

## **User Surveys at the University of Washington Libraries**

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The University of Washington (UW) is a large, comprehensive research university with a main campus located in Seattle, Washington and two smaller branch campuses located nearby. 2014-15 student enrollment at all three campuses is approximately 40,000 undergraduate students and 15,000 graduate and professional students. In 2014-15, UW was ranked 26<sup>th</sup> in the world by the Times of London and 15<sup>th</sup> in the Academic Ranking of World Universities.

The University of Washington Libraries (UW Libraries) has a long-established and robust assessment programme that has delivered critical information about user needs, library and information use, importance, impact and priorities for more than 20 years (Hiller, 2001; Hiller, 2004; Hiller & Wright, 2009; Hiller & Wright 2014). Employing a variety of qualitative and quantitative assessment methods, including large-scale surveys, the UW Libraries uses assessment information extensively in planning, programme development, services evaluation and in communicating the value of the library to the broader community. The UW Libraries has developed and fostered a 'culture of assessment' where evidence-based decision-making and a user-centered focus are expectations from line staff to administration. Libraries staff have made substantial contributions to the library assessment field in such areas as user needs assessment, usability, collections and resources usage, space planning and organisational performance assessment. As cofounder and cosponsor of the biennial Library Assessment Conference, the UW Libraries has been an influential leader in promoting and nurturing the value of assessment for libraries and their communities.

The assessment programme is under the aegis of the UW Libraries Office of Assessment and Planning which is headed by a Director who is part of the library administrative leadership. This Office assists in the coordination of library assessment efforts and helps integrate assessment and planning. A half-time Library Assessment Coordinator works closely with the Director and the Libraries Assessment and Metrics Team to design and implement assessment efforts, including large-scale surveys.

This chapter will review two large-scale customer surveys conducted by the UW Libraries (the Triennial Survey and the In-Library Use Survey) and show how results have been used to improve organisational performance, the development of programmes to address user needs, and support advocacy efforts that have led to increased funding. More information about the UW Libraries assessment programme, including survey forms and results, can be found at the UW Libraries Assessment website.<sup>1</sup> The list of references also cites previous publications dealing with these surveys.

### **Customer Surveys: Strengths and Weaknesses**

The large-scale customer survey is a widely used and accepted methodology. A survey helps identify user issues, concerns, and needs and measures performance from the perspective of the user. It can provide a wealth of data that can be analysed using standard statistical techniques as well as for making statistically valid generalisations. The survey also provides opportunities for open-ended comments by the user, which supplement the quantitative data, and which are often quite helpful in providing context or evoking new information. Survey results

can, and generally should, lead to changes and improvements in the library. Because the survey is such an accepted method, the results are generally useful in institutional assessment and accreditation. Survey research offers librarians the opportunity to learn, in an empirical way, what their customers need and want, and their level of satisfaction with library services. Surveys conducted repeatedly over a long period of time provide a record of the changing library environment and an indication of the library's success in responding to those changes. It is not the only assessment tool, but it is a crucial tool.

However, large-scale user surveys do have their limitations. The participants rely on their previous experiences and the results are usually a compilation of perceptions, not necessarily a rating of current library use and services. The ability to generalise from the survey respondents to the population depends not only on the number of respondents but also how representative they are of the target population. While it is easy to launch a web survey using any number of inexpensive software applications, constructing a survey is not a simple task. It is difficult to frame complicated questions and response scales, and poor wording can skew the results. Constructing a survey properly for the first time can be difficult and costly. The ease of conducting web-based surveys often leads to a plethora of survey requests delivered through electronic mail or available on Websites. Potential respondents suffer 'survey fatigue' which can lead to lower response rates, especially for surveys that are not relevant to the respondent, are poorly constructed, or biased. For these reasons, the large scale survey should not be the only tool in the library assessment toolkit. However, it is a valuable method, and is particularly useful to demonstrate changes over time using longitudinal data (Hinchcliffe, 2015).

## **Local Survey Development at the University of Washington Libraries**

The University of Washington Libraries is well known for its programme of large-scale cyclical user surveys that have been conducted every 3 years since 1992, the longest running large-scale survey of any North American academic research library (Hiller & Self, 2002; Hiller & Self, 2004; Self & Hiller, 2012). More than just satisfaction surveys, these ‘Triennial Surveys’ (as they came to be known) have provided invaluable information about how students and faculty use libraries, their information needs and priorities and the library contribution to research, teaching, and learning during a period of rapid change in the information and higher education environments. Complementing this large-scale survey offered every 3 years is an in-library survey that asks what spaces and services were used during a specific visit. The in-library survey also includes questions about the importance of, and satisfaction with, various services and spaces, as well as a space for comments. These two surveys provide the basis for a lengthy history of user-centered and evidence-based decision-making and resource advocacy.

