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Graduate Students Evaluate Resources and Services, Winter 2005

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Graduate Students Evaluate Resources and Services - 2005

Seventy-one graduate students expressed their opinions about EMU Library resources and services through an online survey offered during March and April 2005. With approximately 5000 graduate students enrolled in EMU programs, the number responding to our survey is disappointing and obviously not large enough to do any meaningful statistical analysis. However, we greatly appreciate the efforts of those who did complete the survey, many of whom provided additional insightful comments. While it may be impossible to generalize based on the responses of 71 students, we can get some perspective of graduate students' attitudes about our collections, services, staff, and facilities. The survey was a follow up to our 2003 participation in LibQUAL, a national library survey that measured users' perceptions and expectations of 24 items pertaining to the quality of library resources and services. Many of the questions in the national survey were too general or ambiguous to draw any useful conclusions so we decided to design our own survey that would specifically target the concerns and needs of each of our user groups. Because LibQUAL revealed that graduate students were the most dissatisfied group, it was only appropriate to survey them first.

Approximately 85% of the survey respondents are working on master's degrees and 9% are in doctoral programs. Of those students enrolled in courses on campus, 51% are full-time and 39% are part-time. 10% identified themselves as distance education students. 24% of the respondents obtained their undergraduate degree from EMU.

When conducting surveys, libraries should also reach out to nonusers to determine why these individuals do not utilize the plethora of resources and services, many of which can be accessed remotely as well as on-site. Seven out of our 71 respondents report that they do not use our resources and services, primarily because the building's location and hours are not convenient for them and because they use the Internet (other than the Library's Web site) to find information. These seven students are either taking evening classes only or are enrolled in the distance education program. Even though parking problems or job and family constraints may be legitimate obstacles preventing evening students from coming to the building, we can reach them through course-integrated library instruction. These students should be using the Library's Web site as their primary gateway to information rather than relying on Internet search engines to locate the scholarly resources necessary for graduate level course work. While it may not be feasible for distance education students to come to campus, we do have a librarian who devotes approximately 65 to 70% of her time to helping these students obtain the resources they need. In fact, several distance education respondents single out that librarian for the quality of her service to them.

The survey respondents who do use our resources and services (Chart 1) typically do so at least once a week – 27% in person and the others remotely (37% from elsewhere on campus and 51% from off-campus). When asked to indicate all the reasons they come to the Library in person (Chart 2), 70% report that their primary purpose is to find/use books and/or journals. Approximately 40% come to the library to study or to use the computer labs for class work. 35% report that they interact/consult with a librarian when in the building. Graduate students were asked how often they use specific resources to identify the books or journals needed for their course work and/or research projects (Chart 3). The Library's online databases are used very frequently or frequently by 92% of the respondents. The second most heavily accessed resource is the Library's online catalog used by 72% of the respondents followed by Internet search engines used by 66%. Of the three choices (faculty, fellow students and friends, librarians) listed for personal assistance, librarians are the least used resource with 3% of graduate students consulting them very frequently, 14% frequently, 28% occasionally, 33% seldom, and 22% never. Although low, these figures probably reflect positively on the quality, accessibility, and ease of use of our electronic databases and online catalog rather than negatively on the responsiveness and knowledgeableness of our librarians. It might also be surmised that by the time they reach the graduate level, students have become more comfortable navigating these resources and using them effectively without librarian mediation.

The 2003 LibQUAL survey questions about library collections did not adequately distinguish between books and journals or between paper and electronic resources. Our new survey has separate sections for books and journals, with additional breakdowns by format, making it easier to determine what graduate students think about the quality of our various resources and the ease of finding, accessing/locating and using them. With a declining acquisitions budget and escalating serial costs, we need to be more cognizant of the collection usage preferences of our patrons in order to achieve the maximum cost/benefit ratio when allocating monies. 23% of the 64 respondents consider books to be more important than other types of resources in their subject areas. 42% report that books are very important, 30% somewhat important,

