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Editorial: Assessment in an Era of Accountability

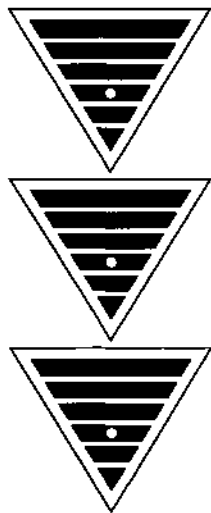
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Editorial: Assessment in an Era of Accountability

The July issue of the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* will focus on assessment. Ronald F. Dow, Dean of Libraries at the University of Rochester, will lead with an article outlining theory and detailing applications in a university environment. A set of articles reporting specific assessment exercises undertaken at a variety of different colleges and universities will follow. As an international authority on forms of assessment, Editor-in-Chief Peter Hernon will comment on the best practices. This editorial discusses why academic librarians should be interested in understanding assessment and practicing it with precision.

Much about how librarians provide services to their major constituents, faculty and students, is changing rapidly. For instance, paper index tables now sit deserted because students and faculty use the electronic versions of those indexes either elsewhere in the library or from outside the library. Even more daunting is the growing student reliance on the World Wide Web as a source of information for their scholarly work. Librarians have often communicated outside libraries using only the vocabulary and constructs of librarianship. With these broad issues of profound, dynamic change, librarians must begin to communicate using the vocabulary of the academy. Assessment is a part of that vocabulary in this era of accountability. As local and federal governments, and the public in general, have become more critical of how academia operates, assessment results are increasingly important in order to demonstrate accountability to key missions. Four major audiences for librarian assessment activities are college and university administrators, faculty, students, and other librarians.

COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS

College and university administrators have many complicated and relatively sophisticated interests in understanding their institutions' libraries. Many administrators continue to rate their libraries based on the input measures favored by the Association for Research Libraries, the Association for College and Research Libraries, and the U.S. Department of Education.

Librarians who want to remain effective in the digital environment need to develop and market to their administrators new assessment measures that reflect concerns with outcomes, rather than inputs.

Recently, Ron Dow and I brainstormed some ideas for what kind of output measures might demonstrate to university administrators the quality of library programs. Libraries might measure the number of reference questions answered and the number of circulations recorded as ratios of the number of individuals who enter the facility. These ratios could be compared across universities of different sizes and would allow for effectiveness to be assessed. Such numbers might also be figured as a ratio of the number of students, faculty, and staff who might have come into the library facility. As more and more individuals use online catalogs and electronic indexes remotely, uses of indexes might be measured against subsequent full text and print article reading numbers. Similarly, the number of individuals receiving different types of library-related instruction and using online instructional and help functions should be calculated against the possible user population. Such ratios would be more effective than gross numbers and would make better arguments for additional resources.

Citation analyses of term papers could begin to tell us the extent to which students are beginning to use the World Wide Web, where only 5% of resources meet standards of discipline discourse, for many or most of their information. Librarians and teaching faculty would need to judge the validity of resources found there in order to reach conclusions on the efficacy of that approach. These results could also be generated as ratios.

Many universities are focused on their recruiting efforts and on offering early admission to the best potential students. Perhaps subject librarians could begin the process of engaging the students in becoming active learners by calling these early admits during their long wait to matriculation and beginning to build a relationship with them. Longitudinal studies could be conducted to measure the value of these early contacts to entering students.

The associations that prepare comparative data must provide such new outcome-based measures that can be compiled and that can be used to communicate with academic administrators who have concerns about reputation, equity, and bragging rights. Such measures need to address three areas of concern:

- **Reputation:** Most large university administrators care about their rankings in the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* combined ranking based on five factors collected about Association for Research Libraries' members. The formula ranks volumes held, serials owned, volumes added, staff employed, and budget expended. Ranking schemes for smaller universities and colleges tend to use these same quantitative input data. None of these data measure the effectiveness of the library in meeting the programmatic needs of the college or university or in helping the university with key strategic issues, such as recruitment and retention.
- **Equity:** Many years ago, the percentage of a university budget assigned to the library was a key measure of quality. Now only the most prestigious institutions, such as Harvard University, still provide the recommended 3-5%. Librarians, rightly afraid to keep emphasizing unwelcome bad news, have ceased to prepare charts indicating that the college or university only gives the library 1.5% of its budget. Such charts most often resulted in a discussion about the details of the figures rather than in an addition to the library's budget. As access becomes a more important strategy than ownership, librarians need to develop new outcome measures to replace these older markers. One such measure might be to review student papers and faculty articles for the proportion of materials on the shelf available immediately, the proportion available within five working days, and then the remainder which either takes longer to borrow or cannot be borrowed at all.
- **Bragging rights:** Administrators enjoy bragging about institutional accomplishments. Recently, the access to new electronic resources has become a hot topic at national higher education meetings. Because some of these resources are funded by foundations which have multiple interests in academic institutions, keeping campus administrators informed is particularly important. The only way a library can counter these political maneuvers to sell foundation-supported electronic resources is through a strong history of credible assessment projects that measure faculty and student reactions to them. For instance, local use of new products, such as JSTOR and Muse, needs to be measured for quantity of use and for quality of patron experience. Faculty and students' satisfaction with the approach, the coverage, and the presentation can be determined through active assessment.

