

Utilizing Undergraduate Student Focus Groups to Navigate Difficult Budget Times

Tania Bardyn, Taryn Resnick, Diana Tedone, and Alison Armstrong

The large size of the undergraduate population on most college campuses means that undergraduates are an important constituency for academic libraries. It is critical for library administrators to ask and identify what services matter most to undergraduate students, especially when cuts in library services are a reality. Feedback from undergraduate students, generally the largest user group for academic libraries, is a crucial component of planning services in academic libraries, especially in difficult budgetary times. An understandable response to difficult budgetary situations is the impulse to avoid and deny, but such responses do not demonstrate effective leadership. Focus groups are one type of feedback mechanism that provide library administrators with a powerful, low-cost, strategic evaluation of staff performance and allow students an opportunity to reflect and connect to library services and collections. Just as a low grade in a class does not mean the end of an academic career, negative feedback does not mean the end of a library's reputation; it is simply a sign that the library as an organization needs to make adjustments.

Background

Many academic libraries have used focus groups to evaluate library services, but there is little discussion in the literature about how focus groups can help libraries determine which services are important in difficult economic times. When creating a new information commons at Utah State University, Fagerheim and Weingart found that focus groups of undergraduate students were a very useful tool for understanding students' needs and preferences.¹ Others have used focus groups to improve existing services. Spackman reported on the use of focus groups made up of undergraduate students and teaching assistants to evaluate the effectiveness of an information literacy course for a general biology class.² Focus groups are a particularly effective tool because they require a minimal amount of

time and resources and provide valuable insight into users' attitudes, feelings, and ideas about library services, as well as giving different user groups a role in the decision-making process.³ According to Shoaf, using focus groups is especially helpful after a print or online survey has been administered, because the survey results can guide the scope of the focus group meetings and provide information about user needs, habits, research, and overall satisfaction with the library.⁴

Institutional Background and Context

The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the UCLA Library

The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) is a large, Tier 1, public research institution. With 26,000 undergraduate students, UCLA has the largest undergraduate student population in the University of California system. It is one of five four-year college campuses in California that has an undergraduate student population over 26,000 (as of fall 2008; see table 1).

Because of the vast size of the student body and the complex logistics involved, the 26,536 undergraduate students at UCLA had not been involved in library-sponsored, face-to-face focus groups in the last decade. Previous focus groups, which had last been done in 2003, were generally targeted towards faculty concerning specific programs, such as information literacy training. Moreover, none of the research interventions with students had occurred during difficult economic times nor did they focus on the macro-level of topics: library services and spaces.

Undergraduate Initiatives at UCLA Library

In 2007, the UCLA Library created a unit called Undergraduate Initiatives (UI) and hired a director of

Tania Bardyn (bardyn@library.ucla.edu) is Associate Director for Public Services, Louise M. Darling Biomedical Library, University of California at Los Angeles. **Taryn Resnick** (tresnick@medlib.tamu.edu) is Resources Management Librarian, Medical Sciences Library, Texas A&M University (College Station). **Diana Tedone** (dctedone@gmail.com) is a recent University of California at Los Angeles MLIS graduate. **Alison Armstrong** (alison.f.armstrong@uvm.edu) is Director of Information and Instruction Services at Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

Table 1. California Universities with Undergraduate Populations Over 20,000*

CSU Long Beach	31,564
CSU Fullerton	31,356
CSU Northridge	30,235
CSU San Diego	29,481
UC Los Angeles	26,536
UC Berkeley	25,151
CSU San Jose	24,708
CSU San Francisco	24,378
UC Davis	24,058
CSU Sacramento	24,034
UC San Diego	22,486
UC Irvine	22,122

*Population numbers from fall 2008 semester.

undergraduate initiatives (DUI). Gary E. Strong, university librarian, conceived UI as a broader service concept than that of the “first-year experience” librarian. The DUI is based in College Library, a traditional undergraduate library serving 26,000 students, most of whom are enrolled in the College of Letters and Science. The DUI held two retreats, one in 2007 and one in 2008, which included participants from all campus libraries. Based on the information and feedback from the retreats and surveys, a UI Planning Group recommended establishing an Undergraduate Initiatives Council (UIC), chaired by the DUI and comprised of unit, program, and administrative representatives. In 2008, the university librarian created the UIC membership and gave it the charge detailed below.

