Undergraduate Focus Groups for Libraries’ Website Redesign

Moderated by Nancy Whelchel
on behalf of the Access Tools and Integrated Instruction sub-committee of the NCSU Libraries Web Redesign Committee
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Purpose

To solicit input for the Libraries’ website redesign from undergraduate students, the largest group of patrons; to see why and how undergraduates use the current website; to discover what they think about the current website, and what they would like to see on a redesigned website.

Method

Nancy Whelchel, coordinator for survey research at University Planning & Analysis, moderated two 90-minute focus group sessions on March 18 and 19 in the Harrelson Room at D.H. Hill Library. Seven undergraduates attended each session.

See Appendix A for demographic details about the students.
See Appendix B for the questions Nancy used to guide the discussion and other details about methodology.

Summary

- Homepage is too cluttered.
- Students asked for tools and services we already have. This suggests that not only is it hard to find things on the homepage, but on other pages as well.
- The catalog is central to students’ research, but they find it an unforgiving tool that yields zero or too many results.
- E-reserves was the most frequently mentioned reason for using the Libraries’ website.
- Some students will use online instruction or ask a librarian, but we should be aware that other students simply do not consider asking for help when they are using a website. These students are more likely to move on to another site or give up.
Findings

1. **Homepage is too cluttered.** Most, but not all, students agreed with our in-house consensus that the homepage has too many links and puts too much of a burden on users to read too much to find what they are looking for. As one student said:

“The layout is not search-oriented. Everything blends together. You have to read everything to find what you need.”

Students cautioned us, however, not to get too “flashy” as we revise the site.

2. **Catalog is central.** Many students talked about the catalog, some at surprising length. In the 1st session, most students agreed that they started their research in the catalog (that exact question did not come up in the 2nd session). Three important ideas emerged:

- **Hard to get a good number of relevant results.** Students want the system to be more forgiving and/or offer intelligent ways to revise to get a reasonable number of results. As one student said:

  “If you get too specific, you get zero hits. But if you’re too broad, you get too much.”

- **Limit searches to only available items.** Sometimes students have no interest in materials that are not readily accessible.

- **Help them sort!** Students want to be able to sort by location, call number, availability, and date. They also want the flexibility to choose how results are displayed.

3. **E-reserves.** First, e-reserves are popular and barely received one complaint. Second, every single student called the service “E-reserves.” No one said “reserves” or “course reserves” – to them it’s “e-reserves.”

4. **Students asked for things we already have.** They asked for online dictionaries and encyclopedias, e-books, options for sorting and displaying in the catalog, and help citing their sources. One student found out about Ask a Librarian during the focus group and wished she had known about it before. Another said the Database Finder is hard to get to, but it is a central link on the homepage.

5. **Students bounce around between websites.** They move among Google, the Libraries’ website, and other websites in search of the most efficient route to what they are looking for. Many of the students we saw are pragmatic and interested in finding information quickly and easily. They use one site to get good keywords to use in the other. If they can’t find what they are looking for, many leave quickly to try another site rather than looking for help with the first one. A few students said they are quite demanding of websites – if one fails to help them, they are unlikely to try it again later.

6. **Google rocks!** Students use Google and love it. The 1st session, especially, was a Google love-fest. They use Google as a brainstorming tool, both for finding actual results and for coming up with keywords and ideas to look for elsewhere. Google is forgiving where the the Libraries’ search tools demand precision and correct syntax and
spelling. As one student said:

“I start at Google because on the library [website] you have to type in the exact right words. If I don’t have specific terminology yet, it’s kind of hard to use the library website. [I go to the Libraries’ website] once I know what I’m looking for.”

7. **Contradictory thoughts on reference books:** On the one hand, many students agreed that they use Google, not the Libraries’ website, to look up facts. On the other hand, they asked for online encyclopedias and dictionaries.

8. **Interest in map of bookstacks.** Most students in the 1st session said they look for the map online. (This finding will be greatly affected now that the catalog tells patrons which floor of D.H. Hill a book is on.)

9. **Mixed thoughts on ‘Help.’** Some students expressed great satisfaction with reference services, while others said they do not use them and would not use them. Some expressed hesitation about the label “Ask a Librarian” – they wondered if “Help” would be better. One student was pleased to find out about Ask a Librarian but had never noticed it on the website before.
Recommendations

1. Reduce homepage clutter. Better site architecture and allowing for both searching and browsing could reduce the clutter.

2. Consider how to make catalog searches more often yield manageable result sets – neither zero nor too many (to the extent that we have control over this).

3. Consider allowing patrons to limit catalog searches to items that are not checked out (if this is not currently possible, ask Sirsi about it for the future).

4. Improve A) the catalog’s abilities to allow students to determine sort order and what fields are displayed, and B) the findability of the sort options in the interface.

5. Ensure Course and E-reserves are easy to find, and reconsider the label given that every student who talked about reserves called them “E-reserves.”

6. Provide easier access to online reference sources (encyclopedias, dictionaries, style manuals, etc.)

7. Advertise Ask a Librarian better, and reconsider whether other labels such as ‘Help’ would be more appealing.
Detailed Results

What are some of the reasons you use (or try to use) the Libraries’ website?

