

Title: Three Thousand Library Users Can't Be Wrong: Demonstrating Library Impact Using One Open-Ended Survey Question

Abstract: Librarians seeking to balance quantitative value measures with qualitative methods should consider the inclusion of critical incident technique (CIT) questions into their library value inquiries. Even the addition of one well-conceived CIT question in a larger survey question pool can provide valuable stories in users' own words describing the impact of the library's services, resources, and spaces on teaching, learning, and research at their institution. This chapter will discuss the CIT question used by one large, multi-campus public research library to elicit over 3,000 undergraduate student, graduate student, and faculty responses: "Tell us in a few sentences about a time that Libraries staff, services, resources, or spaces had a positive impact on your academic work." Taken as a whole, the comments point to the impact of library staff, spaces, and services on faculty and students, while individual responses can serve as callouts within larger reports and provide depth and description necessary to understand other quantitative results.

Keywords: assessment, value/impact, critical incident technique, survey, qualitative methods

Project focus: assessment methodologies, techniques, or practices; user behaviors and needs; data use and technology; assessment concepts and/or management

Results made or will make case for: more funding, improvements in services, improvements in spaces, improvements in collections, changes in library policy, proof of library impact and value, a strategic plan or process

Data needed: We collected status (faculty, grad, undergrad), level (title, degree, year in school, respectively), major or college/school, and whether they self-identified as part of a special population (e.g. international student, transfer student)

Methodology: qualitative, quantitative, evaluation or survey

Project duration: greater than 1 year

Tool(s) utilized: We used Qualtrics as our survey tool and did all of our coding in Excel. Visualization was done in Tableau. One part-time, hourly Assessment Research Analyst was hired out of the overall survey budget.

Cost estimate: \$2,000–\$5,000; the overall project budget was in the range specified, but the specific technique we are writing about, critical incident technique, does not require such a substantial investment.

Type of institution: university—public

Institution enrollment: 30,000+

Highest level of education: doctoral



Chapter 9

Three Thousand Library Users Can't Be Wrong

Demonstrating Library Impact Using One Open-Ended Survey Question

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Introduction

Libraries nationwide are striving to capture, demonstrate, and communicate their value and impact on users. How do academic libraries help students learn, earn better course grades, and be retained through graduation? How do academic libraries aid faculty in their teaching, research, and grant-seeking efforts? Many libraries have engaged in quantitative approaches to answering these questions, perhaps because they appear more manageable and less time-consuming than other methods. However, quantitative approaches speak only to some library stakeholders and resource allocators, not all. In order to create a rich, detailed picture of library value and impact, qualitative strategies are key.

This case study explores how the University of Washington (UW) Libraries employed a critical incident technique question on a user survey to gather stories about

the library's impact on teaching, learning, and research and used the resulting responses in communication, outreach, and fund-raising efforts. It also provides tips for working with qualitative impact data and describes ways to improve upon the critical incident technique (CIT) question and subsequent use of responses.

Context

The University of Washington is a large comprehensive research institution with three campuses (Seattle, Bothell, and Tacoma). The UW Libraries is a member of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and includes sixteen different libraries across the three campuses. The UW Libraries has run a large-scale user survey (the Triennial Survey) every three years since 1992. The Triennial Survey is distributed to all faculty and graduate students at all three campuses, to all undergraduates at the smaller Bothell and Tacoma campuses, and to a sample of 5,000 undergraduate students at the Seattle campus (a stratified sample based on year in school). Survey results are used to improve spaces, services, and resources, as well as for budget and advocacy purposes. Library assessment staff (the Director of Assessment and Planning, an Assessment Librarian, and a Data Visualization and Analysis Librarian) are responsible for survey design, implementation, and data analysis.

