
Use of focus groups in a library's strategic planning process

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The use of focus groups to determine patron satisfaction with library resources and services is extensive and well established. This article demonstrates how focus groups can also be used to help shape the future direction of a library as part of the strategic planning process. By responding to questions about their long-term library and information needs, focus group participants at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas Library contributed an abundance of qualitative patron data that was previously lacking from this process. The selection and recruitment of these patrons is discussed along with the line of questioning used in the various focus group sessions. Of special interest is the way the authors utilized these sessions to mobilize and involve the staff in creating the library's strategic plan. This was accomplished not only by having staff members participate in one of the sessions but also by sharing the project's major findings with them and instructing them in how these findings related to the library's future. The authors' experience demonstrates that focus groups are an effective strategic planning tool for libraries and emphasizes the need to share information broadly, if active involvement of the staff is desired in both the development and implementation of the library's strategic plan.

INTRODUCTION

For customer-centered organizations like academic libraries, any good strategic plan will incorporate extensive input from patrons about library operations, re-

sources, and services. Libraries have used a variety of methods to gather information from and about their patrons, such as satisfaction surveys and usage data. However, few methods provide the wealth of information gained from actually conversing with patrons.

Consequently, many libraries have used focus groups to better understand their patrons. The intent of focus groups is usually to enhance staff knowledge about the needs of their patrons or to determine patron satisfaction levels with services or resources. This information can be used to address relatively short-term concerns by improving, developing, eliminating, or acquiring services or resources based on the input received from patrons.

The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas Library used focus groups in a way that is unusual for libraries. As part of our strategic planning process, we held focus groups to gather information about the *future* needs and wants of our patrons. Unlike the majority of focus group projects, which are prompted by targeted issues with a relatively short-term outlook, our library's goal was to gather broad patron input about all aspects of library operations, resources, and services for long-term planning. Within three months, we organized and held eight patron focus groups and one staff focus group. We then coached our library staff of fifty-five on the appropriate use of focus group data as a component of the library's overall strategic planning process.

As we planned the focus group project, we looked for articles to determine how other libraries incorporated focus groups into long-range planning. We searched Library Literature, ERIC, ABI/INFORM, HealthSTAR, and MEDLINE from 1990 to 2000. We located articles documenting the use of library focus groups to gather feedback on current services and to assess the needs of patrons [1, 2]. Although we found some community colleges and businesses using focus groups as part of their strategic planning process, all examples in the library literature described efforts to establish short-term goals [3–6]. We did not locate any libraries that had documented the use of focus groups as part of a comprehensive strategic planning process, although strategic planning has been suggested as a possible topic for library focus group discussions [7].

Because few examples were available in the library literature, we learned a great deal through trial and error about how to integrate focus groups into an academic library's long-term planning efforts. The result of the focus group project was ultimately very useful for us, and we hope to provide valuable information for other libraries seeking to engage in a similar process.

In this article, we hope to fill the gap in the library literature regarding focus groups and long-term strategic planning. This paper will demonstrate the usefulness of focus groups for strategic planning in a large academic medical library and describe the processes we found particularly helpful or problematic. We will supply detailed explanations of the following:

- the management of our focus group activities

- the integration of the focus groups into our strategic planning process

- the involvement of the entire library staff in both the process and the outcome

- the approach for analyzing and utilizing the collected data

We will also share our library's focus group findings, offer some cautionary words in the use of the data, and identify issues to be aware of when using focus groups for other library's strategic planning efforts.

BACKGROUND OF PROJECT

To begin our new strategic planning cycle, all staff were invited to two librarywide meetings in December 1999. We then formed an Environmental Scan Project Team to assess the library's current environment as well as broad events, trends, and relationships that might impact the library's future. The group gathered and evaluated information from a wide variety of sources, including professional organizations, corporate and government sources, published literature, colleagues at other libraries, and our own library staff.

