Campus Disconnect: Academic Libraries and the Information Needs, Skills, and Behaviors of Non-Teaching University Staff

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Introduction

The mandate of most academic libraries includes some variation on a commitment to serve the institution's "students, faculty, and staff," and most do an admirable job of meeting the needs of students and faculty. However, closer examination of academic library web sites[1] and discussion with academic librarians reveals that few make a targeted effort to reach non-teaching staff at their institution. Many of these non-teaching staff work in information-intensive positions and wield significant influence on campus. Some play a major role in advising students on information and other needs, while others are high-level administrators who make significant decisions that affect the direction of the institution as a whole and, by extension, the library. It is mystifying then that this population has been under-served (and in most cases unserved all together) by the libraries in their institutions. They seem to have fallen between the cracks of academic libraries, with their focus on faculty and students, and special libraries, with their focus on worker information needs in non-academic institutions. This paper reports the results of a study that explored the information needs, skills, and behaviors of non-teaching university staff and the role of the academic library in addressing these needs.

Literature Review

Academic librarians and researchers in other fields have devoted considerable attention to the information needs and information-seeking skills and behaviors of faculty and students in postsecondary institutions.[2] Special librarians (those working in corporate, law, health, government libraries) have focused on researching the information habits of the professionals (lawyers, physicians, executives, etc.) working in their institutions.[3] There has, however, been little research on the information needs of non-teaching staff at academic institutions, a group that has fallen between the cracks of these two (academic and special) library fields of study. The few related studies that have been published are of limited usefulness for a variety of reasons: they are dated because, like Celone's 1988 article,[4] they were written prior to the ubiquitous computer technology that permeates today's workplace; they suggest enhancing library service to this group without any data collection to support their recommendation;[5] they are more limited in scope than the proposed study, focusing on a specific subgroup like Mularski's 1988 article on clerical staff[6] and Watson's 1989 focus on academic administrators;[7] or they report on "faculty and staff" as a homogenous group

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that makes it difficult to extract data on non-teaching staff, as we see in Washington-Hoagland's 2002 article.[8] The issue becomes even more pressing when one considers that these staff constitute an increasingly large portion of postsecondary employees. Recent statistics released by the U.S. Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics indicate that in 2006 the number of administrative positions in higher education outnumbered faculty positions for the first time.[9] Comprehensive Canadian numbers are not readily available but numbers from Ontario, Canada's most populous province, indicate that Canada is following a similar trend.[10]

Methodology

The research study was conducted during November and December 2008 at the University of Regina, a public university in Saskatchewan, Canada, that offers undergraduate and graduate programs to approximately 11,500 full and part-time students. The University Library is housed in a single campus location and staffed by seventeen librarians/archivists (including the University Librarian and one Associate Librarian), forty-two permanent support staff, and numerous student assistants. (Three small libraries are housed in federated colleges located on the campus, but both the staff of these colleges and their libraries are beyond the scope of this study). The Library operates under a liaison model, with a librarian assigned to each academic subject area. No liaison librarians are assigned to non-teaching areas and no targeted efforts have been made to communicate with or serve non-teaching staff, although any who seek it do of course have access to all services, including print/electronic collections, reference service, etc.

The University's Human Resources Department advised that there are 778 staff members who are either out of scope/executive (n=109), or belong to a union of administrative/professional/technical staff (n=213), or a union representing clerical/support staff (n=456). They were unable to furnish a list of staff meeting the study criteria in the necessary timeframe, so the researcher and assistant generated a list from multiple sources, including a current campus phonebook, current union seniority lists, and staff listings on the University web site. Our final list contained 768 staff members, fairly close to the number provided by Human Resources, and was therefore quite comprehensive. Library staff names were then removed from the distribution list on the basis that their library knowledge and experience would be substantially different from that of other campus employees and could therefore skew results.

