



Editorial

Publishing Assessment Projects as Research

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Librarians and other information professionals commonly conduct assessments and evaluations of their own programs and services and report the results of these efforts in journal articles. However, consideration should be given to when it is appropriate to publish the results of an assessment project as research. This article will provide some guidance about this issue.

Assessments are focused on understanding ways to improve programs and services and may be conducted on an ongoing basis. *Evaluations* are a more formal type of assessment, intended to judge a program's overall effectiveness for the purpose of decision making. Assessment projects are useful for activities such as understanding user satisfaction with library resources and services, identifying ways to improve processes and outcomes for both employees and users, determining user impact, and providing data that can be shared with library stakeholders.

Many similarities exist between assessment projects and research studies. Both seek to answer questions and employ appropriate study designs to do so. Both use qualitative and quantitative research methods in the collection and analysis of data. Both conclude with written and/or oral reports of the results.

While assessment projects share much in common with research studies, there are crucial differences. The primary purpose of an assessment is to improve a local service or program, whereas a research study uses a systematic investigation to generate knowledge that can be broadly applied. Thus, assessments are

specific in focus, while research is generally intended to contribute to knowledge beyond the local context, often influencing the development of interpretations and theories that help to explain processes, trends, issues, and phenomena. An assessment project often begins with specific questions about a service or program's efficacy, while researchers may generate questions for inquiry from a broad array of topics, such as those concerning human behavior or the operation of systems. Because assessment projects are local in nature (i.e., they measure programs, resources, or services in one's own library), their design choices may be constrained by timelines, staffing, and available participants in ways that differ from projects designed primarily for research purposes.

Differences exist with reporting as well. Research reports are typically disseminated in scholarly venues such as journals, whereas assessment reports are often shared with internal and external stakeholders, and through institutional repositories, trade publications, and conference presentations. While conducting research studies involving human subjects often requires ethics approval from an entity like an institutional review board, conducting local assessments does not need this kind of formal approval (unless the results will also be used for research purposes). Furthermore, assessment projects emphasize practical improvement options, while research reports may be limited in their exploration of practical implications, inviting readers to apply the results of research in ways that are relevant for their own contexts.

It is not uncommon for those conducting library and information assessments to consider turning their projects into research studies and submitting them for publication in peer-reviewed journals. When trying to decide whether to go this route, authors should consider answers to the following questions.

1. *Are the assessment results transferable to other settings?* Transferable research must be described in enough depth and with enough context that readers can judge whether the results can be applied to a similar situation. If the results of assessment projects are overly specific to a local library or information context, then readers will not be able to apply them to their own situations. Some projects produce results that are meaningful or applicable to the local setting only.
2. *Are the assessment results novel and will they be interesting to others?* Assessment projects are often conducted on standard or routine library or information programs and services. These projects are often essential for ensuring the provision of good service; however, the results may be of limited interest to others. Assessment projects conducted on novel, innovative, or unique programs and services are more likely to be of interest to those who want to implement comparable programs and services in their own institutions.
3. *Has the assessment project been designed to be as rigorous as possible?* When conducting library or information assessments, resource restrictions may limit more extensive data collection, or only a limited amount of data may be needed to provide information for improvement. However, for a research study, data collection and analysis should be executed in as rigorous a manner as possible, given whatever limitations are in play. Some characteristics of rigorous research studies are:
 - The use of an appropriate study design
 - The careful crafting and testing of any data collection instruments
 - The use of appropriate participant sampling methods
 - The collection of an adequate number of participant responses
 - The use of appropriate methods of data analysis
 - The following of ethical standards throughout the project
 - The use of appropriate documentation throughout the project

Thus, when deciding whether to publish assessment results as research, the project design should be reviewed to ensure that it was executed with sufficient thoroughness. Assessment projects that rely largely on data collection measures such as brief satisfaction surveys may lack the appropriate degree of rigor. In a research paper, projects should be described with sufficient methodological detail for readers to assess credibility and potentially adapt the approach.

4. *Has ethics approval been obtained for human subjects research?* Whether formal ethics approval is required depends on institutional policy, jurisdiction, and type of project. Because it may be difficult or impossible to obtain ethics approval retroactively, project leaders should consult the relevant review body early if there is any possibility that the work may be disseminated beyond local reporting, including journal publication. All published research reports should follow appropriate guidelines for maintaining participant privacy.
5. *Can the results of the assessment project contribute to the scholarly conversation?* The process of conducting, writing about, and publishing research involves having a scholarly conversation with other researchers who are engaged in studying a particular topic. Research questions are often developed from reviews of the scholarly literature, while assessment questions are usually generated from the identification of local problems and may or may not involve a review of the literature. To publish assessment projects as research, the project and discussion of its results will need to be situated within the scholarly literature, with reference to library and information science concepts and theories that are important for a discussion of the topic.

The time to begin considering whether an assessment project could become a publishable research project is early in the process, when the project is being designed. While it will, of course, be too early at this stage to know whether the results obtained from the data collection will be meaningful, one can still speculate about the project's novelty and potential applicability to a broader audience. Keeping the possibility of publication in mind, assessment project leaders can consider an appropriate research design and determine whether human subjects research approval is necessary.

Written assessment reports may differ significantly from the structure of research articles, so assessment reports need to be carefully and extensively adapted for a scholarly journal's requirements. In these reports, authors will need to report any limitations and sources of bias, including those related to the local context and implementation. While some assessment reports may not be suitable to publish as research studies, they may be appropriate for other types of journal submissions such as the Using Evidence in Practice articles published in *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*. Finally, when discussing one's own institution in a research study or other type of article, consideration should always be given to maintaining a respectful tone and protecting the privacy of others in the institution.