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STUDY LEAVE REPORT

Introduction

In 2010 I was granted permission to take a 6 months study leave from the University of Victoria Libraries. This report outlines my activities during that leave (June - December).

As I have been a reference and collections librarian at the UVic Libraries for 20 years I have many years of experience working with students from all disciplines. For the past 5 years or so, I noticed a great many more middle aged students using our services, with varying degrees of comfort with the changing library research environment. This personal experience sparked my interest and led me to propose the following research outline.

“During this leave I wish to research how libraries provide service to older students, especially middle-aged students. Institutional Analysis at UVic shows that the number of students aged 40 years and older has been increasing over the last 10 years, both in absolute numbers and in percentage overall. Many UVic Aboriginal students are older than the average UVic undergraduate (personal communication from T. Smith, UVic Libraries). A survey of this demographic would provide information relative to what services these students want from the library compared to what is currently available. A review of how other libraries offer services to older adult students, will contribute to the formulation of recommendations to the strategic plan of the library generally and to the goals of the Reference Services unit specifically. As I have just been appointed for a second 3 year term as Reference Coordinator I believe this research is directly related to my duties as a Subject Liaison Librarian as well as a Coordinator in Reference Services. “

I began with a literature review of older, mature student's use of libraries. This proved somewhat disappointing as I was able to find very few papers on this topic. I did find one paper which discussed a survey done with older students. My literature review became more broadly about adult students and libraries, and adult learners in general. The research literature defines adult learners as those over 25 years of age. However, I was mainly interested in the older, more mature adult learners so I decided to conduct focus group interviews with UVic students over the age of 40. I also decided to interview librarians at various academic institutions in Canada and abroad to find out their views on working with older students, and whether those libraries or librarians had implemented any special services for this group of students. With the help of Chelsea Garside, Library Assessment Office, I was able to receive Ethics approval from the University and proceeded to plan for 4 focus group sessions with up to 10 students per session. These sessions will be described in detail below. I visited the following university libraries and spoke to public service librarians about my project and received information from these colleagues.

The three parts of my study leave - the literature review, the focus group interviews and the library visits all led me to the same conclusion. Libraries and librarians do not treat the older students (over 40 years old) any differently than any other adult students (25 years or more) and

have no special services or initiatives directed towards them. However, the focus group interviews I conducted showed that our UVic mature students are generally quite satisfied with the library service they receive and their difficulties or frustrations are similar to those experienced by younger students and also by faculty and community users as well, i.e. access to resources, computer and printer issues of all kinds and study space concerns. One highlight from the interviews was the suggestion by a group of interdisciplinary PhD students that the library provide a meeting place for these students on a regular basis, as they do not know each other, nor do they have any way of identifying others in their situation while they are studying. Other groups of graduate students in specific depts. have many ways of meeting each other, through list serves, faculty/dept. meetings, seminars, common lab spaces, etc but the interdisciplinary students often are “homeless” and they felt the library could provide a common ground. Being able to talk about their situation, their challenges and successes together, with help from a trained librarian was something they felt would be very useful to them.

Literature Review

In performing the literature review I searched various library and education databases for articles discussing library services to older, mature students. I also looked for articles about adult students and libraries since many of those articles would give breakdowns about survey results by age. I also searched the internet for library web pages that would describe special services for older, mature students and the only library I found with such a service was Simon Fraser University Library in Burnaby, British Columbia. Even in this case, when I spoke to the SFU librarians, they explained that the services offered to older, mature students were exactly the same services offered to all students!

My reading of the literature educated me in the qualities of mature students, how they approach learning and how best to orient them to library resources. Coincidentally, this information is now being offered to all the reference and collection librarians at UVic through a series of workshops offered by Pia Russell, the Teaching and Learning Librarian.

One other experiment I conducted while conducting the literature review was to determine how many of my references were available online. Of those I chose to read, all but one was available in electronic format. I also chose not to print out these references, but instead, used my laptop computer to read the materials. Since we suggest this option to students every day, I thought I should test whether it was appropriate for older people, like me. I found the experience manageable, if not completely enjoyable. One good feature is the ability to enlarge the font easily.

Selected results of my literature review are listed at the end of my report.

Interviews with Librarians

Initially, I had hoped to visit a number of libraries across Canada, but illness prevented this. I was able to visit the following libraries in Canada.

