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Library Assessment

December 2007

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SURVEY RESULTS

Executive Summary 11
Survey Questions and Responses 15
Responding Institutions 57

REPRESENTATIVE DOCUMENTS

Position Descriptions

University of Alberta
Assessment Librarian 62
Brigham Young University
Process Improvement Specialist 64
University of California, Irvine
Director of Planning, Assessment, and Research 68
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Assessment Librarian 72
University of Southern California
Assessment Coordinator 74
University of Virginia
Director of Management Information Services 75
University of Washington
Director of Assessment and Planning 77
Washington State University
Library Data Officer 79

Assessment Charges and Mission Statements

University at Buffalo, SUNY
Statistics, Metrics & Survey Development Committee. Committee Charge 82
University of Connecticut
USER Team. Charge 83
Cornell University
Charge for PSA Research and Assessment Unit 85
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Library Assessment Committee. Charge 87
University of Southern California
Assessment Team. Team Purpose 88
University of Texas at Austin
Service Quality Assessment and Improvement 90
University of Virginia
Management Information Services. About MIS. Mission Statement 91
Washington State University
Assessment Working Group. Role 92

Organization Charts

Brigham Young University
Harold B. Lee Library Organization Chart 94
University of California, Irvine
UCIrvine Libraries 95
University of Chicago
The University of Chicago Library Organizational Chart 96
Cornell University
Public Services & Assessment 97
University of Massachusetts Amherst
UMass Amherst Libraries Organization December 2006 98
Oklahoma State University
OSU Organization Chart 99
University of Texas at Austin
University of Texas Libraries 100

Assessment Web Sites

University of Colorado at Boulder
Assessment Committee 102
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Assessment @ UIUC Library..... 103
Ohio State University
Assessment Committee 104
University of Pennsylvania
Data Farm 105
University of Virginia
Management Information Services..... 107
University of Washington
UW Libraries Assessment 108
Washington State University
Assessment Home..... 109
University of Western Ontario
Assessment Committee 110

Assessment Activity Reports

University of Alberta
Information Question Logging Project.....112
Brigham Young University
Online Collections at BYU Survey Results 123
Cornell University
Library Annual Statistics 2005/2006 130
University of Pennsylvania
PennLibrary FACTS 2005|2006..... 137
University of Southern California
2006 LibQUAL+ Report 139
University of Virginia
Benchmarking Team. Report on Benchmarking Process 141
University of Washington
UW Libraries Usability Testing Report: New Design Fall 2004..... 146

Assessment Plans
Columbia University
Assessment Plan 150
Howard University
Library Assessment Plan 169
University of Texas at Austin
Administrative Unit Assessment Plan 170
University of Western Ontario
Assessment Committee Plan 179

SELECTED RESOURCES

Books 187
Journal Articles 188
Library Assessment Web Sites 190
Other Resources 191

SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

To assess, in general, is to determine the importance, size, or value of; to evaluate. Library staff assess operations by collecting, interpreting, and using data to make decisions and to improve customer service. They study internal processes, levels and quality of service, and library impact on institutional goals.

The number of assessment activities undertaken in libraries over the last decade has grown exponentially. Libraries of all kinds are looking more closely at how and how well they are serving their users. What may have begun as the occasional assessment duty assigned to the library staff member with the most interest or greatest statistical acumen, has blossomed at many institutions into a formalized library assessment position, committee, department, or all three.

Although this growing area of library management has become recognized as a legitimate use of limited budgets and time, there is not as yet a good overview of precisely how library assessment activities are being implemented or developed. This survey sought to address that missing piece of the puzzle—to examine the current state of library assessment, as well as to provide a starting point for those seeking to develop a library assessment program at their own institutions.

This survey was distributed to the 123 ARL member libraries in May 2007. Seventy-three libraries completed the survey for a response rate of 60%. Only one library indicated that it did not engage in any assessment activities beyond collecting annual data for the ARL statistics, though no reason was given as to why this was the case.

The respondents are primarily from US academic libraries, 63% in public institutions and 22% in private institutions. Twelve percent are libraries in Canadian academic institutions, all of which are public. Public libraries account for only 3% of the respondents. This closely reflects the membership distribution of ARL.

