

Welcome to the Library: Data-Driven Student Worker Empowerment

Elena Carrillo et Jung Mi Scoulas

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Using Evidence in Practice

Welcome to the Library: Data-Driven Student Worker Empowerment

Elena Carrillo

Clinical Assistant Professor and Head of Access Services

University of Illinois at Chicago, University Library

Chicago, Illinois, United States of America

Email: elena48@uic.edu

Jung Mi Scoulas

Clinical Assistant Professor and Assessment Coordinator

University of Illinois at Chicago, University Library

Chicago, Illinois, United States of America

Email: jscoul2@uic.edu

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Setting

The University of Illinois-Chicago (UIC) is a public research university in the United States. The UIC Library provides materials (in excess of 2.2 million items) and a wide variety of services in support of instruction and research at its split East and West Chicago campuses and at regional health sciences locations in Peoria, Rockford, and Urbana. The collection focus at the Richard J. Daley Library in Chicago is humanities, social sciences, and engineering. The university serves more than 33,000 undergraduate and graduate students across sixteen colleges.

The UIC Library employs 150 faculty and staff members as well as more than 100 student employees. At any given time, 20 to 25 of these student employees serve the Daley Library Access Services Department, which staff all four key public service points in the building. Daley Access Services is responsible for key in-person, non-virtual functions in the Library system including circulation, course reserves, interlibrary loan, and consortial resource sharing, as well as media assistance and other customer-oriented services.

The department also is responsible for two staffed door stations visible to anyone who

comes into the building. Patrons must pass these stations to enter the library. The additional service desk on the first floor is a combined service point for all circulation activities.

UIC boasts a campus on which there is no racial or ethnic majority, but this diversity alone does not determine whether students feel welcomed into campus spaces, including the Daley Library.

Problem

Undergraduate student employees responsible for staffing the entry stations at the East and West doors were originally trained to monitor the alarm system and check ID cards after hours. Their role was primarily security. Since 2016, the desire was to transition that role from one of “watchdogging” the doors to one of welcoming patrons in order to encourage library use. This decision was made primarily in conjunction with other efforts outlined in our strategic goal to “create and sustain an inclusive culture and a welcoming environment for all” (UIC Library, n.d.).

Library administration and operations managers had no previous data on patron attitudes about the library, only anecdotal feedback and opinions from staff and patrons raising concerns about their experience entering through doors. We were concerned about the impact of receiving no interaction or negative interaction when entering the library, especially on students who may experience library anxiety.

A study conducted by Jiao, Onwuegbuzie, and Lichtenstein (1996) shows that college students experience library anxiety and that “it is imperative that libraries are made as attractive, as welcoming, and as monochrome as possible. In order to achieve this, it is important that all library staff are friendly and professional” (p. 159).

We used data from iterative assessment to develop mission-focused training as part of

our effort to create a welcoming library environment toward more positive academic experience. As we stated in an article about this department’s experience with change management, “staff does work simply because they were told to, without any clear sense of why it is necessary or how it figures in the bigger picture.... Either they have forgotten the reason or it was never explained to them to begin with” (Carrillo & Gregory, p. 29).

Our goal was to empower student workers to do great work by connecting them to the mission of the library and to our diverse patron population. We also sought to reduce factors that might intimidate or discourage library use. We used data to assess and share the experience of patrons entering the library in order to reinforce a positive customer service attitude and identify areas for improvement.

Evidence

The Daley Library Access Services Department conducted a pilot survey during the fall 2018 midterm exam period to assess how patrons felt about the service they received when engaging with the library service points. The survey was paper based and made available over a two-week period for patrons who visited the library in person. The survey asked if patrons felt they had received what they needed and whether they were made to feel welcome. The survey also asked for any additional feedback about their customer service experience in an open-ended question.

A total of 291 participants completed the survey, and the results show that the majority of them (more than 85%) responded positively (see Table 1). We were surprised by the response because of previous mixed anecdotal evidence to the contrary. Our desire then became to *increase* the positive response percentage with a goal in mind of 90% or better.

We then decided to repeat the survey with a specific focus on the welcoming aspect of our

Table 1
Pilot Survey (n = 291)

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
I was greeted with a smile and made to feel welcome	85.91%	11.00%	2.06%	1.03%	291
I got what I needed.	87.97%	8.93%	2.41%	0.69%	291
All of my questions were answered.	89.69%	8.59%	0.69%	1.03%	291

customer service at our entryways. The goal was to hone in on first contact with the library as opposed to patrons potentially already familiar with our services. We simplified this new “door survey” to present a single statement: “I felt welcomed when I entered.” Patrons were then provided with four options to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement.

