

Assessment Outside of the Box: The Need for a Focused Study of Information Seekers in a Changing Environment

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Introduction and Background

As academic librarians, we are certainly familiar with the ongoing mandates from a variety of federal, state, and accrediting agencies to evaluate educational programs and services within our institutions. We periodically complete detailed statistical questionnaires on our collections, budgets, staffing, and public services to demonstrate how we support our students and faculty in the learning and teaching process. While statistics do provide helpful information on such issues as the use of the collections and the number of reference inquiries, this data does not give the complete picture, nor does it provide explanations of why any changes might have occurred. To find out what our users need and why, a proactive model of library assessment is required in which users are not only counted for their transactions with the library, but are also consulted for their perspective on the library's success in providing them with information. The assessment model, as described in this paper, looks to user

satisfaction and expressions of users' needs to complement the statistical data libraries traditionally collect.

Before describing the assessment model developed by the Raymond Walters College Library, it is necessary to provide some background information on the College and why we designed this particular model. Raymond Walters College (RWC) is a two-year suburban regional campus of the University of Cincinnati with an enrollment of over 4,000 full and part time students. The College offers over 50 programs of study in business, computer support, office administration, the allied health sciences, and liberal arts. Approximately 60% of the students are enrolled in career degree programs and 40% are planning to transfer into baccalaureate programs.

In March 1999 the College underwent an accreditation site visit by the North Central Association (NCA). One of the requirements for the NCA accreditation was to develop an assessment process that focused upon

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student outcomes to evaluate teaching effectiveness and student academic performance. Approximately five years before this site visit was to take place, the College created an organizational structure to develop an assessment process and gather the required data. Three committees were established: Academic Assessment Committee to evaluate the degree and transfer programs; Non-Academic Assessment Committee to examine support services such as Student Services and the Library; and NCA Issues Committee to coordinate all of the assessment activities and to address institutional and administrative areas such as policies, governance and finances. The Library/Media department had representatives serving on all three of these committees.

The Academic Assessment Committee created the College-wide model that included the following components:

- Academic or service outcome statements based upon the College and/or departmental mission statement and goals;
- Multiple measures (e.g. surveys, test scores) to quantify each outcome statement;
- Results of the measures;
- Changes made in the academic program or service area based upon the results of the measures.

The RWC Library Assessment Model

The RWC Library/Media department is unique within the College because it is an academic unit with a dual function. It supports the educational mission of the College through its services and collections, and it offers associate degrees and professional certificates in Electronic Media Technology and Library Media Technology. While the academic assessment of the degree programs would be handled by the program directors, the Library and the Media Services Center staff would be responsible for developing a plan to assess services and collections. During the summer of 1997, Library/Media Services faculty and staff met and identified the department's four primary service areas:

- Instruction and reference: developing and providing classroom instruction sessions and workshops on the effective use of information resources and media technology; providing reference assistance on research, course assignments, and media resources for classroom use;
- Facilities: providing appropriate study space, hardware to access information resources (e.g. computer

workstations, photocopiers), and media production facilities;

- Management of resources: selecting and purchasing materials for the Library/Media collections; cataloging and organizing information resources for access by students and faculty; providing interlibrary loan services; maintaining equipment;
- Production and dissemination: designing and developing instructional media programs; developing web sites and guides for students and faculty to access information resources; providing support services for distance education courses.

For each service area, the Library/Media staff developed goals, outcome statements based upon these goals, and multiple measures for every outcome statement. Because the number of outcome statements to be assessed for all of the service areas was too many to handle at one time, the Library/Media department established a three-year cycle. The outcomes for instruction and reference services would be measured every year because they are the highest departmental priority. The outcomes for the other three service areas would be measured alternate years. Table A illustrates the assessment cycle and associated outcomes for the Library.

The RWC Library/Media faculty and staff have spent a considerable amount of time in developing this assessment model and in analyzing the results. When we began our discussions, we struggled to articulate outcome statements that focused upon our users. It was also a challenge to identify a number of *different* methods of measuring these outcomes. For most of the outcomes, user surveys were appropriate, but we had to find additional ways of measuring each outcome statement. It was difficult in deciding upon what the level of achievement for each measure should be. For example, when measuring reference services, we had to decide what would be an acceptable percentage of students who would respond that they had benefited from using reference services. We needed to identify a realistic percentage, but also a percentage that would indicate that we were reaching enough students. Although the assessment model described in this paper focuses upon Library services, some of these services, specifically reference and bibliographic instruction, are more closely aligned with academic assessment than with non-academic assessment of support services. However, reference and bibliographic instruction do not fit into the traditional classroom/student performance mold either.

