

Informal and Anonymous Voices: The Unexpected Value of Unsolicited Feedback in the Academic Library

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In the lobby of the Killam Library at Dalhousie University, students, faculty, and staff stop and gather around a large bulletin board decorated with vibrant yellow cards, each covered in different handwriting. Reading these cards, one patron laughs, another nods their head in agreement. One student calls over a friend, points, chuckles. The group disperses; another forms. Someone grabs a yellow card from the stack beside the bulletin board, adding their own voice to the mix.

The Comments, Compliments, and Complaints Board (also known as the “CCC Board”) is a unique source of unsolicited feedback for the Killam Library. The board creates a forum for library patrons to anonymously submit (and share) comment and criticism on anything they wish. They simply fill out a yellow card, pop it in the submission box, and wait to see their card posted to the board.

While the CCC Board is undeniably popular (feedback submissions are steady throughout the academic term and the scene described above is very much accurate), the Killam Library previously had no way to document and analyze this feedback. This paper describes a project I undertook to develop an unsolicited feedback database for the library, and the findings of my analysis of all feedback submitted from January 1, 2015 to May 1, 2016. Notable findings include that the majority of feedback was about library space (in some cases, patrons were even using the board to submit facilities maintenance requests) and most feedback was critical in nature (more complaints than compliments). Most notable, however, was the discovery that patrons would often submit fun and humorous messages to the CCC Board. In this way, I argue the board had an unexpected purpose: it created a space for patrons to informally interact with the library (whether as givers or readers of feedback), cultivating a sense of spontaneous conversation between patrons and between patron and institution.

This paper argues for the value of creating sites of unsolicited feedback in academic libraries, using the CCC board as an example, and highlighting the importance of informal and anonymous conversation forums for helping patrons form connections with their library.