

LibQUAL+TM: An Innovative, Technology-Based Assessment Tool for Libraries
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LibQUAL+TM is a research and development project undertaken by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in collaboration with Texas A&M University and with financial support from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) through September 2003. Project goals include: a) establishing a library service quality assessment program at ARL; b) developing web-based tools for assessing library service quality; c) developing mechanisms and protocols for evaluating libraries; and d) identifying best practices in providing library service. Information on the LibQUAL+TM project is available online at <<http://www.libqual.org/>>.

The project is defining and measuring library service quality across institutions and creating useful quality-assessment tools for libraries. Begun as a pilot with 12 ARL libraries in spring 2000, there are over 300 libraries worldwide testing the instrument in 2003. Results from the LibQUAL+TM instrument are helping to identify benchmark indicators to better assess library service quality, provide empirical documentation of the findings to campus administrators, and develop a reliable tool by which to measure library service.

As LibQUAL+TM enters its fourth year, a number of new libraries and consortia are joining the project, enriching the mix of participants and more fully reflecting the range of American and international library systems. In 2003, consortia representing public, military, and college libraries will join the major research institutions that have participated in earlier surveys. Eight different library consortia will be a part of the 2003 LibQUAL+TM: AAHSL, Alabama Academic (NAAL), MERLN (Military Education and Research Library Network), NY3Rs College and University Libraries, NY3Rs Public Libraries, Oberlin Libraries Group, OhioLINK, and SCONUL (U.K. Standing Conference of National and University Libraries). In addition to the U.S. and Canada, there will also be participation from libraries in the U.K. and the Netherlands, and the survey is also being translated into French.

The survey instrument is a statistical management tool adapted from an instrument called SERVQUAL (for SERVICE QUALity), which is grounded in the "Gap Theory of Service Quality" developed by the marketing research team of A. Parasuraman, V.A. Zeithaml, and L.L. Berry. The instrument was re-grounded using a qualitative process and a series of interviews with library users and developed into a web-based tool allowing for easy local administration.

The Web-based survey instrument uses 25 core questions to measure library users' minimum, perceived, and desired levels of service quality in four key dimensions: Access to Information, Affect of Service, Library as Place, and Personal Control. More than 78,000 users at 164 institutions throughout North America completed the 2002 LibQUAL+TM survey. Each participating library gathers a random sample of e-mail addresses representative of their user population and sends a message to the sample encouraging recipients to complete the survey on the web. Survey data are transmitted directly from the central server to a database.

In order to support the wide range of institutions taking part in the project, technical requirements have had a lot of attention. Reduced HTML requirements and regular testing assure that the LibQUAL+™ survey has been designed to work with the largest number of combinations of web browser/operating systems that project staff test. These combinations range from the popular IE versions on Windows and Macintosh machines, to Netscape, to older versions of these browsers, to machines running Linux, handheld devices, etc. In developing the technology there are two major criteria adhered to in the following priority order (a) functionality – making sure that it works in as many different settings as have been encountered, and (b) aesthetics – the appearance of the pages. The project has two load-balanced web/application servers connected to one database. Software used includes ColdFusion, IIS webserver, SQL server, and Windows Advanced Server 2000.

Institutions participating in the LibQUAL+™ project receive reports that provide information on how users perceive the quality of their library services. Included are custom radar graphs representing each major constituency group, and aggregate information to which each library can compare their results. In addition, a notebook with customized summaries, including statistics for all variables comparing summary institutional data to peer-group averages and medians is also provided. The reports provide the library with information on the gaps between users' desired, perceived, and minimally acceptable levels of service. In addition, because there were enough responses from the 2001 and 2002 surveys, it was possible to create score norms tables. Norm tables allow conversion of observed scores into derived scores and are used to generate both generic and specialized tables.

From project data, institutions participating in LibQUAL+™ can identify in which dimensions and for which specific services need improvement, according to their users. They can also compare their service quality with that of peer institutions in an effort to develop benchmarks and understanding of best practices.

A substantial body of literature is being developed from the LibQUAL+™ project. This literature discusses such things as the quantitative and qualitative analyses for the project, administering a web-based survey, representativeness vs. responsiveness, score reliability, and response rates. Many more documents are expected as the spring 2002 and 2003 data are analyzed.

In addition to the funding from FIPSE, ARL and TAMU have also received funding from the National Science Foundation to adapt the LibQUAL+™ instrument for use in the Science, Math, Engineering and Technology Education Digital Library community. Goals for this 3-year grant include: a) defining the dimensions of digital library service quality from the users' perspectives; b) developing a tool for measuring user perceptions and expectations of digital library service quality across NSDL digital library contexts; and c) identifying digital library best practices that permit generalizations across operations and development platforms. This project will begin in late 2002 with its own qualitative development effort.