- Find a book, get call number (most students)
- E-reserves (most)
- Find journal articles (most)
- Find map of bookstacks (most)
- Use the E-journal Finder (a few)
- Read particular periodicals online, e.g., Science, Nature, Wall Street Journal (a few)
- Renew books (a few)
- Find books for personal reading (2 students)
- Use TRIPSaver and Satellite Shelving forms (2)
- Check Spotlight to find out about exhibits like Pulitzer (2)
- Reserve the Collaboratory (1)
- Check hours of D.H. Hill and branches (1)
- Find movies to watch in the Media Center (1)
- Ask a Librarian (1)
- Find textbooks (1)
- Use online Oxford English Dictionary (1)

Do you look for facts on the Libraries’ website?

In the 1st session, one student said, No, he uses Google for that. Other students nodded. In the 2nd session, one student mentioned the online OED.

When you use the Libraries’ website, do you use other sites as well? Where do you typically start?

Google was the most common starting point mentioned in both sessions.

One student in the 1st session said, “I start at Google because on the library [website] you have to type in the exact right words. If I don’t have specific terminology yet, it’s kind of hard to use the library website.” This student said she goes to Google for ideas, then goes to the Libraries’ website “…once I know what I’m looking for.” She said she uses keywords she found using Google to search the library (whether she meant the catalog and/or databases is unclear). A student in the 2nd session expressed the same idea.

Two students explained that the library (they probably meant the catalog) was a tough place to start because they got too many hits on their first searches. “If you come to the library first, you get – phew, a lot of stuff.”

Two students, one in each session, said they started with the Libraries’ website. One said, “My professors say we have to use journals. We’re not allowed to use magazines, so I never go to Google.” The other student used the catalog as her starting point. “Books in the library are more thorough and educational,” she said. Another student used this strategy: “I find old stuff in the library, then use that to find newer stuff on that topic in Google.”
Other starting points included Yahoo, PubMed and EBSCOhost (we don’t know if the students who mentioned the latter two got there through the Libraries’ website, although that seems very likely for EBSCOhost and not as likely for PubMed).

Regardless of where they start, many students said they bounce around from the Libraries’ website to Google and other sites, and back again while searching for what they need.

*What are some good things about the Library’s website (e.g., things you think work well and wouldn’t want to see changed)?*

- E-reserves (most students)
- Ability to search according to topic (most)
- Free access to databases, e-journals and magazines (a few)
- Ability to renew books online (a few)
- Ask a Librarian (2). “It’s great because when you’ve been looking for stuff on a topic for an hour and you can’t find it, they’ll help you,” one student said. “You’re at home and you don’t have to go to the library,” she said, describing Ask a Librarian LIVE, the chat service. “It’s really cool – they can show you where to go.”
- Whole article online, convenient, view without coming to library (1).
- Information is accurate (about books, availability) (1).
- TRIPSaver (2)
- Simplicity of site – “nothing too flashy” (a few). One student liked the left-side list.
- “I like how search is the first thing on the page, how you don’t have to scroll to find that,” one student said.

*What mistakes should the Libraries avoid making as it changes its website?*

- Don’t use paid results (ads), or make students pay for resources. Warn people ahead of time if a subscription is required (1).
- Don’t get too flashy – in general as well as literally, as in the Flash program (1).
- Don’t offer search boxes that bring back too many irrelevant results. One student talked about searching for “dog food” in a search engine and getting back every page that contains "dog" and every page that contains "food."

*What are some things about the Libraries’ web site that really don’t work well for you?*

- Too much information, too many links on the homepage (several):
  - “On the NC State homepage, you have to hunt and peck to find anything,” one student said. “It’s just trial and error – there’s so much stuff. The library is the same way.”
  - One student suggested that if we have 50 links, divide the page into 5 sections with 10 links under each.
  - “The layout is not search-oriented,” one student said. “Everything blends together. You have to read everything to find what you need.”
- “There’s a lot of stuff going on on that left side,” one student said.
- “I’m wondering why there’s that huge blank space on the right?” one student said.
- Sometimes hard to find E-Reserves (1).
- E-Journals only have more recent articles (1).
- Catalog searching frustrations:
o “If you get too specific, you get zero hits,” one student said. “But if you’re too broad, you get too much.”
  o “I have trouble narrowing down my search,” one student said. “I get too many irrelevant hits.”
  o Hard to find fiction, like new books. OK if you know the title or author but hard otherwise (1).

- Database Finder is hard to get to. Provide more guidance for beginning researchers to get to the right place (1).
- E-journal Finder doesn't take you to article, drops article information (1).
- Dead links.
- Sometimes systems [probably they meant individual databases or e-journals] are down and you can't access things from home (1).
- Limitations on how many patrons can use a database at one time. “They should do something about that,” one student said emphatically, noting that he had run into this problem right before an assignment was due.
- A technical detail about E-reserves, noticed by one student: If you open one document, it opens in a 2nd window. If you open another document, it takes over that 2nd window, so you can’t easily open more than 1 e-reserve at a time.
- “Sometimes TRIPSaver can take almost a month,” one student said.
- One student wants a full list of movies in the Media Center instead of having to search the catalog for movies one by one.
- It can be hard to search for Microforms (1).