FACULTY

Faculty's interests in library services and collections are equally complex and sophisticated. Because faculty have dual loyalty to their discipline and to their hiring institutions, faculty often rely on discipline measures, standards, and contacts to achieve internal rewards, such as tenure, promotion, and merit, in the academic institution. Some discipline accrediting agencies have yet to accept electronic resources as being equal, and from the student's point of view even superior, to paper ones.

Faculty want the library to be a showcase for their scientific and scholarly production, whether it is in books or journals. Explaining to a faculty member why the library does not and cannot own a journal he or she edits is a diplomatic assignment. This task, and others surrounding the increasingly familiar serials cutting ritual, can be facilitated through the use of assessment practices, such as use studies and cost per article or page. Nevertheless, library ownership conveys prestige and the logic of assessment may not fare well against such emotional issues.

STUDENTS

Student needs and patterns of use are more highly regarded in the current accountability era than they were previously. Undergraduate students have a primary concern for their personal convenience with Sunday evening being the obvious time to begin work on a paper due on Monday. Anytime, anyplace service via electronic systems appeals to their sense of timing and their value system—the new being superior to the old.

Traditional age students, sometimes called Generation Xers, want variety, personal attention, and feedback, and concrete information packaged in concise, laser printed format for their convenience. Leading-edge technologies appeal to their sense of the new. The Web is much cooler, glitzier, and more appealing than the familiar paper environment. To date, librarians have not spent much energy in designing glitzy services or in measuring their effectiveness with this crowd so averse to being bored.

Graduate students are perhaps the most discriminating and serious users of the library. As they work towards that dissertation project where they will become the expert in a narrow field, their information needs become increasingly intense. Yet, they have not developed the personal networks and contacts that allow many faculty to make limited use of academic libraries. Graduate students still need assistance in locating materials locally, in understanding the discipline's scientific and scholarly communication patterns, and in filling all their requests through the access paradigm. Quick, helpful, and polite interlibrary loan service is crucial for them and their opinions should be sought in assessing its effectiveness. Measuring their satisfaction with these services should be a regular activity.

OTHER LIBRARIANS

Like academic administrators, subject librarians are relatively focused on meeting the needs of their primary discipline clientele and are, therefore, interested in issues centering around national reputation, equity, and bragging rights. In the expansion days, librarians sought to build collections that would be enviable to others, and a few still strive for those comprehensive collections, although almost everyone accepts that resource sharing is essential in an environment where information doubles every two to three years.

Librarians are quite attentive to issues of internal equity. Most materials budget divisions represent the political history of departmental power more than they represent the current number of students in the discipline or even the cost of materials. Measures should be developed to ensure that students in arts and humanities find materials locally at the same rate as those in science in an institutions that purports to have a universal approach.

Bragging should acquire new content. Librarians should begin to extol what they do for students, how they connect them with needed resources, and how they teach them to find

information, not just for today but for the future. Librarians should talk about what they are doing to improve learning rather than about what they have in their stacks. Along the way, they need to be telling their peers how they are measuring these successes and how library administrations are getting credit for this work with faculty, students, and university administrators. For instance, Columbia University's analysis of its success with Project Open Book is an excellent example; see

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/libraries/digital/texts/about.html>

<http://www.arl.org/scomm/scat/summerfield.ind.html>.

Assessment techniques reflect academia's dedication to the discovery and propagation of new knowledge. Through assessment, librarians can know, rather than guess, about the effectiveness of new initiatives. With assessment, librarians can communicate more effectively with key constituents—academic administrators, faculty, students, and other librarians. By doing assessment, librarians can participate more fully in college or university-wide initiatives to demonstrate accountability for an effective learning environment to government and the public at large.—G. St. C.