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Ramping up Assessment at the UNLV Libraries
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ABSTRACT: Assessment activities at UNLV Libraries have strengthened and diversified over the last several years, thanks to several factors including the guidance of its Dean, the development of technology and human infrastructure, the impact of implementing the LibQual+ survey, and other factors. Signs of its place in the Libraries can be seen in the Libraries' Strategic Plan and a recent review of the Strategic Plan's effectiveness and continued relevance.

KEYWORDS: assessment, data-based decision-making, LibQual+, assessment planning and development, library-wide assessment, departmental assessment, assessment in the organization, resistance to assessment, peer comparisons

[ARTICLE BEGINS]

“Ramping up” sounds like a smooth uniform gradient, doesn't it? More accurate would be “jacking up” – but it did not sound mellifluous enough for a title! “Jacking up” more accurately describes the changes in assessment at the UNLV Libraries since Lied Library opened in January 2001 – it has been a jerky, uneven, laborious task.

Organizational placement of assessment

Assessment can be viewed from both the library-wide perspective and the departmental perspective. Although the section below is not comprehensive, it does give a flavor of where assessment is happening in the UNLV Libraries.

***Library-wide assessment**

Assessment, in the sense of an organized library-wide effort, has taken several organizational paths at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Libraries, just in the ten plus years that this author has been at UNLV. The first incarnation was an ad hoc group of three librarians [Head of Public Services, Architecture Studies Librarian, and Head of Special Collections] appointed by the Dean to respond to concerns raised about the library by faculty during a campus accreditation visit. This group in 1995-1996 drafted and brought to completion a campus-wide survey of both faculty and students.

The original group of three was expanded by two in 1998 and became a standing committee, co-chaired by the Head of the Architecture Studies Library and the Head of Special Collections. This group took on as its responsibility the standardization of annual report formats throughout the library, and conducted a campus-wide survey in 1999. This Assessment Committee made departmental annual reports a keystone in its approach to assessment, seeing it as a first step to an assessment “program.” They recommended, and the Libraries have since followed, a standard narrative annual report format, and created a Uniform Statistics Data Collection Form to gather statistics on use and patron contacts.

The group continued, with some changes in composition, until 2003. Its responsibilities were amorphous and to a large extent self-determined. During this period, accomplishments included an assessment plan (for 2001-2006) and a matrix of assessment activities in the Libraries [see Appendices I-IV for more information]. The assessment plan was organized into the following categories: purpose of assessment, summary of Libraries’ assessment activities 1996-2001, flaws in Libraries’ assessment activities 1996-2001, goals for current assessment plan, assessment needed to determine success of the strategic plan, additional areas to be addressed, and action plan (by year). The matrix has columns for the assessment activity, a designation of the type of assessment [e.g. external survey], beginning and completion dates, contact person(s), and comments -- including the URL for posted results.

In 2003 the Assessment Committee was reconstituted as the Research and Analysis Committee, chaired by the Head of the Architecture Studies Library. In a letter to the Library faculty and staff, Dean Kenneth Marks noted that “two conclusions have become fixed in my mind as a result of the work of the past eighteen months with the ACRL @your library Task Force First, academic librarians do not know enough about their patrons. Second, there is a disconnectedness between knowing library customers, strategic planning, and assessment of library activities.” The Research and Analysis Committee was charged with building a knowledge base concerning segments of the Libraries’ patron population, identifying library needs for each segment, sharing information with the Strategic Planning Committee, and conducting regular periodic analyses (e.g. patron surveys) and evaluation of the Libraries’ activities in order to identify gaps in meeting customer needs.

*Departmental assessment

The Libraries’ departments/units engage in assessment activities independently of the Committee. The Research and Information department has in fact recently designated one of its librarians as the “Assessment and Training Librarian” – although it should be noted that assessment is one of many tasks for the librarian, including desk service and collection development. The Assessment and Training Librarian’s assessment duties include identifying statistics and assessment activities related to R&I services and collections. She has, in addition to gathering statistics, developed a form for collecting data on off-desk reference activities, and has recently developed a short survey to

determine who the primary users of the reference desk service are and whether they receive the information they need when they come to the reference desk.

A department which has strongly committed to assessment is web services. Web assessment has been one of the most varied assessment efforts in the Libraries. The Web Administration Team (WAT), recently incorporated into the Web and Digitization Advisory Committee (WDAC), has done usability studies, card sort studies, heuristics analysis, log file analysis, and surveys of both patrons and staff. The emphasis on assessment is due to the leadership of webmaster Kyle Felker, who also guided the team in translating the results into concrete redesign elements.

