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# Acknowledging the Political, Economic, and Values-Based Motivators of Assessment Work: An Analysis of Publications on Academic Library Assessment

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## Abstract

Key motivators for assessment work in academic libraries include the persistent service ethic and evolving user focus in libraries; a quality assurance framework in higher education that focuses on measuring outcomes; and an overall political and economic climate of accountability and austerity. However, researchers publishing and presenting about library assessment do not always explicitly acknowledge the factors influencing their assessment work, nor do they consistently identify whose values the assessment represents. Through a review and content analysis of the papers published as part of the biennial Library Assessment Conference proceedings from 2006–2014, this research identifies how researchers acknowledge the motivators of assessment work, and aims to promote awareness and reflection among researchers about their own motivations.

The paper highlights results related to frequency and nature of language used by researchers to show their motivation for conducting library assessment work, with 92% of authors identifying the motivator of improving the library and 46% identifying the motivator of proving something about the library. The use of the concepts of accountability and hope are further discussed. Recommendations are included for librarians to consider before and while undertaking assessment work and when preparing manuscripts and presentations about assessment.

## Introduction and Purpose

Assessment work has grown substantially in academic libraries in the last two decades, as have physical and online venues for disseminating assessment research and sharing projects. Commonly used definitions of assessment focus on two facets: *proving* something about the library (e.g., demonstrating contribution to learning or need for funding), and *improving* the library (e.g., improving services, spaces, or collections). Assessment has been

increasingly presented and discussed as compulsory in libraries—an activity that all librarians must engage in if they in fact value libraries and embody library values. Nitecki, Wiggins, and Turner write that the idea of a culture of assessment “has become a popular ‘necessity’ for academic libraries since the 1990s,”<sup>1</sup> and the authors’ use of scare quotes in that quotation demonstrates some of their skepticism about its role. The development of library assessment has introduced new terminology and concepts, not always well-defined, and librarians use words such as “value” (as in, proving the value or contribution of the library to its users or its broader institution) without explaining what they mean by it.<sup>2</sup> While there is certainly tacit knowledge within the field, alongside that are many assumptions about practices, meanings, and motivations.

This paper seeks to determine whether motivators for assessment (i.e., the reasons why assessment work is being done) are being acknowledged by librarians and whether a variety of motivators are being named. Is there, in fact, variation in how librarians describe their reason and motivation for engaging in assessment work?

There is a lack of critical reflection and research about motivations for engaging in assessment work; through content analysis of papers published in the LAC proceedings, the purpose of this paper is to provide a baseline for understanding how librarians describe their motivations for assessment work, and to provide perspectives on the importance of presenting and understanding these factors. Content analysis allows for an unobtrusive review of authors’ disseminated work.

## Literature Review

While much has been published about library assessment, very little has focused critically on motivations or rationale for undertaking library

assessment work. Motivations for assessment have been noted broadly by a number of authors as background to their own work and have included improving quality of services, calls for accountability, supporting the institutional mission and vision, questions prompted by stakeholders, and internal management needs. The notion of defining motivation for assessment is addressed indirectly by Snead, who writes that “library decision makers need [to] be able to select the best evaluation strategy given the... [m]otivation for the evaluation,” which suggests that one must be able to identify the motivation for the evaluation or assessment.<sup>3</sup> Assessment can be motivated by deeply held values, with the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) survey as an example: “Constructing an educational metric is never a neutral act. Value-based choices about what to measure, how to measure it, and how to draw conclusions and communicate results within the constraints set by methodological integrity, will dog every step.”<sup>4</sup> Identifying and acknowledging those values and motivations is key to bringing clarity to assessment practices.

Two sets of authors have conducted surveys or interviews related to rationale and motivation for assessment. Town presented results from 38 responses from libraries at British institutions and found that “[r]ationales for undertaking value and impact measurement were almost numerically evenly spread across the three motivations of advocacy, service improvement, or inter-institutional comparison,”<sup>5</sup> with many libraries providing more than one motivation. Hiller and Wright visited 24 libraries as part of two Association of Research Libraries (ARL) related services: “Making Library Assessment Work” and “Effective Sustainable and Practical Assessment.” They found that “the primary motivators for engaging in assessment were the external ones of accountability and accreditation, and the internal ones of measuring achievement and improving library resources and services.”<sup>6</sup> More specifically, from highest percentage to lowest, the responses were: using data effectively, organizational culture/culture of assessment, data analysis, university needs, data collection, staff assessment expertise, accreditation, performance measures/benchmarking, planning (library), and student learning outcomes (instruction). Hiller and Wright also present results from a 2007 survey undertaken by ARL of 73 libraries about the impetus for assessment (again from highest to lowest percentage): desire to know more about your customers, investigation of possible new library

services/resources, desire to know more about your processes, desire to identify library performance objectives, need to reallocate library resources, accountability requirements from parent institution, and institutional or programmatic accreditation process.<sup>7</sup>

