

Off-campus Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Library User Education

Monica Hines Craig and Kim E. Schultz
Central Michigan University

In January, 1990, Central Michigan University's Michigan Metropolitan region (MIMET) began to offer MSA 600, a course in administrative and research methods, as a foundation to the core courses for the Master of Science in Administration (MSA) degree. The course is designed to acquaint students with research processes and tools used in selecting and developing a problem, project, or issue for analysis. An important component of this course is the literature review. Off-campus librarians conduct a bibliographic instruction session which can be described as an interactive module outlining the steps involved in the review of the literature.

This paper will examine the effectiveness of library user instruction to off-campus graduate students in an administration curriculum. A user evaluation survey was administered to students who have completed the MSA degree program. The findings of this survey were analyzed to determine the value of the library use component to successful completion of assignments in subsequent courses and the final integrative project.

BACKGROUND

Central Michigan University Extended Degree Programs (EDP), offers both undergraduate and graduate courses in approximately 55 centers throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico. Seven professional librarians work with off-campus students and faculty to provide reference and referral assistance, and bibliographic instruction.

The provision of library use instruction is one of the important functions of Off-Campus Library Services, (OCLS). As outlined in the Mission and Goals statement, OCLS librarians "Instruct users about systematic methods of identifying, retrieving, and using information; and develop and distribute instructional materials to facilitate the acquisition of information and research skills" (Central Michigan University 1988). During fiscal year 1991-1992, OCLS librarians provided library use instruction to 3,843 students in 150 classes program-wide.

CMU Extended Degree Programs supports OCLS in its effort to provide library instruction. The MSA 600 Model Course Outline lists within its Outline and Assignment Schedule Class Session 4 "Reviewing the literature..library resources and procedures by videotape instruction, librarian, course assignments, etc." (Central Michigan University 1990). The outline recommends to all instructors

teaching the course that a library component be provided which instructs students on topic selection and focus, search strategy, and conducting the literature review. In addition, the *CMU Library Guide* is listed as one of the required course textbooks.

The CMU MIMET librarians established two goals for the bibliographic instruction module for the MSA 600 course:

- To enable students to perform a review of the literature.
- To enable students to effectively use the CMU library services.

Based on these goals the primary objective of this session is the creation of the beginnings of a bibliography which can be used for a research project proposal developed in this course.

Students are required to attend a two and one half hour bibliographic instruction session and must usually make provisions if this is not possible. The class size ranges from 10-34 graduate students.

A variety of instructional methods are used for conducting these bibliographic instruction sessions. The librarians feel this variety is important to create and maintain student interest; to address the different learning styles students' possess; and to use the most effective method based on the material presented. The instructional methods used represent each of the three categories described by Svinicki and Schwartz (1988) as "The Direct-to-Indirect Continuum".

Lecture (direct instruction) is used to provide an overview of the literature review and to describe other basic principles. Most of the bibliographic instruction session involves active participation of the students. The librarian demonstrates or describes a procedure which is immediately followed by a task performed by the students (semi-direct instruction). The students, using their own topics simulate the steps involved in a review of the literature. They develop a problem statement, devise a search strategy, discuss the role of monographic sources, and use periodical indexes (brought to their class) to research their topic. The lecture and demonstrations are supplemented by handouts, an exercise sheet, and a guidebook (*CMU Library Guide*). Brainstorming and discussion are encouraged (indirect instruction) at various points in the session. The session usually ends with an overview of CMU's library services and how they can be utilized to complete course assignment for MSA 600 and subsequent courses.

While the librarians felt that this course and particularly the bibliographic instruction session would strengthen individual research abilities and skills, we wanted to determine if students shared this opinion. King and Ory (1981) state, "The most prevalent of the methodologies currently in use for evaluation of instruction programs is the questionnaire designed to elicit the opinions and perceptions of students and/or faculty concerning the value of instruction, the quality of presentation, the relevance of content, and attitudes toward the library." We developed a survey instrument with two objectives in mind:

- To examine the effectiveness of library user instruction of off-campus graduate student in an administration curriculum.

- To determine the value of the library use component to successful completion of assignments in subsequent courses and the final integrative project.

The survey consisted of 21 questions using the Likert Scale model. The first few questions were intended to obtain demographic information. Questions 3-7 focused on the number of years since the completion of the undergraduate degree, and experience with bibliographic instruction. Questions 8-11 assessed the impact of bibliographic instruction on the completion of course assignments. Questions 12-15 focused on the methods of presentation. Questions 16-17 addressed the effect of the BI presentation on student library skills. Question 18 asked how BI impacted the student's ability to use CMU's library services. Questions 19-21 were open-ended, providing the students an opportunity for comments.

The librarians surveyed all off-campus Michigan Metropolitan (MIMET) graduate students who had matriculated during the 1992 year. A cover letter, survey, op-scan sheet, and return postage paid envelope were mailed to the 583 graduates. Two hundred thirty-six completed surveys were returned. The data was analyzed by the CMU Computer Services Department using SPSS.