and 5% not very important. In their evaluation of the breadth and depth of the Library's book collections, 20% report that our monographs meet their study/research needs to a great extent, 47% to a moderate extent, 25% to a limited extent and 5% not at all. 33% find it very easy to search for books in the online catalog and 62% find it somewhat easy. The survey also sought feedback on specific service issues relating to our book collections in paper format, including layout and organization, reshelving, ARC retrieval, loan periods, and searches for missing books. The majority of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied in every category except the handling of search requests for missing books. Of the 26 students who have used this service, 16 (61%) report being either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. We are now in the process of implementing changes to improve this situation. Currently the Library provides access to over 20,000 electronic books primarily through NetLibrary; slightly more that 20% of respondents have used our ebooks and the majority report being satisfied with the ease of accessing them from on- and off-campus, printing capabilities, and viewer display quality. However 8 (42%) of the 19 respondents who have checked out ebooks are dissatisfied with the six hour loan period. When asked to indicate their format preference for books, 56% of respondents prefer paper, 25% prefer electronic, and 19% express no preference. Criticisms of the book collections range from the specific – the library has inadequate collections in construction management, historic preservation, and music education to the general – the library should purchase current editions of textbooks and additional copies of frequently checked out books; our books are too old; our books are "not up to par with most doctoral granting institutions, and "lost books have been a problem."

The survey included a similar set of questions about journal importance, quality, and usage. Over 65% of respondents believe that journals are the mostimportant resource in their field and 22% consider journals to be very important. In their evaluation of our journal collections, the students' responses concerning quality mirrored their opinions about the book collections. 42% of the respondents find it very easy to search for journals in WebVoyager; 43% find it somewhat easy; and 15% find it difficult. While only 58% of respondents have used journals in paper, 91% have used electronic journals. Approximately 34% have used the microform journal collections. 72% prefer electronic journals, 12% prefer paper, and 16% have no preference. Most of the comments about our journal collections reflected this preference for electronic journals with the consensus being "the more electronic full-text journals the better!" The layout and organization, reshelving, and ARC retrieval for the paper journal collection all received satisfactory ratings as did the service issues (ease of access, printing, and display) relating to electronic journals. However, 65% of the respondents are very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the handling of search requests for missing journals.

While our LibQUAL results had given us the impression that most of our patrons did not utilize interlibrary loan/document delivery services, the new survey indicates that slightly over half of the graduate student respondents have used the service. Approximately 66% report being very satisfied or satisfied, while the 34% who are dissatisfied complain primarily about slow delivery times and short borrowing periods. Interestingly, several respondents praise the delivery speed, but one of them does point out that it had "improved dramatically in recent weeks." Other students suggest increasing the five item limit for requests and providing the option to renew materials. There also appears to be some confusion among distance education students on whether to contact the interlibrary loan department or the distance education librarian to receive service.

Graduate students were also asked about their use of and satisfaction with other types of print and/or electronic resources. 73% of the respondents have used reference materials in paper format with 89% being very satisfied or satisfied; 87% have used such resources in electronic format with an 87% approval rating. In a previous survey question, the overwhelming majority of respondents report that they rely on electronic indexes and databases to identify books and journals for their studies, so we would expect usage of such resources to be much higher than their print counterparts. In fact, only 6 students out of 63 report that they do not use electronic indexes/databases compared to 25 students who do not use the paper versions of these resources. However, while 92% of those students using the paper indexes are very satisfied or satisfied, only 77% of those using the electronic versions are similarly satisfied. Electronic course reserves have been accessed by slightly over 53% of the respondents (compared to 37% using paper course reserves) with 97% being satisfied or very satisfied with the collection. Other collections, including theses and dissertations, government documents, maps, archives, and audiovisual materials, are seldom used by the graduate students who responded to this survey. Typically somewhere between 60 to 70% of the respondents report not using or being unaware of these collections.