Undergraduate Initiatives Council Charge

Building on a strong foundation of existing library services and programs, the UIC aims are as follows:

- support the UCLA Library’s strategic plan through identifying and implementing best practices and determining measures of excellence for undergraduate library services
- stay abreast of technology trends relevant to undergraduate library users and partners through collaboration with the Web Services Advisory Committee, Library Computing Services, and others
- improve and strengthen communication and outreach to undergraduate students
- engage in campus-wide discussions on current practices and future trends in undergraduate education,

research and teaching, and library services

- keep the undergraduate community apprised of library services and resources relevant to them

Methods

Student Focus Groups: Participants

In April 2009, under the direction of the UCLA Library UIC, the associate director for public services at the Louise M. Darling Biomedical Library organized focus groups to identify what library services matter most and to engage in campus-wide discussions of current practices and future trends in undergraduate education, research, and teaching. The purpose of the study was to determine which library services and spaces were important to undergraduate students and to pinpoint how the UCLA Library needed to improve service to undergraduate students. The authors chose the focus group forum because conversation among participants engenders a discussion of issues that may not arise in individual interviews or an online survey. The authors conducted focus groups with UCLA undergraduate students in science, engineering, math, and nursing and student campus leaders from the Undergraduate Students Association Council (USAC).

The associate director for public services at the Biomedical Library invited the dean of the School of Nursing; the director of the Undergraduate Research Center for Sciences, Engineering, and Mathematics and the Center for Academic and Research Excellence; and the president of the Student Council to help the UCLA Library recruit participants by sending a recruitment letter via e-mail to their respective distribution lists. The students contacted the Biomedical Library, were prescreened for eligibility, and were selected based on their use of the existing UCLA libraries. Out of 335 eligible students, 66 (20 percent) responded to the initial call for volunteers, and 27 qualified and participated in the focus groups.

The 27 focus group participants were enrolled full-time at UCLA during the 2008–09 academic year. Each student either self-identified as a library user majoring in the life sciences, engineering, math, or nursing, or was an elected student leader. Many of the student leaders were majors in political science, economics, communication studies, business, or anthropology. Nineteen percent were freshman, 37 percent were sophomores, 22 percent were juniors, and 22 percent were seniors (see figure 1).

Student Focus Groups: Procedures

Prior to the launch of the focus group project, the study design was submitted to and approved by the UCLA Institutional Review Board. The authors held a test group using twelve UCLA Library student workers to test the videotaping equipment and interview questions. The interview

questions were modified based on the practice session.

All three focus group sessions were digitally audio-recorded, videotaped, and transcribed. Two librarians and one UCLA Library School student moderated the three focus groups. While many authors recommend using outside moderators, budgetary concerns did not allow this, and librarians were used instead.⁵ The authors also believed that librarians had more insight into UCLA's library services and would therefore be better equipped than outsiders to lead a discussion on those services.

The focus group moderator followed a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit students' feedback about their experiences with library services and spaces (see figure 2).

The questions and prompts used to engage in conversation with students were designed to obtain their impressions of current library services and spaces. The associate director for public services initiated the discussion by telling students that people, not organizations, make innovations happen and that students' ideas were important to the UCLA Library. Participants were encouraged to champion ideas that improve library services. During the focus groups students were asked to describe their experiences and impressions of library services and spaces and to think about their future needs as undergraduates conducting research, learning, and innovating. Students were asked to name their favorite services or space and why they use these particular services or spaces.

Each focus group lasted approximately one hour over the lunch period. Participants received a \$25 gift card for the on-campus dining services or bookstore for their participation and were provided with lunch. The cost to run the focus groups was roughly \$1,058 (\$39 per student), not including staff time. A cost breakdown is provided in figure 3.

