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Engaging Students and Faculty in the Evaluation of a USMLE Review Product

Implications for Library Collection Development

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Background

Study materials for the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) are some of the most commonly requested materials at Dana Medical Library. Many academic health sciences libraries collect exam review materials in support of medical school curricula.^{1,2} However, choosing the most suitable resources remains a challenge for librarians.

Hendrix and Hassan established the need for consultation with students and faculty, including trials of online USMLE preparation materials prior to library purchase of such resources.³ They also urged “conducting usability tests or instituting structured feedback collection during product trials” (p. 214). Shultz et al stress the importance of “peer advice” or student-to-student advice regarding the USMLE Step 1 examination process.²

Description of Project

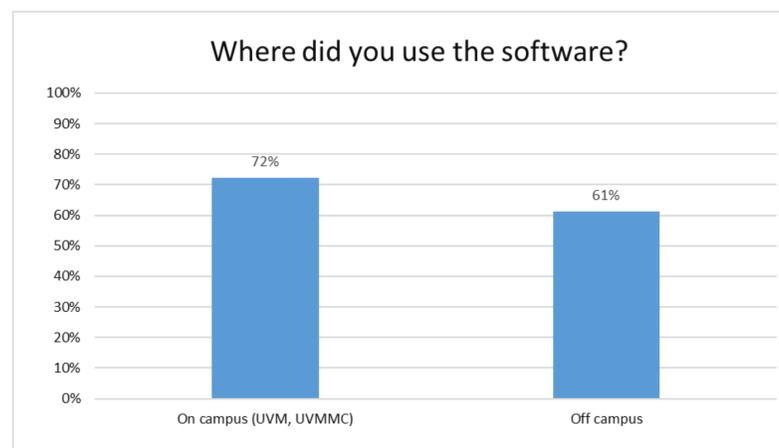
In Fall 2015, the Dana Medical Library received several student requests for online USMLE preparation materials. Requests came from Foundations students preparing to study for Step 1 as well as Clerkship students looking for subject and Step 2 study support. Librarians arranged for a trial of a new USMLE test preparation software available for library licensing. The software included content for Step 1, Step 2 CK and Step 3 exams. Librarians designed a plan for soliciting student and faculty feedback to inform the purchasing decision.

Methods

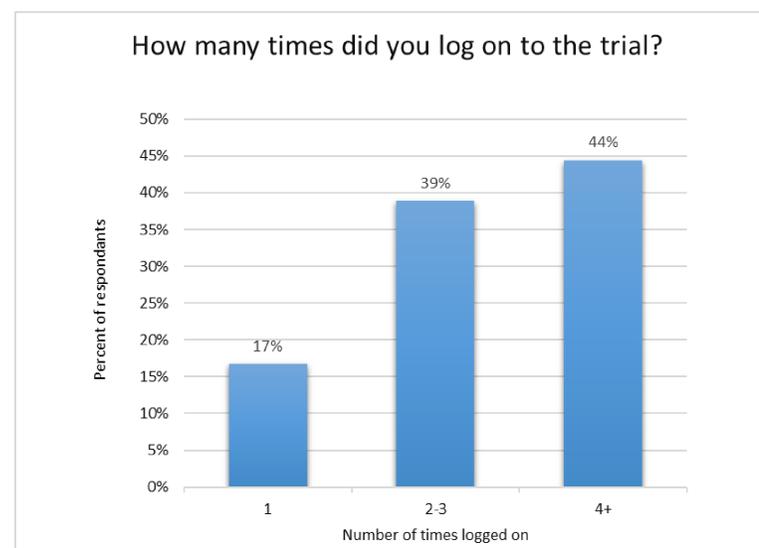
The Dana Medical Library ran an 8-week trial of the USMLE preparation software. Students and faculty were notified of the product trial through meetings, e-mail, signs in the library and social media. Trial participants were required by the vendor to create individual accounts linked to their email accounts. Participants were invited to complete an anonymous survey at the end of the trial. Survey questions addressed ease of use, quality of content, effectiveness in test preparation, and recommendation for or against purchase.

Results

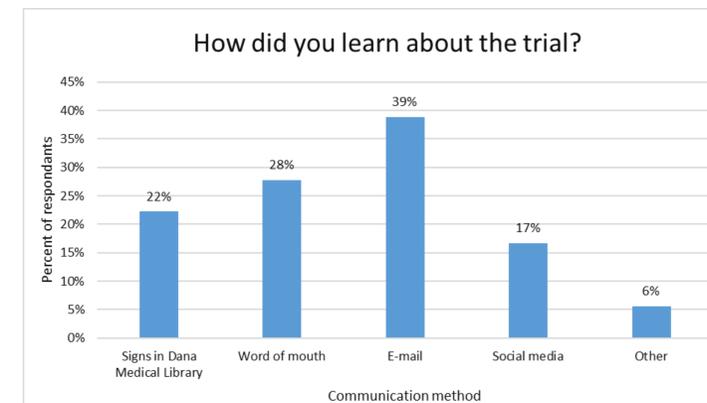
Forty students and faculty members participated in the trial. Eighteen responded to the survey (45% response rate). Survey respondents were divided over a recommendation for purchase, with 50% advising against purchase, 37.5% advising for purchase with reservations and 12.5% recommending purchase. Feedback on the ease of use, quality of questions, and overall performance was also mixed.



Students used the exam preparation software both on campus (72%) and off campus (61%), demonstrating the need for study materials that can be utilized at their convenience.



Trial participants generally tried the product several times during the trial period. Almost half (44.4%) logged in four or more times.



Peer-to-peer communication methods (email, word-of-mouth and social media) were more effective in promoting the trial than library-generated signs or publicity.

Conclusions

Finding the best quality resources for USMLE preparation is important to students and librarians. This trial of exam review software was much more successful than typical library trials. Publicizing the trial through student-to-student communication yielded high participation. The availability of email addresses for trial participants allowed for more targeted solicitation of feedback, which was highly advantageous in generating high-quality feedback on the product.

Librarians will continue to evaluate and trial new exam review products in collaboration with students and faculty. There is a need for ongoing education about the difference between individually licensed study materials and those available for institutional licensure.

Online resources are only one type of study material. The library also collects print study guides. Future research could explore the differences between students using print preparation materials versus students using electronic or online preparation materials.

References

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3. Hendrix D, Hasman L. Survey of collection development for United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) and National Board Dental Examination (NBDE) preparation material. *J Med Libr Assoc.* 2008 Jul;96(3):207-216.