



# Building an Impact Narrative

**Librarians at American University used a one-question survey to collect narrative data from library users and assess the library's support and services.**

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In early 2018, the authors conducted an assessment project to explore the impact of library support and services for American University students, faculty, and staff in the Kogod School of Business and School of Public Affairs. The project was inspired by a one-question, open-ended qualitative survey of library users at the University of Washington that was designed using critical incident technique (CIT). That survey asked respondents to share stories about their experiences with the library (Belanger, Faber, and Oakleaf 2017).

CIT involves the analysis of “significant instances of a specific activity ... as experienced or observed by the research participants” (Hughes 2007)—in this case, the use of the university library for academic work. The goal was to collect narrative data from library users about their experiences, not quantitative data like satisfaction ratings.

The AU survey instrument was developed in Qualtrics and distributed via e-mail as well as in fliers posted in the School of Business and School of Public Affairs buildings. Both the e-mail

and fliers emphasized that the survey should take fewer than five minutes of the participant's time.

We collected very limited demographic information from the participants, including their school affiliation and position (e.g., faculty member or graduate student). The focus of the survey was the following question: Can you think of a time that the library's staff, services, spaces, or resources had a positive impact on your academic work? If participants answered yes, they were asked to describe the experience in just a few sentences. If they chose no, they were asked to briefly comment on this response as well.

## Survey Findings

A total of 164 faculty, staff, students and alumni responded to the survey, and more than three-quarters (77 percent) indicated that the library had made a positive impact on their academic work. A large majority of participants (80 percent) were affiliated with the School of Business. Although the business and public affairs communities were targeted, participants from other schools were not prevented from taking the survey.

Fifteen responses were collected from those affiliated with other schools, such as the School of International Service and the College of Arts and Sciences. Almost half of the participants were undergraduate students.

Although the survey asked participants to think of a specific example of library support (i.e., the critical incident), many gave general answers in their descriptions. For example, an undergraduate noted, “Love the ‘chat with the librarian’ feature because it allows me to receive help even if I’m not in the library or late at night.” A graduate student observed that the library is a “good place to meet and do group projects.”

While these overall impressions (which often referred to physical library spaces) were useful, the comments were not explicitly connected to critical incidents. Fifty-three responses clearly described a critical incident, often involving a specific research assignment or paper.

Three major themes emerged in the survey responses: information literacy, research support, and library spaces. Both faculty and students described positive experiences with information literacy instruction:

- “[A librarian] spoke at our Senior Capstone class and explained citation software and other useful resources for doing research.”  
*undergraduate student, College of Arts and Sciences*



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- “Taught my masters class re: research tools available to all at AU.” *faculty, Kogod School of Business*

References to research support were also common:

- “Librarians were always equipped and ready to help me with research and gave me skills on how to effectively search for sources.” *graduate student, Kogod School of Business*
- “I’ve had two instances where I have been assigned to write research papers and I was required to cite books; when I went to the library, I asked the main desk for help. They were able to point me in the right direction and gave me call numbers for books that were relevant to my research topic. It was very helpful!” *undergraduate, School of Public Affairs*

The library as a physical space was particularly important to students:

- “Provides a nice place to quietly study in between classes. Especially

helpful for students who live in other parts of the city.” *graduate student, Kogod School of Business*

- “During finals, it’s a great place to study because it has all of the essentials that a student could ever need: printer, quietness, research resources, textbooks, extra pens/pencils, computers, study rooms, comfy chairs.” *undergraduate student, School of Public Affairs*

Of those who indicated that they could not think of a time that the library had supported their academic work, the majority stated that they simply did not need help from the library—not yet, at least. A few reported being self-sufficient in their use of library resources, interpreting the absence of human interaction as a lack of proactive assistance from the library. Though rare, a couple of participants reported asking for help and being dissatisfied with the service received. In one example, the librarians staffing the reference desk at time of need did not have the subject

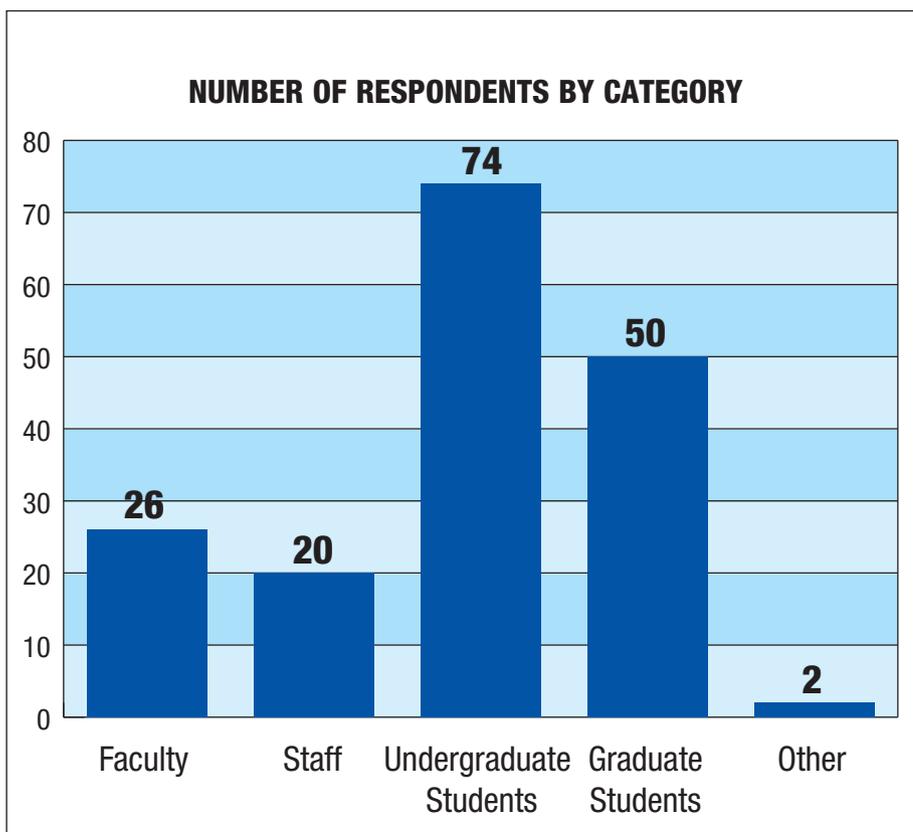
expertise the student required, which left the student feeling frustrated.