What do you do when you can’t find what you’re looking for? What other websites do you turn to? Do you use help features on the Libraries’ website (e.g., Ask a Librarian, How do I...?, catalog help screens, etc.)?

- “They have those people standing at the desk in the computer lab,” one student said, referring to the Reference Desk at D.H. Hill Library. How’s that for humbling?
- One student was enthusiastic about Ask a Librarian LIVE, our chat service, as a way to get help. “You don’t have to stand in line. They give you priority. If they don’t know the answer, they go ask someone else and get the answer. They won’t tell you to ‘go to another desk.’”
- One student said she sought out subject specialists.
- Others expressed a reluctance to ask for help of any kind. “It seems like too much trouble to ask someone for help when there are [other] sites you don’t need help with,” one student said. “I’d just close it and go to another site.” This student added that if a site makes him give up, he will not come back to it for future searches.

Would anything get you to ask for help? Nancy Whelchel asked. “It’s like [men] asking for directions,” the student joked. “It’s just not going to happen.” Later he said, “If it was called ‘Help,’ I might use it. ‘Ask a Librarian’ sounds like you have to call someone.” Another student joked about not needing to go to all the trouble of asking for help: “Sometimes they [professors] give you a mulligan – they drop the lowest grade.”

In the 1st session, 5 of the 7 students agreed that they didn’t ask for help from librarians.

The 2nd session was quite different, with 4 or 5 saying they had asked questions at a reference desk. One student said, “You should advertise ‘help’ better. I never saw Ask a Librarian before. Had I known, I would have used it a lot more and been less confused.”
A perfect Libraries’ website would offer:

- Fewer choices on the homepage. “Put stuff under subheadings” (several students). One of those heading should be “Search,” one student suggested.
- Help with keyword searching (several students). “It should tell you what to type in to narrow it down,” one student said. Another student liked the way search engines ask, “Did you really mean…?” Suggestions on right: ”You could do this...”
- Online encyclopedias and dictionaries (2).
- Help creating citations the various formats – APA, MLA, etc. (2).
- E-books with a good search engine (1).
- More fine-grained groups of E-Journals than ”Mass Communication” – subcategories under “Mass Communication.”
- A “Top 10” list of books that librarians could choose, like at video stores, or that students could choose and vote on (1).
- More prominent FAQ – don’t bury it under Ask a Librarian.
- Knowledge base: One student asked for a search box with something like Google’s calculator function. A second student said, “Remember, this is a library website.” The first student insisted that his request was reasonable because the kinds of things he imagined typing into the search box – conversions, physical equations, raw facts – were the sorts of things found in reference books, and therefore the sorts of things a library search engine should know.
- Information about other cultures, one student suggested. E.g., African-American Reading Room. Or have special events, e.g., movies in Hindi. Or three different cultures, three movies.
- An enhanced catalog. Students in the 1st session got into a long conversation about the display of results from keyword searches. Some asked to see only titles so more results would fit on one page (this option exists, but these students have not found that feature). Then another student said she wouldn’t want just titles; she wants to keep call numbers on the results page. Another student could see her point, and argued for showing titles and call numbers. “The default should be less – right now you’re showing me 7 things, at least.” A third student said, “It should let you choose what information you want displayed.”

Other desired catalog enhancements:
- Shopping cart – the ability to mark items, go back to them, and print.
- Ability to sort catalog search results by location, call number, availability, and date (several students).
- Results screens with terms you searched for highlighted.
- “Maybe it could offer to search only books that are available,” one student said. Here Nancy Whelchel made a friendly joke about the laziness of not even considering books that are temporarily checked out. “Is that they way you students work?” she asked. Most students in the 1st session nodded or said “yes.”
- Show availability of books more clearly – red if a book is checked out.
- A way to search microforms (1).

- And, of course, one student said, “I like the homepage the way it is. I can get to everything. I like the way it’s organized – services, about the libraries...”
Appendix A: Participants

14 undergraduates.
Majors: architecture; biology (2); biochemistry; biomedical engineering; business; chemistry; communications; computer science (2); English; food science; history; and mechanical engineering.

Appendix B: Method details

Nancy Whelchel used the following questions and discussion points to direct the conversation:

- What are some of the reasons you use (or try to use) the Libraries’ website? Do you use the Libraries’ website to look for facts? When you use the Libraries’ website, do you use other sites as well? Where do you typically start?

- What are some good things about the Library’s website (e.g., things you think work well and wouldn’t want to see changed)? What mistakes should the Libraries avoid making as it changes its website?

- What are some things about the Libraries’ web site that really don’t work well for you? What do you do when you can’t find what you’re looking for? What other websites do you turn to? Do you use help features on the Libraries’ website (e.g., Ask a Librarian, How do I…?, catalog help screens, etc.)?

- Describe a perfect Libraries’ website.

Josh Boyer and Steve McCann took notes both days. Linda Saunders took notes on a flip-chart for the 1st session; Kelsey Libner did so for the 2nd session.