

In today's academic libraries, knowing how to provide great customer service can make all the difference. Understanding what students and faculty need and using effective service techniques to meet those needs are essential for keeping the library running smoothly, especially as more space goes digital and physical space shrinks. Being aware of these changes and staying ahead of the curve can help academic libraries secure funding, maintain the right staffing levels, and keep everyone happy with the work being done. This literature review will focus on defining customer service, the importance of training staff in soft skills, staying on top of tech trends, and adapting to how society is changing all for the purpose of improving customer service in the academic library.

## **Gaps in Customer Service in the Academic Library**

Looking at where there needs to be improvement in academic libraries,, *Kaushik, Kumar, Biswas, 2020*, point to the following areas where there are existing notable gaps in customer service in the academic library.

1. **Accessibility Services:** Libraries often lack sufficient training for staff on how to assist students with disabilities, creating a barrier to equitable service.
2. **Multilingual Support:** As the student body becomes more diverse, the lack of multilingual staff or resources can hinder effective communication and support for non-English speaking students.
3. **Digital Literacy:** While libraries are incorporating more digital resources, there is a gap in training all staff members effectively in these technologies, which can lead to inconsistent customer service.
4. **User Experience Design:** There is often inadequate attention to user experience in digital platforms, which can frustrate users and lead to a decrease in library use.
5. **Feedback Mechanisms:** Many libraries do not have robust systems in place to capture user feedback regularly, missing critical insights into user needs and potential improvements.
6. **Proactive Engagement:** Customer service roles in libraries may lack proactive engagement strategies, focusing more on reactive measures rather than anticipating user needs and addressing them in advance.

Addressing these gaps, an academic library can improve the overall patron experience ten fold. But the importance of implementing change can only come from understanding the difference between good and bad customer service.

## **Good Versus Bad Customer Service**

According to *LinkedIn*, a leader in professional training, indicators of bad customer service might look like a failure to empathize, long wait times, incomplete resolutions, unclear communication, lack of ownership, and ignoring feedback. These all contribute to customer frustration and dissatisfaction. Alternatively, *LinkedIn* also lists good customer service traits—empathetic listening, timely responses, proactive problem-solving, personalized interactions, clear communication, and a willingness to go above and beyond. These all contribute to creating memorable experiences.

## **Leadership's Role in Service Excellence**

As far as identifying where improvements in customer service are needed in an academic library, it starts with a top down mindset. Leaders and administrators of the library need to be the ones setting the trend towards change. *Art T. Weinstein and Donovan A. McFarlane* argues that “customer value is not something that can be created within a day; it must be ingrained in the organizational culture.” Weinstein and McFarlane go on to define customer value mindset as the customer seeing value in a library that makes their lives easier and improves their overall sense of well-being. They suggest that the academic library should master five key activities when considering shaping a customer value mindset; (a) Managing Information and Insights: Libraries must efficiently organize resources and analyze patron data to tailor services. (b) Adapting to New Desires of Customers: Staying flexible and responsive to changing patron needs is crucial for library success. (c) Employing Skills and Highly Educated Staff: Having knowledgeable and skilled staff enhances the quality of service and user experience. (d) Leveraging Technology, New Media, and Social Networking: Utilizing digital platforms and social media expands library reach and accessibility. (e) Outthinking Direct and Indirect Competitors: Strategic thinking helps libraries stand out in a competitive landscape, ensuring their relevance and value. By mastering these key activities, (*Liao & Chuang, 2004*) point out that libraries can establish highly engaged employees that approach challenges without fear of reprisal, willingly help customers and peers quickly, ask questions proactively and listen carefully to determine how they can best serve others.

## **Recommendations**

*Patkin(2014)* states that library leaders need to be on the lookout for people performing with high levels of engagement. When an employee is seen doing the right thing by a hire-up, it is important for that hire up to give praise publicly. Patkin goes on to explain a simple approach to boost morale, “If you don’t want your team to dread your presence in their workspace, you need to start each day with the intention of catching as many people as possible doing well.” Praising employees reflects positively on the leader, boosts morale, and encourages employees to continue working hard. Employees tend to be more engaged when they receive rewards and recognition for their work, ultimately enhancing staff morale, *Delaney and Royal (2017)*.

