

Small group discussion report

An analysis and summary

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Introduction:

As the ULS User Services Redesign Project gets underway, it is important to meet with individuals in ULS public and collection services departments and gather their views on where they see the public and collections services now and how they envision them changing in the future.

Eighteen members representing various departments of ULS public and collections services were invited; sixteen individuals accepted. A total of three different sessions were held on the week of September 12th – 16th.

Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez and Heidi Card served as note takers during the sessions, while Karen Calhoun acted as a moderator for conversation. Based on their notes, Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez and Heidi Card analysed the conversations around pre-formulated questions asked by Karen Calhoun. The questions were designed to encourage group discussion. Following the sessions, Elvia and Heidi categorized some participant observations as “highly representative” based on the frequency of same or similar themes expressed by members of the three groups. They also identified some “unique or outlying” statements of significance. They then compiled this summary report of the group discussions, which presents the common themes and several of the unique ideas or commentary. The report also includes a number of verbatim comments from the three sessions.

Highly Representative Observations: *Communication Issues*

The most frequent theme of the discussions was insufficient communication, experienced both internally within the University Library System and externally (i.e. with faculty and the University community at large).

Inclusion in “top down” decisions

Many group members voiced their opinions about their lack of involvement in policy or strategic decisions. Many felt changes come from a “top-down” structure, where administration makes decisions that directly affect them without providing for a more inclusive or transparent forum to express their views or opinions on policy or strategic direction. The recent termination of ULS programs and services, such as the reference Internship and the closing of departmental libraries were cited as examples of how ULS Administration could have better communicated the changes, in addition to reasons why these services would no longer be supported.

Some expressed a desire to have a proactive role in planning and ULS initiatives for change; participating in such initiatives, some commented, would make them feel like they are a part of a team that is making improvements to better their services.

“I feel like there are a lot of policies and procedures that we don’t know about... my department doesn’t go to council meetings. There are a lot of things that we are not involved in so we don’t know about them... when policies change, they affect us too, but we don’t always know about it.”

“I don’t feel like there are more opportunities to influence the course [of ULS]. I think I work with a lot of people who have a lot of great ideas but there are not a lot of opportunities to pursue those.”

“There are a lot of things that we get the response and frustration from users all the time. But we are not seen as a resource in understanding what users need.”

Some feel this lack of inclusion contributes to morale issues in the work place; one or two wondered whether their input is seriously encouraged or, when given, taken seriously.

Changes to ULS Web Pages

Various group members provided first-hand accounts of experiencing unforeseen changes in the webpage in the midst of instructing a class. They wished for a better system for communicating and coordinating changes to web pages.

Faculty and University at large

Various group members reflected on the general decline in faculty-librarian interaction in most recent years.

Some acknowledged the lack of structural support required to further develop their relationships with faculty.

Better integration with the university at large (i.e. better communication with Student Affairs, Residential Life, and CourseWeb) were all examples mentioned as ways to improve campus communication. Moreover, all three groups observed that the Writing Center is one of the most successfully used programs by students.

Highly Representative Observations: *Web Troubleshooting*

Several group members expressed frustration with delays or difficulties addressing troubleshooting issues with the ULS web site. Others reported contacting or directing patrons to contact Web Services to resolve issues and receiving

“I’ll be teaching a class and the website would all of a sudden have changed and that’s how I find out about it. At that point, I have no idea what to expect.”

“I used to have a lot of contact with faculty and liaisons. I still try to do it but I do not have any faculty contacting me for much... they have deserted us and they are our link to the students.”

“If there is going to be larger change occurring, you really need to have an open line of communication from wherever the change is being implemented down to...part of the idea of adapting change is knowing what is coming in and having a sense of being able to adjust. And I don’t know if that has always been the case here.”

“I tell users to contact ULS all the time, but their input or their problems are not listened to either. And then I feel bad because I actually told them to do it but nothing changes; they see and know that.”

neither a timely response nor a response at all.

The members of one group expressed interest in a system that confirms their request has been received and is being processed. One group member suggested implementing a ticketing system to improve response-time and efficiency from Web Services.

Highly Representative Observations: External Communications: “Re-packaging our value”

A common consensus amongst many of the participants is the ULS’ insufficient self-promotion. In addition, discussion moved towards how the Internet and the ever-changing digital information retrieval systems are affecting user needs and information-seeking behavior. Attracting interest and attention to learning research skills requires the ULS to “re-package” the library’s value in new ways.

Re-design of existing services and service tools

Further conversation on user complaints about the ULS website prompted various observations on some “cumbersome” features. Some felt the website could be greatly improved by integrating certain services (i.e. one login for all ULS services).

Some also expressed interest in re-designing statistical information taken at the reference desk, citing that the current design does not accurately reflect reference desk activity.

“It feels like the biggest challenge is to articulate why we are relevant... We need to get ourselves in the equation as much as we can... We do good work but I’m not sure if we package it in a way that we can easily talk about it.”

“I think we have changed enough that we need to rethink how we are researching our success [that is, gathering statistics].”

Further re-design suggestions mentioned the physical space of the reference desk – separating virtual from face-to-face reference and reducing the space to kiosks located on various floors of the library.

Unique or Outlying Observations:

Several observations stood out from the common discussion themes. These “outlier” statements reflected valuable insight, but did not spark further conversation. Several are reproduced here.

Experimenting with new tools

Though connected with communication issues, two group members noted an interest in experimenting with new or re-designed tools. An anecdote of how Google allows its team members to take on small initiatives and try them out was noted as an example of a workplace that allows its employees to experiment with new tools. It suggested that a similar initiative could be incorporated by the ULS, allowing team members to be given release-time to focus on such projects.

“We need the ability to try things out that would help us adapt to the flux.”

“I feel like there is no room to experiment and fail. I think people are scared to bring up ideas because what if it is the wrong idea or what if it is not in sync with what administration is thinking?”