### **University of Washington Libraries Triennial Survey**

The initial catalyst for survey development arose from the UW Libraries’ first strategic plan in 1991, which called for a user-centered approach to services and resources. Specifically, the plan called for ‘the development and implementation of a study to identify user populations, their information needs, and how well they are being met’. Prior efforts to gain information about the UW user community were sporadic and narrowly focused, with the results rarely used. A Task Force was appointed to design and carry out such a study and made the decision to conduct a survey of UW faculty and students.

The survey design process began in 1991 and 16 questions were developed with the intent to determine who used libraries and why, what resources and services were used, and what were student and faculty needs for library-related information and programmes. The survey also asked how satisfied faculty and students were with the resources and services of the library. The Task Force arrived at several decisions concerning methodology that served as a foundation for future surveys:

- The survey would be run during the Spring academic term
- The survey population was defined as faculty, graduate and professional students and undergraduates; all faculty and a random sample of students, would be surveyed
- Separate surveys would be designed for each user group, although there would be a number of common questions
- The survey would be mailed directly to the survey population
- The survey would be returned to a nonlibrary campus unit for data entry
- A small incentive would be offered for submission of surveys

Surveys were mailed in April 1992 to 3900 faculty and random samples of 1000 graduate and professional students and 1000 undergraduates. Response rates ranged from 28% of faculty to 56% for graduate and professional students. The aggregate results for each group (including comments) were distributed to staff with academic programme specific information analysed and also sent to the appropriate subject librarians and library unit heads. The 1992 results showed high satisfaction rates for all groups. While the physical library was of paramount importance to students, nearly half the faculty reported they had connected remotely to the online catalogue and

bibliographic databases. Comments from undergraduates indicated a perception that staff at some service desks did not take them seriously.

The Task Force made several recommendations for follow-up actions, including online catalogue improvement; recognising undergraduates as the primary users of the physical spaces; making it easier to connect to library resources and services remotely; and ensuring that staff treated students respectfully. The latter led to the development of a ‘good customer service’ class that all staff were required to attend and which is still offered to new employees.

The library administration found the 1992 survey results to be of value and asked for the survey to be run again in 1995 to look at the effect of programmatic changes made as a result of the 1992 survey and to continue tracking remote online use outside of the library. Results showed a continued shift to use of remote online discovery tools and resources among faculty and graduate students and the frequency of remote library visits by faculty had surpassed their physical library visits. Changes made as a result of 1992 survey results resulted in higher undergraduate student satisfaction, as well as faculty and graduate student satisfaction with online resources. Once again survey results provided valuable insight into library use, importance, satisfaction and user behaviour. UW Libraries administration made the decision to continue the surveys on a 3-year cycle (Table 19.1). This cycle allowed for survey analysis, programmatic changes, and survey design.

Although there were substantial changes to the 1998 Triennial Survey, core importance and satisfaction questions from previous surveys were retained, along with a five point Likert response scale to most questions. Preparation for the 1998 Triennial Survey included

collaborating closely with other university programmes on questions dealing with the use and impact of information technology. Results showed that the frequency of remote visits by faculty and graduate students continued to increase, especially from off-campus, although there were differences by discipline. For example, scientists and engineers were willing to sacrifice print for online journal access, while those in the fine arts and humanities were still dependent on physical access to the library for their information resources. As a result, print journals in the health sciences and some of the sciences began to be canceled if online versions were available.

Post-1998 Triennial Surveys have continued to be administered on a 3-year cycle and retain a small core group of questions from survey to survey. The 2004 survey was the first conducted through the Web with response rates similar to previous ones. Surveys are developed over the course of a lengthy design process, which enables the Libraries Assessment and Metrics Team to add or change questions in order to meet specific planning and programming needs (Figure 19.4). Recent versions of the survey have given attention to questions of the importance of library services and resources, as well as their impact on user success. Several questions were added to assess the impact of library services and programmes on research productivity, recruitment and teaching effectiveness. Since 2001, results have shown:

- High satisfaction with the library (Figure 19.3)
- High importance of library resources (Figure 19.1)
- Decline in importance of information services (Figure 19.1)
- Positive contribution of library collections, programmes and services on research, teaching and learning programmes (Figure 19.2)

- Continued importance of library physical spaces to undergraduate students (Figure 19.1)

Responses from all groups are especially valuable in helping to map the Libraries contribution to user success at the group level. The large number of responses enables analysis at subgroup levels such as year in school or academic programme. Survey results have also made substantial contributions to strategic planning efforts. In addition, while survey results have always been used for improvement, as well as for initiating new programmes designed to meet user needs, results have been increasingly employed as a part of the Libraries' advocacy efforts in reaching out to external audiences and stakeholders.