As of 2003, web services have been combined with digital projects to form the Web and Digitization Services department (WDS). In spring 2004 this department conducted a needs assessment, interviewing each department head concerning their needs for databases. An interesting finding from an assessment point of view was the need expressed for statistics management. According to the report prepared by Kyle Felker "Several departments, including Research & Information, Materials Ordering and Receiving, Collection Development and Management, and others, requested help in keeping, managing, and generating statistics. In many cases, people in one department (such as Collection Development) need access to statistics generated or kept by another department (such as Materials Ordering and Receiving). Many departments complained that simple spreadsheets or access databases did not generate the kinds of reports they needed." Even more interesting, perhaps, is the report's statement on the need for a statistics database, which provides some insight into the state of assessment at the UNLV Libraries: "While WDS staff are probably not the best people to address this, we think it is something that the whole library needs to examine. Centralized access to statistics could be beneficial for improvements to services and internal processes, and if the push for assessment is ever realized, then we will have much more data to manage."

For the Libraries' collections functions, the most prominent aspect of collection assessment occurs when a new degree program is proposed. At that time, information is gathered by the subject librarian and presented to campus committees according to a standard template. The template calls for information on the amount of money needed to bring the books, journals, and electronic resources to the point where they can support the program. It also calls for a prediction of the impact of a new program on public services and document delivery.

Collection Development staff compile usage statistics on electronic products whose vendors supply such data. The data has not been used substantially, either for targeted marketing or for deselection. The e-resources collection is fairly young and it is felt that there has not been enough time to produce a record on which to predicate action. A recent collections assessment project that did employ use statistics was the Serials Assessment Project. The 2003 Serials Assessment Project, according to Collection Development head Reeta Sinha, "provided UNLV students, faculty and librarians the opportunity to review approximately 1900 print journals using factors such as cumulative 3-year use, availability of content in other formats, price, regional availability and whether or not

articles could be acquired on-demand. Faculty were asked to identify those journals which were essential to their teaching and research activities.”

A collections assessment effort which originated outside of the Collection Development Department was a report produced by the Circulation Department. The stacks manager did a one-time analysis of use of call number areas of the collection housed in Lied Library. The report, produced in June 2003, looked at items added to the collection since January 2001 by call number, noting in-house use versus checkouts, total number of items in the call number, number added since January 2001, and growth rate. This was timely given the rate book stacks had filled since Lied Library’s opening. The report was ultimately used to justify a project which resulted in massive weeding or relocation of materials to the automated storage and retrieval (LASR) location.

The Instruction department incorporates assessment of learning outcomes into their classes by having the students demonstrate in class their ability to perform the skill being presented [e.g. finding an article on their topic]. They have also performed an analysis of student online tutorial learning, using a pre-test/post-test. The students performed better on the post test, from which they concluded that “use of online learning tools is a viable component of the total instruction program.” This year they have been a test site for Project SAILS [Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills] which has the potential to provide a baseline for instruction outcomes assessment.

The three branch libraries (the Architecture Studies Library, Curriculum Materials Library, and the Music Library) have had an ongoing interest in obtaining patron feedback on a variety of issues and in analyzing the use of their collections. Examples of assessment projects undertaken by the branches are:

- Architecture Studies Library (ASL) survey to determine which hours were preferred by patrons.
- ASL formation of an ad hoc student group to provide input on library services and collections.
- ASL collections study similar to the one done by the Lied stacks manager (referred to above), analyzing use of materials purchased in the last two years by call number.
- The Music Library questionnaire to elicit views of patrons on web site development, services and facilities.
- The Music Library collection assessment in preparation for a new DMA program. The assessment came in the form of using standard bibliographies to measure against the collection, comparison with peer institutions, and creating core lists in collaboration with faculty in the Music Library.
- CML survey focusing on library use and patrons' perceptions of unmet needs that asked patrons to fill in answers to "What I use most at the CML" and "What I would like to see at the CML." There were 262 responses to this survey. Results were compiled into categories, and requests for collection items or equipment/services were addressed by either purchasing the item or putting things on wish lists for future purchase.

- CML survey that focused on "library as place" to get patron input on library space as plans for renovation are made. There were 95 responses to this survey, including 58 undergraduates, 28 graduates, 2 faculty, 5 school teachers, and 3 "community" patrons. 86 responses were from people affiliated with the College of Education. Overall responses focused on the need for more space to work and study and more room for collection resources. The survey also gave patrons a chance to voice other comments relating to the CML.

