
Event Evaluation: Developing a Rubric for Assessing the Value of Library Programming

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Abstract

This paper covers the University of Louisville Libraries' experience with developing tools and a rubric for assessing events sponsored by one of the campus libraries. It provides background information about the local environment, outlines a conceptual framework developed for understanding event assessment, and briefly describes the tools that were designed for that purpose. It also describes some of the organizational barriers that were encountered as the assessment plan was shared within the organization. It serves as a reminder that creating a culture of assessment involves much more than introducing specific tools and methods for gathering feedback. It requires an organizational commitment to learn how well and what good is accomplished through the delivery of collections, programs, and services.

Introduction

Events programming at the University of Louisville (UofL) Libraries has always been considered a means for the unit to contribute to the vibrant intellectual climate on campus and create a welcoming environment for users. Over the years, the libraries have initiated and hosted a broad range of activities in our facilities, including exhibits, receptions, lectures, presentations, workshops, and open houses. During a period of organizational transition, this approach came under administrative scrutiny, and event assessment was recommended as a means of refining the future direction of the libraries' events programming.

Context

The previous dean of libraries strongly encouraged events as one method of generating visibility for the libraries. Her underlying premise was that increasing the number of events held in library facilities elevated the libraries' campus profile. It was believed this would increase the university administration's perception of library value and eventually result in greater investment via budget increases. Another

administrative tenet affecting the volume of activity was that building relationships with external academic and support units was critical for reaching our long-term goals of administrative investment. As such, collaborations with other units, regardless of the libraries' role in event planning or execution, were encouraged and rewarded. Compounding these issues was an ad hoc infrastructure supporting events that drove a distributed decision-making culture. Library directors, librarian liaisons, and a very active exhibits committee were all empowered with initiating and hosting events.

For a period of time, this approach appeared to be quite successful. The number of events increased and the libraries experienced increased traffic. Librarians were rewarded for their efforts and believed that they had accrued positive social capital with campus colleagues. Campus surveys validated that the libraries were held in high regard by the campus community, and the libraries enjoyed good support from the university administration. It is impossible to determine if any of these conditions were related to the increasing number of events held in the libraries, but it was a highly self-justifying system.

By the time a new Dean arrived in early 2011, this approach to events programming had become, in many respects, a victim of its own success. With so many different people involved and the lack of coordination, events were being scheduled when the buildings were closed, rooms were being double-booked, and the libraries' technology, public services, and facilities staff were spending hours each week responding to "emergency" help requests from outside groups who viewed libraries' personnel as their conference center support group. Because the issues were the most pressing in the largest of the campus libraries, the library director convened an events work group to manage the calendar and logistics for all events in that facility.

For the first time, one central body was charged with coordinating events, spaces, and resources. The group started meeting weekly and consisted of the library director, the head of access and user services, and two individuals closely involved in room scheduling. Their first tasks were to develop a schedule of all routine, ongoing events and to coordinate planning with event sponsors for future events. This allowed them to be better prepared for those ongoing events the libraries had long-standing arrangements to support. The group also rigorously reviewed incoming requests for new events and determined whether the libraries could accommodate their building use needs. Finally, they identified key library personnel for each event's management and shifted responsibility for security, maintenance, and other physical labor to the event planners. With these nominal changes, it was clear that, although some of the events were related to local collections and services, others had tenuous connections at best. Being charged to take a more focused and strategic approach to events planning allowed the group to say no to requests that were outside the scope of the libraries' strategic plan, particularly when the requested event placed significant demands on library resources. Within a year of when the group started, there was a clear decline in both the number of new events taking place in the library and the amount of situational drama that occurs when things go wrong. Additionally, the events that were taking place were better planned, better resourced, and more connected to the mission and goals of the library.

Building a Tool

Despite the many positive changes made to the logistics and scheduling of library events, assessment was not being used to help the group get feedback on events programming. As such, the authors volunteered to develop instruments to assist the events coordinators with understanding how well they were doing and where there were opportunities for further improvements. They envisioned the final outcome would be similar to the program evaluation forms that are a standard feature at most conferences, augmented with more casual onsite tools such as whiteboards or guest books.

