

PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
2008 LIBRARY ASSESSMENT CONFERENCE  
BUILDING EFFECTIVE, SUSTAINABLE, PRACTICAL ASSESSMENT

AUGUST 4-7, 2008

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

EDITED BY

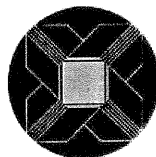
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# Assessment Cycle or Circular File: Do Academic Librarians Use Information Literacy Assessment Data?

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## Abstract

Academic librarians design and implement information literacy assessments, but do they use their assessment results? This survey-based study explores the degree to which academic librarians assess information literacy, produce assessment data, and use results to achieve the purposes of information literacy assessment. It identifies numerous barriers that impede librarians progress throughout the assessment process including too little time and too few resources, difficulties understanding of assessment and how to produce and use results, a need for centralized support of assessment activities and increased campus collaboration, and a lack of assessment tools that adequately measure information literacy and provide detail descriptions of student skills. Finally, areas for supporting librarians who seek to overcome these assessment barriers are suggested.

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, academic librarians have become increasingly aware of the need to assess student information literacy skills for a number of purposes including:

- To increase student learning;
- To improve instruction;
- To collaborate with faculty;
- To collaborate with other librarians;
- To provide data for accountability measures such as accreditation or program review;
- To argue for increased resources; and
- To inform future assessment efforts.

Librarians have responded to the growing need for assessment by designing and implementing surveys, tests, performance assessments (such as research paper bibliography and portfolio evaluation), and Classroom Assessment

Techniques.<sup>1</sup> The literature of information literacy instruction is rife with allusions to such assessments; however, the use of assessment results to achieve these purposes is less apparent.<sup>2</sup> One might conclude (1) that academic librarians do not possess the results of their assessments; (2) that they possess assessment results, but do not use them; or (3) that they both have and use assessment results, but do not include them in their publications. If librarians do not have assessment results, or have them but do not use them, then that begs the question, "What barriers interfere with academic librarians' ability to obtain or use information literacy assessment results?" Only by understanding these barriers will librarians be able to address and overcome their challenges and so, in an effort to answer this central question, the present study was conducted to investigate seven research questions:

1. Do academic librarians assess information literacy skills?
2. If they do not assess information literacy skills, why not?
3. If they assess information literacy skills, do they possess information literacy assessment results?
4. If they do not possess assessment results, why not?
5. If they possess assessment results, do they use them?
6. If they do not use assessment results, why not?
7. If they use assessment results, how do they use them?

## Literature Review

Academic librarians are not the first in academia to struggle with assessment; faculty and student support professionals have also confronted significant challenges. An examination of the barriers encountered by faculty and student

support services provides a useful list of difficulties librarians might face.

Academic faculty often cite three major barriers to assessment: time, resources, and lack of understanding of assessment.<sup>3</sup> Student support professionals report four additional challenges: lack of understanding of student learning theory; lack of collaboration with others, especially faculty; lack of trust; and difficulty managing expectations.<sup>4</sup>

Lack of time and resources appears to be a universal challenge to assessment processes. Faculty and student support professionals state that the time required for assessment often comes at the cost of time spent doing the activity that will be assessed. They report difficulty in balancing competing time commitments and reallocating time from one job responsibility to another.<sup>5</sup> Other resources in short supply include funding, staff time, and professional development opportunities<sup>6</sup>; a lack of any of these resources presents a barrier to assessment.

Another barrier to assessment is lack of knowledge. Faculty and student support professionals who feel that they are not competent are unlikely to engage rigorously in assessment processes.<sup>7</sup> Lack of knowledge can result in anxiety or even fear—fear that assessments will reveal personal incompetence or program failures.<sup>8</sup> These barriers are exacerbated when combined with a lack of time, resources, or process coordination.

The assessment process requires coordination as well; when that coordination is missing, it becomes an additional barrier for faculty and student support professionals. In academia, assessment coordinators and committees are necessary for shepherding assessment processes and creating an organizational culture and framework that values and supports assessment work. The presence of assessment coordinators and committees also signals an institutional commitment to assessment.<sup>9</sup>

A lack of conceptual framework for assessment presents one more challenge to assessment.<sup>10</sup> On many campuses, assessment is traditionally tied to measures of student satisfaction rather than student learning. In order to move forward with outcomes-based assessment of student learning, the historical link between assessment and satisfaction must be minimized and replaced with a conceptual understanding of assessment as an examination of student learning. Furthermore, the role of faculty and student support professionals in assessing student learning needs to be clarified, especially

their roles in large-scale accreditation and program review.<sup>11</sup> This is particularly true for student support personnel, who may be viewed as secondary or “auxiliary” by faculty, rather than as true partners in the assessment of student learning.<sup>12</sup>

Lack of trust and difficulty managing expectations round out the major barriers to assessment for student support professionals. Some student support professionals report anxiety about who might view assessment results and how the results might be used; others are concerned about the continuation of programs and positions in the face of negative assessment results.<sup>13</sup> The final barrier for student support professionals who conduct assessment is the challenge of managing expectations. For example, student support professionals are concerned about a possible disconnect between what they expect students to learn and what they can be expected to teach and measure. They also report concerns about the rigor with which they can embrace assessment, the amount of descriptive detail available in assessment data, and their ability to report and document results.<sup>14</sup>

While much is known about the barriers to assessment confronted by faculty and student support professionals, no previous systematic research has been undertaken to examine the barriers facing academic librarians. The present study seeks to begin to rectify this omission.