While the environmental scan project proceeded, we invited all library staff to help create a collective values and philosophies statement. Because group values and philosophies serve as underlying themes to any strategic plan, it was important for staff to reach a common understanding of these influential factors.

As we worked to reach consensus on our values statement and complete the environmental scan project, the library's Focus Group Project Team began planning and conducting patron and staff focus groups in the spring of 2000. In the late summer, we completed the strategic planning cycle by inviting all library staff to multiple brainstorming and planning sessions. We used these sessions to incorporate staff expertise, ideas, and feedback about the library and its patrons. We also shared information obtained from both the environmental scan and focus group projects. Using a collaborative process, our final step was to create new goals that would guide and help prioritize our library's activities for the next five years.

By actively involving both staff and patrons in our new strategic planning cycle, we hoped to gather critical insight that would assist us in creating a well-designed, responsive, and visionary strategic plan. Ultimately, staff would implement any plan created, so it was essential that they have a stake in both the design of the plan and the outcome. While we recognized that library staff have considerable expertise about the behavior, wants, and needs of our patrons and while we had gathered massive amounts of quantitative patron usage data, we thought it would be invaluable to hear our patrons verbalize their own opinions, impressions, and ideas.

We recognized that focus groups could provide

thought-provoking synergy among the participants—an effect that could never be captured through traditional survey methods. Focus groups seemed like the perfect tool to stimulate our patrons and generate creative thoughts and excitement about the library's future. The opportunity for us to interact with our patrons and gather needed input, while also promoting our planning efforts and the library in general, turned out to be a winning combination.

CREATING THE FOCUS GROUP PROJECT TEAM

Patrons of our academic medical center library are quite diverse, and different subgroups have very different desires and needs. We knew the focus group project would have to be large to gain input from representatives from all groups. Our first action was to organize a Focus Group Project Team, consisting of five library staff members to lead this project. We also hired a professional evaluation specialist to guide us through the focus group process.

The external specialist brought well-rounded knowledge and experience soliciting, compiling, and evaluating patron data, as well as both credibility and objectivity to our process. This particular consultant worked as an evaluation specialist in a teaching support unit at another University of Texas health sciences center, and she was quite familiar with large academic library environments. In addition to moderating the focus groups, the specialist prepared abridged transcripts of each discussion, analyzed the data, and prepared a final report summarizing the major findings resulting from all of the sessions.

After much discussion, we elected to have Focus Group Project Team members serve as assistant moderators. Initially, we were concerned that the presence of library staff would inhibit open conversation among participants, but, in the end, we believe our decision to use staff as assistant moderators was appropriate. Staff were able to respond to questions that inevitably arose during the discussions, thus providing a service to the participants. In addition, by serving as recorders during the sessions, library staff were able to help the external moderator understand technical terms and jargon used (sometimes incorrectly) by participants. While we cannot know objectively if the presence of the library staff members affected the focus group conversations, the participants appeared to speak openly about their needs and desires relating to library resources, services, and operations.

SELECTING FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

We used a purposive sampling strategy to select the participants in our groups and concentrated on known patrons of library services and resources [8]. We felt

this group would offer the most valuable insight and have a personal stake in the long-range outcomes.

Since 1998, the library has maintained a record of interactions with our affiliated patrons in a patron-contact database. Interactions ranged from collection development suggestions to reference questions to complaints. By using names from the patron-contact database, we compiled a list of stakeholders and gatekeepers who had some history of interaction, positive or negative, with library staff. Invited participants included patrons from the areas of patient care, research, and education—our institution's three main missions. We followed standard recruitment practices outlined in the authoritative Focus Group Kit, a six-volume series edited by Morgan, Krueger, and King [9].

We held nine one-hour focus group sessions—eight with patrons and one with library staff selected from all major areas of the library. We attempted to get a total of ten individuals for each focus group, or a total of ninety participants. We achieved a fairly high success rate. Seventy-three percent of those agreeing to attend actually participated.

