

A Decade of Assessment at a Research-Extensive University Library Using LibQUAL+®

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Introduction¹

Since 1999, the Texas A&M University Libraries have used the LibQUAL+® survey to assess programs, collections, and services. As the major partner with ARL in the development of the protocol, the LibQUAL+® theory of service quality is used as the framework from which to assess the success of the libraries from three dimensions: affect of service, information control, and library as place. In an age of accountability for higher education worldwide, there is a growing need for effective means of longitudinal assessment useful in local contexts as well as cross-institutional comparisons for institutions of higher learning and their libraries. Stakeholders, including students, parents, taxpayers and the public at large all have an interest in society's libraries that become more expensive to operate each year, particularly in contrast to information readily and freely available.

LibQUAL+® History

In 1999 as a part of ARL's New Measures Initiative, researchers at Texas A&M University and ARL embarked on a pilot study to reground SERVQUAL, the premier total market survey for assessing service quality in the commercial sector, for the research library environment. With funding from a US Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant, the LibQUAL+® survey instrument was developed and a program at ARL was inaugurated to run the web-based survey on an annual basis. From a modest beginning with 13 ARL libraries in 2001, the survey has

now been taken by 1.2 million respondents from 1,200 libraries in 20 language versions throughout the world.

A number of goals have emerged as the foundation of the LibQUAL+® program:

- Foster a culture of excellence in providing library service
- Help libraries better understand user perceptions of library service quality
- Collect and interpret library user feedback systematically over time
- Provide libraries with comparable assessment information from peer institutions
- Identify best practices in library service
- Enhance library staff members' analytical skills for interpreting and acting on data

In its final version LibQUAL+® consists of 22 questions and a free-text comment box. This box secures open-ended comments from users regarding their concerns and suggestions about library services. A set of demographic questions, a set of satisfaction questions, and five outcomes questions are also included. The survey measures three dimensions of library service quality: affect of service, the emotive aspects of service provision; information control, the scope of content and means of access to content; and library as place, the physical characteristics of library spaces. Respondents answer each of the 22 questions on a nine-point scale from three perspectives: the minimum level of service; the perceived, current level of service; and the desired level of service. Perceived scores most often fall somewhere on a continuum anchored by a minimum level of service at the low end and a desired level of service at the high end. The spectrum of opinion is called the "Zone of Tolerance," a term borrowed from LibQUAL+®'s progenitor, SERVQUAL.²

LibQUAL+® at Texas A&M University Libraries

Texas A&M University has implemented LibQUAL+® each year since 2000. The survey has provided direction for local management decisions and for monitoring progress on those directions longitudinally across time. The survey has also been used to benchmark against peers, particularly other ARL libraries using LibQUAL+®. With nearly a decade of LibQUAL+® data, trends are emerging that are particularly useful. A few highlights of this trend data are discussed below by dimension and within dimension by user group using Texas

A&M as an example. The top priorities, areas of excellence, and areas of concern from the Spring 2010 LibQUAL+® survey results for undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Top Five Priorities, Areas of Excellence, and Areas of Concern by Texas A&M User Group, Spring 2010

Undergraduates

Top Five Priorities

- AS-3 Employees who are consistently courteous
- AS-5 Employees who have the knowledge to answer user questions
- IC-5 Modern equipment that lets me easily access needed information
- LP-3 A comfortable and inviting location
- LP-4 A getaway for study, learning, or research

Top Five Areas of Excellence

- AS-3 Employees who are consistently courteous
- AS-5 Employees who have the knowledge to answer user questions
- AS-6 Employees who deal with users in a caring fashion
- AS-8 Willingness to help users
- IC-5 Modern equipment that lets me easily access needed information

Top Five Areas of Concern

- LP-3 A comfortable and inviting location
- Other LibQUAL+® responses ranked 50% or better within each Zone of Tolerance

Graduate Students

Top Five Priorities

- IC-1 Making electronic resources accessible from my home or office
- IC-2 A library website enabling me to locate information on my own
- IC-5 Modern equipment that lets me easily access needed information
- IC-6 Easy-to-use access tools that allow me to find things on my own
- IC-8 Print and/or electronic journal collections I require for my work

Top Five Areas of Excellence

- AS-3 Employees who are consistently courteous
- AS-4 Readiness to respond to users' questions
- AS-5 Employees who have the knowledge to answer user questions
- AS-6 Employees who deal with users in a caring fashion
- AS-8 Willingness to help users