We received the results we expected from the first final exam period survey – that a significant percentage of our patrons (nearly 69%) agreed that they felt welcomed upon entering the library. The numbers could not tell the whole story of why the remaining 31% did not feel welcomed, however.

During the spring of 2019, we created a “secret shopper” type of observation log for staff to provide feedback on behaviour happening at our doors. Staff were aware of the observation period and made to understand that the purpose of the log was not disciplinary but to record evidence of patron’s perspectives on our service. We did not differentiate the findings in terms of which door the observed behaviour was recorded at, and no staff were associated with any behaviour or identified by name.

We recruited 10 staff members from a variety of library departments and asked them to record their observations in a Google form about their experience when they entered and exited the building for a two-month period

(January 21 to March 21, 2019). The survey specifically asked them to record “Welcoming” and “Negative” behaviours, as well as inviting them to make open-ended comments.

Table 2
Observation Log: Top 3 Welcoming Behaviours

<i>Top 3 Welcoming Behaviours</i> (n = 103)	%
Attendant made eye contact	90.30%
Attendant greeted me	53.40%
Attendant smiled at me	54.40%

Table 3
Observation Log: Top 3 Negative Behaviours

<i>Top 3 Negative Behaviours</i> (n = 71)	%
Checking cell phone	36.60%
Chatting	21.10%
Slouching	15.50%

For this observation log, observers recorded over 188 interactions at the doors. The majority of respondents reported welcoming behaviours, and as shown in Table 2, the top

welcoming behaviour was “attendant made eye contact” (n = 93, 90.3%) followed by “attendant greeted me” (n = 56, 54.4%) and “attendant smiled at me” (n = 55, 53.4%). The findings also indicate that negative behaviours included “Checking phone” (n = 26, 36.6%), “Chatting” (n = 15, 21.1%), and “Slouching” (n = 11, 15.5%), with cell phone usage being the top complaint by observers (Table 3).

Additional comments were reported in the open-ended response including “attendant was reading or working on assignments” (n = 9) and “looking down” (n = 5).

Implementation

As a result of feedback from the pilot survey, the observation log, and subsequent door survey results in 2018, a dedicated program of retraining was introduced. We called it a “student refresher,” referring to the work of student employees who primarily work at the doors.

This student refresher was conducted by the student employee managers in the Daley Access Services Department during a half-day session. During the session, the purpose of the assessment, the results, and the mission of the Library were emphasized—along with reminders for work expectations and library policies. The training included these elements:

- Reflection on the observation log comments

- Story-based scenarios to help staff recognize and model exemplary service
- Emphasis on a positive welcoming experience for a diverse patron population
- Goals to increase a welcoming experience for the spring final exam period

While it’s true that “sometimes tasks are handed down through the years to the point at which no one can really remember why they started doing them in the first place” (Carrillo & Gregory, p.29), it’s often the case with student workers, who have so many competing demands on their attention, that remembering the tasks from semester to semester can be a challenge.

Gathering and sharing evidence based data from these various assessment tools was the key to reinforce positive customer service habits, inspire student workers to make connections with patrons, and remind them of their critical role in the library.

Outcome

The door survey was conducted again during our final exam period in the spring of 2019. (We have conducted it every final exam period since December 2018). The results appear to corroborate the general positive experience of patrons entering the library.

Table 4
Door Surveys: Round I (n = 1,282), II (n = 870), III (n = 1,002)

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Round I	Dec-18	52.82%	16.15%	6.24%	23.79%
Round II	May-19	55.98%	23.62%	5.63%	9.77%
Round III	Dec-19	62.67%	21.36%	4.29%	11.68%

As shown in Table 4, the number of respondents who reported “agree” or “strongly agree” increased 10.6% from fall 2018 to spring 2019. A 15% increase is shown from fall 2018 to fall 2019.

We believe the intervention empowered student workers to empathize with the needs of our patrons and connect their work to the service mission of the library. Student workers responding to a survey after the spring 2020 refresher training indicated that they appreciated the evidence of the impact of their work on positive patron response. Despite critical feedback pertaining to some of the activities during the refresher, 100% stated that they believed the goal of a 90% welcoming satisfaction response from patrons was achievable. They also reported that they were committed to providing the excellent customer service necessary to reach the goal.

Reflection

While the process seems like it should have been straightforward, it was a challenge to introduce this work into a department without a strong culture of assessment. After several iterations of completing the survey work and retraining, student workers became more comfortable being evaluated at the service points. The initial skepticism was largely ameliorated by the positive reinforcement of the survey results. Through the assessment, students connected their work to the impact it can have on academic success and how it is valued as a cornerstone of the library mission. The future challenge will be to encourage a constructive competitive spirit that will continue the momentum of increasing the percentage of positive results. In order to accomplish this, we will continue to use evidence based practice to reinforce excellent customer service.

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