



# Assessment in North American research libraries: a preliminary report card

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to report on the first phase of a two-year project sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries, “Making Library Assessment Work: Practical Approaches for Developing and Sustaining Effective Assessment”.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper reports on the project, which is intended to provide libraries with the knowledge and understanding necessary to select and apply appropriate measurement techniques, and to use assessment data in decision making. The focus of this effort is on practical and sustainable approaches to effective assessment. The paper is particularly interested in the successful application of assessment within different organizational cultures and moving library assessment from a project-based approach to a more programmatic, integrated, and sustainable operation within libraries.

**Findings** – The findings of the study indicate that all the ARL libraries in Phase I are developing a stronger understanding of the value of assessment and library leadership supports this movement. It finds that there are staff in each library who have good research methodology skills, although they may not be involved in assessment efforts. It reveals that areas that did not receive a passing grade in most libraries included resource allocation, sustainability, prioritizing needs, choosing the appropriate assessment method, using data for improvement, and communicating assessment results.

**Originality/value** – The paper provides useful information on a project intended to help librarians in decision making.

**Keywords** Research libraries, Assessment, North America

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

This paper reports on the first phase of a two-year project sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), “Making Library Assessment Work: Practical Approaches for Developing and Sustaining Effective Assessment”. The

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project is intended to provide libraries with the knowledge and understanding necessary to select and apply appropriate measurement techniques, and to use assessment data in decision making. The focus of this effort is on practical and sustainable approaches to effective assessment.

Ten years ago the first Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services provided a spotlight on a range of activities associated with performance measurement, service quality and library assessment. The Conference coincided with a move among North American research libraries towards a customer-centered focus that stressed the importance for libraries to “collect data and use them as the basis for decision-making rather than rely on subjective impressions and opinions” (Stoffle *et al.*, 1996). The rapid change in the information environment during the latter half of the 1990s also contributed to the need to find new ways of measuring the effectiveness of libraries in providing value to their customers. The ARL played a primary role in identifying key areas and developing new methods and tools to measure service quality and library performance (Blixrud, 2003). The most successful of these tools is LibQUAL+™, a service quality instrument that has been used by more than 700 libraries worldwide (Cook *et al.*, 2001).

ARL officially recognized the strategic importance of library assessment as a key driver for change in 1993 through its strategic objective to “describe and measure the performance of research libraries and their contribution to teaching, research, scholarship, and community service.” While ARL has made excellent progress in raising the visibility and importance of library assessment and in supporting the development of new measures, there is evidence that a sizeable number of libraries experience difficulty devising appropriate measures or methods, understanding and analyzing the data, using data to make changes, and building a sustainable assessment program (Hiller and Self, 2004). As a result, the authors proposed to ARL a project to evaluate assessment efforts and establish a process to help libraries develop effective and sustainable assessment in their local environments. This proposal was accepted in September 2004 and a call for interest went out to ARL member libraries. This approach underscores the need for collaborative structures in conducting and sustaining assessment and ARL has served as a natural home for this activity given the expanding collaborative assessment enterprise it has maintained since the early formation of the association (Kyrillidou, 2005).

The proposal was originally viewed as a one-year project, consisting of visits to four to six ARL libraries during the first half of 2005 and funded by the participating libraries. The process would consist of a pre-visit survey, on-site evaluations that include a presentation as well as interviews and meetings with key staff involved in assessment, and a written report. Because many more libraries expressed interest than the four to six anticipated, the project was extended and split into two phases: Phase I involved seven libraries from February through June 2005; Phase II will cover more than 16 libraries from September 2005 through December 2006. A final report will be made available to ARL at the end of 2006. This paper covers the first phase of the project, including a review of the evaluation process, notable findings at the Phase I libraries, and emerging patterns. It provides a preliminary report card on the state of library assessment at North American research libraries.

### **Issues in using data effectively**

The impetus for this project comes from a recent work that identified a variety of issues libraries face in using data effectively (Hiller and Self, 2004). This review indicated that libraries appear to face similar barriers to sustained and effective assessment, and in using data for improvement. While ARL supported the development of new measures and raised awareness of the value of service quality assessment, it was also becoming clear that a more systematic and sustainable approach to conducting assessment was needed. We sought additional evidence to understand the issues that impeded practical and sustainable assessment and prevented libraries from using data effectively. From our own knowledge of assessment in libraries, as well as related literature, we understood that these issues were likely to fall into the following areas: library leadership, organizational culture, library priorities, sufficiency of resources, data infrastructure, assessment skills and expertise, sustainability, presentation of results, and the ability to use results to improve libraries.

The authors initially discussed the proposed concept in June 2004. They drafted a final proposal on how to proceed by August 2004 and launched Phase I in September 2005. An invitation to participate in the project was sent to all ARL member libraries. A total of 16 libraries expressed interest. Seven were chosen for Phase I, and a decision was made to extend the project another year to accommodate the additional libraries that had expressed interest. A half-day pilot took place in November 2004. We selected the participants in Phase I to be representative of the ARL membership by geographic location, library size and budget, level of assessment activity and whether they were public or private institutions. It is interesting to note that the 22 participating academic libraries in Phase I and II had a rank mean of 50.5 and a rank median of 49.5 in the ARL membership criteria index score, showing good distribution using that metric.

Each of the participating libraries was asked to name a main contact for the site visit. The seven libraries participating in Phase I designated contacts from a variety of organizational positions such as administration, services, collection services, and public services. The diversity of these positions indicates the variety of organizational positioning given to assessment within these institutions. At each participating library we sent a pre-visit survey. From the responses we collected information on recent assessment activities, inventory lists of statistics kept, important assessment motivators and the organizational structure for assessment at the library, what has worked well, details about sticking points or specific areas to address, and a sense of each library's expectations for the site visit.