Beginning in 2007, the Triennial Survey included a question about the contribution the UW Libraries makes to research, teaching, and learning at the institution. The faculty and graduate surveys, for example, ask respondents to rate the library's contribution in areas such as keeping current in their field, enriching student learning experiences, getting research funding, and making efficient use of their time.¹ While this question provides rich quantitative data that enables UW Libraries to communicate how its services and resources support the campus community, assessment staff also recognized that there was a missing element in survey data: stories in users' own words describing the impact of library services, resources, and spaces on their work. Inspired by Oakleaf and Millet's deployment of a "help study" comprised of two CIT questions designed to elicit examples of library value,² assessment staff decided to include a new open-ended question on the 2016 Triennial Survey that could provide evidence of the value of UW Libraries to users and the institution. A CIT question involves asking respondents to describe a memorable interaction, with the aim of exploring moments of personal significance and gaining insights into those experiences in a respondent's own words.³ Todd and Kuhlthau employed a critical incident question on a large-scale survey designed to understand how school libraries help students.⁴ Drawing on the examples provided by Oakleaf and Millet, and by Todd and Kuhlthau, the following CIT question was asked of UW faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students to draw out evidence of library impact: "Tell us in a few sentences about a time that Libraries staff, services, resources, or spaces had a positive impact on your academic work."

The 2016 survey was distributed to over thirty thousand faculty and students across all three UW campuses and was completed by more than 8,000 respondents. The response rates varied by population: 34 percent for faculty across all three campuses, 23

percent for graduate students, and 22 percent for undergraduate students. No incentives were offered to faculty and graduate students, but twenty university bookstore gift cards of \$100 each were offered in a lottery for undergraduates who completed the survey. The CIT question received over 3,000 responses, the highest response of any qualitative question on the survey. These responses covered topics ranging from teaching and learning, to support for research and clinical work, study spaces, interlibrary loan services, collections, and technology. Many of the results made explicit the connection between a library service, resource, or space and what users were able to do or how they specifically benefited as a result of using the service. Some key examples include comments that highlight the time and money saved for faculty, clinicians, students, and the institution. One faculty member shared the following:

I cannot stress how important and helpful the [Libraries' Active Learning Classroom] has been for my teaching. We are able to teach twice the number of students in this space as we would in another space—or put another way, we are able to increase access to our major without greatly increasing costs because this space is available.

A number of comments point to the value of liaison support for faculty and student work at various points in the research life cycle (including getting grants, finding research material, and communicating research). A graduate student noted:

As a PhD student, I had a question about copyright issues involving my published article. UW Libraries was very helpful in allowing me to successfully navigate the complexities of copyright law and inform me about open access options that I was unaware of. As a result, my work has been cited more than I anticipated!

In addition, there were numerous examples of the critical importance of study space for student success and grades. An undergraduate student commented on the value of the study space in UW's Suzzallo Library:

Every day, I sit at Suzzallo's big library, pull out my laptop, and am actually able to focus on my school work. This has been the single most important thing that has helped me turn my college career into a successful one.

Taken as a whole, the comments point to the positive impact of library staff, spaces, and services on faculty and students. Individual responses have served as callouts within larger reports and provide depth and description necessary to understand quantitative results. The specific ways in which these results can be used are discussed in more detail in the following section.

Communicating Results and Impact

In order to make sense of such a large volume of qualitative data and to communicate the comments as effectively as possible, responses to this question were coded using both content codes (e.g., spaces, teaching and learning, collections) and a single code for impact. This enabled comments reports to be generated quickly based on the needs of various individuals and groups, such as the Dean of UW Libraries or the library fund-raising unit. In the first instance, results from this question were shared internally (via presentations and short reports) with library leadership and with all library employees at a large all-staff meeting at the start of the academic year. Results focusing on specific operational areas such as digital scholarship, IT, collections, and access services were also shared with a variety of library departments and stakeholder groups via targeted reports and interactive Tableau dashboards (figure 9.1). The dashboards provided staff with a flexible way to find comments by topic and impact. The approach to coding and the presentation of CIT question results in the dashboards were designed to empower library staff to identify for themselves the comments most relevant to their needs, both for internal reporting and for communicating with faculty, students, and other external stakeholders.