We kept the groups as homogeneous as possible, as suggested in the focus group literature [10]. We organized faculty, student, and staff groups consisting of clinical nurses, nurse researchers, hospital administration support staff, computing services staff, clinical nutritionists, and others. It was advisable to separate graduate, medical, and allied health students, because their library usage and needs tended to be very different. Despite our best efforts, our student focus groups did contain a mixture of varying student groups. Although we had some overlap and the students spoke very openly, we might have focused on different areas had we been able to conduct homogeneous graduate, medical, and allied health student groups.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

We designed our questions (Appendix A) to elicit information on one overriding theme: what will our patrons need and want from the library in the next five years? Following general guidelines for developing focus group questions, we opened with an introductory, icebreaker question all participants could answer comfortably. We followed with critical questions about long-range wants and needs and then closed with a summary question allowing patrons to supply any additional thoughts and ideas [11]. When necessary, we included a list of probes about specific topics related to the questions. In that way, we ensured each group addressed the same topics.

The primary purpose of the library staff focus group was to get staff's perceptions of *patrons'* needs. While an important question for strategic planning is "What will staff need to do their jobs well in the long term?,"

we did not use it as part of this focus group. Instead, we asked staff the same questions we asked the patron groups, edited slightly to gather staff's perceptions of our patrons' future wants and needs.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

Using the audiotape-based approach, the external moderator produced individual, abridged transcripts of each focus group session and summarized the key findings based on an analysis of all session results [12]. If patrons mentioned a particular theme or issue in four or more different focus groups, we considered this a major finding. The moderator also reported any findings that seemed specific to a subgroup. For example, students were very interested in extended library hours, while faculty were particularly interested in electronic journals.

Most of the findings (Appendix B) did not surprise the library staff. For the most part, the library staff focus group participants agreed with patrons on the most important issues facing the library and on some of the suggested means of best addressing those issues.

The findings confirmed what we had already discovered through other evidence gathered in preparation for the strategic plan. They also served to validate trends presently in place in the library. For example, much of the library's currently received print journal collection is now available in electronic format and accessible from remote locations. The focus group findings further proved that this decision conformed to our patrons' wishes.

One of the most unexpected findings was the fact that so many of the focus group participants, especially students, mentioned the importance of the physical library. A facility that is clean, comfortable, and open late at night will remain many patrons' preferred place to study alone or in groups, to use computers, to browse the newest journals, and to access certain nonnetworked online resources.

INTEGRATING THE FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS INTO THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

Along with the environmental scan, the focus group project was intended to raise awareness among staff about possible developments that might be in our future and to stimulate staff to factor in such possibilities as we pulled together new goals for the library. Consequently, it was essential that all staff be kept informed of the ongoing focus group activities in an attempt to build interest and enthusiasm for the project and, in turn, the larger effort the project supported. To accomplish this, the Focus Group Project Team distributed various provisional reports using numerous channels:

- email
- presentations of principal findings at the library's monthly staff meetings
- executive summaries

We posted the moderator's final report on the library's intranet, and, in the months following the release of the report, we emailed reminders to the library's management staff, encouraging periodic reviews of the final report.

These efforts to diffuse the results of the focus group sessions and to familiarize the staff with the data were extremely successful. "Focus groups" soon became bywords in the library. Staff frequently referred to the focus groups when justifying responses or actions.

After concluding the environmental scan and the focus group projects, we invited all staff to several planning sessions. Staff members were encouraged to review the data from both projects in advance. Based on the accumulated project information and our staff's own experiences and knowledge, we asked staff to identify what they felt to be the most important issues facing the library for 2000 to 2004. From those issues, we collaboratively developed goals for the library's new five-year strategic plan (Appendix C).

TRAINING STAFF IN THE USE OF THE RESULTS

The Focus Group Project Team recognized that they would have to train library staff regarding the nature of the focus group data and regarding appropriate responses to the data. Our experience showed that staff's eagerness to comply immediately with patrons' wishes expressed during the focus group sessions would be much greater than if these same wishes emerged out of a quantitative research study. The narrative approach used in reporting qualitative data and the incorporation of direct quotes seemed to impart more of the character and personality of the participants.