Assessment Activities

Survey results indicate that while a modest number of libraries in the 1980s and earlier engaged in assessment activities beyond annual ARL statistics gathering, the biggest jump in activity occurred between 1990 and 2004. The overwhelming majority of responses indicate the impetus was service driven and user centered and came from within the library itself rather than from an outside source. Respondents' top impetus for beginning assessment activities (63 respondents or 91%) was the desire to know more about their customers. Based on responses to a question about their first assessment activities, over half began with a survey, almost all of which were user surveys.

It is clear from the survey results that respondents use a wide variety of methods in their as-

sessment endeavors. All respondents have gathered statistics, presumably at least ARL statistics, but every one of the methods listed in the survey has been used by at least one of the respondents at some point, either currently or in the past. The top five assessment methods currently being used are statistics gathering, a suggestion box, Web usability testing, user interface usability, and surveys that were developed outside the library. Locally designed user satisfaction surveys used to be widely used. Now, 20 of the 31 libraries (65%) that previously used this method have switched to surveys developed elsewhere, such as LibQUAL+®. The five least used methods are secret shopper studies, the Balanced Scorecard, wayfinding studies, worklife/organizational climate studies, and unit cost analysis.

The areas of the library being assessed are as varied as the methods used. In the last five years, every function of the library listed in the survey has been assessed by at least one respondent. Almost every respondent has assessed the library's Web site, most frequently with a usability study. Other widely assessed areas include electronic resources, usually assessed by statistics collection and analysis; user instruction, evaluated through statistics and surveys; and reference and collections, both most frequently assessed through statistics collection and analysis. Administrative functions, including human resources, financial services, marketing, and development, that are not centered on users are least evaluated; 30% of the respondents have not assessed even one of these areas.

Organization of Assessment Activities

Respondents were asked to identify where assessment responsibility fits into their organizational structure. Forty-nine respondents reported that responsibility for assessment activities rests on either a single full- or part-time individual (24 or 34%), an ad-hoc or standing committee (16 or 23%), or a formal department (9 or 13%). All but one of the full- and part-time assessment coordinators and department heads is within two reporting levels of the library director. The remaining 21 respondents (30%) described another organizational structure. The majority of these (15 or 71%) are decentralized, with various units doing their own assessments as needed. For large-scale projects such as LibQUAL+®, an ad-hoc team or committee may be formed. The remaining respondents either use a combination of coordinators and committees or are in the process of creating a new coordinator position.

Though respondents indicated that assessment activities have been performed in their libraries over the last 20+ years, the presence of staff who have primary responsibility for assessment activities has a much more recent history. All but one of the part-time and two of the full-time coordinator positions were created between 2002 and 2007; all of the assessment departments were created in 2000 or later. Nearly 60% of these positions and departments were created between 2005 and 2007. All four ad-hoc committees were created between 2002 and 2007. Standing committees or teams have the longest history of primary assessment responsibility (one since 1984), but the most recent was created in 2007. Departments average 2.4 FTE; committees average six to seven members.

At nearly all of the responding libraries, regardless of organizational structure, assessment staff analyze, interpret, and report on data collected in assessment activities and consult with staff on assessment methods and needs. They frequently perform assessment activities and coordinate the collection and reporting of data. They train staff at just over half of the libraries. They only approve assessment projects at 25% of the responding libraries.

Full- and part-time coordinators and assessment department staff are very similar in the tasks they perform, although part-time coordinators are less likely to be responsible for training staff or monitoring projects. Standing committees are less likely

to coordinate the collection, reporting, or archiving of data, to fill requests for library data, or to submit external surveys.

The majority of assessment staff have collaborated on assessment activities with other non-library departments, agencies, or units within the institution, though standing committees are less likely to do so. These non-library collaborations are most often with institutional offices of research and learning, information technology, and assessment and planning.

Assessment Results Distribution and Outcomes

Methods of distributing assessment results vary depending on the audience, although overall, the most frequently used method is through a Web site. In addition, the methods most widely used to inform the parent institution are print reports and library newsletter articles, while presentations and e-mail announcements are used more frequently for library staff. Staff appears to be the most targeted audience for the distribution of library assessment results; all methods except a campus newsletter are heavily used for them. Results are overwhelmingly distributed to the general public through a Web site or library newsletter articles.

