

Taking the Mountain to Mohammed: the Effect of Librarian Visits to Faculty Members on their use of the Library

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Abstract: Much has been written on liaison programs and faculty perceptions thereof, but little has been written on the effectiveness of specific liaison activities. This article contains the results of a survey which asked faculty to indicate whether meeting individually with a librarian changed their use of library services and resources. Although it was sent to only a small number of faculty (30), 40% of those who were contacted responded to the survey. Of those who responded, 92% indicated that meeting with a librarian had increased their use of at least one library resource or service.

Keywords: liaison; faculty; library resources; surveys

Introduction

How can we ensure that the faculty in our liaison areas are receiving the services and resources they need from the library? As more of our print resources have become available online, fewer faculty are coming to the physical library, which has significantly reduced the amount of face-to-face contact between faculty and librarians. Without this interaction, it is difficult for liaison librarians to know if faculty are aware of the services and resources available to them.

As one of the four liaison librarians at the University of Saskatchewan's Health Sciences Library, I faced this same problem. Our library serves the School of Public Health, and the Colleges of Dentistry, Kinesiology, Medicine (including the School of Physical Therapy), Nursing, and Pharmacy and Nutrition. Each liaison librarian is responsible for providing instruction sessions to undergraduate and graduate students; selecting monographs, serials and other resources; answering reference questions; and communicating with faculty in her assigned liaison disciplines. Because instruction sessions are scheduled regularly for the undergraduate and graduate students, in general, we see them much more often than we see the faculty. The students are also much more likely to come into the library, especially to use the computers in our branch, which are loaded with word processing and productivity software.

I had been in my position for over three years when I decided that I needed to meet more of the faculty in my liaison areas. I targeted two of my smaller liaison

areas, Dentistry and Pharmacy, for which the faculty offices are not located in the same building as our library, and thus with whose faculty I felt most out of touch. I hoped to get a better understanding of the faculty's needs, and to ensure that they were aware of the resources and services available to them.

Starting in the spring of 2005, and continuing until December 2008, I telephoned all faculty members in the two areas in an effort to set up individual appointments. Although I had previously met a few of them when they visited the library or attended my instructional sessions, in many cases, this was our first meeting. Over the course of the three and one half years, I was able to meet most of the faculty, including those who had been previously unavailable and those who became faculty members during this period. Although in most cases I met with faculty individually, I once met with two new faculty together (at their suggestion), and once with a faculty member and his graduate students. Also, in one case, a new faculty member contacted me to set up the meeting. Not all faculty were interested in meeting, but many were; in all, I met with 32 of the 51 (63%) faculty in the two areas.

The meetings varied in length. Although in some cases they lasted only 15 or 20 minutes, in others, they lasted an hour or more, depending on the interest level and questions of the faculty. In each meeting, I asked the faculty members about their areas of teaching and research, and let them know about specific resources (e.g., databases, electronic book packages) and services (e.g., interlibrary loan, remote access to electronic resources) that I thought they would find useful. I left my business card with them, and let them know that they were welcome to contact me if they had questions about anything to do with library services or needed help finding information. If the faculty members had any questions that I wasn't able to answer during the meetings, I later found the needed information and sent it to them.

After these meetings, I began to notice changes in the faculty's use of the library. Whereas previously I had received little or no response to e-mails about new library products or services, it seemed to me that I was now receiving more feedback. I also seemed to be receiving more requests from faculty for help finding information. However, because I had not kept statistics prior to meeting with the faculty, I had no clear evidence that these changes were actually occurring or that they were related to the meetings. I wanted to find out whether faculty felt that meeting with me had changed the way in which they used the library.

Literature

Although liaison programs are not a new idea, the shift toward online resources has given them even more of a reason for being (Whatley 29-30). With fewer patrons, especially faculty, coming to the library, it has become important to try to reach them in other ways. Many methods have been proposed to do this, including setting up office hours in liaison departments, going to conferences attended by users in the liaison discipline, setting up lunch meetings with new faculty attending departmental meetings, and meeting with applicants interviewing for faculty positions (Wagner; Hankins et al. 98-113; Isaacson 532-533; Stoddart et al. 424).

