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Outcomes Evaluation: A Message from ASCLA President Ethel Himmel

Library folks have been measuring their successes by counting things for many years. The underlying principle has been that change in numbers over time is good; we are either decreasing costs (bad things) or increasing services (good things). We have not asked whether what we were counting was important! The emphasis today has moved from counting to evaluation and to evaluating what impact a particular service or project has. Those providing the funding say, "Be accountable; show us not only that you spent our money the way you promised you would, but also that there was a positive impact on your community because we gave you this money." This is new territory.

Indeed, program evaluation has been around for a long time. It became really widespread along with President Johnson's Great Society. Remember all those social programs that were federally funded? Because there was never enough money to fund every good idea, Congress needed some way to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs so that future funding priorities could be established. But note that the emphasis in this type of evaluation is on the program itself -- was it properly administered, did it reach the people most in need?

Outcomes Evaluation goes one step further and asks what happened because of this program. What impact did it have? And the truth is, that it is very, very hard to know. In scientific laboratories we can conduct experiments in controlled settings and know that doing X results in outcome Y. But in the world outside the laboratory, we lack that control. There are many, many variables involved and we can't be sure that some factor other than the one we're interested in didn't really produce the outcome we got.

Still, saying it is very hard is not saying it cannot be done! We do want to be measuring what is important. What is important is that people and their lives are in some way improved because of the programs our institutions and organizations provide. This issue of *Interface* includes stories about experiences with outcomes evaluation. As we learn what works, we will become more adept at outcomes evaluation. Stay tuned. And stay involved with ASCLA, where you'll meet, work with, and influence the leading thinkers in library outcomes evaluation.

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50 E Huron St., Chicago IL 60611 | 1.800.545.2433