



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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College Catalogs: Who Needs—oops!—Reads Them?

Idly curious, I began following correspondence about college and university catalogs on the Internet. Comments like "often published but never read" and "our most expensive, least read publication" were common. A casual examination of almost any catalog yields an obvious explanation: policies of the institution, language of the institution, faculty and staff of the institution, history of the institution, pictures of the institution. The catalog easily convinces the user it was written by the institution, about the institution, and for the institution. Rules, regulations, policies, and concerns of the institution dominate page after page. Even the most impartial reader must wonder if anyone uses the catalog. One also wonders why institutions do not pay more attention to this critical publication.

I became aware of this problem working as a faculty advisor. Even though I gave students our catalog and the catalogs of institutions to which they planned to transfer, they still came back confused and often upset that I had asked them to read such boring, difficult material. As result of my experience, I chose to conduct a content analysis of college catalogs for public two- and four-year institutions in Arkansas. My purpose was to estimate their usability by prospective students.

The problems with the catalogs began with lack of focus. They seemed to be written for multiple audiences: trustees, alumni, faculty and staff, other institutions, legal system, government agencies, and, in theory, prospective and current students. The demands of the educational, governmental, and legal systems result in gobbledygook stuffed into formats so rigid as to rival the Tin Man minus his oil can. If institutions must serve multiple audiences with one publication, perhaps they could develop it for the audience least prepared to use it: prospective students. If the intention of the institution is to inform prospective students, then they need to adapt the reading difficulty and focus to fit this primary audience.

The literature seems to agree that college catalogs are boring and difficult to use for anyone, including counselors and advisors. Still, many institutions see them as recruiting devices, and most institutions expect students to know and abide by the rules and regulations published in the catalog. This expectation that

prospective and/or current students use the catalog seems to mandate that catalogs be usable. Operating under this premise, I examined the general information section of 21 catalogs for public two- and four-year institutions in Arkansas for readability and student focus. To estimate readability, I used the Flesch Reading Easy Score which includes difficulty and human interest paired with the Fry readability graph to determine a grade level. To examine student focus, I analyzed lead sentences under major headings and first subheadings and examined photographs. Lead sentences were categorized as focusing on the institution, on students, or on description. Photographs were classed as emphasizing students, students and faculty, faculty, or non-human/group subjects.

The analysis revealed a marked sameness among the catalogs. The reading level on the Flesch Reading Easy scale was very difficult for 16 of the catalogs and difficult for the remaining five. The lowest grade level for any catalog was 16. These reading levels suggest the reader must be a college graduate to read a catalog designed in theory for prospective students, many of whom may not read above the ninth or tenth grade level.

The reading level for these catalogs, paired with the human interest score, presents an even greater challenge. All the catalogs fell into the dull category with scores below 10. Five catalogs had human interest scores of 0. A thoughtful person can only conclude that a college graduate might be able to read these catalogs but would probably choose not to do so. Certainly, a high school junior or senior would have great difficulty reading and understanding this material.

The analysis of the lead sentences suggested an intense focus on the interests and policies of the institution. Seventy percent or more of the lead sentences in every catalog were focused on the institution or were mere description. Less than one-third of the sentences were focused on the needs and concerns of students. The point of view was that of the sender—the institution, with little regard for that of the receiver—the student.

The analysis of the photographs suggested an inconsistent use of pictures in catalogs. Only five



catalogs focused on students in half or more of the photographs. Seven catalogs had more than half of their photographs focusing on faculty or non-human/group subjects. The distribution of photographs suggests a lack of controlling purpose for the development of the catalog; certainly, students do not appear to be a primary audience.

Although I did not include active/passive voice as part of the study design, I found verb usage in these catalogs to be heavily passive. Freshman composition courses demand active voice; we teach students to write active and force them to read passive.

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If students need the information in college and university catalogs, then perhaps the institutions should establish simple guidelines governing their catalogs:

1. Determine the purpose of the catalog.
2. Determine the audience of the catalog.
3. Determine the lowest reading level of prospective students and write the catalog at or below that level.
4. Write in active voice, address students directly, and personalize the writing by using "you."
5. Use photographs that emphasize students and faculty and reflect the gender and ethnic makeup of their particular student body.
6. Test catalogs with the audience(s) that will be using them.

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Perhaps students will never choose college catalogs for entertainment. However, they should be able to pick up a catalog and find information they need to help them select a college and succeed once they get on campus.

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