
Assessment Planning in the Time of Change

Laurie Borchard and Charissa Jefferson
California State University, Northridge, USA

Abstract

Creating effective assessment plans are a challenge, especially when academic libraries are constantly evolving. This case study provides the experience of a library that aimed to develop an assessment plan that aligns with strategic goals, provides a reporting structure and actionable items, and ensures that the plan could and would be implemented in a timely manner. During the planning phase, it is imperative to assess the current library climate, consult with everyone in the library, and collect preliminary data to determine what the needs of the library are. The purpose of this paper is to provide best practices for developing library assessment plans.

Introduction

Libraries are constantly evolving and our library is at a time of large institutional and professional change. We are undergoing strategic planning, library morale team building, implementing a new library management system, adopting the ACRL framework, and additional university-wide initiatives. Our library assessment plan aligns with university and library strategic goals in anticipation of upcoming major changes in instruction, technologies, and personnel workflows. This paper provides best practices for creating an assessment plan for academic libraries. When in the design phase of an assessment plan, there are multiple factors to consider such as utilizing relevant data gathering tools, incorporating an evaluation of the internal organizational climate along with external performance, and determining potential external influences.

Overview of Assessment Planning

There are a variety of ways to accomplish assessment plan design. Applegate¹ provides five design strategies to assessment plan creation, all of which must be comprehensive, feasible, and organized. Plans can use existing data and add context, use a strategic plan to map quantity and quality indicators, evaluate departmental functions, score performance indicators that alert to problem areas, or create a grid to match academic department goals with measures of those results for which the library is responsible.

Each of these design approaches is not necessarily exclusive from one another. There may be combined or layered approaches to Applegate's planning design. Perhaps the best example of this is with UC Berkeley Library. Loo and Dupuis² explain how the UC Berkeley Library approached assessment planning by strategically aligning to evaluate its organizational functionality and performance with wider academic goals and priorities.

Using Academic Program Review reports, UC Berkeley Library developed its evaluation by examining its organizational role in the academic department program. The library conducted a self-study to examine and propose new fiscal and personnel models, as well as approaches to enhancements in services and organizational structures. In this example, the organization aligned itself with the institutional goals and outcomes that will inform an assessment culture that continuously demonstrates value of the library's contributions. The library added qualitative context to the quantitative data, ensuring a human-centered approach to capture the phenomena to motivate personnel. By using a strategic plan to prioritize and validate efforts, the library has been able to enhance the organization with evidence-based procedures.³

Regardless of how a plan is designed, it is essential that each plan communicates the content and frequency of data gathering as well as who is responsible in the data collection on that schedule. While having a plan is not necessary to be able to conduct assessment, having the plan and evaluation schedule helps library personnel see why assessment is important and what the data contributes to value, accountability, and informed decision making. The evaluation plan reflects areas of importance to the organization and aims to streamline efforts in data collection by preventing duplication.⁴

The purpose of assessment is to measure the quality of effectiveness of the organization in achieving the outcomes of the parent institution that it supports.⁵

With institutional attention on student retention and achievement, it is the library's services, physical space, collections, and administrative processes that are evaluated as related to shaping the desired outcomes of the students and teaching faculty. The assessment plan focuses on which measurements will be sufficient to demonstrate the library's organizational performance and how it contributes to the institution's advancement. Assessment plans evaluate workflows, processes, and procedures as they pertain to those objectives of the external organization, the parent institution. Because assessment is tied to outcomes of the institutional mission and goals, performance review may never reveal worthy information of personnel matters that would be valid concerns to library administration. It can be problematic to overlook areas within departments of the library that have discord, dysfunction, or contentious working relationships.

