But what do you do? What is an assessment librarian?

By Margaret Friesen.

Introduction

I was asked many times in my four years as assessment librarian at the UBC Library, "what do you do?" I will try to answer this question as follows:

The practice of assessment is not a new phenomenon. Libraries have always evaluated their services to improve them or to develop new services. In the last decade, assessment librarianship has evolved as a specialty that builds on this practice, using an ever expanding set of methodologies and tools.

The following summary provides examples of some assessment projects and programs carried out at the UBC Library and updates some projects presented to the Academic Librarians in Public Service (ALPS) session in December, 2011. The impetus for these programs at UBC originated with the assessment initiatives sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries.

Why do it?

More than ever, libraries need to be able to demonstrate and proclaim the value of library resources and services to their communities, especially the value of their human capital, that is, the value-added contributions of library staff. This proclamation of the value of libraries must be tailored to the particular audience — the business community, government leaders, other non-profits, academia — so that each group understands what's in it for them. Above all, the primary goal of assessment is to improve library services to our customers — it's about them, not about us.

What is library assessment?

It is a structured process:
- to learn about our communities
- to respond to the needs of our users
- to improve our programs and services.

Library assessment methodologies can also be used to:
- demonstrate accountability for resources

- compare with others
- identify changing patterns
- market/promote the library.

Some outcomes of assessment are:
- raw data
- data analytics
- tables and charts
- observations, findings
- evidence for decision making
- narratives for communications (customers' stories).

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The knowledgeable assessment librarian uses project management methodology to frame the assessment project, considering factors such as:
- purpose of assessment (why?)
- focus (what is in scope in the study, what is not in scope?)
- stakeholders (participants, audience)
- partners
- time lines
- assessment outcomes.

The assessment project manager formulates goals and principles for the project and chooses appropriate methods, tools, sources of data and analytics.

The success of an assessment program depends on some key factors:
- library leadership (the environment to promote, support, use assessment results)
- organizational culture (customer centered)
- ongoing commitment to assessment
- assigning responsibility for assessment
- resources
- data infrastructure
- skills, expertise.

The assessment librarian does not usually make operational decisions. Rather she/he contributes the

know-how, evidence and rationales for the decision makers.

How?

It's not an easy thing to do, to go beyond the traditional statistics gathering and reporting that libraries have always done. Barriers to a successful program are often heard:
- lack of time
- isolation (assessment librarian may not be in the leadership circle)
- lack of resources
- lack of a sound knowledge base of relevant assessment skills.

A. Getting started - three LibQUAL surveys

At the UBC Library, the catalyst for the assessment program was the 2007 LibQUAL+® campus-wide survey, repeated in 2009 and 2010. This survey instrument is sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries. It is a complex survey consisting of 22 questions and a "box" (the comments box). The 22 questions fall into three broad categories: customer service, collections and library space.

With this survey, we invited our students and faculty to tell us "How can UBC Library serve you better?"

About the user experience, they said:
- "make your services more visible, make it easier to find the content, the people, the information, the places, the electronic resources,
- buy more collections: print, media, and electronic,
- create more quiet and multi-purpose spaces for us to do research and learn without distraction".

B. One size does not fit all

Although the UBC Assessment Office scouted for best practices in assessment used at other research libraries, not every practice from elsewhere can be applied to the local situation.

That's why we also undertook some focused investigations to find out the answers to the following questions:

- What do graduate students prefer to see in a proposed Research Commons?
- What do life sciences students want to see in a renovated space in the Woodward Library?
- How effective are the referral services in the Learning Commons?

- How are specialized collections used (fine arts, rare books, archives)?
- What level of reference questions are being asked at each service point?
- Who is attending library classes, which topics are covered?
- Which library staff and units are engaged with external communities and how?
- What does it cost the library to support new academic courses?

C. The value of the library

We have quantified some of our services. In 2011, we found out that:
- 8 out of 10 of students at UBC attended the library's information literacy classes
- reference staff answered an average of 4 reference questions per FTE student
- 43 print books were circulated annually per FTE student
- more than 7 million electronic journal articles were "borrowed" that year.

A more elusive quest remains: to determine student success outcomes. *Does the library service contribute and if so, how much*? Can this contribution be quantified? Assessment researchers have suggested some possible ways to answer this question, including gathering data to find out:
- What would it cost if researchers had to purchase their books and journals, e-books and e-journals themselves?
- How much time did the researcher save because she/he attended an information literacy class tailored to her/his academic discipline?

D. Knowledge/data sharing

Assessment as an ongoing library practice often still needs to be "sold" to peers within the institution as well as to an external audience. We told the library assessment story in two ways: through education/training programs and through a shared data repository.

1. Education/training:

We published data tables and reports in cIRcle, the UBC institutional repository, presented papers to the international Library Assessment Conference and published them in the proceedings, taught classes in the School of Library Archival and Information Studies (SLAIS), hired and trained SLAIS graduate academic assistants, and presented workshops on assessment librarianship at the BC Library Association

conference, among other venues. See links to cIRcle and conference documents below.

2. Data repository:

The UBC Library Metrics Project is a more recent initiative. In November 2011, the UBC Library Assessment Office began developing a centralized statistics database, called LibPAS (Counting Opinions). The purpose was to streamline and simplify the process of gathering data, analyzing, reporting and sharing the data.

Where do you start?

The community of assessment librarian specialists is scattered across North America, and indeed the world, but we are well connected online and through biennial library assessment conferences. I have found that assessment librarians are eager to share their knowledge and many of our writings are readily accessible online. None of us began with a fully developed assessment program. It is reassuring to know that library assessment can be done in small chunks, one project at a time. One way to start is to ask the assessment librarian near you "what do you do?"

Further reading: cIRcle documents and conference proceedings

"Good assessment starts before you begin" (ALPS, BC Library Association, Dec. 2, 2011).
http://hdl.handle.net/2429/39822

"Applying ATLAS.ti and Nesstar WebView to the LibQUAL+® results at UBC Library" in *Proceedings of the Library Assessment Conference, August 4-7, 2008, Seattle, WA*. Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2009, 449-455.
http://hdl.handle.net/2429/23040

"UBC Library LibQUAL+® 2010 survey results for "library as place": explanatory notes for charts 9-11"
http://hdl.handle.net/2429/24879

"Towards democratizing library data: data management and sharing in the institutional repository" in *Proceedings of the 2010 Library Association Conference: Building Effective, Sustainable, Practical Assessment, Baltimore, MD*. Association of Research Libraries, 201-212.
http://libraryassessment.org/bm~doc/proceedings-lac-2010.pdf

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