While the staff's responsiveness to our patrons' requests was laudatory, their ready acceptance of the focus group report had a downside. They were eager to act upon even the most incidental suggestions, forgetting that comments might represent the opinion of only a single individual. Therefore, we had to educate staff to concentrate on major findings that could be verified by other evidence or to pursue additional research to verify minor findings rather than respond to isolated patron suggestions. The focus group findings were simply one data set, which was intended to be combined with other gathered information for the purpose of developing a new strategic plan. We did not conduct the focus groups to ascertain patron satisfaction or dissatisfaction with specific operations, resources, or services.

Unfortunately, the focus group method has one major disadvantage that strategic planners must keep in

mind: it is too labor intensive and too expensive to carry out on a large scale. The gathered information reflects the views of only a small number of individuals. To judge the trustworthiness of the focus group findings, we had to compare them with other supporting data for the plan, such as surveys, environmental scans, brainstorming sessions, benchmarking, and literature reviews.

BENEFITS OF USING FOCUS GROUPS IN THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

Involving stakeholders was probably one of our best decisions, both in terms of the data we gathered and the goodwill we built on campus. Our focus groups raised the library's profile on campus and reinforced the perception of the library as a customer-oriented department. Patrons were eager to provide us with input and greatly appreciated the opportunity to participate in the library's planning process. We received several apologies from patrons who were unable to attend, and we received post-session letters thanking us for the opportunity to provide input. By simply asking for patron input, we communicated clearly that the library valued the opinions of its patrons and did not make plans in isolation.

Focus group data provided staff with a direct link to our patrons' vision of a desired future library. The patron feedback also provided us with a benchmark to compare to the staff's vision. We were gratified that the visions of both library staff and patrons agreed. By validating the staff's perceptions of patrons' wants and needs, staff became energized and eager to start the specifics of the long-term planning process.

Although our goal was to gather planning data for the next five years, the focus group participants inevitably raised short-range concerns. Instead of disregarding this additional input, we put this data to good use by quickly addressing a few, frequently mentioned concerns that were corroborated by other data. In one instance, we realized immediately that an earlier attempt to simplify the Ovid login procedure with an alternative, generic option had an unexpected consequence. Focus group participants now using a generic login had either forgotten or never discovered the added benefits of a personal login, such as online document ordering and automatic updates for saved search strategies. Focus group participants repeatedly suggested we offer Ovid capabilities currently available under the personal login option. By making a few changes to the login page, we quickly raised the visibility of readily available services that patrons clearly wanted.

In some cases, requested products and services were already under development, and the focus group responses simply confirmed our patrons' wishes. One example was the creation of an electronic document

ordering option that we long recognized was needed. Other efforts already in progress included specialized "toolboxes" of Web resources, which we were either developing or enhancing for targeted patron groups, such as those in the basic sciences and nursing fields.

We publicized the major findings of the focus groups to the campus through various print and electronic university publications, sharing our patrons' wishes for the library of the future. We also listed library initiatives already in progress that supported some of the participants' feedback, such as the electronic document delivery form and toolboxes. This sharing of information generated even more goodwill on campus, and we received positive feedback on the promptness of our responses to our patrons' input. One nurse, on seeing the revised and updated nurses' toolbox of Web resources, exclaimed that it was the first time in her professional career that she had seen follow-up and results from research collected from focus groups.

CONCLUSION

Our efforts to gather and incorporate qualitative data into our plan were highly successful and beneficial to our staff and the library as a whole. Staff seemed to be inspired by the wealth of qualitative data we obtained, which, in turn, created excitement for our overall planning process. Although the goodwill generated by involving our patrons could never be quantified, it certainly invigorated our staff and added value to our planning process.