Tryon and Snyder address developing an assessment plan that incorporates internal factors relating to improving work quality in the pursuit of the efficient and effective workflows that the organization is being evaluated upon externally.⁶ It is the means which justify the end. Assessment plans can be difficult to implement if library personnel find that evaluation and measurements are yet another task to do. However, if the purpose of assessment itself is to improve the quality and efficiency of the work, and have the ability to use metrics and data to support decision making and justify needs, it is more likely that personnel will see that internal needs are being met by these measures. For an assessment plan to succeed, only the most useful metrics and deliberate data are conducted and integrated into workflows for the purposes of their improvements. By building a culture of assessment in the organization, the focus becomes more on the capacity for affirming decision making and in the pursuit of quality improvement. The expectation to engage in assessment must be accomplished through fostering an environment of trust and transparency of data sharing.⁷

Taylor and Heath stressed the importance of communicating inclusivity with library personnel so as to focus more on human capital.⁸ Where metrics were associated with the accomplishments of library initiatives, the targeted measures specifically sought to lead to results that provided predictive information and guidance by asking, "If we are successful in accomplishing this strategic objective how will we know?" Optimizing staff and resources

enables organizational accountability that focuses on actionable measures.

Context

California State University, Northridge (CSUN), is located in the San Fernando Valley just north of Los Angeles. Student enrollment is around 40,000, serving mostly undergraduate students. The president of the university has set forth a list of priorities that include student learning, employee engagement, and increasing faculty research. There is an assessment group with a representative from all nine colleges that meets on a regular basis.

The Oviatt Library had an assessment librarian in years past, but now has a team of three faculty librarians serving on the assessment team (A-Team). Our previous six-year assessment plan expires in 2016. This plan focused on assessing the ACRL Information Literacy Standards, Library Collections, and Library Services. Unfortunately, this plan was very broad and the assessment of collections and instruction was never carried out. The A-Team has a rotating membership so every three years the membership changed. The previous plan did not have a reporting structure and the outcomes were not very specific, making it difficult to implement. Obviously three librarians do not have the ability to do all assessment within the library.

Our Approach to Assessment Planning Library Climate

It is no secret that libraries are constantly evolving, and we are going through multiple changes that may affect our assessment and the types of activities we focus on. We wanted to be cognizant of current and future projects that may or may not have an effect on how we approach assessment, our timeline for implementation, and possible integration of assessment into existing projects.

The Framework for Information Literacy is the biggest change/challenge for our information literacy programming. We have developed a working group and are in the process of coming up with best practices for teaching. We are also participating in a CSU-wide pilot assessment of our freshman composition courses.

We are in the process of implementing a new Unified Library Management System (ULMS); this is a CSU project. This project means that all of our backend processing will be completely different and we will

have a new discovery interface. We have a large amount of staff undergoing intensive training and they will literally be learning how to do their job in a completely different environment.

We completed ARL's ClimateQUAL[®], which is an assessment of library morale, including employee perception of diversity, policies, procedures, and job satisfaction. As part of this process, we also held team-building workshops which created an open forum for discussing some of the issues that came up in ClimateQUAL. We also began having more presentations and discussions about diversity in the workplace, including the Privilege Walk.

The library has taken on new roles in the past six years. We have an institutional repository, we have been doing more outreach for assistance related to copyright, we coordinate the campus Open Educational Resources (OER) initiative, and we have been experimenting with library publishing. We also just started strategic planning for the entire library.

Implications:

- How can assessment be embedded into already existing projects?
- Will existing projects affect our ability to do assessment and commit to various projects?
- Where do the new roles the library has taken on fit into our plan?
- How can we incorporate the university's strategic goals into our plan?
- How can we work with library strategic planning to help inform our plan and vice versa?

Best Practices:

- Make sure your plan aligns with the university's goals, as well as the library's.
- Review initiatives that can help or hinder the implementation of your plan.
- Evaluate the previous plan to determine what worked and what did not.
- Make sure your plan is not too broad, but specific enough.
- Assess whether your plan implementation is feasible within a specific amount of time.

Who to Consult?