### **In-Library Use Survey**

The 2001 Triennial Survey results revealed that the frequency of in-library visits by faculty and graduate students continued to decline and had been substantially surpassed by remote use. We still needed good information about who used the physical library, why they visited and what they did during their visit. Surveying users in library facilities was seen as a more effective method of acquiring this information than a broad-based perceptual survey. A short one page survey was developed to capture that information and first applied in 2002. The survey was distributed to those entering the library during 2 hour time periods and completed surveys were returned as users exited the library. Survey methodology and distribution remained reasonably consistent in subsequent surveys run in 2005, 2008, 2011 and 2014. The number of survey responses ranged between 3160 and 3878 surveys with response rates between 45% and 60% (Table 19.2). Results confirmed the importance of the library as place for undergraduate

students and showed a steady increase in the percentage of respondents who were undergraduates – reaching nearly 75% in 2011. Survey results that year also showed a decline in the use of library computers and a substantial increase in use of personal computing devices. These trends continued with the 2014 survey (Figures 19.5 and 19.6).

These two survey instruments have continued to develop in parallel, each providing different pieces of information about our various users groups and their needs. While the Triennial Survey is a web-based survey sent to all faculty and graduate students and a large sample of undergraduates, the In-Library Use Survey is only distributed to those using a physical library facility at particular times. The In-Library Use Survey therefore provides critical data about those who use the library spaces, why they visited, what users did during their visits and suggestions for improvement (Hiller & Porat, 2011). This has enabled the Triennial Survey to remove most of the detailed space-related questions and has resulted in a much shortened survey.

### **Case Study: Multiple Assessment Methods and User-Centered Design**

User surveys in the 1990s revealed that students, especially undergraduates, were the primary users of library facilities. As use of library space shifted from a focus on collections to users, efforts were made to gain input about what was important for them in library facilities. While survey results were useful, they needed to be augmented with other methods in order to understand how the UW Libraries could better support the student experience.

To address changes in student work in high-technology environments, the UW Libraries initiated in 2010 a renovation of an existing space in the main library to create the Research

Commons. This new space was designed to foster technology-focused collaborative and interdisciplinary work. A user-centered design approach was employed in the development of the new space, incorporating feedback from interviews, focus groups, observations and design workshops. After the opening of the Research Commons, staff used several techniques to assess how the spaces (and the services and technology within the space) were being used. Evaluation methods included observation, discussion groups and short surveys in Spring 2011 and Spring 2014. Each assessment method verified the findings of the others: users identified the Commons as collaborative work space and enjoyed the ability to customise their work environment with the flexible furniture and equipment available to them (Ray & Macy, 2015).

The findings from the Research Commons-specific assessments were even more powerful when combined with results from the 2011 In-Library Use Survey. On both the 2011 and 2014 In-Library Use Survey, users were asked to indicate which specific areas within a particular library they visited, with one of the options being the Research Commons. Including this area as a category of the general In-Library Use survey enabled the Libraries Assessment Team to compare users and non-users of the Research Commons space. Survey results showed that those who used the Research Commons tended to use the library for longer periods of time, did more group work, and used more of the services and resources offered by the Libraries (Figure 19.7).

Changes made based on the results of discussion groups, observations, and surveys included the removal of some computer workstations and rearrangement of others to de-emphasise their use as individual workspaces, and the addition of two new reservable group areas to allow for more and larger group activities. This mixed-methods approach enabled the

Libraries to triangulate results to build a more coherent picture of Research Commons use, and also to identify key areas for improvement.

## **Conclusion**

The past 20 years have seen UW Libraries assessment efforts grow from an initial large-scale user survey to a multifaceted assessment programme within an integrated planning and assessment framework. Large-scale user surveys have been essential, especially when complemented with other methods such as data mining, usage statistics, usability testing, focus groups, structured interviews and observations to provide a multidimensional perspective on library and information use and needs by the University of Washington community.