Top Five Areas of Concern

- IC-1 Making electronic resources accessible from my home or office
- IC-2 A library website enabling me to locate information on my own
- IC-4 The electronic information resources I need
- IC-6 Easy-to-use access tools that allow me to find things on my own
- IC-8 Print and/or electronic journal collections I require for my work

Faculty

Top Five Priorities

- IC-1 Making electronic resources accessible from my home or office
- IC-2 A library website enabling me to locate information on my own
- IC-4 The electronic information resources I need
- IC-6 Easy-to-use access tools that allow me to find things on my own
- IC-8 Print and/or electronic journal collections I require for my work

Top Five Areas of Excellence

- AS-3 Employees who are consistently courteous
- AS-4 Readiness to respond to users' questions
- AS-6 Employees who deal with users in a caring fashion
- AS-8 Willingness to help users
- IC-4 The electronic information resources I need (tied with IC-8)
- IC-8 Print and/or electronic journal collections I require for my work (tied with IC-4)

Top Five Areas of Concern

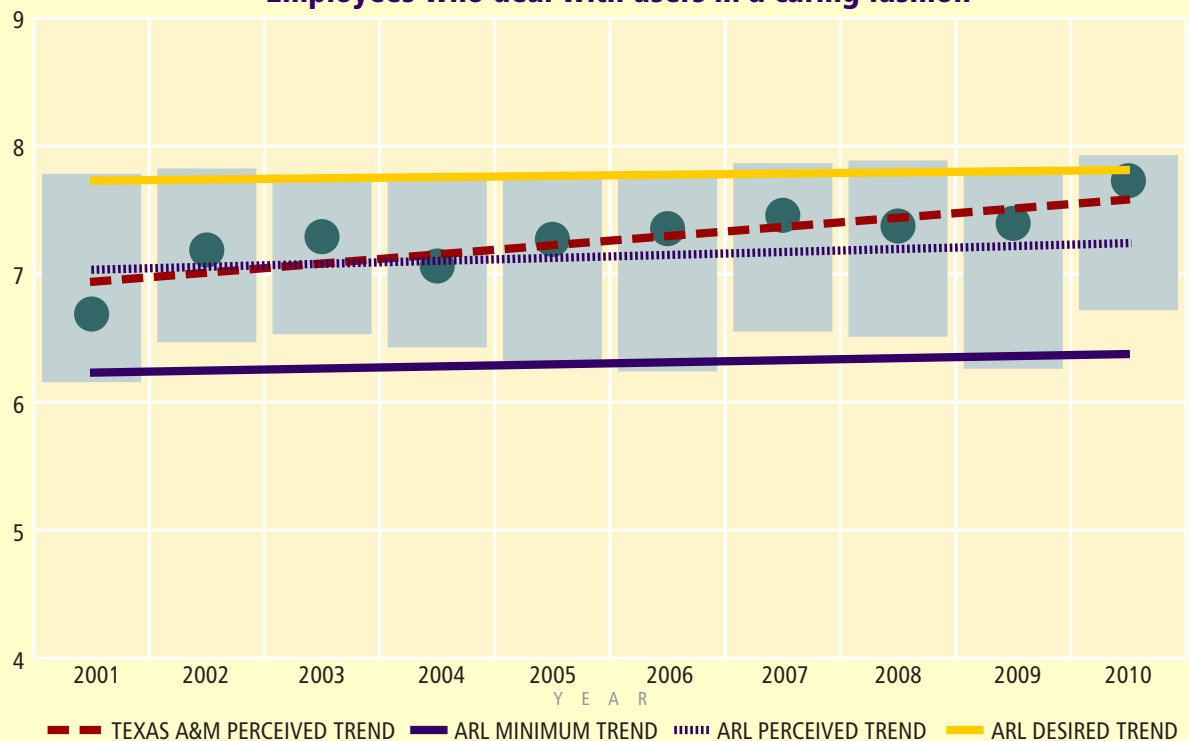
- IC-1 Making electronic resources accessible from my home or office
- IC-2 A library website enabling me to locate information on my own
- IC-4 The electronic information resources I need
- IC-6 Easy-to-use access tools that allow me to find things on my own
- IC-8 Print and/or electronic journal collections I require for my work

