

Putting Your Money Where your Mouth is — \$\$\$ Speaks Louder Than Words

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Introduction

Most librarians have been engaged in spirited (and occasionally dispiriting) discussions revolving around the seemingly simple question “What is a library?” You can count on someone saying “Sure, we’re a warehouse but we are also a study hall.” That is usually followed by a variant of “We are more than walls, we are the people who do the work of the library and we are what they do.” The arguments continue until we usually surrender to the idea that the simple question has only complicated, personal answers. As librarians, of course, we believe everyone has a right to think what they want and then we abandon the debate and turn to worry about why links are not working in the catalog or why there is a backlog in shelving. Few of these arguments express the notion of the library as a budget even though we have a fairly strong suspicion that university administrators think of us that way.

“Are we getting our money’s worth?” is their thought. Where is the value and what are the accomplishments? Those questions are even harder to answer.

Even if we can’t answer the more metaphysical inquiries about value, it is possible that we can employ the notion of library as budget to look at our library in different ways. A practical use is to examine if we are doing what we say we are doing or want to do. Do we move resources to what we say are our priorities? Do we change the budget to match changing realities?

Many of us have the feeling that libraries move slowly and that change is happening much faster than we are adapting. There is, in some, a belief that librarians confuse change that is forced upon our organizations by rapidly evolving external dynamics with change that we have managed and that represents a healthy enterprise. We think because we have had change inflicted on us that we have changed and to some extent that is true. But have we changed our organizations in fundamental ways? We talk about the future and the paths we need to take but do we move that way? We have heard so many presentations and been to so many meetings where people wanted to “think outside the box” and where it is apparent that outside the smaller box is another box that is only slightly larger.

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Our original intent for this paper was to look at The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) “Top Ten Assumptions for the Future of Academic Libraries and Librarians,”¹ and compare the assumptions with trends in national data sets from ACRL,² The Association of Research Libraries (ARL)³ and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES).⁴ It soon became apparent that the “Assumptions” were, to a great extent, not measurable or could not be measured by available data. Library literature is full of articles decrying the state of our measurements, data and assessment efforts so we will not add to it here. In order to build on and extend the ACRL Assumptions, we also examined a number of library strategic plans⁵ and formulated some common themes that we thought could be measured. These include:

1. Libraries will become increasingly digital and will also increase their role in producing digital content (ACRL assumption #1)
2. Libraries will start hiring more professionals without the MLS (ACRL assumption #2)
3. Libraries will purchase most information digitally (ACRL assumption #3)
4. The definition of service will shift from traditional reference, instruction, and circulation interactions (ACRL assumption #7)

These modified assumptions blend both budget data with counting activities that libraries commonly report to national data gathering efforts. ACRL and ARL largely collect and report budget data for: overall library expenditures, salaries, materials, interlibrary loan, and digitization and preservation activities. The ACRL “Assumptions” document however, also lists: intellectual property, higher education as a business, distance learning, free access to publicly funded research and privacy as important topics that will have a significant impact on academic libraries. While we do not dispute these as important trends, these categories are much more difficult to measure in terms of the dollars committed to activity or effort.

For each of the four modified assumptions, data is available in most cases between 2002 and 2007. This time period is sufficient to examine trends and to consider whether libraries are planning for the future by spending more dollars or counting more activities in these areas that are considered to be important to the future academic library. This paper limits examination of data to ARL data, ACRL data from “institutions granting doctorate degrees (Carnegie Code D), and

NCES data for all types and sizes of academic libraries. When reported, the “mean” was used for norming the numbers reported, “mean” being the average of all responses.

It is perhaps just as important when looking at budget data to track spending increases to look for a concomitant reduction in spending or activity in areas that will increasingly be de-emphasized. In the current economic climate, it is not realistic to believe that new money can always be found to grow the activities and services that are priorities in the library to meet patron demand. Rather, libraries more commonly must consider what “to stop doing” in order to “put your money where your mouth is.”

Libraries will become increasingly digital and will also increase their role in producing digital content (ACRL assumption #1)

The ACRL assumption is published as, “There will be an increased emphasis on digitizing collections, preserving digital archives, and improving data methods and storage retrieval.” ACRL began tracking activity on digital collections in 2004. Libraries report: number of collections, size in megabytes, number of items, usage, and direct costs for personnel and equipment. In this case, a look at both budget data and counting data can give a picture of the importance of digitization to academic libraries.

