaluations, a number of major themes emerge:

- a. A culture of good will toward the Library, and specifically toward Library personnel. Library staff (used here generically applied to all Library personnel) are seen as a caring, helpful group.
- b. The comments for improvement and those for future opportunities reflected a consumer driven mindset.
- c. The University community assumes an integration of library and non-library services, i.e., users will assume any service, personnel, or feature within the walls of Ottenheimer to be organizationally part of the Library.
- d. There is a concern about and interest in the physical setting and facilities.
- e. There is continued interest in collections, sometimes manifested in questions that ostensibly appear to be about other aspects of the Library.
- f. There is significant interest in engagement, seen in three ways:
 - in information literacy/library instruction.
 - in access issues.
 - in marketing, promotion, and outreach.

The Themes Reviewed.

The questionnaire by design, and the focus sessions by discussion thread, attempted to solicit feedback on the Library as place, as services & collections, and as people from three perspectives: a) what is working? b). what needs improvement? and c) what future opportunities are there to serve the user better? While the following discussion is somewhat arbitrarily categorized, many of the issues are highly interconnected.

1. **The Library as Place - Facilities.** The discussion of the Library as place elicited significant discussion in all three sessions. Clearly participants use the Library and see the Library environment as a significant aspect of their educational experience. Library users appreciate the fact that Ottenheimer is segmented, with some areas/floors devoted to quiet space and others to group study. Students also appreciate the relatively generous hours of operations, and the degree of computer and technologically-based access in the Library. In typical consumer fashion they desire more of it. There was significant desire for two offshoots of group study – a) group study space that could be segregated from other group study space, and b) group study space that could easily incorporate technology, particularly as groups rehearse for class presentations. Implicit in the former are group study rooms as opposed to a common group study space as currently configured. The latter reflects the growing technical sophistication with which assignments and projects are presented in a classroom setting. It is also clear that there are constituencies for both quieter, individual areas (including faculty interested in study carrels) and for more communal settings. Another aspect of facilities had to do with

general environmental issues – lighting, furniture, and ambience. Several suggestions were made that perhaps more informal settings such as sofas or other soft seating could be provided for specified areas of the upper floors, in addition to conventional study table settings which many respondents felt needed updating. Mentioned more than once was the concept of a coffee/snack service and seating, perhaps outside the secure area, but within the building, particularly with a close proximity to the computer lab. Such a possible service was seen as especially significant if it could complement the hours of similar services in the Student Center.

2. **The Library as People – the Human Factor.** Without fail all three forms of feedback expressed a clear message that Library staff are appreciated, that they are helpful, and it is the perception of the University community that Library staff are constituency-oriented and make them feel personally attended to. Comments on reference services, instruction, ILL, assistive outreach, media services, and some of the other specific departmental services bear this out. There are no negatives here other than the occasional isolated personal experience, which one might anticipate in any sample of a user population. This positive component of Ottenheimer’s assets will be useful in addressing some of the other issues.

3. **The Library as Services – General Services**

a. ***Computers and Computing.*** The computer lab is seen as a definite asset to the building. That it is a closely related but separate entity is immaterial to the campus community given the relationship between the Libraries’ resources and their application to finished products produced via the computer resources. Respondents want more computers, perhaps more computers generally, as well as more computers integrated into various settings within the Library, in part for ease of use with collections, particularly reference, and in part for use in group study or group project development and rehearsal. There was also significant discussion about the need for consistent ease of virtual access to the Library and its electronic resources, whether onsite or via remote access, a theme underscored in discussions about the growing needs of online curricular programs. The group seemed generally pleased with the array of electronic resources available, almost to the point of complacency, at least in terms of seeing such resources as a significant point of discussion. However, at the same time, a much smaller group appeared to be learning of some of these resources for the first time during the focus sessions (paralleling session participants who indicated that they didn’t realize there were floors beyond the second in Ottenheimer).

- b. ***Online Services & Resources.*** As noted above, there was a general appreciation of the range of electronic resources available to users (databases, e-journals, e-books, or media). At the same time there were numerous inquiries about the uniform availability of various software packages in all computers in the Library, and calls for specific software packages such as Office 2007 (Word, Excel, PowerPoint), QuickTime, Maple, or Dreamweaver. Of equal significance is the potential need to communicate to the user community why there may be very good reasons for the way in which computers are configured and the differences in functionality between those in the lab and those in the main part of the Library.

