Assessment Programs: A Continuous and Iterative Cycle of Improvement

Nisa Bakkalbasi, Assessment Coordinator at Columbia University Libraries and enthusiastic proponent of assessment, discusses how an effective program impacts decision making and user-focused design within a major academic library system.

INITIATING AN ASSESSMENT PROGRAM AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

In the past decade, the interest in library assessment has expanded greatly—particularly as a method to gather evidence and context for strategic planning, priority setting, and decision-making. As has been the case with our counterparts across the nation, assessment of the quality and effectiveness of services and collections has grown exponentially at Columbia University Libraries. Although libraries of all kinds have been collecting data and looking at how well they are serving their users for a considerably long time, the presence of staff or units that are primarily responsible for assessment activities are recent.

Service driven and user centered, Columbia University Libraries began formal assessment efforts by creating an Assessment & Marketing Librarian position in 2006, moving to a full-time Assessment & Planning Librarian position in 2011. There was a real need to have a full-time person dedicated to these efforts as assessment projects grew in number and complexity and reliance on data-driven decision making for planning and service improvement evolved over time.

SURMOUNTING THE CHALLENGES, GATHERING DATA FOR A ROBUST ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

An intrinsic challenge is that responsibility and authority for assessment activities are distributed across units, while coordination of these tasks rests with a single full-time librarian. A wide variety of research methods and techniques are used, and the areas being assessed are as varied as the methods used.

In a large and decentralized organization with diverse projects and methodologies,

“...”

staff engaged in assessment activities may not have the skills to effectively apply diverse methodologies or the time to gather appropriate and accurate evidence to inform data-driven decision making.

As the program has progressed, the library staff is increasingly enthusiastic and interested in participating, thereby creating an environment conducive to a shift from a project-based approach to a programmatic approach in assessment.

ESTABLISHING CLEARLY DEFINED OBJECTIVES AND IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT

The fundamental questions for any assessment project are what do we need to know, how are we going to gather data to answer those questions, and what are we going to do once we have that information.

Once we develop the framework to address these questions, directly linked to organizational goals, this is how our process typically works:

- Customize the tools, resources, and methodologies – Our tools include surveys, usability testing, observation studies, wayfinding study, quantitative analysis, interviews and focus groups, specifically tailored to meet project goals and objectives (commercial tools like SPSS, nVivo, and Silverback Usability used when appropriate).

- Gather data from multiple sources – Data from the swipe access system, COUNTER usage, Google Analytics, Twitter, Facebook, user data from surveys and focus groups, and other sources are compiled.

- Evaluate and interpret data – Our goal is to present meaningful and significant conclusions that stakeholders can understand and use.

- Communicate the value of findings – Promoting information transparency is extremely important. A comprehensive report that documents the key findings, methodology, and recommendations is distributed up, down, and across the organization and communicated via presentations to stakeholder groups. Representatives from these groups are asked to contribute to the discussion.


Nisa Bakkalbasi is the Assessment Coordinator at Columbia University Libraries. Prior to joining Columbia University, Nisa served as the Director of Planning and Assessment at James Madison University, and previously headed Electronic Collections at Yale University Libraries. She holds an MS in Applied Statistics, an MS in Library and Information Science from Long Island University, and a BA in Mathematics, from University of Alabama.

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5 GOALS OF AN EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

1. Enable Data-Driven Decision Making
2. Support Strategic Initiatives Through Assessment
3. Promote and Sustain a Culture of Assessment
4. Disseminate Research Results and Promote Information Transparency
5. Engage with Professional Community and Association

and recommendation sections, making the results more likely to be used.

- **Implement key findings from research results** – Because all activities are initially designed to support the libraries’ strategic initiatives, key findings are typically implemented by administrators and managers throughout the organization.

- **Connecting the results to planning** – Assessment is a continuous cycle that begins with establishing clearly defined objectives that are mapped to the strategic planning document. Once the initial cycle has been completed, the knowledge and information that has been gained through the implementation process can be used to improve the assessment plan prior to the next cycle.

**Assessing Assessment** – Several indicators, most importantly integration, help us measure the success of our initiatives. When the results of our assessment projects lead to improvement, we have achieved a measure of success.

**BECOMING AN ASSESSMENT LIBRARIAN**

While there are no formal assessment librarian programs available (yet), formal training or experience with quantitative and qualitative assessment methodologies and their application in academic libraries and knowledge of statistical software tools are very helpful. An effective assessment librarian needs strong communication and project management skills, and above all, be an enthusiastic facilitator and motivator.

PASSING ALONG A FEW WORDS OF ADVICE TO COLLEAGUES PLANNING SIMILAR PROGRAMS

I can sum it up in a single word: Commitment! It can take what seems like some long years before an assessment program matures and its benefits are recognized and broadly accepted. Accept feedback and criticism with grace.

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