### Discussion

Students referred to other services available in the research commons in the library, including the Writing Center, general technology support, poster printing, and Blackboard support. Interestingly, some support services that are outside the library, such as the Career Center, were also referenced by survey participants. This may speak to the success of the research commons, where groups from across campus provide student support in the library space. From the students’ perspective, assistance is streamlined and available at point of need without having to differentiate which office does what. For service providers on campus, it may be difficult to assess the value of their services if students conflate all support with the library.

This type of assessment can provide a window into the library’s success in specific initiatives, even without a time-consuming, multi-part survey. For instance, the AU library has dedicated resources in recent years to improving textbook availability on reserve. Saving money on textbooks came up in several responses. An undergraduate business student explained that the reserve system “saves me upwards of a hundred dollars every semester as I don’t often need to pay for the textbooks.” This demonstrates that the library’s effort to improve services is meeting needs that are front of mind for our users.

The assessment project also indicated that additional outreach is needed, especially to graduate students, who are often introduced to the library only briefly during orientation and tend to be on campus only during non-standard business hours. Efforts to demonstrate the value of the library, even during a period of information overload like orientations, could help build relationships with graduate students.





# BUILDING AN IMPACT NARRATIVE

## Assessing Library Support for the Business School Community

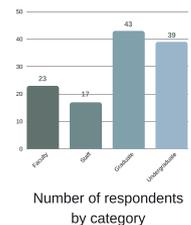
### The Project

This assessment project was designed to explore the impact of library support and services for American University business school students, faculty, and staff. Inspired by a project at the University of Washington (Belanger, Faber & Oakleaf, 2017), a one-question qualitative survey asked respondents to share stories about their experiences with the library.

### The Survey

The online survey was designed using critical incident technique, which involves the study of "significant instances of a specific activity as experienced...by the research participants" (Hughes, 2007). The first question asked: **Can you think of a time that the library's staff, services, spaces, or resources had a positive impact on your academic work?**

73% of the 122 respondents said yes. They were then asked to describe the experience (i.e. critical incident) in just a few sentences, or explain briefly why they answered no. Responses were coded by theme.



### RESEARCH SUPPORT

During my Marketing 300 class brand analysis, the business librarian was always open to talking with me and helping me with my paper. -Undergraduate

Amanda's participation in helping out the MBA students on their global projects has made a significant impact in improving the quality of their final research project. -Faculty

The AU online library resources were useful for researching answers for an assignment in my accounting class. -Graduate

### INFORMATION LITERACY

The business librarian has come in to several of my business classes to discuss the library resources. It was helpful to see what is available to me when I am conducting research or writing a paper. -Undergraduate

I am grateful to the library for speaking in my courses about resources. Amanda presented a lecture to my research class on how to conduct tax research. -Faculty

### LIBRARY SPACES

Provides a nice place to quietly study in between classes. Especially helpful for students who live in other parts of the city. -Graduate

Having a quiet area for you to be creative and come up with ideas for essays and projects helps massively. -Undergraduate

Good place to meet and do group projects. Solid working spaces to reserve. -Graduate

Belanger, J., Faber, M., Oakleaf, M. (2017, March). *3,000 library users can't be wrong: Using one open-ended survey question to demonstrate your library's value*. Poster session presented at the ACRL 2017 Conference, Baltimore, MD.

Hughes, H. (2007). Critical incident technique. In S. Lipu, K. Williamson, & A. Lloyd (Eds.), *Topics in Australasian library and information studies: No. 28. Exploring methods in information literacy research* (pp. 49-66). Wagga Wagga, Australia: Centre for Information Studies.

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### Conclusion

This assessment was designed to encourage participants to think about the library in terms of a critical incident or specific experience. The qualitative data collected provides an opportunity to gather impact stories that can help communicate the value of the library across campus. Themes from the data shed light on the ways the library and librarians have been successful in supporting the business and public affairs communities, and also help identify opportunities to improve existing services or try new support models. This type of assessment goes beyond satisfaction ratings to build narratives that help us

understand our patrons' needs and be more innovative in our practice. **SLA**

### REFERENCES

Belanger, J., M. Faber, and M. Oakleaf. 2017. "3,000 library users can't be wrong: Using one open-ended survey question to demonstrate your library's value." Poster session presented at the Association of College & Research Libraries 2017 Conference, Baltimore, Md.

Hughes, H. 2007. Critical incident technique. In Lipu, S., K. Williamson, and A. Lloyd (Eds.), *Topics in Australasian library and information studies: No. 28. Exploring methods in information literacy research* (pp. 49-66). Wagga Wagga, Australia: Centre for Information Studies.