Several studies have reported that faculty view liaison programs positively, and that faculty feel that liaison programs lead to increased communication between the library and faculty members (Tennant et al. 405; Davis and Cook 165; Ryans, Suresh and Wei-Ping Zhang 17). Some authors have also reported that faculty feel that an important role of liaison librarians is to make faculty members aware of the library services available to them (Ryans, Suresh and Wei-Ping Zhang 19; Yang 126). However, these studies do not examine whether liaison librarians' efforts to make faculty aware of library services actually lead to increased use of these services.

Librarians have reported on the use of various library resources and services following the implementation of a liaison program, but no one has asked faculty whether a *specific* liaison activity has resulted in changes in their use of library services and resources (Isaacson 533; Tennant et al. 404-6; Yang 126). It seemed appropriate then, to find out whether faculty members felt that their use of library services and resources had increased after the implementation of a specific liaison activity, namely, individual meetings between the liaison librarian and the faculty member.

Methods

In June 2009, I sent an e-mail message to the 30 faculty with whom I had met individually over the past four years. (Although I had actually met with 32 faculty, two of them had since left the University of Saskatchewan.) In this message, I invited them to participate in an anonymous, online survey (see Appendix) which had been approved by the University of Saskatchewan's Behavioural Research Ethics Board. In the survey, I asked respondents to indicate whether after meeting with me, there was a change in the frequency with which they used specific library resources or services. I also provided them the opportunity to indicate if they used other resources more frequently (or less frequently) as a result of the meetings. In addition, I invited the respondents to comment on the reasons for any changes in use frequency and on the value of the meetings overall. In September 2009, I sent reminder e-mails to all 30 faculty, asking those who had not completed the survey to consider doing so.

Results

Of the 30 faculty, 12 (40%) completed the survey. Responses to the multiple-choice questions about library services and library resources can be seen in figures 1 and 2, respectively.

Physical and Online Resources

Interestingly, no faculty members reported visiting the physical library more often, although one respondent (8%) indicated that he/she was more likely to check out print books, and two (17%) indicated that they use print journals more often – both of which would seem to entail visiting the physical library. However, it is possible that they are using these materials more often but are asking other people to retrieve the materials from the library. Alternatively, respondents may have had a different understanding of the “visiting the physical library” than the author; perhaps for the respondents, “visit” implied a longer stay, and so a quick stop to pick up books or journals did not qualify. The librarian-faculty meetings were held, for the most part, in the faculty member’s office, unless he/she preferred to come to the library. This may be partially why the meetings did not increase the frequency of visits to the library; the physical resources of the library were not highlighted in these meetings.

Surprisingly, one respondent (8%) reported using print journals less often, and two (17%) indicated that they used the physical library less often. One of the respondents who reported visiting the physical library less often also reported using online and print journals more often. The other respondent who reported visiting the physical library less often, also reported using print journals less often, but online journals and online library resources from off-campus more often. In the case of this second respondent, it is possible that he/she had become more comfortable with, or more aware of, online resources, and so was now able to use online resources instead of coming to the library to use their print equivalents. As for the respondent who both visited the library less often, but used print journals more often, this might again be the result of the respondent understanding “visit” in a different way than the researcher, or of the respondent asking others to retrieve print journals for him/her.

Three respondents (25%) were more likely to use online resources from off-campus, and seven (58%) were more likely to use online journals, so it seems that the meetings did increase the faculty members' awareness of the electronic resources available to them. One of the respondents (8%) reported requesting interlibrary loans less often, which may indicate that he/she was better able to assess whether needed items were available locally, and thus whether interlibrary loans were necessary. Conversely, three respondents (25%) stated that they now requested interlibrary loans more frequently; perhaps this is a result of their being previously unaware of either the existence of the interlibrary loan service, or the process for requesting loans.

Communication

As can be seen in Figure 1, seven of the faculty stated that they were now more likely to contact the librarian for help finding information. Six of the respondents (50%) stated that they were more likely to read "library news" e-mails from the librarian. This suggests that just e-mailing is not enough – faculty have to know who we are in order for our messages to stand out from the mass of e-mails they receive. It may seem -- at a time in which the availability of online resources means that users no longer have as much reason to visit the physical library -- that meeting with our users in person is no longer valued or necessary. However, one of the respondents commented, "I liked the face-to-face contact with the librarian. Now, if I have questions I know the person to ask." Because our users are no longer meeting librarians through visiting the library, the library may seem to be a large and impenetrable entity. If faculty have met their liaison librarian, though, they have a starting point for any reference or other library-related queries. This differs from what was found in a previous study though, which indicated that many faculty contacted their liaison librarian if they had concerns or complaints about the library

system, but that few consulted their librarian if they had problems finding information (Yang 126).

