Tellin' Our Story—Or Not: Assessment Results on Academic Library Web Sites

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If a tree falls in the forest, unwitnessed, does it make a noise? If academic libraries perform well, improve, develop and implement new services, does anyone notice, besides the students, faculty and researchers who use those specific services? This brief review focuses on connecting stakeholders, library advocacy and library assessment. The term "assessment results" is used rather broadly here. Assessment usually means an institution is reviewing its performance with an eye toward benchmarking performance and making improvements. "Assessment results" is meant to convey that the results of this self-examination and the subsequent improvements in library performance are included in the information given about the library on its web site.

The current challenges faced by higher education and academic libraries have widened the circle of stakeholders, and have increased the importance of some of the stakeholders. Many librarians still feel that the students, faculty and researchers who use the campus library are to be given the highest priority. But the Boards of Trustees, politicians, donors to the library and to the institution, Friends of the Library, local businesses, campus neighbors, visiting researchers, and even local high school teachers and administrators may have more ability than they once had to influence library policies, funding, and activities. Campus units that may never have had anything to do with the library have become important stakeholders: the admissions office (they want the library to be part of the institution's competitive advantage in successfully recruiting prospective students), the campus business services office (they want the library coffee/snack shop pulling in as many extra dollars as possible) and even athletics (they may want special library classes and services for student athletes, and they at the very least want the appearance of a campus balance between scholarly pursuits and athletics).

In the current and future environment for libraries, library organizations and literature have been emphasizing the importance of library advocacy, asking librarians to move forward in a proactive way to make library successes and needs know to public officials and to stakeholders. An important part of successful advocacy is the power of narrative. The ability to effectively tell the library's story is essential. Author Alex Kotlowitz stated in an interview about school librarians, "I so strongly believe in the often fierce *power* of

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narrative. Stories do two things: they bring us places we otherwise might not venture, and they introduce us to people we otherwise might not meet."[1] He then encourages school librarians to use their power as the guardians of stories to maximize their influence on their stakeholders. That same fierce power of narrative should be a part of the advocacy for academic libraries. The results of library assessment should give power and credibility to that narrative. Mitch Freedman, former ALA president wrote, "We must *tell* the *story* of what we do and why it is so important…. O*ur* users can be *our* best advocates."[2] But they can advocate most effectively when they are armed with facts.

Library organizations and library literature have also emphasized the value of assessment in recent years. Some of the facts that can form the most crucial part of the library's story can be supplied by assessment. Amos Lakos writes that assessment "includes many components and prerequisites, among them is the need for libraries to be customer focused, outcomes and impact focused, and the need to act on what is examined, measured, and analyzed. The process of assessment needs to be systemic and become part of work…it would be unduly optimistic to say that a majority of libraries have developed such a culture (a culture of assessment). That sadly is not the case. This lack of a culture of assessment is most distressing since the advantages of using assessment as the foundation for decisions will benefit the library, the goals of the parent institution, and the expectations of its stakeholders—students, parents, faculty, employers, governments, and so on."[3] Workshops, tutorials, programs, books, articles and important initiatives such as the development of LibQUAL+ and the use of Balanced Scorecard for libraries have all striven to build a culture of assessment in libraries. But for many, it seems that assessment is regarded as an adjunct, rather than central, activity to the operation of the library. Assessment is performed during the process of reaffirmation of the institution's accreditation, or when an enthusiastic administrator take up the cause for a time, or when there is a perception that the library is not performing well: some regard assessment initiatives as a last resort effort. Some have felt that they cannot afford the time, the effort, or the learning curve for a routine program of assessment and continuous improvement.

Some types of information about library operations and achievements, such as usage statistics, can also be helpful in a narrative about the library. This data is collected routinely and when compared to previous periods of time or data from other institutions can demonstrate trends. To be most useful, analysis of these trends must be interpreted and explained for stakeholders. Is the library no longer relevant because reference statistics are declining? Perhaps not in the face of increasing downloads from databases and reference questions answered by instant messaging. But these statistics must be put into context and explained.

The most logical conveyance to stakeholders of this vital information would seem to be at the library's web site. If someone wanted to know about the library's performance, as well as about its physical facilities, services and history, he or she would most probably start with the web site. Many would rather find information about libraries on web sites than call the library for it. So that raises the question, how easy is it to find performance information, or results of assessment on academic library web sites? How much is the library used, and what are the learning outcomes associated with its use? What are the perceptions of faculty and student users?

To attempt to see if academic library web sites answer these questions, 250 academic library web sites were examined and scored with a rubric. Scoring (A, B, C and F) ranges from excellent for pages that had an intuitive path for access to current information that was interpreted and put into context for stakeholders, to F for pages with no access to any type of evaluative or measurement information.

