

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LIBRARIES EVALUATION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass) Libraries is one of a group of twenty-four libraries participating in the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) project, "Making Library Assessment Work: Practical Approaches to for Developing and Sustaining Effective Assessment." (http://www.arl.org/stats/newmeas/VPO_Hiller_Self.html). This two year project is under the aegis of the ARL Statistics and Measurement Program, Martha Kyrillidou, Director. ARL Visiting Program Officers Steve Hiller and Jim Self conducted the evaluation of the UMass Libraries assessment efforts which was capped with a visit on October 6-7. In addition to a presentation on effective library assessment, they met with library staff and discussed a wide range of assessment and measurement related issues. The UMass Libraries also responded to a request for information about assessment activities, needs, and issues before the visit. The following report summarizes the current environment and offers options and suggestions for developing effective and sustainable assessment at the UMass Libraries.

CURRENT ASSESSMENT ENVIRONMENT AND ACTIVITIES

Within the past few years the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has imposed drastic budget cuts on the University, resulting in a significant reduction of the budget and staffing level of the University Libraries. Some, but not all, of the budget cuts have been restored recently, but the Libraries are still operating with less funding than five years ago. The limited resources makes it very difficult to mount a full assessment program at the UMass Libraries. However, it also raises the possibility that certain assessment activities might pay for themselves if they provide evidence that an increase in library resources will benefit the campus as a whole.

UMass, Amherst, has unusual and very notable leadership. The Chancellor, John V. Lombardi, is a nationally recognized expert in compiling data to evaluate higher education. He has made clear that he wants UMass to develop and advance as a center for research, and for its faculty to receive more sponsored research funding from the federal government and major foundations. In addition, Mr. Lombardi knows libraries and he knows standard library data. He has publicly stated that the standard ARL statistics, particularly the ARL index, are not good measures of library effectiveness. However, he may well be receptive to other assessment data from libraries, especially if it relates to the research enterprise.

The University of Massachusetts Libraries has long been a leader and active participant in the definition and compilation of ARL statistics. Gordon Fretwell is one of the deans of the ARL statistical community, and although he is mostly retired, he continues to work part-time to compile, tally, and report the annual statistics. The Libraries recently moved into a new phase in

its assessment efforts by appointing Rachel Lewellen as assessment librarian in 2004 and establishing an assessment committee in 2005. Jay Schafer, newly appointed as University Librarian, has made clear that effective assessment is central to the success of the Libraries.

The Libraries participated in LibQUAL+ in 2004. While the response rate to the survey was somewhat disappointing, results provided much worthwhile information. These results were shared with the University Deans and with the Research Library Council, a Faculty Senate committee. Particular attention was paid to faculty impressions of collections and facilities. Information from the survey was also distributed to candidates during the search for a new Director of Libraries.

One area in which the UMass Libraries has recently made effective use of data is examination of serial subscriptions, particularly print subscriptions. Leslie Button, Associate Director of Collection Services, compiled use statistics for unbound journals and interlibrary loan data. These data have resulted in a plan to cancel several hundred print journals. The data and the plan are now being shared with the Library Research Council, with the idea of making the cuts effective in 2006.

Another area of effective data collection relates to the establishment of the Learning Commons, a newly established innovative use of space in the W.E.B. DuBois Library. In 2004 the Libraries held student focus groups to establish priorities for the new space. In 2005 focus groups provided feedback regarding furniture for the Commons, and names for the various service points.

In 2004 The Libraries participated in the ARL SAILS project (Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills). The results of this effort were somewhat disappointing, as many of the student respondents did not include demographic information, limiting meaningful analysis.

IDENTIFIED ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Prior to the site visit, the UMASS Libraries identified a number of assessment-related issues and concerns in the response to our request for information. During our visit several more issues surfaced. Among these issues were:

- How do you assess the impact of the library on learning and research?
- What is the best structure for a library assessment program?
- Given limited resources, how do you get the most out of an assessment program?
- How do you prioritize assessment activities?
- How do you put assessment data to practical use?
- How do you sustain assessment activities?
- How do you educate library staff about the value of assessment, and the appropriate techniques for particular issues?