Common expressions of resistance to assessment

Although assessment is becoming more accepted, and more practiced, at the UNLV Libraries, it was not long ago that strong reservations to spending time on assessment were openly expressed. These occasions are rare now, but it is worth noting that these opinions have been and still are in evidence here. Oft repeated phrases completing the initial "Why should we spend time and energy on assessment" are:

- The results are never taken seriously
- The results are taken too seriously
- Even though the results indicate x, we know y to be the case
- Even though the results seem to indicate x, you can't really be sure enough to take action
- It takes too much time away from what we really need to be doing

Elements lending credence to the value of assessment

The changing assessment climate for the UNLV Libraries is the result of several factors.

***Good numbers**

With the Lied Library opening there were dramatic successes to report, leading to a certain positive fascination with the numbers and enthusiastic reporting that one strongly suspects would not have been there for numbers reflecting declining use. Gate count has been a favorite number, as initial use of the facility vastly exceeded that of the previous facility and subsequent use has continued to increase. E-reserves, implemented in fall 2002, was another count that quickly skyrocketed, justifying the service and the innovation.

***Campus environment**

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas cannot be said to be on the cutting edge of assessment. It too, however, has made some headway in the area of assessment. Responding to pressure from a variety of sources, including its accrediting agency, the Board of Regents, and system-wide administrators for the University and Community College System of Nevada, the university has taken several major steps in the last year. The 2003-2004 Planning retreat [an event held annually] focused on brainstorming

performance indicators for each of the university's eight goals. This was followed by the appointment of a task force to develop the ideas from the retreat into a set of performance indicators and measures that could be used throughout the university.

At the same time the Provost directed a small group of faculty to analyze the budget documentation submitted by the colleges for the last budget request cycle. They did so and recommended a template to be followed in the next cycle. The template requires that goals be linked to the university Strategic Plan, performance indicators be aligned with the university's, areas of needed change be supported by documentation, and benchmarking against peers be included.

For the first time campus academic units are being formally required to incorporate data to support budget requests. And the Libraries are ready, thanks to LibQual+ and the focus groups triggered by the results of LibQual+. This requirement from above and the Libraries' readiness to provide data to support budget requests form a firm basis for sustaining and even expanding the Libraries' assessment efforts.

*Direction from the Dean

Although the Dean has been reluctant to mandate a full-fledged assessment program, he has nonetheless been supportive of assessment. His approach has been to foster gradual realization of the value of assessment. His work with ACRL's "@ your library" campaign has reinforced the perception that assessment is needed. His training sessions on marketing for selected members of the library in the summer of 2003 stressed the need for accurate information about the Libraries' target audiences.

The Dean's approach to building assessment in the Libraries is expressed by the following passage supplied by Dean Kenneth Marks for this article.

Assessment is a concept that is viewed with uncertainty and concern by individuals throughout the university. Librarians are faced with a more difficult assessment task since we have no students enrolled in the library. Determining what should be assessed, how to assess, when to assess, who to assess, and who to do the assessing are issues that are unsettling to librarians because underneath everything else there is the implicit indication that librarians must justify their activities. Librarians and libraries are no longer an accepted "good" that will be supported. Librarians have to demonstrate their value to the institution.

Trying to accomplish this in a short period of time will only lead to failure and a disengagement on the part of librarians from the assessment process. It is far better to build slowly allowing librarians to move into assessment in small steps, to build on small successes rather than run the risk of alienating librarians and achieving only failures in assessment.

Ultimately, assessment of library programs, collections, and services must be a continuous process if only to provide the basis for successful strategic planning and successfully competing for scarce financial and personnel resources.

Technology environment and its impact on assessment

In early 2002 Chuck McClure, assessment proponent and one of the authors of ARL's e-metrics data collection manual, visited the UNLV Libraries. He suggested at that time that technological infrastructure was a key element in setting up an effective assessment program at UNLV. He further suggested that the Libraries look at the University of Pennsylvania's datafarm for a model in that area. In following up with Joe Zucca, the director of the datafarm, it became evident that the infrastructure needed was both technological and human. Mr. Zucca identified EZproxy and the Oracle database as two critical technological components.

The Libraries now has both EZproxy and Oracle. EZproxy was implemented soon after the 2002 LibQual+ results showed strong dissatisfaction with the remote access system. Although the Libraries' Systems Department had been looking into EZproxy before LibQual+, the survey results put implementation on a fast track.

