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Review Essay: The Documentation of Library Assessment Planning Process, Lessons Learned and Suggestions

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Abstract

A library assessment plan describes outcomes, direct and indirect assessment methods, timelines, and responsible individuals who will conduct the assessment. Numerous academic libraries have developed and made publicly accessible assessment plans to demonstrate the impact of their library services and resources. Many guidelines are available for academic libraries on how to develop a library assessment plan (e.g., Maki, 2002; Oakleaf, 2010; Rubin, 2006), yet only a handful of academic libraries have shared their actual assessment planning experiences, how they applied available guidelines, and what difficulties they had. The purpose of this article is to document academic libraries' assessment planning processes that have been published since 2010. The reported strengths and challenges of assessment planning are discussed.

Keywords

library assessment, assessment planning, academic libraries

Introduction

Today's academic and research libraries are increasingly asked to provide evidence for the impact and value of their efforts (Oakleaf, 2010). Reduced budgets and resources call for evidence of greater accountability and assessment efforts (Taylor & Heath, 2012). An assessment plan is a detailed document that describes assessment efforts and records assessment results (Oakleaf, 2010). It may consist of three major outcomes-based assessment areas: library impact on student learning, faculty teaching, and research (Matthews, 2007). It also documents planned assessment activities in diverse areas such as needs assessment, space assessment, usability assessment, and learning assessment (Luther, 2016). Developing an assessment plan is important because it helps organize and track assessment efforts, record results, and document lessons learned (Oakleaf, 2010).

Many academic libraries have developed and made publicly accessible assessment plans that span their entire library services and resources. In addition, many guidelines have been prepared for helping academic libraries build their assessment plans. However, only a small number of libraries have documented how they initially created their assessment plans, which tools they used to plan their assessment cycle, which obstacles they confronted, and any suggestions they might provide for other libraries. Although each academic library may have specific needs and challenges depending on institution type, mission, and goals, a review of experiences faced during the development process would prove useful for libraries that are at different stages of library assessment planning. The purpose of this paper is to review available literature on library assessment planning that has been published since 2010. A review of the last seven years will provide up-to-date and relevant information for academic libraries in 2017. Four research questions guided this review:

1. What was the goal of the academic libraries' assessment planning?
2. Which tools and resources did academic libraries use while developing their assessment plan?
3. What were the reported strengths associated with the library assessment planning process?
4. What were the reported challenges confronted during the library assessment planning process?

Criteria for Inclusion

The author searched relevant databases, including Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar, using the keywords "assessment planning," "library assessment," and "library assessment plan." Only the journal articles that documented academic library assessment planning were included. This criteria resulted in the inclusion of six academic libraries' assessment planning processes that were reported as case studies. The institution types are presented on Table 1 below.

Table 1

Academic Library Institution Type

Institution type		Number (N)
Private	Research	3
	Teaching	1
Public	Research	2
	Teaching	0
Total		6

Literature Review**Purpose of Developing a Library Assessment Plan**

Libraries have been reporting their resources, activities, and services provided until recently (Matthews, 2007). Increasing demands from various stakeholders have led academic libraries to focus more on outcomes such as skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (Matthews, 2007). More recently, libraries have shifted from the assessment of individual learning outcomes to larger-scale value assessments that measure library impact on the institution (Oakleaf, 2010). As such, the academic libraries included in this review indicated several common purposes for developing outcomes-focused assessment plans. The common purposes included data-driven priority setting and decision making, better organized data collection and reporting, the justification of library value and impact, quality improvement, transparency, and efficiency (Smith et al., 2015; Tatarka et al., 2010; Taylor & Heath, 2012). Two academic libraries also saw developing an assessment plan as a way to provide support to library strategic planning (Taylor & Heath, 2012). One library specifically developed its assessment plan as a component of the continuous strategic development process (Tatarka et al., 2010; Taylor & Heath, 2012). This review showed that the academic libraries shared mutual motivations for designing an assessment plan.

Tools and Resources Used for Developing a Library Assessment Plan

The academic libraries used various tools and resources while developing their assessment plans, identifying goals and objectives, and determining who would be involved to the assessment projects. Table 2 provides a summary of tools utilized by the academic libraries in the assessment planning process. Reviewing the assessment

literature, not necessarily specific to library assessment, was one of the most commonly employed approaches at the start of the planning process (Smith et al., 2015; Tatarka et al., 2010). The libraries also examined existing data sources, such as previously conducted surveys (e. g., LibQUAL+, Climate-QUAL), past meeting agendas, and education and training materials (Tatarka et al., 2010; Taylor & Heath, 2012). Surveying was another commonly used tool while designing an assessment plan. One library interviewed key staff members and another surveyed assessment planning participants to foster a collaborative network while determining the library's assessment goals and objectives. One library reported that the assessment planning committee reviewed the library strategic plan while developing the assessment plan. Analyzing and organizing existing data in a way that could support future longitudinal assessment projects was part of the strategy of one of the libraries.