Table As: Raymond Walters College Assessment Cycle and Outcome Statements

Year	Service Area	Outcome Statements
1997–1998	Instruction & Reference	Students will be offered effective reference services. Students will be taught how to locate, evaluate, and effectively use information.
	Facilities and secure environment for the purposes of and use of information technologies.	Students will have an inviting, well-equipped, study, research, nology and other re-
1998–1999	Instruction & Reference	Same as 1997–1998
	Management of Resources available through resource-sharing, that will studies.	Students will have access to a collection of informational material, both in-house and support their
1999–2000	Instruction & Reference	Same as 1997–1998
	Production & Dissemination	Outcomes to be developed.

We had to be creative in designing meaningful outcome statements and measures for these quasi-academic service areas. Although the planning and implementation of this assessment model has consumed a significant amount of time, the results have benefited our students and have generated a meaningful examination of how and why we provide the services that we do.

Based upon our experiences in using the student outcomes assessment model described above, we would like to share several suggestions in creating an assessment process that measures library services in both a meaningful and practical way. A number of the measures and results from the RWC Library assessment model are provided as illustrations for each of these suggestions.

Five Suggestions for Assessment Success

1. Focus on users and what they use.

We mentioned above the importance of considering users’ perceptions along with quantitative data. When deciding upon your outcomes and measures for assessment, try to answer this question: what services or collections are most often used in the library? You may need to rely on both quantitative data and your staff’s

perceptions to decide on these areas, but your next step is to measure the effectiveness and usefulness of these areas to the individuals who use them. While you can know from your record keeping that circulation has increased or decreased, only by questioning your users will you be able to analyze why this has occurred.

Since our entire assessment process was established with this concept in mind, most of our measures are focused on users’ reactions to heavily-used services and resources (see a complete list of the measures we have used in Table B). In both years that we have been following our plan we have utilized surveys as measures. Through these surveys we are able to gain feedback on services and resources that we either perceived were used heavily or that we could measure the usage of quantitatively. A library user survey sought to gather background information on respondents and a sense of whether and how they used the Library. We also asked questions on the survey that served as service area-specific measures (i.e., were students aware of and satisfied with reference services, were the Library’s physical accoutrements and its staff acceptable for users’ needs?). In addition to these questions, we called for general suggestions on improving the Library.

The feedback gained from the survey was very interesting and helpful to our service planning. We learned that 11% of our respondents had never used the Library, that 35% had never asked for reference assistance, and that only 58% believed we had enough workstations available in the Library. There were also a good number of written suggestions for improving the Library, many of which were related to collection development in specified areas. While these are just a few of the results, they demonstrate the types of information that a survey can gain from users which are impossible to assess quantitatively. The 1999 version of this survey, which asks some new service area-specific questions in addition to the general ones from 1998, is currently underway. It should produce a larger sample due to a new means of distribution. We have asked the help of faculty members to distribute the survey in their classes so that we can reach more students, particularly those who may have never

entered the Library. To date, the survey has been offered to students in the Library and in the nearby hallway.

Your outcomes and measures may also include services or collections which are known to be rarely used, or for others which you have no current perception or measurement of usage. An attempt to measure their use could be used to promote them. Surveys can both create awareness and assess it.

2. Make an assessment plan that does not overwhelm the library or its users.

The twin temptations of assessment are to do too little or to do too much. While the first temptation is addressed under Suggestion One, this suggestion addresses the latter. There are countless measures available for assessment purposes, and the idea of assessing several different aspects of the library at once can be very attrac-

Table B: A Measures Used By the RWC Library, Organized by Area of Assessment

Instruction

- A tally of students attending library instruction sessions during the academic year.
- A survey of student satisfaction with, and understanding of, the instruction session they attended.
- A survey of faculty members who requested instruction for their classes to gauge changes in student research skills.
- A survey of student satisfaction with the library resources section of the Computer Awareness class.
- Primary trait analysis of student exams from Computer Awareness to assess student understanding of key library resources concepts.

Reference

- A survey of library users which assessed users' knowledge and use of reference services.
- A survey of reference service quality, following a reference transaction.
- An analysis of class assignments which utilize library reference sources.

