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Webmasters, web policies, and academic libraries: a survey

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to gauge how university libraries are currently handling web policies as well as to see if the role of the library webmaster has evolved.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey was created and an invitation to participate was sent to various electronic discussion lists. Most of the questions were quantitative and were coded to find trends in the responses.

Findings – Most of the respondents either are reference librarians or webmasters, and they are mostly staff or faculty. As increasing numbers of resources become available electronically, university library web pages are going to continue to play an important role in academia. Survey responses indicate that most libraries (52 percent) have developed a web policy and 64 percent have formed a web advisory committee to maintain their web content. Responses also indicate the desire for further training in keeping up with the new technologies and the increased workload due to the time spent in maintaining web pages.

Research limitations/implications – Actual policies could have been collected but it seemed beyond the scope of this paper.

Practical implications – Developing a policy or forming an advisory committee is desirable as technology becomes more sophisticated and content and resources are proliferating, as seen in the trends indicated by this survey. Therefore, the amount of the web work can be decentralized and should be shared by all parties involved in order to maintain and enhance the quality of the library's web site.

Originality/value – While there have been many articles written about the role of webmasters in libraries, there appear to be few that deal with the policies of the library itself in regard to creating content for the web. This paper would be useful to academic librarians dealing with web policies.

Keywords Internet, Academic libraries

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

While there have been many articles written about the role of webmasters in libraries, there appear to be few that deal with the policies of the library itself in regard to creating content for the web. This paper reports the results of a survey of academic librarians, particularly webmasters, who were asked about their library's web policies. The goal of the survey was to gather information on how academic libraries deal with web site policy. Who develops the web policy? Are webmasters responsible for designing the web site as well as creating the content? Answers to these questions could help libraries develop their own web policies.

Literature review

The library webmaster is a relatively new position, as compared to that of reference librarian or serials cataloger. The web phenomenon really started a little over a decade ago. Although libraries were quick to adopt this new technology, the web pages that

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were initially created were not very sophisticated. The person who created pages did so as extra work. Typically, the first people to start coding web pages were those who could install the software necessary to host the pages. HTML had to be coded by hand. As the hosting software became more prevalent and coding software became available, non-technical people could start producing web sites. Once this occurred, a clash over content and who was allowed to modify content became more common and it was soon necessary to have policies to settle these conflicts.

An early survey of the role of the webmaster dealt with the business sphere and not academic libraries. Pieter W. van der Walt and Pieter A. van Brakel (1997) wrote "The webmaster: a new player in the information centre's online team". In 2000, they published "Task analysis of the webmaster: results of an empirical study" (van der Walt and van Brakel, 2000). Both articles deal with the role of the webmaster in the business sphere and not the library. However, in the former, they write:

> An area where early Web expertise could be found was the academic, and specifically university, environment. It is also here where, in the realm of research, people demonstrated the motivation, abilities and in most cases the facilities to explore and invest in Web site activities (van der Walt and van Brakel, 1997).

In the latter article, they surveyed 100 webmasters from *Fortune Magazine*'s Global 500 list of organizations. They found that the majority of webmasters had been employed in their position for less than two years. They found that the emphasis on programming and technical aspects of server administration had shifted to management of web sites in their second survey (van der Walt and van Brakel, 2000). They determine that:

> . . . it could be established that multidisciplinary skills are required in any webmaster's office. Also that the webmaster and team play an important role in establishing and ultimately maintaining an organization's online presence on the World Wide Web (van der Walt and van Brakel, 2000).

Lingle and Delozier (1998) surveyed those libraries that had their web policies available on the web, and found that no two policies were the same, but they did share some common themes. "Each library obviously will address the issues that are important and relevant to the local operation, as well as those that often are determined by the larger 'parent' institution"(Lingle and Delozier, 1998). Some of these common themes are: mission statement; target audience; scope and content; evaluation and selection criteria; maintenance; administration; training and support and document creation and design. The authors suggest that a library's web site should be managed like its collection, and that the "principles of good collection development should be applied to both electronic and printed formats"(Lingle and Delozier, 1998).

One survey specifically concerned with the role of library webmasters was conducted by Mary K. Taylor (2000). She surveyed library webmasters whose institutions are Association of Research Libraries (ARL) members and had 82 responses (Taylor, 2000). Her survey did not cover the policies and committees involved. (See Johnson, 1998; Church and Felker (2005) for a discussion of committees.) A total of 78 percent of her respondents had library degrees and only 10 percent had undergraduate degrees in computer science. Most respondents were in reference or systems and 30 percent had web or WWW or electronic or digital in their title; 20 percent were administrators. One-third were assigned the job and one-quarter volunteered for the position. Of the respondents, 85 percent were responsible for web decision making but shared the responsibility with others, including committees.

