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Stay Calm and Cover Your Assessment: Creating a Culture of Assessment on a Shoestring

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Abstract

Academic libraries engage in assessment for a variety of reasons. Improving processes, responding to customer needs, fulfilling accreditation reporting requirements, and demonstrating impact and value to the institution are just a few. Many academic libraries find themselves in the position of being required to *prove* they are fulfilling a mission that contributes to the academic success of students and their value to the institution. Assessment is no longer a choice for libraries, it has become an expectation. Although most libraries are already doing some form of assessment, there seems to be little effort in many institutions to build a culture of assessment, where staff understand and participate in the process. In many organizations, assessment is often initiated and driven by library administration. Despite good intentions, many initiatives ultimately fail due to lack of staff buy-in.

Introduction

Libraries have long focused on traditional measures for evaluating library collections and services. These include gate counts, volume counts, circulation and instruction statistics. Although large amounts of data are collected by libraries, in many cases the data is not examined in ways that reveal relationships, patterns, and trends; therefore, the data is not a useful tool for decision-making. These old measures do not reflect the impact academic libraries have on students and faculty. ACRL's publication, *Value of Academic Libraries* (2010), argues that "Librarians are increasingly called upon to document and articulate the value of academic and research libraries and their contribution to institutional mission and goals." One way to communicate the value of the library is by an analysis of Return on Investment (ROI).

Return on Investment (ROI) is a financial performance measure used to calculate the worth of investments. Very simply put, ROI is how much one gets back for what one has

put into something.” (Grzeschik, 2010). ROI is another mechanism which can be used to assess library performance. Library metrics provide information about the use of the collection, including the number of items charged out by call number, database use and the importance of the collection in regard to who is using what. Recently, it has become evident that academic institutions and accrediting bodies are moving away from measuring library success purely based on these kinds of numbers. For example, the number of instruction sessions provided to students is no longer an adequate measure of instruction. Instead, the impact of library instruction is now correlated to student retention and student success.

In recent years it became clear that while data collection is occurring in academic libraries, there is often a lack of awareness about these projects with no collective way to share and disseminate results. In other words, good work is being done, but a *culture of assessment* is not infused into the culture of the library environment. This leads to the inability to close the loop, and improve, based on assessment results. The University of South Florida Libraries was fairly typical in that there was a recognition that assessment was essential in demonstrating the value of the library, but a true “culture of assessment” did not exist.

The University of South Florida Libraries

The University of South Florida (USF), located in Tampa, Florida, is the main campus of the USF system and has an enrollment of approximately 47,000 students. There are approximately 35 faculty librarians working in all departments of the USF Tampa Library, along with more than 50 professional and staff colleagues. Like many institutions, the USF Library has used the LibQual+ survey, the Ithaka faculty survey, and other methodologies to collect data about its collections, facilities, and services. The USF Tampa Library employs a one-desk model, combining library reference and circulation into a single *Library Services* desk. This unified service point offers additional opportunities for collecting qualitative and quantitative data.

What is a Culture of Assessment?

“A Culture of Assessment is an organizational environment in which decisions are based on facts, research, and analysis, and where services are planned and delivered in ways that maximize positive outcomes and impacts for customers and stakeholders. A culture of assessment exists in organizations where staff care to know what results they produce and how those results relate to customers’ expectations. Organizational mission, values, structures, and systems support behavior that is performance and learning focused.” (Lakos & Phipps, 2004). Meredith Farkas further argued that “In a culture of assessment, assessment becomes the norm and a valued part of planning and teaching.” (2013). Developing a culture of assessment goes beyond traditional areas, such as library instruction, and is the overarching goal.

The results of an ARL survey conducted in 2007 noted a strong commitment by library directors toward building a culture of assessment, while at the same time most believed

that their staff did not have the necessary skills or expertise to conduct assessment (Wright, & White). Ten years later, a survey by Farkas, Hinchcliffe & Houk revealed that nearly half of library directors who responded indicated that assessment was not a regular part of institutional practice (2014). Through the survey, the authors also identified several factors that may provide motivation for creating a more organized effort to support assessment activities. The most significant factors that seemed to facilitate a culture of assessment included an institution-wide emphasis on assessment, accreditation requirements, a user-focused “culture of curiosity”, and the availability and use of assessment data. Several of these factors reflected the environment at USF.

The state of Florida recently adopted a model of performance based funding, with metrics that include academic progress, affordability, graduation rate and post-graduation employment. In an effort to bolster performance metrics, USF began to support university-wide efforts to enhance undergraduate and graduate student success. The libraries’ role in these efforts included providing relevant collections that support the curricula, instruction and research assistance. Initiatives were launched, including a textbook affordability program, electronic reserves, copyright, and digital media services, all which support student success. In order to show that the basic services of the library (collections, reference and instruction) along with new initiatives have impact, it is critical to assess resources and services and reveal the relationship between those resources and services and student success. Additionally, during the University’s reaccreditation with the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges (SACS) in 2015, it became clear that there was no organized effort to manage and direct library assessment.