SUGGESTIONS AND OPTIONS FOR MOVING ASSESSMENT FORWARD

We offer the following suggestions and options for moving assessment forward at the UMass Libraries. They do not answer all the concerns noted above, but they provide a starting point.

We do not intend the suggestions to be prescriptive, but rather an outline of best practices for enhancing and sustaining a viable assessment program.

1. Continue the current assessment structure, with the possibility of gradual and modest expansion.

We believe the UMass Libraries has a good assessment structure in place, and recommend continuation of the model. Rachel Lewellen, currently on a one third time appointment, is a capable leader and we are also impressed with the individuals serving on the Assessment Committee. In addition we commend the Libraries for persuading Gordon Fretwell to continue, on a part time basis, his longstanding and notable work as collector and keeper of the ARL statistics. Finally, we must note the strong support for assessment by Jay Schafer, the University Librarian.

In an ideal world the Libraries would devote more staff and resources to assessment, but in the face of the severe budget reductions of recent years, there will not be significant increases in the foreseeable future. However, it would be useful to hire student assistants to ease some of the work load of the coordinator and committee. Over the longer term, as the assessment enterprise develops in the library, and demonstrates the utility of the enterprise, the university administration may be amenable to providing more resources for assessment.

2. Focus assessment activities in areas of priority, as defined by the Chancellor.

Chancellor Lombardi is very knowledgeable about assessment and data. He is likely to be receptive when he receives the right sort of assessment data from the Libraries, and not at all receptive if he has doubts about the validity of the data. This situation certainly presents opportunities and risks to the Libraries.

Since increasing the amount of research funding is a campus priority, faculty who receive sponsored funding or notable awards should receive special attention. Using a variety of assessment techniques such as interviews, focus groups, or surveys, the Libraries should find out the library and information needs of these faculty, the impact of the Libraries on their research, and their satisfaction with library collections and services. Areas of satisfaction should be noted and commended, areas of dissatisfaction addressed. The Libraries should gather information from researchers that will enable it to show the Chancellor its role in the research process and enable it to request appropriate levels of financial and staffing support.

The Chancellor has recently designated three universities as benchmarks. The University of California at Berkeley is an aspirational peer, while Illinois and Indiana have been designated as current benchmarks. We would suggest comparing library data at UMass with Indiana and Illinois, and noting the areas in where additional financial support might prove useful to the research enterprise. Some standard library measures (e.g., number of volumes) are not likely to impress the Chancellor, but others (expenditures for serials and electronic resources) might help make a case for more library support.

3. Involve all library staff in the assessment process.

It is important for all library staff to understand the importance of assessment, and the role of customer input in improving library services. The Libraries should work to cultivate an appreciation for the value of assessment through effective communication, appropriate training, and demonstrating the use of assessment data to improve services and resources.

Training is an important element in any assessment effort. It serves to increase awareness of assessment among library staff in general, and to expand and enhance the skills available to the participants in the process. Members of the assessment committee would particularly benefit from focused training in important assessment techniques. Some training can be performed in-house, but in other cases, it may be beneficial to utilize on-campus experts, or to send the participants to workshops at other locations.

When assessment information is collected, it is important to inform library staff as quickly and as fully as possible. Dissemination of information may prevent duplication of effort, and it reinforces the idea that assessment is a central element of providing excellent library service. Assessment is essential for libraries to ensure services and resources support customer needs and institutional goals. When the Libraries use assessment data to implement changes in services or policies, staff need to be fully informed.

Dissemination of information can take many forms: formal written reports, e-mail announcements, presentations at staff meetings. The appropriate form depends on the nature of the information. Whatever the medium of initial communication, we would suggest the development of an assessment website, where library staff and University faculty and students could easily find a compilation of assessment activities.

