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# A Tool for Measuring Success

Carol Myers

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The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County included fourteen questions in a telephone survey of Mecklenburg County residents conducted by the Urban Institute of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in October 1987. The Urban Institute conducts the survey annually, and participants share the costs of the survey and the statistical analysis of the results.

The Public Library of Charlotte has participated in the survey twice, once in 1983 and again in 1987. In 1983, the library's administration wanted to evaluate the local political and social climate prior to placing a \$11.2 million dollar bond issue for a new main library and three branches before the voters. In 1987, a \$2.3 million dollar bond for a new regional branch in southeast Charlotte was on the November ballot, and the survey provided information on the public's likely response to the bond. The results of the 1987 survey and their usefulness are the focus of this article.

The Urban Institute surveyed and reported the answers of 850 residents of Mecklenburg County to 14 questions the library designed. The full text of the questions and the results are included in the appendix. The results are statistically valid  $\pm 4$  percent at 98 percent confidence level (that is, if the survey were conducted 100 times, the results would fall within the 94 percent to 100 percent range 98 times.) The Urban Institute used a number of techniques to minimize possible skewing, including employing random digit dialing and setting a quota on three-digit telephone number prefixes to insure that persons from all areas of the county were sampled. The library received both the statistical results of the fourteen questions the library included and cross tabulations with other demographic and voter information collected as part of the survey.

Some of the findings of the survey confirmed assumptions and instincts we already had about our patrons and community. We know we are generally well-liked; the question becomes how well-liked? When asked "How important do you

feel the library system is to our community?", 84.1 percent found it to be "very important," the strongest measure one could choose. For other questions, our expectations were based more on hope. When asked if respondents would support more government funds being spent to improve library services, 78.9 percent gave a positive answer.

The 118 cross tabulated reports yielded valuable information. From cross tabulations, we found that the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County is "very important" to the county's population regardless of age, sex, or race. Not surprisingly, the trend is that those with more years of education are stronger supporters and users of the library. Those with a college education showed the strongest support for providing more funds to improve library services. Responses showed that, as a group, those twenty-five to thirty-four years of age made the highest percentage of visits to the library—five to ten visits a year.

Other figures touched areas that we might not have instinctively known. For example, in comparing the "more funds to improve library services?" question with income range, the highest percentage of agreement was the group reporting a \$10,000 - \$19,999 annual income, although all income groups agreed by at least 73.2 percent. More blacks support additional funds for improving library service than whites by 87.0 percent to 77.1 percent.

Cross tabulations specific to voter registration information found that, of those registered to vote, 85.3 percent believed the library to be "very important." Further, of those who "always vote," 78.1 percent stated that more government funds should go to the library to improve service. For those with children, the figure goes up to 81.6 percent. A higher number of registered voters use the library than those reporting themselves as not registered.

Several of the figures prompted a closer look. For example, 73.4 percent of the respondents said they used the library within the last year. The figure may be high. Perhaps the "halo effect" was at work here. Did that many respondents actually use the library, or were they giving an answer that

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they felt was the "right" or "best" answer? The wording of that question was wide open, and a more specific question or a follow-up question as to *what* use was made of the library might be more valuable in a future survey.

The library did choose carefully the wording of the question, "Would you be willing to see more government funds spent to improve public library services in Mecklenburg County?" We envisioned a much lower positive response had we asked, "Would you be willing to pay higher local taxes to improve public library services in Mecklenburg County?"

When the results of the phone survey were reviewed, we were cautiously pleased with the respondents' positive attitudes towards the library. The survey indicated that the library's bond would pass based on the 78.9 percent of the respondents who were willing to see more government funding spent on public library services. And the bond did pass handsomely. With a 40 percent voter turnout, 77 percent of those voting voted yes for the \$2.9 million library bonds.

Had the survey indicated that the political climate was cloudy or uncertain for the bond, the Friends of the Library, the library board, and/or the bond campaign committee would have had useful information available to address the negatives. Even more importantly, they had the demographic information from the survey to identify those more likely to vote for the library. Then their efforts could (and did) concentrate on reaching those voters who support the library to encourage them to go to the polls and vote. As it was, the survey's report of an apparently bright outlook allowed those advocating the bond to speak confidently and emphasize the benefits of a new regional branch.

Was the survey helpful to us? Was it worth the cost? Did it tell us anything we did not already know? The answer to all three questions is yes. The survey confirmed in valid and believable numbers that the residents of this county were positive about their public library and its services. We believe they still are. The UNCC telephone survey was a valuable tool for pinpointing the public's perception of the library within the prevailing political climate. If the ultimate measure of success for a public library is a high level of public approval, then this telephone survey verified for us the library's success at that one point in time. We do not intend to rest on our laurels. Participation in a future UNCC Urban Institute survey will allow us to measure how well we do.

## Survey

1. How important do you feel the library system is to our community? Would you say it is very important, important, somewhat important or not important?

a. Very important	84.1%
b. Important	12.4%
c. Somewhat important	2.9%
d. Not important	0.4%
e. Don't know	0.2%

2. About how far from your home is the nearest public library? Is it less than one mile, 1-2 miles, 3-5 miles or over 5 miles from your home?

a. Less than 1 mile	21.1%
b. 1-2 miles	34.8%
c. 3-5 miles	30.6%
d. Over 5 miles	10.9%
e. Don't know	2.6%

3. Would you be willing to see more government funds spent to improve public library services in Mecklenburg County?

a. Yes	78.9%
b. No	16.0%
c. Don't know	5.1%

4. Have you or any member of your household used any branch of the Mecklenburg Public Library, including the Main Library, in the past year?

a. Yes (ask questions 5-10)	73.4%
b. No (ask questions 11-14)	26.1%
c. Don't know	0.5%

5-9. (If Yes) We would like to know the age groups of persons who use the library. Thinking of the ages of yourself and family members who have used the public library in the last year.

(percentages listed for those reporting at least one)

5. How many users are 12 and under?	11.1%
6. How many users are 13-17?	14.1%
7. How many are 18-29?	18.1%
8. How many are 30-50?	20.1%
9. How many are over age 50?	7.1%

10. Please estimate the total number of library visits or calls made by yourself and household members in the past year. Would you say the number is less than 5, 5-10, 11-20, or over 20?

a. Less than 5	21.5%
b. 5-10	30.8%
c. 11-20	22.4%
d. Over 20	24.5%
e. Don't know	0.8%

11. (If no one has used the library) Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

11. Library branches are too far from my home	
a. Agree	18.1%
b. Disagree	75.7%
c. Don't know	6.2%

12. Library hours are not convenient	
a. Agree	12.8%
b. Disagree	70.8%
c. Don't know	16.4%

13. I don't know where library branches are located	
a. Agree	14.6%
b. Disagree	79.2%
c. Don't know	6.2%

14. I'm too busy to go to the library	
a. Agree	43.4%
b. Disagree	50.4%
c. Don't know	6.2%