Referrals and Use of Library Services

Seven of the faculty (58%) stated that they were more likely to refer other people to their liaison librarian. One respondent commented that he/she understood library procedures better after the meeting, and another that he/she had a “better understanding of the library services available.” It was not clear to the author whether the respondent meant that he/she was more aware of which services were available, or whether he/she better understood how to use those that were available.

One respondent reported using library handouts and guides (which are posted online and are available in print in the library) more often, and another reported attending group library instruction sessions more frequently.

Engagement with the Library

The meetings also seem to have led some faculty to become more involved in delivery of library services: three faculty (25%) were more likely to recommend that resources be purchased for the library, and one (8%) was more likely to ask that items be put on reserve.

Resources

When asked about their use of specific electronic resources (databases, bibliographic management tools, and e-book packages), participants indicated that they used many of these more frequently – in fact, each of the 14 resources listed was used more often by at least one respondent, and participants listed two additional resources in the open-ended question (figure 2). Only one respondent (8%) indicated that he/she did not use any of the listed resources more frequently, nor listed a resource in the open-ended question.

Discussion

The response rate to the survey was 12/30 (40%). All respondents but one (92%) indicated that meeting with the liaison librarian increased their use of library resources or services. It is possible that those who felt that the meeting had positively affected their use of library resources were more likely to answer the survey. Still, if more than one third (11 out of a possible 30) of participants felt that the meeting positively affected their use of the library, it is well worth librarian time to set up such meetings with their faculty. When the respondents were asked if they had further comments on whether the meetings were useful, one wrote “Absolutely useful. I think we do not utilize our librarian enough.” Another commented that “review of the services provided and/or new information explained during librarian visits is of great value to a faculty member. Whether this information would increase the frequency of using library services is important to know but the most significant aspect from my point of view is that the faculty member would be aware of resources/new tools and use them as needed.” This last comment echoes the findings of earlier studies which highlighted the liaison’s role in making faculty aware of library resources (Ryans, Suresh and Wei-Ping Zhang 19; Yang 126).

The data gathered in this study came from a survey of the faculty themselves, and asked them to provide their perceptions of their library use patterns. Of course, because these are only perceptions, it is possible that their actual use of the library is different. However, short of tracking actual use, which would pose numerous technical problems and raise many privacy concerns, this is perhaps the next best option.

Because my interactions with the faculty were pleasant, I was worried that they might write positive comments about my work, rather than evaluating the worth of the meetings. I tried to avoid this by writing in the information letter, “Please note

that this survey is not meant to serve as an evaluation of the quality of service provided by your liaison librarian.” Still, a few of the respondents did write comments which named me specifically, or commented on the quality of the service provided. Perhaps the goal of the survey could have been stressed more in the invitation e-mails.

Librarians at the University of Saskatchewan are members of the Faculty Association, the union to which the professoriate also belongs. One commonly raised concern among University of Saskatchewan librarians is that our faculty do not see us as colleagues, even though we too, are required to do scholarly work, and to go through the tenure process. One respondent to this survey commented that as a result of the meeting he/she sees “... the librarian in a different light. I see what an excellent resource she is and more importantly, I see that she is willing and able to help with my research. I see her as a colleague now.” Meeting with our faculty then, could be a way to increase opportunities for collaboration and understanding of our role. Tennant et al. also reported an increase in collaboration between librarians and faculty following implementation of a liaison program (406).

This comment and another, “a dedicated librarian for discipline specific attention has been great,” also lend credibility to the liaison model. In the past, faculty came to the library more often, and so were more likely to have met a librarian. Now that there is less need for our users to come to us, we may need to reach out to them, so that they realize what the library has to offer.