Results

The authors analyzed the transcriptions and the videotapes of the completed focus group sessions in order to discover any recurring themes. The object was to identify the concerns and issues that students raised regarding service quality or space. Data was captured and subgrouped under three headings—(1) collections, (2) spaces, and (3) services—in order to provide feedback to the associate university librarians responsible for collections, public services, and operations. Having done this for specific themes, the authors generated lists of popular services and spaces, areas for improvement, and individual quotes, which were then presented to the UCLA Library Cabinet two months after the conclusion of the focus groups.

It was clear from the focus groups that UCLA undergraduate students are sophisticated and discerning library users with complex information needs. The most

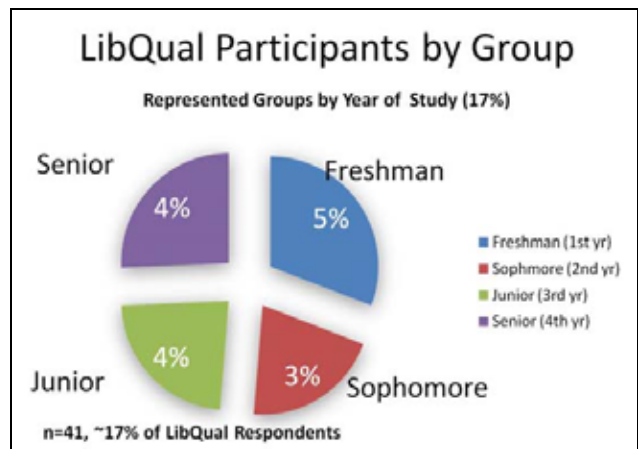
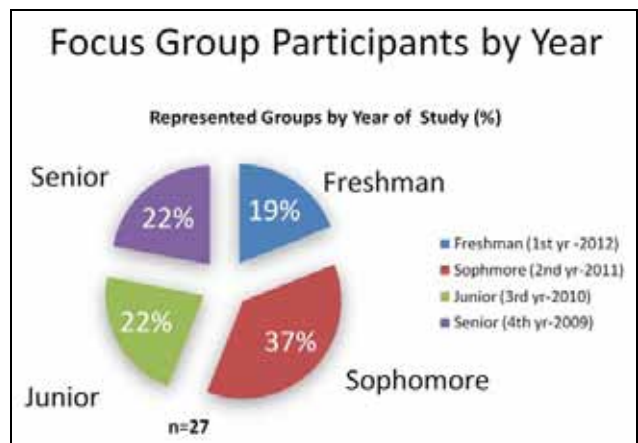


Figure 1. Focus Group and LibQual 2009 by Year of Study: Undergraduate Students

1. Think of the libraries and UCLA Library website. What library services have you used during the last year?
2. What did you think of that service?
3. How often did you use it?
4. Do you wish we had others? Please give examples.
5. How did you find out about the services you've used at UCLA Library?
6. What service would you want to see available electronically from the Library?
7. Where do you go to study and learn on campus?
8. Where do you go online look up information for your classes?
9. Do you use the campus libraries? Which ones? Why?
10. What other spaces do you use to learn or conduct research?
11. If you were designing the perfect study and learning space, what would you include?

Figure 2. UCLA Focus Groups with Undergraduate Students: Facilitator's Guide, March 2009 Questions.

ITEM	AMOUNT
External hard drive	\$163.00
Digital videocassettes	\$40.00
Gift cards (27 @ \$25 ea)	\$675.00
Lunch (pizza)	\$150.00
*excludes staff time for videotaping, editing tapes and transcripts, IRB submission, administrative reports	
TOTAL	\$1,058.00

Figure 3. UCLA Library Focus Group Budget, 2009.

valued library service is reserves, followed by 24/7 study space. Undergraduate students plan their library use, research, and study strategies carefully. Students think about the routes they walk on campus, which libraries they will pass, and what services are available in those libraries. They think about where they can read for leisure and where they can stop for a rest when they have only a short break between classes. Students think about whether they need to carry their own laptop or if they can check one out from the UCLA Library. Do they need to carry a heavy textbook or can they access the book through Library Reserves? The focus group students appreciated the quiet study spaces in Young Research Library, the collections in the Biomedical Library, the convenience of the Science and Engineering Library, the beauty of Rosenfeld Management Library, and the magnificence of Powell Library. The undergraduate student participants advocated for convenient services, close to their classes, residence halls, and iPhones. During the focus groups it became clear that the students sought explanations about research service priorities, library locations for study, and library procedures.

