
Writing the Library's Story, Three Outcomes at a Time

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What started as a campus mandate at Hollins University has become the foundation of the Wyndham Robertson Library's assessment work, spurring action to make assessment a part of the library's annual work cycle. The library saw an opportunity to create a cycle of assessment—driven by library needs—that would benefit the library, its users, and the campus, while demonstrating the value of assessment to library staff members.

Approach

To prepare for an impending reaccreditation process, particularly the institutional effectiveness component, the Hollins University administration asked every department in 2013 to develop three outcomes to be assessed on a yearly basis. The library identifies three new outcomes for assessment every year, based on the assumption that three “evergreen” outcomes will not cover the wide range of the nine library principles identified in the ACRL Standards for Libraries in Higher Education (<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/standardslibraries>). Also, library priorities and projects vary from year to year, so the strategy of selecting three new outcomes each year allows the library to ensure assessment is conducted on its most impactful work.

All library staff are involved in the process, beginning with outcome selection. Each outcome must relate to the library's mission, must stem from an ACRL standard (preferably one not addressed in the previous round of assessment), and must provide immediate value to the library. After staff deliberation and selection of the year's desired outcomes, the university librarian identifies the staff member whose job responsibility relates most closely to that outcome, and asks that person to either coordinate the assessment of that outcome or to co-coordinate in tandem with the university librarian. One outcome each year must be a student learning outcome: we committed to this as part of an accompanying university-wide focus on student learning outcomes.

Findings

With this approach, the library is following in the footsteps of a long line of libraries that have sought to use outcomes assessment to improve their services and to show their value to the campus. Outcomes assessment began to be adopted by libraries in the early 2000s, as exemplified by the 2002 ALA publication, *An Action Plan for Outcomes Assessment in Your Library*, and the January/February 2002 issue of *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* devoted to outcomes assessment. Libraries shifted to outcomes, or measures of impact, from input and output measures. Library inputs include such measures as the number of staff and the size of the collection; outputs measure the activity at the library, such as material usage and instruction sessions. Outcomes assessment does not replace either input or output measures, but instead provides another viewpoint (frequently based on whether library users can achieve desired outcomes) to assess the effectiveness of the library.

Outcomes assessment is often used in conjunction with library instruction, as librarians work to measure whether students are learning. However, the term “outcomes assessment” does not have to refer to learning outcomes. As defined on the Hollins campus, desired outcomes could include any work related to a departmental mission that helped a part of the HU community achieve a desired goal. Thus, we are examining a broad measure of outcomes, which could include anything that displays the effectiveness of library work. Institutional effectiveness, to borrow a definition from Dugan and Herson, “examines the extent to which institutions meet their stated mission, goals, and objectives.”¹

According to its mission, the Wyndham Robertson Library “fosters student success at Hollins University by teaching students to critically engage in the discovery and use of information; by connecting faculty and students with resources that advance scholarship and creative work; by strengthening the intellectual community; and by preserving and sharing Hollins' legacy.” Any desired outcome that

the library wishes to measure must reflect either an aspect of the mission statement or one of the nine complementary fundamental commitments, available at <http://presslib.hollins.edu/mission/>.

The library also wanted its outcomes to reflect the ACRL Standards for Libraries in Higher Education because the document “provides us with a framework to think strategically about our value, role, and contributions to institutional effectiveness and assists us in our efforts to effectively communicate this importance to all of our constituents.”²

Much has been written about the importance of assessment to the success of libraries; it seems nearly an equal amount has been written about obstacles to successful library assessment. Hiller, Kyrillidou, and Self drew upon an Association of Research Libraries study to examine “the organizational factors that facilitate and impede effective data use and the implications for assessment,”³ and found that the two most critical determinants were “library leadership that promoted, supported, and used assessment, and an organizational culture that was customer-centered and motivated to improve library services.”⁴

The assessment initiative at the Wyndham Robertson Library began with the university librarian, and was accompanied by a commitment to provide the necessary support (monetary or otherwise) to make assessment work. The library already possessed a customer-centered culture, as shown through an ACRL Excellence in Academic Libraries award in 2009 and consistently stellar library satisfaction scores on a biannual student survey.

With the climate ripe for effective assessment, we were determined to make the assessment meaningful. Given our small staff size of six librarians and three paraprofessionals, with everybody having multiple responsibilities, we knew we could not afford to waste our time on this university mandate without receiving something valuable out of the work.

To make the work relevant and meaningful, we decided to choose outcomes based on our impending work for the year. As an example, in 2014–15, we had recently installed shades and whiteboards in study rooms. Thus, we chose to focus on Standard 6 (space: “Libraries are the intellectual commons where users interact with ideas in both physical and virtual

environments to expand learning and facilitate the creation of new knowledge”). We wanted to assess student reaction to these improvements, as well as find whether other small improvements could enhance the student experience in the library. We began gathering data on usage of particular library spaces, and also conducted targeted surveys both inside and outside the library to assess students’ desires for working spaces. Our desired outcome was that “students will find physical spaces in the library to engage and explore in their intellectual pursuits.”

In 2015–16, we knew we would be exploring a potential website redesign. Thus, we decided to base one outcome, “Members of the Hollins University community will discover resources that enhance their work through a virtual space provided by the library,” on Standard 4 (discovery: “Libraries enable users to discover information in all formats through effective use of technology and organization of knowledge”). This outcome committed our IT librarian to usability testing, card sorting, and other web assessment efforts, and also raised the awareness of his work across the library.