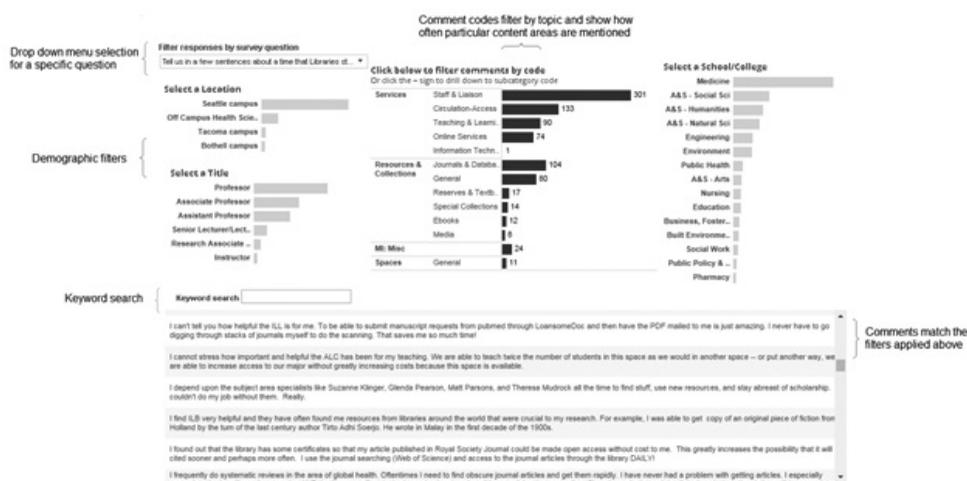


Figure 9.1

The Triennial Survey comments dashboard allows library staff to discover impact stories by filtering for demographic information, keywords within the comment, or general topic coding by Assessment staff.

To maximize the usefulness of quantitative and qualitative survey data for library staff, assessment staff also created a set of “impact snapshots” that include a key data point (drawn from either survey data or annual library statistics) coupled with a related quote elicited from the CIT question. These impact snapshots are particularly useful for advancement and fund-raising efforts. Impact comments were used at major fund-raising events in fall 2016 and spring 2017. At the first event, the Dean of the UW

Libraries highlighted user stories in a presentation to donors. At the second event—focused on supporting preservation, programs, and student employee scholarships—key impact stories were featured on table tents on all guest tables (figure 9.2). For many audiences, like the community members and university administrators who often attend fund-raising events, hearing stories in users' own voices paints a compelling picture of the difference the library makes for students and faculty.

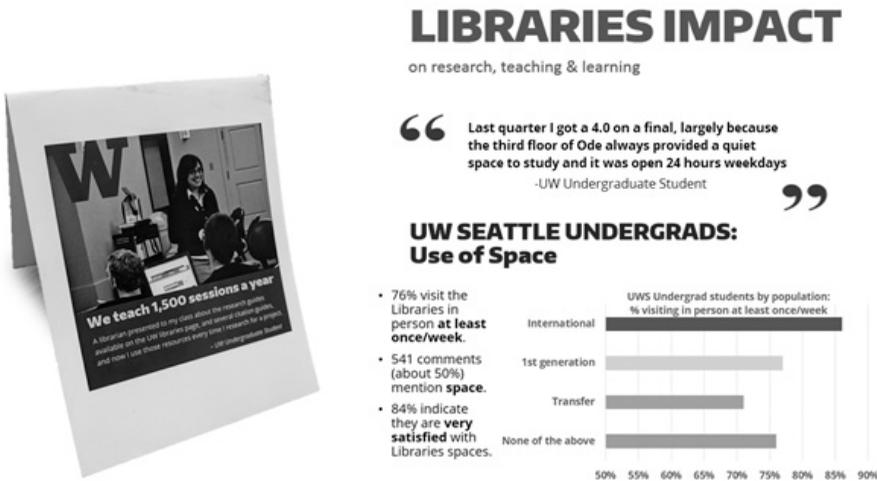


Figure 9.2

Two ways impact comments have been communicated with the campus community. (Left) Table tents from the 2017 Literary Voices fund-raising event paired images, annual statistics, and impact statements on each table. (Right) The Dean of UW Libraries shared slides with impact stories and contextual statistics at the 2016 Dean's Circle event.

User comments have been especially valuable when used in conjunction with quantitative data to provide a more holistic and meaningful picture of library value. For example, the dean's presentation to donors included survey data showing that 76 percent of undergraduate students use the library at least once per week, paired with a student comment about the impact using a library space had on the student's ability to get a good grade. Combining quantitative and qualitative data in this way helps to convey both the scope and the depth of library contributions in key areas such as student success.