The study consisted of two parts: an online survey and one-on-one follow-up interviews. The online survey was anonymous, could be completed in ten to fifteen minutes, and included an opportunity to enter a draw for an incentive prize. The questions on the survey fell into four general categories: information needs, library knowledge and use, demographic questions, and a separate block of questions for those providing direct student services, asking about library referral practices. The survey was set up in the online survey tool SurveyMonkey and was then pre-tested in two stages: first, a small group of library staff provided feedback, and then a few members of the test population were invited to complete the survey and share any questions or concerns. Minor adjustments and clarifications were made as a result of this feedback. The researcher then used campus e-mail to send an invitation to participate (which included the link to the survey) to the target population. A reminder message was sent after one week, and the survey closed one week later, giving respondents a two week window in which to complete the survey.

The second part of the survey was a follow-up interview. Survey respondents were asked to provide their name and contact information if they would be willing to participate in an interview. Interviewees were selected from those who agreed to participate, with the goal of interviewing employees from a broad range of work areas and position levels. The number of interviewees was left open, to be determined by resource limitations (funding for research assistant, time limitations, etc.), to a maximum of twenty. Interviews were scheduled for twenty minute timeslots and were conducted and recorded by the researcher, to later be transcribed by the research assistant. The open-ended questions were designed to further probe staff information needs and their perceptions of the role the library could or should play in meeting these needs. The entire project (survey and interviews) was approved by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board.
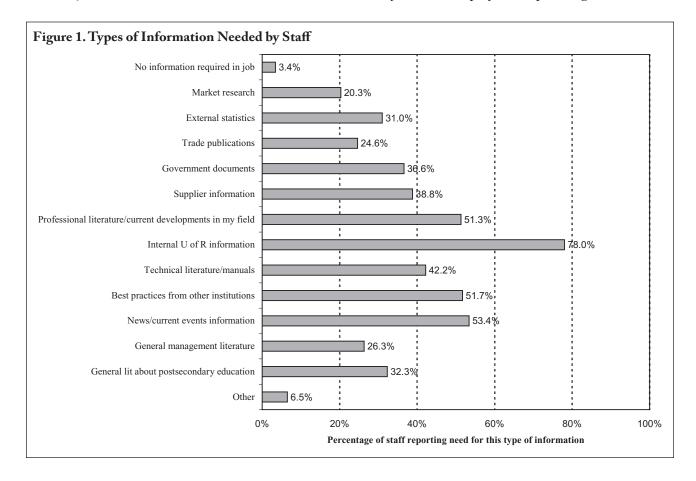
Results and Discussion

Ultimately, 638 staff received and opened either or both of the initial invitation to participate or the reminder e-

mail (our campus e-mail system allows users to see who has opened their message). Reasons for the disparity between the 768 staff initially identified and the 638 who received and opened the message are explained by a number of factors, including the exclusion of library workers, campus employees unavailable for the duration of the study (typically vacation/parental/sick/other leave), those who had moved to an ineligible position or very recently left the employ of the University, and those (primarily custodial staff) who do not have ready access to a computer to check their e-mail regularly. 232 surveys were completed, for a response rate of 35.4%. Forty-three staff volunteered to participate in the interviews, and available resources supported interviews with twelve staff from a wide range of positions.

The survey's first four questions explored staff information needs, with the first question asking staff what types of information they need when performing their job and inviting them to select all that apply. Only 3.4% of respondents indicated that they "didn't need any information in job," confirming this study's assumption that the vast majority of non-teaching university staff have substantial information needs

in their positions. While "internal University of Regina information" was most commonly needed (78%), significant numbers of staff identified types of information that are the traditional focus of academic libraries, including "government documents" (36.6%), "professional literature in my field" (51.3%), "general management literature" (26.3%), and "general literature about postsecondary education" (32.3%).

As expected, the type of information needed varied considerably depending on the type/level of the individual's position. Those in administrative and managerial positions reported needing many more types of information than those in clerical/secretarial and student services positions. The types of information sought varied widely too; for example, managerial staff needed (understandably) more "general management literature" (60%) and "professional literature/current developments in my field" (71.4%), whereas those in technical/paraprofessional positions were much more interested in technical manuals (87.5%) than any of the other information sources.

