# SPEC Kit 318

## Impact Measures in Research Libraries

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## SURVEY RESULTS



## REPRESENTATIVE DOCUMENTS

# SELECTED RESOURCES

# SURVEY RESULTS

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## Introduction

In the face of ubiquitous access to online information, users tend to give libraries less and less credit for contributing to their success at their work. At the same time, funders and governing bodies increasingly challenge libraries to demonstrate their impact beyond the occasional user testimonial and anecdote. The number of volumes held or number of library instruction sessions taught is no longer seen as compelling justification for continued funding. The question that the profession needs to be able to answer is this: what difference do library resources, services, and expertise make in their users' lives?

In their 2007 SPEC Kit on library assessment,[1] authors Stephanie Wright and Lynda White reported that library assessment was alive and well in North American research libraries and that there had been considerable progress in that area from the mid-1980s through 2007. The authors of this SPEC survey were curious about how much research libraries have ventured beyond gauging user satisfaction and collecting input and output measures, into attempting to assess the impact of library use on academic and career success. What kinds of projects, experiments, or programs have taken place in recent years, how wide spread are these, what do their results reveal, have these results been shared and have they made a difference for the library? Are there best practices emerging? Finding answers to such questions and helping to spread best practices was our goal.

## The Survey

Loosely following a framework presented by Roswitha Poll and Philip Payne in their article entitled "Impact Measures for Libraries and Information Services,"[2] the survey asked respondents in ARL member libraries whether they have investigated five major areas of possible library impact: correlations between measures of library use and student success pre- or post graduation; correlations between participation in library instruction and information literacy skills; correlations between measures of library use and research output; attempts to calculate how much financial value the library contributes to the parent institution or user community; and any other areas of library impact.

Within each of these five areas, the survey asked which measures were correlated, which methods were used to collect data, what conclusions were drawn, who instigated the study, whether the study was one-time or ongoing, whether the results were shared outside the library, and whether the results were used to influence decisions at the library or parent institution.

The survey was conducted between February 22 and March 31, 2010. Fifty-five of the 124 ARL member institutions completed the survey for a response rate of 44%. It is impossible to know whether the responding institutions provide a representative sample of the impact assessment activities in ARL libraries, or whether the libraries that did not respond to the survey indeed have done less in this area.

## Findings and Observations

Despite the urgency the library community has felt in recent years to justify its value, the responding libraries reported shockingly little work that focuses on investigating whether use of library resources and services correlate with measures of success for library users. Only 19 respondents (34%) report having conducted a study in one or more of the five impact

areas, though 13 others (24%) are planning to conduct studies. The remaining 23 respondents (42%) report their library has not and has no plans to study impact measures.

Relatively speaking, library instruction is the area that has seen the most impact assessment activities, probably due to the increased emphasis on assessing learning outcomes in higher education, as well as well-established course-evaluation practices at universities. Still, only 15 respondents (27%) have studied this area and 12 others (22%) have plans to. That means half of the responding institutions have not measured and have no plans to measure whether participation in library instruction, one of the flagship services of academic libraries, increases the attendees' information literacy skills and success in their work or career. Among the assessment activities that are occurring in the instruction area, most focus on immediate results of instruction, such as feedback on instruction and quality of bibliographies in attendees' assignments, with overall GPA hardly ever used for correlation studies and post-graduation impact not investigated at all.

Only a handful of respondents reported any impact measurement activities in the other areas covered by the survey. Each of the other areas has been studied by between one and five libraries; between three and nine other libraries plan to conduct studies in the next 12 months. The vast majority of survey respondents has not measured and has no plans to measure possible correlations between library use and student success, library use and research output, the library's financial value, or any other measures. The number of studies in each category could be even lower because it appears that some of the studies might not legitimately belong in the impact categories under which they were reported. (The responses were too brief for the authors to better categorize them with confidence.)

To gauge whether the impact assessment activity is a project or program, the survey asked if the study was one-time or ongoing. Only half of the responses across all five study categories indicate that the impact investigations discussed are ongoing. A full 13% of the activities were clearly reported as one-time projects. Instruction again appears to be the most established area: two-thirds of the reported impact studies were identified as ongoing. In contrast, studies of research output have the highest reported percentage of being one-time projects (50%). It is worth noting that more than a third of the respondents are unsure about whether their libraries' assessment activity is intended to reoccur or not, of which financial value calculations ranked the top: eight out of fourteen, or 57%, indicated that they do not know whether that investigation will be ongoing or one-time. It is hard to judge whether this is indicative of the uncertainty about the value or perceived value of such studies, or it is due to the difficulty of obtaining such findings.

Similar to the findings of SPEC Kit 303, this study also revealed that libraries tend to initiate impact assessment activities. Library administration is by far the most-often cited instigator of impact studies. It is unclear how much of this is in response to external pressures. It is interesting to observe that in the library instruction category, "other entity," which includes librarians, faculty, and library or campus departments, is a very close second instigator of the reported investigations.

An examination of the methods libraries reported using to collect data reveals that online and paper surveys rule the landscape, and are the most often used assessment methods for instruction and research output. The majority of the surveys are designed by the library itself.

