Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Guest Editorial

Current Themes in Academic Library Assessment: Select Papers from the 2010 Library Assessment Conference

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The 2010 Library Assessment Conference was the third iteration of an ongoing partnership of three institutions, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the University of Washington Libraries, and the University of Virginia Library. The event was attended by more than 450 registrants and featured more than 68 peer reviewed papers (Hiller, Justh, Kyrillidou, & Self, 2011) and enticing keynotes (Hiller, Kyrillidou, & Self, 2011). The Library Assessment conferences build upon ARL's rich history of describing research libraries typically with its statistics collection and more recently with the qualitative ARL Profiles (Potter, Cook, & Kyrillidou, 2011). These forums advance the cause of assessment and data-driven decision making by engaging the academic library community in an active and elevated discourse about the strategic and policy issues that demonstrate the value of the library and its linkages to the academy.

ARL's historical trajectory includes decades of gathering the *ARL Statistics* and the *ARL Annual Salary Survey*, but the need to investigate new assessment measures began fermenting in the 1990s. In 1999, the chair of the ARL Statistics and Assessment Committee, Carla Stoffle, initiated a gathering of ARL directors interested in defining "New Measures" (Blixrud, 2003), which became the foundation for the follow-up activities ARL pursued, as well as the "Living the Future" conferences (Bowlby, 2011) launched at the University of Arizona. In fall 2000, ARL

sponsored the Measuring Service Quality forum (Heath & Kyrillidou, 2001), where the latest thinking on assessment was brought together and immortalized in a special issue of *Library Trends*. At this gathering, innovative developments in library assessment were presented, notably the new survey protocol branded as LibQUAL+®. In early 2002, the ARL E-Metrics gathering was launched in Arizona (Shim & McClure, 2002) with follow up work that influenced the data collected on electronic resources and the will for ARL to be one of the founding members of COUNTER. In early 2001, ARL and OCLC co-sponsored a forum on academic library performance in the digital age, which led to the implementation of the Balanced Scorecard at the University of Virginia Library (Self, 2003). Later that year Steve Hiller and Jim Self presented a review of library surveys at the 4th Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services, an event co-sponsored by ARL (Stein, Kyrillidou, & Davis, 2002). Following this event, a collaboration between the University of Virginia, the University of Washington, and ARL was initiated with the establishment of an onsite consultation service, initially known as "Making Library Assessment Work" and later recast as "Effective, Sustainable, and Practical Assessment" (Hiller, Kyrillidou, & Self, 2008). In 2005 Martha Kyrillidou, Steve Hiller and Jim Self realized the growing library assessment community needed a venue for exchanging information and ideas, both formally and informally. Thus was born the Library Assessment Conference (see the conference website at www.libraryassessment.org). The success of the conference reflects the growth and the success of academic libraries – institutions that are navigating transformative changes and are positioning themselves to help users achieve both short-term research and learning goals and longer-term outcomes and life-long achievement.

The papers presented at the 2010 Library Assessment Conference demonstrated that the areas where evidence based decision making is needed are multi-faceted and complex. The following selection of articles features several emerging facets of library assessment and highlights activities that are shaping and have shaped the ARL agenda. Starting with an article by Dupont and Yakel entitled "What's so special about special collections? or, Assessing the value special collections bring to academic libraries," one of the major challenges research libraries face in the 21st century, justifying and increasing the value of special collections activities in an era of diminishing resources, is discussed. The authors "recommend shifting from collection-centric to user-centric approaches and identifying appropriately precise metrics that can be consistently and widely applied to facilitate cross-institutional comparisons." They suggest the potential benefits of "substituting the commonly used "reader-day" metric with a "reader-hour" metric and correlating it with item usage data in order to gauge the intensity of reading room use." They also "discuss attempts to assess the impact of instructional outreach through measures of student confidence in pursuing research projects that involve primary sources." This discussion is timely as the assessment of special collections is a key element of the ARL agenda and efforts are underway to capture their value in more effective ways by developing a set of simple annual indicators.

The transformations taking place in academic libraries are deep and issues of organizational culture are explored in a set of three articles that focus on implementations of the ClimateQUAL protocol, a standardized staff survey that ARL has developed in collaboration with the University of Maryland that focuses on organizational culture and diversity assessment. Phipps, Franklin and Sharma examine a recent implementation at the University of Connecticut; DeFrank and Hillyer describe the ClimateQUAL implementation at the University of Nebraska-Omaha; and Mengel, Smith, and Uzelac discuss their experience at Johns Hopkins University. Our society is changing

rapidly and our professional ranks are facing pressures to reflect the increasing diversity of the larger society – issues of fairness, justice and psychological safety are some of the areas on which these assessment efforts focus. The overarching argument in this set of articles is that a healthy organizational climate ultimately links to healthy customer service.