The second question asked staff to think about a major decision, project, or planning situation that

Figure 1. Types of Information Needed by Staff

Percentage of staff reporting need for this type of information

Category	Percentage
No information required in job	3.4%
Market research	20.3%
External statistics	31.0%
Trade publications	24.6%
Government documents	36.6%
Supplier information	38.8%
Professional literature/current developments in my field	51.3%
Internal U of R information	78.0%
Technical literature/manuals	42.2%
Best practices from other institutions	51.7%
News/current events information	53.4%
General management literature	26.3%
General lit about postsecondary education	32.3%
Other	6.5%

has arisen in their workplace in the past six months and to identify all the sources that they used to obtain information in this instance. "Internet search using search engine like Google, Yahoo etc" was the most common response (81%) and "Other University of Regina employees/colleagues (72%) ranked second. Interestingly, the library-related options ranked lowest among the twenty possible answers, with 14.5% selecting "print books, journals, newspapers, reports, etc from the University of Regina Library," 15.5% selecting "electronic books, journals, newspapers, reports, etc from the University of Regina Library," 12.5% selecting "databases available through the University Library," and a startlingly low 5% selecting "librarian/library staff member." Clearly, the University Library is barely on the radar of these staff members, despite their substantial information needs.
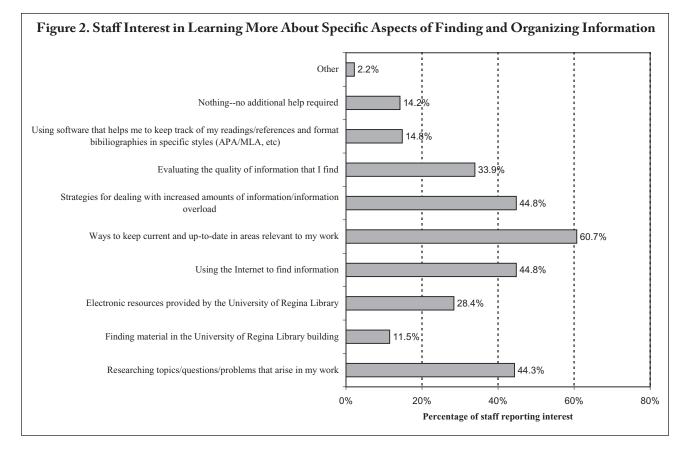
There was an interesting correlation between years of service and use of library tools (print/electronic books & journals, databases, library staff), with those having less than ten years of service more likely to use these sources. Our library, like many academic libraries, focuses heavily on library instruction for students and one theory is that these recent graduates are applying skills learned during the course of their studies to the workplace. This hypothesis was further supported during the interviews, when newer staff mentioned trying to apply library knowledge learned in their studies to the workplace, with varying degrees of success (depending on length of time since graduation and the extent of the difference between their area of study and their current position). Another interesting finding was that there was no correlation between age of respondent and preference for print or electronic information sources—older staff use technology as much, and in some cases more, than younger staff.

The next question asked staff about what criteria are most important when using information sources. Accuracy was consistently rated as very important (83.8% of respondents), while cost and speed at which information can be obtained were very important to only 29.8% and 49.2% of staff, respectively. Currency of information (very important to 69.6%) and ease of access/convenience (very important to 60.7%) fell in the middle. This finding may have important implications for how academic libraries market their resources and services to staff. While students typically respond well to free, fast, and convenient access, staff

responses seem to indicate that emphasis on the accuracy and quality of information that we provide may be a more meaningful message for this audience.

