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LIS 662 Information Services for Diverse Client Groups

Assignment 2 - Term Project Analytical Paper

Library Use By URVM Veterinary Students Survey

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics most recent data indicates that 90% of veterinarians in the US are white (*Labor Force Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity*, 2019), making it the second whitest profession in the country (Dental Hygienists are the whitest). The future looks better, as the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges reports that, as of 2020, over 20% of veterinary students in the US are from racial and ethnic groups historically underrepresented in veterinary medicine (URVM) (Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges, 2020). In order to ensure that the Veterinary Medicine Library (VML) at NC State University provides the best possible resources, services, and patron experience, the VML plans to survey as many patrons as possible who identify as Hispanic, Black, Indigenous or Asian and develop and implement changes and improvements based on the feedback gathered. The ultimate goals of this project are to make the services and spaces of the VML as welcoming and inclusive as possible, in order to best support these students during the educational process, but also to provide a foundation for their information-seeking behaviors and skills once they enter practice.

Determining a Research Methodology

There are many methods of getting feedback from library users, including anecdotal reports, direct observation, interviews, surveys, and focus groups (McKenna, 2004). In an ideal situation, multiple avenues and methods would be used, however for this project, some methods were not possible. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the VML (and NC State University overall) are operating at a limited capacity, and with limited on-site services. As a result, patron use of the physical library has been greatly reduced, making obtaining anecdotal reports more challenging, and virtually eliminating the possibility of direct observation. Neither of these methods are particularly appealing for the purposes of this project, in any case. Anecdotal reports provide too limited a cross section of respondents, and observation runs the risk of making patrons feel less comfortable and welcomed.

Focus groups would potentially be very beneficial, however they have notable disadvantages in this case. First, during the ongoing pandemic, bringing patrons together in person for a back-and-forth discussion would be discouraged by the

University's guidelines, though a virtual focus group would be possible. The second, and more serious disadvantage is the fact that a focus group would not offer the possibility of anonymous response. Given the small population of URVM patrons, it is likely that any focus group members might not be completely candid in expressing any negative feelings about the VML directly, either out of politeness or a desire to avoid potential retribution in the future.

A structured survey has several distinct advantages, including permitting anonymous feedback. From a practical standpoint, a survey is easy to distribute and allows respondents to complete it as they have time available. Individual interviews potentially offer more in-depth feedback, though logistically they are significantly harder to arrange and carry out. One option for combining both methods would be to allow survey respondents to indicate if they would be willing to participate in an interview after the survey. A short survey that includes some open-ended questions and allows for an optional interview would serve to meet all the needs of this project. It would offer specific, actionable feedback, while allowing respondents to provide as much or as little information as they wish.

Obtaining Permission

Because I am an employee of the NC State University Libraries, there were several steps to obtaining permission to distribute the survey. The Libraries has its own Organizational Strategy department that is responsible for gathering, measuring, and reporting information about the Libraries' performance and contributions to the University in general. Specifically, any data collection to be carried out within the Libraries must be approved in advance by this department. Conveniently, they also offer detailed guidance for navigating the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. In this case, the Organizational Strategy department explained that since the purpose of the survey was strictly for internal review of the VML's procedures and services, the survey would be considered "not under purview" of NC State's IRB. Even so, a report to that effect must be filed with the IRB. The NC State IRB offers a convenient online form for doing so.

Developing a Survey Instrument

Essential to the purposes of this project is capturing the demographics of the respondents. Current best practices for gathering racial and ethnic data suggests asking two separate questions, one asking whether the respondent identifies as Hispanic/Latino or not Hispanic/Latino, and the other allowing the respondent to select which race or races they identify as. A "prefer not to answer" option should be included

for both questions (Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity, 2016). The survey will not ask for gender identity, sexual orientation, or any other official demographic data. The one additional demographic question is to ask if the respondent attended NC State for their undergraduate degree. This information is sought to determine if use of the VML increases with the respondent's familiarity with the NC State University Libraries.

With an eye towards keeping the impact on respondents as minimal as possible, the rest of the survey will be short, requiring only a few minutes to provide a simple but informative response. However, in order to provide patrons with the opportunity to give in-depth feedback if they wish, the survey will include questions that allow for longer answers. The survey will ask how often the respondent uses the VML, and which VML services they have used. Most importantly, the survey will ask what, if anything, prevents the respondent from using VML services, with a number of possible options, including "Don't feel comfortable and/or welcome" and "Nothing prevents me from using Veterinary Medicine Library spaces or services". The respondent will have opportunities to explain or expand on these answers. Additionally, the survey will ask which of several potential services the respondent would be most likely to make use of. This is designed to create a starting point for developing a new service or services, and will also include a open-ended option to allow respondents to suggest their own ideas for services the VML could offer. The final question will allow respondents to enter their email address if they would like to be contacted to set up an interview.

The survey will attempt to take advantage of three existing groups at the NC State University College of Veterinary Medicine for distribution directly to URVM students. First, VOICE (Veterinarians as One Inclusive Community for Empowerment) is a student-run multicultural group that tries to "provide a campus environment that embraces diversity and promotes the success of students, particularly underrepresented students." (*Veterinarians as One Inclusive Community for Empowerment*, 2021) The second group is the Latinx Veterinary Medical Association at NC State, a student-run organization with the goal of creating "a space for the Latinx community at the veterinary college to provide them with professional resources and a place to connect with other Latinx students." (*Latinx Veterinary Medical Association at NC State*, 2021) The third group is the College of Veterinary Medicine's Diversity Committee. An email will be sent to each group, explaining the survey and its goals, and asking them to distribute it to their constituents.

The final survey instrument is available here: <https://forms.gle/R2KJdjELSfSehdBA6>

Results

The survey was ultimately unsuccessful. Several weeks after emails were sent to the three groups listed above no responses to the survey had been received, and none of the groups contacted responded to the email about the survey.

There are multiple potential reasons for the failure of the survey. It is possible that the contacted groups decided not to distribute the survey for any number of reasons. It is possible that they did not consider it appropriate, or it may have just come at an unfortunate time in the academic calendar, just a few weeks before finals. It is also possible that some or all of the groups did distribute the survey, but no individuals decided to respond.

Asking members of marginalized groups for their assistance with efforts to improve diversity, inclusion and equity can be a delicate balance. While it is essential to include members of the community in efforts to make changes and improvements that might affect them, it can also be a burden, especially when those individuals are asked repeatedly because their community is not well-represented in the larger community. This “diversity fatigue” could be a reason for the lack of participation in the survey. Either the groups contacted decided not to bother their members with another request to participate, or the members of the group made that decision individually.

Lessons Learned and Future Development

I intend to continue this project as part of my professional responsibilities at the VML, but I clearly need to regroup and reconsider how I solicit input from URVM students. One option would be to offer the students some benefit for their participation. This approach is used often in other feedback-gathering projects at NC State. A program called Tiny Café involves setting up a table in a high-traffic area and offering students coffee and snacks for 5 to 10 minutes of feedback (Davis & Song, 2020). Obviously, this method poses challenges in a pandemic environment, but a similar approach that offers patrons compensation for their time might be similarly effective.

Another approach would be to reach out to URVM students in a more personal way than via email. Once in-person meetings of the student groups and the Diversity Committee resume, VML staff could make a presentation to the groups, explaining in more detail the project and explaining to them the way that their participation will improve the VML for themselves and for URVM students that will come after them.

I truly hope that this project will eventually come to fruition and will provide a real-world benefit to current and future students of the NC State University College of Veterinary Medicine.

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