Program Title: Research Paper Planner: Students Love It, but Do We Know Why?

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Short program description:
Students get excited about the research paper planner because it generates a personalized schedule of research and writing steps for papers. They also find the links to advice and tips for these steps and the email alerts helpful. We attempt to quantify this enthusiasm and use of the research paper planner through web page analytics and a user survey. These data will help us develop targeted marketing programs and other similar tools.

Full program description:
In spring 2012 the libraries had a "soft introduction" of the Research Paper Planner (the planner). The planner was adapted from the popular "Assignment Calculator" and calculates a schedule for the 13 steps identified in researching and writing papers. This version is accompanied by a separate research guide with advice and links for each step. Although geared towards undergraduates, graduate students could also find the planner useful. At that time, the planner was posted on the libraries web site, introduced to faculty and staff at the Writing Center, and incorporated into library instructional sessions. Due to the positive response a marketing plan was developed over the summer and launched in fall 2012.

The Research Paper Planner was widely praised by faculty and students: they liked the email alerts, the concrete deadlines for each step, and the supporting materials in the separate guide. This feedback was mostly anecdotal so a more formal quantitative review was initiated. To supplement the data from the LibGuides program, Google Analytics were embedded in the planner home page during the fall 2012; and a survey was constructed to elicit feedback from users who signed up for email alerts.

Preliminary results from the LibGuide data from spring 2012 suggest that students are more engaged with the guide for the research process and steadily less so for each step of the writing process. This trend confirms that students are actively seeking more guidance in the research process.

Usage statistics of the guide are high in April even though formal library instruction promoting the tool ended in March. Because early steps of the research process still have many hits late in the semester, these data indicate that students with a tendency to procrastinate still see the planner as useful. High usage in April may also come from students returning to the guide through the links in the email reminders.

Fall 2012 preliminary data indicates very modest increase in usage following marketing pushes to undergraduates. These findings were unexpected but may be due to the fact that the marketing was primarily a print campaign. Since the planner generates customized due dates, this feature creates a "wow" factor for students which is not easily replicated in static promotional materials.

Demonstrating how easily a schedule is created may be more effective in encouraging students to use the planner.

These observations confirmed that the planned user survey would be useful in analyzing the planner and the accompanying guide. The questions in the survey are designed to ascertain where users learned about the planner and to provide feedback on the effectiveness and usefulness of individual steps. Other data will include user demographics, feedback on the preferred format of reminders, and suggestions for future improvements.

Future plans include marketing to first-year programs and academic communities in the dorms and producing more media-rich advertisements which demonstrate the tool. Potential developments also include creating similar tools for theses and working with the Office of Research to explore the adaptation of such a tool.

Learning outcomes:
Objective 1: Students are more engaged with library tools for the research process than for the writing process
Objective 2: Students' use of the tool continues beyond librarian mediated intervention or instruction
Objective 3: Demonstrations of the tool appear to be more effective with undergraduates than traditional marketing techniques