Survey results have led to many changes and improvements:

- Reallocation of collections funding
- Keeping the undergraduate library open 24 hours
- Support for the transition from print to e-journals
- Improved study and collaboration spaces
- Reallocation of internal budgets and staffing
- Support for external budget requests
- Informing the strategic planning process
- Implementation of performance measures
- Enhanced usability of discovery tools
- Identification of issues and problems requiring further study

Survey results used as advocacy with those outside the library have become increasingly important (Hiller & Wilson, 2013). Combining survey data on as library satisfaction, user needs and priorities, and contributions to student and faculty success with other data have led to increased funding for:

- Acquisitions
- Student employment
- Facilities renovations to address changing user needs
- Technology
- Bridge funding for new positions

The UW Libraries is recognised as an institutional leader in application of survey data and assessment results to shape and deliver high quality services that contribute to student and faculty success. This has played a key role in decisions to increase University investment in the library. As the University moves to a data driven budget allocation model, it is critical that the Libraries present supportive and compelling evidence that demonstrates its value to the University community.

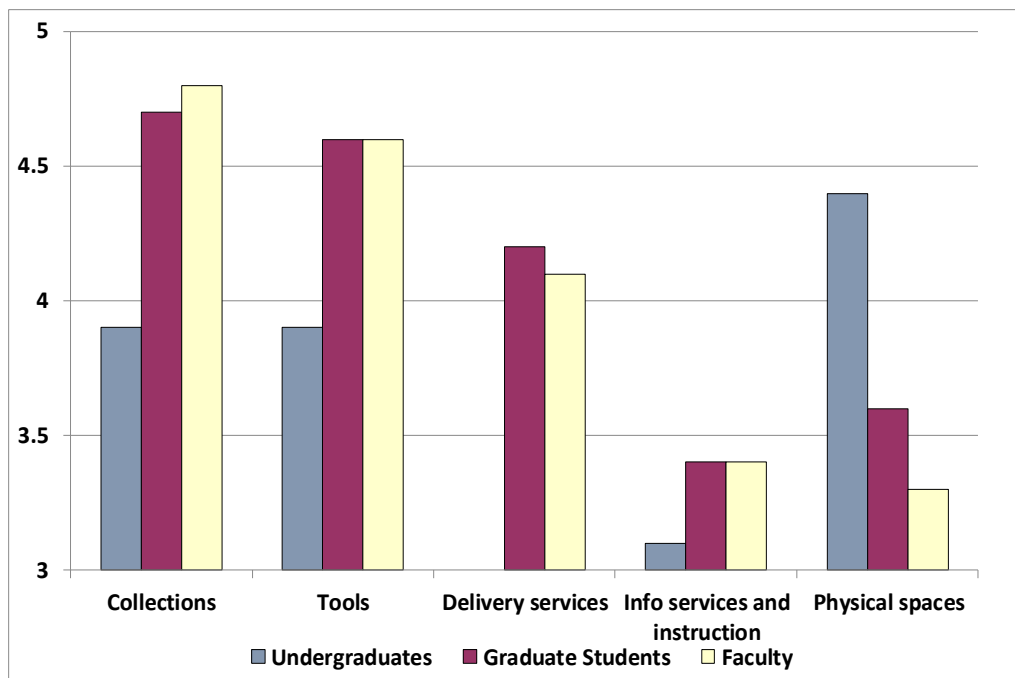
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<sup>1</sup> University of Washington Libraries. UW Libraries Assessment. <http://lib.washington.edu/assessment/>.