Two-thirds were guided by a written policy and over half also had to follow the policies of their institution. Of the respondents, 81 percent worked with a web team or committee and over 80 percent were very satisfied or satisfied. A total of 27 percent disliked the fact that they did not have enough time to devote to the web.

Still's (2003) *The Accidental Webmaster* is aimed more at someone volunteering to do a web site rather than at librarians maintaining their library's web site. The second chapter, entitled "First things first: setting policies", deals with the importance of having a written policy and a web advisory committee as well as a mission statement (Still, 2003). However, this chapter does not go into great depth as to how to create a policy. Also, a web policy for a PTA website is going to be different than one for an academic library.

Fred Beard and Rolf L. Olsen's (1999) article, "Webmasters as mass media gatekeepers: a qualitative exploratory study", does not deal directly with policy, but it is interesting as it posits that webmasters' personalities and attitudes influenced how they mediated messages as do other types of media gatekeepers, such as journalists. The authors cite a study of television stations that found that decision-making seems to be a group process and that it was not always the same number of people involved (Beard and Olsen, 1999). In their study of eight university webmasters, they found that "several Webmasters said there were few institutional policies governing the content and appearance of their sites" (Beard and Olsen, 1999). However, they still seek participation and approval from committees, colleagues, supervisors and others. Considering they only interviewed eight webmasters, it might be that their sample was too small.

Survey

The purpose of this survey was to discover how academic librarians deal with policy for their web site and their role in policy making. Webmasters who did not work in a library were not surveyed as the purpose of this paper was to gain librarians' perspectives. Although there are staff who work on library web sites who are not part of the library, and their experiences may be similar to those who work for the library, it was beyond the scope of the paper to survey them. Their views are as legitimate as those who work in libraries. While a few staff did reply, the majority were librarians. The survey instrument was created using WebSurveyor, a program that allows one to create web-based surveys. A list of the questions used in the survey were:

(1) What is your title?
(2) Is this a staff, faculty, or administrative position?
(3) How long have you held this position?
(4) How long have you been at your current institution?
(5) What are your web duties?
(6) What is your department?
(7) Who do you report to?
(8) Have you always served as webmaster (or title) at this institution?
(9) What percentage of your work is spent on the web per week?
(10) What education/training have you had?
(11) What other duties beyond the web do you have?

(12) What library committees do you serve on and how do they relate to your duties as webmaster (or whatever your title is)?
(13) How much control and/or authority do you have over your library's web site?
(14) Who has final approval for web content?
(15) Is there an advisory committee for the web? If so, how are the members selected? How much authority does this committee have?
(16) Is there a web policy for the library? If so, who developed it? Does it conform to the university's policy?
(17) Did you have to seek approval for web content and design from the entire library (faculty/staff)?
(18) Who is allowed to modify the web at your library?
(19) Do you have staff help for managing your library's pages?
(20) How do you liaise with the university web master?
(21) Does your web page have a unique logo (different from the university) for the library, if any?
(22) If yes, who designed the logo?
(23) Does (must) the library web design follow the university's web design?
(24) Overall, my experience as webmaster at my library in the past year is:
(25) My work experience with the web would be better if...

An invitation to participate was sent to three lists, WEB4LIB, ASIS&T, and LITA since they are geared toward academic librarians who deal with computing in libraries. A total of 60 complete responses were received, but due to the nature of lists it's hard to report with any accuracy the return rate. The return rate may seem very low, but it should be borne in mind that the number of webmasters is a small percentage of the list subscribers.

Analysis of results

The survey started with a question, 'What is your title?' Interestingly, no one's title is strictly webmaster, although one respondent wrote "Systems Analyst III/Webmaster". The closest to webmaster is "web services librarian" or "web development librarian". as 18.3 percent identified themselves. Some of the Other responses ranged from "Digital library specialist" to "research assistant" as seen in Table I.

	Percent
Web services librarian	18.3
Reference librarians	21.7
Electronic resources librarians	10
Information services librarians	8.3
Graphics designer	1.7
Heads of systems	15
Systems staff	10
Administrators	6.7
Other	8.3

Table I. Job title

This result is interesting, as Taylor's earlier survey found more systems personnel than reference librarians. This shows a trend of shifting away from technical people managing content on the web.