Library service is key. Collections and access have merged in the minds of our users, and product and process when it comes to information discovery are seen as one and the same. In this environment it is imperative for libraries to have good data and to use it effectively for service improvement and effective marketing. The article by Porat highlights some emerging organizational themes and activities at the University of Haifa while discussing the relationship of marketing and assessment functions and demonstrating how this relationship has been strengthened. Marketing and assessment are two sides of the same coin – one needs the other and yet the two do not face in the same direction. Assessment "tries" to be objective while marketing (or advocacy) is shameless in being biased and partial to the message we want to promote. Having a straight face on both sides of the coin is important!

A set of four articles focuses on the measurement of library service quality from the LibQUAL+® perspective (Harvey & Lindstrom; Fox & Doshi; Neurohr, Ackerman, O'Mahony, & White; and Rutner & Self). Library as place, a key dimension of service quality measured by LibQUAL+® is explored by Harvey and Lindstrom, and Fox and Doshi, while Neurohr et al. focus on the analysis of the qualitative comments received through this survey protocol. Rutner and Self replicate an earlier study that demonstrated the insatiable appetite of faculty for journals, especially in a research library setting – no research library in the world will ever have enough journals for the voracious researchers at the top research institutions, or do we foresee a world where this situation might change?

In the area of standardized protocols for assessing the merged environment where library and information technology have come together stands MISO – Measuring Information Services Outcomes. An effort developed within the context of a group of liberal arts educational institutions where libraries and IT services have merged, MISO provides a way to assess these merged services from the perspectives of faculty and students. A group of five collaborators from sponsoring institutions analyze data collected by 38 colleges and smaller universities that participated in the MISO Survey between 2005 and 2010. The survey gathers input from faculty, staff, and students about the importance, use, and satisfaction with campus library and computing services.

There is an increasing interest in capturing the value that libraries provide to parent institutions, and a number of methods of assessing library value are being tested - both the Association of College and Research Libraries and ARL have broad-ranging initiatives under development in capturing value. A set of three papers, Jubb, Rowlands and Nicholas, King and Tenopir, and Jantti and Cox present examples of efforts to shift the focus of library assessment in this direction. These articles, representing three different continents and countries (UK/Europe, US/North America, and Australia) reflect the global perspective and movement towards the perceived need to capture library value to the fulfillment of institutional missions. These articles focus on library outcomes in relation to research, faculty productivity, and student performance respectively. Work in this area is emerging and most of it taking place at the research and development stage, though the example from Australia stands as a strong application of theory put into practice, with a disciplined and collaborative process that demonstrates where the future of library assessment activities may be heading.

This work on measuring library value also demonstrates the importance of having a robust,

stable, and well-architected technical infrastructure that enables a better understanding of user behavior in an era when users increasingly enter the "library" through its website. The work of Joe Zucca at the University of Pennsylvania stands as a fine example of capturing useful data through sound data architecture and demonstrates how linkages between resource allocation and user behavior can be drawn. In his article, "Business intelligence infrastructure for academic libraries," Zucca poses a strategic challenge to ARL to be "an effective broker, providing a space for potential partners to begin addressing the challenge of creating and governing a critical new infrastructure for managing library services." This is a world where libraries can share assessment data more easily to understand their users and serve them and their institutional missions more effectively.

Lastly, Lewis, Mengel, Hiller, and Tolson describe the experience of four ARL libraries in building library scorecards using the Balanced Scorecard framework. The article covers "an introduction to the Balanced Scorecard and its key components; an overview of the ARL initiative and the process used to develop scorecards at each library; an exploration of the concept of a standardized suite of measures for ARL libraries based on a commonality of key objectives; and a review of organizational challenges faced by the sites during their implementations." The authors emphasize the importance of communication and organizational development activities and conclude that "the Balanced Scorecard forces an organization to have new, sometimes challenging, conversations and to analyze aspects of its current and future state that may have otherwise gone unexamined. Ultimately, the Scorecard may substantially shift an organization's strategic direction or dramatically change how its human capital and other resources are allocated. The Scorecard is, by its very nature, a change driver."

Leading change is a theme articulated in all of the articles in this collection. The authors demonstrate the continued commitment of libraries and their staffs to push towards more "effective, sustainable and practical assessment," the enduring subtitle and underlying purpose of the Library Assessment Conferences.

Acknowledgement

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