The library literature provided a number of useful, thought-provoking, and holistic approaches related to event assessment, particularly in sources about public library programming. Sources from the business literature also provided invaluable

guidance for understanding how to measure event performance. In both librarianship and the business world, the concept of Return on Investment (ROI) with respect to events led to thinking about the success of events more broadly than originally conceived. If ROI was at the core of the transformative change in events coordination at UofL, the ability to assess it would greatly enhance assessment efforts.

The authors then focused on learning more about the purpose and history of events the libraries were already hosting, such as an annual Dia de los Muertos display that filled the first floor lobby with altars and kites created by introductory Spanish classes to pay tribute to the deceased. Structured interviews were conducted with the library contacts for five representative events derived from the compiled events schedule. During these interviews, they asked planners a set of questions about the history of the event, its goals, success indicators, and their perceptions of the value to the libraries for hosting the event. These conversations were very pivotal in the development of an initial conceptual model for assessing the libraries' events. One of the key findings from these interviews was that the desire to build and maintain relationships with campus partners was often the primary goal of hosting the event from the library planners' perspectives. Although the planners had little evidence that event collaboration led to more frequent or deeper collaborations, they were highly certain of their value. Another important finding was that libraries' personnel frequently had little, if any, involvement in overall event decision making.

An early conceptual model (Figure 1) emerged from the literature review and interviews with colleagues that had four dimensions for assessing events. As the authors developed a bank of questions and suggested methods (a toolkit) for collecting information related to each dimension, it appeared that the categories were not quite as distinct and encompassing as initially thought. Some questions seemed to fall in multiple categories and others did not fall neatly into any of them. After further analysis of the model and its four dimensions, it appeared there were two broad domains relative to event assessment that needed to be captured: "How well did we do?" and, "What good did we do?"

The "How Well" measures covered the quality of the event and core issues of performance. Many

event evaluations focus exclusively on these issues, however, a comprehensive and robust event assessment should focus on both. Beyond performance issues, the “What Good” questions addressed impact and value. The relationship

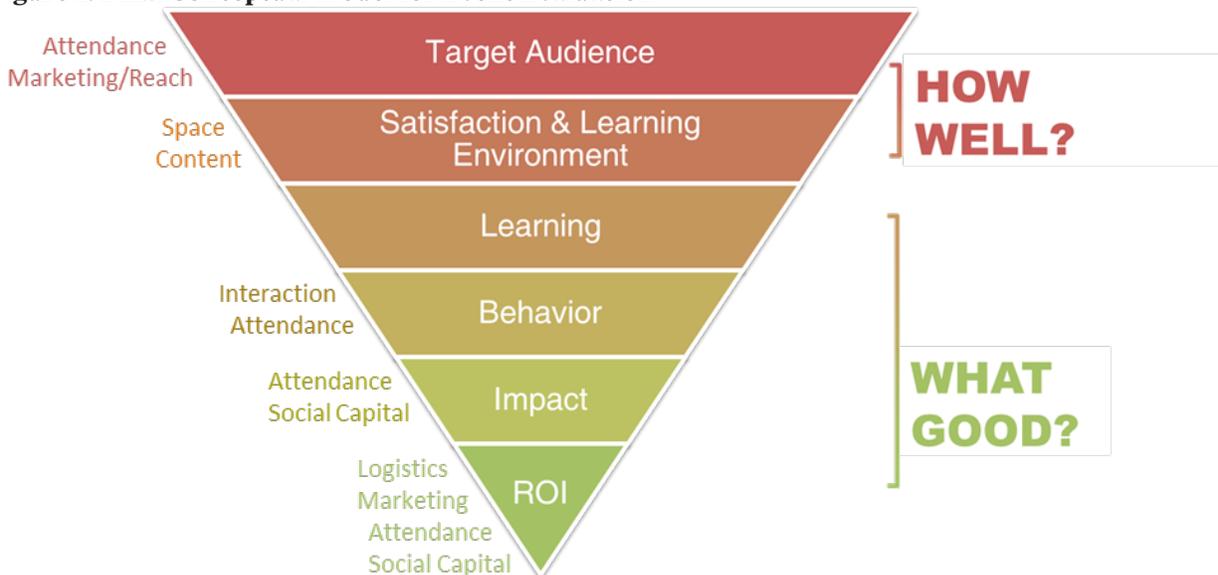
between these two domains is hierarchical, such that, if the quality (How Well) threshold has not been met, having a positive impact and value (What Good) are unlikely to be achieved.

