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Library Analytics and Assessment: The Sine Qua Non of Measuring Our Success

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New and Noteworthy

Library Analytics and Assessment: The Sine Qua Non of Measuring Our Success

Jennifer A. Bartlett

Regardless of setting and focus – school, public, special, academic – libraries are being increasingly called upon to prove their value to their larger organizations and communities. Although there will always be library supporters, it is no longer possible to assume that governmental and organizational leadership will automatically believe that libraries are valuable. All libraries, regardless of type, must demonstrate their economic and organizational value. As library managers, we know our collections and services are valuable. How do we effectively and systematically prove our libraries' worth to others?

As stated in the introduction to the Association of Research Libraries' Library Assessment blog,¹ library assessment may be generally described as:

“...any activities that seek to measure the library's impact on teaching, learning and research as well as initiatives that seek to identify user needs or gauge user perceptions or satisfaction with the overall goal being the data-based and user-centered continuous improvement of our collections and services....”

Several recent publications discuss the importance of systematic data gathering and analytics for libraries, and offer real-world suggestions for developing of assessment programs.

Edited by Ben Showers, Digital Transformation Manager in the United Kingdom's Cabinet Office, *Library Analytics and Metrics: Using Data to Drive Decisions and Services*² provides an overview of key themes involving analytics and metric development in academic libraries and other cultural institutions. Beginning with a definition of terms, the book moves into data-driven collection management, demonstration of library impact and value, development of services and tools using analytics, transforming the library user's experience, web and social media metrics, and legal and ethical risks of analytics. In addition to the numerous charts, tables, and other illustrative materials, a particular strength of the book are the case studies illustrating each theme, contributed by institutions in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. For example, the Library Cube project³ from the University of Wollongong seeks to discover the connection between library

borrowing and e-resource downloading data and student performance. In other words, does library usage correlate with student success?

Another recent title regarding analytics in a higher education environment is *Reviewing the Academic Library: A Guide to Self-Study and External Review*.⁴ Academic librarians are often required to participate in reaccreditation processes, in addition to internal self-studies. How does the library contribute to institutional value? What is the role of the library in program accreditation? The sixteen chapters in this title, written by thought leaders including James Rettig, Kara Malenfant, Martha Kyrillidou, David Consiglio, James G. Neal, and Kathryn Deiss, present major themes of formal assessment and review, from an introduction to the accreditation process to self-studies and external reviews to assessment methods.

Another key author in the field of library assessment is Joseph R. Matthews, a library consultant focused on evaluation of library services and planning for all types of library institutions. His book *The Evaluation and Measurement of Library Services*,⁵ while published in 2007, remains an excellent, highly readable book offering advice for all types of libraries, and a key work on the subject. The book's logical, easy-to-use format covers a discussion of qualitative and quantitative tools and evaluation of library services organized by functional area including electronic resources, reference services, technical service, interlibrary loan, and so on. Matthews emphasizes the need for libraries to integrate additional metrics including customer satisfaction outcomes with traditional measures such as gate counts and circulation statistics. The result of a more comprehensive assessment strategy is a broader picture of library strengths and areas for improvement.

Of particular interest to school and public librarians is Priscille Dando's *Say It with Data: A Concise Guide to Making Your Case and Getting Results*.⁶ Dando, a library information services educational specialist in Fairfax County (Va.) Public Schools, makes the point that surveys and focus groups can yield excellent data if planned and constructed thoughtfully with an eye towards the initiatives the library wishes to communicate and support. Dando states, "This book is intended to assist librarians and managers in school and public libraries in establishing communication through data as the heart of their advocacy strategy. Every librarian has a part to play in communicating an advocacy message; time invested in simple methods of communication will pay dividends" (viii). Certainly this is a philosophy relevant to librarians regardless of type of institution. In support of this advocacy focus, the book's six chapters discuss determining need, message, and audience; effective communication; working with statistics; survey techniques; focus group methodology; and data presentation. Also included are several real-life examples from

public and school libraries, and the useful appendices offer checklists for surveys, focus, and data presentation.

While gathering user data is an important facet of an effective library assessment program, librarian and blogger Meredith Farkas warns of the implications of being too specific in gathering user data in a brief *American Libraries* opinion piece.⁷ Techniques that may be useful to marketers in a retail setting (such as issuing loyalty and discount shopping cards to customers) may not translate well to a library setting, which is based on the ideals of personal privacy and intellectual freedom. Predictive analytics, while potentially useful as a tool to guide library service development, can be a potential threat to the professional relationship librarians enjoy with their patrons.

Speaking at the Library Assessment Conference in 2005, Martha Kyrillidou observed,

“The need for library assessment is a universal concept and the call for accountability extends beyond national borders. Libraries, through both their public and their academic roles, are asked to prove their value more urgently today than ever before. The concept of universal and open access is within our reach and both public and academic libraries need to position themselves as key players in the provision of information services.”⁸

Regardless of setting, all librarians and library administrators need to continually assess and communicate our institutional value to our communities to ensure we remain active and vital players in information access.

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¹ Kyrillidou, Martha. (n.d.). *Library Assessment: A blog for and by librarians interested in library assessment, evaluation, and improvement supported by the Association of Research Libraries*. Retrieved from <http://libraryassessment.info/>. Managed by Martha Kyrillidou, Director of the Statistics and Measurement Program at ARL, this blog is as good source for news about upcoming conferences and events, in particular for the academic library community. Also of interest is ARL's biennial Library Assessment Conference; more information may be found at <http://libraryassessment.org/>. Another key report on academic library assessment is ACRL's

The Value of Academic Libraries; the report and an additional list of resources may be found at <http://www.acrl.ala.org/value/?p=325>.

² Showers, Ben. (2015). *Library Analytics and Metrics: Using Data to Drive Decisions and Services*. London: Facet Publishing.

³ For more information about Library Cube, see Cox, Brian & Jantti, M. (2012). Discovering the Impact of Library Use and Student Performance. *EDUCAUSE Review*. Retrieved from <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2012/7/discovering-the-impact-of-library-use-and-student-performance>.

⁴ Mitchell, Eleanor, & Seiden, Peggy. (2015). *Reviewing the Academic Library: A Guide to Self-Study and External Review*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.

⁵ Matthews, Joseph R. (2007). *The Evaluation and Measurement of Library Services*. Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited. Other relevant titles include *Library Assessment in Higher Education* (2nd ed., 2014, ABC-CLIO) and *Measuring for Results: The Dimensions of Public Library Effectiveness* (2004, Libraries Unlimited). More information about Matthews' presentations and publications may be found at <http://www.ioematthews.org/>.

⁶ Dando, Priscille. (2014). *Say It with Data: A Concise Guide to Making Your Case and Getting Results*. Chicago: ALA Editions.

⁷ Farkas, Meredith. (2014). Drawing the Line on Data. *American Libraries*, 45(11/12), 29.

⁸ Kyrillidou, Martha. (2005). *Library Assessment: Why Today and Not Tomorrow?* Paper presented at the Library Assessment Conference, organized by The Council of the Technological Educational Institution of Thessaloniki, Greece. Washington: Association of Research Libraries. Retrieved from <http://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/KyrillidouGreecePapers.doc>.