The focus of the questions then shifted from past practice to future preferences, asking, "When it comes to knowing more about finding and organizing information for work-related purposes, what would you like to know more about?" Only 14.2% selected "nothing—no help required," with the rest of the respondents indicating an interest in many of the instructional services that fall under the purview of academic libraries. Staff are clearly looking for help dealing with the volume of information in their lives: 60.7% want to know more about ways to keep current and up-to-date in areas relevant to their work, and 44.8% want strategies for dealing with increased amounts of information/information overload. Electronic information garnered more interest than print, with 44.8% wanting to know more about using the Internet to find information and 28.4% interested in learning more about the library's electronic resources (this compares to 11.5% interested in knowing more about finding print material in the library). Figure 2 shows the full results.

Interview participants echoed the interest in current awareness and "keeping up" strategies that emerged in the online survey. One interviewee highlighted her need for a strategy to keep current, saying, "otherwise you are only researching what you know about and you are missing stuff just because it is new." Others echoed this with remarks like, "I know there is relevant research out there but I'm not clicked in to all of it, just bits and pieces."

41.8% of respondents indicated that they have used the library or its electronic resources in the past two years. In keeping with responses to the second question, those with fewer years of service (less than twenty in this case) were more likely to have used the library in this time frame. Those in administrative and managerial jobs, who were shown in a previous question to have more information needs, were also much more likely to have used the library's print and electronic resources. Among those respondents who have used the library in this time frame, the most common uses were visiting the library in person (65.9% do this at least several times a year) and using an office computer to find electronic resources (80.6% do this at least several times a year). Using telephone, e-mail or instant messaging to communicate with library staff

Figure 2. Staff Interest in Learning More About Specific Aspects of Finding and Organizing Information

was much less frequent, with two- thirds of staff indicating that they do this less than once a year.

When those who rarely or never use the library were asked why this is the case, they most frequently selected "my work does not require the use of library materials" (47.8%) and "I get all the information I need on the Internet" (46.6%). "Library hours are inconvenient," "library search systems are too difficult to use," and "I do not have the proper equipment to access the library's electronic resources" were seldom or never chosen as answers. Very few chose "the University of Regina Library does not have the information I need," indicating that they feel current collections are sufficient to meet most of their information needs. Staff in clerical/secretarial and technical/ paraprofessional jobs were much more likely to select "my work does not require the use of library materials" than those in administrative and managerial positions. Interestingly, 13.5% of respondents selected "other (please specify)" and their comments are remarkably consistent in expressing the sentiment that the idea had simply never occurred to them, as in, "I had forgotten it was an option," and, "Never thought of using the library." They also conveyed uncertainty about

what types or resources might be available: "I think it comes down to an ignorance of how the library can help me in my administrative role," and, "don't know what is available there relative to my role and job function." This was also a theme in the interviews, with many respondents echoing the comment that, "I need to become familiar with what you do provide and find out how I can use it."
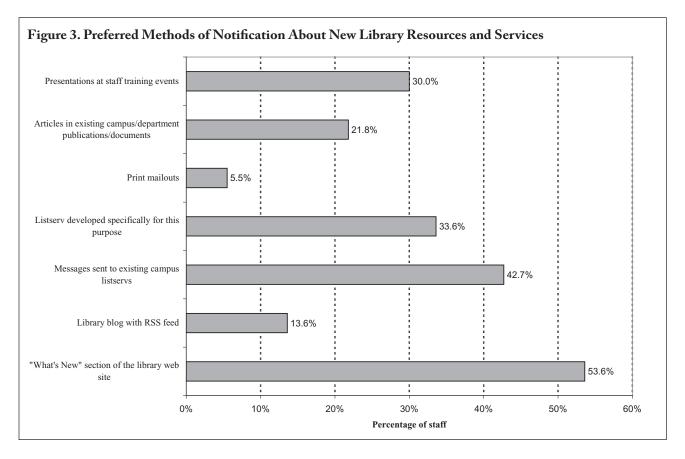
Survey respondents were also asked about their awareness and past use of, and future interest in, specific library services. Half to two-thirds of staff were aware of key services (e-mail reference, chat/instant messaging reference, instruction sessions, one-on-one consultations with library staff) but few had used any of these themselves. However, when asked if they were interested in using these in the future, 43% expressed an interest in e-mail and chat reference assistance. It seems logical that awareness of a service and an interest in using it would result in use of that service, but that does not appear to be the case.