Respondents then were asked if their position is considered staff, faculty or administrative. A total of 40 percent replied "staff", 33.3 percent faculty, 9 percent administrative, and 15 percent classified themselves as Other. A few respondents indicated what they meant by "Other" and listed such classifications as "professional, non-faculty" or indicated that librarians were their own unique position at their institution.

The survey also asked how long respondents held their current position and how long they had been at their institution. The mean number of years for the position was 4.7241 whereas the mean for the years spent at the institution was 7.4276. This would suggest that many of the people's jobs changed and they did not start out working on the web.

The next survey question dealt with respondents' web duties. As indicated in Table II, 13.3 percent mention coding; and while some were clear they meant some kind of CGI programming or database-driven sites, others might have just meant coding HTML.

Typical comments were, "I maintain and design the library web pages along with the library's webopac. I delegate work out to some library departments who do work on their own pages – i.e. reference department." and "[I] Migrate over content to new template/design, ensure XHTML and ADA compliance, instruct staff on how to migrate their pages (using Dreamweaver or hand coding), contribute to intellectual content, and participate in overall site accuracy and to metadata struction/formation."

Next, respondents were asked what department they are from. Slightly over 36 percent are from Systems, 26.7 percent are from "Other," 23.3 percent are from Public Services, and 13.3 percent are from Technical Services. Three of the Others indicate they are part of Systems, although a name other than Systems is used, such as Digital Library Services or Information Technology. Three indicated they are in Library Administration; three also indicated that they do not belong to any particular department.

Respondents were asked who they report to, and the results are shown in Table III. Please note that it might be possible that a Library Director and a University Librarian are the same position. If a campus has more than one library, there could be one University Librarian and several Directors. Over 23 percent of respondents reported to various people whose titles did not fit neatly into any one category. One respondent reports to the "Web mistress".

The survey asked if respondents had always been the webmaster at their institution, 58.3 percent said no, 41.7 percent said yes. This contradicts the results from question numbers 3 and 4, which seemed to indicate that most people had been at their

Table II. What are your web duties?

	Percent
Maintain the web site	68.3
Maintain their library's web OPAC	16.7
Maintain the web server	11.7
Coding	13.3
Created graphics for the web site	3.3
Train others	10

institution longer than they had been webmaster. To add further confusion, some comments for this question were: "I have served in this capacity from time to time." And "I am not the Webmaster." Not all of the respondents answered every question, which may account for the discrepancy.

The question "What percentage of your work is spent on the web per week?" generated a mean of 40.86 percent per week (N = 58) (see Figure 1). This indicates, at least based on Taylor's survey, that webmasters are spending more time on the web. It also indicates that the respondents are expected to do work beyond just the web. This is a marked increase over what Taylor found in her survey where her respondents stated that they spent fifteen or less hours on the web.

Next, respondents were asked what training and/or education they had received. Over 60 percent stated they have a Master of Library Science degree (although this degree was mostly referred to as a MLS, there were a few variations). Furthermore, 11.7 percent have non-library degrees, such as a BFA or MBA, and 3.3 percent stated they have a PhD, but did not indicate in what field. Beyond their degrees, 21.7 percent indicated they were self-taught, and 36.7 percent stated they had classes and/or training in HTML coding.

"What other duties beyond the web do you have?" The results found in Table IV are interesting but not surprising. It seems that more reference librarians share some web responsibilities than other types of librarian. Respondents were allowed to comment on their responses for this question.

	Percent
Library director	33.3
University librarian	8.3
Head of reference	13.3
Systems head	8.3
Assistant director	13.3
Other	23.3

Table III. Who do you report to?

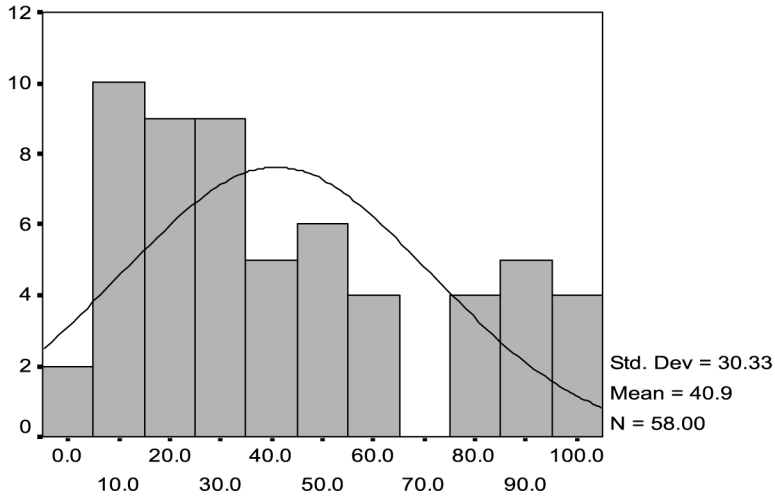

Figure 1.

