

## COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT AND ENGAGEMENT IN A COLLEGE LIBRARY

by Lisabeth Chabot

While participating in the Continuous Assessment/Continuous Improvement (CACI) Workshop series, the Ithaca College Library decided to employ some of the CACI assessment techniques and practices to engage our users in assessment. We posed the question “We are planning for the future – what would be in your ideal library?” The question was posted on the library’s website and a large public comment board on the library’s main floor. Additionally, librarians staffed a survey table in the Campus Center. As users completed comment forms, the library staff posted all suggestions and comments on the comment board. After the initial comment solicitation phase, the library asked users to vote for the ideas/comments that they believed should receive first consideration. Press-apply colored dots were used for the voting process, creating a visually engaging *Consensogram* activity. (Figure 1)



Figure 1: Poster encouraging students to vote for ideas.

From the CACI workshops, I knew that *Rapid Cycle Improvement* was a powerful tool. After collating the votes, I developed a table-formatted document that displayed the results, additional specific comments related to individual items, and most importantly, the library’s action/response with a timeline for addressing each item. (Figure 2). The document was enlarged and displayed as wall-sized poster in a prominent place in the library.

### USING COMMENTS TO MAKE INITIAL IMPROVEMENTS

Participant comments broadly fell into three categories: the library facility, library services, and library resources. (See Figure 2). The library was able to address several recommendations immediately. We automated patron notification of circulation matters, eliminating the use of paper notices. Although there was not the physical space to add a café, we were able to respond to a recommendation to provide vending machines. We revised our operating hours for the next semester, closing earlier on Friday evenings and opening earlier on Sunday mornings. To address the issue of noise, quiet floors were created and the smaller tables and individual carrels were moved to these floors. Larger group tables were deployed to the heavily trafficked main floors. The renovation of a residence hall provided the opportunity to recycle furniture that was going to be discarded. Seventy-five two-position chairs were refurbished and reupholstered, adding 20 percent more seating in the library. Library student workers were issued photo/name tags to facilitate their identification.

To address the library building’s aesthetic aspects, (mentioned by several users) the library collaborated with the Art and Art History departments. Initially, a colorful collection of large graphic prints was loaned to the library. When a plaster cast collection of Greek and Roman sculptures was to be returned to storage after a College gallery show, the library offered to permanently display several items.

The library worked with Information Technology Services (ITS) to have a standard set of software applications installed on all computers in the building. We also utilized user feedback to prompt ITS to provide authenticated user access to the wireless network on personal laptops. Additional laptop computers were purchased with end-of-year savings. While additional listening stations were not feasible, we did purchase additional headphone sets for concurrent use of the existing stations. ITS also provided surplus computers with limited functionality, which the library used to create library catalog-only stations on each floor of the building.

Figure 2: Ithaca College Library Patron Survey, Spring 2004

COMMENT CATEGORIES	# responses	Additional Specific Comments	Action/Timeline/Response
<b>PHYSICAL FACILITY</b>			
Café/Vending Machines	97	Coffee, Soda, Snacks	Install Vending Machines Fall 2004, Café will be included in Vision Plan
Quiet/ Quiet Space	60	More single study carrels, Restrict Cell Phone Use	Designate 5 <sup>th</sup> floor as quiet floor – Spring 2004 - Signage
More seating/comfortable furniture	34	Adjacent to windows	Capital Request 2004/05, 05/06
Group Study Space	32	Study Rooms, less open space	Capital Request 2004/05, 05/06
Building Aesthetic	5	Change Drab interior color scheme, More Plants, More Artwork	Work with Art Department to develop additional displays 2004/05
Quieter Closing Bell/Quieter Security System	2		Will review options
Better Temperature Control	2	Too Warm	Refer to Physical Plant Spring 2004
<b>LIBRARY SERVICES</b>			
List of Library multimedia items – online and print list	38		Fall 2004
Revise Weekend Operating Hours	27		Fall 2004
Eliminate Banner Page on Print Jobs	27		Print Management - ITS project
Circulate Journals	23		Some titles in high demand – use scanners
Change Machine	15		Switch to ID Express - ITS project
Library Student Worker Nametags	12		Fall 2004
Fax Machine	12		Use scanner and E-fax on Library PC's
Promote Collection	10	Linked to Calendar – e.g. Women's History Month resources	2004/05 – Library Web Group Project
Better Copy Machines	5		Color Copier Fall 2004
Increased checkout period for multimedia collection	5		Increased in 2003/04
More wireless access/functionality	3	Use of personal laptops, network access	Virtual Private Network – ITS project
Shorten/Revise Circulation Period	1	Music Scores	Create reference collection of scores Summer/Fall 2004
Automate Patron Notification	1	Reduce use of paper notices	Fall 2004
<b>LIBRARY RESOURCES</b>			
More Laptop Computers	41		8 additional laptops Fall 2004
More viewing stations	13	Viewing area with comfortable seating, Dual Listening, More Headphones	Additional Headphones 2004/05
More Books	4	Currency of book collection, Perception of collection inequality across curriculum	Collection Analysis Project 2004/05
More Movies on DVD	4		Collection Development 2004/05
Uniform software on all public computers	4		Fall 2004
More Music CDs	2	More Current titles	Collection Development 2004/05
More Library Catalog Only Workstations	1	PCs without MS Office	One PC on each floor for Fall 2004

## CONTINUING IMPROVEMENTS

When a Senior Class representative met with me to solicit ideas for the Class Gift, I was able to suggest the renovation of an under-utilized space to create three collaborative study spaces, a high priority in the user assessment activity. The library created a visual mockup of the re-envisioned space and our project was selected by student vote for the class gift.

Building on the momentum from the initial assessment project, we created a library website feature called "Talk Back" where library staff provide rapid responses to user inquiries. In many instances these inquiries have helped us to identify opportunities to clarify and/or refine library policies. We indicate that any recommendations for major changes in policies are reviewed on an annual basis as we prepare for the new academic year. All queries and answers are archived for public access. Students in particular appreciate the opportunity to have their concerns addressed in a timely manner.

We have also used the library's website to host a "Community Dialogue" on challenging issues such as Cell Phone Use in the Library. We describe the problem, provide the library staff's perspective and ask users to submit their perspectives. User comments are

summarized and a consensus approach to the issue is suggested. The full remarks of all comments are also provided. Again, students appear to simply appreciate the opportunity to be heard, as do the library staff and student workers.

The library continues to utilize user feedback to establish goals and priorities and to enhance services, resources, and the library facility. I encourage librarians to engage their users in assessment and to use the data for strategic planning and advocacy of the library. I frequently tell colleagues that users do not generally ask for the moon and the stars. They often submit achievable requests for items such as improved signage. If they do ask for the moon and the stars, we have data for planning and goal setting. When the library is able to act on a request, we send the message that we are serious about planning for the future and building the ideal library.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisabeth Chabot is the College Librarian at Ithaca College. She has worked as a cataloger, reference librarian, and library administrator over her 30-year professional career. She believes that a successful library is one that is used---both virtually and on-site, To that end, the Ithaca College Library is committed to

the development of 1) content that meets the diverse needs of its users 2) high-quality, personalized information services; 3) collaborative activities that enhance teaching and learning; opportunities for students and faculty to develop research skills; and 4) continuous improvement.