DO WE NEED AN ASSESSMENT PROGRAM?

How do we know when we are being successful? How do we describe our contributions and successes to others? Can a shift toward evidence-based decision-making and a culture of assessment help?

There are mounting pressures for libraries to be accountable:

- State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) list accountability among the top three challenges to be met by public higher education today.
- Forty-four states have formal accountability mandates; twenty-one use some form of performance measure in allocating educational funds.
- The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) predicts libraries’ contributions to quality teaching, student outcomes, research productivity, increasing accessibility to collections and digitization will become critical aspects of service provision. ARL recommends developing metrics to track libraries’ work with departments, librarian contributions to course & curriculum design, assembly of high-quality primary resources for student learning, design of learning outcomes assessments for library-assisted course development.

New Directions blogger, Brian Light describes a sense of need within the library to not only account for what we do, but to develop new ways of plotting future actions, “… we are not assessing our changing environment, or anticipating the future as effectively as we need to in order to respond…”

As Betsy Wilson described, University of Washington has adopted a “culture of assessment”. What does a “culture of assessment” look like? How does it compare to what we lovingly refer to as “Fuzzy assessment: the loop we love to break”?

OVERVIEW OF A CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT

“Culture of Assessment” in libraries is defined (Lakos, Phipps, & Wilson, 1998) as:

“An organizational environment in which decisions are made based on facts, research, & analysis, & where services are planned & delivered in ways that maximize positive outcomes & impacts for customers & stakeholders. A Culture of Assessment exists in organizations where the staff cares to know what results they produce & how those results relate to customers’ expectations. Organizational mission, values, structures, & systems support behavior that is performance & learning focused.”

Evidence of a Culture of Assessment:

- An outcomes-based orientation is built around clearly articulated strategic goals & objectives
- Administrators strongly value & support assessment
- Missions, planning & policies emphasize supporting the customer’s information & communication needs
- Relevant data & user feedback is routinely collected, analyzed, & used to set priorities, allocate resources & make decisions & are shared throughout the organization.
- Performance measures clearly articulated in library planning documents
- Assessment is part of everyone’s job
- Staff set customer-focused S*M*A*R*T (specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, & timely) goals
- Services, programs & products are uniformly evaluated for quality & impact
- Units have defined measures linked to successful processes & services
• Staff are rewarded for removing barriers to quality customer service

Visible leadership is mission critical to establishing a Culture of Assessment. This requires institutional leadership & commitment:
• Clarity of organizational purpose
• Ability to communicate that purpose
• Creation of a supportive work environment & rewards system
• Careful consideration of results & outcomes

The framework for assessment is oftentimes described as a continuous “assessment loop”. See schema attached.

SOME ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND PROGRAMS
• ARL has a program consisting of a pre-visit survey, on-site evaluations that include a presentation, interviews, & meetings with key staff involved in assessment, & a follow-up written report. Since June 2005 some 20 ARL member libraries have participated in this project.
• LIBQUAL+, by ARL, is “a suite of services that libraries use to solicit, track, understand, and act upon users’ opinions of service quality.”
• Project Sails “began in 2001 with the goal of developing a standardized test of information literacy skills that would allow libraries to document skill levels for groups of students and to pinpoint areas for improvement.”
• JUR, SCOPUS, Library Dynamics, OCLC WorldCat Collections Analysis, and Scholarly Stats are products currently under review as assessment tools for collections.
• MINES, by ARL, allows institutions to insert a very short survey at the point a patron clicks through to a library resource.
• Google Analytics (GA) is a free web analysis tool offering detailed visitor statistics showing where site visitors come from and how they interact with a site. It can be used to track number of visits, number of page views, pages viewed per visit, average time on site, where visitors come from, etc. and gain an understanding of how well a site is performing.

LOCAL IMPACTS: QUESTIONS & ISSUES
1. Can we commit to new action, based on assessment results?
2. Do we have to collect all the data ourselves? Betsy Wilson suggested that libraries do not need to re-invent the wheel and can apply like-institution’s data to local issues. Kevin Guthrie presented us with marketing research. Can his findings be applied here? Can the library productively partner with other campus data collection centers, UC libraries, the Office of the President, California Digital Library, or comparable institutions to share customer data?
3. How rigorous must the data be before action can be taken? Can results from informally designed instruments, such as the New Directions faculty and graduate student interviews and the surveys of student Library employees, constitute part of the “good data required for organizational decision-making?”
4. What skill sets do we have and/or need to do assessments and to properly interpret the results?
5. How do performance evaluations, production goals, and assessments interrelate?
6. How would the Library approach each of ARL’s recommendations to create a sustainable & systemic approach to assessment: a) assign responsibility & coordination for assessment, b) prioritize assessment activities, c) move from project-based to sustainable assessment, d) share & publish assessment results, e) allocate sufficient resources to sustain
assessment, f) review maintenance & use of statistics, g) incorporate the use of data into library management, and h) understand other university assessment & collection data warehousing efforts

7. What objective data can we collect to assess our collections, physical and digital spaces, and staffing allocations?

PLACES TO START

1. AUL's and Directors adopt a set of commonly-agreed-to goals and objectives to form the basis for an assessment program.

2. Include an assessment plan as part of all pilot programs.


4. Participate in ARL's program to evaluate libraries’ assessment efforts & establish a process assisting libraries to develop effective & sustainable assessment in their local environments.

5. Mine studies & reports generated by national associations such as the AACU, Carnegie Foundation, National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education, National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, the American Evaluation Association, & others. These can inform the development of Library strategic goals & objectives & an assessment framework within which the Library might collect, analyze & use information for strategic planning & operational improvements.

6. Make use of data from OCLC, the Pew Foundation, Berkeley’s Center for Studies in Higher Education, EDUCAUSE, National Freshman Attitudes Report, National Survey of Student Engagement, the University of California’s UCUES project, O’Reilly, the Horizon Project, & peer libraries which have well developed MIS & assessment programs and publish user profiles & trends data that can also inform assessment planning locally.

REFERENCES and RESOURCES


Amos Lakos and Shelley Phipps. "Creating a Culture of Assessment: A Catalyst for Organizational Change.” portal: Libraries & the Academy, 4.3 (2004): 345-361,
https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/portal_libraries_&_the_academy/v004/4.3lakos.html (Accessed March 14, 2008).


libraryassessment.info (a blog for and by librarians interested in academic library service assessment, evaluation and improvement supported by ARL)

Evidence Based Library and Information Practice, "a peer reviewed, open access journal published quarterly by the University of Alberta Learning Services... to provide a forum for librarians and other information professionals to discover research that may contribute to decision making in professional practice. http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP"