

Lessons Learned from Surveying Sensory Support Services in R1 Libraries

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Abstract

Objectives: Discuss the results and failure of two surveys on the topic of implementing services for sensory processing support.

Methods: Three members of the University of Nevada, Reno University Libraries' Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility Committee created a survey to measure the effectiveness of the libraries' sensory processing items. Challenges from this survey were encountered, including low response rates from patrons using the items. The team pivoted and developed a new survey to send to R1 research institutions to see what kind of programs and items they offered for their neurodivergent communities.

Lessons Learned: The pool of responses for both surveys was too few to draw any conclusions. Limitations of the patron-facing study include low circulation figures that hindered the survey response rate, as well as the lack of interest in disclosing personal information via a survey. Recommendations for improving this survey include additional promotion of the collection to increase usage and consulting with programs that directly work with the neurodivergent population to redesign the study. Limitations for the second survey included promoting the survey to only circulation staff members and the lack of sensory programs within academic libraries. Recommendations include broadening the targeted audience to reach more library staff in other departments and expanding the methodology to include a content analysis of websites.

Conclusion: Both studies experienced a lack of participation that ultimately led to their floundering. There were several potential reasons for this, including issues with study design and promotion. The lessons learned can, however, be applied to future studies of this emerging area. More research on how to identify potential participants and better promote a survey like the ones described in this article, for example, could lead to greater success.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a rise in the use of sensory processing tools in schools to improve concentration for students who struggle with various neurodiverse challenges. Research shows that tools like fidget toys provide tactile stimulation that serves to release energy, promote stress management and maintain focus¹. Libraries have an opportunity to support their neurodivergent student population. Few studies discuss the use of sensory processing tools to help patrons focus on studying or working within an academic library. Environmental considerations and their impact on how neurodivergent students focus while studying in the library are common topics within the literature. Lawrence discusses how libraries can support autistic library users and professionals by providing certain services and environments that can help this population use library resources, like adapting fluorescent light levels to those who are light sensitive². Shea and Derry examine the lack of adequate resources and services available for autistic users as well as lack of training and awareness in academic library professionals to serve this student population³. With limited research on library supported research services and tools, this study aimed to bridge the gap and provide insight on how university libraries provide sensory processing support to enhance existing services and inspire future development.

In 2023, the University Libraries conducted several guided conversations with library faculty and staff members regarding a new strategic plan. In one session, a faculty member mentioned the need to support the neurodivergent community by offering study aide resources. This was brought to the University Libraries' Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (IDEA) Committee and the Sensory Processing Tools Program was developed later that year. Funded by the University Libraries and Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, university affiliates can check out noise cancelling headphones, light sensitivity glasses, fidget kits, weighted lap pads and foot fidget pads at all library service points.

With the implementation of this lendable collection, three librarians on the Libraries' Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (IDEA) Committee initiated a study aimed to inform how University Libraries can further support students, including expanding collection development for sensory items and study spaces. A survey was developed to assess how students use these sensory tools. The intent was to use this feedback to improve the service. Due to the lack of survey participation, the authors pivoted the focus to more broadly study how libraries within R1 institutions developed sensory processing programs or services. The lack of survey participation for both surveys resulted in inconclusive findings. This led the authors to determine limitations of both studies and consider several lessons learned that could be applied for future study.

Methods

Survey 1

The first attempt to engage in research on sensory items in libraries involved a short survey about the collection of items available for checkout. It included questions about student use and satisfaction with the items as well as photos and descriptions of other sensory equipment that could be added to the collection. The survey was piloted with a few trusted colleagues who, though eager to share their input, do not identify as neurodivergent. The project was approved by the Institutional Review Board and was accessible via a QR code and note inviting participation attached to the items themselves. The method of reaching potential respondents was two-pronged: via relevant campus listservs and at point-of-contact. The authors shared a link to the survey with campus partners, such as the Neurodiversity Alliance, and asked them to distribute it widely. They also encouraged access services staff to promote it to users as they were checking out or returning the materials themselves. Additionally, a few liaison librarians promoted the services during their library instruction sessions, handing out flyers. After several months where only 10 surveys were completed fully, the project was abandoned.