A sample was drawn from the University of Texas at Austin's alphabetically arranged list of 2040 U.S. Universities. (U.S. colleges are included on the list.) Each institution on the list was given a number, beginning with 1 at the start of the alphabetical list, and ending with 2040 at the end of the list. A random number list was generated to draw the sample. Publicly-assisted institutions formed 44.6% of the sample, while private institutions included in the sample totaled 55.3%. 44.6% of the sample institutions were universities and 37.5% were colleges.; 17.85% were "other": art and music institutes and conservatories, service academies, theological /bible/seminary colleges.

Each institution was located by searching Google to arrive at the institution's front page and the library was located from there. Once on the library page, a

search for assessment, operational or evaluative information was begun. It was not expected that such information would appear on the front page, since the majority of visitors would be users looking for resources and services. Many libraries have a section called "About the Library", or "About Us". It was assumed that if there was not a direct link there to assessment information, there could be links to other documents containing the information, such as annual reports. Failing that, if a site index existed, it was browsed, and if a site search feature existed, it was searched. Items searched were assessment, evaluation, statistics, operating statistics, annual report, dean's or director's report, plan, strategic plan, goals, objectives, achievement, analysis, scorecard, balanced scorecard, LibQUAL+, summary, survey, facts. If those searches did not yield any information, departments or services such as circulation, interlibrary loan and reference were searched for information and/or statistics.

If the library's pages did not present any of this information, the institution's site search or site index are searched to see if there is an institutional assessment or reporting process in which the library participates. "Institutional research "is added to the above terms searched ; many institutions have a unit called institutional research that handles data about enrollment, student demographics and other statistical information.

Five percent of the academic libraries in the sample scored an A. A clear path led to information about the library's performance, often linked to an item on the web site called "About the Library". This might lead to annual reports, survey results, the full LibQUAL+ results, usage data, and trends. For a score of A, the information had to be interpreted and put into context. Summary information could appear with the raw data. The information is connected to goals, objectives, or the strategic plan to demonstrate progress in reaching the goals. How the information has been used is also presented, to show improvements in service. The information presented is current. They may be included in the institution's assessment or statistical reporting.

Sixteen percent of the academic libraries sampled received a B using the rubric. They also had an easy to follow path to the information. Statistics were presented, but may not be compared to previous years data or benchmarked against other groups of institutions or standards to put them into context. LibQUAL+ or

other survey results may be available for view without commentary or explanation. They may be included in the institution's assessment or statistical reporting.

Sixteen percent of the sampled libraries received a score of C using the rubric. They had some data or statistical information, reports linked to strategic plans, or survey information, but it was incomplete or not interpreted at all, and it was often out of date, i.e., the strategic plan timeline may have ended 3 years ago, or the balanced scorecard might be 4 years old. It may be that a key administrator left the library, and there is no continuity. They may be included in the institution's assessment or statistical reporting.

An astonishing 73 percent of the libraries sampled received an F. On the web sites of those libraries, not a single usage statistic or piece of evaluative information was presented. Searches of the institution's web sites did not turn up any information on the library's performance or operation either. It is entirely possible that this information appears on a web page, but it is not linked in any way to the site, and searching the site search or using the site index for both the library and the institution as described above did not reveal any of this information. It is probable that many of these libraries are collecting data internally and not posting it to the library's site. Annual reports and other documents are routinely created but are not posted publicly. One type of library in the sample, theological /bible/seminary colleges, did not post any of this information. But generalities cannot be made: one library in the sample, an ARL library at a public institution, received an F.

However, this is not to say that this is the case at all times. This review was performed in Fall semester. It was done over a two week period, so it is a "snapshot" taken of library pages at that time. Results would possibly vary if this had been conducted at a different time of the year. These libraries may issue reports in the spring prior to the end of the fiscal year. Some of the assessment initiatives are done in the spring; for example, many libraries administer the LibQUAL+ survey in the spring. It is possible that these libraries remove the results after a few months because it is no longer "current" enough for the web site.

Nonetheless, the percentage of libraries not sharing assessment information on their web sites was a surprise. All of the emphasis placed on assessment, the power of the narrative, and library advocacy by our profession's literature, conferences, and continu-

ing education may not be having the widespread effect that might be imagined. The title of this presentation ("Tellin'" rather than "Telling") reflects the cavalier attitude toward putting our story together and telling it. It is hoped that most of this information is shared directly with stakeholders, since it does not appear on the web site. It appears academic libraries have a long way to go in building a culture of assessment, and in fully tapping the fierce power of narrative.

Notes

1. Gail Bush, "The Fierce Power of Narrative: An Interview with Alex Kotlowitz," *Knowledge Quest 34* (May/June 2006): 28-29.

2. Maurice J. Freedman, "Libraries, Priorities, and Telling Our Story," *American Libraries 34* (February 2003): 2.

3. Amos Lakos, "Evidence-Based Library Management," *portal: Libraries and the Academy 7* (October 2007): 431-450.