### **The site visit**

The sample site visit schedule included a meeting with the university librarian and the contact person, a presentation on library assessment with a particular focus on customer-based evaluation, and a discussion of concepts and best practices using examples from the University of Virginia and the University of Washington to show how data can be used to effect change. During the 1990s, two important concepts emerged in libraries: the rise of the customer-centered library and the culture of assessment. The customer-centered library is characterized by a focus on all services

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and activities viewed through the eyes of the customer. At the same time the culture of assessment emerged as a concept describing an organizational environment in which decisions are based on facts, research and analysis, an environment where services are planned and delivered to maximize positive customer outcomes.

The University of Virginia assessment examples included reports showing compiled data from various sources including extensive survey data, performance and financial standards as implemented through the Balanced Scorecard framework, and ways to present the data and use them for improvement. The University of Washington promotes the use of multiple methods of assessment and shared examples of user needs assessment as done through triennial, large-scale surveys that they initiated in 1992, ongoing qualitative input, and ways to present the data for improvement purposes.

After the presentation, a series of group meetings took place with management and other administrative groups, and/or assessment-related groups if they had been formed. In general there was support and understanding of the value of assessment although often there were a few skeptics and others unconvinced of the importance of assessment. These meetings were invaluable in gaining insight into the organizational culture and thus how to approach developing effective and sustainable assessment within that library.

### **Overview of Phase I visits**

In summary the Phase I site visits demonstrated a diversity of organizational cultures. Every library, much like every person, is a little island unto itself with its own unique characteristics. The response to concepts related to library assessment was overwhelmingly positive, even though skeptics existed. Our discussions on library assessment issues led to spirited and engaged discussions and we learned about other assessment activities that had not been previously reported to us. Library staff found that the best examples of effective assessment were those that were more easily observable and tangible. These included facilities renovation activities where architects that redesign library spaces focused on customer needs, and worked extensively to identify those needs through focus groups and other user-centered methods. Usability was another area where the user perspective was critical to effective web design. Although these libraries were a self-selected group, they were clearly ready and willing to engage in library assessment in a more systematic fashion.

### **Preliminary findings**

Within 30 days of each site visit a report was provided to the library evaluating assessment efforts and offering suggestions on how to move to more effective and sustainable assessment. The report format included an introduction, a description of the current environment regarding assessment, the locally identified issues and concerns, and typically five to seven suggestions for moving assessment forward.

Our evaluation found a wide variation in the extent and type of assessment done by participating libraries. Four out of the seven administered LibQUAL+™ within the last two years, while the other three ran it in 2002. In addition to LibQUAL+™, four out of the seven libraries used other surveys, three have done focus groups, five have

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engaged in usability testing, four have engaged in development of performance measures and all of them have done some form of cost study. Library-identified assessment needs include data collection, analysis, use, and warehousing; analytical skills; performance measures; sustainability; and organizational culture issues. The most frequently identified need across the seven libraries was using data to improve libraries or make changes, followed by the need for data analysis and the development of skills and the ability to conduct analytical and evaluative work.

It is noteworthy that none of the Phase I institutions had a specific staff position dedicated to assessment and only one had established an assessment committee, that occurring just before our visit. Instead, assessment responsibilities at best were diffused within the organization – usually found in a committee with one of the following aspects: the customer/user perspective; design and usability aspects of network resources; user education/collection development; or a services advisory group. In most cases, assessment work was accomplished as a one-time effort or project and not as a sustainable operation. It was not uncommon to discover that these one-time efforts were not communicated well even within the library.

### **Preliminary report card**

Our preliminary report card indicates that all seven ARL libraries in Phase I are developing a stronger understanding of the value of assessment and library leadership supports this movement. We found that there are staff in each library who have good research methodology skills, although they may not be involved in assessment efforts. Areas that did not receive a passing grade in most libraries include resource allocation, sustainability, prioritizing needs, choosing the appropriate assessment method, using data for improvement, and communicating assessment results. Our recommendations attempted to address those issues by suggesting libraries:

- assign coordination and responsibility for assessment;
- prioritize assessment activities;
- move from project-based to sustainable assessment;
- share and publish assessment results;
- allocate sufficient resources to sustain assessment;
- review maintenance and use of internal statistics;
- incorporate use of data into library management; and
- understand other university assessment and data warehousing efforts.

### **Conclusion**

The feedback we received from the seven participating libraries in Phase I indicates that a one-day visit may be too short, that additional resource material would be helpful, that additional real-life examples would be valuable; and that follow up activities are needed to maintain momentum and establish an assessment community that would keep people involved. As a result, our Phase II enhancements include increasing the site visit from one day to at least one-and-a-half days, the provision of additional materials, the strengthening of the web site, a follow-up consultation after

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the initial site visit on assessment plan implementation or a specific assessment exercise, and a follow-up in person meeting at a professional conference.

In the meantime, it is clear that organizational positioning of assessment is maturing rapidly. Four of the first five Phase II participants already have designated staff positions as assessment coordinators and all have some form of assessment group. While the barriers and facilitators to effective, sustainable and practical assessment were reasonably similar in most of our first seven libraries, we will feel more confident making those judgments based on the larger sample of more than 20 libraries that will have participated in the project when it ends in 2006. Our final report to ARL in late 2006 will include not only our evaluation of assessment in these libraries but specific recommendations on how ARL can assist libraries in making assessment effective and sustainable.

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