Exploring the Information Needs of Life Sciences Researchers

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Objectives
To determine the needs of bioscience researchers in a newly established, multidisciplinary center designed to facilitate collaborative research.

Because the center houses researchers from different departments traditionally served by separate libraries, the University Libraries formed a task force to evaluate the information needs of this group as a whole.

The creation of this task force has presented a unique opportunity to look at information needs beyond the boundaries of traditional library services.

Methods
Three focus groups:
1. Graduate Students (n=7)
2. Junior Faculty (n=10)
3. Senior Administration (n=3)

Questions asked were deliberately broad:
1. What's your information environment in a typical day?
2. How do you manage your information environment?
3. What gaps do you find in your information environment?

Conclusions
- Because of the diverse nature of the research, focus groups were an appropriate way to explore the information needs of these researchers.
- Meeting with researchers in their building let them know that the Libraries were serious about making new connections.
- Asking questions about the information environment—as opposed to information use—successfully broadened the conversation, indicating that the Libraries can be an integral part of their information environment.

Task Force Members
- Librarians from the main campus library, the health sciences library, and the veterinary medical library
- Research Consultant focused on evaluation of new services
- Fellows from the Departments of Health & Medical Informatics and Computer Science

Findings
- Not surprisingly, full-text electronic journals are of paramount importance.
- Print lab notebooks remain crucial: “The information we use comes to use in electronic format, but what we do with those data is recorded on paper.”
- Information “guru” in lab changes with subject and over time.
- New graduate students and faculty rely on previous institution’s library Web site.
- Use of EndNote is widespread, and many researchers expressed interest in instruction.
- A designated librarian should be the contact point for all those in the Center.
- Researchers prefer that librarian come to the Center to provide services.

Immediate Follow-Up
- EndNote training sessions
- Journal access questions answered
- Meetings with interested faculty on available library services

Future Directions
- Move from “breadth” interviews (e.g., the junior faculty) to “depth” interviews (e.g., all members of a single lab) to further characterize the information environment.
- Investigate models for providing a “bioinformatics librarian.”

Task Force Charge
Create a systematic approach to information services delivery for persons engaged in life sciences research on the MU campus, beginning with personnel working at the Bond Life Sciences Center. This approach should include: exploration of the scientists’ needs; creation of outreach services tailored to their needs; and development of uniform services to all life sciences library users.