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Surviving the Future

*Academic Libraries, Quality, and
Assessment*

GAIL MUNDE AND KENNETH MARKS



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List of abbreviations

ABEF	Australian Business Excellence Framework
ACRL	Association of College and Research Libraries
AQIP	Academic Quality Improvement Project
ARL	Association of Research Libraries
ARWU	Academic World Ranking of Universities
ASIBU	Annuaire Statistique Interactif des Bibliothèques Universitaires
BIX	Bibliotheksindex
CAUL	Council of Australian University Librarians
CNI	Center for Networked Information
CRM	customer relationship management
CSEQ	College Student Experiences Questionnaire
DEEP	Documenting Effective Educational Practices, or Project DEEP
EFQM	European Foundation for Quality Management
HE	higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
ICT	information and communication technology
IFLA	International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
IGERT	Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship
ILI	information literacy instruction
IPEDS	Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics

NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
OCLC	Online Computer Library Center
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OIS	International Organization for Standardization
ROI	return on investment
SCONUL	Society of College, National and University Librarians
SIMALTO	Simultaneous Multi Attribute Level Trade Offs
SMART	specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely
STEM	science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
SWOT	strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats

About the authors

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Preface

In 2007 we set out to prepare a workshop for academic librarians on the general topic of library quality improvement and assessment. Our hope was to distill some basic principles of library quality improvement and assessment, provide a few examples of best practices, *and* to present this overview in a single workshop day. From our mutual interest in the topic and our professional experience working both together and separately in multiple academic libraries, we thought the task would be relatively straightforward. We are still laughing at our ambition and our naivety.

As we began the literature review, we were quickly overwhelmed by the depth and breadth of the scholarship and, to be frank, surprised by its international scope. Borrowing from business and higher education excellence models, academic librarians around the world had published their ideas and their research on efforts to measure library quality, to devise metrics and methods for control, and to make continuous improvements in library quality in response to a universal demand for greater accountability in higher education. Much of the best and most interesting work was reported in journal articles and conference proceedings. The nature of these venues gives the impression that the literature is fragmented, making it difficult to grasp as a coherent whole. We wished there were a few books, or better yet, a single book that would provide a thorough, logical, and integrated view of academic library assessment, evaluation, and quality improvement—a book that would draw together and relate the essential information and understandings necessary for academic librarians to work toward quality improvement in the context of their own institutions. This book is an attempt to fulfill our own wish.

We would like to thank the many, many authors upon whose work we have drawn for this book—for their scholarship and creativity, and for having shared information and ideas with the profession through their publications. Without them, there would have been no basis for this

book. We would also like to thank our spouses, Chuck Twardy and Karen Marks, for their endless patience and support.

Gail Munde
Ken Marks
November 2008

Quality, assessment and evaluation

Defining quality

What is quality? Most of us believe that we know quality when we see it. Whether this is actually the case is another matter. We bring so many assumptions to our view of the world that our biases automatically color our assessment of reality. Are there varying levels of quality? Does quality depend on circumstances? If quality is essential, under what circumstances will “good enough” be an adequate and acceptable level of quality? Does quality change over time? Will today’s high quality fail to meet future quality standards? How does the library world’s concept of quality match up with the views of quality of other segments of society?

How quality is defined will depend on the environment and the observer. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) publication *Measuring Quality* states:

The definition of quality has developed from the product-oriented aspect of control and inspection to a broader service-oriented concept that involves the whole organizational structure. Quality in this sense is fitness for purpose, that is to say, a service or product should supply or perform as it is intended to. The “purpose” of a service or product is defined by the customers. Quality in this sense is neither an isolated standard nor the highest standard; it is defined by the needs of the clientele of the individual institution.¹

The International Organization for Standardization (OIS) Standard 11620 defines quality as the “totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on the library’s ability to satisfy stated or implied needs.”²

Green has identified a number of concepts of quality:

The traditional concept of quality is associated with the notion of providing a product or service that is distinctive and special, and which confers status on the owner or user ... The notion of exclusivity is implied. Second, there is the notion of quality as conformance to a specification or standard. The definition of quality adopted by most analysts and policy makers in higher education is that of fitness for purpose. Exponents of this approach argue that quality has no meaning except in relation to the purpose of the product or service. Quality is judged in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose(s).

