# Making Informed Decisions: The Implications of Assessment

*Susan J. Beck*

The future of libraries and librarianship is intimately associated with outcomes assessment and accountability, as well as competition for diminishing resources. In every day language, the library must be able effectively to tell real stories about its accomplishments without solely resorting to anecdote. Just as important, if libraries do not assess themselves—the university administration will do it, with limited understanding and lacking perspective.

With these premises in mind, this paper reports the initial analysis of data from research conducted on the impact of assessment on library management decision-making and the degree to which assessment data has influenced change. Nine Association of Research Libraries' public universities in the United States and Canada were studied. University library directors from each institution were interviewed concerning the impact of assessment on decision-making in their organizations. Focus groups were conducted with "Cabinet level" administrators regarding the impact of assessment on decision-making within their purviews.

At the conclusion of each session, two brief surveys were administered to subjects. The first survey assessed each individual's beliefs regarding their institution's development of a culture of assessment using Amos Lakos, Betsy Wilson and Shelly Phipps' *Do You Have A Culture of Assessment?* The second survey used Beck's *Factors in Decision Making*. Variables investigated include: university-wide accountability, governance issues, institutional assessment goals, integration of assessment activities into the planning process, costs of assessment, time spent on assessment activities, assessment impact on decisions, data driven decisions, assessment impact on customer needs, change implementation, barriers to change, technological impact on assessment process and need for new data measures.

In the fall of 2000, the Rutgers' University Library Assessment Committee (LAC) articulated one of its goals for the year would be to better educate ourselves about assessment techniques and practices. As part of that process, we had an educational lunch meeting with Janice Ballou, then the director of the

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Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics who was sharing her experiences with designing surveys.[1]

One of my colleagues questioned her about the results of the surveys and asked: What happens after the survey? Do the people really find the information they were looking for? How do they respond to the information they received?[2] She really had no answer. Her specialty was survey design. Her responsibility ended with the design and administration of the survey itself. Once that was completed she moved on to the next project.

Following this luncheon, I discovered I was intrigued with survey outcomes. Soon after, I discovered that sabbatical proposals for the next academic year were due. I had been thinking it was time to take a sabbatical, but I hadn't selected a project. I found myself considering this topic. I finally committed to studying assessment outcomes.

In my sabbatical proposal, I planned to develop my knowledge of library assessment techniques by upgrading both my qualitative and quantitative skills. I did not want to merely read a lot of library literature on assessment. Although I was looking forward to educational opportunities, I did not want to only attend workshops and conferences on assessment.

I wanted to see assessment in action. I wanted to talk with people. I wanted to know how they were using information from their assessment activities. How were librarians evaluating their services? I wanted to find out how librarians were using assessment data. Were they making data driven decisions? If not, what was informing their decisions? How were libraries using this data in their decisions? How were libraries changing? How did librarians respond to their users?

My sabbatical proposal had two components. First, there was a focus on educational activities that involved attending conferences and participating in workshops. These activities would help me develop my assessment skills. The second focus was on visiting academic libraries and interviewing library administrators and staff about their assessment experiences. I was granted a sabbatical leave for July 1, 2001 to June 30, 2002.

I attended three major conferences:

• Fourth Northumbria [Northumbria Conference] International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services. Sun-day, 12 August, to Thursday, 16 August 2001, Sheraton Station Square Conference Center Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "Meaningful Measures for Emerging Realities".

• Library Research Seminar II, Partners and Connections Research and Practice, University of Maryland, Library Research Roundtable and the Library History Roundtable of the American Library Association, College Park, Maryland, November 2–3, 2001

• Living the Future Conference 4: Collaboratively Speaking a library Conference on Organizational Renewal, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, April 24–27, 2002. The Association of Research Libraries and the Association of College and Research Libraries cosponsored this conference.