Figure 1. Early Conceptual Model for Event Evaluation



The current working model (Figure 2) overlays the How Well and What Good domains on Hamso’s six dimensions.¹ In this hierarchical model, the new dimensions offered better-defined categories than the previous model and greater granularity for exploring the two broader domains. The How Well domains were expanded to two dimensions. The first, Target Audience, covered not only how many people attended an event, but the impact of marketing on reaching and attracting the target audience. The second dimension, Satisfaction and Learning Environment, measured overall satisfaction with the event content and space. In the What

Good domain, the Learning dimension tackled measuring participant perceptions of their learning at the event, while the Behavior dimension aimed to capture whether the event influenced participants’ attendance at other events or their interactions with planners following the event. The Impact dimension measured whether event sponsorship had any effect on our relationships and whether the event led to other opportunities for collaboration with partners. And the final dimension, ROI, zeroed in on the return on investment in publicity and marketing, logistics, and building social capital.

Figure 2. Final Conceptual Model for Event Evaluation

A toolkit, within the framework of the new six-dimensional model, is currently under development with lists of questions and data collection templates that a program planner could use to customize an assessment instrument or set of instruments based on the purpose and scope of any given event. This customizable toolkit will reside on a shared network where event planners will draw from the question and methods bank and essentially create their own assessment plan on a case-by-case basis without having to fully reinvent the wheel for each event. During the initial year, the user experience/assessment librarian will work closely with event planners as they use the toolkit to determine which questions have been productive for them, which ones need refinement, and which should be abandoned. Ideally, the event planners will add to the question list for use by other future planners. Assessment's role will eventually be to track which evaluation methods/templates are favored by planners and elicit the most insightful responses, and modify the toolkit as needed.

Implementation

When the conceptual model for event evaluation and preliminary measurement tools was ready to be shared with colleagues in the organization, it became an agenda item at a monthly meeting of library department heads and other functional area specialists. What was expected to be a limited engagement agenda item turned into a very animated and lengthy response to the model and the toolkit

of proposed questions and assessment instruments. In presenting the proposal, the authors focused on the model and ended up priming meeting attendees for a more philosophical conversation about event evaluation, rather than focusing on barriers to incorporating the tools and limitations of specific tools. Despite the inadvertent priming, the meeting attendees still provided a number of practical ideas for improving the end product based on their experiences on the front lines of event planning.

Although the proposal recommended fairly low stakes methods, there were still a number of comments about assessment introducing unnecessary complications into event planning. Program evaluation was perceived as burdensome and a barrier to adoption when it was assigned to planners instead of an assessment librarian. Sustainable, best practices from an assessment perspective were not considered to be a positive value for the individuals who were now responsible for the work. Others expressed concerns about the methods being overly intrusive and alienating to attendees. At the end of the discussion, it was clear that they wanted low-effort and unobtrusive tools for capturing assessment information, particularly for smaller events. Additionally, there was apprehension about where the data would reside and wariness about how it would be used. For meeting attendees, the goal of event evaluation was unclear—was it to provide data that would allow them to refine their events, or to determine

which events should continue? This uncertainty reflected a larger issue; the conceptual model had struck a nerve regarding the organizational culture around events management, which had not been as closely managed.