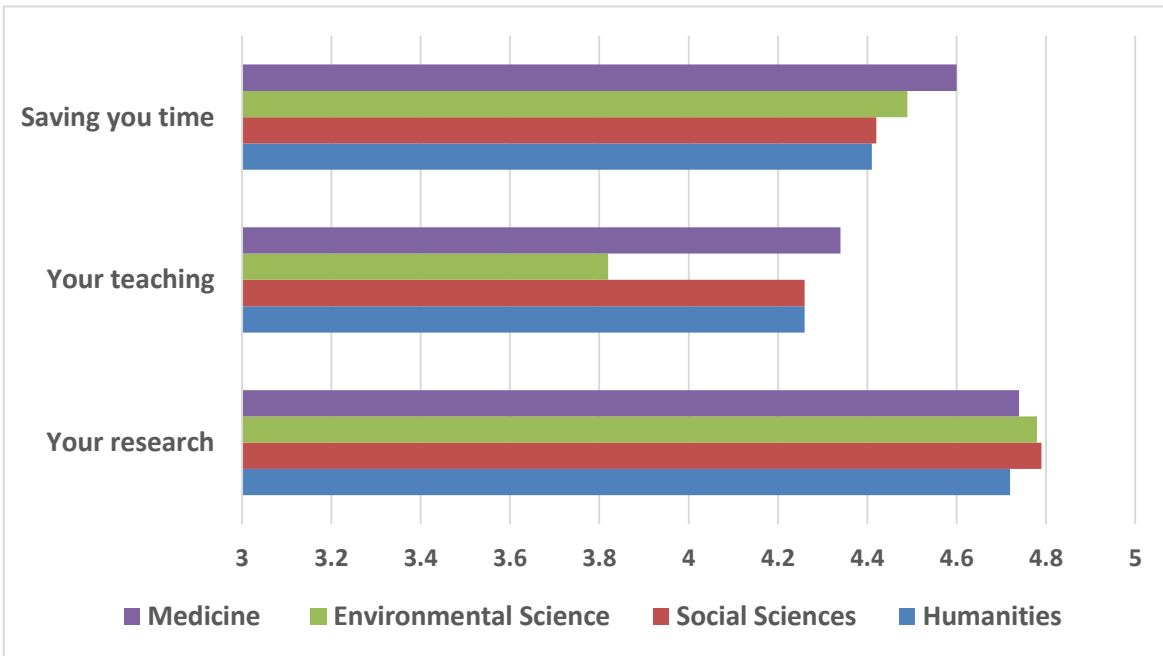
**Table 19.1** UW Libraries Triennial Survey: Number of UW Seattle respondents and response rate 1992-2013

Group	2013	2010	2007	2004	2001	1998	1995	1992
Faculty	1537 (37%)	1634 (39%)	1455 (36%)	1560 (40%)	1345 (36%)	1503 (40%)	1359 (31%)	1108 (28%)
Grad/Professional (Sample size varies)	2127 (20%)	640 (32%)	580 (33%)	627 (40%)	597 (40%)	457 (46%)	409 (41%)	560 (56%)
Undergrads (UWS) (Sample size varies)	1044 (21%)	365 (16%)	467 (20%)	502 (25%)	497 (25%)	787 (39%)	463 (23%)	407 (41%)

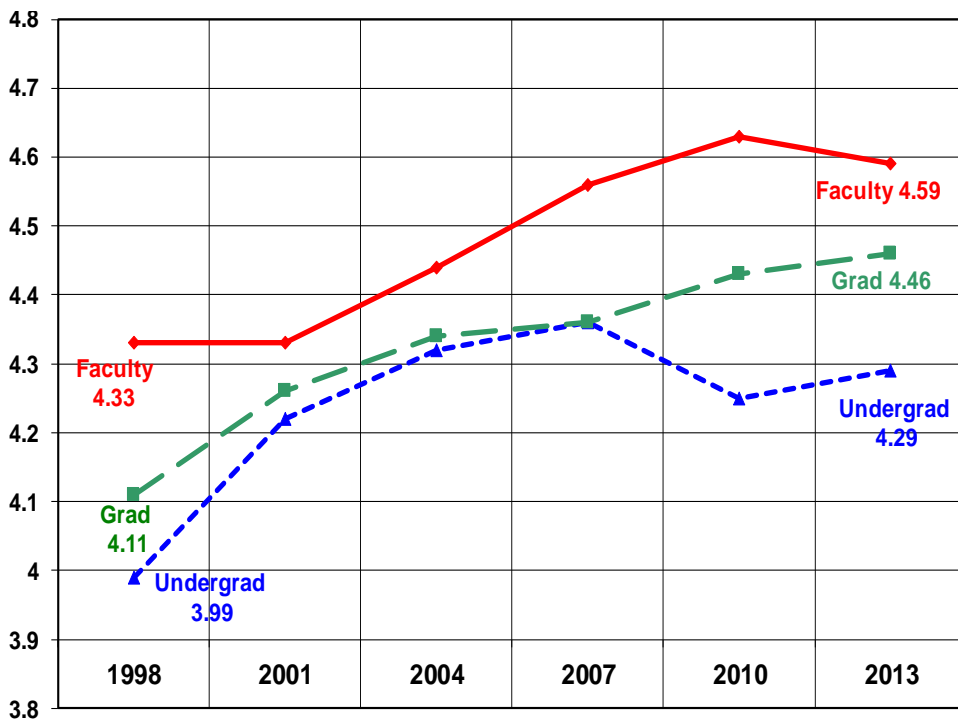
**Figure 19.1** UW Library services and resources: Overall importance to work by group (2013 Triennial Survey) scale of 1 ‘Not Important’ to 5 ‘Very Important’.



