

Results from the IALL1999 Conference Snapshot Survey

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At the IALL '99 conference, hosted by the University of Maryland, an informal computerized "snapshot survey" was administered to volunteers who responded to questions related to the current and future state of their language lab facilities, their expectations of IALL, and which skills they deem most important in their work. What follows is a summary of those responses. This summary is not scientific in that it does not attempt to include all data. The intention is to provide a meaningful picture about trends and priorities.

There were a total of 46 respondents. The most common job title listed was akin to "Director, Language Modern Languages," Resource Center," followed by "Lab Technician" and "Professor of....."

Questions were open-ended, allowing respondents to explain themselves in their own words and include as many "answers" as they wanted. For the first three questions, I have grouped responses into several general categories formulated in my own words. These appear in italics. I have also indicated the number of people who responded with an answer fitting into each category, and included a few quotes from each category.

1) "Considering today's trends in hardware, materials, and technology, please finish the sentence: In the year 2009, I would like my language lab to have:"

A. Networked delivery of materials/digitized materials (15 respondents)

"Seamless technology for audio, video and computer."

"To be completely digital."

"High-speed network server and networked computers."

B. Remote access/Virtual delivery of materials (8 respondents)

"More Web-based AV."

"No need [for lab] to exist ... wireless connection to the WWW."

"World-wide distribution of courses on-line."

C. More space improved physical layout (8 respondents)

"Offices for staff that are not lunchrooms."

"Windows—not the Microsoft kind."

"Space, good lighting, better lines of sight."

D. Faculty development center services (6 respondents)

"Workroom for materials development and training of faculty."

E. Expansion of center to serve other academic units (3 respondents)

"I would like to see the Center integrated into a university-wide initiative to foster an international climate on campus."

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2) "By the year 2009, 1 would like my language lab NOT to have:"

A. Analog tapes (20 respondents)

"Any analog media."

"Cassette machines."

B. Incompetent staff (3 respondents)

"Inexperienced lab attendants"

At least one respondent mentioned each of the following: wires, booths, a small budget, four different computer platforms, bandwidth limitations, record-keeping requirements on student use of lab, AV services to classrooms, adversarial relationship with academic computing department, students checking their email.

3) "If I could do one thing for me, it would be:"

A) Continue its current activities (16 respondents)

"To continue to foster collaboration among the peer institutions."

"Continue to provide opportunities for professional development."

"Never stop doing what it's doing—it's a great organization."

"To keep me thinking about the positive aspects of my position instead of the negative ones."

B) Provide information directed to university administrators (4 respondents)

"Help me to communicate with the powers that be when it comes to funding and support of technology."

"Help educate administrators on the professional nature of being a language lab director."

"To continue to contact administrators to encourage their direct solicitation of what foreign language faculty need."

At least one respondent mentioned each of the following: provide more information on grant opportunities, provide more "how-to" manuals, put the lab management manual and the lab design kit on the Web, promote dialog on changing organizational structure for information technology, and "Get me to Japan next year"—presumably for the FLEAT 2000 Conference!

4) "1 consider my most valuable skills to be (Please rate 1=most important, 6=least, etc) [on a 1-6 scale]:"

In this question, five skill areas were listed in the survey. Respondents could add a sixth if they wanted. Skills appear here in the order in which respondents rated them, beginning with the most important:

Organizational/ Management Skills (Av. 2.1)

Experience/ Expertise in Language Teaching (Av. 2.5)

Technical Expertise (Av. 3.2)

Knowledge of a language other than English (Av. 3.3)

Instructional Design Expertise (Av. 3.4)

Other skills added by at least two respondents: interpersonal skills, and having a sense of humor!

Conclusions

It is clear from questions #1 and #2 that respondents wish to move away from analog media toward digital media and the corresponding networked delivery of them. However it is also clear that other considerations such as efficiency of working spaces, faculty development and the larger issue of reaching out to other units within the institution are also important.

Question #3 gives valuable information on what we expect from IALL, and this should be useful to the IALL leadership when planning future initiatives. Although member satisfaction with the organization appears to be high, several people feel that IALL could do more to help members interact

with institutional administration.

For question #4, in which respondents rated the importance of job skills, it is very interesting that organizational/management skills and language teaching experience were rated significantly more important than technical expertise or the other two skill areas. Employers take heed! This is what many "lab experts" consider most important in their jobs.

In sum, I think this type of survey is helpful in defining where the "language lab" is headed and therefore where the organization as a whole should focus its attention. "Thank You" to each of you who contributed. I hope that more IALL members will have an opportunity to participate in a larger survey in the future. ♦

David Pankratz has been Director of the Language Learning Resource Center and German Instructor at Loyola University Chicago for eleven years. His work experience includes teaching ESL and curriculum development in vocational ESL. From 1993-1998 he authored the column "LLTI Highlights" for the IALL Journal.