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METRICS

Building the Assessment Librarian Guildhall: Criteria and Skills for Quality Assessment

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Keeping up on the “latest and greatest” in library assessment isn’t easy. Basic strategies for being in-the-know include scanning the professional literature or attending conferences. Professional journals like the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *College & Research Libraries*, and *portal: Libraries and the Academy* are great venues for library assessment publications, and the Library Assessment Conference (LAC) is arguably the best professional meeting for learning about current assessment projects taking place in academic libraries nationwide. A few months ago, as an attendee at my fourth LAC, I was excited to note the increase in attendance at this conference, both in the variety of librarian roles represented and in the total number of participants. This growth indicates that a community of “assessment librarians” (or librarians who engage in assessment) is fast developing in academic libraries.

THE LIBRARY ASSESSMENT GUILD

In his LAC keynote titled “Living in the Cloud: Who Owns It, Who Pays for It, Who Keeps it Safe, and Will My Kids Inherit the Wind,” John Lombardi (former president of the University of Florida and the Louisiana State University system as well as past chancellor of University of Massachusetts—Amherst) described higher education as a “guild” structure in which faculty communities form the core of the institution. There are history guilds, biology guilds, and art guilds with each guild

“defin[ing] itself in terms of the intellectual methodology that its members apply to their field of study.... The guild’s definition of standards based on these methods and the evaluation of quality based on the standards are what define the guild’s responsibility. Members of the guild must meet these academic and methodological standards, or the guild will not recognize the validity of their work. As has been the case for all guilds since medieval times, the methodological standards guarantee that the members’ products meet guild criteria” (Lombardi, Craig, Capaldi, Gater, & Mendonça, 2001, p. 5).

At LAC, Lombardi’s comments were limited to disciplinary teaching and research faculty; he did not mention a “librarian guild” or an “assessment guild” in his keynote. Even so, his talk inspired me to think about potential quality criteria for our burgeoning library assessment guild. His remarks framed my thinking about the rest of

the conference; I set out to capture a sense of the current quality criteria developing in the library assessment community. By the end of the conference, I noted three overarching quality criteria that may guide library assessment guild practices: 1) an emphasis on value, 2) the use of the “right” tools and data, and 3) the generation of decisions, actions, and communications based on assessment results. Certainly, this is a short and simple list, and I do not intend it to be exhaustive or prescriptive. I offer it only as a means to begin a discussion amongst our guild members about what indicators, themes, or standards we may use to guide our pursuit of quality library assessment.

EMPHASIZE VALUE

Increasingly, compelling library assessment focuses on the existing and potential value of academic libraries. Academic library value, in this context, is derived from the degree of alignment between the library services, expertise, and resources and an institution’s focus areas (Oakleaf, 2012a). Quality library assessments that fit this criterion investigate the ways in which library services, expertise, and resources (e.g., instruction, reference, data curation, collections, facilities) *impact, contribute to, affect, influence, relate to, cause, determine, or help* an institution achieve its focus areas (e.g., strategic priorities, missions, financial resources or commitments, and stakeholder needs) (Oakleaf, 2012b). Institutional focus areas might include:

- Student recruitment
- Student retention, completion, graduation
- Student career success
- Student grades, test achievement
- Student learning outcomes
- Student experience, engagement
- Student–faculty academic rapport
- Alumni lifelong learning
- Faculty recruitment
- Faculty tenure, promotion
- Faculty teaching
- Faculty service
- Faculty research productivity
- Faculty grant seeking
- Faculty patents, technology transfer
- Faculty innovation, entrepreneurship
- Institutional prestige
- Institutional affordability

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- Institutional efficiencies
- Institutional accreditation, program review
- Institutional brand
- Institutional athletics
- Institutional development, funding, endowments
- Local, global workforce development
- Local, global economic growth
- Local, global engagement, community building, social inclusion
- And so on (Oakleaf, 2012a).

According to this “library value” criterion, quality library assessment 1) focuses on measures and methods, 2) uses appropriate assessment designs (i.e., longitudinal, cohort, control, sampling, etc.), 3) employs or generates evidence and data, 4) involves partners, collaborators, and stakeholders, 5) seeks funding, and 6) disseminates results—all to provide actionable information about the connections between libraries and areas of institutional focus in an effort to demonstrate library value. A great example of this criterion shared at LAC is the University of Minnesota Libraries’ investigation of connections between library use and academic achievement and retention. At LAC, this work won recognition in the form of a poster titled, “Making Use of What You are Already Collecting”; it is also due to be published in article format soon (Soria, Franssen, & Nackerud, 2013).