The USF Library Assessment Committee

The USF Library Assessment Committee was created by the Dean and the initial chair was a senior librarian with both assessment skills and institutional knowledge. The remainder of the committee was, and remains, comprised of faculty representing all major units within the library along with two staff members to provide support. The following charge continues to guide the group's actions:

To strengthen the Tampa Library’s culture of assessment, the committee will:

- provide support and oversight, as needed, for assessment efforts conducted by library staff;
- share expertise concerning assessment methods and goals;
- evaluate and recommend library assessment best practices and policies;
- promote participation in assessment activities throughout the library;
- maintain a repository of assessment data and reports;
- create and manage a cycle or calendar for all library assessments;
- create and manage an inventory of past, present, and future assessment activities;
- provide an assessment “context” for newly created positions and initiatives;

- communicate relevant and appropriate assessment information throughout the Tampa Library; and
- recommend actions to provide improvement, based on assessment data/findings.

Once the assessment committee was created and priorities were identified, it was necessary for the committee to become educated and provide the appropriate tools needed to guide staff through the mechanics of an assessment process. Some of the challenges that had derailed assessment efforts in the past included the lack of in house expertise, minimal staffing levels and budget limitations. The committee was concerned with the difficulty in obtaining staff buy-in to take on yet another task. There were also negative perceptions about assessment, assumptions that collecting statistics was analogous to assessment, and information revealed through assessment may negatively impact annual performance evaluations. Thus, the committee initially concluded that it was necessary to underscore activities by creating a set of guiding principles that involved all of the staff and departments, to build an environment of trust, communicate our progress and results, and to encourage collaboration which would underscore these activities. The goal was to allay any fears or misconceptions that existed.

Based on past experience when launching a large project, it was determined that the best way to engender staff support was to keep our initial activity small and simple. It was important to create concrete processes and procedures and to communicate the results with the entire staff. Two-way, open communication was identified as one of the essential elements of the process.

Assessment Committee Activities

One of the first activities that the committee engaged in was to conduct an audit or inventory of assessment activities conducted in the preceding five years (2010). Members of the committee interviewed librarians and staff about their involvement in library assessment. The information sought information included:

- Who held the assessment results?
- What department(s) or unit(s) were involved?
- What was assessed?
- What was the timeline?
- Was the assessment repeated or is it ongoing?

Beyond the gathering of information, the committee also wanted to recognize and acknowledge past efforts. Many times when new initiatives are announced, it is easy to forget that some individuals and departments have worked diligently in this area and the committee did not want to let their work go unrecognized.

Once the interviews were completed, it was assembled into a spreadsheet and organized by department. General library assessments, including LibQual and the

recently conducted Ithaka faculty survey were placed in a category labelled “General”. Organizing the spreadsheet by department revealed which departments had engaged in assessment in the past and which departments did not. It also revealed what methodologies had been employed (surveys, focus groups, data analysis, etc). The audit also showed where there were gaps in assessment. For example, the librarians in some areas, such as library instruction, had long been engaged in assessment, although the committee noted that there was little programmatic assessment completed. However, in other areas of the library, most notably in some areas of access services, little or no assessment had taken place over the course of the last five years.

Following the audit, the committee recommended that each library department/unit engage in both qualitative and quantitative assessment on an ongoing basis at scheduled intervals. Further, the committee recommended that a variety of methods be utilized when conducting qualitative assessment. These methods include, but are not limited to, surveys, focus groups, transcript analysis, and data analysis.

In order to organize and unify the assessment deliverables for all library departments, units, and people, the committee started with the following specific projects:

Assessment Toolkit & LibGuide:

In order to facilitate the additional assessment activities, the committee created an assessment toolkit to provide a single location for staff to access relevant tools, best practices and other helpful information. This toolkit was created using the LibGuides platform and the guide is currently linked on the Dean’s webpage. The guide contains both external initiatives and national initiatives, as well as internal initiatives. Internal initiatives include the assessment audit, timeline, individual USF Librarian assessment activities and initiatives, tools and assessments, best practices and resources, and an continuously updated FAQ. While this guide is largely for internal use, the information is available for use by colleagues at USF and beyond. Some of the data that is currently housed on the guide will soon be used to populate a more exciting, public face of USF Libraries assessment efforts.

URL: <http://guides.lib.usf.edu/assessment>

Library Wide Meeting (Kickoff!):

To foment and unify the goal of a culture of assessment, the committee planned its first meeting, which was organized and publicized library-wide. This “kickoff” meeting was designed to create a climate of enthusiasm and to make all library personnel realize all the work already done in this area. With this momentum, the committee further energized faculty and staff to increase their level of collaboration and communication with regard to assessment activities. Food and drink were provided and all library employees were encouraged to attend and participate.