- c. ***Specific Site Services.*** Respondents were generally pleased with assistance they had received from various service points. They cited Reference, ILL, Media, and Instruction, among others, as being helpful. There was considerable discussion in all three sessions about information literacy or bibliographic instruction. A number of respondents indicated they had benefited from having such sessions. The feedback included the desire for more tailored instruction, the possibility of required instruction of a general nature, and even a combination of general and specific instruction for individual classes (the former to occur very early on in a semester and the latter somewhat later, once students began homing in on specific assignments or topics). Some even suggested virtual tours as a quick and convenient method of gaining further information about the Library, which would have the added advantage of being asynchronous.

- d. ***Publicity and Marketing.*** Whether it involved facility features, individual service point capabilities, broader services, collections, or other specific offerings of the Library, respondents continually emphasized the need to market, publicize and “get the word out”, whether in print, online, or in person concerning the breadth of resources and services available. Some also saw such publicity as a means by which to redirect perceived misconceptions about specific collections, services, or policies.

4. The Library as Services - Collections.

While the discussion of collections among the focus sessions reflected direct interest in specific disciplines or topics, the nature of Ottenheimer collections were implicit in broader discussions that reflect access issues. One might assume that faculty, who typically would express collection concerns, were somewhat underrepresented among the session attendees, although at five of the 36 attendees, they were probably fairly close to being proportionately representative.

Collection concerns included the topics enumerated below, and while they should be noted and explored, they may also represent highly specific, individual interests. Their general breadth, however, suggests further review in later user studies, or as a part of a more general study of collections:

Audio books

Foreign language materials, especially literature (Russian, Spanish, German, & Arabic)

Gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender (GLBT) materials

General fiction

Latin American resources

Mathematics materials

More and newer CD's and videos/dvd's

Reference materials

Resources on the technical aspects of photography

In reviewing such expressed needs, there may be underlying issues of users not being cognizant of collection priorities, of misunderstanding how to search the PAC adequately, or misunderstanding of classification schemes, but the expression of these collection needs provides some specific sample areas in exploring further materials assessment studies.

A somewhat subtler take on collections was expressed through various access issues:

- a. Interlibrary loan was the recipient of a number of positive comments for their helpful service, but respondents also asked if information gathered in filling ILL requests was subsequently utilized to develop collections, either by specific title or by discipline. One respondent went so far as to suggest automatically purchasing anything requested, and while such an approach is not necessarily universally advisable, it points out interest in collections, and a perceived need for expansion of resources.
- b. Suggestions were also made regarding the purchase of multiples, and in one case the automatic purchase of course materials for the collection. Again, such an approach is not advisable, but the inquiries were indicative of a strong interest in and desired connection between the collection and the curriculum.
- c. Respondents also noted an inability at times to locate items found in the PAC, and depending on the respondent, sometimes interpreted such phenomena as an issue of misshelving, or in other cases, an inaccuracy of the PAC itself. As is often the case in such situations, user persistence in either checking sorting trucks or shelves, or seeking further assistance is fairly low.
- d. Interest was also expressed, together with appreciation for excellent service, in enhancing access to materials for those with disabilities by exploring expansion of

- alternative formats for materials and providing enhanced viewing, reading, and listening techniques.
- e. A similar interest was expressed generally in continuing to expand the electronic resources available to the UALR community. In some instances that interest reflected the growing proclivity of the user community for electronic, rather than print access when possible. In others, the issue was more directly tied to access for a growing array of online courses, and convenience for part-time, non-traditional, and distance-based students.
 - f. Another discussion thread was the advisability, based on the success of ILL, to maximize or expand any consortia relationships with respect to borrowing and with respect to the development of resources, particularly e-resources.

Major Discussion Threads and the Ottenheimer Library Strategic Plan.