Beneath the somewhat natural reaction to having their events evaluated for the first time, it was clear that many of the library department heads were still using the previous dean's vision of events as their guide for event planning and defining success. For example, one person indicated that use of the library's space by other departments was an indication of success as a liaison. Another expressed that being considered a good partner was the gold standard for event planning. Another underlying theme was a fear of losing the autonomy for event planning that was a hallmark of the previous approach. Although there had been an emphasis on coordinating event logistics and calendar management for more than a year at the proposal presentation, the model for event evaluation highlighted coordination of purpose in a way that had not been explicitly addressed. A third very strong theme was concern that evaluating success and impact would impose limitations on *potentially* valuable outcomes, outcomes that might not materialize until well into the future, and, relatedly, whether assessment could possibly measure the *true* value of events. These ideas were reminiscent of the provocative beliefs articulated in the 2015 Southeast Library Assessment Conference keynote address, specifically that assessment can get in the way of innovation and erode the academic social contract of being free to try and fail.²

The analysis of the comments collected during the presentation of this proposal revealed a great deal about the organization's readiness for an event evaluation program. Despite the successful and largely unquestioned work of the events work group, nominal attention had been paid to managing the human aspect, and the friction shared during the meeting was clearly in response to an organizational change that did not have strong buy-in. The power of organizational culture and attachment to existing values had been underestimated, even though it had been articulated during the interview phase. Although these interviews revealed obvious disparities between the planners' and administrators' goals and success indicators, it was naïve to think that assessment could be the bridge between the two. Assessment is a powerful tool for providing organizational information that can be used to

inspire or drive change, but it cannot replace an old vision with a new one. Alternatively, more time could have been invested interviewing all the key stakeholders, allowing emphasis to be placed on measuring progress toward shared goals instead of focusing on measuring progress in areas where stakeholders were not on the same page. With further reflection and analysis of the feedback, the toolkit was redesigned to include many more methods that do not require direct engagement with attendees. The overall conceptual model, however, remains unchanged.

Event Evaluation in the Wild

Despite the challenges to implementing event evaluation at the main library, the decision was made to pilot the model during the 2016 fall semester. Kick Back in the Stacks (KBitS) is an annual social event held in the main library since 2013. It was created by First Year Initiatives, a subunit of Undergraduate Affairs, and is scheduled for the Friday evening before the start of classes. Over one thousand students show up for fun activities, food, and informational stations. KBitS has high visibility among undergraduate students and has strong potential for relationship building with an important unit on campus.

A scaffolded approach to implementing the model was recommended for the pilot, focusing on the How Well domain with a small foray to measure What Good issues. To capture feedback on the Satisfaction/Learning Environment dimension, a memory wall was mounted on a large glass surface near the exit with the prompt "My Favorite Moment Tonight Was..." Guerilla voting was also incorporated to provide a low effort and non-disruptive way to identify preferred experiences. Using Google Forms, an icon-based survey was created to help speed up the voting process, and staff armed with tablets approached students as they exited the events. With subsequent iterations, either new dimensions or new facets of a dimension could be folded into the program's assessment to collect more complete information about the performance and impact of an event.

In the What Good domain, the libraries will use the card swipes collected by First Year Initiatives as students entered the building to look at behavior. These card swipes capture student names and identification numbers and will be compared with other library data to examine relationships between

first-year student use of the library and attendance at the KBitS event. For this event, future low-hanging fruit might be adding the attendance dimension, as its event planning is highly coordinated and heavily marketed.

Next Steps

A rubric for evaluating performance for each dimension is currently under development. The rubric's primary goal is to improve performance and, as such, will take an analytic approach for each facet of the dimension. There will be a three-point scale of "beginning," "proficient," and "transformative," with distinct and detailed descriptions for each facet, providing a clear path for improvement. The rubric may also be used to make future decisions about continuing or abandoning events. Plans are now underway for additional pilots in the 2017 spring semester for different types of events. Over time, the toolkit will contain customizable assessment tools to address all the dimensions of the model, and the original goals of the project will be realized.

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Notes

1. Hamso, "ROI Methodology."
2. Ludovice and Bennett, *Consilience with Pete and Charlie*.

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