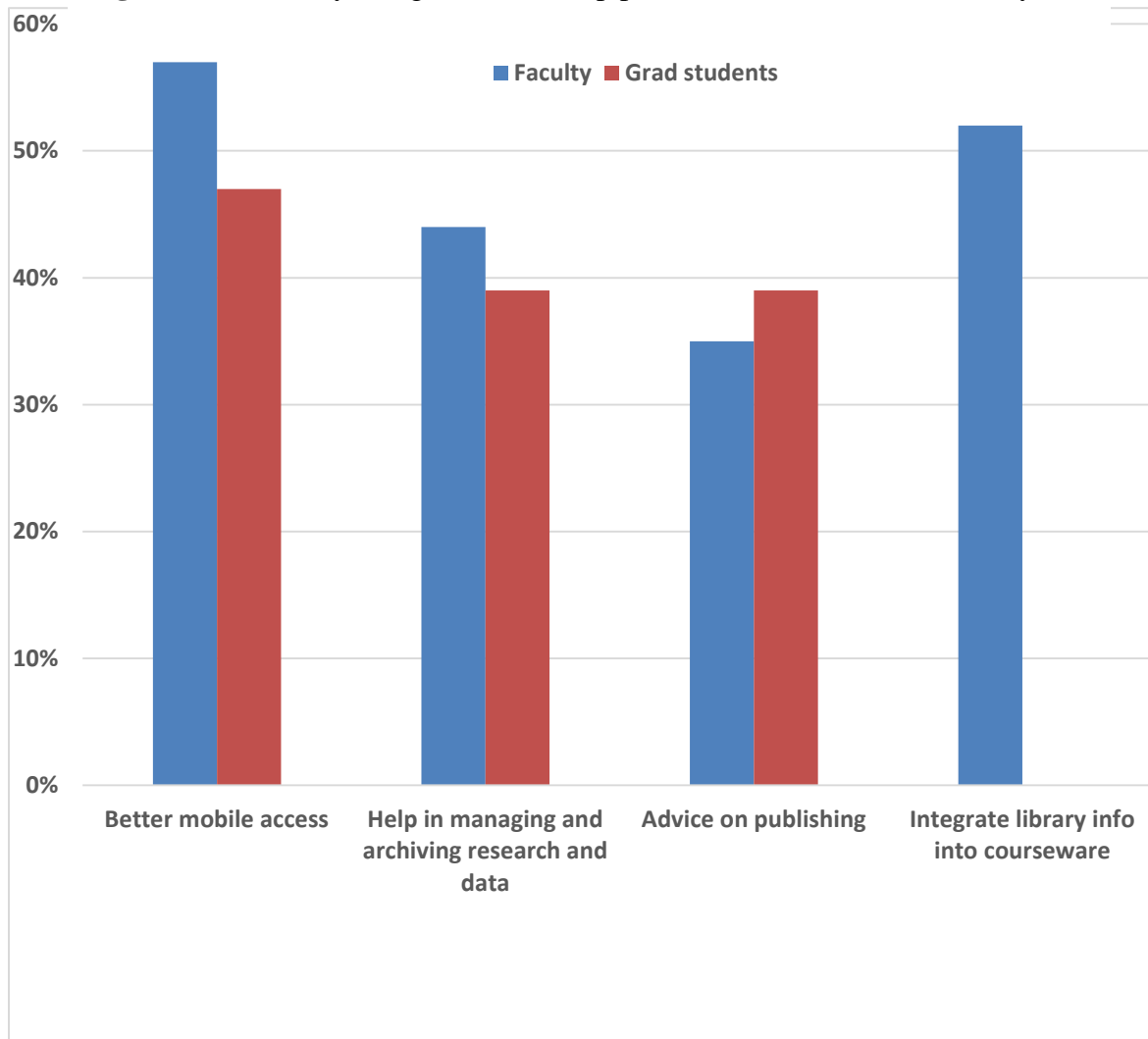
**Figure 19.2** 2013 Triennial Survey Library contribution to faculty by selected programme:  
(Scale of 1 Minor to 5 Major)