I participated in seven workshops. My first workshop was actually at the last ACRL Conference in Denver where I attended a pre-conference on Survey Research: A Crash Course. I also participated in ARL's Measuring Library Service Quality Online Lyceum. I was a proud participant in the first ARL Library Service Quality Academy, a five-day intensive workshop focusing on qualitative and quantitative methods for collecting and analyzing library service quality data. Other workshops included developing listening, facilitation, and project planning skills. I was also fortunate to take a private workshop on conducting focus groups from the staff of the Rutgers Center for Organizational Development and Leadership.

The Northumbria Conference had the biggest impact on the future direction of my sabbatical project. That conference provided me with opportunities not only to learn about library assessment activities around the world, but to meet and know other library professionals who were concerned with assessment, on the cutting edge of the issues relating to assessment in libraries.

I had high aspirations. I wanted to visit libraries! I wanted to visit libraries all over the world! When finally selecting libraries to visit, I realized I needed to limit my scope of travel. My first criterion for selection was that I would limit my visits to English speaking countries. As a next step in narrowing down which libraries to visit, I decided to limit the libraries to public institutional members of ARL, thus reflecting my own background and experience. A third criterion I used was if the library had ever participated in Libqual. Participation in Libqual was considered

to be a positive indicator of the institution's interest and commitment to assessment activities.

After the Northumbria Conference, I selected a couple of the libraries based on the presentations that were given there. Instinctively, I wanted to visit the University of Virginia, the University of Washington, the University of Connecticut, and the University of Arizona (preferably in February or March). My list of libraries would change over time. I felt very strongly about visiting Canadian libraries. I was certain that visiting another country would add interesting dimensions to my study.

My final list of libraries to visit were:
The University of Virginia
Virginia Tech
The University of Washington
The University of Arizona
Arizona State University
University of Texas
University of Connecticut
University of Toronto
York University

After selecting the libraries, I contacted the library administrator. I described my project and requested permission to visit their institution to conduct my research. I interviewed two different segments of administrators. First, I would interview the director or dean about their assessment activities. I then would interview the cabinet level administrators. Each institution has their own unique titles for the deans, or directors, or university librarians and cabinets or leadership councils. For ease of discussion, however, I have assigned these individuals into two categories: The Directors and The Cabinet

To develop my questions for the interviews, I e-mailed friends and colleagues, seeking their input about what they thought were the most important questions I could ask about assessment. My colleague's responses trickled in, from Rutgers, the Library of Congress, Northern State University (S.D.), a library head-hunter firm, the Association of Research Libraries, and a colleague from University of South Africa [whom I had met at the Northumbria Conference]. Each person suggested approaches and questions about assessment in libraries.

In developing the final list of questions, I was concerned whether I should ask different questions of the two groups of people. Ultimately, I did vary the questions slightly between the two groups, but the basic line of inquiry remained the same. I was asking: How do librarians evaluate services; do librarians make data driven decisions; and how do librarians respond to the needs of their users? See the list of questions in Table 1 and Table 2.

While I was in my question development phase, I emailed Martha Kyrillidou, [Senior Program Officer at the Association of Research Libraries, whom I kept running into at various assessment conferences] seeking interview questions. She suggested some, and also suggested that I become an ARL Visiting Program Officer assigned to the New Measures Initiatives. This would open some doors for me in my research.

I interviewed 59 librarians on nine different university campuses across the United States and Canada.

| Table 1. Director's Questions |
|---|
| University Wide Accountability |
| Governance Issues |
| Evaluation of Services |
| Assessment Impact on Decisions |
| Assessment Process Goals |
| Planning Process |
| Time & Cost of Assessment Activities |
| Decision Factors: When Data Is Not Informing Decisions, What Is? |
| Specific Instruments |
| New Data Measures |
| ARL Assessment & Decision Making |

| Table 2. Cabinet Questions |
|---|
| Role of Assessment in Your Area of Responsibility |
| Governance Issues |
| Customer Needs |
| Assessment Impact on Decisions |
| Decision Factors: When Data Is Not Informing Decisions, What Is? |
| Specific Instruments |
| Change Implementation & Barriers |
| Impact of Technology on Assessment |
| New Data Measures |
| ARL Assessment & Decision Making |