Everyone! We were a team of four (three reference and instruction librarians and one collections librarian—no staff). We knew that four people were not going to be able to do all the assessment for the library, and that the problem with the previous

plan was that it was not clear exactly who was responsible for carrying out various assessments. In order to make our plan successful and to get more involvement, we decided to consult with everyone during the planning phase. We wanted to make sure that we understood what their priorities were and what projects could potentially help or hinder larger-scale projects.

We started with coordinators of collection development, information literacy, and reference. We discussed their priorities relating to assessment in order to establish overlap or opportunities for the assessment team to assist with projects. We also wanted to get a sense of already existing working groups or committees that might assist with carrying out the assessment plan. We also asked individual librarians to share their assessment activities.

We consulted with the associate dean who used to be the previous assessment librarian. She gave us input on past projects and we discussed our future plans with her.

We also investigated the campus to determine what the assessment priorities were, as well as see what kind of help or opportunities there were.

Implications:

- Understanding the priorities of others and already existing working groups helped us develop a reporting structure for implementation.
- Better understand what the role of the assessment team would be.
- Are there people on campus who can help provide funding for incentives, grant opportunities, consultants for survey development and research methodology?

Best Practices:

- Make sure people are on board.
- Develop a timeline and reporting structure.
- Collaborate with everyone in the planning and implementation phases.

Data Gathering

We wanted to get a sense of the data that the library is already collecting and what we are doing with it. We already know the library is required to report statistics to ACRL on the use of our collections, instruction, reference, circulation, ILL, personnel, and expenditures. However, we know that various

service points collect data that is much more granular and we wanted to know exactly what was being collected, how it was being collected (what software or tools people were using), how often the data was collected, and what was done with the data. We also felt this would give us a sense of the culture of assessment within our library. Were our colleagues analyzing the data they collect? Were they changing services or resources based on their data collection? We felt this would also give the assessment team an opportunity to collaborate with our colleagues in assisting them with their assessment.

We surveyed all the service points and supervisors in the library and we discovered that a lot of granular data was being collected on a daily, semester, and yearly basis. We learned that, although a lot of our colleagues used our ILS and *LibAnswers* to run reports and track statistics, there were also a lot of manual observations and tabulations being done. We also discovered that, although we were collecting a lot of statistics, there was not always time to analyze the data and not everyone was making updates to services points or our collections.

We also reviewed assessment that we had done in the past, which included a large student survey on the use of our physical space, service points, and collections. We also had a Usability Group within our library that had conducted several usability studies on our website, but nothing had been done in several years. We discovered that we have not done anything to assess faculty or staff's use of the library.

Implications:

- There needs to be more guidance and collaboration across the library on assessment.
- There is potential for new tools and technology that could help with data collection and analysis.
- Previous data collected from student survey and usability testing could inform our assessment priorities in our plan.
- Faculty outreach and assessment is lacking; this needs to be a huge priority.

Best Practices:

- See what is being collected in your library and what assessment is already being done.
 - Are there any gaps? Are there services or populations that are being overlooked?
 - What type of assessment would help moving forward (i.e., surveys, focus groups)?

- Is there anecdotal data? For example, senate meetings, faculty workshops, reference desk, reserves, ask people who work directly with students and staff in different capacities.
- What assessment projects should you continue and what new assessments do you need to make a priority?

Findings

The assessment team found that the previous assessment plan was difficult to implement because it was put on the shoulders of one librarian. The team sought to organize an evaluation reporting structure that involved the entire library organization. The library assessment team organized the assessment plan to measure five years of organizational performance in the three areas of information literacy, space and services, and collections to be conducted on a continuous rotation. When one area is being assessed, another area's data is being analyzed, and another's results and recommendations are being shared.

Having recently conducted a student survey almost two years ago about students' use of library space and services, we feel there is sufficient current evidence of the value in this area. Given that our library is migrating to a new management system, it has affected the workflows of our systems and acquisitions personnel so our collections analysis is postponed until after the new system is in place. The first area of assessment will be information literacy. We are particularly interested in library instruction learning outcomes and the ACRL Threshold Concepts. In conjunction with the library's framework working group led by our information literacy instruction coordinator, the library assessment team is in the process of developing information literacy instruction evaluations for the first cycle.