Facilities

- A survey of library users which assessed users' opinion of : (1) the Library as an environment for study and research, (2) the Library staff's approachability and helpfulness, and (3) the availability of workstations for accessing library resources.
- A measurement of available student study space, based on the ACRL Standards for Two-Year College Learning Resource Centers.

Management of Resources

- An analysis of the RWC Library's holdings of recommended materials in nursing, veterinary technology, and dental hygiene.
- A survey of library users which assessed users' opinions and awareness of the ability to request materials from libraries within OhioLINK.

tive. Library staff may find, however, that administering too large a number of measures is extremely difficult to do while fulfilling their regular duties. Likewise, library users may grow weary of filling out interminable surveys or experiencing service delays caused by certain measures. Selecting a reasonable and comfortable amount of assessment for any one time is essential.

The assessment model used at RWCL, as described above, addresses this potential difficulty. By only assessing half of our service areas annually we are able to control the impact of assessment on both our library and our student body. We decide upon a certain number of Instruction & Reference-related measures to use each year. Then we devise measures for the other service area that will not compete with those for Instruction & Reference but which will still provide good information about that area. A workable method for lowering the demand on staff and users is to space assessment measures out over the year's academic quarters or semesters. We have also been able to have a single measure serve a dual purpose. For instance, in our first year we conducted a survey of library users that included questions related to both Instruction & Reference and Facilities. We are repeating this survey in the second year of our cycle, this time combining Instruction & Reference and Management of Resources. This has helped our administration of assessment and increased the willingness of students to give their input by requiring only one survey to cover a variety of separate measures.

3. Pick measures that will provide meaningful samples and useful information.

Make sure your measures actually measure something. Will your measure reach enough individuals to provide an accurate sample of your user population? If you do reach a meaningful sample, will the information you ask of your respondents actually help you with assessment?

Our measures, particularly the surveys, owe their success to two reasons. First, we have kept our surveys short (ranging from three questions to twelve questions) and fairly easy to understand in order to ensure the cooperation of our intended respondents. Neither the length of the survey nor difficult to understand questions should try the patience of respondents. This last point can be a difficult one to achieve with certain library activities (such as aspects of instruction), which demand terminology that sometimes defies layman's

terms. Second, we have tried to offer some measures in a controlled environment which help ensure participation. For instance, our library instruction surveys are offered to students right before the end of the instruction session, when they are still a "captive" audience. Students rarely refuse to complete the survey.

On the other hand, our survey of reference quality was an abject failure. Here the problem was probably not the survey itself, but how it fit (or intruded) into the process it was meant to measure. The survey involved handing out a form to students who had asked a reference question once they either had an answer or when the reference interview ended. Though we can certainly not fault the model for our instrument, our survey was loosely based on the forms used by the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program.¹ Reference staff members either found it awkward at times to hand out the survey, particularly when they were away from the reference desk, or simply forgot to do so during busy periods. Library users were not unwilling to complete the survey, but some did not have time to fill it out once they had located their needed materials. Other reference users who were, unbeknown to staff, offered a second or third survey refused to fill it out again. After reaping only forty-three surveys out of a total of 360 reference interactions, we decided to call a halt to this measure. The service was heavily used and the information would have been useful, but our method could not reach a meaningful sample of our users.

Whether you are using surveys or not, be sure to take the time to carefully design your measure and its distribution to ensure user participation. There are many sources in the assessment literature that can guide you in the use of focus groups or any other measure you have in mind.

4. Experiment with new measures.

You certainly want to have some measures that you use consistently so that you can compare data from one year to the next. However, this should not restrain you from finding new ways to measure your assessment outcomes. Experiments can come about at various times and for various reasons. An experiment may be a measure that is just new to you (never before tried by your library) or an entirely new instrument. When you begin your assessment plan, you may wish to try something new (not just another survey, for instance). Once you have

been working under a plan for some time, you may find that your original measures do not assess all of the important aspects of a given collection or service. You may even need to scrap an “old faithful” measure that is no longer fitting to your library. At any time, new services may be added which require a different approach. Whatever the reason, be open to trying new measures as long as they do not violate Suggestions Two or Three.

Even in the short duration of our assessment plan we have attempted experiments at several different points in the process. Our planning process allows for staff to critique current measures or suggest new ones so that changes or additions can be made quickly. Three experimental items that we have tried are the survey of reference quality (described above in Suggestion Three), an analysis of library-related class assignments, and the primary-trait analysis of student exams following a required library session.

