



Are qualitative and quantitative data appropriately gathered for managerial decisions?

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Academic libraries have begun to incorporate principles of research-based management in improving the quality of reader services, as evidenced by the increased attention to seeking input from library users. But is the “user perspective” identified, analyzed and interpreted in ways that are aligned with decisions required of library service managers?

Contemporary management theories advocate that managers make decisions based on data, with special emphasis in the management of services to include the customer’s perspective among data considered. To practice such data-driven or evidence-based management, decision makers require an understanding, if not a mastery, of ways to systematically gather data for a defined purpose, and the associated methods to analyze and interpret the results. If they themselves do not gather the data, they need a foundation in applied research to judge the quality of data they are presented by others. The growing emphasis on utilizing customer perspectives in decision making has introduced qualitative data to organizations previously managed by quantitative monitors. Justification of value, outcomes, and service quality require data about opinions, perceptions, and preferences, which are new to many managers who had mastered reporting of amounts of resources, volume of activity, or productivity rates. The changed expectations of managers to embrace robust data might not be paralleled by changes in their understanding of the qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather and interpret data they use in decision making.

This presentation addresses the application of theory in practice by exploring the extent to which library managers accurately distinguish qualitative and quantitative approaches to gathering and interpreting data needed for managerial decisions. The results of a two-phased exploration will be summarized. The first phase involves a survey and focused group interview of administrators of public services in large academic libraries and the second phase examines samples they provided of evaluation reports of services used in making decisions about service improvements. Together the study explores the following research questions:

- What are the types of decisions for which administrators of public services in large academic libraries seek data?
- What methodologies are used to gather the data needed for such decisions?
- Do procedures for gathering, analyzing and interpreting such data reflect the established theoretical basis and protocols of the quantitative and qualitative methodologies used?
- How confident are administrators of public services in large academic libraries in their understanding of research methodologies needed in their work to gather data about users and uses of libraries?

The results of this study should be of interest to managers, academics, and educators to clarify what practitioners need to know about the data presented to them and which they commission or gather themselves, as well as to identify areas for which further research could inform managerial decisions. Ultimately, the provision of appropriate data and the capacity of service managers to effectively rely on them in making decisions should result in improved service quality and value of libraries.