One of the systems people wrote: "if it plugs into a wall, I have responsibility for it. Also, if it requires logic . . . " The "Other" responses ranged from "Management of the Information Wall notices (done via images projected on a plasma screen)" to "Occasional print or other promotional work. Some light programming (javascript, etc)" and "training/instruction, metadata quality control".

Respondents were next asked what committees they serve on and how they related to web work. Over 35 percent were so unique that they fit into the Other category. Answers ranged from "IAC – Internet Access Committee. Serves as a steering committee for oversight of library web site maintenance and development. Chaired by the head of public services" and "Public Interface Design – group that I chair that helps me make decisions about the library's web presence. Assessment Council – some of the assessment work involves assessing usability of the library Web site." Table V lists various committees that respondents served on. Most of the web-related committees appear, from their description, to have about the same function.

"How much control and/or authority do you have over your library's web site?" Slightly over 53 percent indicated that they have total control, 23.3 percent said they have minimal control, 5 percent stated they have about 80 percent control, and 18.3 percent indicated that their amount of control over their web site was variable. Some of the responses were humorous: "Depends on availability and state of mind of Library webmaster (really!)"; "I have root access and absolute power!"; "That of a strong personality – I nag people until I get my way." and "Not enough!"

Respondents were next asked who has final approval for web content. Over 26 percent indicated that they have final approval. Table VI has the complete results.

Some of the Other responses ranged from "Good question. We're restructuring now that the previous Web Manager has left" to "Depends on the page. If it is a second or third level page (i.e. not the top page), then the primary content owner for that page along with other stakeholders. Any major changes on the top page must go through the Library Operations Committee, which is all the managers."

Table IV. Duties beyond the web

	Percent
Reference	50
Systems work	36.7
Cataloging	1.7
Administration	3.3
Electronic resources	5
Other	8.3
Entirely web	1.7

Table V. What committees do respondents serve on?

	Percent
Web task force	3.4
No committees	16.9
Web committee	16.9
Web team	11.9
Search committee	5.1
OPAC committee	5.1
Departmental meetings	5.1
Other	35.6

When asked if there was an advisory committee for the web, and if so, how the members are selected, 63.8 percent said there is an advisory committee, 31 percent said no, and 5.2 percent indicated Other. For the Other responses, some respondents indicated that there was an advisory committee but that it had folded. An example response is, "Sorta. There was when I got here, and I was to be ex-officio. But no one else on the committee had any motivation for improvements, ideas, or any technical expertise, so it was abandoned for lack of interest. I have no idea how they were picked." For those who said yes, 18.9 percent of the members are volunteers, 48.6 percent were selected or appointed, 8.1 percent are representatives of their department within their library, and 24.3 percent are unknown or the respondent did not answer. As for how much authority these groups have, 32.4 percent have total control, 18.9 percent have minimal control, 10.8 percent control policy and design, and 37.8 percent are unknown or the respondent did not indicate the amount of authority.

Respondents were also asked if there was a web policy for the library. If so, who developed it? Does it conform to the university's policy? Slightly over half do have a web policy, as indicated in Table VII. Most respondents indicated that this responsibility is carried out by a web committee, but the majority indicated they must follow their university's policy.

Some of the responses seem to indicate that not everyone is happy following the university's guidelines: "None formal, just that expressed by web committee" and "Yes. Me, with input from the Web Task Force. Yes, but only the limits of it. We don't conform to the whole style of it for a whole slew of very valid reasons."

Next, 86.7 percent of the respondents stated they do not have to seek approval for web content and design from their whole library. Respondents were allowed to make comments, and 62.5 percent said they do ask for feedback and/or comments from the library.

	Percent
Respondent	26.7
Library director	20
Head of unit	13.3
Webmaster	23.3
Other	13.3

Table VI. Who has final approval for web content?