The next group of survey questions dealt with the responsiveness, courtesy, and knowledge of library staff at our various service points. We received disappointing customer service ratings from graduate students who participated in the 2003 LibQUAL survey, but the general nature of the questions made it impossible to identify where problems were occurring. In addition, our facility shares space with several heavily used student-centered operations which the Library does not manage, such as Multimedia Services and the ground floor computer lab. However, we did realize that customer service quality was uneven among Library departments and that we needed to be more cognizant of the skills needed by our front line employees. In the last two years, some staffing changes were made and more customer service training has been provided for both staff and student assistants. These improvement efforts have been recognized by the graduate students who responded to the new survey. More than 80% of them have received assistance at the main Information Services/Reference desk and 92% are impressed with the responsiveness of this staff, 94% with their courtesy, and 90% with their knowledge. The same number of respondents received help at the Circulation/Reserves desk and these students report being very satisfied or satisfied with responsiveness (90%), courtesy (86%) and knowledge (78%) of the staff. 75% of the respondents have had interactions with Client Services; 83% of them are very satisfied or satisfied with staff responsiveness and courtesy and 81% with the knowledge displayed by staff. Approximately 40% of the respondents have sought help at the Periodicals/Government Documents desk and that staff receives positive ratings from 95% of those students. The same numbers of students have used University Archives and 88% are very satisfied or satisfied with their treatment. 15% of the respondents have asked for assistance from Map Library staff with a 100% satisfaction rating. However, at all service points, there is room for improvement as most students report being satisfied rather than very satisfied with customer service quality, usually by more than a two to one margin. The exception is the service provided at the Information Services/Reference desk where the number of very satisfied customers nearly equals the number of satisfied customers. In comments about their experiences with Library staff, several respondents also single out the reference librarians for praise. Unfortunately, some students have had negative interactions, with one complaining that "the employees are often rude and start with the attitude that something can't be done and the patron is bothering them for asking." The survey also asked whether the number and hours of the service desks are adequate for graduate student needs, which is pertinent because we have been exploring how to expand reference service to the third floor. 92% of the respondents feel that the Library has enough service points and 89% are satisfied with the hours of service provided by the desks.

The next section of the survey sought feedback on the use of and satisfaction with facilities and equipment. Approximately 80% of the respondents use computer workstations in the Library and 70% use our printers; nearly one-third of them are very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with this equipment. Public photocopiers and noise levels in the building are both considered less than satisfactory by 26% of the respondents. Students report the most satisfaction with building signage, lighting, and temperature and air quality, although again the number of those who are very satisfied is significantly less than the numbers who are satisfied. The majority of written comments reflect the dissatisfaction with Library's computers and lack of quiet areas.

In the final section on library instruction, 62% of the respondents report that they have attended at least one instruction session on how to use our resources and services. When asked what types of instruction they find to be the most useful (Chart 4), 56% of the students selected assistance from librarians at the reference desk. Course-integrated instruction given by librarians during class time, remote access to a librarian, and online help/tutorials were each selected by approximately 40% of the respondents. Printed guides/information sheets are judged to be the least useful among the nine choices offered.

Although it is impossible to draw conclusions based on the small number of respondents, the survey does seem to corroborate much of what we had learned or suspected about the needs and preferences of graduate students based on LibQUAL results, focus group feedback, and suggestion box comments. Graduate students want the power to function independently when accessing our resources and services. Consequently, the importance of the work done by Library technical services and network/systems staff to ensure and improve upon the accuracy, availability, and ease of use of our online catalog and databases cannot be overemphasized. Journals appear to be more heavily used than books by graduate students, but of course, a statistically significant number of respondents in each academic program would be needed to determine whether this holds true across all disciplines. Full-text electronic journals are definitely preferred over their paper counterparts. Although relevance will vary by academic discipline, our specialized collections – government documents, maps/atlases, archives – are a source of diverse and