One version of the “fitness for purpose” model concentrates on evaluating quality in higher education at the institutional level. A high quality institution is one that clearly states its mission (or purpose) and is efficient and effective in meeting the goals it has set itself. During the last 20 years, the definition of quality most often used in industry has evolved and is no longer given solely in terms of conformance to a specification but in terms of meeting customers’ needs. High priority is placed on identifying customers’ needs as a crucial factor in the design of a product or service.³

No wonder that defining, and then applying, quality is so difficult for academic librarians. They are faced with concepts that are not only drawn largely from business and industry, but are then cast in terms of higher education in general, and finally applied to academic libraries. The reality is that to a large extent library quality will be defined by the parent institution. In writing about Monash University, Pernat affirms this belief with the following observation:

Fitness of purpose means that the university must create its own agenda for its own unique situation and that purpose at all levels needs to be agreed. Fitness of purpose applied to the library involves examination of the alignment of the library’s mission with that of the university.⁴

How can libraries confirm that the library’s and university’s mission statements are in alignment? Often, librarians view the institutional mission simply as another statement filled with glittering generalities to be given lip service or ignored. Many times the library mission statement is written without any attention to the university’s mission. It is the responsibility of the library director to ensure alignment between the two mission statements.

A dramatic international shift in the perspective of librarians toward quality has occurred in the past 10 to 20 years. Historically, academic library quality was thought to be determined by the size of the collection and the size of the budget. It was a numbers game. The shift has been to the concept of the customer-centered library. Hiller and Jilovsky name seven fundamental changes in the library environment that are responsible for this shift:

- explosive growth in networked electronic information and consortial purchasing
- noticeable changes in library use patterns
- new library organizational structures and strategic planning
- instability of library and institutional funding
- increased complexity of navigating the information environment
- moves towards outcomes-based assessment in higher education
- accountability for library expenditures.⁵

The shift has been inevitable as parent institutions have become concerned about outcomes, and the contributions that units make to the achievement of those outcomes. If quality is defined by the customer, then the library should focus on that reality. Hiller and Jilovsky identify the following characteristics of a customer-centered library:

- All services and activities are viewed through the eyes of customers.
- Customers determine quality.
- Library services and resources add value to the customer.
- Data-based decision making is a cornerstone of the customer-centered library in which:
 - decisions are based on facts, research and analysis
 - services are planned and delivered to maximize positive customer outcomes.⁶

According to Hiller and Jilovsky, North American academic libraries continue to have difficulties in implementing the steps that would lead to a customer-centered library. This also appears to be a challenge internationally. One of the reasons for this may be that librarians historically have had difficulty listening to their customers. This is changing, but not quickly enough. A second reason may be that librarians have not been trained to work in an environment where

decisions are based on the analysis of data and integrated into a regular planning cycle.

Another reason for the difficulties may be the fact that each stakeholder group has a different concept of what quality means to it. Poll has identified three stakeholder groups: the users (actual and potential), the financing authorities (university, community, commercial firm, etc.), the library's staff, and goes on to say:

Their view of the library's quality will always differ. While users judge on the quality of services they use, authorities will be interested in the library's benefit to the institution it has been set up to serve and in the library's cost effectiveness. Staff, on their part, look to the quality of their working conditions, to further education and to the library's organization.⁷

The challenge for librarians is how to reconcile these potentially conflicting views of quality. This becomes more difficult if librarians determine that the relative importance of the stakeholder groups will shift from time to time.

Although each stakeholder group has its own concept of quality, an unanswered question remains: what are the characteristics or criteria that make up quality? Poll has adapted work done by Peter Brophy to construct a chart of criteria as shown in Table 1.1.⁸

The characteristics noted in the chart are appropriate for users, but hardly seem relevant to the other two groups of stakeholders—authorities and staff. Authorities will have criteria that include financial control; effective use of resources; outcomes and impacts; planning; and internal and external cooperation. Staff will have criteria that relate to both their physical and organizational working conditions; opportunities for professional development; involvement in planning; involvement in governance; and reputation of their library. Balancing the achievement of these disparate stakeholder criteria is a challenge for library administrators. It is important for a director to remember the following statement by Barrionuevo.