The *Ottenheimer Library Strategic Plan* focuses on four major areas: assessment, collections, staff training & development, and facilities. Assessment emphasizes the process, but expressed in that goal is its ultimate end – identification of resource and service needs. Collections also have an implicit ancillary goal of enhanced access. Each component contains a fairly ambitious agenda of action items, many of which are means to a longer-term end. There are a number of discussion threads that dovetail with the strategic plan outline.

- I. *Assessment.*** Initially many of the major threads from the focus group sessions might become areas of exploration or areas to test for validity through subsequently planned measures such as LibQUAL or CAP. The more confirmation produced, the more focused future action items can be rendered. Assessment also is seen here as a means to several ends – resource needs, staff assistance, and service needs. Item 4, “broadly publicize enhancements so that patrons can capitalize on user-centered changes,” is clearly very much on target, based on the focus session feedback.
- II. *Collections.*** This goal focuses on both appropriate development of collections and upon access. The feedback indicates that a CAP or perhaps a modified CAP study would be useful, focusing on several entities:
 - a. further identifying and cultivating key constituencies
 - b. enhancing a liaison system
 - c. focusing on two aspects of collections – inventorying, weeding, and maximizing the accessibility and utility of what is currently present in the physical collection, and focusing on maximizing the fiscal resources available for electronic materials, given the current trends and proclivities of users. This

would entail getting the most out of limited resources and call for a review of e-resources to limit redundancies, a current objective in the plan.

- d. Paying attention to evolution of formats in such areas as media
- e. A cognate to the last item in the Assessment goal, i.e., publicize collections, maximizing investment by making the user community as fully aware as possible of the collection's potential.

III. *Training and Staff Development.*

There is significant opportunity here to build on a perceived strength of the Library - its customer orientation. Particularly objectives 2 and 3 would reinforce the Library's already good service orientation by ensuring uniformly good service through appropriate investment in ongoing training and development.

IV. *Facilities.* In many ways, the focus sessions provided feedback that reinforce and validate the specific objectives of Goal 4. The three objectives paraphrased and condensed – innovation in facility use; maximizing the spatial dimensions of the library within its fixed limitations; and shaping it in an inviting way to complement services and collections are all in order.

Possible Directions to Consider or to Validate/Refute in Subsequent Study

These observations should be viewed in the context of their limited basis, i.e., considerable reflection on discussions with Ottenheimer personnel and on the focus sessions.

1. Reinforce the good will and perceived positive relationship of Ottenheimer personnel with the University community.

Keys:

- a. Emphasis on continued, consistent training and development at all levels.
- b. Continued articulation and cultivation of partnerships with key groups such as campus computing, University administration, student groups, faculty (through liaison efforts), disability services, broader student services groups (i.e., inculcate the library into general student life so that it becomes another “student activity”) and broaden consortia . As in the case of the focus groups, provide ways for the user community to share in the development of the Library. For example, is there a standing University Library Committee?
- c. Critically examine the most cost effective ways to push out information about services and collections – publicize, inform, and utilize opportunities to partner. All resource issues aside, the Library has much to offer and to share, and a focused and creative attempt at continuous campus-wide library orientation will reinforce the existing good will and reduce the potential for misconceptions.

2. Focus on access to services and collections.

Keys:

- a. The computer lab and various services of a technological nature within the Library are well used, and making them even more usable, integrated, and embedded will enhance partnerships, and cultivate more use of the facility. Make it as easy as possible to access library materials.
- b. Continue to invest in focused electronic resources. Given their cost these will have to be chosen carefully.
- c. Consider inventory and analysis of existing collections. Identify areas of strength and publicize them. Identify areas of need, and potential growth areas (match resources with academic program development). Establish clear priorities through collections policies, given that fiscal resources will never match resource needs.

3. Build a knowledgeable constituency.

Keys:

- a. Goal 1, Objective 4 in the strategic plan - appropriate publicity and marketing.
- b. Engage the University community in conversation (particularly the faculty) regarding the best practices for information literacy.

4. Draw users to both the physical facility and to the virtual facility.

Keys:

- a. Optimal organization and configuration of available space.
- b. Create within that space an inviting environment. The upside here is that the Library personnel are already perceived as a positive, and enhancing the physical environment will only reinforce that sense.