Like the reference quality survey, our plan to analyze class assignments to see if they were supported by our reference collection was introduced as an experiment in the initial year of our assessment plan. It was unlike anything we had ever tried or read about before, and could have become a staple measure of our plan. Sadly, and again like the reference quality survey, this measure failed. Our call for assignments netted a small number to work with, and a significant number of them did not use library resources (despite the fact that our call made note of this requirement). In the end, it was possible to only minimally evaluate the reference collection in just a few subject areas. We will not be repeating this measure in the future, but we cannot rule out the possibility that we will, through experimentation, eventually arrive at a measure that accomplishes our objective.

Our latest experiment is still ongoing. As part of our Instruction & Reference measures for 1998–99, we are attempting to use Primary Trait Assessment (PTA) to analyze student exams from RWC’s Computer Awareness course. Primary Trait Assessment is a method for assessing student learning which focuses on the required elements for a given assignment. Instructors can use their grading criteria to construct a scale with which they can analyze students’ assignments.² Computer Awareness (CA) is a one-credit course which teaches incoming students the fundamentals of word processing, e-mail, brows-

ing the Internet, and library resources. We conduct a two hour session for CA students and then contribute five multiple choice questions to their final exam.

We have already been surveying students on their satisfaction with the session and surveying faculty members on the potential effect of Computer Awareness. Now we hope to use a primary trait scale based on the key concepts we test for in the exam. Since each of the five questions concerns one of the five concepts taught in the session, our scale is determined by the number of questions a student answers correctly, thus demonstrating understanding of the underlying concepts. Preliminary results show that 55% of students are missing one or fewer questions, placing them at what we have designated as either Level One or Level Two on our scale. For students missing two or more questions (Level Three on our scale), we hope to see if there are trends in the questions they are missing and whether we can improve the session to better stress the most crucial concepts.

5. Make assessment a regular part of your operation.

In order for assessment to be truly effective it has to be continuous. Do not just wait to assess immediately prior to an accreditation visit. Do not assess on only an ad-hoc basis (although this can be a fine additional method of assessment if you discover something that should be assessed immediately). We believe that our model of assessment is in keeping with Suggestion Two (do not overwhelm) and Suggestion Five (do not forget). Our hope is that our measures will cause us to make changes. By assessing regularly, meaningfully, and with a certain number of consistent measures, we will create a feedback loop in which these changes can then be assessed. We can only decide whether the changes have been successful by going back to the same (or quite similar) measures the next year and then comparing the results. If a change works, then we will keep it in place and keep measuring that service or resource. If it does not, then we will have data in place that may suggest a new change.

Another reason for regular assessment goes beyond the changes that you initiate. Academic libraries by their very nature are constantly in flux, with new services and resources appearing and being created to meet needs and demands that may be beyond the ken of your assessment model. Campus environments change regularly, most obviously through the departure and

influx of students. You cannot base today's changes on survey results from five years ago. Annual and semi-annual assessment will provide the recent data you need for decision-making.

The Future of Assessment at the RWC Library

We expect to continue following our three-year cycle and to repeat our most successful measures. When the three-year cycle begins to repeat in 2000-2001, we plan to modify the outcome statements for our four service areas to reflect any changes in the Library's goals. We will also review all of our measures at that time to decide which ones should continue to be used.

We will continue to experiment with measures, one of which (the Primary Trait Assessment of Computer Awareness) was discussed above in Suggestion Four. A measure we would like to implement is some kind of information needs assessment to better understand the types of resources and services our entire college community expects from the Library. An instrument has yet to be created for this measure and we will be combing the assessment literature for ideas. We also hope to experiment with focus groups to measure those service areas where they would be appropriate.

Assessment is not exactly a science and is hardly an art. It is, however, an honest attempt to make sense of the daily activities which make up library work. With a good plan and enough determination any library is capable of better evaluating its services and collections and improving its offerings to its user population. It is not merely an additional activity for us to undertake; it is our professional responsibility.

Notes

1. See Stalker, John C., and Marjorie E. Murfin. "Quality Reference Service: A Preliminary Case Study," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 22 (Nov. 1996): 423-9. The Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program is very well described in this article, and its list of references has a number of other pertinent sources.

2. See the Web page <http://www.rwc.uc.edu/phillips/Assessment/AcadAssess.html> for more information on Primary Trait Assessment (PTA). Under the "General Education Assessment" section of the page there are links to PTA activities at Raymond Walters College and to an introductory essay on the topic by Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Anderson.