often unique information that, judging from our survey results, are severely underutilized. We have made progress in our efforts to provide better customer service; we now need to ensure that our users perceive that all their interactions with library staff are *very* satisfactory.
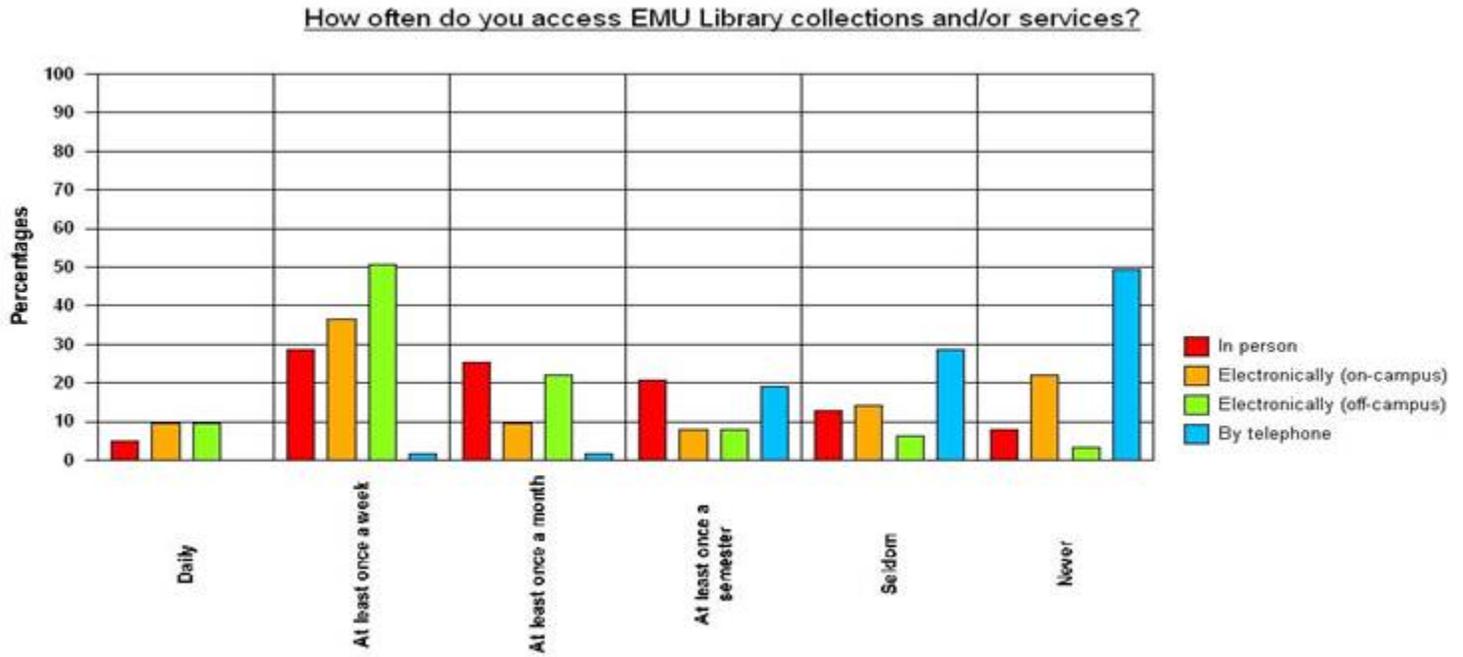
Chart 1

How often do you access EMU Library collections and/or services?