	Percent
Web policy	54.2
No web policy	39
Other	6.8
Web committee formulated policy	37.5
Not known	9.4
Respondent formulated policy	25
Webmaster developed policy	9.4
Follow university's policy	18.8
Policy conforms to university policy	93.5
Policy does not conform to university policy	6.5

Table VII. Web policy

In response to the question, "Who is allowed to modify the web at your library?", there is a wide range in what different libraries allow (see Table VIII). It is interesting to note that there is an almost equal amount for both sides of the spectrum, from anyone to just a few people.

Some responses were hard to classify. For instance, "Permissions vary. The web team within the systems dept. has the most freedom to take content live. Most systems employees also have access. There are also web authors from every dept. in the library, and quite a few in Reference, including myself, who do extensive web authoring work."

Next, respondents were asked whether they have staff who help manage their library's web pages. A total of 55 percent said yes and 45 percent said no. Respondents were allowed to make a comment, and some did, but none formed any pattern. A few indicated that they could use staff help if they could get it.

When asked, "How do you liaise with the university web master?", only 15 percent said they did, but usually when they had questions for the university web master. See Table IX for the results.

A few respondents had negative things to say about their university's webmaster. One respondent wrote, "Not well – they have their own CMS, and we just have a similar design but our own server. We found their CMS too restrictive for our needs, so we fought to keep our own site." Some of the Other answers were "She is my manager and I work with her every day." and "We house our own server and web site – the university webmaster has no 'permissions' to do anything on our site. We make reasonable attempts to conform to the main site look and feel."

Next, respondents were asked if the library's web site has its own unique logo, and 51.7 percent said no whereas 48.3 percent indicated yes. Respondents were allowed to leave comments, but no pattern emerged from them. Some of the comments were, "I did not want the library to have a unique logo or identity." and "right now yes, but not for long with the newly redesigned pages."

If the respondents' library had a unique logo, who designed it? Table X lists the results. It appears most used personnel within the library or at least the institution.

Table VIII. Who is allowed to modify the web?

	Percent
Respondent	31.1
Web team or group	16.4
Systems	3.3
Anyone	13.1
A few people	14.8

Table IX. How do you liaise with the university webmaster?

	Percent
Do not or N/A	22
Rarely	13.6
Regularly	15.3
E-mail	10.2
Only with questions	15.3
Via committee meetings	13.6
Other	10.2

	Percent
Respondent	14.7
Unknown	5.9
Graphics designer	20.6
Webmaster	2.9
Staff	29.4
Marketing group	5.9
Web group	2.9
University-level	11.8

Table X. Who designed the logo?

Respondents were asked if their library's web design follows their university's design, and 56.7 percent said no and 43.3 percent said yes. Again, comments were elicited and they varied, from "Web design standards are minimal here" to "Not currently, but will do imminently" and "They'd like us to, but we refuse."

Respondents were asked how their overall experience as webmaster at their library in the past year was. Over 9 percent were extremely satisfied, 32.8 percent were satisfied, 39.3 percent were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and 9.8 percent were very dissatisfied. No one was extremely dissatisfied.

Finally, respondents were asked "My work experience with the web would be better if . . . " Not all respondents answered this question. Of those who did, 12.5 percent said they wanted more time, 12.5 percent indicated they could use more help and/or staff, 15 percent would like more control over their web site, 7.5 percent want a different platform (UNIX versus Windows IIS, etc. . .), 10 percent want better communication between all parties involved in the web, and 2.5 percent want a better Content Management System (CMS). Of the responses, 40 percent did not fit into any particular category and are therefore considered Other. Some of the "Other" responses are, "I had more time to learn some of the new programs, such as Macromedia Flex, that are out for the web." and "I were paid more!" Two "Other" responses dealt with the profession as a whole. One example is, "Libraries were willing to make bolder steps towards new technologies and were more accepting of how the students use the web vs. how the staff has always used it/wants them to use it." Another example is from someone who seems to be from an institution where the library has to follow university guidelines:

> The experience would be better if I had confidence in our web department, in my college's web direction or in my college's willingness to listen to ideas and needs of any group other than the admissions or marketing folks. Everyone seems to forget that a good deal of people who work on campus – and an even larger percentage of students have to actually use our web pages for work and school activities. The marketing and admissions people do not take the needs of the college community into account when making decisions for the web. It seems to all be about the image of the website for external users and potential students. As such, we have a poor site for community users to find things like online forms, etc.

Apparently, time, help, and more control of the web seem to be the biggest concerns among those who responded to the survey. This is similar to what Taylor found in her survey of library webmaster roles.