By sharing the existing work, updated philosophy, and benefits of improved coordination, the meeting served an integral purpose in building a foundation for new projects going forward. In addition, the event was key in making colleagues aware of new tools and processes designed to make engaging in assessment easier and more effective. The gathering also served to acknowledge and appreciate the good work and effort by staff throughout the years; failure to appreciate these past endeavors would be a major roadblock to future assessment projects. Future meetings are also in the initial planning stages that will further facilitate communication and offer colleagues of all types the opportunity to share new and planned assessments.

Planning and Reporting Forms:

In order to best capture the work of staff who engage in assessment activity, as well as to make the data collection and sharing simple and consistent, the committee created two brief, but descriptive forms. The first, a “Planning Form”, would notify the committee and by extension, other library departments, of any planned assessment activity. It was made clear that the role of the committee was not to approve or deny any proposed efforts, but simply to coordinate and maximize the benefit of these projects while, as much as possible, avoiding redundancy and over-surveying any particular population(s).

The second and final form is the “Reporting Form”. This online form asks the investigator of any project to provide a succinct review of their findings. As with the planning form, the information requested is only basic and summary in nature, so as not to burden anyone with too much additional work. A few lines of text on each form serve to effectively keep everyone abreast of ongoing activities. This form helps the committee and the investigator(s) to “close the loop” and ensures consistent reporting of data.

Assessment Newsletter:

Intended to update people on the latest and the greatest, the newsletter includes announcements, planned assessments and/or reports, training opportunities, and any updates to the page, the FAQs, or other relevant information. The first newsletter was issued in Spring 2016 and future editions are planned to keep assessment in the forefront of the memory of all library colleagues. This initial newsletter was created with the help of the library webmaster and created on the WordPress platform. This and future newsletters may be found online at: <http://www.lib.usf.edu/assessment/category/spring2016/>. The plan is to publish at least two newsletters each year, with one each at the end of the Spring and Fall semesters to update all library personnel of the types of assessments planned and completed.

Successes and Challenges

After the completion of one year, the committee celebrated a number of achievements and successes. The real work, however, had only just begun. The newly created Assessment LibGuide was officially made available and provided an easy and central source for assessment tools and information. Training opportunities were offered for software, productivity and project management tools such as Trello. Training sessions for activities such as writing effective survey questions was planned. The initial assessment newsletter was distributed to all faculty and staff in an effort to continually remind staff about, as well as encourage discussion of, the library's assessment efforts. Most importantly, assessments have been both planned and completed and the results are located in one place.

Many of the challenges faced include maintaining momentum (we are all busy), disseminating information in a timely manner (because life happens), incorporating assessment into our planning and daily activities (it is easy to forget), and closing the loop (remembering to finalize a project with an assessment report). We continue to struggle with increasing awareness of including the assessment process in our project plans; thus, it invariably means that when a committee member becomes aware of an imminent project, they take it upon themselves to remind staff to complete a planning form and then a reporting form.

Future Plans

As the committee continues to raise awareness about assessment, it is critical that the efforts and accomplishments be viewed as a beginning, rather than an end result. The committee created a foundation on which future committees will continue to build. In the short term, there are several initiatives in the planning or beginning stages. The committee plans to continue to offer training on a wide variety of topics related to assessment. Faculty and staff outside of the library who have expertise in assessment related topics have offered to hold training sessions for staff. One such training session is to be offered in 2017 and will be focused on the best practices for survey design.

The committee has also received approval and funding to develop a mini-grant program for all library staff who wish to engage in assessment activities. Librarians and staff will be able to apply for funding to engage in a number of assessment activities, including, but not limited to purchasing software, traveling to assessment related conferences, offsetting survey expenses or covering any other costs related to assessment initiatives. Awardees will be required to submit a report and to share their results with all staff and are also encouraged to share results outside the library and university. The committee also plans to host regular open forums to give librarians and staff the opportunity to present their results assessment project results.

It is the collective hope that events such as open forums, training opportunities, and funding will further energize assessment endeavors throughout the library. In an effort to communicate the value of the library to the university community, the committee is also working with the library's webmaster to create a visually appealing, public-facing

website. This website will highlight assessment activities, results, and other interesting facts about the library.

Conclusion

Academic libraries are being asked by stakeholders and customers to provide increasing amounts of evidence of the impact and value of their efforts. Although data gathering, or collecting library metrics, provide information about the use of the collection and the quantity of library services used, it is important to remember academic libraries are tasked with demonstrating to their institutions that the library provides a return on investment. Library statistics alone are not a measure of success. Data collection, along with thoughtful interpretation and analysis, will help demonstrate the value of the library to the institution. To this end, it is vital that academic libraries develop a mechanism for all staff to contribute to these efforts.

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