Conclusion

Approaching faculty members to set up one-on-one appointments to talk about library resources and services does seem to be worthwhile. Although this is a small study, it shows that more than one third of those who met with the librarian found this

approach helpful. It also shows that this method can alert faculty to the resources available, and thus lead to increased, or more judicious, use of these resources. Meeting with faculty in person can also make them more receptive to further communication, whether this is face-to-face or not. Finally, this approach may lead to a greater understanding of the role of the liaison librarian and thus more effective use of liaison librarians' skills by faculty.

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Erin Watson has been a liaison librarian at the Health Sciences Library, University of Saskatchewan since 2001. She has been a Senior Member of the Medical Library Association's Academy of Health Information Professionals since February 2008.

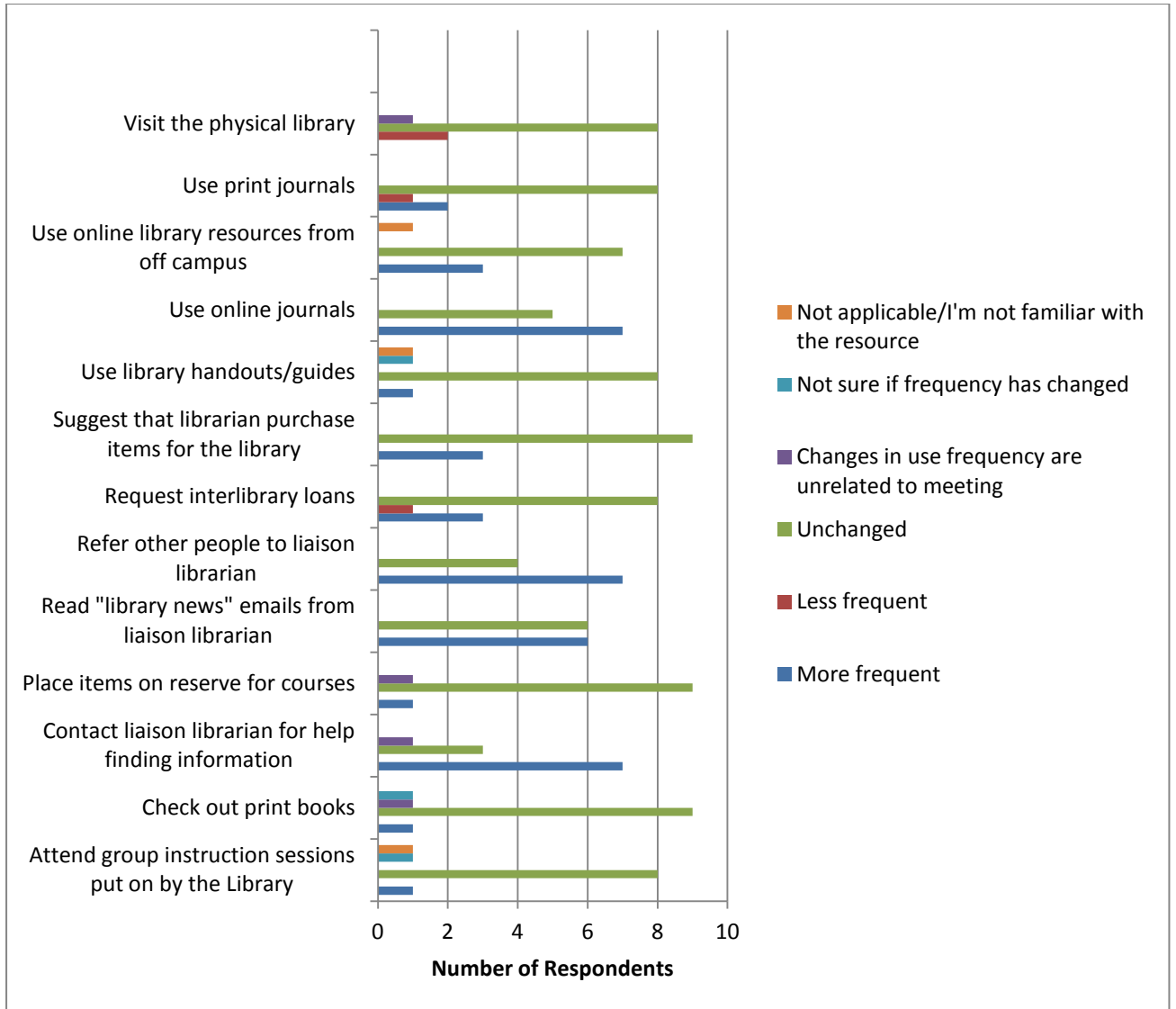


Figure 1: Changes in Frequency of Use of Library Services

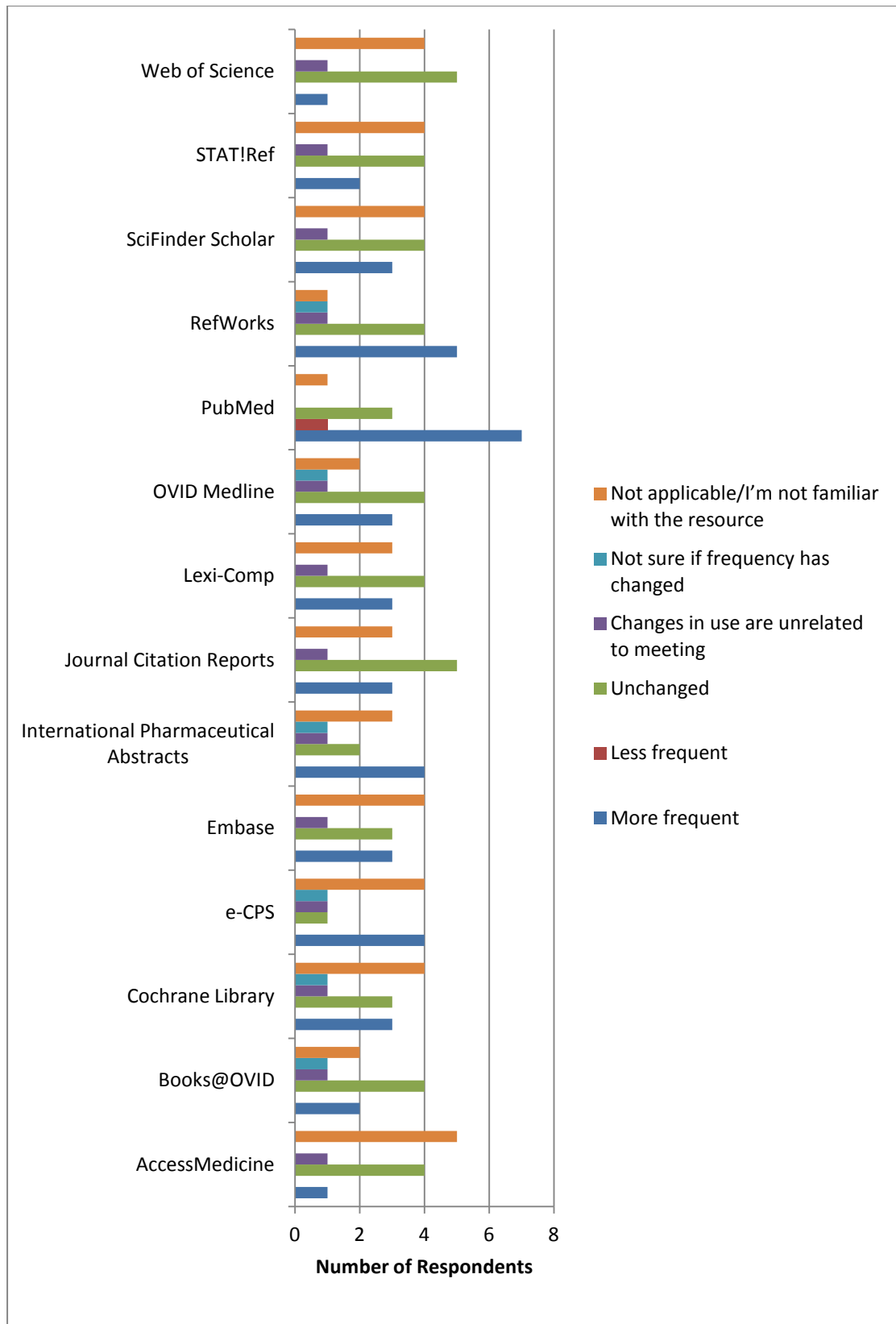


Figure 2: Changes in Frequency of Use of Library Resources

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Appendix:***Introductory E-mail***

Hello everyone,

You are receiving this e-mail because you have met with me individually (or in the company of your lab group) to discuss library resources and services sometime over the last 4 years. I am doing a research project on whether faculty's use of library resources and services changes after meeting with a librarian, and to that end, am sending you an **anonymous survey**, which should take **no more than 10 minutes** to complete.