## Methodology

This study employed a survey methodology. A twelve-question multiple-choice survey was distributed via two professional listservs. First, the survey was sent to the ACRL Institute for Information Literacy Instruction Alumni listserv. Members of this listserv have attended a rigorous 5-day program that covers the pedagogy and assessment of information literacy instruction.<sup>15</sup> Second, the survey was also shared via the Information Literacy Instruction listserv (ILI-L), an open list for reference and instruction librarians at community college, college, and university libraries and others interested in information literacy and instruction. Participation in the survey was voluntary; those who wished to respond clicked a link in the listserv message and were forwarded to the online survey.

Over two weeks, 437 volunteers participated in the survey, and 84% completed it (n=365). Ninety-eight percent of respondents were academic

librarians, and 96% conduct information literacy instruction. Thirty-five percent also supervise librarians who provide information literacy instruction. Years of experience varied: 31% had been a librarian for 0-5 years, 21% for 6-10 years, 14% for 11-15 years, 9% for 16-20 years, and 24% for more 20 years.

## Results

### Do Academic Librarians Assess Information Literacy Skills?

Seventy-six percent of survey participants (n=332) reported that they assess information literacy skills, a result that is gratifying. It should be noted, however, that this number may be inflated due to the participation of Immersion alumni. Even so, nearly a quarter of participants responded that they do not assess information literacy skills. Those that do not assess information literacy skills cited a number of barriers to assessment.

Lack of time is a significant barrier for librarians who do not conduct information literacy assessment (n=105). Of those who indicated that they faced assessment barriers (n=72), 26% stated that they spend their work time on other responsibilities and 21% were unsure how to reallocate their work time to accommodate assessment. Lack of resources is another important barrier. Twenty-nine percent stated that they have insufficient staff to conduct information literacy assessment, and 19% said other library services monopolize available resources. Lack of knowledge about assessment is a problem area as well. Twenty-one percent said their understanding or expertise in assessment was limited. Seventeen percent were concerned that they were not competent in assessment, 15% don't know how to select and implement assessment tools, and 14% don't know how to analyze assessment data. Librarians also felt a lack of a coordinated assessment process was a problem. Twenty-nine percent cited the lack of centralized support and/or commitment for assessment as a barrier. Twenty-two percent noted the lack of an assessment coordinator, and 15% mentioned the lack of an assessment committee. Eighteen percent stated that assessment was not valued by their library. Some librarians felt a lack of conceptual framework for assessment was problematic. Eighteen percent said it was difficult to integrate with college-wide assessment efforts and 17% reported difficulty in understanding librarian's role in assessing learning. Furthermore, 21% librarians cited lack of faculty

collaboration as a barrier to assessing information literacy. Nineteen percent stated that faculty consider the library an auxiliary service and 11% said faculty will not collaborate with librarians at all. Finally, 17% of respondents who do not assess information literacy said that available assessment tools don't adequately measure information literacy. In conclusion, librarians who do not assess information literacy need:

- More time or help reallocating their time;
- More staff;
- Greater understanding of information literacy assessment;
- Centralized support and/or a coordinator of assessment; and
- Increased faculty involvement.

### Do Academic Librarians Who Assess Information Literacy Skills Have Results of Those Assessments?

Eighty-six percent of librarians (n=276) who conduct information literacy assessment have results and 14% (n=46) do not. Those librarians who conduct assessments and do not possess the results of those assessments but who indicated reasons why (n=29) cite numerous barriers. Lack of time is a significant barrier for these librarians; 31% stated that they spend their work time on duties other than producing assessment results. Twenty-four percent don't have time for the added responsibility of producing assessment results, and 21% are unsure how to reallocate their time to make room for these duties. In addition to time limitations, these librarians do not feel they have sufficient resources. Twenty-four percent do not have the necessary staff to produce assessment results, and 10% stated that they would not be rewarded for the production of assessment results. Thirty-one percent said they have limited expertise or understanding of how to produce assessment results and 14% don't know how to select or implement tools to support the process. Librarians also say that lack of a coordination of the assessment result production process is a barrier. Twenty-four percent say that there is no centralized support and/or commitment for producing assessment results. Ten percent cite a lack of assessment coordinator, assessment committee, and institutional support as problem areas. Seventeen percent say it is difficult to integrate with college-wide assessment efforts and faculty involvement is limited. Indeed, 24% say that faculty do not collaborate with librarians or vice versa. Finally,

31% of librarians who do not have information literacy assessment results say that available assessment tools do not adequately measure information literacy skills, and 17% say the results of these tools do not provide an adequate level of detail. As a result, librarians who assess information literacy, but who do not possess assessment results require:

- More time or help reallocating their time or responsibilities;
- More staff;
- Greater understanding of how to produce assessment results;
- Centralized support for producing assessment results;
- Increased faculty collaboration in producing assessment results; and
- Assessment results that adequately measure or describe student information literacy skills.