This number also includes interviewing several individuals outside of my categories, but with significant assessment responsibilities at their institutions

Although I personally visited each institution, I was unable to interview some directors. One director, for example, was called away at the last minute. In such cases, I added director's questions to my interview with the cabinet-level administrators. A vacationing library director volunteered to participate in a telephone interview. I interviewed the rest of the directors in their offices, with one exception, when I interviewed one director at a conference. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

Working full time and trying to analyze research does not always lend itself to a speedy analysis. Originally I hoped to present my preliminary results for both directors and cabinet level administrators. However, do to time constraints; this presentation will focus only on the interviews with the director's.

## University Wide Accountability

My first question to library directors was about university wide accountability. What do university administrators ask library directors about the operations of the library? Do they ask library directors about the library at all? Does the university have specific accountability requirements? Does the state government have mandated accountability requirements?

The principal responses, as might be expected were financial:
• The university expects us to make sound use of the monies that we are budgeted.
• I think they are interested that we keep track of our money; that we can talk about materials' budget; that we can talk about what happens with the materials' budget.

Other responses concerned the institution's mission and traditional library values:
• The expectation is that we will deliver the services, the resources, [and] the collections that are appropriate to a major research institution.
• I think their expectation is that we meet the needs of the students and the faculty.

Libraries in Texas, Arizona, and Washington have state mandated requirements for accountability. The University of Texas Library has a university wide accountability program, a compliance evaluation program and participates in annual performance reviews.

The University of Connecticut Library also has university required performance assessments. One director stated:

> This university expects me to create strategic movement that is consistent with the university's articulated strategic directions or strategic movement that is consistent with the movement that is within the professions with which I deal. It expects me to be where it needs me to be and they expect that I will be there in ways that are consistent with our peers, especially in areas that require coordination standards, commonality of approach.

## Governance Issues

If I was going to investigate how assessment impacted decisions, I also needed to discover how decision-making occurred in each library. Governance structures varied across all libraries, ranging from a strong centralized model to a decentralized participatory model.

Library directors characterize their decision-making processes like this:
• strong leadership with input;
• matrix team management;
• leadership council;
• library services council;
• working groups; and
• teams.

One library director commented that: "It is my hope that we get the people involved in decision-making who have information to bring to the decision."

I suspect my favorite response was: "I hate to say it because it sounds so bossy, strong leadership, with input."

## Evaluation of Services

Libraries survey different user groups, as one method of evaluating services. For example, some libraries will survey undergraduates, graduate/professional students, and faculty as three distinct groups. Other libraries conduct annual user surveys; some libraries alternate surveying different user groups cyclically. Library services at York University are evaluated as part of regularly scheduled graduate and undergraduate program reviews.

When multiple user groups are combined, graduate/professional students are often combined either

with undergraduates or with faculty. When combined with undergraduates they are viewed as a category of students. When combined with faculty, they are viewed as having similar research agendas and use patterns.

Campus-wide, web-based surveys are becoming more common as expertise grows with web technologies. The University of Connecticut conducted their first campus-wide web-based survey in the fall of 2001. This survey focused on use, satisfaction, and importance of the library's services, collections, facilities and equipment to their work. Users were also asked to rank their top three priorities for collections, services, facilities, and equipment.[3]

Facing future space demands, The University of Connecticut Library (spring 2002) surveyed faculty and graduate students to determine if a library shelving facility was a priority. More than 72 percent felt that it should be a university priority, even it meant something else would not get built in its place. In the same survey, users responded negatively to the idea of sending library materials to an offsite storage facility.[4]

The University of Washington Library conducts separate surveys for each of its three users groups (faculty, graduate/professional students and undergraduates) triennially. These surveys focus on library use and satisfaction as well as user needs and library priorities.[5]

The University of Virginia Library also uses a three-year cycle. In the first year, they survey faculty and then the next year, students. The third year is spent evaluating and planning for the next round of surveys. See University of Virginia's Management and Information Services page on their Library Surveys[6] In addition to their user surveys, the University of Virginia also uses the Balanced Scorecard technique as a means to track performance measurement indicators.[7]