Conclusion

As increasing numbers of resources become available electronically, university library web pages are going to continue to play an important role in academia. It appears from

the responses that most libraries have a web policy and some sort of advisory committee. Responses also indicate that webmasters could use more time and training to maintain their web pages. Most of the respondents either are reference librarians or webmasters, and they are mostly staff or faculty. Regarding web logo design, there was almost a 50/50 split between those whose libraries had their own unique logo and those who did not. This corresponds with whether they must follow their parent institution's guidelines. A total of 64 percent have an advisory committee that they attend and 52 percent have a web policy. A total of 87 percent do not have to seek approval to make changes, but nearly all of them ask for feedback to be collegial.

Developing a policy or forming an advisory committee is desirable as technology becomes more sophisticated and content and resources are proliferating, as seen in the trends indicated by this survey. Therefore, the amount of the web work can be decentralized and should be shared by all parties involved in order to maintain and enhance the quality of the library's web site. The trend in libraries, at least from what was gleaned from this survey, is that Systems, although still involved in the web, is less involved and is being replaced by reference librarians. It is also apparent that librarians should be trusted to know what is best for the user rather than relying on the judgement of the university's marketing department. Finally, the best web policy can be developed in a collaborative way involving librarians, library administrators, and the campus community.

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ACCESSIBILITY

Web accessibility trends in university libraries and library schools

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Abstract

Purpose – Only properly designed web sites are accessible to people with print disabilities. The purpose of this paper is to follow up on earlier investigations of this kind by looking at the web sites of all 56 ALA-accredited library schools, and of the libraries on these campuses.

Design/methodology/approach – Bobby 3.1.1 was used to evaluate compliance with major accessible web design guidelines. In addition, key web pages were checked manually for the presence of skip-navigation components, and the sites' re-design status was ascertained. The results were presented in the form of basic descriptive statistics, including percentages of Bobby-approved pages and the average number of barriers per page. Correlations of the current accessibility data with older data sets and with library school ratings were also calculated.

Findings – The results indicate that despite an increase in accessibility, only 50 to 60 per cent of the web sites were free of Bobby-detectable errors. Canadian sites were more accessible than US sites. Contrary to previous findings, recently redesigned sites tended to be more accessible. Highly ranked sites also tended to have higher accessibility scores. US sites showed a random-like up-and-down movement in accessibility status between 2002 and 2006.

Research limitations/implications – The collected data reflect compliance with only a subset of accessible design principles.

Practical implications – More education and continued advocacy is needed to increase web accessibility at libraries and library schools and to help establish library schools as models of program accessibility.

Originality/value – This is the only study that provides trend information about the accessibility of a broader set of library and library school web sites.

Keywords Worldwide web, Disabilities, Libraries, University libraries

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

After over 20 years of digitization efforts, many library information resources have become available in an electronic, typically web-based format: information about the library itself, catalogs, indexes, dictionaries and encyclopedias, books and journals, tutorials, reserve materials, and reference services.

The migration of these resources to the online environment has opened unprecedented opportunities to people with "print disabilities", who cannot

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Evidence-Based Practice to Enhance Library Web Site Usability: An Implementation Case Study at Northwestern University Library

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This paper examines the introduction of evidence-based practice within the Web Advisory Group at the Northwestern University Library. As a case study, the focus of this paper is on implementation of research into practice by focusing on two of the core elements identified by Kitson, Harvey, and McCormack (1998): context and environment and method of facilitation. Through this examination, some implications are developed for the potential role of evidence-based practice in academic library web site design and academic library management in general.

OBJECTIVE: In many libraries, web site design is informed more by opinion rather than evidence. A critical question for libraries then is how to move from an opinion-based design process to one that is based on sound principles of evidence-based practice.

METHOD: Following an examination of the background of evidence-based practice and its potential applicability to website design and implementation processes, the study explores the application of evidence-based practice in one particular setting: a large ARL library serving a diverse population of approximately 25,000 users.

RESULTS: While implementation of evidence-based practice within the target environment has occurred, the implementation pathway has not been without problems and challenges. Resolving these challenges will be a test of the long-term effectiveness of evidence-based practice in an academic library setting.

CONCLUSIONS: Using evidence-based practice in website design can make a significant difference in the effectiveness of the website design process. By evaluating the outcomes of the implementation within the web design group, some conclusions on engaging staff throughout the library in evidence-based practice have been developed.

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