Chart 2

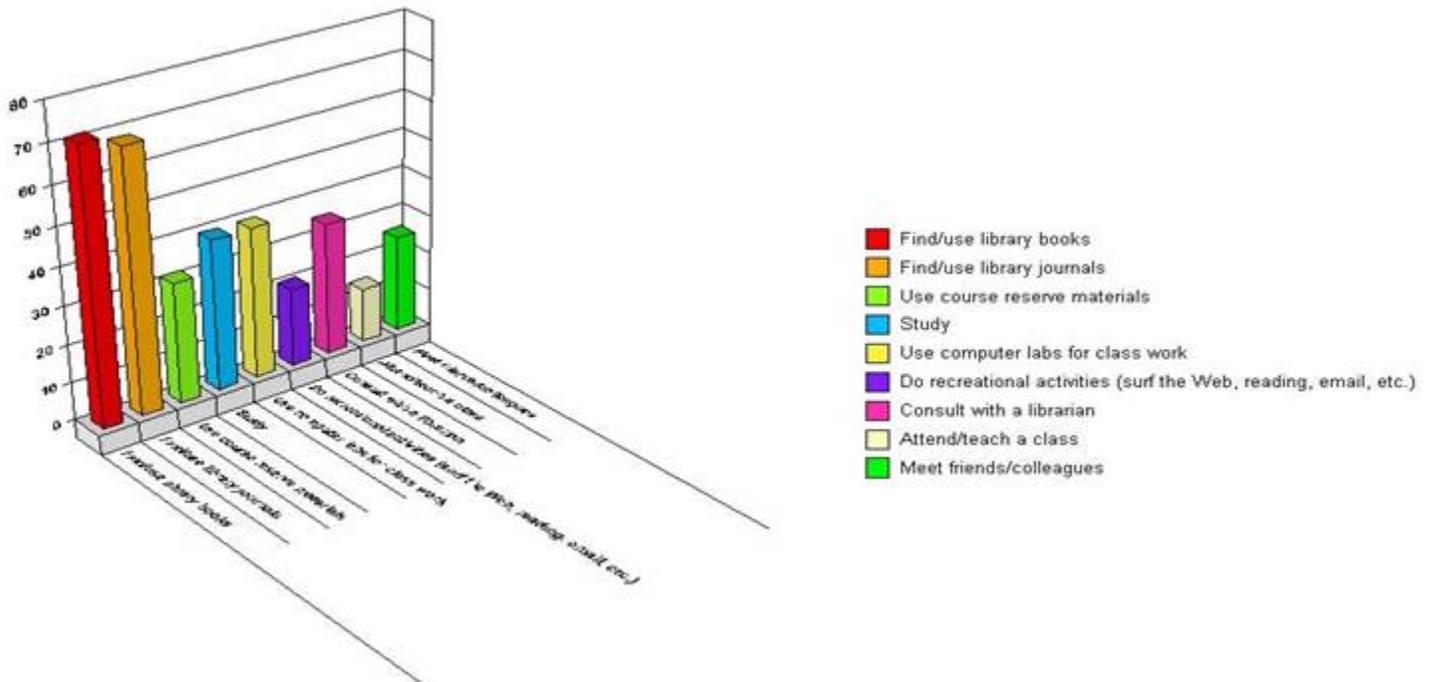Chart 3

How often do you use the following resources to help identify the books or journals needed for your course work and/or research projects?
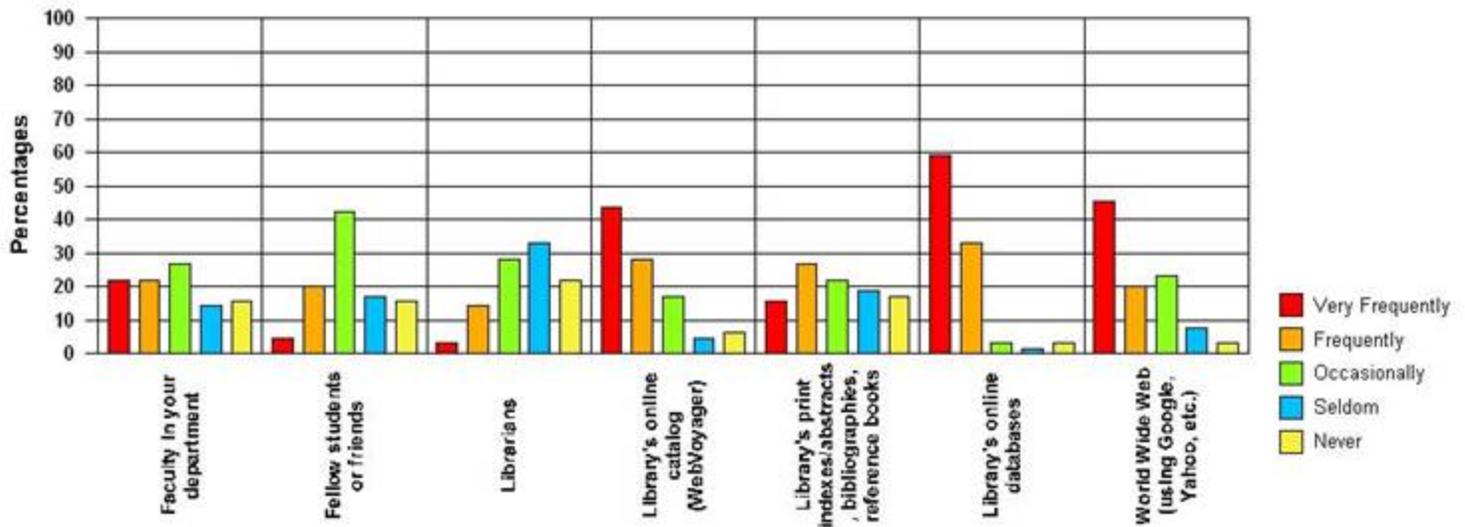

Legend: Very Frequently, Frequently, Occasionally, Seldom, Never

Chart 4

What types of instruction do you feel are most useful?