Undergraduate students at UCLA are concerned about the following:

- library fines, billings, and e-mail notifications for overdue items
- navigating the UCLA library website, which they found confusing, to find services and information

Undergraduate students at UCLA value the following:

- friendly, welcoming, and knowledgeable library service
- course and textbook reserves and increased access to this kind of material electronically (e-textbook reserves)
- the variety of library spaces in our facilities, with an

emphasis on ready and increasing access to study rooms

- the convenience of electronic textbooks and course readers
- computer laptop lending
- understanding library policies and procedures (for example, how to reserve group study rooms and if food and drink is allowed in the library)

By focusing on students' overall impressions of operational aspects of library services and spaces, and without naming specific concepts, tools, or activities, we were able to identify key impressions of library services, inform the development of a portfolio of undergraduate services, and help senior library administrators plan appropriate operational efficiencies, like library closures and consolidating print reserve services.

Discussion

Focus groups can be an effective and inexpensive tool for providing timely feedback that empowers library administrators to address service shortfalls. The feedback from UCLA Library undergraduate students during these focus groups was rarely negative.

While there was a certain amount of predictability in student response (for example, more is better), overall the responses from these UCLA undergraduates were informed and pragmatic. These students shared their impressions, good and bad, about library services. They identified the most valued services, areas for improvement, and helped name potential future campus partners. At UCLA Library, this feedback provided senior library administrators, at a critical budget time, with data to help inform plans for operational efficiencies in public service.

Given the complex and changing budget situation in California in 2009, being honest both internally within the UCLA Library organization and with students was constructive and beneficial to evaluating the usefulness of existing programs and services, and also provided timely feedback to library administrators who were preparing 3-, 5-, and 10-percent budget reduction scenarios.

This study suggests that the current utilization of focus groups in difficult budget times is best used for formative feedback and not as a "high stakes" assessment tool. According to UCLA Deputy University Librarian, Susan E. Parker, when asking for input and feedback, it is important to contextualize in order to set expectations for the people who are sharing their ideas. As librarians, we cannot give people the false expectation that an interest in obtaining their input and feedback means what they say will be automatically acted upon. This is never realistic, particularly in economic circumstances that demand cuts and trade-offs in order to survive.

A number of popularly held beliefs regarding students

and libraries were overturned by the participants in this study. The following are five intriguing findings that confounded the authors' expectations:

1. At academic libraries, consumer applications such as Google Apps, Facebook, and Flickr are putting pressure on libraries to make their enterprise applications easier to use. Undergraduate students, who can easily use these consumer and social networking programs, felt overwhelmed and confused by the way the library presented information and services to them via the website and online catalog.
2. Proximity of a library to classes is very important to undergraduate students. They are unlikely to go out of their way to find a library if it is not within a certain distance of their next class. As a result, weekend library hours are not as important as they used to be. Since the focus groups were held, with the exception of the Rosenfeld Management Library, the UCLA Library has closed all of its libraries on Saturdays and reduced Sunday hours significantly.
3. Students requested interactive maps of physical study spaces, more e-books, more late evening 24/7 study spaces, online room reservations, and mandatory freshman orientation to the library.
4. Undergraduate students are increasingly demanding better online self-service options.
5. Social networking sites, such as YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook, are not as important for communication as expected. Focus group participants preferred traditional forms of communication such as paper flyers and e-mail.

Comparing Focus Groups' Feedback to the LibQual Survey

The authors were asked by UCLA Library administration to compare the focus group results with the feedback provided from undergraduate students in the 2009 LibQual+ Survey.⁶ The demographics and results are remarkably consistent with feedback provided by students from the UI focus groups conducted in April 2009 (see figure 4). This correlation is a strong and positive indication that UCLA students are appreciative of the library staff and their expertise, that they value library spaces and facilities, and that they use a variety of library resources. Areas of concern also overlap: students have difficulty using or are simply unaware of services offered, notably remote access to resources; students' needs for reserve materials continue to grow; and climate control within library buildings remains a challenge.