RESULTS

There were slightly more female respondents than male respondents, the majority of which were employed by corporations (profit/nonprofit, 80.8%). Respondents employed by government and educational institutions were almost evenly represented. The graduate area of concentration most represented was General Administration (78.4%), followed by Health Services Administration (15.3%), Human Resources Administration (5.1%), and Public Administration (.8%). It is interesting to note that the years since the completion of the undergraduate degree depicted two extremes. It had been under one year since 30.5% of the respondents had completed their undergraduate degree, while 48.3% indicated that it had been six years or more since the completion of this degree.

To our surprise, only 43.2% stated that they had received library instruction in their undergraduate program, while 54.2% stated that they had not. Respondents indicating that they had not received library instruction in their undergraduate program seemed to represent the group who had completed their undergraduate degree 6 years or more ago (62.5%). Are we to assume that library instruction is now emphasized more in the undergraduate curriculum, or that possibly undergraduate library instruction did not make a great impact on the respondents?

The questions included in the next part of the survey were posed to assess the impact of the library instruction presentation. We wanted to ascertain if the library instruction presentation was useful in the completion of assignments for the MSA 600 course, and also analyze the transferability of this knowledge to subsequent courses. One hundred thirty of the 236 respondents received a library instruction presentation in the MSA 600 course. Of this group, 97.6% "strongly agree" or "agree" that the library presentation should be a required component. As students progressed in the program, their perception of the usefulness of the library instruction presentation to the completion of course assignments increased.

USEFULNESS TO COMPLETION OF COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

(Strongly agree or agree)

- 91.3% MSA 600
- 94.4% Subsequent course assignments
- 96.1% MSA 685 (Final integrative project)

These statistics were supported by student comments such as... "this allowed me to effectively complete assignments throughout my graduate studies!"

Whereas students had strong favorable opinions about the usefulness of the library presentation in the completion of course assignments, students did not feel as strongly about their knowledge of specific library resources ("strongly agree" 36.5%, "agree" 50.8%), and confidence as a library user ("strongly agree" 30.2%, "agree" 45.2%) as a result of this presentation. It would be interesting to further investigate the reasons for these responses.

We also wanted to determine if the students felt that the methods of presentation were effective in the teaching of library skills. The majority (91.2%) "strongly agree" or "agree" that the methods were effective. When asked about two components of the presentation, in-class exercises and instructional materials, 73% felt that the in-class exercises helped them to understand the steps involved in a library search strategy, while 94.4% stated that they were able to use the instructional materials in the completion of MSA 600 and/or other course assignments. Of the two components, student comments seemed to favor the use of the instructional materials over the in-class exercises. Survey responses also indicated that the amount of time spent on the library presentation was "just right" however, several student comments suggested lengthening the presentation (e.g. a mandatory 3-4 hour session or a two day back-to-back presentation.)

Another way that we measured the effectiveness of library user instruction was to look at student ability to utilize library services. A majority of the students, (88.8%) felt that they were better able to utilize the CMU off-campus library services as a result of the library presentation. In effect, our MSA 600 goal of enabling students to effectively use the CMU off-campus library services was achieved.

We concluded our survey with open-ended questions so that we could better make suggestions for improvement by eliciting not only what was helpful, but also what was least helpful about the library presentation. We received an overwhelming number of comments including: the information was covered in undergraduate library instruction and therefore redundant; a request for an invitation to alumni to use the off-campus library services; format suggestions such as a two-stage presentation (novice and advanced), or a 10 minute video; and the provision of flashcards with critical use instructions. One student even suggested eliminating the MSA 600 course, but maintaining the library instruction presentation!

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

"Effectiveness is a measure of whether methods produce the change we desire. We try to find out how well our educational efforts are achieving the intended results" (King, 1983). Based on the results of our survey, library user instruction in MSA 600 was effective. Students understood the steps involved in a library search strategy and found the instructional materials valuable. Students were also better able to use the CMU Off-campus library services as a result of the presentation. Finally, survey responses demonstrated that the session was useful to the completion of course assignments.

We would like to build upon a program that was positively received by our off-campus students. Recommendations we propose include:

- To provide additional in-depth workshops or mini-sessions focusing on one specific aspect of library instruction(i.e., search strategy, using periodical indexes, the on-line card catalog) for students desiring further instruction.
- To incorporate computer technology in the library instruction presentations. Plans are already underway to use a data-display unit for on-site demonstrations of CMU's on-line catalog and databases mounted on CMU's mainframe.
- To conduct a survey of faculty perception of the value of library instruction to augment the findings of this study.

By surveying student attitudes towards library user instruction, we were able to gauge its effectiveness and its value in the completion of course assignments. In an effort to promote continuous improvement, library instruction should be evaluated, using one or more methods, at regular intervals.

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