Library Assessment

More than Numbers

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October 31, 2012
“No questions arise more frequently in the mind of the progressive librarian than these:
Is this method the best?
Are we up to the standard of similar institutions of our class?”

--J.T. Gerould, 1906
In days gone by...

- Library held the knowledge of the university
- Librarians had the codes to retrieve the knowledge
- No need to justify the library’s existence
I have often thought that nothing would do more extensive good at small expense than the establishment of a small circulating library in every county, to consist of a few well-chosen books, to be lent to the people of the county under regulations as would secure their safe return in due time.

- Thomas Jefferson to John Wyche, May 19, 1809
Easy comparisons

- All collections were local
- Count the volumes
- The biggest must be the best
- More is more!
Changing times

- A shift in the 1990s
- Bigger is not necessarily better
- Focus on the ‘user-centered’ library
- Just as the library world was changing...
...as the focus turned to users..

- Some of the users were leaving the building
Weekly Visits to a Physical Library

University of Virginia Faculty

- 1993: 79%
- 2011/12: 22%
Weekly Visits to a Physical Library

Undergrads
- 84% (93/94)
- 79% (96/98)
- 67% (00/01)
- 67% (04/05)
- 69% (07/09)
- 67% (10/11)

Grads
- 43% (93/94)
- 38% (96/98)
- 23% (00/01)
- 21% (04/05)
- 21% (07/09)
- 21% (10/11)

Faculty
- 79% (93/94)
- 67% (96/98)
- 50% (00/01)
- 43% (04/05)
- 38% (07/09)
- 21% (10/11)
Reference Questions per Week
University of Virginia Library

- 1992: 6,181
- 1997: 2,000
- 2002: 4,000
- 2007: 6,000
- 2012: 1,125
In the 21st century....

- Resources are online and shared.
- Counting pieces is not so meaningful.
- Tallies of traditional activities are declining.
- Libraries need better evidence
  .....of their worthiness.
Looking for the evidence

- LibQUAL+® and other customer surveys
- Usability testing
- Wayfinding, evaluation of facilities
- Ethnographic studies
- Quantitative performance measures
- MINES, COUNTER, and e-resource use
- Staff surveys
An explosion of assessment

- New positions with *assessment* in the title
- Attendance at this conference
  - 217 to 377 to 460 to 565
- Sessions at ALA, ACRL et al
Found on the road
...the big picture

- Acceptance of assessment as a core activity
  - But sustainability is still an issue
- More collaboration on and off campus
- More use of qualitative data and narrative
- UX in the mix
- Changing views of data comparisons
Political benefit of assessment programs
Appreciative inquiry
Postcard surveys
Formalized business plans for each unit
Creating a ‘punch list’
Improving ‘access to known items’
Focus on under-served clientele
New stories at the LAC

- Secret shoppers
- Special collections, repository assessment
- Cross campus collaborations
- Narratives and data for institutional support
- Scorecards for consortia
- Changes in the ARL index
- More R&D, less assessment
Still needed...

- Common measures and information sharing
  - Counting journals
  - Counting e-holdings
  - Counting e-usage
  - Costs of e-resources
  - Learning outcomes
  - Value, ROI

- Survey templates and metrics
Assessment looks at past and present, but tries to take us into the future.
Creation and innovation do not necessarily spring from the trends of today.
The world around us may change drastically.
The performance data quoted represents past performance, and is no guarantee of future results.

- www.tiaa-cref.org
Local Barriers

- Complacency
- Fear
- Arrogance
- Inertia
- Operations mindset
The purpose of assessment

- A search for truth?

- *For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead,*
  - Thomas Jefferson to William Roscoe, December 27, 1820
The POV of Library Assessment

- Neutral, unbiased?
- Would it ever recommend a lesser library?
- How does it differ from advocacy?
- From marketing?
Salvation by assessment

- University libraries that wonder what they must do to be saved will not find the answer in a data table...

- They must look for and measure what is necessary to give users what they need when they need it.

  - Kendon Stubbs, 1981