Key: "AS" = Affect of Service "IC" = Information Control "LP" = Library as Place

Affect of Service

The Affect of Service dimension asks respondents to rate their interactions with library staff, in particular, about their general helpfulness and competence. One statement, "Employees who deal with users in a caring fashion," is an issue of high salience for graduate students as indicated by high scores in both desired and minimum expectations (see Figure 1). Relatively speaking the Zone of

Figure 1. Graduate student responses to item AS-6, "Employees who deal with users in a caring fashion"



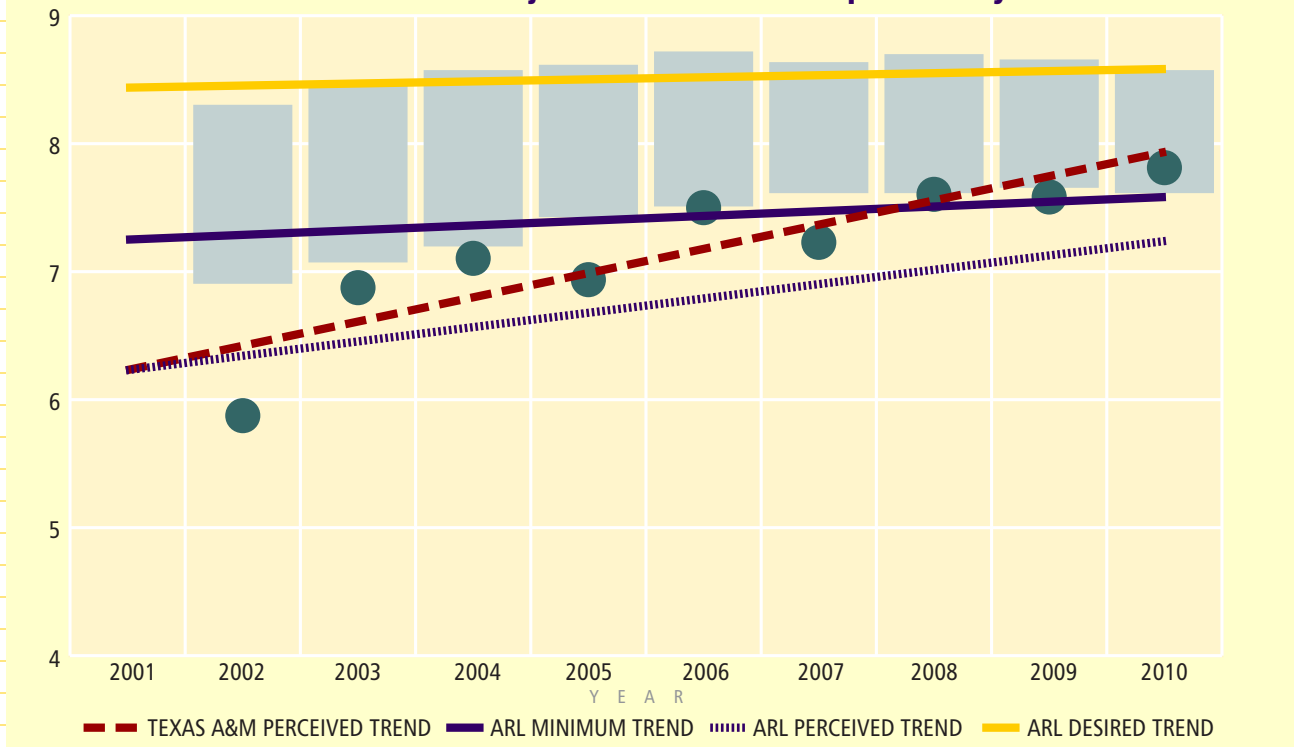
Tolerance bar ranging from 6.7 to 7.9 is high on the graph. Perceptions of caring service at Texas A&M are generally higher than those at other ARL institutions.

Steps Taken to Improve Affect of Service Scores

In order to improve LibQUAL+® scores in the Affect of Service dimension, focus groups were held to better understand what interventions users wanted. In particular, users desired increased hours of library services. As a result of suggestions from LibQUAL+® respondents, the West Campus Library, and shortly thereafter the Library Annex, was opened 24 hours/5 days a week. All libraries began opening earlier on weekends and hours were further expanded in the Cushing Library and the Medical Sciences Library. Texas A&M Libraries thus increased their ranking to third in their designated aspirational peer group in terms of open hours. Interlibrary Loan (ILS), Circulation, and Reference services were merged to a single service point. Library personnel were directed to staff expanded service hours for ILS and the popular "Get It For Me" service through which users can request articles online if e-versions are not readily available. If owned in print,

the journal articles are scanned and delivered through e-mail. If not owned by the library either in print or licensed in digital form, the article is requested through ILS and delivered electronically to the user. Liaison services to colleges were enhanced and in some instances office hours for librarians were established in departments. Virtual reference services were expanded and use of virtual services has increased substantially over time. A customer service program was crafted for the libraries that included on-site training provided by the Disney Institute.