These stories have also had unexpected and less obvious uses. For example, at large institutions, the ways in which staff work matters to users may not always be immediately or directly visible to staff themselves. While the focus in recent years has centered on demonstrating value to external audiences, making the value of staff work more visible within the library can be one important, if intangible, benefit. The impact comments have also been effective in gaining buy-in from staff in engaging with survey results more broadly. At a meeting with the UW Libraries Teaching and Learning

Group, for example, the discussion began with the comments about the impact of the instruction program on student learning and success, and then broadened to areas for possible improvement in terms of outreach to faculty and instructors in support of their teaching. In this case, starting with positive stories about what users value with regard to the library lays the groundwork for productive conversations about potential improvements.

Leveraging the Findings

In addition to the approaches above, the next steps for using impact comments involve partnerships between assessment staff and those responsible for library marketing and communication, as well as individual librarians and library units, to develop targeted marketing and outreach campaigns for specific services such as online chat reference, instruction, and liaison support. Going forward, various library units plan to use the comments and the impact snapshot template as the basis for working with library marketing staff to create tailored communication plans for different services and audiences. The aim of these campaigns will be to highlight the range of library services and resources available to students and faculty and to demonstrate the difference these services make to users' work. The snapshots may also be used as part of a new library website template, with pages about a specific service and space including a relevant comment about the impact they have on users. This approach would highlight the value of each service or space and also provide a consistent visual branding across different sites. Assessment staff can support these communication efforts by continuing to streamline the process of accessing and working with the data. This can involve the ongoing creation of tailored reports, as well as assisting with the creation of additional impact snapshots to provide library staff with a menu of options that they can readily draw upon for a variety of outreach and communication needs.

Reflection

One of the key successes of this approach to gathering qualitative impact data was the ability to reach thousands of users by including a single question on a large-scale survey. This method, or variations on it, is applicable to a variety of libraries and scalable to different contexts and needs: a CIT question can be distributed via an existing library survey or can be sent to users as a single question. In addition, this qualitative data can be powerful either independently or used in conjunction with quantitative data in the form of survey results or other routinely collected library statistics. The resulting impact data and story snapshots have the potential to create rich, detailed pictures of library value and impact that can appeal and be tailored to a wide variety of library stakeholders.

As this question was new on the 2016 UW Libraries Triennial Survey, there is still much that can be learned and improved upon for future iterations of the survey. One possible area for improvement is the formulation of the critical incident technique

question itself. While the single question produced over 3,000 comments, in reality many of the responses did not fully articulate the impact of the library or librarians: many described a service they liked or found useful but stopped short of providing full, concrete details of the *results* of using that particular service or resource. Approximately 20 percent of the responses to this question provided examples of what a library service or resource enabled them to do. In the help study that inspired this CIT question, Oakleaf and Millett suggested asking the question in two parts (“Think of a time when the library/librarians helped you. What help did you receive? What did that help enable you to do?”). However, because the question was embedded in a large, multipart survey, UW assessment staff decided that their users might be more inclined to answer a single, open-ended question. A more effective way to make impact explicit might be to use the two-part question formulation suggested by Oakleaf and Millet. This two-part reformulation has the potential to increase the number of usable impact stories from respondents, but there might be a tradeoff in requiring more time and effort for users to answer.

The use of a single CIT question on a user survey is a simple and scalable approach to understanding impact. Librarians seeking to emulate this approach should prepare for the high volume of comments resulting from this question and the additional effort required to code and report results. As discussed previously, responses to this question were coded both for content and for whether the comment articulated the library’s impact. The authors used a single yes/no code for impact; others may wish to add additional codes to distinguish the type of impact, such as time or money saved, better grades, or getting research funding. Adding these codes might create additional challenges to coding. However, a greater level of detail could be valuable for communicating more targeted impact stories to different audiences.

