Assessment Management Systems: Questions to Spark Librarian Engagement

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In recent years, ever-increasing demands for accountability have had an impact on all sectors of higher education. As a result, assessment has become central to the work of higher education institutions nationwide. Initially, many institutions scrambled to gather whatever assessment data they could find, and the handling of that data was somewhat haphazard. Now, institutions recognize that assessment data must be carefully collected, stored, organized, analyzed, communicated, and acted upon. To achieve this goal, many institutions purchase assessment management systems (AMSs). Librarians, who might otherwise be stymied in their efforts to participate in campus-wide assessment initiatives, can leverage their selection skills to help their institutions choose an AMS. Indeed, the selection of an AMS "remains one of the most difficult decisions facing assessment professionals and faculty" (RiCharde, 2009, p. 51). In contrast to many higher education professionals, librarians are experienced selectors and can provide valuable input to their institutions on the identification and evaluation of AMSs. Likewise, librarians can participate in the use of AMSs as fully as other faculty and professionals on campus. The *Value of Academic Libraries Report* highlighted the need for librarians to learn more about these systems and get involved in using them (Oakleaf, 2010, p. 45), and a number of libraries have reported that they are using institutional AMSs to track assessment of student learning outcomes (Oakleaf, Belanger, & Graham, 2013, pp. 9–10). However, many librarians are just starting to learn ways in which they can use AMSs to collect, manage, and report library data. Librarians may not be sure how to begin investigating AMSs or get involved in campus-wide AMS conversations. To this end, we offer some initial, practical questions that may help librarians engage in AMS exploration.

Why use an AMS?

AMSs enable faculty, librarians, and other higher education professionals to "design, document, and report assessments" (Oakleaf, 2011, p. 76). In addition to the ability to collect, manage, and report on assessment data, many systems now support activities such as curriculum mapping, strategic planning, and accreditation reporting. Multiple commercial systems are now available, but some institutions have also developed their own homegrown systems. Either way, AMSs provide librarians with a number of benefits: the opportunity to document and improve student learning related to information literacy skills; greater visibility of the library's assessment efforts alongside those of other departments and units on campus; the chance to align library outcomes and strategic plans to those of the wider institution; and the ability to demonstrate how

the library has an impact on those institutional outcomes and contributes to overall institutional and student success (Oakleaf, Belanger, & Graham, 2013, pp. 10–11).

Despite the many potential benefits for libraries, librarians may feel daunted by the prospect of getting involved in decisions and discussions about their institution's AMS. AMS conversations often occur at a high level (amongst institutional researchers or other assessment leaders on campus), and as a result, librarians may or may not be involved in the process of implementing a system, especially if their library is relatively new to assessment activities. However, librarians can "start small" (McCann, 2010, p. 816; Oakleaf, Belanger, & Graham, 2013, p. 14) and begin by asking exploratory questions that can lead to greater understanding of, and involvement in, the use of an AMS.

Does my institution use an AMS?

This is a relatively simple question, but finding the answer may not be straightforward. Librarians can learn more about AMSs at their institutions by interviewing institutional researchers and other individuals responsible for assessment on their campuses. Librarians can also consult vendor websites for a list of institutions using a particular commercial system, and then follow up with assessment professionals on their campus. Asking institutional researchers and other assessment professionals questions about AMSs can help librarians determine whether their college or university has an AMS (and, if so, which one) and connect library assessment efforts more meaningfully to institutional assessment initiatives. Librarians who actively use their institution's AMS report that these conversations result in stronger partnerships with assessment officers and other units on campus (Oakleaf, Belanger, & Graham, 2013, p. 11).

What if the Answer is "No"?

Even if an institution does not currently use an AMS, librarians can follow up with additional questions and conversation starters, such as:

- If my institution is not using an AMS, are there plans to select one?
- How can the library participate in discussions about the need for an AMS and the process of evaluating systems for adoption?
- What does my institution need an AMS to be able to do, and which AMS would best fit these needs?

While AMS decision-making often occurs at an institutional level, librarians can participate in campus discussions by educating themselves about AMS features and how these features help achieve institutional goals and outcomes. Our recent paper at the ACRL National Conference discussed selection criteria and key features of assessment management systems in order to provide librarians with a deeper

understanding of AMS capabilities. There are a number of key criteria librarians should consider when participating in discussions about the adoption of an AMS, or when thinking about how to use a system effectively:

- cost
- ease of use
- interactivity
- assessment ability
- outcomes alignment
- repository capacity
- data management
- system integration
- support services
- internal reporting
- accreditation reporting
- action-taking support (Oakleaf, Belanger, & Graham, 2013, pp. 8–9).

Librarians equipped with an understanding of the main features, benefits, and challenges involved in in using an AMS may feel more confident in their ability to participate in discussions about these systems on their campuses. Librarians can also ask questions about what they—and their institutions—need a system to do (RiCharde, 2009, p. 53; Oakleaf, 2012, p. 47). For example, librarians can use the *Academic Library Value Impact Starter Kit* (p. 47) with colleagues within and outside of the library to define the AMS features they require. Armed with this list of features, librarians can help their institutions identify a commercial AMS or a homegrown option that can meet these needs.