While still undergoing the strategic planning cycle, the assessment team has found it necessary to develop collaborations with persons responsible for specific areas in the library to create a plan that is feasible and reflective of strategic initiatives. The assessment team has laid out the plan for what is to be assessed based on the appropriate workflows and timeline of the organization, and identified personnel, specific coordinators, and working groups who are measuring their performance area. The assessment plan acts as a document that gives the timeline for what is going to be implemented and by

whom, but gives freedom to the facilitators of the evaluation to specify and design the measures that would be most effective.

In a recent survey of library area coordinators, the assessment team found that many areas are already gathering data. The assessment team plans to assist the coordinators with identifying the goals and objectives while providing guidance for measurement of those objectives, especially those that mirror the strategic plan.

The assessment team found that while many librarians are interested in gathering data to improve their teaching quality, they need some tools and resources to get started. One of the goals for the assessment team is to develop and provide a toolkit for librarians and library personnel to utilize. Additionally, the assessment team plans to sponsor assessment themed work events like a sweeps week where, during a given week, librarians can opt in to assess all of the information literacy instruction sessions with pre- and post-assessment questionnaires.

The assessment team has identified in the assessment plan the frequency and reporting structure of data collection and sharing among affected personnel and library administration. The information from the measurements, analysis, and implementation of the results will be submitted in an annual report prepared by the assessment team and shared with the campus assessment committee.

Conclusion

The library's assessment plan focuses on which measurements will be sufficient to demonstrate the library's organizational performance and how it contributes to the institution's advancement. Assessment plans evaluate workflows, processes, and procedures as they pertain to those objectives of the external organization, the parent institution. Plans can use existing data and add context, use a strategic plan to map quantity and quality indicators, evaluate departmental functions, and score performance indicators that alert to problem areas, or create a grid to match academic department goals with measures of those results for which the library is responsible.

For an assessment plan to succeed, only the most useful metrics and deliberate data are conducted and integrated into workflows, for the purpose of their improvements. By building a culture of assessment

in the organization, the focus becomes more on the capacity for affirming decision making and in the pursuit of quality improvement.

The best practices of library assessment plan design include consulting with library personnel on their current data measures and identifying the gaps or duplication, developing a timeline and reporting structure for who is responsible, and ensuring that assessment is part of the personnel and organizational culture by implementing human-capital value in the measures.

—Copyright 2017 Laurie Borchard and Charissa Jefferson

Endnotes

1. R. Applegate, "Designing Comprehensive Assessment Plans: The Big Picture Leads to the Little Picture," *ACRL Fourteenth National Conference* (Seattle: ACRL, 2009).
2. J. Loo and E. Dupuis, "Organizational Learning for Library Enhancements: A Collaborative, Research-Driven Analysis of Academic Department Needs," *College & Research Libraries* 76, no. 5 (2015): 671–689, doi:10.5860/crl.76.5.671.
3. Ibid.
4. Applegate, "Designing Comprehensive Assessment Plans."
5. Raynna Bowlby, "Living the Future: Organizational Performance Assessment," *Journal of Library Administration* 52, no. 6 (2012): 626–652, doi:10.1080/01930826.2011.601627.
6. H. Tryon and L. Snyder, "Developing an Academic Library Assessment Plan: A Case Study," *Performance Measurement and Metrics* 16, no. 1 (2015): 48–61, doi:10.1108/PMM-12-2014-0045.
7. Ibid.
8. M. Taylor and F. Heath, "Assessment and Continuous Planning: The Key to Transformation at the University of Texas Libraries," *Journal of Library Administration* 52, no. 5 (2012): 424–435, doi:10.1080/01930826.2011.2700798.
9. Ibid, 434.