All our outcomes assessment reports are available at <http://presslib.hollins.edu/assessment/>.

Value

In just two years, more than half the library staff engaged with the process as a coordinator or co-coordinator of an outcome assessment. The library has gained valuable information with which it could make immediate changes to improve services. And the assessment cycle has become ingrained in the library’s yearly work.

- July/August (all staff): Review Standards and Mission / Staff meeting to select items for assessment / Instruction team meeting to select student learning outcome
- August/September: Selection of staff member to coordinate or co-coordinate / Design assessment measures and prepare timeline
- Fall and spring semesters: Gather assessment results / Use assessment results to make decisions for improvement
- May/June: Write assessment outcome reports and gather supporting documents for reporting / Send final report to director of institutional effectiveness

Much of the library has contributed to this work, with all our librarians except one having coordinated

or co-coordinated at least one outcome assessment. For example, our instruction coordinator has overseen each of the student learning outcome assessments. The outreach librarian co-coordinated our assessment of how well we encourage user feedback and transparently respond to suggestions. Our technical services and metadata librarian coordinated an assessment of our ability to process and catalog resources in a timely fashion. Our information technology librarian coordinated the assessment of community members' ability to find needed resources through our website.

The involvement of so many staff members has been critical to distributing the workload and ensuring that nobody sees assessment only as a library administration responsibility. Instead, assessment is everybody's responsibility.

The assessments have resulted in concrete changes to the library's services, resources, and spaces. Examples of changes we made, accompanied by the reason for the change, include:

- We created an assessment dashboard page for our website (<http://presslib.hollins.edu/assessment/>), where we share our assessment efforts with the community, based on an informal survey of other libraries to examine best practices in sharing assessment results.
- We placed lamps with outlets and USB ports on many of our study tables, replacing old lamps that did not have outlets. Student surveys, conducted both in the library and at the dining hall, had revealed dissatisfaction with outlets in the floor.
- We established a monthly blanket-washing schedule, in response to a whiteboard suggestion to keep the always-popular library blankets cleaner.
- On the library home page, we built additional and easier routes to our library databases, based on identification of a common "pain point" in usability studies.
- Our library usage studies (based on hourly census accounts across chosen weeks during academic semesters) highlighted underutilized spaces in the library, to which we made changes. As one example, we removed child-sized seating from the juvenile section and replaced it with beanbag chairs, which retained the playful feel and gave students a new seating option.
- We refocused our part-time cataloging assistants on their primary task of cataloging and processing newly received books, because the

time lapse between book receipt and appearance on the shelf had grown to an unacceptable three months.

We expected our assessments to show areas for potential improvement, and they have, but the message of needed change is usually accompanied by strong positive feedback as well. Examples include:

- Although our study of cataloging and processing turnaround times showed that routine book processing times were a concern, rush requests were being handled in a prompt fashion.
- Our surveys about campus study spaces revealed that the library was the most popular place on campus to study.
- Assessment of our plagiarism-related student learning outcome found that a large majority of first-year students could cite sources correctly, and that they understood their responsibility to cite.

Good news helps to encourage library staff to respond to suggestions for improvement, knowing that students appreciate the work of the library and benefit from our efforts.

Last but not least, completing this assessment work on an annual basis provides a strong foundation with which to begin writing responses for regional accreditation standards. The institutional research office has these reports to demonstrate institutional effectiveness, and the library used pieces of the work in narratives for the most recent submission to the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges. The library director also includes the outcome assessments in his annual report to the vice president for academic administration (VPAA), and discusses them over the course of the academic year with the VPAA.

Next steps

Having established an ongoing cycle of assessment, the library's next step is to explore opportunities for integrating its assessment work (particularly in regards to student outcomes) with the assessment work being done by academic departments. All academic departments identified student learning outcomes to assess on a yearly basis, and some of those outcomes include skills commonly associated with information literacy outcomes.

We are moving forward in this area in 2016–17, with the inclusion of faculty volunteers on our team to

assess our library's student learning outcomes. We have faculty helping to create the assessment rubric and then evaluating, in tandem with librarians, 50-plus annotated bibliographies from a variety of courses.

We hope as faculty become more aware of our assessment work, and of our interest in ensuring that students are learning the information skills they need to succeed at both Hollins and in their careers, we will find increased opportunities to partner with faculty in the assessment of departmental student learning outcomes. In the meantime, we will continue to fold assessment into our annual cycle of work in the library, to ensure we are meeting our fundamental commitments and carrying out our mission statement.

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Endnotes

1. Robert E. Dugan and Peter Herson, "Outcomes Assessment: Not Synonymous with Inputs and Outputs," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 28, no. 6 (2002): 376.
2. Amanda Bird, Kelly Rhodes McBride, and Elizabeth Cramer, "Modeling ACRL's Standards for Libraries in Higher Education: A Path to Creating a Culture of Assessment," *College & Research Libraries News* 75, no. 11 (2014): 614.
3. Steve Hiller, Martha Kyrillidou, and Jim Self, "When the Evidence is Not Enough: Organizational Factors That Influence Effective and Successful Library Assessment," *Performance Measurement and Metrics* 9, no. 3 (2008): 224.
4. *Ibid.*, 225.