New Directions Pre-Retreat Town Hall Discussions
April 10, 2008

Do We Need an Assessment Program?

Session 1, Table 7, Participants: David Eifler, Gail Ford, Kathleen Gallagher, Sheehan Grant, Pat Maughan, Heather Thams, Susan Wong

1. Participants engaged most with these issues
   a. "Assessment is fundamental to everything we do" and Administrative Group leadership in this area is critical. There is a need for our upper levels of Library Administration to "strongly emphasize that what our users think matters."
   b. Some assessment may need to be very structured and longitudinal in nature, and should closely align with stated mission and goals held by ADMIN. Assessment programs should be based on stated and commonly held priorities.
   c. Clear priorities and goals, set by the Library’s top leadership would help all work, not just make it easy to assess – right now a good idea runs into myriad obstacles and often is never implemented. If a good idea was also part of a supported priority, implementation would be more likely.
   d. Some assessment might be on a more “one-off” basis, e.g., assessing how effective a pilot has been. But the fact that we will be assessing a pilot, and the terms for doing such an assessment need to be agreed to up front as part of the pilot’s design.
   e. Is there some way of doing assessments that surface milestones and accomplishments in addition to identifying “problems” and gaps? When doing assessments, how do we keep a firm hold on what’s practical (as opposed to perfect.)
   f. We all do a myriad of assessments. It’s not so clear that we know how to do assessments. We need more training and expertise in this area. (Hopefully this expertise could be cultivated among existing staff rather than paying a consultant).
   g. We really need to seek information from and respond to users about their needs. Library “culture” seems to assume that we know and students need to learn. We need to shift this “arrogance” into better listening and more responsiveness. (e.g., Why do we continue to teach arcane tools when we should really be fixing the tools to be more user friendly? Why are we still using library buzz words on our websites? Etc.)
   h. What kinds of projects are easy to measure using counts? What kinds of projects need qualitative input?

2. Additional starting points
   a. "Assessment happens at various levels within our organization. We need to define those levels” and Library Administration needs to work with staff to specifically articulate what it is that we want to assess and to link this to the library’s priority goals and initiatives.
   b. Create a data rich environment. Make readily available the numbers we do collect already (e.g. number of reference interviews over time.) Articulate what data points we should be tracking for the wide variety of programs and services we undertake and make this data easy to collect and easy to find / manipulate. (In particular, decide what data points we need the new ILS to track and be sure that these are addressed in acquisition and installation of the new system.)
c. Itemize the general areas that we need to assess – then begin to discuss how each may require different metrics and/or approaches
  o How do we track what users require of the library and the extent to which we are meeting their needs?
  o How do we track what is important to donors and the extent to which we are progressing in those areas?
  o What kinds of information should we track for the administration?
  o How do we measure our collections?
  o How do we measure individual effectiveness (e.g. what feedback will a teaching librarian find useful in refining content or technique?)

d. Train existing staff and / or partner with Haas Business School or one of the social science departments for help/guidance/manpower on designing assessment studies

3. Comments on existing starting points
   a. Item 5 (“Mine studies and reports…) and Item 6 (“Make use of data from OCLC…) are good ideas but might take a very long time to finish. Don’t wait for these to happen before moving forward with some assessments.

4. Add this resource