

ARL Profiles: Qualitative Descriptions of Research Libraries in the Early 21st Century

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When ARL library directors were interviewed in 2005 and asked to describe a research library in the 21st century, there was general sentiment that the suite of ARL Statistics and the toolkit of services offered through the ARL Statistics and Assessment capability were insufficient in answering this question. There was a call for greater flexibility in describing today's research library in qualitative terms. Textual narrative descriptions of collections, services, collaborative relations, and other programs, as well as physical spaces will be necessary if the essence of a research library is to be described and evaluated.

This article describes some of the themes that emerged from narrative descriptions later submitted by ARL libraries. The Statistics and Assessment Committee discussed these themes and considered how to use them to shape the committee's future work and accelerate ARL's Statistics and Assessment work as indicated in the 2010–12 ARL Strategic Plan.

Background

During 2007 and 2008, members of the ARL Statistics and Assessment Committee in collaboration with other ARL member leaders developed narrative descriptions of their libraries called profiles. The end result was a small

collection of model profiles, which offered an alternative way of describing research libraries in addition to the ARL Statistics.

In the spring of 2009, ARL invited all member libraries to submit profiles. At that time, the following plan detailed how the profiles were to be used:

- The narratives would stand on their own as accompanying descriptions to the quantitative annual statistical data.
- The profiles would be analyzed to identify possible new descriptive variables for the annual statistics that represent today's research library.
- All materials from the analysis would be made available to the ARL membership.

The long-term goal was to explore testing and development of a multi-factor index measuring and assessing collections, services, and collaborative relations using new data elements identified in the profiling process. Such an index would be an alternative to the ARL Library Investment Index, which is a summary measure of relative size among the university library members of the Association and serves as one indicator of potential for ARL membership.¹

RLLF Fellows Analyze Themes in ARL Library Profiles

Four participants in the 2009–10 ARL Research Library Leadership Fellows (RLLF) program—Bob Fox (Georgia Tech), Pat Reakes (Florida), Brian Skib (Michigan), and Ann Snowman (Pennsylvania State)—selected the ARL member library profiles as the subject of their RLLF group project. The group worked with Martha Kyrillidou, Senior Director of ARL Statistics and Service Quality Programs, to develop the scope of their project, which was to review the profiles and make recommendations that might inform future changes to the ARL Annual and Supplementary Statistics. The group drafted a list of themes from the profiles and gathered feedback from other RLLF fellows and colleagues in their libraries on the themes that warranted further study. The feedback included possible data-collection mechanisms and frequency. Some of the themes that emerged from this review of the profiles included: digital publishing, e-science/data curation and management, collaborations across all levels and on/off campus, assessment activities/space utilization, social networking tools/mobile applications, staffing changes, and collaborative collection building/development. The group's complete report and recommendations will be made available to the Task Force on Reviewing ARL Statistics, ARL Supplementary Statistics, and ARL Annual Salary Survey, which is slated to begin work in October 2010. This task force is charged to review the three flagship ARL statistical publications and recommend data elements that should be dropped or revised. The full report will be available by early October on the ARL website <http://www.arl.org/stats/aboutstats/>.

Eighty-six ARL members submitted the institutional profiles. ARL consultants and staff² used computer software, ATLAS.ti, to identify and analyze the ideas and themes contained in the narrative profiles. The software provided tools to isolate, code, and annotate the ideas and themes and to evaluate and rank them. The resulting set of reports not only broke each profile into a set of codes but also combined the codes into an overall view of the 86 responses, showing the frequency of themes and terms across all profiles as well as suggesting how libraries are similar and different.

It should be stressed that the profiles are not inventories or lists of every service or program that a library provides. Indeed, two libraries may host the same activity and one may discuss it at length in the profile while the other may not mention it at all. A profile reflects what a given library viewed as important at the time the profile was written. Therefore, when the frequency of an activity is mentioned below, bear in mind that it is the frequency of how many libraries mentioned that activity, not how many actually perform it.

Of the 86 libraries that provided profiles for analysis, 82 were academic libraries (7 Canadian, 22 US private, and 53 US public institutions). While all the profiles were valuable, this report focuses on the 82 academic libraries.