Some papers have acknowledged the possible tension between individual or library motivations and values and the institution or government’s motivations and values, in particular as it relates to adopting business practices. In the forward of Oakleaf’s *Value of Academic Libraries* report for ACRL,<sup>8</sup> the ACRL executive director and the ACRL president acknowledged the difficulty for libraries, librarians, and academics in adopting business terminology and practices, and note that this is a necessity because of our environment; Oakleaf herself also acknowledged this tension.<sup>9</sup> Others note that “standard economic methods for determining value are not appropriate”<sup>10</sup> for universities or libraries, and call return on investment calculations “naïve and misinterpreted assessments of our roles and impacts at our institutions and across higher education.”<sup>11</sup> The use of management tools (e.g., balanced scorecard, strategic plans, LibQUAL+) are tied to discourse around accountability and evaluation, and tools that conform to the values of an organization are promoted.<sup>12</sup>

How do values (beliefs and codes of behaviour that guide actions and decisions) relate to assessment? Some librarians argue that the mission, vision, and values of a university must inform library planning and assessment,<sup>13</sup> but do not address how values of the library or librarianship fit into that process, and what happens if (when) there is disagreement. As an extreme example, a director of a research library in South Africa shared some of the history of the apartheid government requiring libraries to report numbers of volumes in specific subject areas, in order to impose control over the types of materials that citizens or students could access.<sup>14</sup> Are we critically analyzing and questioning the rationale of our own governments’ or institutions’ demands for assessment, and the implications on our own libraries, staff, and users? Do assessment practices of librarians always mirror and incorporate core values of librarianship, such as those of the American Library Association (access, diversity, and social responsibility, among others)?<sup>15</sup> Oakleaf poses a question about the congruence of espoused values and enacted values,<sup>16</sup> and Town and Kyriallidou note that “[v]alue is inextricably linked to values; thus

values will provide the key and route to proof of worth.”<sup>17</sup> Tying values to actions is not new, and yet the connection is not always made explicit.

### Methodology

While there are many sources of published literature about library assessment, the Library Assessment Conference (LAC) is a key venue for presenting assessment work, with proceedings published about one year after the conference. The 2016 conference marked the 10-year anniversary of LAC, and papers from the five sets of LAC proceedings from 2006–2014 (a total of 361 papers from which a random selection was generated) were chosen as the units of analysis for this content analysis.

The goal of the analysis was to identify motivations for library assessment and to code the text using a name that represented the type of motivation, whether for a specific assessment/research project or for library assessment generally.

While Town<sup>18</sup> and Hiller and Wright<sup>19</sup> present results of three surveys that identify possible motivators of assessment, this research uses an inductive approach to identifying motivators so as to not predetermine what a motivator might be. A structured process for developing codes through content analysis was used by randomly choosing 10 papers out of the 361 and carefully reading them to identify and develop coding language for assessment motivators.

When reading for text that described motivations, the author looked for words such as *purpose, reason, because, why, goal, objective, and intention*. Subjective reading and interpretation was done to best identify the motivation(s) for the assessment work. Imperatives or statements such as “Libraries must demonstrate...” or “This study attempts to determine...” or “We wanted to better understand this area in order to...” also indicated motivations or justifications for conducting that work. Most papers contained more than one type of motivation, and often contained more than one instance of describing a particular motivation.

This iterative process led to a list of 17 possible codes for motivations. Definitions were created during the process based on the coded texts, and verified to accurately and adequately represent the codes and the coded text. The codes were further reviewed and revised along with the coded text to determine an appropriate level of coding. Five codes were removed and the texts were assigned other codes as applicable. While there are similarities among the codes, in practice it was straightforward to differentiate among the codes, and the goal was not to assign only one code to each paper, but rather to identify all of the possible motivators in a given paper.