This project has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board, and I have attached an information letter which provides further details. Please feel free to contact me with questions.

If you would like to participate, you can go to <http://www....> ; this link is also in the information letter.

Thanks very much.

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Information Letter

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “The Effect of Librarian Visits on Faculty’s Use of Library Resources.” Please read this letter carefully, and feel free to contact the researcher to pose any questions you might have. You may wish to print this letter for future reference.

Researcher: Erin Watson, Health Sciences Library, University of Saskatchewan, (306)966-7327, email

Purpose and Procedure: This letter has been sent to faculty who have participated in one-on-one meetings with the researcher in the last four years. The purpose of the study is to find out whether individual meetings with faculty members are an effective way to promote library services and resources. To that end, you are invited to participate in an **online, anonymous** survey regarding your use of library resources. Please note that this survey is not meant to serve as an evaluation of the quality of service provided by your liaison librarian. Completing the survey or any of the questions within it, is optional.

Completing the survey should take no more than 10 minutes.

Potential Risks: There are no risks associated with participating in this study. Because the survey will be completed anonymously, your responses, or your choice whether or not to participate, cannot have any effect on the service you receive from your liaison librarian or any part of the University of Saskatchewan Library.

Potential Benefit: A greater understanding of how best to provide library services to faculty members.

Confidentiality: No identifying information will be requested; surveys will be completed online and anonymously. The IP address of respondents' computers will not be tracked.

Right to Withdraw: Your participation is voluntary, and you may answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. There is no guarantee that you will personally benefit from your involvement. The information that is shared will be held in strict confidence. You may also choose to withdraw from the study by not completing the survey.

Consent to Participate: Completing the survey will be taken as your consent to participate in this study.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to phone or e-mail the researcher at the number and address provided above. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on June 5, 2009. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Ethics Office ((306) 966-2084). Out of town participants may call collect.

Follow-up: Results of the study will be published in a journal article. The researcher will send all potential participants an e-mail letting them know once the article has been published.

If you would like to participate in this study, click the link below to fill out the questionnaire: <http://...>

Survey Questions

1. Sometime during the last four years, you met individually with your liaison librarian. How has this meeting changed the frequency with which you use the following resources? (If you have met individually with your liaison librarian more than once, please comment on how your initial meeting has changed the frequency with which you use the following resources.) Respondents were asked to choose "more frequent," "less frequent," "unchanged," "changes in use frequency are unrelated to meeting," "not sure if frequency has changed," or "not applicable/I'm not familiar with the resource."

AccessMedicine
Books@OVID
Cochrane Library
e-CPS
Embase
International Pharmaceutical Abstracts (IPA)
Journal Citation Reports
Lexi-Comp
OVID Medline
PubMed
RefWorks
SciFinder Scholar
STAT!Ref
Web of Science

2. Are there any other electronic resources that you use more frequently as a result of your meeting with your liaison librarian? If so, which ones? Are there any other electronic resources that you use less frequently as a result of your meeting with your liaison librarian? If so, which ones? Please enter your comments here.

3. **How has meeting with the librarian changed the frequency with which you do the following? Respondents were asked to choose “more frequent,” “less frequent,” “unchanged,” “changes in use frequency are unrelated to meeting,” “not sure if frequency has changed,” or “not applicable/I’m not familiar with the resource.”**

Attend group instruction sessions put on by the Library
 Check out print books
 Contact liaison librarian for help finding information
 Place items on reserve for courses
 Read "library news" emails from liaison librarian
 Refer other people to liaison librarian
 Request interlibrary loans
 Suggest that librarian purchase items for the library
 Use library handouts/guides
 Use online journals
 Use online library resources from off campus
 Use print journals
 Visit the physical library

4. **Did your meeting with the liaison librarian change the frequency with which you use other library services, or participate in other library-related activities? Please explain.**
5. **If your frequency of use of library resources or services, or participation in library-related activities has changed since meeting with your liaison librarian, why do you think that is?**
6. **Do you have any other comments on whether librarian visits to faculty are useful or not?**