This book is a strong plea to move away from the traditional reliance on inward-looking forms of assessment (facts that describe collection size, collection use, library space, different forms of library use) to output measures that focus on the outcomes or impacts of an academic library on students, faculty and the larger organizational context (p. 5).

The eight chapters of this book deal with the importance of properly formulated institutional and library mission statements, instruments that measure or assess student learning outcomes, methods that have been used to measure the library’s contribution to the educational process, methods that have been used to measure faculty research output and the library’s contribution to this output, and the methods that should be used to develop a truly effective, meaningful library assessment plan. There are numerous bibliographic notes at the end of each chapter and numerous charts and diagrams that help illustrate the arguments that Matthews advances.

While one would applaud the move away from the collecting of facts and statistics to a focus on the student learning process or the faculty research process, Matthews frequently makes bold statements for which no proof or documentation is provided and not infrequently, he appears to contradict his own arguments. On p. 27 one reads that “Every aspect of the student’s development—cognitive and affective, psychological and behavioral—is affected by the peer group.” On p. 28 he states, “A student’s academic achievements are not influenced by the intellectual level of his or her peers …” On the same page one reads that “Attending a college with a heavy research orientation—in which the faculty is rewarded for scholarship, not teaching prowess—increases student dissatisfaction and has a negative impact on measures of cognitive and affective development” but no proof or documentation is provided for this statement. Similarly, one reads that “Two key predictors of academic success are the duration and quality of student-faculty interactions and the quality of the students’ interpersonal life on campus,” (p. 85). Again, no proof for this statement is provided. One reads that “very little support was found between usage of libraries and academic performance, but a link between extensive use of library catalogs and high academic performance was found,” (p. 63). Is one to understand that the use of libraries and the use of library catalogs are two totally different activities, yielding very different results in terms of academic performance?

The section dealing with the numerous studies (of collection size, collection use, library instruction, information literacy programs) that have been undertaken to measure the impact of libraries on student learning outcomes is interesting but also sobering, given the highly contradictory results of these studies and the
large number of them that suggest that library collections and library instruction programs have almost no impact on these learning outcomes. Matthews summarizes the results of many different studies undertaken in Europe as well as North America.

While the discussion of the evaluation of the impact of libraries on students is comprehensive, the discussion of the impact on teaching faculty is too narrow. The discussion revolves almost exclusively around faculty research, and does not adequately deal with the library as a facility or service to assist in faculty teaching: library collections that may (or may not) support the assignments given to students, technologies such as electronic reserves or course reserves, and the availability of staff to provide library instruction or orientation.

In summary, Matthews raises important issues regarding the lack of relevance of many forms of library assessment to the underlying question of student learning outcomes and he discusses the many attempts that have been made to measure the impact of libraries with respect to these outcomes, but as he admits in his introduction, “although learning is the role of higher education, there is no clear model for assessment … [and] how to demonstrate to others … the value of a college education … and no assessment model to demonstrate the value of research and service of faculty and students to the community …,” (p. 2) The goal of adequately assessing the role of libraries in higher education will probably remain an elusive one for a long time.

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