How Are We Doing?
A Survey of Patrons at the Augusta County Library

by Daza Craig

Augusta County Library is a medium-sized public library in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley. It serves a population of about 73,500 people, has a staff of 23 full- and part-time employees, and spends an operating budget of just over $1 million. One branch and three stations are located throughout the county, with the main library located between two cities, Waynesboro and Staunton. These two cities operate their own libraries but have a cooperative venture called the Valley Libraries Connection. This enables the three libraries to share their catalog and their resources but maintain separate budgets. The main facility of the Augusta County Library is newly renovated.

Daza Craig has worked in various types of libraries for over twenty years. She is currently the circulation supervisor for Augusta County Library in Fishersville, Virginia. This project was undertaken as part of the Virginia Library Leadership Academy (VALLA). The author may be contacted at dazacraig2@augustan Countylibrary.org.

Newly renovated Augusta County Library, Fishersville, Virginia.
County Library is located in an old high school and just recently underwent a $2.2 million renovation. The collection contains approximately 180,000 volumes (all formats).

Recently, it was time to rework the old Five Year Plan, and it seemed a good idea to ask our patrons what they thought about the services and what changes should be considered for the future. The assistant director, Debbie Sweeney, had designed a survey in one of her graduate classes that was easily modified to ask the questions that would be most helpful for future planning. Fundamental questions included why patrons came to the library, what services they used when they came, and what additional services they would like. Other questions collected data on age; use frequency; help requested from staff; and satisfaction with hours, catalog, and loan period. A rating system ranked satisfaction levels on a scale of one to six. The last page left room for comments and open-ended questions about the most and least important services and new services. Copies of the survey were placed at the library entrance and on the website for a nine-day period with a sign asking, “How are we doing?” The staff encouraged patrons to fill out the survey, offering a piece of candy to every patron who completed one.

Completed surveys numbered 227. This included fifty-five responses from the branch and stations. The results were encouraging and insightful. A surprising number of patrons took the time to write a total of 156 comments and suggestions. These made especially interesting reading.

The first question about age confirmed that 35 percent of our patrons are over fifty-five, an important statistic when planning for the next five years. Respondents who came to the library at least once a week accounted for 75 percent. The number one reason why patrons came to the library was to check out books for pleasure reading, and the most important service offered was access to books and information. This confirmed an extensive survey report by OCLC in 2005 that concluded, “Borrowing print books is the library service used most; and ‘Books’ is the library brand. There is no runner up.” The second largest reason our patrons said they came to the library was to check out DVDs. This confirmed staff observations about the high use of the DVD collection. The third-ranked
reason was to pick up reserve items on hold, a service that seems very much appreciated by our patrons. A twice-daily courier service between the three main libraries gives our patrons a very quick response to their requests in most instances. The fourth most important reason patrons gave for coming to the library was to check out books for information. Use of the Internet came in as reason number five, and program attendance followed at number six. In another question, twenty-seven patrons stated that their most important library service was children’s programming and services. This seems to coincide with the fact that our weekly children’s programs are very well attended. Other reasons for coming to the library were to read newspapers and magazines, check out audio books, use the copier, and access Wi-Fi via laptops. Also mentioned were the ongoing used book sale, a quiet place to study, a friendly place to bring the kids, and meeting rooms.

The majority of our patrons seemed satisfied with loan periods, hours, locations, and the public access catalog. Those who had heard about our library services from a friend numbered 33 percent. In answer to the question, “How often do you ask staff for help,” 50 percent said “Sometimes.” The number one reason for needing help was to find specific items. Other reasons for requesting help from staff included (in order of response) placing holds, finding information, learning about services/programs, using public computers, placing interlibrary loans, and conducting genealogy research. A gratifying 90 percent of our patrons said they were “very satisfied” (the highest rating) with library services.

On the last page of the survey, patrons were asked these three questions:

1. What are the most important services the library offers?
2. What are the least important services the library offers?
3. What new or different services would you like to see the library offer?

Although some patrons skipped this or put “Everything,” “Nothing,” or “IDK” (I don’t know), a total of 384 responses were collected, tabulated, and sorted. The answers to the first question were categorized into ten main groups as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Description</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Access to books &amp; information</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Access to computers</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Movies and DVDs</td>
<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Children’s services</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Friendly staff</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Programs</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Holds</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Audio books</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Quiet study area</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Other</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
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Mentioned in the “Other” category were newspapers and magazines, meeting rooms, used book sales, computer classes, Wi-Fi, large print books, music, fax, and copy machines.
In answer to the question about the least important services, many patrons said “All are important,” but some did list Wi-Fi, children’s programs (didn’t have children), fax, copier, and too many fiction versus nonfiction books as services that were not important to them.