Figure 2. Faculty responses to item IC-8, "Print and/or electronic journal collections I require for my work"



Information Control

The LibQUAL+® Information Control dimension includes questions that address content scope, and ease of access. Figure 2 shows the faculty response to the item, "Print and/or electronic journal collections I require for my work." As shown in Table 1, this question appeared on the Texas A&M faculty's list of top priorities, areas of excellence, and areas of concern. The trend for ARL generally is slowly upwards over time for desired and minimum scores while perceived scores are rising more rapidly. The comparative, even more aggressive, upward trend for the Texas A&M data in perception scores is noteworthy. Faculty users are recognizing the investments made in the journal collections over time.

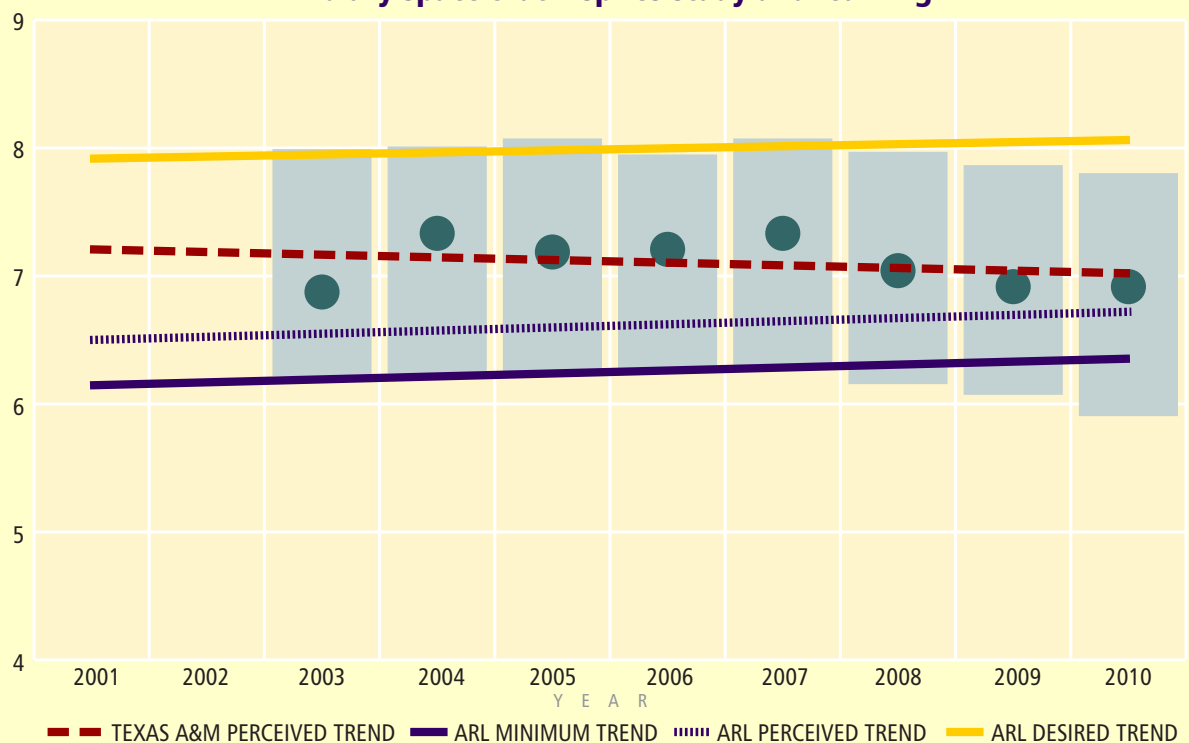
Steps Taken to Improve Information Control Scores

LibQUAL+® results have guided collection development decisions at Texas A&M University over the past decade. Digital format is preferred. Twice within the past 10 years, the libraries’ websites have been redone. To test the usability of the websites, ongoing analyses are undertaken. The budget for print serials has dropped while that for electronic serials has risen substantially over the past decade. Texas A&M is ranked fifth among ARL libraries in serials expenditures.