Survey 2

The authors then pivoted by completely redesigning the survey with an academic library audience in mind and, after receiving Institutional Review Board approval once more, distributed this new questionnaire to a list of library staff at R1 academic libraries. This second survey featured questions about the sensory-related services available (or not) at these libraries. Again, though the second research instrument was run past a few colleagues, a pilot was not conducted with potential respondents. R1 peer institutions were chosen and the authors compiled the list of

contacts after scouring the libraries' website for relevant staff members by their titles who work within circulation departments or in administration. To encourage greater participation, the authors included a section using skip-logic for those libraries that do not provide sensory services but might have thoughts about feasibility of initiating them in the future.

Lessons Learned

In the first year of the sensory processing tool service's implementation, 54 circulations were recorded across all items and service points. The low circulation figures provided limitations for the success of the study, as it was expected that more usage of the collection would yield more survey completions. Ten patrons completed the user satisfaction survey, which did not yield enough data to assess the collection. The research team recognizes that this new collection would need more promotion to increase the usage.

Employees at service locations were asked to promote the survey while checking out the items. Employees noted that this was not received well, as patrons expressed hesitancy in sharing their experience. Some staff members were hesitant to verbally promote the survey, saying that these interactions were awkward. The authors should have paid closer attention to the feedback provided by access services staff and reconsidered their efforts. In retrospect, the authors might have instead identified on campus experts, such as staff outside of the library who serve neurodiverse students, and asked them for feedback on the questionnaire and advice on how to best reach this population.

The second survey, developed to assess the development of sensory items collections within academic libraries, resulted in low survey responses. With the targeted approach to email individuals to complete the survey, it was assumed this was the best population to reach as these individuals work directly in circulation and would have knowledge of existing services or programs. Despite reaching out to individual respondents and sending reminder emails, only 18 of a total of 187 possible institutions completed the survey. With a response rate of only 8%, it was deemed wise to discontinue this version of the project as well.

The library institution survey reported that there was an overlap in oversight of services and spaces, including library user or access services, library student success programs, library events committees and hosted spaces within other campus departments. Broadening the marketing to library administration or the institutional level may contribute to more participation, as these services or programs do not exist fully within the circulation department.

The authors found that 46% of participants from the library institution survey stated they do not offer these services or did not know if they offered these services. Of that population, 71% said they are not considering offering services like this or did not know. Based on this limited data, the authors acknowledge that these services may be an emerging trend that has not yet taken shape. There are academic libraries that are creating the blueprint for these services³. With more promotion through scholarly contributions, visibility of services on library websites, and conversations among libraries, these services could become more prominent.

The authors would like to revisit this study in two ways. To address the challenges from the first survey, they would adjust survey recruitment methods to reach a larger audience, consulting with campus neurodiversity support programs for recommendations. For the second study, they would expand the methods to a content analysis of library websites, to determine where services are being offered. The authors are interested in exploring a different style for disseminating the research findings that could contribute to scholarly conversations, such as a conference panel, a poster presentation or hosting virtual presentations for relevant library associations.

Conclusion

Research subject engagement was a problem from the start, affecting both the internal, patron-facing survey and external, librarian-centered survey in a similar fashion. There are several potential reasons for these low response rates. The first study targeted a user population that wishes to remain anonymous and to whom outreach was not always easy or comfortable. Meanwhile, few academic libraries, even those at R1 institutions, seem to offer such neurodivergent support services currently, hampering the second project. Perhaps this line of research could be revived in the future, if sensory items become more common within library collections. Another method, like content analysis of academic library websites, might yield more robust data. Should the authors wish to revisit the first survey, they might benefit from first doing more research on how to best engage with hard-to-reach populations. Despite a disappointing outcome, however, they do not regret undertaking these research projects and intend to put the lessons learned to good use going forward.

CRedit Statement

Rebecca Glasgow, Deirdre Buckley and Elena Azadbakht worked together to conceptualize the research project, develop the methodology and survey tool, disseminate the survey, analyze the data and write the original draft. Rebecca Glasgow and Elena Azadbakht worked together to review and edit the document. Rebecca Glasgow was the project administrator.

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