As an overview, six broad categories emerged from the analysis of the profiles. More detailed codes are grouped under each broad category and are too numerous to be discussed in detail in this brief report. Instead, major themes, similarities, and differences are discussed here along with suggestions for codes that merit further investigation and discussion as possible new measures.

The six categories discussed here are:

- Management and Self-Assessment
- Collaboration and Support—External
- Collaboration and Support—Internal
- Library Services
- Branch Libraries
- Collections

Analysis of Six Categories

Management and Self-Assessment

Virtually all of the profiles mentioned the need for assessment as indicated in

their discussion of specific tools, methods, and management strategies. Almost all reported some quantitative data when discussing management issues, but only 20% provided any qualitative measures. Interestingly, 25% did not mention collection size and 60% did not address the size of the user population. Over half mentioned building projects in the context of assessment activities.

One divergence of note is that public university libraries were more likely to discuss the parent university than private university libraries (85% vs. 59%) and that libraries ranked highest in the ARL Library Investment Index were less likely to mention the parent university (56% in the highest quintile of the index vs. 100% in the lowest quintile).

Themes that were widely reported included construction projects (55%), usage data (55%), the future of libraries (44%), and LibQUAL+® (45%).

Some themes that were mentioned infrequently were building-use statistics (13%), website analytics (10%), and assessing relevance of collections (13%).

Recommendation

Three common themes emerged that merit further discussion to define new measures or methods: developing mission and strategy statements, addressing collection development priorities, and providing the best way to describe the parent institution.

Collaboration and Support—External

All respondents addressed their collaborative relationships with other libraries and almost all provided a list of their partners. The most frequent activities of these collaborations were scholarly communication (65%), interlibrary loan (59%), and bibliographic enterprises (55%). Presumably, all ARL libraries are involved in interlibrary loan consortia, but not all reported them in their profiles.

The greatest divergence in this category was seen in the expression of a statewide mission, with 42% of public university libraries mentioning such a mission but only 5% of private university libraries noting one. Conversely, twice as many private university libraries mentioned holding a collection of national distinction as public university libraries, 64% vs. 30%. Interestingly, there was no similar distribution when members are broken down by the ARL Library Investment Index. In fact, libraries in the middle quintiles of the index tended to mention collections of national distinction more than libraries in the highest and lowest quintiles: 50% of the libraries in the second and third quintiles and 38% of

the libraries in the fourth quintile mentioned such collections, while only 31% of the libraries in the first and fifth quintiles noted such collections.

Participation in a government depository program was mentioned in 29% of the profiles. Activities that were less frequently mentioned included shared storage (21%), working with museums (18%), and working with businesses (2%).

Recommendation

ARL should consider tracking collaborative efforts that are valued by ARL libraries, such as collaboration with non-library entities and shared storage facilities.

Collaboration and Support—Internal

Collaboration with other units within the parent university, usually departments or schools, were mentioned in 92% of the profiles. This collaboration was most often described as support for faculty success and student learning and took the form of faculty outreach and information literacy instruction.

Information literacy was mentioned more often by public university libraries (77%) than private university libraries (55%). Conversely, providing support for curriculum development was mentioned more often by private university libraries (64%) than public university libraries (45%). Promoting open access was more common in the top two quintiles of libraries in the ARL Investment Index (25%) than in the lower three quintiles (13%).

Other activities mentioned by at least a quarter of the libraries include technology support (51%), course management support (29%), and grant proposal support (25%). Less frequently mentioned are promoting open access (18%), leadership in copyright policy (10%), hosting electronic journals (9%), and marketing faculty research (4%).

Recommendation

A promising area for ARL assessment is the extent that member libraries are promoting open access.

Library Services

When mentioning specific library services in the profiles, the most common theme was providing innovative access to the library, notably in seeking expanded roles for the library. These included proactive orientation (89%), faculty outreach (61%), and a greater virtual presence (50%).

With regard to library services, there is little divergence among libraries by type and very little by funding, with a few exceptions. For example, laptop lending and extended hours were mentioned more often by libraries at the lower end of the ARL Investment Index while a service orientation was mentioned more frequently by the better-funded libraries. It is not possible to draw conclusions about these differences, but they might merit some examination.