For this research, the author then randomly selected 10% of the number of papers each year, rounded up to the nearest whole number (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Total and Analyzed Papers from LAC Proceedings, 2006–2014**

Conference Year	Total Papers Published in Proceedings	Papers Analyzed
2006	43	5
2008	66	7
2010	68	7
2012	72	8
2014	112	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>361</b>	<b>39</b>

The author then closely read the 39 papers (see Appendix A for the list of papers) and assigned the predefined codes to phrases or text within each paper that demonstrated motivation. One new motivation was identified that did not match

a previously defined code, and a new code and definition was created. There were 13 total codes after completing the content analysis. Table 2 shows the final groups of codes found to be motivations for library assessment, with brief definitions.

**Table 2: Motivators for Library Assessment**

<b>Code for Motivator</b>	<b>Brief Definition</b>
<b>Develop Internal Expertise</b>	Providing hands-on experience for librarians and staff to develop knowledge and interest in assessment
<b>Contribute to Body of Research</b>	Contributing to library literature so as to provide information/evidence for others; filling gaps in knowledge
<b>Involve Users</b>	Demonstrating user-centeredness of library by focusing on users; involving users directly in assessment for engagement purposes
<b>Determine User Satisfaction</b>	Measuring/determining users' perceptions and satisfaction with library
<b>Measure Contribution of Library</b>	Determining how the library or a service of the library has contributed to users (goal is measuring versus proving)
<b>Make Decisions (Current and Future)</b>	Using data gathered as part of assessment to make a decision about a library service/resource (focus is on evidence versus anecdotes, making best use of library financial and human resources)
<b>Improve the Library (Services/Resources/ Spaces)</b>	Making an improvement to the library or a library role (e.g., student learning, spaces, services, collections); focus is on making something better for the users
<b>Understand Users' Behaviours/Needs/ Knowledge</b>	Developing greater understanding of users' knowledge, behaviours, and wants/needs; a further goal may or may not be present (i.e., why do the authors want to understand users?)
<b>Advocacy and Justification</b>	Providing information to help advocate for or justify funds/investment/expenditure, future projects/renovations, librarian/staff time
<b>Demand from Administration</b>	Responding to demand from the university or library administration for assessment
<b>Political/Economic Situation</b>	Responding to local or broad political or economic factors
<b>Accountability</b>	Responding specifically to a demand for accountability; any use of the word stem accountab* in reference to libraries or institutions.
<b>Prove/Demonstrate Value of Library</b>	Proving that the library makes positive contributions (e.g., to student learning, to faculty research); combination of proving/demonstrating/showing + value/worth/impact/outcomes of the library (goal is proving versus measuring)

The initial expectation and goal of the research was to identify political, economic, and values-based motivations. Upon examining the papers, these were not in fact prevalent motivations, or were not expressed at a superficial or manifest level. For that reason, the broad code of "Political/Economic Situation" could be used.

### Findings

As noted in the introduction, assessment is often defined as having two facets: *proving* and *improving*. The codes can be similarly divided into motivations that aim to prove something about the library, and motivations that aim to improve something in the library. Table 3 summarizes the motivations

found within the 39 papers. All papers had at least one reference to a motivation, and 32 had more than one motivation. Authors who developed and wrote out their research questions (generally in the introduction to the paper) had more clearly structured motivations.

One-third of the papers included motivators from both the *improve* and *prove* categories, reinforcing that the two categories are not mutually exclusive

and that assessment work can serve multiple purposes. In many cases, assessment that could be used for immediate action or improvement could also be used to help prove something about the value of the library.

Due to the small sample size, no meaningful comparison can be made among the different conference years.

**Table 3: Numbers of Papers with Motivators**

Motivator	Number of Papers	
Develop Internal Expertise	2	Improve: 36 papers (92%)
Contribute to Body of Research	4	
Involve Users	6	
Determine User Satisfaction	6	
Measure Contribution of Library	13	
Make Decisions (Current and Future)	15	
Improve the Library (Services/Resources/Spaces)	23	
Understand Users' Behaviours/Needs/Knowledge	24	
		Both: 13 papers (33%)
Advocacy and Justification	3	
Demand from Administration	4	
Political/Economic Situation	5	
Accountability	7	
Prove/Demonstrate Value of Library	9	
		Prove: 18 papers (46%)

**Improving the Library**

The vast majority of papers (92%) included at least one motivator of *improving* the library. Papers with motivators in these categories often focused on a specific project as opposed to assessment writ large. The focus was frequently directly tied to users, and reflected the desire to change something in the present or near future. In many cases, authors who described *improving* kinds of motivations presented their assessment work as valuable in and of itself, and understanding users' behaviours and needs and measuring how the library contributes to users' learning and research experiences were labelled as beneficial. Even for those 23 papers with the motivation to "Improve the Library (Services/Resources/Space)," the specific improvement or plan for improvement was not always made explicit. There is often a disconnect between the motivator of the assessment and the result of the assessment.