The interviews provided further insight into why awareness and use of a service may not have translated into past use. Staff overwhelmingly indicated a preference for a specific and assigned contact person (along

the lines of the liaison librarian program for academic departments). One expressly asked for a model similar to that used for academic departments, saying, "I know that in terms of how the library is set up with its services to different faculties, for instance, they have people who are subject experts and it seems to me that if there is someone who is an expert in topics related to a specific work area, that would be the way to go." Another suggested "a designated person working with staff in general at the U of R because all of us in different areas do reports, do stuff like that, so we do need information." Staff provided these and more models for how the service could work, but their reasoning was always the same: "I prefer a go-to person. You can build a rapport with the person. You don't have to give all the background information every time you need help." This unanimity among responses indicates that designating a contact person may be an important step in serving non-teaching staff.

The next few questions attempted to gauge staff interest in and preferred methods for learning more about library resources. Nearly two-thirds of staff indicated that they would be interested in keeping abreast of new library resources that might be helpful

in meeting the requirements of their jobs. Respondents in student services positions were much less interested in this (only 33.3%) than those in other job categories (where the range was 58-71%). The "What's New' section of the library web site" (53.6%), "messages sent to existing campus listservs" (42.7%), and "listserv developed specifically for this purpose" (33.6%) were the preferred methods of receiving this information, with print mailouts (5.5%) and, surprisingly given the recent emphasis on Web 2.0 tools, "library blog with RSS feed" (13.6%) among the least popular options.

There was also considerable interest (72.2% of respondents) in receiving instruction or training on how to use the resources and services available from the library. There was a sharp split, with those having less than twenty years of service much more interested than those who had been with the University longer. Their preferred ways of receiving this instruction were "online tutorials" (60%), "library session as part of staff training event" (55%), and "asking library staff for help when needed" (43.8%). The preference for online tutorials increased with respondent age, with almost three-quarters of those in the 56-65 age group

Figure 3. Preferred Methods of Notification About New Library Resources and Services

Method	Percentage of staff
Presentations at staff training events	30.0%
Articles in existing campus/department publications/documents	21.8%
Print mailouts	5.5%
Listserv developed specifically for this purpose	33.6%
Messages sent to existing campus listservs	42.7%
Library blog with RSS feed	13.6%
"What's New" section of the library web site	53.6%

indicating a preference for this learning method, providing further evidence that we have passed the era when there was a correlation between age and technology adoption.

Interviewees offered additional insight into the kind of training that they would most value. They were almost unanimous in expressing a desire for hands-on training that would give them practical skills and suggestions that they could use immediately. They also envisioned the training as an introduction to the possibilities available at the library, with comments like, "that would make me aware of what kinds of things are available at the library" and, "after the training I would then know enough to go the library to get some advice to solve my problem." Staff suggested that multiple short sessions, with each covering a different topic, would be more valuable and easier to attend then a single half or full day session. They also had multiple suggestions for tying these sessions into existing events, such as staff meetings or other staff educational seminars, or meetings of their staff association or union.

There were two questions which, when their answers are taken in concert, clearly demonstrate the gap between the importance that the employees currently place on the library and their perceptions of the library's potential importance in meeting their information needs. When asked about the importance of the library in meeting the requirements of their job, the majority of respondents (45%) selected "neutral," while 18.9% selected "important" or "very important," and 35.1% selected "not important" or "completely irrelevant." These responses are disappointing, but the next question indicates that more than half of respondents would like to see the library play a larger role in helping them meet the information requirements of their position. There is clearly unmet need here and receptiveness to the library expanding its role in meeting it. The ball, it seems, is in the library's court.