## Enhancing Staff Morale and Skills

Library leaders must focus on providing support and practicing promoting the organization to employees with the goal of increasing employee engagement, satisfaction, work performance and ultimately customer service *Kim, Knutson, & Han, (2015)*. This mindset put into action can manifest in several ways:

*Glusker, Emmelhainz, Estrada and Dyess (2022)*, recommend strategies such as promoting respectful teamwork, ensuring fair pay and job stability, and providing opportunities for professional development to boost staff morale. The organization should also emphasize inclusive decision-making and actively involve staff in committees and projects. Moreover, management support for fair compensation, flexible schedules, and fostering a positive work environment is essential for addressing financial challenges and improving staff retention.

*Laura Saunders* investigates survey data gathered from libraries across North America. Her research highlights the importance of "soft skills," as emphasized by respondents who stress the vital role of effective communication, interpersonal prowess, as well as adaptability and flexibility. Saunders concludes that these personal attributes are crucial for success in the roles of librarian or modern information professional.

Regarding the cultivation of these soft skills, *Emy Nelson Decker*, examines the use of improvisation training, specifically focusing on the "yes and" principle, in improving satisfaction levels for both patrons and staff. Decker underscores the significance of readiness for spontaneous scenarios and draws parallels between the improvisational abilities of library staff and those of actors facing unpredictable scenes. Through exposure to navigating uncertain circumstances, individuals develop a greater comfort with ambiguity, thereby enhancing their capacity to respond adeptly in the moment. Decker finds that utilizing improvisation techniques can effectively tackle the challenge of addressing spontaneity in library contexts.

## Technological Implications and Human Interaction

Implementing various improvements in customer service interactions can significantly enhance the experience within an academic library. However, these enhancements must be implemented comprehensively across all departments of the library. With the advancement of technology, patrons' interactions with the library are evolving, necessitating an understanding of these new interaction patterns in customer service.

*Castelo, Boegershausen, Hildebrand, and Henkel*, delve into the significant negative responses from customers regarding their experiences with bots compared to that of human

interactions. The research reveals that the absence of a human presence in customer service roles adversely affects customers' perceptions of the company they are dealing with. Customers often feel unvalued and like an afterthought when dealing with robots, in contrast to feeling acknowledged and appreciated during interactions with actual humans. Therefore, it's crucial to prioritize human interaction in customer service to maintain positive relationships with patrons.

*L. Appleton*, highlights the substantial transformations underway in academic libraries since the onset of the pandemic. Appleton asserts that the societal shifts observed, such as those experienced in March 2020, will persist in reshaping the academic library landscape. Taking this into account, *Wu, Caruso and Price (2014)* ask an important question - Do we remain passive and responsive guides in the universe of knowledge or do we embrace our expertise and proactively lead the information revolution?

To address these shifts in customer service, one effective strategy is adopting an experiential learning engagement model. *Everett and Bishoff*, delve into the advantages of involving students directly in frontline customer service roles within the library. Their research reveals that students in these positions experience heightened engagement, skill enhancement, and a stronger connection to broader educational objectives. Frontline employees have the most direct contact with patrons and are responsible for the patron's experience with the organization *Bersin, (2014)* For this reason, frontline employees must experience perceived organizational support in order to perform well. Moreover, this model is shown to align with high-impact educational practices crucial for post-college preparedness and overall well-being. It promotes elements such as mentorship, long-term projects, internships, and extracurricular engagement. Further clarification on this model underscores its efficacy and its applicability across various library settings. It advocates for deliberate planning, effective project management, and formal assessment methods, while stressing the importance of aligning student experiences with institutional missions. Ultimately, the article advocates for a comprehensive approach to student engagement within academic libraries, underscoring the significance of meaningful experiences, mentorship, and reflective practices in nurturing student success.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the landscape of academic libraries is undergoing significant transformation, with an increasing emphasis on providing exceptional customer service. As this literature review illustrates, understanding the nuances of customer interactions, implementing effective service protocols, and nurturing staff morale are crucial elements in ensuring the success of academic libraries in meeting the evolving needs of students and faculty.

From defining customer service to exploring innovative training methods such as improvisation techniques, and a top-down mindset this review highlights the multifaceted nature

of enhancing customer experiences within libraries. It underscores the importance of soft skills, adaptability to technological advancements, and the human touch in establishing positive relationships with patrons.

Moreover, the imperative for library leaders to instill a customer value mindset throughout their organizations cannot be overstated. By prioritizing staff development, promoting inclusive decision-making, and embracing experiential learning models, academic libraries can position themselves as dynamic hubs of knowledge and support for their communities.

As we navigate the complexities of modern library services, it is clear that a proactive approach to customer service is essential. By embracing change, fostering a culture of continuous improvement, and prioritizing human connections, academic libraries can remain vital resources for generations to come.

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