#### **Do Academic Librarians Who Have Assessment Results Use Them?**

Eighty-two percent of librarians who have assessment results have used them (n=228) but 17% have not (n=48). According to the librarians that have, but do not use, assessment data (n=40), several barriers impede their progress. Time is a major problem for these librarians; 45% say they spend their time on other work responsibilities, 25% don't have time for the added responsibility of using assessment results, and 18% are unsure how to reallocate their time. Similarly, lack of resources is a barrier. Fifteen percent state that they lack the budget, professional development opportunities, and staff required to use assessment data. Fifteen percent also say they won't be rewarded for using assessment data, and that other library services and priorities monopolize available resources. Lack of knowledge is a problem for many librarians who do not use their assessment results; 40% say they have limited knowledge in this area, and 33% don't know how to select and implement tools for using assessment results. A lack of a coordinated assessment process also is a challenge. Twenty-eight percent report a lack of centralized support and/or commitment for use of assessment results. Fifteen percent and 13% feel the use of assessment results is not valued on their campus or by their library, respectively. Ten percent cite the lack of an assessment coordinator as a barrier, and 13% say the same of an assessment committee. The lack of a conceptual framework for assessment is a significant difficulty for this group of librarians too.

Thirty-five percent find it hard to grasp the expectations for using assessment results, and 28% say it is hard to understand the librarian's role in using assessment results. Thirty-three percent state that it's difficult to integrate the use of assessment results with college-wide assessment efforts. Faculty collaboration is a challenge as well. Thirty percent of respondents believe that faculty do not collaborate with librarians, and 28% feel that faculty collaboration is limited. Interestingly, a large number of librarians who do not use assessment results state that their results can't be used because they do not adequately measure (48%) or describe (40%) student information literacy skills. The librarians in this category indicate that, in order to use assessment results, they need:

- More time;
- Increased training in how to use assessment results as well as how to select/implement tools for using results;
- Centralized support for using results;
- Clearer expectations for using results (especially librarians' role in the process);
- Increased faculty collaboration and methods for integrating with campus-wide assessment efforts; and
- Assessments that adequately measure and describe student information literacy skills.

Happily, 83% (n=228) of survey respondents assess information literacy skills, have results, and use those results. In the group that indicated how they use their results (n=225), 96% of librarians report that they use information literacy assessment data to improve instruction and 73% to increase student learning. Fifty-eight percent use the results to inform future assessment efforts, and 52% use the results to respond to calls for accountability. Assessment results are also used to collaborate with others. Half of the librarians who used assessment data employed it to collaborate with faculty, and 36% used it to collaborate with other librarians. The least mentioned use of assessment results was to argue for increased resources; only 20% of librarians leveraged assessment results for this purpose.

#### **Discussion**

This study is the first to examine the barriers confronted by academic librarians who seek to assess student information literacy skills; future research will be required to learn more about each challenge librarians face. Even so, this study reveals

two broad areas that must be addressed in order to support librarians who strive to overcome assessment barriers: (1) education and prioritization and (2) coordination and collaboration.

### Education and Prioritization

First, librarians and library administrators need to be educated about the challenges of information literacy assessment. Librarians require additional training about information literacy assessment in general. This training may take the form of professional development opportunities, immersion in assessment literature, or consultant visits.<sup>16</sup> Librarians also need to become familiar with the tools available for assessing information literacy (adequately and in detail), producing assessment results, and putting those results to use. Library administrators need to be informed of the time and resources required for information literacy assessment—not only for the assessment itself, but also for producing and using results—so that they can rearrange priorities and allocate both materials and personnel to facilitate the assessment process. Additionally, librarians and library administrators need to establish a common language, agree upon a conceptual framework for assessment, and clarify the roles and expectations of librarians who conduct assessments, produce results, and use those results for a variety of purposes.

### Coordination and Collaboration

Second, librarians need to coordinate of the assessment process and collaborate with others—including faculty and other librarians. Librarians should coordinate assessment efforts both within the library and across the overall institution. The addition of a library assessment committee and/or assessment coordinator provides a source of both expertise and organizational structure. Furthermore, librarians need to integrate their assessment efforts with campus-wide structures and personnel. Information literacy assessment is student learning assessment. Consequently, aligning information literacy assessment with other institutional learning assessments will help both the library and the overall campus to achieve their assessment purposes.

### Conclusion

Do academic librarians use information literacy assessment data? Certainly, many do. However, librarians who do not conduct information literacy assessment, conduct assessment but do not produce

data, or produce data but do not use it face similar challenges: too little time and too few resources; difficulties understanding of assessment and how to produce and use results; a need for centralized support of assessment activities and increased campus collaboration, and a lack of assessment tools that adequately measure information literacy and provide detail descriptions of student skills. Although additional investigation of these barriers is merited, initial findings suggest that academic librarians require assistance in four areas—education, prioritization, coordination, and collaboration—to overcome these barriers and successfully achieve the purpose of information literacy assessment.

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### Endnotes

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