University of Calgary Library

University of British Columbia Library

Simon Fraser University Library

Vancouver Island University Library

All the Canadian libraries I visited were very open to the idea of services for older, mature students. In fact many of the librarians I spoke to said they were happy to consider such a service, as they had not thought of such a thing before. However, after my readings and discussions I have come to the conclusion that the services we offer do suit older students, just as they suit part-time or distance students and that when planning services we need to keep in mind how people in various situations will be able to access our services, in many different ways.

I also visited Queensland University of Technology Library in Brisbane, Australia. I met with 5 library staff and had a productive talk with them. These librarians and academic staff told me that the reason they do not advertise special services for older students (even though they have many mature, older students) is that to do so would be seen as discriminating against the younger students! Therefore any services they offer are open to everyone, even if what they are offering (e.g. orientation classes later in the day, to suit students who work full time during regular working hours) would actually target the older, mature or part-time student.

While I was in Calgary, AB visiting the University of Calgary Library I attended the 2010 LOEX of the West conference. (<http://blogs.mtroyal.ca/lotw/>) This is an international Library user education conference that I found very interesting and useful. I used the opportunity to talk to colleagues about their experiences with mature, older students. Many of the librarians there had little experience with older undergraduates and those that did deal with mature students related that they did not provide any special services or instruction for them. This reflects my experience with the individual interviews I had with the Canadian and Australian librarians.

Focus Group Interviews

I began planning for the interviews by working with Chelsea Garside. Initially we thought we might have a survey of our over 40 year old students but we discarded that idea as our students have been surveyed quite a lot recently! We decided that focus groups would provide rich data and would be manageable given the time frame and resources available. We received approval from the Ethics Office to perform the interviews and were able, through permission from the University Secretary, to send an email invitation to every student registered in a course during 2010 who was 40 years old or older. The focus groups took place in room 403 of McPherson Library, and lunch was provided. The timing (either 10:30-12:30pm) or (12 - 2pm) proved problematic for some students who worked full time and could not come to a session at that time. If students could not come to an interview they were also invited to submit written comments or give comments to me over the telephone. In one case a student wished to participate but lived in Ontario, so we were able to have him present at the focus group via Skype. Each student who registered for the focus group signed a permission form which outlined the parameters of the interview and its results.

Analysis and Discussion of Focus Group Interviews

In total there were 32 students who registered but only 24 who actually attended one of four focus groups in June 2010. The participants represented age groups in the 40s (~37%), 50s (~42%) and 60s (~21%). Undergraduate (50%), Master's (~33%) and PhD (~17%) students were present. Various ethnic backgrounds were represented, including one person who self-identified as First Nations. Both men (~33%) and women (~67%) attended the sessions.

Chelsea Garside and I facilitated the discussions and recorded them so that I could analyze the results. These were open-ended discussions with the questions being posed as very general.

“Where are you experiencing frustration with library services?”

“How are we meeting/not meeting your needs?”

“What doesn't the library do that you want it to do?”

In most cases, the comments were very positive. I used the categories of the LibQUAL Survey instrument (provided to me by Chelsea Garside)

PrimaryCategory	24 Study Space
1 Affect of Service	25 Survey Instrument
3 Information Control	26 Unusable Comment
4 Library as Place	27 Laptop Lending
5 Other	28 Ebooks
	29 Equipment
SubCategory	30 Lighting/HVAC
1 Areas for Improvement	31 Laptop Outlets
2 Computers (IC)	32 Building
3 Distance Education	33 Staff
4 Does not use Library	34 Special Collections
5 Electronic Collection	35 Fines & Copy cards
6 Food and Drink	
7 Libraries website	
8 Hours	
9 ILLO	
10 Instruction/Reference Services	
11 Kudos	
12 Law	
13 Loan Periods	
14 Music/Audio/Media	
15 Noise	
16 Online databases	
17 OPAC	
18 Print Collection	
19 Printers/Copiers	
20 Reserve	
21 Personal Safety	
22 Signage	
23 Stack Maintenance	

Using these categories I found that the majority of comments related to **3: Information control** (about 48%), the next largest category of comment was from **1: Affect of service** (about 32%) and the smallest category of comments was from **4: Library as place** (about 17%). My analysis of the subcategories of comments was somewhat fluid, as I found I was often using the same subcategories under more than one Primary category. For example comments relating to Instruction/Reference Services were found in both Affect of Service and Information Control. The subcategory most often appearing in the comments was this one, Instruction/Reference Services which appeared 12 times. Here is a breakdown.