The top two types of assessment information listed on a library's assessment Web site (whether publicly accessible or staff-only) are general library statistics and analyses of assessment activity results. Assessment publications are found more frequently on a public Web site than on a staff-only Web site, while presentations and assessment data are provided more on staff-only Web sites than on public ones. Other types of information mentioned by more than one respondent include meeting notes and agendas on staff-only Web sites.

There is little point in having an assessment program unless the results are used to make improvements in services. Respondents were asked to list three outcomes that were attributable to their assessment activities. Twenty areas were reported, but changes to Web sites and facilities were the most frequently mentioned. Collections, hours, and staff formed the next highest groups. Other areas that were changed include customer service, journals, access services, the online catalog interface, instruction and outreach, and reference services. Only one respondent reported no changes attributable to assessment.

Professional Development

When asked if their library provides assessment training to library staff, all but 20 of 68 respondents (71%) indicated they received some sort of support for training, whether provided by the library (28%), their institution (32%), or an outside source (62%). When the library provides training, the topics focus primarily on assessment methods, basic statistics, survey construction, the value of assessment, and data analysis.

When evaluating assessment-related professional development venues (such as conferences) outside the institution, the most highly recommended and most attended events were ARL assessment-related meetings and the 2006 Library Assessment Conference. When asked to identify the professional development needs not being met by the aforementioned conferences, respondents focused on training, indicating that there is a lack of available instruction on basic statistical analysis, methodologies, and tools.

Culture of Assessment

The survey included a series of statements on the culture of assessment. Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 how well the statements described their respective libraries. Between 68% and 79% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statements related to the commitment of their library administrations to assessment. The remaining statements were related to staff and their support for, or ability to carry out, assessment activities. Only 50% or fewer of the respondents rated

these statements at agree or strongly agree; most cluster around the middle of the scale. There appears to be a strong administrative commitment to assessment that does not translate to the organization as a whole.

Just under half of the respondents (31 or 46%) indicated that there is an assessment plan in some or all of their library's departments or units or a library-wide assessment plan. Fifteen respondents commented that the library was either in the process of developing a plan or used an alternate document (such as a strategic plan or annual report) as their assessment plan.

Conclusions

What do "typical" library assessment programs look like? The typical programs began in the 1990s and engage in various assessment activities in addition to the collection of ARL statistics. They began by doing a user survey because the library wanted greater knowledge of its users and wanted to determine which new services to offer. The programs most frequently gather statistics (100%), but are also strongly involved in doing various user surveys, Web usability testing, and focus groups. They have performed studies of their Web sites. They track usage statistics for electronic resources and assess user education programs, collections, and reference. They have not usually assessed their administrative areas that are not centered on the library user.

Typically, various individual library departments or units do assessment, although the number of institutions with assessment coordinators or committees is growing. The coordinators have typically been appointed within the last five years (2002 to 2007) and are within two reporting levels of the library director. If there is an assessment department, it has just over two members. Committees sometimes date to the 1990s and average six to seven members. The tasks performed by all are remarkably uniform; they analyze, interpret, and report on assessment activities, consult with staff on assessment methods and needs, and perform assessment activities. They coordinate their work with other units in their institutions.

Results of activities are usually distributed through a Web site; they are communicated with staff more frequently than with the parent institution or the general public. Both staff and public Web sites most often present general library statistics and analyses of assessment results. Assessment does lead to programmatic changes in the library, primarily changes to Web sites and facilities.

Training in assessment is supported by the library but is mostly outsourced rather than local. Training that is provided by the library is focused on assessment methods, basic statistics, and surveys. The most highly regarded training appears to come through ARL-sponsored events such as meetings at American Library Association conferences and the Library Assessment Conference. These venues are also appreciated for their networking and sharing opportunities. But more training is needed in assessment basics.

Library administrations are typically committed to the concept of a culture of assessment in their libraries, but there is a perception that this commitment is not shared by all staff. Many staff do not have the skills or rewards needed to carry out assessment projects. Most libraries have an assessment plan or are using a similar alternative document, or they are in the process of developing a plan.

In short, library assessment is alive and well in North America. There has been considerable progress in this area from the mid-1980s through 2007. For that progress to continue, there needs to be more effort to train not only those responsible for assessment, but all staff who are expected to participate in assessment activities.