From 2004-2007, libraries actually decreased their reported personnel spending on digitization activities by 38%. In real numbers, libraries reported spending \$63,577 on digitization personnel in 2004 and by 2007 the costs decreased to \$39,240. There are several possible explanations for this change: as digitization becomes more commonplace, a lower level of staff is involved with scanning; the intellectual activity has become a routine part of more senior job descriptions, which would be more difficult to quantify; or the definitions for reporting activity have changed.

In 2004, libraries spent \$30,506 on “equipment, software or contract services” for digitization and in 2007 that number had only increased to \$32,849, or 7.7%. In contrast, libraries reported a 92% increase in the number of digital collections between 2004 and 2007 and a 45% increase in the number of items in those collections. So, in the case of ACRL, the budget trend is not reflective of an increased priority on local digitization activities, but the number, size, and number of items in digital collections all suggest libraries are growing in this area.

A complimentary set of data is available from NCES. From 2002-2006, there was an increase in libraries reporting local digitization activities. In that period, libraries reporting that staff were digitizing documents increased from 25% to 32%.

Libraries will start hiring more professionals without the MLS

ACRL words the Assumption, "The skill set for librarians will continue to evolve in response to the needs and expectations of the changing populations that they serve." There would be little dispute that both job advertisements and skill sets of newly graduated MLS students have changed significantly over the past decade. The library literature has documented not only the changes in titles of traditional job roles, e.g. cataloging to metadata, bibliographer to collection manager, but the work duties as well. Libraries have need for specialists in information technology, systems architecture, subject disciplines, and other responsibilities that are not necessarily part of an MLS-accredited program.

It is difficult to use the available ARL, ACRL, and NCES to determine whether more professionals are being hired into libraries without the MLS. For 1998-2006, ARL libraries report a 14% increase in the number of professional staff in their organizations. The definition for reporting this category does include professionals without the MLS. However, there is no descriptive data for the types of positions added and ARL allows individual libraries to determine which jobs fall under the category of professional.

For that same time period, ARL data shows that professional salaries as a percent of total salary costs increased by 5%. Student and support staff as a percentage of total salary decreased by 3% and 2% respectively. The growth in professional salaries can be explained by both higher starting salaries for new professionals and higher salaries for non-MLS professionals with highly competitive skill sets.

The NCES data, which reports on academic libraries of all sizes, shows a slightly different picture than ARL. As reported for the period 1998-2006, there is no change in the number of librarians as a percent of total staff. However, there was a 35% (from 5.4% to 7.3%) increase in "other professional staff" and a 12% (from 29.3% to 25.6%) decrease in the number of student assistants. This could be a more realistic picture of changes in staffing patterns because the data categories differentiate between librarians and other professionals.

Libraries will purchase most information digitally

"Students and faculty will increasingly demand faster and greater access to services." The full description of this Assumption includes content/library materials under the umbrella of service. Tracking the migration from print to digital content is one of the most common activities in libraries today. Persuasive and very compelling arguments are made to funders about materials inflation and the cost of format migration that libraries must absorb in order to provide content in the ubiquitous environment now expected by students and researchers.

Both ARL and ACRL have robust figures on the numbers of e-journals, e-books, and computer files held, as well as the library expenditures for electronic materials. In 2002, as reported by ARL, electronic materials were 18% of the total materials budget. By 2007, electronic materials had grown to 44% of the materials budget.

ACRL began tracking electronic materials expenditures in 2004. A dramatic shift occurs between 2004 and 2007 as libraries reported a 66% increase in spending on computer files, electronic serials, and electronic books. The greatest growth in spending between 2004 and 2007 was in electronic serials. The mean spent in 2004 was \$938,310. In 2007, the mean spent was \$1,634,917, which is a 124% increase.

Even without the inflation factor, budget data reveals that libraries are spending more for electronic materials. A review of ACRL data between 2002 and 2007 shows that the materials budget as a percent of the overall library budget has only grown less than 1%, 39.48% in 2002 and 40.50% in 2007. For the same time, ARL libraries increased their spending on print materials by 11%. This slower growth as compared with dramatic expenditures on electronic materials supports the assumption that libraries are not using all new monies to support electronic collections. Instead, a larger and larger portion of the materials budget is being committed to electronic.

