

Library Assessment from a Fresh Perspective

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I believe one of the greatest strengths of Next Gen librarians can be found in their ability to bring new and innovative ideas to the information workplace. When reading the library literature, one expects to find that any mentioning of Next Gen librarians will incorporate a discussion of new technology implementation, issues relating to Web 2.0, the benefits of social networking, or any of the other talking points commonly associated with fresh-faced librarians who grew up in the digital age.

These newly minted librarians are typically branded as having the knowledge and skills to blog, start wikis, design web pages, create podcasts, produce videos, and take on just about any other technologically oriented task that may be thrown at them. These stereotypical characteristics may well represent a vast majority of these so called 'Next Gen' librarians; however, it's important not to typecast these young go-getters as merely tech taming apprentices. As I have found out in my brief three-year career as a librarian, Next Gen librarians can successfully serve in capacities that include leadership roles in core library functions such as planning or assessment, often with an enthusiasm that is refreshingly welcome.

Dialog at library conferences these days is seldom had without the dreaded word 'assessment' springing into the conversation. As an instruction librarian in an academic library, I quickly became aware of the need to assess the effectiveness of what we were teaching our users. At the time, there was no assessment to be found in my library outside of the statistical record keeping typically found in most libraries. I saw an opportunity to get ahead of the game, by using knowledge I had obtained from conferences, workshops, and the professional literature.

After two years of collecting data based on testing, research assignments, and other measures collected through assessment initiatives, I was effectively able to say that our library's instructional services were having a positive impact on student learning. And wouldn't you know it, around this time rumblings of the upcoming accreditation visit began to be heard around campus, with that heinous word 'assessment' being thrown around throughout every academic department. It wasn't until this point that the library administration began to consciously incorporate the word assessment into the lexicon of our organizational meetings.

Looking ahead to our accreditation visit in 2010, the Dean of Library Services sought to get a formal assessment plan underway to help us plan our strategy for meeting SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) requirements. As with any initiatives in higher education, the start of our assessment process called for the forming of a committee within the library. Knowing that I had a leg up on assessment through the work I had put in toward assessing our instructional services, the Dean decided to appoint me as chair of the committee. With this appointment, I was charged with forming a

committee that would ultimately be responsible for creating a blue print for assessing all library operations.

My first point of order was to assemble a committee that was comprised of representatives from all departments within the library. I decided to name seven librarians to the committee. Once the committee was established I called our first meeting to open the floor up to ideas. Since we do not use LibQUAL or any other commercially designed user survey or tool that collects peer institution data, we were starting from scratch for the most part. We did however already have homemade patron survey instruments in place as well as volumes of data collected via our automated systems. Some of this data included circulation, interlibrary loan, serials, and acquisitions statistics which served as a good jumping off point. The biggest challenge for the committee was deciding what additional data we would need to collect and how we would use it to improve library operations.

Based on the ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) Standards for Continuous Evaluation, we created an outline for assessment that tied together elements from our library mission and goals, supporting library services and activities, expected outcomes, and means for assessment. Being that we had seven goals and seven committee members, we decided that each member should choose a goal closely related to that librarian's day-to-day tasks for which he/she could articulate how we should assess the operations associated with that goal. This strategy worked well as we were able to present our ideas and come to a consensus on how each service, activity, or program could best be assessed.

With our plan for assessment in place, we decided to set a date for an unofficial trial run. This trial run would expose any weaknesses within our plan and bring to light any gaps that we had not accounted for. Following the trial run, we would then give ourselves an official two-year assessment cycle with which to collect our data and compile reports to have in place for the accreditation visit. As of fall 2008, the committee was on pace to meet its goal.

As the orchestrator of this assessment plan, I was able to bring together important ideas and a group of people that shared interest in achieving a common goal. Although Next Gen librarians may not come to the table with the impressive number of years of experience that many of our colleagues possess, we do come with a desirable array of talents aside from the expected technological skills. And combined with those talents, Next Gen librarians are also eager to become involved in important issues within their workplace, making them a valuable asset to any information organization.

Note – This article first appeared in the publication *Library Connect Newsletter* in vol. 7, no. 1, January, 2009 - ISSN 1549-3725