The choice of language around the desired or observed utility of the results of the assessment work was often unclear and referenced ideas of hope

and the future. Results of assessment work may not be straightforward, and implementing changes is not always within the scope of the papers' authors or within the authors' timeframe with respect to the conference presentation or publishing of the conference proceedings. However, more clearly defining the motivation and research questions or project goals at the start of the project and paper would allow authors to more directly determine if they have answered their questions or met those goals.

*Proving the Library*

Just under half (46%) of the papers discussed a demand to *prove* or demonstrate something about the library as a motivator for conducting assessment, whether it be a specific project or research or assessment generally. In these papers, assessment and the motivation for assessment are described at a high level, and are often presented in a strategic (as opposed to operational or immediately practical) way. While the ultimate beneficiary of the assessment may be the direct user (student

or researcher), the motivations in this category generally referred to demand from higher-level stakeholders. This demand is coming from university administration, who are themselves being pressured and required by governments and accrediting bodies to demonstrate learning and research outcomes. It is described in a matter-of-fact way, as something that has already been accepted and with which libraries must comply without question. There was no written reflection on the possibility of libraries playing a role in having conversations about or shaping that demand. The “demand” is also often described in vague terms, and without further discussions with the authors, it would be impossible to truly understand the context.

“Accountability” was described as an era and a movement, and was used in ways to suggest that the definition should be known to all readers. Similarly, economic pressures, fiscal realities, and political climate are also noted as motivations for conducting assessment in the library, but are not described in detail. The assumption is that readers (in particular American readers) will understand the situation experienced by the authors and their institutions.

### Implications

This research demonstrates that authors do identify at least one motivator for their assessment-related projects and work; however, motivators are not always clearly identified. It often took careful reading to find the motivator, and many were identified by interpreting fairly general statements and piecing together different statements within the papers. Making the motivators explicit will help readers more fully understand the context and the impetus for the assessment work. Furthermore, acknowledging additional context around the values and organizational culture that informed the assessment work will inform readers and facilitate conversations around the direction of assessment, as well as conversations about librarians’ roles in shaping that direction. Values such as access to information or social responsibility may be so innate as to seem obvious, but clearly identifying them will enhance a rich body of literature and provide context for readers and colleagues.

Before embarking on a project, it is recommended that the authors clearly discuss and define the motivation behind their work, and revisit this during the project. The “why” of assessment must be discussed purposefully and critically, and authors

should be clear about their interpretations and the context for potentially vague concepts such as accountability or value. This additional information and thoughtfulness may also surface assumptions to be explored and possibilities for advocacy around libraries’ and librarians’ roles in determining the future of library assessment.

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### Notes

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## Appendix A: LAC Proceedings Papers Used as Units of Analysis

- Susan Gardner Archambault, "Charting Your Course: Using Curriculum Mapping to Enhance Information Literacy," in *Proceedings of the 2014 Library Assessment Conference: Building Effective, Sustainable, Practical Assessment*, August 4–6, Seattle, Washington (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2015): 260–264, <http://libraryassessment.org/bm-doc/proceedings-lac-2014.pdf>.
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- Susan Bailey and Megan Slemons, "Halt! Who Goes There? Assessing Library Use with Turnstile Data," in *Proceedings of the 2014 Library Assessment Conference: Building Effective, Sustainable, Practical Assessment*, August 4–6, Seattle, Washington (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2015): 406–412, <http://libraryassessment.org/bm-doc/proceedings-lac-2014.pdf>.
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- Karin de Jager, "Demonstrating Library Value: Appropriate Methodologies and Practical Approaches at the University of Cape Town," in *Proceedings of the 2014 Library Assessment Conference: Building Effective, Sustainable, Practical Assessment*, August 4–6, Seattle, Washington (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2015): 545–548, <http://libraryassessment.org/bm-doc/proceedings-lac-2014.pdf>.



- Wanda Dole, Donna Rose, Maureen James, and Suzanne Martin, “Integrating Assessment and Planning: A Path to Improved Library Effectiveness,” in *Proceedings of the 2008 Library Assessment Conference: Building Effective, Sustainable, Practical Assessment*, August 4–7, Seattle, Washington (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2009): 403–408, <http://libraryassessment.org/bm-doc/proceedings-lac-2008.pdf>.
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