There were educational benefits for staff as well. The Focus Group Project Team, for instance, gained experience designing and carrying out the focus group project. Other staff members benefited by participating in a genuine focus group. By sharing information about the entire process, all staff gained basic familiarity in the use of the focus group methodology and the appropriate use of the collected data.

By conducting the focus groups, we gathered some unexpected feedback that other evaluative methods might have never captured. We were certainly surprised by the passionate statements about the continued value of the physical library given the increased demand for and usage of remotely accessible, electronic resources.

The use of focus groups in strategic planning is a complex process, and we have learned quite a bit from our experience. Our staff taught us that the process is just as important as the outcome. If the staff's active involvement is desired in both developing and implementing a strategic plan, then it is essential that information be shared broadly in support of this process.

It is also important to keep the context for the focus group findings in mind and to identify an individual or group whose role is to keep waving the "context"

flag for all staff. Without this focus and coaching by the Focus Group Project Team, it would have been very easy for our original goals to get lost in the excitement of receiving data that could be used for many purposes other than long-range planning.

By selecting known users who had some familiarity with the library, we felt we increased our chances of gathering input focused on the library's future. Even with this approach, however, some of our participants still mentioned the need for resources and services currently offered by the library.

Our experience has taught us that feedback asked in this type of broad context could be unwieldy unless specific goals are set for the focus group activities at the outset and those goals are adhered to religiously. On the other hand, even if very specific goals are set for the type of desired feedback, the library should expect and be prepared to respond to participant input that may not support the intended goals. Patrons will offer other types of information regardless of the goals, and it would be wasteful not to capture those ideas. The distinction just needs to be clear.

Our use of focus groups as part of a major strategic planning cycle proved to be an extremely worthwhile endeavor that we encourage other libraries to pursue. We feel the benefits to our staff and the library as a whole far outweighed the challenges we experienced. The project energized our staff, provided compelling patron input, and was a public relations tour de force. These benefits, taken as a whole, argue persuasively for incorporating focus groups in a library's strategic planning process.

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Received April 2001; accepted July 2001

APPENDIX A

Questions posed

- How do you use the library?
- How do you see your information needs changing?
- What will you need from the library in the next five years?
- What are your frustrations in using the library?
- Do you have any other advice for us?

APPENDIX B

Key findings

- Patrons want as many services and resources online as possible.
- All patron groups desire off-campus access to online resources and services.
- Students want extended library hours.
- The physical library is still highly valued.
- The most requested additions to the physical facility were color printers and copiers.
- Patrons want library staff to play a leadership role in locating quality information and managing information.
- Information should be customized, uncluttered, and concise.
- Patrons want one-stop shopping for solutions to computer problems.
- Patrons are unaware of the full range of resources and services the library provides; multiple avenues of communication were recommended.
- Info-Library was popular with subscribers but is not well known as a vehicle for communicating timely library information. (Info-Library is our bimonthly electronic newsletter distributed by email.)
- Classes offered by the library appeal primarily to staff; faculty and students prefer assistance and training on demand.

- Overall service from library staff received high ratings.
- Patrons want to know each staff member's areas of expertise.

APPENDIX C

Library goals, 2000–2004

- expand our position as the university's primary provider of online and print biomedical information
- effectively meet the information needs of our customers by providing anywhere, anytime products and services
- provide an appropriate mix of electronic and paper resources and services based on customer feedback, quantitative and qualitative research, and reliable usage statistics

- increase customer awareness and usage of library resources, services, and opportunities
- anticipate customer and library information technology needs and facilitate campuswide solutions
- shift organizational energy effectively and rapidly toward librarywide priorities
- create and sustain an innovative, effective organizational structure that emphasizes open communication and continuous quality improvement
- encourage and empower staff to seek out educational and professional opportunities that support the library's mission
- recruit, develop, and retain a full staff of the most well-rounded and flexible individuals who are innovative, experimental, and visionary
- create a flexible library environment that anticipates and responds effectively to change