Instruction assessment studies most often collect data through direct methods such as evaluation of student assignments and observation of student behavior and indirect methods such as collecting student and faculty feedback. A handful of respondents mentioned that they use standardized tests such as SAILS (Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills) and CLA (Collegiate Learning Assessment) for measuring information literacy skills. When measuring student success, respondents most often reported analyzing institutionally collected data (5 of 11, or 45%). Only three correlation studies on research output were reported. They used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data.

The survey asked the libraries that collected data whether they had also analyzed the data. According to responses about 34 impact studies, a significant percentage of the collected data either has not been

analyzed (12 studies or 35%) or the analysis is in progress (6 studies or 18%). Data has not yet been analyzed in half of the eight student success correlation studies and three of the four research output assessment activities. Instruction showed a better result: all but five of the twenty-two respondents (77%) have analyzed collected data. Of the 16 impact assessment studies that have analyzed data, none reported to have found a negative correlation; 13 cited positive correlation and three reported that the correlation was mixed or inconclusive.

When asked whether the impact assessment results have influenced the library's or parent institutions' decisions, the respondents reported a larger effect on the library than on the parent institution. Sixteen of the 23 responding institutions (70%) reported that their results have influenced the library's decisions, ranging from library strategic planning to space decisions. Four reported that such influence reached their parent institution (17%), affecting budget allocations, staffing decisions, and instruction or curriculum change. (It is worth pointing out that all four reported this influence in the instruction category.) Two responded that the results had no impact on the library's decision making. Ten respondents, however, report the influence of the study results on either the library's or the parent institution's decisions is "not yet decided."

In response to the question on whether the results were made available beyond the library, respondents described 33 studies. In eight of the twenty library instruction studies (40%) results were shared beyond the library; in another eight they were not. This could have resulted in the fact mentioned above that instruction results have influenced more decisions on the parent institution level than any other surveyed area. In four of the five financial value studies (80%) results were shared, making this the impact area that had the highest sharing practice percentage-wise. This could probably be explained, at least partially, by the fact that data about value of ownership is usually requested by risk management offices of the parent institutions for insurance purposes. Such numbers are usually produced by multiplying volumes held by a standard per volume cost figure. As such, this kind of data probably does not qualify as a real impact measure since it is getting at replacement cost, rather than impact of the content on users' lives.

Although the survey included no questions specifically about obstacles to impact assessment, in their comments respondents identified concern for patron privacy issues and the difficulty of establishing meaningful impact measures as major challenges.

## Conclusions

Our first goal of this SPEC survey was to investigate how much ARL libraries have ventured into assessing their impact on users. Although the authors hoped to see it half full, we cannot help but admit that the glass of library impact investigations is almost empty. It is encouraging to learn that those activities that took place have been initiated by libraries; that among the surveyed areas, correlating instruction with measures of student success is getting more established; and that some of the assessment results have influenced decision making at the library or the parent institution level.

Yet, impact assessment is a field in its infancy for research libraries. Absent institutional or regulatory mandates, impact assessment activities might remain at this level unless compelling success stories demonstrate enough incentive for more libraries to venture into this field.

Our second goal was to help spread best practices. Unfortunately, the number of libraries that have conducted impact assessment is very small, leaving us feeling uncomfortable coining examples as best practices. Instead, we'd like to focus on the major issues we see impeding the development of the field and offer some suggestions that emerge from the comments respondents made.

Paradoxically, the current hunger for demonstrating library impact might be slowing our libraries' progress by creating too much pressure to produce results that are compellingly supportive of our case. Research libraries should consider and debate such questions as: Is it a necessity for us to assess impact? How can we freely investigate and experiment when in a large part libraries depend on results that look good? What happens if investigations do not demonstrate positive correlations? Do we share the results and with whom?

Beyond this basic dilemma, practical challenges also abound. First, libraries need a clear goal towards which the impact assessment contributes. Second, we need standard definitions about measures, so that the profession can have a shared vocabulary to discuss these concepts, for instance, what consists of student success? Third, impact assessment requires sufficient resources and skilled professionals so the effort does not end after the data has been collected. The value of impact assessment rests with utilizing the results to improve decision making. Fourth, to make inroads in this challenging field, we need to get more comfortable as a profession with gathering and analyzing confidential, but not anonymous data. Librarianship's proud tradition in protecting confidentiality, too often leads to knee-jerk rejection of performing data analysis, when carefully adhering to standard data protection methods would be sufficient to protect users. Last, but not least, we need success stories where the impact measures led to positive outcomes for the library, and we need to know how to share the findings effectively. One respondent to our survey said that the study in question "prevented more significant cuts to our budget than we might have suffered without this information." Can we do better?

Endnotes

1. Stephanie Wright and Lynda S. White, *Library Assessment*, SPEC Kit 303 (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, December 2007).

2. Roswitha Poll and Philip Payne, "Impact Measures for Libraries and Information Services," *Library Hi Tech* 24, no. 4 (2006): 547–62.