Quality is a relative concept, closely linked to the level of user expectation and requirements. The relative nature of quality leads ultimately to excellence, a mobile, unattainable concept, the achievement of which requires effort, the assimilation of change, and a forward-looking and positive approach.⁹

Table 1.1 Criteria by which library quality is judged

Criterion	Definition	Example
Performance	A service meets its most basic purpose	Making key information resources available on demand
Features	Secondary characteristics which add to the service but are beyond the essential core	Alerting services
Reliability	Consistency of the service's performance in use	No broken web links
Conformance	The service meets the agreed standard	Dublin Core
Durability	Sustainability of the service over a period of time	Document delivery within 2 days
Currency	Up-to-dateness of information	Online catalog
Serviceability	Level of help available to users	Complaint service
Aesthetics	Visual attractiveness	Physical library, website
Usability, accessibility	Ease of access and use	Opening hours, website structure
Assurance/ competence/ credibility	Good experience with staff's knowledgability	Correct reference answers
Courtesy/ responsiveness/ empathy	Accessibility, flexibility and friendliness of staff	Reference service
Communication	Clear explanation of services and options in jargon-free language	Website, signposting in the library
Speed	Quick delivery of services	Interlibrary lending
Variety of services offered	May clash with quality, if resources are not sufficient for maintaining quality in all services offered	Broad collection, reference service in walk-in, mail, and chat forms
Perceived quality	The user's view of the service	Assessment by satisfaction survey

All librarians want their libraries to achieve excellence, but few understand the linkage between quality and the consequences of accepting and internalizing change, and planning for the future.

Leadership from the director is essential if a library is to be committed to achieving and maintaining quality and, ultimately, excellence. The library administrator is properly placed to monitor the institution's evolving commitment to and definition of quality, thereby ensuring that the library maintains effective alignment of its own efforts to embed quality. As a director considers the issue of quality, the question of how to pursue quality arises. Does the library use total quality management, quality assurance, quality control, quality enhancement, or quality management philosophies, processes and techniques? Each of these has its own proponents and disciples who argue their particular philosophy represents the only "true" way to quality. Many of these approaches rely on the existence of some type of standard against which library activities, resources, services, and programs might be measured. An important question is whether the standard against which measurement occurs is externally imposed or established internally by the library. Another absolutely critical question is: what do we really mean when we use the word "measurement"?

Measurement

Measurement has been the downfall of many academic libraries. They have collected many data on every facet of the library's activities and environment, but have had no plan for processing the information. It seems that while data collection should be useful, quite often the data found in a library is

- gathered but has little relevance in the decision-making process;
- gathered for a specific purpose, but then not used;
- used to justify a decision (and sometimes gathered after the decision is made);
- requested even though sufficient information is available to make a decision (some data manipulation and analysis may be required);
- not used even though some people will complain about the lack of information; and
- not in itself as important as just having it.¹⁰

Most librarians can remember an experience involving data collection when the staff opinion was that the activity was “busy work.” When that opinion becomes the prevailing view, then measurement will be flawed and assessment is doomed.

An often-overlooked fact is that measurement is more than collecting numbers; it is the process of gauging a library’s performance. Data collection is often considered to be routine reporting, and performed without any thought as to how those activities being measured are performed, or their effect on library stakeholders. Cullen presents another aspect of performance measurement:

Performance measurement is a highly political activity, and must be seen as such, at the macro and micro level. We must look outwards to social and political expectations made of our institutions and ensure that they meet the needs and expectations of our significant client or stakeholder groups; we must use our planning and goal-setting activities in a services meaningful way, incorporating appropriate measures, to demonstrate our response to this external environment, and our willingness to align our aspirations to broader corporate goals. But we must also look within and seek to promote an organisational culture which acknowledges the political nature of measurement. This means using performance measurement to:

- indicate the library or information service’s alignment with broader organisational goals
- demonstrate the integration of information with the key activities of the organisation, or of the community
- support the library’s position as the organisation’s primary information manager and service provider.¹¹

Because academic libraries have traditionally been viewed as a common good and an essential part of any university, the idea that all library activities now have political implications may be unsettling to many librarians. Librarians have been reluctant to play the political game required to garner the budgetary resources necessary to keep their libraries competitive. Also, they have been reluctant to market themselves and their organizations, perhaps based on the assumption that it is somehow unprofessional. Librarians are learning, but it has been a painfully slow process.

