Assessment in Academic Libraries

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Gregory A. Smith
Liberty University, USA

INTRODUCTION

Within the context of academic libraries, assessment may be defined as the systematic study of library/information resources, services, users, and behaviors, conducted to increase the library's efficiency, improve users' experience, and demonstrate the library's value. Academic library assessment has existed in some form for more than a century. However, this field of practice has developed and diversified in recent decades due to technological advances, financial constraints, and accountability initiatives.

Exemplary libraries of all types engage in disciplined, data-driven efforts to understand their users' needs and desires; to evaluate and improve the usefulness of their collections and the impact of their services; and to articulate their value to their stakeholders. These efforts may be labeled in various ways, including *assessment* (Matthews, 2007; Oakleaf, 2009; Lowery, 2011), *evaluation* (Wallace & Fleet, 2001; Markless & Streatfield, 2013), *market research* (Lee, 2004; Chmelik, 2006), *measurement* (Orr, 1973; Rubin, 2006), *metrics* (Dugan, Hernon, & Nitecki, 2009), and *needs analysis* (Westbrook, 2001). Many academic librarians gravitate toward the term *assessment*, presumably because of its educational connotations.

Though this article focuses particularly on the context of academic libraries, many of the concepts and sources cited here are applicable to a broader spectrum of information organizations and services. The article's specific objectives are to provide a brief overview of the history of academic library assessment; to survey recent trends in the field; and to facilitate further inquiry through identification of critical issues, key sources, and opportunities for networking.

BACKGROUND

The history of library assessment can be traced back at least to the mid-19th century (Lancaster, 1994). However, systematic and cumulative efforts to assess performance within the academic library community appear to have emerged early in the 20th century. Such efforts can be seen in the collection and publication of comparative library statistics, the promulgation of standards for libraries, and the publication of progressively more sophisticated research–both theoretical and applied–in the area of library assessment.

Beginning in 1908 and continuing through 1938, James Thayer Gerould compiled various data pertaining to the operations of research libraries in the United States, thus facilitating benchmarking (Molyneux, 2010). Several organizations continue to collect and report academic library statistics; in the United States, they include the National Center for Academic Statistics, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). Entities that perform similar functions in other parts of the world include the Council of Australian University Librarians and the Society of College, National and University Libraries (Dugan, Hernon, & Nitecki, 2009).

As early as the late 1920s, college librarians in the United States aspired to refer to professional standards pertaining to their libraries' development. Though the ACRL published the first edition of its guidelines in 1959, precursor documents appeared in 1930, 1932, and 1943 (Brown, 1972; Kaser, 1982; ACRL, 2011). Members of the higher education community–both those working in libraries and those involved in accreditation–have long wrestled with the tension between

qualitative and quantitative measures of library performance, as well as the extent to which standards should be viewed as authoritative (Brown, 1972; Kaser, 1982).

Academic librarians have sometimes erred on the side of idealism through their support of quantitative standards (Goudy, 1993). However, since the 1990s the pendulum has swung away from prescriptive quantitative measures. Assessment of outcomes made its first appearance in the ACRL standards in 2000, paving the way for a more descriptive, context-specific approach to academic library assessment. According to the ACRL (2011), "The 2011 *Standards* differ from previous versions by articulating expectations for library contributions to institutional effectiveness. These *Standards* differ structurally by providing a comprehensive framework using an outcomes-based approach, with evidence collected in ways most appropriate for each institution" (p. 28).

By the 1960s and 1970s, substantive discussion of theoretical and practical issues related to library assessment was present in the literature. Some such studies were influential enough to be cited four decades later. For example, in 1968 Morse published a groundbreaking work entitled *Library Effectiveness: A Systems Approach*, and in 1973 Orr authored a significant analysis of the measurement of libraries' quality and value. By 1977 Lancaster was able to publish a summary of studies regarding the evaluation of catalog use, reference service, collections, document delivery, and the like. The literature of this period documents that many academic libraries–especially large ones–performed sophisticated, highly contextualized assessment studies. However, these were labor-intensive, and it was simply impossible to apply them to every library management problem. As a result, for decades to come many libraries would look to professional standards rather than locally gathered intelligence to guide them in planning and decision-making.

Dugan and Hernon (2002) recognized significant distinctions between the traditional measures of library operations–labeled as inputs and outputs–and emerging measures of quality and impact–referred to as outcomes. Examples of inputs and outputs include volume counts and instruction sessions, respectively. Outcomes may be construed in relation to the institution (e.g., graduation and retention rates) or individual students' learning (e.g., development of knowledge and skills). Though outcomes came to prominence in the 1990s, they did not displace measurement of inputs and outputs entirely. Rather, all these types of appraisal are needed to assess the role that the library plays in the life of an institution (Dugan & Hernon, 2002; Griffiths, 2003).

The current shape of the academic library assessment movement is the product of several influences, four of which are highlighted here. First, a certain amount of assessment is native to the field of library science, or more broadly, to the field of information science. Such activity includes, for example, studies that focus on topics that are inherently information-oriented (e.g., collection management, library/information services, design of information systems), and that do not import a theoretical framework from another discipline. Studies of this sort are necessary but not sufficient. They are typically introspective, reflecting the perspective that Dugan and Hernon described as "the user in the life of the library" (p. 380).

Second, academic library assessment has also developed by borrowing concepts from management disciplines. Cross-disciplinary integration may be seen in studies that seek to understand "the library and institution in the life of the user" (Dugan & Hernon, 2002, p. 380)–that is, studies that are founded in the principles of marketing (Lee, 2003, 2004). Business concepts are also evident in libraries' use of strategic planning (Matthews, 2005), the balanced scorecard (Self, 2004), and predictive analytics (Massis, 2012), as well as various efforts to calculate libraries' value (Harless & Allen, 1999; White, 2007).

Third, the theory and practice of library assessment reflect the growing emphasis on institutional effectiveness within higher education. The influence of this movement may be seen in library literature pertaining to accreditation standards (Thompson, 2002), development of a culture of assessment (Lakos & Phipps, 2004), assessment plans (Matthews, 2007), and alignment with institutional mission (Cottrell, 2011). Assessment that is oriented towards institutional effectiveness may exhibit either of two perspectives: "the user and the library in the life of the institution" (Dugan & Hernon, 2002, p. 380) or, alternatively, "the library and the institution in the life of stakeholders" (Dugan, Hernon, & Nitecki, 2009, p. xi).

A fourth influence on academic library assessment is the adoption of evidence based practice across various sectors of society. Regardless of the field, evidence based practice prioritizes findings from high-quality research studies in professional decision-making. Evi-

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