Library as Place

The third LibQUAL+® dimension, Library as Place, addresses user desires for convenient and inviting physical surroundings while working. Generally speaking this dimension receives lower overall desired scores than the other two dimensions. Nonetheless, Library as Place is fundamental to library service quality from a user-centric perspective. Again, Texas A&M data can be used to show how LibQUAL+® scores have changed over the past decade and how this information has been used to drive management decisions. Undergraduate response to “Library space that inspires study and learning” shows that, even

Figure 3. Undergraduate responses to item LP-1, “Library space that inspires study and learning”



though Texas A&M ratings are higher than the average ARL scores, they are experiencing a slight downward trend (see Figure 3).

Steps Taken to Improve Library as Place Scores

Many steps have been taken in listening to users to improve their perceptions of the Texas A&M Libraries in terms of physical spaces and access. Opening hours have been changed significantly in that several libraries are now open 24 hours/5 days a week. Libraries are now open Sunday mornings as requested by students. Accommodations for different learning spaces are being made. “Ninja” quiet spaces are being created in some areas of the library. Quiet reading rooms, enclosed group-study spaces, and quiet open group-study facilities are now also available. One trend seen in LibQUAL+® comments has been the request for additional electrical outlets to facilitate use of personal laptops and other electronic equipment. An Information Commons with flexible furniture, state of the art technology, soft seating, and many well-placed outlets has also been introduced.³ The libraries have collaborated with the university’s Information Technology Department to increase the number of computers and printers in the libraries. In addition, over 150 laptop and netbooks are available for checkout. Another collaboration, this time with the University of Texas System, to provide off-site storage of library materials has enabled additional space to be opened for studying and teaching spaces.

Conclusion

LibQUAL+® provides important management information for decision making, especially when considered over time. Trend data from the Texas A&M University Libraries indicate significant changes in users’ desired, perceived, and minimum expectations over the past decade. LibQUAL+® data allows administrators to trace the results of interventions based upon earlier data. Equally as important desired and minimum data provide leadership with information on evolving user expectations for library service. The LibQUAL+® tool is making key contributions not only for ARL member libraries but also for libraries across the globe.

There are several articles describing other libraries’ experiences using LibQUAL+® and LibQUAL+® Lite in this issue of *RLI*.

- ¹ This paper is an updated and modified version of a paper originally presented as: Colleen Cook, "Practical Lessons Drawn from 10 Years of Library Service Quality in a Research Library" (presented at the 17th Greek Academic Libraries Conference, Ioannina, Greece, September 24, 2008).
- ² Colleen Cook, "A Mixed-Methods Approach to the Identification and Measurement of Academic Library Service Quality Constructs: LibQUAL+™" (PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 2001); Colleen Cook and Fred M. Heath, "Users' Perceptions of Library Service Quality: A LibQUAL+™ Qualitative Study," *Library Trends* 49 (2001): 548–584; Colleen Cook and Bruce Thompson, "Psychometric Properties of Scores from the Web-Based LibQUAL+ Study of Perceptions of Library Service Quality," *Library Trends* 49 (2001): 585–604; Martha Kyrillidou, "Item Sampling in Service Quality Assessment Surveys to Improve Response Rates and Reduce Respondent Burden: The 'LibQUAL+® Lite' Randomized Control Trial (RCT)" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009), https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/14570/Kyrillidou_Martha.pdf?sequence=3; Bruce Thompson, Martha Kyrillidou, and Colleen Cook, "Does Using Item Sampling Methods in Library Service Quality Assessment Compromise Data Integrity?: A LibQUAL+® Lite Study" (Paper presented at the Second Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries (QQML 2010) International Conference, Chania, Crete, Greece, May 25–28, 2010), http://libqual.org/documents/LibQual/publications/lq_gr_1.pdf.
- ³ For a PowerPoint presentation demonstrating many of the space improvements with pictures and additional evidence, see: Colleen Cook, "Practical Lessons Drawn from 10 Years of Library Service Quality in a Research Library" (presented at American Library Association Midwinter Meeting, Boston, January 18, 2010), <http://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/ColleenCook2010jan.ppt>; and "Strategic Elements of LibQUAL+® at Texas A&M University" (presented at "LibQUAL+® and Beyond: Using Results Effectively" workshop, Glasgow, Scotland, May 24, 2010), http://www.libqual.org/documents/LibQual/publications/Cook_StrategicElements.pptx.

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