	Subcategory	Number of Comments
1	Areas for Improvement	8
2	Computers	5
3	Distance Education	1
4	Does not use Library	0
5	Electronic Collection	9
6	Food and Drink	0
7	Libraries Website	8
8	Hours	1
9	ILLO	2
10	Instruction/Reference Services	12
11	Kudos	3
12	Law	0
13	Loan Periods	0
14	Music/Audio/Media	1
15	Noise	1
16	Online databases	5
17	OPAC	4
18	Print Collection	8
19	Printers/Copiers	2
20	Reserve	6
21	Personal Safety	0
22	Signage	3
23	Stack Maintenance	0
24	Study Space	3
25	Survey Instrument	0
26	Unusable Comment	0
27	Laptop Lending	0
28	Ebooks	1
29	Equipment	0
30	Lighting/HVAC	1

31	Laptop Outlets	0
32	Building	5
33	Staff	1
34	Special Collections	1
35	Fines & Copy cards	0

From this analysis we can see that many areas were discussed in depth (Reference, Instruction, Print and Electronic collections, including Ebooks and Libraries website) while some other topics were mentioned less often (Reserve collection, Computers, Online databases, OPAC, Building) and some topics were only mentioned rarely (Staff, Special Collections, Lighting/HVAC, Study Space, Signage, Printers/Copiers, Noise, Music/Audio/Media, ILLO, Hours, Distance Education). Some topics did not get mentioned at all (Fines & Copy cards, Laptop Outlets, Equipment, Laptop Lending, Stack Maintenance, Personal Safety, Food and Drink).

The comments raised by the mature students covered their experiences with using the Libraries and information resources. Both positive and negative experiences were related by the participants but the overall feeling was one of gratitude and appreciation. The “library is an amazing thing” was one comment by a PhD candidate as was another observation on the “deterioration” of information available in books. A number of students commented that they bought their own books and did not rely on the library as often as others in their classes. Many of the students were very familiar with computer technology and appreciated the online books and journals. Some students found there were too many obstacles and barriers to accessing the materials and services (e.g. Refworks). One student noted that the process was overly complex to access online books and journals and that he did not like reading from a screen – it gave him sore eyes. In his opinion a personal computer was a waste of time and money. This opinion was not shared by most of the other participants.

I was struck by the diversity of the participants – their ages and gender, their experience in post-secondary education, their level of schooling (from first year students to PhD candidates) and their willingness to share their thoughts, ideas, experiences and suggestions for improvements. Some of the suggestions made by the participants have already been implemented by the Libraries. For example, one comment related to “boosterism” of the library staff and suggested having posters in the libraries so students could get to know who their librarian was. This has been implemented in the Winter 2011 term through a spotlight about Subject Librarians on the Libraries website and similar displays on the large wall screens in Mearns.

A suggestion that sounded very promising to me was the idea of having the library help interdisciplinary students by hosting and promoting a monthly group meeting, at the library, with a subject librarian in attendance. The students would be able to talk about their work in a group setting and the librarian could suggest appropriate library resources to support their research. This would help the students connect with each other and they would learn about new information sources that might be useful to them. Another suggestion from the focus group would be for the library to teach basic library research skills for students who have been away

from school for some time. It was noted that the transition to school is not an easy one and that the older women students might more easily connect with our older women librarians, rather than some of their fellow students! It was noted that the “social” part of campus life is missing for many mature graduate students.

One student suggested that the library work with the Academic Departments to market the library. Perhaps a piece in the monthly email sent to all students by the Office of the Registrar as an example. These kinds of suggestions conveyed to me how much these students value the library and see its existence as essential to their university learning experience.

Conclusion

I was generally pleased with the results of the research and learning I accomplished during this study leave. I learned how mature students differ from traditional students in their attitudes towards learning through my reading of the literature and by observation. I expected to have a list of recommendations for the libraries at the end of my leave but in fact, the results of the focus groups and of my literature review showed that the University of Victoria Libraries are supporting their mature student population and do provide for their special needs. The Libraries value respect for individuals, diversity and inclusivity which serves this population of students, and all students, very well. I look forward to working with students and faculty of all ages and I feel this leave has increased my confidence for this task.

Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank all the students who participated in the study and gave so generously of their time and reflections on their experiences with the Libraries.

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