Other common library services that were mentioned in the profiles include outreach to the community (44%), outreach services to students (38%), and small group workspaces (27%). Less frequently mentioned were resources available to the public (5%), services to alumni (4%), and wikis (2%).

Recommendation

This is perhaps the area where qualitative assessment is most needed. Measuring the effectiveness of services is difficult. LibQUAL+® has certainly helped, but additional methods of measuring the true benefit of services beyond usage statistics are needed.

Branch Libraries

Virtually all of the profiles discussed branch libraries, with special collections receiving the greatest attention (93%). Other branches commonly mentioned were information commons (66%), science and engineering (42%), health sciences (38%), law (30%), and art and architecture (28%). Less frequently mentioned were music/dance (23%), business (11%), and maps (9%). There is little divergence among libraries by type or by funding in this category.

Recommendation

Possible areas for increased measurement include the relative return on investment of branch libraries or, more generally, the distinctiveness of their value.

Collections

It is notable that the most common reference to collections in the profiles involves creating digital collections. This was mentioned by 96% of the libraries. A close second was preservation, mentioned by 85%. Digitizing was mentioned as a means of improving access by 88% of the libraries while 82% mentioned it as a preservation technique. There appears to be a greater emphasis on stewardship of the existing collections, either through digitization or

preservation, rather than on building collections. Indeed, adding to collections was not overtly mentioned in any profile. Certainly, collection building is ongoing, but it was not prominent in the profiles.

Private university libraries were more likely to mention their nationally significant or distinctive collection than public university libraries (64% to 30%). Otherwise, there was little divergence by type or funding level.

Other themes mentioned by more than a quarter of the libraries included electronic theses and dissertations (37%), created digital objects (33%), government depository (29%), and microform collections (33%). Themes mentioned less frequently include map collections (9%), disaster recovery (4%), and weeding (4%). Electronic books were mentioned in 15% of the profiles.

Recommendation

The challenge of measuring the impact of the transition from print to digital has long been recognized within ARL. The profiles underline this challenge and should provide some guidance to the Statistics and Assessment Committee.

Conclusion

The ARL Statistics and Assessment Committee completed the analysis of the profiles this spring and has identified new directions as articulated in the above recommendations. When combined with other activities, notably the Lib-Value project³ as well as local efforts to develop library scorecards, ARL hopes that the profiles can be used to refine existing programs as well as to identify new ones.

The profiles are a snapshot of the libraries at the time when these narratives were written. In many cases, the profiles are already obsolete. If libraries want to update profiles on a voluntary basis ARL will post updated versions on the website as received. The committee considers that a strategy of systematic updating of the profiles once every four or five years may be a good option for the future as a complement to the numbers collected through the ARL Statistics survey, given the reporting burden and the resource demands of this activity. The analysis of the profiles has been a formative exercise that can help ARL identify new metrics. Recognizing that these profiles and the analysis performed might be useful to others in the ARL community, the findings will be made available through the ARL Statistics and Assessment website <http://www.arl.org/stats/>. All are invited to visit the website and ARL staff and committee members are happy to answer any questions. Indeed, it is hoped that

this report whets your appetite for viewing the full reports and your observations are welcomed in the coming months.

¹ ARL Index, <http://www.arl.org/stats/index/>.

² A consultant, Nicholas Woolf, was retained to guide the use of ATLAS.ti and to prepare reports. Jennifer Rutner (Columbia University), Michael Maciel (Texas A&M University), David Green (ARL), and Martha Kyrillidou (ARL) coded the profiles in detail.

³ Regina Mays, Carol Tenopir, and Paula Kaufman, "Lib-Value: Measuring Value and Return on Investment of Academic Libraries," *Research Library Issues*, no. 271 (August 2010): 36–40, <http://www.arl.org/resources/pubs/rli/archive/rli271.shtml>.

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To cite this article: William Gray Potter, Colleen Cook, and Martha Kyrillidou. "ARL Profiles: Qualitative Descriptions of Research Libraries in the Early 21st Century." *Research Library Issues: A Bimonthly Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC*, no. 271 (August 2010): 25–32. <http://www.arl.org/resources/pubs/rli/archive/rli271.shtml>.