**Figure 19.3** Overall satisfaction by group: Triennial Survey 1998-2013



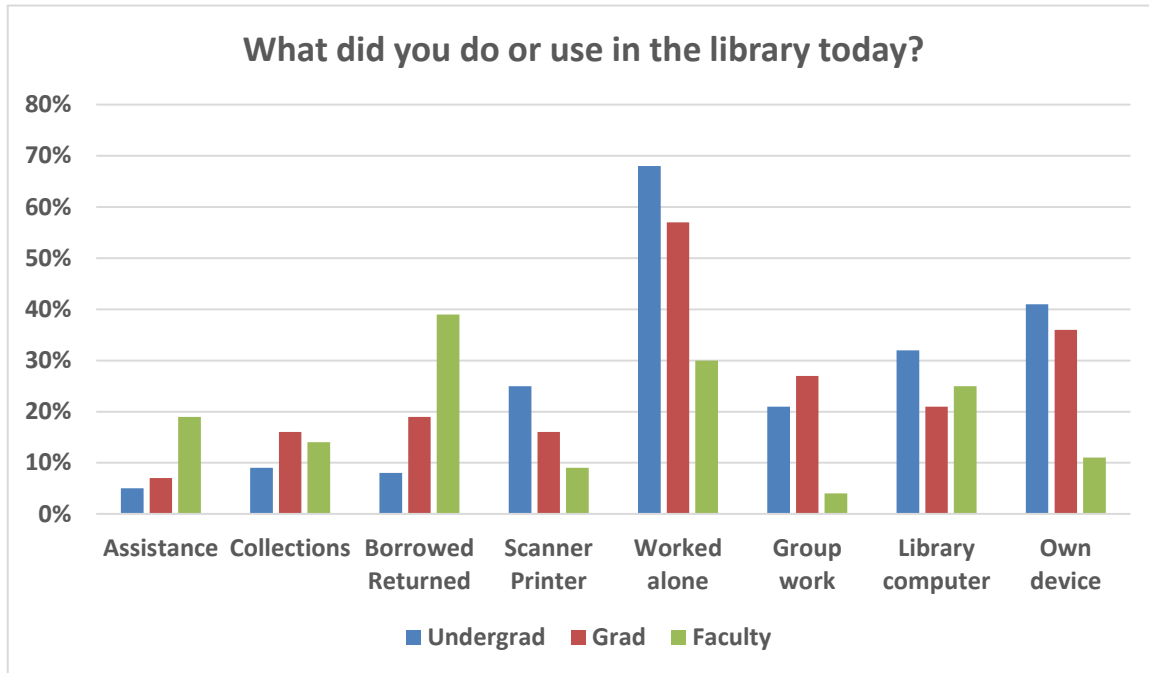
**Figure 19.4** Faculty and grad student top priorities (2013 Triennial Survey)



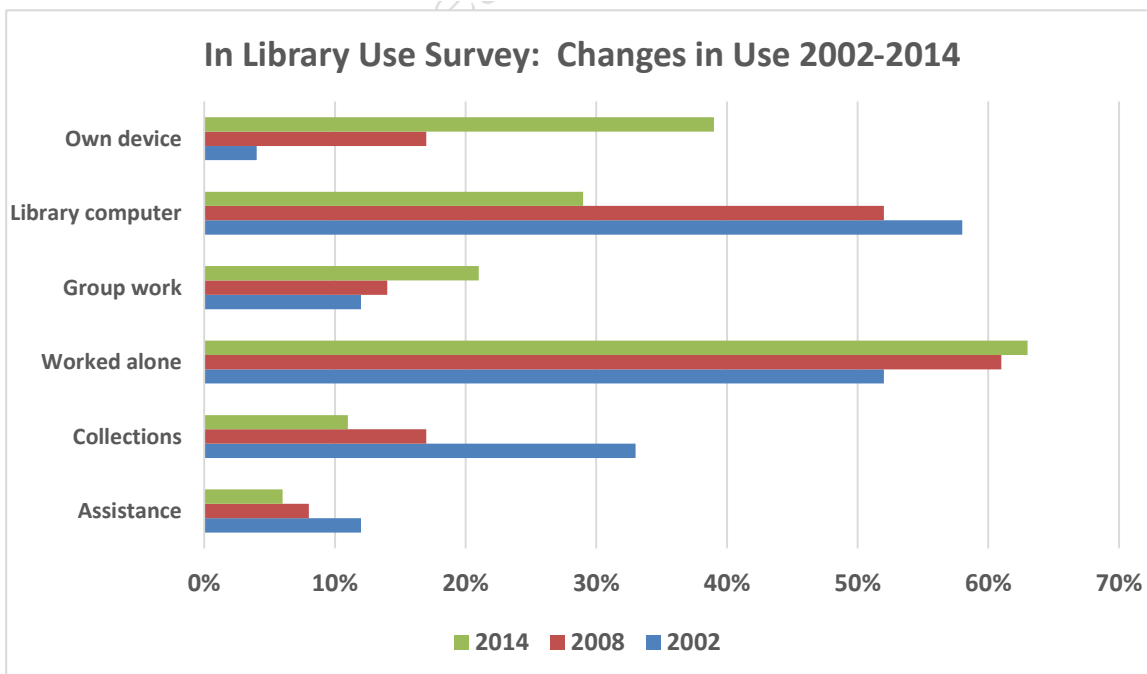
**Table 19.2** In-Library Use Survey number of respondents by group 2002-2014: Sessions in common at UW Seattle