What steps can the library take to manage assessment data?

If an institution does not currently have an AMS, libraries can consider adopting an open source tool, like Zoho or WASSAIL. UW Libraries have recently begun piloting the use of WASSAIL, which was developed by Augustana Library at the University of Alberta. WASSAIL was initially created to "manage question and response data from the Augustana Library's library instruction sessions, pre- and post-tests from credit-bearing information literacy (IL) courses, and user surveys," but has "expanded beyond its original function and is being used to manage question and response data from a variety of settings" (University of Alberta Libraries, 2012). In a perfect world, libraries would always be included in their institution's enterprise-level system. In the real world, a homegrown or open-source system may be a practical option enabling librarians to collect, organize, and report library assessment data. Using a library-based system,

librarians can initiate processes for managing assessment activities and position themselves to take full advantage of an institutional AMS if or when one is adopted.

How can libraries prepare to use an AMS?

Whether or not an institution currently has an AMS, librarians can use the following questions to prepare for assessment data collection and reporting on an institutional level.

- Does the library have stated outcomes and an assessment plan?
- How can librarians connect library outcomes, assessments, and strategic plans to those of their institutions?

While AMSs aid librarians and other educators in their assessment work, they are not "magic bullets". Libraries and their institutions must still do the work of "identifying course and program goals, making judgments about student progress, and using information to improve learning" (Hutchings, 2009, p. 30). To take full advantage of an AMS's capabilities for collecting, managing, and reporting assessment data, librarians need to develop outcomes (including information literacy outcomes) and an assessment plan. Although AMSs can help librarians assess student learning outcomes, librarians need to do the work of defining outcomes and entering them into the system. Librarians can also map library outcomes, assessments, and strategic plans to the outcomes, assessments, strategic documents, and standards of academic departments, co-curricular programs, institutional initiatives, and accrediting organizations. While an AMS is a powerful tool for making connections between outcomes both within and across departments or units, librarians can begin this alignment work in the absence of an AMS. For example, librarians can generate impact maps or use curriculum mapping to demonstrate how the library's instruction activities intersect with broader campus goals and outcomes (Oakleaf, 2011, p. 67–68).

(How) Can I use the system?

If librarians discover that their institutions use AMSs, an additional set of questions can help them engage the system effectively.

- Can the library gain permission to access the system?
- Are other units on campus using the system? How are they using it?
- How can I generate interest in using the system among my librarian colleagues?

Permissions

AMSs are "typically organized around a tree structure based first on organizational units (programs, departments, schools, or the entire institution), then on the goals and/or

outcomes of those units… Permission setting allows different AMS users to access distinct system areas, to reveal either data for large-scale results across programs, or to protect information entered by individuals" (Oakleaf, 2011, pp. 76-77). Initially, librarians may find that they have limited (or no) ability to access the AMS. Permissions are often set up by system administrators, who may or may not be aware of how librarians wish to use the system. Librarians can request access to the AMS on a broad or limited basis. For example, the library could be set up as a distinct "unit" within the AMS, and key individuals—such as the library director, head of instruction, and assessment coordinator—can be authorized to use it. Even a limited form of access enables librarians to explore the capabilities of the system. Once the library demonstrates effective AMS usage, librarians can advocate for expanded permissions to the system. Librarians may also benefit from determining whether other non-academic units on campus are using the AMS. Lastly, librarians can learn about how teaching faculty use the system and seek opportunities to work with academic departments on collaborative information literacy assessments within the AMS.

How do I get buy-in from my librarian colleagues?

McCann's case study of teaching faculty use of an AMS at one university indicated a number of barriers to the adoption of the system. Factors that stymied AMS adoption included: the AMS was "not viewed as relevant to teaching or a tool for improvement"; faculty were "too busy to engage in [AMS] work"; faculty felt "uncomfortable with being evaluated"; faculty "believed they were already doing a good job of assessment"; and they "did not feel responsible for departmental, college or campus assessment efforts" (McCann, 2010, p. 814). Many of these challenges may resonate with librarians, and the question of librarian buy-in for an AMS will be intertwined with the overall culture of assessment within a library. However, McCann recommends strategies for increasing faculty AMS adoption that may also work with librarians: have a single leader responsible for assessment (but who acts with the support of other senior leaders); start with a pilot project; provide hands-on training; communicate the results and impact of using the system and of how assessment results are being used; allow faculty and others to try the system without the fear of needing to use it perfectly; and, lastly, encourage conversations about assessment and how results can be used for improvement (McCann, 2010, pp. 815–817).

Conclusion

Librarians can reap significant benefits from using an AMS to collect, manage, and report on assessment data. If their institution does not have an AMS, librarians can be key partners in the process of identifying, selecting, evaluating, and adopting a system. For those librarians at institutions with AMSs, these questions may serve as a starting point for engagement with the system. As more and more librarians engage with AMSs,

we encourage them to share their experiences with the profession via publications and presentations. We look forward to learning how librarians use these powerful tools for library and institutional assessments!

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