The definition of service will shift from traditional reference, instruction, and circulation interactions.

Assumption # 7 states that, "Students will increasingly view themselves as customers and consumers, expecting high-quality facilities and services." Instead of trying to track budget data for renovations and new facilities, a review of traditional library services suggests

a new definition of services may be necessary. In short, libraries need to take the changes reflected in these data and build, fund and track a new model to invigorate and revitalize the role of the library on campus.

Data on instruction, gate count, circulation, and reference transactions are available using all three data sources. Interlibrary loan is an additional public service category that was excluded in this analysis.

Reference, in particular, is an area of service that has changed significantly over a short period of time. ARL data shows that between 2002 and 2007, reference activity has decreased 35%. This is supported by ACRL data for the same time period that also shows a 35% decrease in reference activity. At the beginning of the article, it was suggested that if new programs and services are to be supported, budget support in areas showing decline should be shifted to support new priorities. Reference would be one area of activity that should be examined for efficiencies and cost recovery.

Circulation in ARL libraries dropped almost 10% in 2007 as measured from 2002, and ACRL data shows that the percentage drop is 13%. Circulation shifts can be attributed to more content being available electronically. Circulation activity can also drop due to benefits derived from more electronic content brought into the library via consortial shared content deals. In either case, circulation activity is another area where an examination of cost recovery to support new areas of growth may be possible.

Coffee bars, 24-hour computer labs, comfortable furnishings, gaming activities, and study rooms are some of the features of the modern academic library designed to attract the user community. While gate count data is fairly scarce in ACRL and ARL, NCES reports that between 2000-2006 gate count increased 14%. Whether this growth is significant will be determined by any individual library in their own setting.

Conclusion

Academic libraries commit significant time and effort to planning and budgeting. Libraries align services with the strategic priorities of their institutions and shift activities to meet changing user demands. As a community, academic libraries also look to their peer groups to learn about emerging technologies, to consider new services, and to stay competitive in support of their institutions faculty recruitment and student enrollment efforts.

To manage the resources within an academic library, the budget should be used to reflect the priori-

ties and service areas of emphasis. Libraries can use their own strategic plans alongside local budget information to determine whether their resources are allocated in support of stated priorities. When there is no alignment between budget and priorities, it is difficult for the organization to accept, manage, and succeed in effecting change.

It is also possible to let library users "vote" for change through observation of their behaviors. As written earlier, the "counting" statistics kept by libraries are really patron initiated activities. If reference or circulation or gate count or interlibrary loan activity is down, and downloads, searches, and hits on databases are up, patrons have laid out the path of priorities that shows the library the way to satisfy user demand.

National statistics can be used to support a shift in local priorities, requests for funding, and measuring local activities against peer institutions. The data produced by ARL, ACRL, and NCES is not solely a ranking activity. These reports are a rich source of information about trends in academic library services, budget allocation, and funding scenarios. Libraries that seek to use the budget as an instrument of their planning process, as a way to enforce the decisions about service priorities will be "putting their money where their mouth is."

Notes

1. ACRL. "Top ten assumptions for the future of academic libraries and librarians." <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/crlnews/2007/apr/tenassumptions.cfm> (accessed 1/4/2009).

2. ACRL. "Academic library statistics." <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/trends/index.cfm> (accessed 1/4/2009).

3. ARL. "ARL statistics interactive edition." <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/arl/index.html> (accessed 1/4/2009).

4. National Center for Education Statistics. "Annual reports." <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/getpubcats.asp?sid=091#> (accessed 1/4/2009).

5. Georgia Tech Library. "Strategic Plan 2007-2011." http://www.library.gatech.edu/about/strategic_plan.php (accessed 1/4/2009); Northwestern University Library. "Strategic Plan 2008-2010." <http://staffweb.library.northwestern.edu/admin/stratplan2008.pdf> (accessed 1/4/2009); University of Washington Libraries. "UW Libraries: Vision 2010 The Libraries' 2006-2010 Strategic Plan." <http://www.lib.washington.edu/about/vision2010/> (accessed 1/4/2009).