The final few questions on the survey deviated slightly from the direction of the other questions. Rather than focusing exclusively on staff information needs, they sought input on the library referral practices of student services staff and asked how the library can better support the work these staff do with students. The primary focus was the same in that the goal was to understand how the library could support staff in their work but broadened out a bit beyond the previous focus on information seeking. These staff have regular interaction with students in different capacities than library workers do, and the opportunity to gain their insight into ways that the library can work with them to better serve students while also helping them in their jobs was too good to miss.

The student services questions were posed only to those who indicated that they have regular interaction with students in an advisory capacity (31% of respondents). They were asked if they had, in the past six months, suggested to a student that he/she visit or consult the library. 53.8% indicated that they had, and they most commonly recommended that students "seek help from library staff" (71.4%), "access electronic materials" (60.7%) or "print materials" (42.9%). It is interesting that these staff frequently suggest that students seek help from library staff, yet it is one of the library behaviors that they engage in most infrequently themselves. 39.2% of respondents indicated that they felt that the library could collaborate with them or their work area to better serve students. Many offered specific suggestions when given the opportunity, and most of these fell into one of two broad categories. The first was to create online guides to resources for specific, but not traditional academic, areas (for example, career resources, aboriginal student resources, English as a second language support, etc). The second was to better publicize and promote library services/resources to the staff that support students. This was reiterated in the interviews, as when one student services staff member said, "the more knowledgeable I become the more I can share that with the people I deal with … I suspect that I could be quite useful to you if I made a point to get to know the library more."

Most interviewees indicated that having additional support and guidance in meeting the information requirements of their position would have an impact on the quality of their working life. Many commented on the time-savings that this would offer, and one staff member went on to say: "If support was available, I think I would be making an attempt to learn a lot more about many other things that I don't even try because I don't have the time, and so I think it would be an amazingly wonderful service and I know I would use it." Others felt that it would have a significant impact on their stress levels if they had support in this area, as when one reported that, "it would reduce my stress to be more fluent in finding information." Another staff member, who gives a lot of

presentations to student groups, noted that, "I would feel more authoritative and more credible. Even when I put together Powerpoint presentations, I try to cite and put references at the end because it gives more confidence in what I am saying and credibility among students." One summarized many responses when she said, "there is always room for improvement in any job you have."

Conclusion

This study confirms that non-teaching university staff have significant information needs and are receptive to library help in meeting these needs. Enhancement of service to this group has the potential to be mutually beneficial to both the staff members and the library. Staff would benefit from the considerable resources and expertise available in the library, and the library would benefit from a better campus understanding of its potential, particularly among those who work directly with students and those in senior administrative positions who are in a position to influence the library's fortunes. Even the process of conducting this study increased awareness and got people thinking about the potential role of the library in meeting the needs of non-teaching staff.

Initial steps in developing a service for this group could likely be undertaken by leveraging existing resources and piloting with a small number of work areas to gain a better understanding of resource implications. Universities worldwide have a significant cadre of non-teaching staff and it will be interesting to see the variety of services and models that emerge if libraries start targeting services to this growing and influential component of their campus staff.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The author of the present study conducted a scan of a random sample of the library and human resources web sites of ARL member institutions to assess current offerings to non-teaching staff. The results were presented in the poster "How 'Special' is your Academic Library? Library Services to Campus Administrative and Support Staff," at the 2007 American Library Association Annual Conference in Washington, DC.

2. Here are just a few of the many articles focusing on students and faculty: Karen L. Curtis, Ann C. Weller, and Julie M. Hurd, "Information-Seeking Behavior of Health Sciences Faculty: The Impact of New Information Technologies," *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 85, no. 4 (1997): 402-410; Babakisi T. Fidzani, "Information Needs and Information-Seeking Behaviour of Graduate Students at the University of Botswana," *Library Review* 47, no. 7 (1998): 329-340; Bonnie Reed and Donald R. Tanner, " Information Needs and Library Services for the Fine Arts Faculty," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 27, no. 3 (2001): 229-233.

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