Some libraries rely on using a combination of their own surveys and participation in Libqual+ to evaluate their services. Directors indicated that their Libqual+ results often validate what they anecdotally know about their services and collections. One director commented:" I think if you just had Libqual, you would really need more, I don't think it's a stand-alone tool" The Libqual+ surveys are also used to complement other evaluations. Steve Hiller, Assess-

ment Coordinator at the University of Washington, compares University of Washington's experience using both types of surveys in a *Library Trends* article.[8]

Some libraries are discontinuing their own expensive user surveys, to rely on Libqual+ to provide general information about user satisfaction with library services and collections. Often these libraries also conduct specific issue surveys to provide useful information for establishing planning priorities. Arizona State University conducted use surveys in their map library in preparation for a possible merger with government documents.

## Communicating Results

It is important to share the results with the users and stakeholders. Highlight what you know about your users and communicate how and when the library intends to responds to the findings. Directors indicated they used these methods to communicate results to their users:

- state of the library address;
- student newspaper;
- library newsletter;
- library Web page;
- faculty and staff newsletters;
- faculty liaison program;
- presentation to university stakeholders; and
- conference presentations sharing methodological issues and results

## Assessment Impact on Decisions

When asked to give examples of data-driven decisions, director's described changing library hours, justifying building or renovation needs, improving services, and identifying staffing trends. Data was used to develop new service policies for primary and secondary borrowers and establish a fee-based service for non-affiliated users. Survey data motivated one library to purchase all new photocopiers, and led to improving, interlibrary loan and audio-visual services. One library used circulation and reference data to close a branch library. Collections budgets were increased based on electronic use statistics. Data is used to explore staffing trends and needs. One director said:

> We evaluate services based on the reaction of our customer base. We do a lot of active surveying; we take the results of those surveys

and turn them back into major portions of action plans, either for improving services or building new services.

**Decision Factors: If Data Is Not Informing Decisions, What Is?**

When decision-making data is not available, directors are guided by:

- benefits;
- economics;
- emotions;
- experience;
- institutional goals;
- professional goals;
- qualitative data;
- strategic directions;
- technology;
- time; and
- values

**Assessment Process Goals**

When directors talked about assessment process goals they spoke to the following types of issues:

- How do you manage assessment?
- What do you want to learn from assessment?
- What you want to accomplish once you understand the assessment data?
- How will you use your data in your planning process to establish priorities?
- Will creating a data farm support decision-making?
- How do you establish collaborative partnerships with campus units in the development of instrument design and administration, data analysis, data validity and reliability issues?

**Planning Process**

Directors cited the following information as being important for planning purposes:

- use patterns on how people are getting to information;
- electronic services usage;
- disciplinary pockets of readiness with teaching and technology;
- examine the impact of external influences such as the information technology unit, which have operational impacts on your operations;
- recognize that key people in the organization

are barriers at critical path points in planning;

- all performance assessments are measured against the library-wide, area-wide and individual plans;
- gate and occupancy counts by time of day; and
- distribution of students by discipline.

Library directors found the collection of these traditional library measures meaningless for their planning purposes:

- volume holdings
- items holdings
- processing statistics
- serials added
- volumes added
- government documents
- serial volumes

**Time Spent on Assessment**

Information, about time expended on assessment activities, varied across institutions. How this information was reported in the interviews also varied. Some Directors reported fte's, while one Director reported staff spent at least 42 days annually. Other Directors indicated they had no idea.

When you think about time spent on assessment activities, you must include many variables. It is not only the time it takes to develop, administer and analyze data related to a survey or a focus group. How much time do personnel spend? How many people are involved in the cumulative processes? How much time does it take to design the survey? Some committees spend months devising questions. How long does it take to administer the survey? How long to analyze the data? How much time to present the data? Some libraries present findings to various university constituencies. Some libraries do follow-up focus groups to drill down further in the data.