USE THE “RIGHT” TOOLS & DATA

For the second library assessment guild criterion, the focus is three-fold. First, using the “right” tools and data means ensuring a good match between 1) the assessment strategy or evidence and 2) a given assessment purpose, need, or question. For example, librarians may seek to investigate potential connections between user interactions with reference services and the acquisition of information literacy skills. In this case, user satisfaction or service quality surveys would not be the “right” tools to ascertain what users have or have not learned from their reference interactions, because users’ degree of satisfaction or perception of reference service quality are not valid, accurate, or direct measures of information literacy learning. Whenever possible, assessment tools and data should be fully integrated into the authentic experiences of both librarians and users. Ideally, assessment tools and data should not be add-ons or “afterthoughts” tacked on to librarian and user experiences after the fact.

Second, this criterion suggests that library assessment should be rigorous. In order to be rigorous, library assessments should utilize mixed methods, communicate limitations, and be subject to appropriate review. Librarians seeking assessment rigor should not attempt to rely on a single “perfect” tool or data source for a given project. Every strategy or evidence pool has flaws; the best way to combat the flaws of one approach is to use more than one approach. For this reason, the best study designs include mixed methods of assessment. For instance, librarians investigating the impact of library collections on faculty grant seeking could survey faculty about their perception of the role of library collections in grant proposal preparations, complete a content analysis of citations in completed grant proposals (funded, unfunded, or both), and conduct interviews with top grant-generating faculty. Other examples were presented at LAC in a concurrent session led by librarians at the University of Virginia, the University of Vermont, and the University of Nevada—Las Vegas as well as an “affinity lunch discussion” session; both events focused on the use of multiple method approaches to assessment. These triangulated approaches maximize the benefits and compensate for the weaknesses of any one tool or data source. Furthermore, whatever tool or data source is selected for a library assessment project, the limitations of the approach, tool, method, design, strategy, data source, etc. must be acknowledged. A detailed and accurate explanation of limitations—and the impact those limitations may have on the assessment results—is a strength of any study, not a weakness.

Anticipated limitations may be appropriate to include in documentation completed to ensure research ethics are followed (i.e., human subjects review), and final limitations should be clearly described to facilitate peer review of resulting publications and presentations.

Third, library assessment is most powerful when it embraces the use of specific, exact, individualized data. Academic library value and impact exist on an individual level. In other words, the difference that academic libraries make in the lives of users typically happens one user at a time. Consequently, the group-level data collected by many libraries is less useful than data that focuses on individual experiences and behaviors as well as the impact of those experiences and behaviors on the lives of individual users. Furthermore, while individual-level data can be aggregated, group data is generally very difficult to disaggregate. Thus, the collection of specific, exact, individualized data is critical to establish the quality of many library assessment studies.

GENERATE DECISIONS, ACTIONS, AND COMMUNICATIONS

Library assessments that do not lead to decisions, actions, and communications with stakeholders are not worth doing; therefore, the basic utility of library assessment deserves its own quality criterion. Assessment is, by nature, iterative and cyclical (Oakleaf, 2009, 2011). In each assessment cycle, some result is attained. Hopefully, the results are revealing, interesting, or even inspiring. Other times, the results may be confusing, faulty, redundant, or otherwise frustrating. Either way, assessment results should be used; results may help librarians decide to act in a variety of ways (e.g., make changes, generate improvements, maintain successes, increase or decrease services or resources, recommend actions to be taken by others, or improve subsequent assessments). They also should be clearly conveyed to all relevant stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, faculty, administrators, or other librarians) using shared language that is understandable to all. The importance of communicating assessment results was the focus of a concurrent session at LAC led by librarians at the University of Washington, the University of Virginia, and the Orbis Cascade Alliance as well as an “affinity lunch discussion” session. Ideally, the decisions, actions, and communications (quality criterion #3) resulting from rigorous assessment tools and data (quality criterion #2) help librarians to increase future academic library value (quality criterion #1).

GETTING IN THE GUILD

This listing of quality criteria for a library assessment guild raises an important question: What skills does an assessment librarian need in order to attain this level of quality and “get in the guild”? In the spirit of further inspiring brainstorming and conversation, I have gathered a list of skills for assessment librarians, divided into five areas: higher education awareness, institutional savvy, collaboration competency, data dexterity, and assessment ability (Oakleaf, 2012a).