Assessment

What is the relationship between measurement and assessment? Often, assessment, evaluation and accountability are used interchangeably, which confuses the individuals trying to understand what a library is doing. Frye states that

when we assess our own performance, it's assessment, when others assess our performance, it's accountability. That is, assessment is a set of initiatives we take to monitor the results of our actions and improve ourselves; accountability is a set of initiatives others take to monitor the results of our actions, and penalize or reward us based on the outcomes.¹²

A decade ago, Dow offered the following interpretations of assessment:

Today assessment is the word most often associated with the measurement of educational outcomes. When asked what that means, responses normally have fallen into three categories. The first category relates to evaluation of student learning prior to admission to college ... A second commonly understood meaning of assessment is the measurement of student performance taken while he or she is enrolled in course work ... The third interpretation of assessment places emphasis on the outputs of the educational experience, measuring what students have learned by the time they graduate ...¹³

The third definition is the ultimate challenge to libraries as they become increasingly required to present information delineating their contributions to student development. The critical departure from past measurement efforts is in the focus of measurement. The institution and the library are no longer the focus; the focus is now on the student and what is gained from time in the university and the library. Dugan expressed it as:

Assessment measures changes in library users as a result of their contact with an academic library's programs, resources and services, such as student known content, developed skills and abilities, and acquired attitudes and values. Therefore, assessment is comprised of statements about what students will know/think/be able to do as a result of their contact with library programs, not statements about what the library should/could do to bring about desired outcomes.¹⁴

One matter to be clarified at this point is the use of the word “assessment.” It actually refers to “self-assessment.” Assessment imposed by an external entity is an audit; assessment conducted by the library on its own initiative is a self-assessment. Evans provides a detailed and useful discussion of the stages of self-assessment, in which she identifies seven distinct stages:

1. Identify the role of self-assessment
2. Commit to the process
3. Identify the self-assessment team
4. Choose the self-assessment model/approach
5. Piloting/training/planning
6. Undertake the self-assessment: manage the process
7. Identify priorities for improvement/plan actions/implement actions
8. Review. The final stage is a review of what has been achieved, i.e.:
 - whether the objectives have been reached
 - whether the performance targets have been met
 - whether the planned timescales have been achieved.¹⁵

The challenges of self-assessment

Troll Covey identified five challenges related to assessment that can assist libraries that are struggling to collect data that will help to confirm their contributions to positive student outcomes:

1. Gathering meaningful, purposeful, comparable data.
2. Acquiring methodological guidance and requisite skills to plan and conduct assessment.
3. Managing assessment data.
4. Organizing assessment as a core activity.
5. Interpreting library trend data in the larger environmental context of user behavior and constraints.¹⁶

Hiller, Kyrillidou, and Self identified a series of issues that augment Troll Covey’s challenges. They note “these issues were likely to fall into the following areas: library leadership, organizational culture, library priorities, sufficiency of resources, data infrastructure, assessment skills

and expertise, sustainability, presentation of results, and the ability to use the results to improve libraries.”¹⁷

Typically, librarians have collected statistics as required by institutional authorities, governmental agencies, or professional associations. Sometimes the requests overlapped, and sometimes the requests were in conflict. Making the activity more challenging was the fact that data definitions might change from year to year and any opportunity for longitudinal analysis was lost. The result was an assortment of statistics that reflected the resources, services, and activities that could be most easily counted. In one sense, this might not have been a bad situation for the library, as the likelihood of having library staff with the requisite analytical skills and comfort level to work with data was minimal. This remains the situation in many libraries today. Even when library staff did have the requisite skills and aptitude, it often didn't matter because there was an overwhelming flood of data to be managed, manipulated, and stored. Managing data continues to be challenging, even today. Responsibility for data collection and management can be delegated by the library administrator, but one thing that cannot be delegated is the leadership role, the essential responsibility to instill throughout the library the importance of accurate data collection and to make self-assessment an integral part of the library's existence. It is the library administrator's responsibility to be certain that analysis and interpretation are done within the context of the parent institution and the community of users. It is the library administrator's responsibility to manage the establishment of an effective organizational culture. This can be a persistent challenge for library administrators, as it takes so long to change cultures, and cultures can fail without constant attention. Given all of the challenges and issues surrounding the prospect of conducting a self-assessment, it is no surprise to find the vast majority of libraries doing only marginal self-assessment.

The challenges noted above beg questions of how to avoid or minimize, and eventually to meet them. Creating a self-assessment plan, or outlining a self-assessment process, is a logical place to begin. In a study of library directors' thoughts about assessment and decision making, Beck outlined some of the beginning questions as:

- How do you manage assessment?
- What do you want to learn from assessment?
- What do you want to accomplish once you understand the assessment data?