When you think about assessment activities, it is not just a library focusing on one specific survey. There are daily assessment activities that go on in all institutions, which reflect the work of the library. There are university assessment requirements; there are state assessment mandates. There are also those demands placed on libraries by membership in professional organizations such as the Association of Research Libraries, and the Canadian Association of Research Libraries. Participation in Libqual+ also takes time. I suspect the Directors, who responded that they did

not really know how much time they spent on assessment activities, are closer to reality.

**Assessment Costs**

Directors cited the following costs associated with assessment:
- Personnel (Salary)
- Programming Time
- Time
- Survey design
- Survey administration
- Follow up focus groups
- Participation Incentives
- Data Presentation
- Web Development
- Printing Costs
- Tabulating Data

**Needed: New Data Measures**

Directors believe the most important thing we need to do today is learn how to measure our impact.
- How do we document that we are making a difference?
- How can we demonstrate what is effective?
- What is the value of investing millions of dollars on university libraries?
- What impact does the library have on research?
- What impact does the library budget have on research?
- What is the impact of our resources and what is the value of this investment?
- How do we figure out and describe what we're doing in the building that's important?
- How do you evaluate the impact of our teaching?
- How will we find new ways of characterizing what we do in libraries so that when we are called upon we can describe how what we do is changing?

**What we want to learn about our users:**
- How can we start understanding what the users need?
- What do our students know about using information?
- How do we impact learning?
- How do scholars do research today, what do they value?

- How are the needs of today's researchers changing?

**How can we improve our services and collections?**
- How will we determine our local responsibilities for digitization?
- What will you digitize and make available outside of the institution?
- How will you balance your digitization priorities with your acquisition of new materials and continue to purchase special collections and acquire primary research material that is archival in nature?
- How will we develop more informative reference measures?

**Preliminary Conclusions**

Assessment data provides evidence that documents needs and guides the implementation of change in research libraries. Specific examples of the successful use of assessment data are described. Libraries that have created, nurtured, and integrated a culture of assessment into their everyday processes are models for other institutions.

The degree to which assessment influences decisions in ARL Libraries is variable from library to library and within individual libraries. Readiness to incorporate assessment data into decision-making processes appears to be a function of leadership, need for information, interest in assessment as a decision making tool, organizational culture, as well as institutional pressures.

Library directors believe the most important thing we need to do today is learn how to measure our impact. Assessment is about measuring our impact and then telling that story. Assessment often validates instincts. We need to learn how to tell our story effectively. One library director told me that she was able to inform the administration that on one busy day, over 11,000 people used the library. This is a good story. Another library was able to save over $70,000 in personnel costs and give back two positions to the university because they improved their book shelving processes. This is a good story.

As one director told me: "…you are better off; it seems to me, making decisions from information than no information."

**The Next Steps**
This paper reports the preliminary analysis of my data. I intend to use Atlas/Ti, a content analysis program to further analyze the transcribed interviews for both the directors and the cabinet level administrators. I will also tabulate and analyze the two surveys that my respondents completed.

**Notes**
1. Since that time she has joined Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., as vice president and deputy director in the Surveys and Information Services Division. http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/Press%20Releases/ballou.htm.

2. You might recall that there was a publication by Grace Anne De Candido a few years ago that asked that a similar question in regard to library surveys. Grace Anne A. DeCandido, *Issues and Innovations in after the User Survey, What Then?* Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, Office of Management Services, 1997.

3. Francine M. DeFranco, "Library Users Tell Us What They Think." *UCONNLibraries* 8 (2): 1+.

4. Brinley Franklin and Francine M. DeFranco. "Researchers Polled on Changing Library Use Patterns" UCONNLibraries 8 (2): 2.

5. See their web pages on assessment at: UW Libraries Assessment http://www.lib.washington.edu/surveys/

6. http://www.lib.virginia.edu/mis/reports/index.html.

7. http://www.lib.virginia.edu/bsc/.

8. Steve Hiller. "Assessing User Needs, Satisfaction, and Library Performance at the University of Washington Libraries." *Library Trends* 49(4):605–25.