When asked about new or different services they would like the library to offer, the suggestions included everything from the practical and clever to the humorous. Some of these additional services suggested were a map showing where things were located; drive-through pick-up for books; drop boxes for DVDs; foreign language classes; longer time on movie loans; more classes on specific subjects (gardening, beekeeping, stargazing); additional computer classes; more new DVDs; more Christian books; more biographies; bigger genealogy section; movie nights; bigger coffee cups at the coffee bar; faster Internet; more educational videos; Kindles to check out; an easier way to find books if uncertain of spelling; parking lot improvements; more displays like the current one on World War I; more self-check-outs; vending machines; longer hours; and dates with the lady librarians.

The four negative comments were about the noise level in the new reading room and the crowded corner of the “New Book” section. These suggestions are being considered for future improvements.

Comments on staff were overwhelmingly positive: “Staff is excellent,” “Gracious and helpful personnel,” “Great job by great people,” “Staff always friendly and helpful,” “Everyone is very nice and helpful. Thanks to all who work here,” “Exceptional staff,” “Everyone is so helpful and friendly to our family,” and “We love the staff.” One of the best comments was, “From the libraries I’ve used, Augusta County has the most friendly staff. You don’t treat us like idiots when we can’t find library,” “Love the renovations,” “Wonderful improvements,” “Like the coffee bar,” “Way cool place to hang out,” “New layout looks fabulous,” “Delightful atmosphere.”

The last section for comments was very interesting and encouraging. All of the 156 comments were sorted into the categories of Facilities, Staff, Services, Collection, and Other. Over 91 percent were positive; only twelve responses were negative. The comments on facilities were very positive: “Beautiful
something! Thanks!” Several of the staff were singled out by name as being especially appreciated. Three negative comments included staff talking too loudly.

In the comments about our services, six were positive comments about the newly installed self-check-out machines. Other positive comments mentioned the children’s programs and the use of the Internet. The most negative comments (five) were about the Public Access Catalog (PAC): “Not easy to use,” “Difficult to find books if unsure of spelling/title,” “Would be helpful to look for items available in different formats,” and “Some items on shelf not easily found in online catalog.” This corresponded to the earlier question, “How satisfied are you with the library’s PAC,” because a significant number of patrons left this blank, put a question mark, or said “Don’t know.” Making the catalog more user-friendly can be identified as an area to investigate for the future.

Comments about the collection were also positive: “I love the books/movies selection,” “The selection is amazing,” “We homeschool and are thrilled with the wonderful resources that we find here from books to DVDs to supplement our curriculum,” and “Good selections.” This was especially encouraging to the acquisitions librarian, who has had to deal with budget reductions for resources.

The Other category included general overall positive comments. “I love the Augusta County Library—it’s user-friendly and kid-friendly, and we always feel welcome here.” “I enjoy bringing my son out to the library. It’s one of our favorite places to be. Thank you.” “Best library I’ve ever been to.”

The survey gave our staff valuable information to use when revising the Five Year Plan. It reinforced the need to continue providing excellent core services to our community with the staff and resources we have. It helped us identify areas that will need further study in the next five years.

One obvious area to be addressed in the Five Year Plan is technology upgrades. The recent renovation enabled the library to install fiber ethernet and increase the available bandwidth. Our computer speed has improved, and future plans include adding the library stations to this upgrade. The library staff will be also be looking into options to make our Public Access Catalog (PAC) more user-friendly for patrons who are unsure of spelling or wording (on the order of Amazon or Google—“Did you really mean…?”). The Five Year Plan will recommend the purchase of additional public access computers, including two in the Young Adult area. Recommendations will also be made to offer more computer classes at various levels, including instruction on the use of the Public Access Catalog. Other plans include increasing the number of e-book titles offered, as well as purchasing e-book readers for loan to patrons.

Another proposal in the Five Year Plan is to increase the number and variety of adult program offerings. One purpose of the program offerings will be to attract nonusers to the library to become acquainted with the facilities and services. The patron survey gave us suggestions for future programs. The newly renovated facilities provide the opportunity to bring in a variety of speakers and entertainment venues and to increase our visibility in the community.

The findings of the survey confirmed that Augusta County Library serves a large and active senior population. The Five Year Plan will propose the establishment of a Senior Advisory Board to enable the library to better serve their needs. A recent grant provided the purchase of four laptop computers. The library plans to partner with the four area senior centers and use these laptops to offer computer classes off-site in the community.

The survey from our patrons was a real encouragement and boost to a staff that has undergone layoffs and budget cuts and lived through days of jackhammers, dust, and noise. Our basic mission remains the same for the next five years: connecting the people of the community with the information they need; maintaining a relevant selection of material in a variety of formats; and providing a facility that can be used for reading, study, and research as well as community programs and activities. Hearing from our patrons that the library is doing a good job in its basic mission gives us the confidence to continue doing what we do well and to identify areas that need attention in the future.