Table 2

Tools and Resources Used in Academic Library Assessment Planning

Qualitative Tools	Quantitative Tools
Examining documents	Surveying
Interviewing	Analysis of existing data sources
Literature Review	Building datasets for longitudinal assessment projects

Strengths and Challenges Associated with Library Assessment Planning Process

Strengths

The authors of the reviewed assessment planning processes reported some strengths, confronted unplanned challenges, and provided useful take home messages.

Most of the libraries stated their plan's adaptive, evolving, and flexible nature as its strength (Smith et al., 2015; Tatarka et al., 2010). They also noted that their assessment plan was responsive to emerging needs. This point aligns with Matthews' (2007) suggestion on library assessment planning success. He recommends libraries periodically reassess their assessment plans to add, drop, or change components as necessary.

The authors also emphasized that involving and considering the needs and expectations of key staff members in the research and writing phases of assessment planning helped to ensure more commitment and buy-in for the plan (Smith et al., 2015; Tatarka et al., 2010; Taylor & Heath, 2012). Staff involvement fostered a universal

recognition of the importance of assessment in the library, which in turn could facilitate a culture of assessment (Taylor & Heath, 2012). The assessment librarians and planning committees increased key staff involvement in the process through interviews, focus groups, and surveys (Smith et al., 2015; Tatarka et al., 2010). An example of a discussion question was “How do you expect your involvement in library assessment to change in the coming year?” (Smith et al., 2015, p. 50).

Lastly, one library emphasized the importance of basing library assessment planning on the library’s strategic plan to increase the assessment plan’s relevance (Tatarka et al., 2010). Another library built its assessment plan as a component of the continuous strategic plan and presented it as a major strength (Taylor & Heath, 2012). The library’s aim was to develop an evolving system that was improved by assessment and evaluation. As supported in the literature, an assessment plan should be a substantial component of the strategic planning efforts for a library (White, 2010). When the assessment plan is grounded in a department’s needs and strategic goals, the assessment librarian can secure commitments from many departments in the early planning phases.

Challenges

While flexibility in assessment planning and implementation was reported as a strengthening factor, it can produce challenges along the way. One library reported that the adaptive nature of the assessment plan made library staff feel that the plan lacked direction (Tatarka et al., 2010). Additionally, the assessment planning team had difficulty estimating and controlling time needed for planned activities. One library raised a similar concern by saying that “keeping the assessment plan ‘alive’ is a challenge, even with the Assessment Working Group” (Tatarka et al., 2010, p. 204). One library noted that while developing a team-based assessment plan involving many people across the library facilitated embedding the plan into departments, the team-based, cross-organizational approach slowed down the assessment cycle due to the time needed for feedback and building consensus (Taylor & Heath, 2012). Another library mentioned that developing an assessment plan as a learning tool for staff later created a challenge since they did not specify measurable outcomes for success in the plan (Tatarka et al., 2010).

Lastly, one academic library reported that the generalizability of the planning process is limited due to the library context and institutional mission (Smith et al., 2015). Institutional goals, mission, purpose, and library context play significant roles in assessment planning and how generalizable they may be to different library contexts.

Discussion

Based on available literature documenting library assessment planning processes and planning guidelines, I propose a few suggestions for people who are in various stages of academic library assessment planning.

Matthews (2007) summarized library assessment planning and implementation processes as four major activities: understanding campus mission and goals, linking library mission with the broader campus mission, using the campus assessment plan as a foundation, and creating the plan. Although the reviewed studies did not acknowledge how they accounted for campus missions and goals in the assessment planning, this should be a vital early planning activity. Assessment librarians and other members of the planning team should identify external people with whom they can collaborate and identify existing resources and assessment initiatives outside the library. These external people can be faculties, campus assessment team members, and/or office of research staff.

Most libraries have a long history of data collection and reporting to national organizations including American Research Libraries (ARL). They have been involved with library assessment in varying degrees either formally using specific tools or informally. Assessment planning should aim to convert those existing data collection and reporting activities into systematic, goal-focused, and meaningful library assessment initiatives. The assessment plan should be associated with previous assessment efforts.

Lastly, the reviewed studies pointed repeatedly to the significance of library staff members' involvement in the assessment planning process. While prioritizing staff opinions, expectations, and needs increases the degree of buy-in in the library, assessment planning should involve realistic and achievable goals given the time and resources that a library has. In addition, setting measurable outcomes for success with the input of library departments would make the assessment plan applicable for everyone.

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