HIGHER EDUCATION AWARENESS, INSTITUTIONAL SAVVY, & COLLABORATION COMPETENCY

Despite the fact that academic librarians work in organizations firmly situated in higher education institutions, many librarians acknowledge an insufficient knowledge of issues facing higher education in general and their institutions in particular. To be prepared for membership in an assessment guild, librarians need to be familiar with higher education accountability initiatives such as:

- Voluntary System of Accountability
- Voluntary Framework of Accountability
- Achieving the Dream
- University and College Accountability Network

- National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment
- Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes
- Liberal Education and America's Promise
- Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education
- New Leadership Alliance
- Bologna Process
- Tuning USA
- Or other initiatives.

In addition to these initiatives, librarians seeking membership in an assessment guild need to be familiar with the standards, guidelines, and practices followed in higher education accreditation processes (both regional and professional) and institutional program review. To participate fully in higher education assessments, librarians must understand, demonstrate, and articulate the role of the library within the focus areas of their institution. Furthermore, they can leverage the central role of the library on campus to break down disciplinary or other barriers that stand in the way of achieving institutional priorities. To achieve these goals, librarians need collaboration skills, including the ability to identify and approach new collaborative partnerships, establish a shared vocabulary with partners to emphasize mutual interests, and maintain and develop existing partnerships. When librarians function as a connecting force in institutional assessment, they increase the visibility and significance of the library within the contexts of their institution specifically and higher education generally.

DATA DEXTERITY

To meet the demands of library assessment guild membership, many librarians need to improve their data skills. Librarians need to be able to identify sources for library data housed in both library-owned and enterprise-level information systems. They need to understand the attributes of the data in these systems and, whenever possible, find ways to join or integrate distinct information systems campus-wide. They may need to identify, select, contribute to, or maintain assessment management systems owned by overarching institutions or distinct units within institutions. Librarians also need general data skills, such as:

- Identifying what data they need to respond library assessment needs
- Gathering and triangulating assessment data
- Analyzing assessment data to answer research questions
- Identifying possible correlative or causative data relationships
- Interpreting assessment results
- Understanding and describing the limitations of assessment results
- Formatting results data for communication to diverse stakeholder groups
- Using assessment results to make decisions and take actions to increase the value and impact of academic library services, expertise, and resources.

ASSESSMENT ABILITY

Finally, librarians seeking to build a library assessment guild need assessment abilities! Building the professional capacities of assessment

librarians is a challenging task—there is a lot to learn. First, librarians need to think in terms of outcomes. What outcomes are library services, expertise, and resources seeking to achieve? What difference do they make? What will users and stakeholders be able to do as a consequence of their library interactions? Stating library outcomes clearly, succinctly, and in measurable language is a fundamental assessment skill. Second, librarians need to align their efforts with the purposes, values, and theories that underpin higher education assessment, such as a focus on continuous improvement, reflective practice, evidence-based decision making, assessment for learning, etc. (Oakleaf, 2011). They must also follow ethical assessment practices, including proper procedures regarding human subjects review and privacy practices. Third, librarians need to articulate linkages between their assessment efforts and missions, visions, budgets, and other strategic documents at two levels: their libraries and their overarching institutions. Fourth, librarians need to develop the necessary skills to design assessment plans and projects effectively; select appropriate tools, models, techniques, and strategies; secure necessary resources for the projects; and use project management strategies and tools to see the projects through to fruition. And ultimately, librarians must be able to communicate the assessment results in ways tailored to the needs of stakeholders as well as make decisions and take action.

CONCLUSION

While Lombardi's description of higher education guilds was limited to disciplinary faculty communities, growing attendance at the Library Assessment Conference and increases in library assessment publications indicate that it may be time to develop a library assessment guild of our own. Guilds are defined by their quality criteria and skills. In order to develop the library assessment community, librarians need to discuss and decide on working criteria that will guide their practice, such as an emphasis on value, the use of the "right" tools and data, and the generation of decisions, actions, and communications based on assessment results. They also need to determine the skills that should be embraced and developed by guild members, like skills related to higher education awareness, institutional savvy, collaboration competency, data dexterity, and assessment ability. These standards and skills are a starting place for community conversation, ongoing dialogue, and—most importantly—action!

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