



Evidence Summary

Larger, Higher-level Academic Institutions in the US Do Not Necessarily Have Better-resourced Library Web Teams

A Review of:

Connell, Ruth Sara. "Survey of Web Developers in Academic Libraries." The Journal of Academic Librarianship 34.2 (2008): 121-29.

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Objective – To discover how library Web teams' staffing, backgrounds, tools, and professional development differ among various types of academic libraries.

Design – Survey.

Setting – Academic libraries in the United States.

Subjects – Academic library Web team members.

Methods – A systematic sample of every twelfth institution on The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education list was used to establish a sample group. A Web search was carried

out to identify each institution's library Web site and contact information for the Web site designer or most appropriate alternative person. Institutions were excluded from the sample if they had no Web site at all, had no library Web site, had a Web site that did not mention a library, or had a Spanish-language Web site.

In September 2006 an e-mail was sent to the contact for each institution in the sample group asking them to participate in an online survey. A follow up e-mail was sent two weeks later and the survey closed after one month. The survey respondents were asked to identify their institutions so that analysis of the results in relation to the size and type of institution could be carried out.

The researchers used a simplified version of the Carnegie classification to sort the responding institutions into five main groups.

Main Results – The systematic sample consisted of 288 institutions (sample size 6.5%).

The profile of the responding institutions was as follows: associate's colleges (35.5%), baccalaureate colleges (18.2%), master's colleges and universities (20.9%), doctorate-granting universities (9%) and special focus institutions (15.5%). A total of 110 institutions completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 38.19%, although not all respondents answered all the survey questions. The final sample of 110 was 2.5% of the total 4384 institutions on the Carnegie list.

Seventy-one per cent of institutions with multiple libraries shared Web teams, with two-year colleges more likely (91.7%) to share a Web team than four-year or above institutions (60.9%). The majority of responding institutions (94.4%) used in-house library Web site design, with only 5.6% of respondents outsourcing this task. Nearly half (49%) of respondents indicated that library Web design was done by one person and even the larger libraries did not necessarily have larger Web teams.

Very few Web team members (4.9%) had Web design as their primary role; the majority (83.5%) indicated that it was just one component of their job. Web team members from master's- and doctorate-granting institutions were more likely to have taught themselves Web design, while those from associate, baccalaureate and special focus colleges were more likely to have taken Web design courses. For all respondents, the most commonly listed quality for selection to the Web team was an interest in Web design and the most valued skill for library Web designers was the

ability to organise information effectively. Knowledge of Web authoring software and basic HTML coding were the most commonly listed knowledge requirements for Web team members. A significant number of respondents indicated that they or other Web team members did not have access to Web authoring (36.9%) and image editing (52%) software.

Generally (except for two very large institutions), the larger institutions were more likely to use database-driven systems for their library Web sites and the smaller institutions were more likely to use content management systems. Associate's and special focus colleges were less likely than other types of institutions to use either database driven or content management systems. Associate's institutions were more likely to achieve ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) Web accessibility compliance. Only 48.6% of respondents utilised usability testing during Web site design.

Conclusion – The author expected that institutions providing higher levels of education would have better-resourced Web design and training, but the results of the survey did not support this expectation. One reason why associate's colleges performed better than other institutions in some areas of Web design may be that these colleges tend to offer more Web design and computer technology courses than baccalaureate, master's and doctorate-granting institutions.

Web site design and testing attracted fewer resources than might be expected in academic libraries. Across all types of institutions, Web design tended to be the responsibility of a small team or one person, with most Web designers having other responsibilities apart from the library's Web site. Just over half of the institutions

surveyed did not implement usability testing of their library Web sites.

Commentary

The author sets the current study in context with a literature review describing previous interviews and surveys of library Web designers. However the author has chosen not to use any of the survey instruments employed in these earlier studies, instead designing one which builds on questions asked in previous surveys. The survey instrument is not included with the article itself but can be accessed by following a link from the electronic version of the article. The questions are clearly posed, but the author does not state whether the instrument was validated before use. Validation may have picked up one problem with the survey, which became clear as responses were received. The survey was designed on the assumption that most academic libraries had a Web design team, but this was true for only 51% of participants and made it difficult for one-person Web design "teams" to answer many of the questions.

This survey attempts to relate information about academic library Web design teams to the size and type of the parent institution. However, the unevenness of the final survey sample decreases the internal and external validity of the study, particularly the external validity. The unevenness was due to the way the sample was constructed, taking every twelfth institution from the Carnegie classification list. The author acknowledges that a better method would have been to use a stratified sample, that is, first separate the

academic institutions by type and then take a random sample from within each group. Some questions are also raised by the exclusion criteria applied to the sample. In particular, institutions were excluded if no library Web site could be found for them. This would have eliminated institutions whose library Web sites sit behind a firewall and require validation to access.

The author wisely chose not to use all thirty-three levels in the basic Carnegie classification to sort responding institutions, instead opting for a simplified version containing five categories. It would have been helpful to include a glossary explaining the terminology used in these five categories, particularly for international readers unfamiliar with terms such as "associate's colleges" and "baccalaureate colleges."

The survey was carried out in September–October 2006, but this paper was not published until 2008. This time lag between research and publication makes the finding that only 7.4% of respondents use RSS feeds to syndicate their library website content out-of-date. Adoption of Web 2.0 technologies by libraries is developing so quickly that by now it is likely that many more of the participating institutions are using either RSS feeds or blogging tools with built-in RSS to update their patrons on changes to the library's Web site.

The most interesting finding of this survey was that academic libraries of all sizes and types are not allocating the staff resources to Web design that might be expected or required. The library Web site is a major point of access to the information resources and services provided by academic institutions for their students. Indeed for many students it is the *only* point of access. An inviting, highly usable, well-designed

and maintained Web site should be a priority for academic libraries, and staff and budget allocations to Web design should reflect this priority. The selected comments from survey participants quoted by the author reflect the frustration of librarians when this is not the case:

I desperately wish that our Web site could be tended regularly by someone with the skills and determination to make it extraordinary. As the portal to the library, it should be the most winning, winsome presence that we can possibly create. And it isn't, simply because we don't have the skills or staff to make it so (128).

The findings of this study are most applicable to academic libraries within the United States, but enough information is given to enable the methodology to be repeated in other countries, with appropriate adjustment of the way academic institutions are classified and sampled. Classification systems used by countries other than the United States are much less complex than the Carnegie classification. This study will be of interest to the academic Web designers, librarians and managers who are trying to juggle Web design with their other responsibilities or secure funding to upgrade or redesign a library Web site. This study has the potential to change practice by providing supporting evidence for Web development funding, particularly in larger, higher-level institutions.