The feedback from the UI focus groups allows for a much better understanding of, and insight into, LibQual+ "adequate" service. The focus group information captures students' stories and usage patterns with a vibrancy, depth, and richness that is lacking in the LibQual+ report.

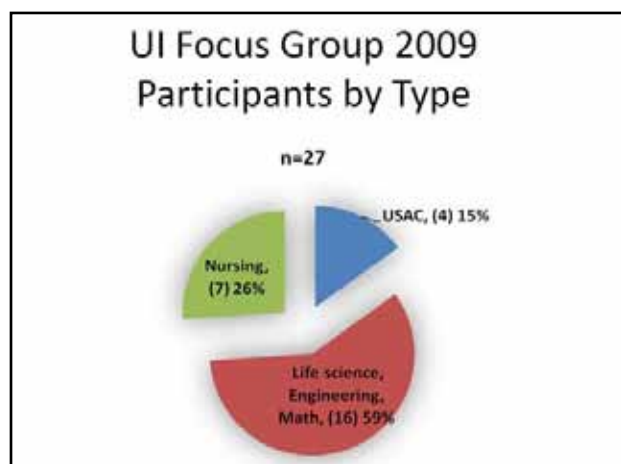
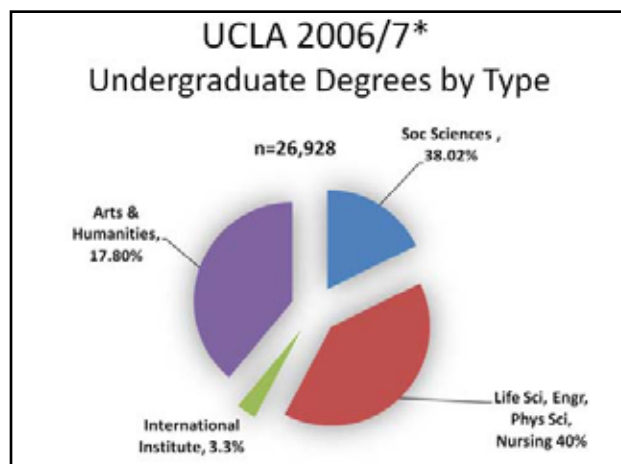


Figure 4. Focus Group and LibQual+ 2009 Participants by Major: Undergraduate Students

Future Directions

Future directions should include library-led focus groups for faculty; instruction and training for library administrators on how to elicit specific feedback, and then report back to the larger academic community; and programs to instruct undergraduate students on how to provide feedback in open forums, such as focus groups, town halls, and study-ins. As a result of conducting the focus groups reported in this article, the authors were able to develop recommendations for the UIC at UCLA Library for the highest service priorities as follows:

1. **Collaborating** with campus partners like Student Residence Hall staff.
2. **Streamlining/automating** business processes—for example, interactive maps indicating available study spaces throughout the libraries.
3. **Reducing** application silos—for example, different interfaces for course management systems, different

versions of Microsoft Office on public computers at various libraries.

4. **Effectively orienting** all freshmen to the online collections and services.
5. **Marketing** convenient services such as overnight checkouts and extended hours during exams.

Conclusions

Focus groups are an economical way to engage undergraduate students in the decision-making process about academic library services when budgets are constrained. The results show that undergraduate students at a large, public research institution are reasonable in their recommendations and want convenient services over expensive services. Some proposed ideas would involve substantial expenditure (for example, technology in group study rooms), but developing an overarching set of student-centered indicators of valued library services and spaces is mission-critical for academic libraries. By using this time-intensive yet low-cost approach to develop service indicators, academic libraries can increase the likelihood of incorporating features of academic excellence and information service quality that are important to undergraduate students, such as access, communication, and aesthetic aspects that lead to students' developing learning and research skills at a research institution.

The process presented in this article may serve as a model for library managers at other academic and community colleges and lead to a greater understanding of student perceptions of high value services in the future development of library services and spaces during difficult economic times.

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