	2014	2011	2008	2005	2002
Undergraduates	2252	2495	2210	2091	2304
Graduate/Professional Students	592	588	640	723	986
Faculty/Staff	107	130	166	168	251
Non-affiliated	120	128	154	250	312
Did not state	89	38	26	34	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>3160</b>	<b>3379</b>	<b>3196</b>	<b>3266</b>	<b>3878</b>

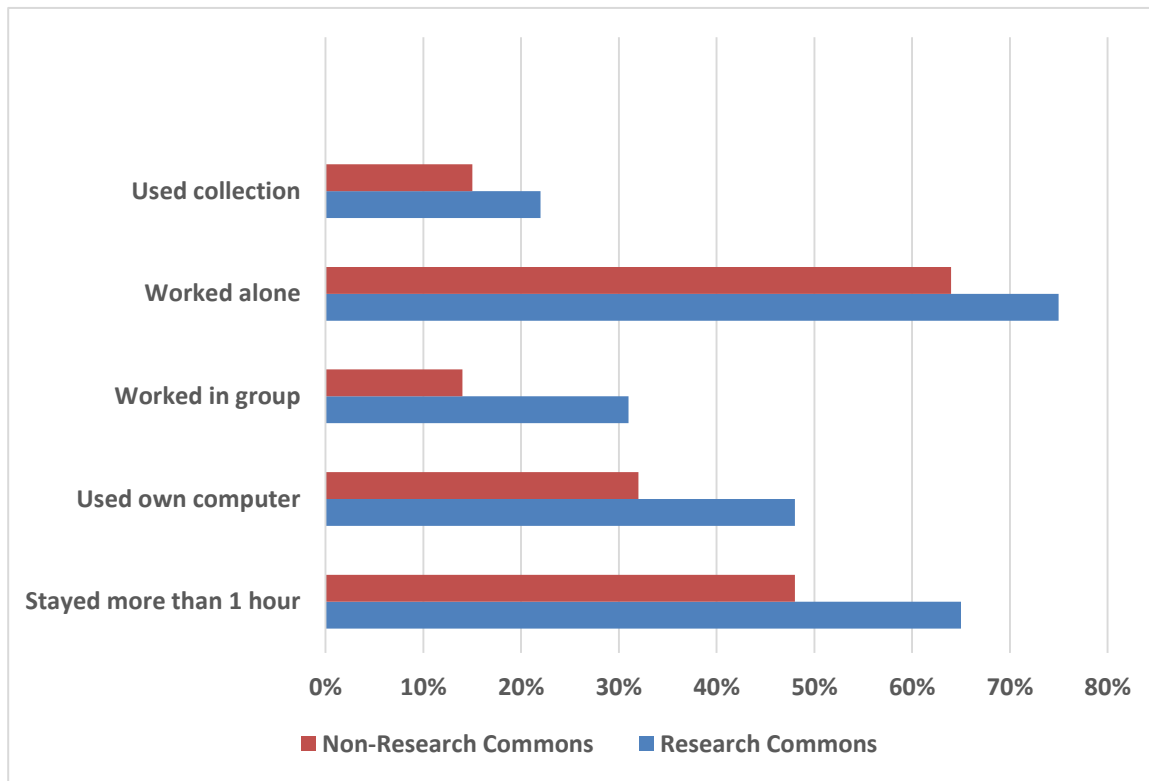
**Figure 19.5** What respondents did in the library by group: 2014 In-Library Use Survey



**Figure 19.6** Activities during Library Visit: 2002/2008/2012 In-Library Use Survey



**Figure 19.7** Main Library: Comparisons of Research Commons users and nonusers (2011 In-Library Use Survey)



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