While the meaning of “library impact” sounds intuitive, it was challenging to define what counted as impact and to distinguish when users actually articulated that impact, rather than merely implying it. The eventual defining criterion was that the comment mentioned what a service or resource enabled the user to do or how the user’s behavior was changed. The authors looked for comments that indicated how the library helped users to complete or do better work, or to work faster or less expensively. Impact comments generally had two important elements: they identified the library space, service, or resource used, or the support provided by the library or a librarian, and gave a specific example of what the library or librarian helped them do (figure 9.3). This second element was the least likely to be fully articulated in the comment. For example, some students noted that using library quiet spaces helped them to feel more motivated or focused on their coursework. While this demonstrates the importance of library spaces, ultimately the authors decided that this didn’t constitute an example of impact because it failed to describe what the user was able to do or how a specific behavior was changed. In other cases, the difference a service made was implied and not directly stated. For example, respondents occasionally implied that efficiencies resulted from using a library service or resource (e.g., that time was saved by using library resources), but the exact efficiencies were left vague. These cases were judged based on what was

actually stated and typically not considered as articulated impact. The complexity of identifying impact in the CIT question comments means that additional time and attention to detail may be required in the coding process.

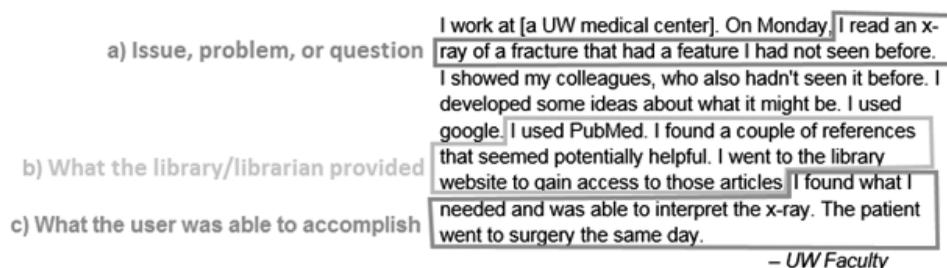


Figure 9.3

Identifying impact within a comment required two key elements: what the library or librarian provided and what this enabled the respondent to accomplish (b and c in this figure). Many also identified a third element (a) of the issue, problem, or question, which typically led to stronger stories, but was not required to be considered impact.

Conclusion

A single open-ended CIT question on a large-scale survey can provide libraries with stories about their impact and value in users' own voices. The key benefit of this approach for libraries of various types and sizes is that is relatively easy to implement and scale; the question can be used on its own, or as part of a multquestion survey. While an investment of time is required to code and communicate the comments, the rich data yielded by this question can be used effectively for a variety of outreach, fund-raising, and marketing purposes, and the data is powerful either on its own or in conjunction with quantitative data. Although improvements can be made to both the CIT question itself and use of the resulting data, the approach in the 2016 UW Triennial Survey yielded a large number of comments highlighting the impact of library services, resources, and spaces on faculty and students. New ways of sharing the results with staff allowed them to find and communicate the stories that are relevant to their work while also engaging them in other survey results and library statistics. Incorporating impact stories into communication plans, marketing materials, and library events have helped users recognize the services and resources available to them and helped stakeholders understand that the services and resources the library makes available have a profound, varied, and positive impact on the campus community.

Notes

1. UW Libraries Triennial Survey instruments and results are available at the University of Washington Libraries Assessment webpage: <http://www.lib.washington.edu/assessment/surveys/triennial>.
2. Megan Oakleaf and Michelle Millet, "Help Yourself to Student Impact Data: Conducting a 'Help'

- Study to Explore Academic Library Value,” *ACRL Value of Academic Libraries* (blog), March 20, 2012, <http://www.acrl.ala.org/value/?p=285>.
3. William Borgen, Norman Amundson, and Lee Butterfield, “Critical Incident Technique,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, vol. 1, ed. Lisa M. Given (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 158–59. Gale Virtual Reference Library, GALE|CX3073600095, http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3073600095/GVRL?u=wash_main&sid=GVRL&xid=2dd5dc76.
 4. Ross Todd and Carol Kuhlthau, “Student Learning through Ohio School Libraries, Part 1: How Effective School Libraries Help Students,” *School Libraries Worldwide* 11, no. 1 (2005): 63–88. EBSCOhost.

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