
Sensemaking for Decisionmaking

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Abstract

Library assessment has matured as a specialty area of practice and academic library assessment programs continue to grow. Attention is needed, however, to aligning assessment activities with planning and decision making. Library leaders must pursue evidence-based decision making and not “decision-based evidence-making.”

It is an honor to give this plenary address here today. As I reflected on Molly Broad’s presentation just now, *Higher Education at a Crossroads*, I am struck by how much what is affecting libraries and library workers is not in our control or even in the control of our institutions. Whether in private or public institutions, we are buffeted by the same strong winds of change and challenge. Societal and political pressures related to increased demands for accountability and lessening public investment manifest themselves in many ways. We are all aware of the challenges of degree completion, the contingent faculty workforce, and technological change.

It is not just academic institutions that are experiencing change, competition, and questions about their value. Libraries are as well. Google and other web search engines as well as online open publication of, and thus access to, information resources have changed what a library can be, what roles are even possible.

Most of the work I did as a graduate assistant when I was completing my master’s degree in library science no longer exists. I had a great job and spent much of my time looking up facts in directories, almanacs, etc. I can’t help but smile to think back to that time when we had intense debates about which 50 books to keep at that “ready reference” desk. This is no longer the work of graduate assistants at the information desk in the University Library at Illinois.

This fact is unsettling to some. For others it is an opportunity. Regardless of whether we like it or not, these changes demand a pivot from a previous role, or set of roles, to new ones.

I think it is tempting to retreat to platitudes and assertions about the library as the “heart of the university” or the like. And, in honesty, we are lucky. Because people love their libraries, we have time to pivot. Other campus units or social institutions would not be given the grace period that we have because they are not so beloved. But libraries, and library workers, cannot live on love alone. It is a cold, hard fact that to do good in the world, we need resources. And, by resources, of course, I mean money. Because whether it is staffing, collections, technologies, space, etc., all of these are acquired through money.

Now, by our nature, libraries are collectivist institutions, seeking the good of all in our communities, not just of particular individuals alone. We are, as they say, “built for purpose” relative to our communities. I have been heartened that, of late, we have seen a reawakening and rediscovery of our social purpose in academic libraries, a return to a progressive perspective. We are embracing that the value we create through libraries is not just economic but also—through thoughtfully developed and shared services and collections—inclusion, equity, and social justice; that we are pursuing the creation of value through our values. We are recognizing that, if we choose to—and I believe that we should, we can, and we will—we can meet the demands of accountability by the impact of our value-informed work.

So, what of assessment?

Playing off of Molly’s theme of being at a crossroads, I would like to suggest that assessment can serve our libraries, and thus our institutions, in at least three ways—as map, as compass, and as strategic guide.

These serve what I see as the mission for library assessment: *sensemaking for decisionmaking*.

Assessment as a map provides us with the “lay of the land”—a high-level and holistic view of the terrain, climate, and locations of key landmarks. Assessment can tell us what is happening by gathering data points but then also providing analysis and interpretation in order to reveal the patterns and trends in what has occurred over time. This descriptive information includes inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts—placed in context and in comparison. This assessment work reveals different scenarios and possibilities. And, like the beautifully illustrated maps of bygone eras, it might even reveal where “there be dragons!” to work around and guard against.

Assessment as compass reveals possible directions—possibilities for growth, improvement, and new initiatives—and shows these relative to our “north star,” our purpose and mission. This data shows us options and choices that can be made. A compass does not, however, tell us which direction to choose; it only illuminates options and pathways and helps us get our bearings. It illustrates what we will walk away from in order to walk towards other directions.

Assessment as strategic guide empowers making choices and decisions that align resources and activities with our goals, mission, and purpose. Data is not a decision. But decisions should be based on data. Decision making, based on data, must be firmly grounded in values and mission, maximizing impact and efficiency, in pursuit of a vibrant future, which can only emanate from strategic options chosen today.

I would like to take a moment here to point out that the future of libraries is made by choices we make today. And tomorrow’s today. And the next day’s today. The future is not some single choice made once and at a single point in time; it is the cumulative and ongoing creation of our decisions on each today. We will make a future for our libraries out of whatever choices we make and not choosing is still a choice. It is possible to make a future by not choosing.

This is what makes it all the more important to be vigilant about the quality of our library assessment work and its purpose. We must ensure that our libraries are pursuing evidence-based decision

making and not engaging in “decision-based evidence-making.”

Let me say that again. Are you engaging in “decision-based evidence-making” rather than “evidence-based decision making?” Is your library’s assessment program finding data to support already-made decisions? Or, is it providing the data from which decisions are then made?

Molly challenged us to think about our institutions and what they need to be—and, by extension, what our libraries need to be. We need to also turn our attention to whether our library assessment programs are what they need to be.

Library assessment efforts have matured in the last decade—from historic focus on inputs and outputs to our current attention to outcomes, impact, and value. I look around this room and see leaders in that effort and hundreds of people who have done the challenging work of making that happen in all of our individual libraries. I would like to think that I have made a contribution to that—in my own library and in the professional as well. And so, with these next remarks, I am challenging myself as much as all of you.

Are our library assessment programs as effective as we need them to be? How do we know? How could we know? How do we avoid “decision-based evidence-making” about our own assessment programs?

Recently, a higher education assessment listserv had an interesting discussion on “assessing assessment” on campus. At the most recent Indianapolis Assessment Institute, I attended a presentation on a forthcoming “assessment maturity” instrument. We need to be having this discussion in libraries as well.

We set out to embrace and expand our library assessment efforts in the belief that it would be helpful to understanding our purpose and achieving our goals. We in the library assessment community have convinced our library colleagues of the utility and value of gathering data, reflective analysis, and affirming or iterating to improve library practices. Can we tell this same story of our library assessment programs? Are we gathering evidence about how well our assessment efforts serve our libraries, colleagues, and administrators?

I have put forth the claim today that library assessment can serve as map, compass, and strategic guide at this time of being at a crossroads in higher education. It is crucial that we ask ourselves whether we in library assessment are achieving that. How well are library assessment programs serving library needs as a map of descriptive information, a compass revealing possible directions, and a strategic guide for choosing? How well are our library assessment programs ensuring that our libraries can get to our destinations, driven by clarity of purpose, that is, the needs and successes of our campus communities?

Are we fulfilling the promise of *sensemaking for decisionmaking*?

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