In some areas, there might be more effective ways of collecting and using information from customers. For example, library liaisons/selectors communicate with faculty and students, but not in a consistent manner. The assessment committee and the selectors group might work together to develop techniques to improve and standardize the collection and reporting of information from faculty and students.

4. Utilize assessment data fully, particularly the 2004 LibQUAL+ results.

When an assessment project is carried out, the Libraries should make the most of the effort. The results should be analyzed, summarized, and communicated to all concerned parties.

When the UMass Libraries participated in LibQUAL+ in 2004, the participation levels were somewhat disappointing. Fewer than 100 faculty returned the survey, while undergraduate and graduate student responses slightly exceeded 100 each. Despite the limited response rate, useful information for UMass is contained in the LibQUAL+ results. We would recommend dissemination of the open-ended comments to appropriate library staff. Faculty and graduate student comments should go to the library liaisons for the various academic departments. Undergraduate comments should be shared with public services units.

Despite the limited response rate, we believe further examination of the quantitative data can reveal some reliable and useful insights. A couple of examples follow. UMass faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates all gave strongly negative response when asked to rate 'printed library materials' and 'print and/or electronic journal collections.' The response by faculty and graduate students is consistent with the responses at many ARL libraries; faculty and graduate students are often dissatisfied with the collections at their own institutions. However, it is very unusual at ARL libraries for undergraduates to give library collections a negative rating. This result warrants further investigation: what caused the negativity among undergraduates.

One another area worthy of study is the discrepancy between the perceptions of customers and library staff. Faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate responded positively when asked about library services, while library staff were generally negative. As noted above, all customer categories were strongly negative when rating journal collections, while library staff were modestly positive. These discrepancies are provocative, and warrant exploration and discussion.

5. Evaluation of the Learning Commons

Establishing the Learning Commons in the DuBois Library is a major and very positive development for the UMass Libraries. Responsibility for this project is shared among several units on campus, so assessment activities will certainly be a shared activity. However, the Libraries should take the lead in assessing the Learning Commons. Due to its location, the Libraries is greatly invested in the Learning Commons. If it is a success, the Libraries will reap many benefits. If it is not successful, the Libraries will suffer.

6. Evaluate monograph purchasing

As noted above, the Libraries recently conducted a very effective review of serial use and costs. During our visit we heard of interest in conducting an analogous study of monographic purchasing, including costs and use. Such a study will require a different methodology than the serial study, but we believe it would be a fruitful area of inquiry.

7. Review how and why internal data are collected and used

The statistics inventory for this project revealed that a variety of internal statistics are collected. We are not in a position to evaluate all current practices, but we would recommend a review of the statistics collected. In addition to reviewing why data are collected, an analysis of the costs compared to the benefits might be conducted. In some cases it may be possible to eliminate entirely a data set; in other cases it may be advisable to gather the data in a more cost effective manner. We encourage the use of sampling and automatic data capture whenever appropriate.

Once the initial review is completed, the assessment group should consider the possibility of publishing, either in paper or on a website, a compilation of library statistics. If the data are worth collecting and recording, they are probably worth sharing with colleagues and interested parties.

8. Develop a set of priorities, or an assessment plan

Carrying out the seven items listed above would be well beyond the current resources of the assessment librarian and committee, indicating a clear need for planning and prioritizing. If the priorities are not obvious, the UMass Libraries may wish to develop an overall assessment plan as an early activity. On the other hand, if the top assessment priorities are obvious, the Libraries may wish to postpone the development of an overall plan. In either case, we stand ready to assist the libraries in a high priority activity, as the follow-up to our onsite visit.

Conclusion

We believe the UMass Libraries has in place the commitment and the organizational structure to move assessment forward. We look forward to working with the Libraries as it moves toward developing a culture of assessment.

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