The Libraries' Systems Department began forays into the Oracle database system in 2004. The Libraries' Innopac system was upgraded to an underlying Oracle database in early 2004. This provided another avenue of extracting information from the Innopac system, through SQL queries outside the Innopac's menuing system and inherent capabilities.

Installing Oracle was an important step in upgrading the technological infrastructure. The next step was/is to develop the human infrastructure. A second test/development server running Oracle was set up in summer 2004. This will allow Systems staff to gain more expertise with Oracle. The test server, combined with recent training and additional database design software tools, will foster a stronger Oracle knowledgebase within the Libraries. Already the Systems Department has used Oracle to analyze computer logins to obtain data on the community user count vs the student count and the average length of time different types of users stay logged in.

The Libraries has made substantial progress in installing technology infrastructure in just the past two years. The expertise has been and is being developed to make use of that infrastructure. The ultimate determinant to successfully employing both technology and expertise is to engage in library-wide discussion of why certain data is needed and what questions can or should be addressed through the gathering of data.

Impact of LibQual+

LibQual+ 2002 was the Libraries' first foray into the LibQual+ arena. The Libraries' experiences with the web-based survey were a defining moment in the march toward data-based decision-making.

*Credibility of LibQual+

As a national survey, rigorously tested, engaged in by hundreds of libraries, with substantial documentation including norms, LibQual+ came with substantial credibility. Some in the library questioned the validity of the results, even though the data were presented with relevant caveats [for instance, caveat one: the results were to indicate areas of further exploration and caveat 2: decisions or changes based on the results would not be made unless they were clearly substantiated either by anecdotal evidence or data from additional sources]. Despite the skeptics' reservations, the Libraries identified several key areas that would need to be addressed based on the survey data.

LibQual+'s credibility was critical in allowing staff to push past "results paralysis." Among the major areas for further focus was ease of remote access. In addition, the Libraries committed to follow up on survey data with focus groups [focus groups with graduate students were held fall 2002; faculty focus groups were held more recently in spring 2004]. The results of LibQual+ were officially reported to the Provost and to the Council of Deans. The Libraries came to be viewed as a leader on campus in the realm of assessment, thanks primarily to its engagement in the LibQual+ survey process. (Additional information on follow up to LibQual+ can be found in Appendix 1 and 2.)

*LibQual+ and the UNLV Libraries Strategic Plan

The visibility that the LibQual+ process and results (and the activities around reporting and trying to use the results) lent to "assessment" is evident in the UNLV Libraries Strategic Plan, drawn up by a large committee of librarians and staff from throughout the Libraries and finalized the August after the spring LibQual+ 2002 experience. Note the LibQual+ style language concerning user expectations in these goals/objectives from the following excerpts from the UNLV Libraries Strategic Plan:

- Strategic Goal 2. Actively foster user-focused environments committed to identifying and delivering information resources and services that meet or exceed user expectations.
- Implementation Strategy 2.1: Library groups will develop assessment tools for determining user needs and expectations as they relate to services and facilities.
- Implementation Strategy 2.2: Each department will evaluate and respond to identified user needs and expectations.

In August 2004 the Strategic Planning Committee issued a report on use and usefulness of the strategic plan, based on feedback from library employees. The comments below concerning Strategic Goal 2 and its implementation strategies reflect, one can argue, a growing consensus among library staff that assessment is necessary and should be expanded. It may also show that the ways assessment data has been used in the Libraries has not been adequately shared with staff.

- Goal 2 points to having to find out what users want. It's meant to be proactive, not reactive. We need to anticipate our users' needs.
- Implementation strategies are very explicit – go assess, then implement what you've found.
- We don't do enough assessment and we don't act upon the results of the assessment we do.
- We need to figure out how to meaningfully measure use of databases, but we are not doing that now.
- We need more local or departmental user surveys, and there is not enough attention paid to service planning.
- The library needs to devote funds to assessment and routinely survey users.

*LibQual+ Norms

LibQual+ also allowed for the opportunity to look at peer data in a way not possible with NCES statistics. With LibQual+ norms tables the Libraries was able to compare UNLV patron expectations relative to specific institutions, and to groups such as the ARL libraries or university-not-ARL libraries. The LibQual+ norms allowed the Libraries to start considering peer data in a more productive context. For instance, thanks to the LibQual+ norms it became obvious that *all* library patrons [pretty much] think their libraries should have more books and journals. On the other hand, it was surprising to learn that UNLV patrons had higher expectations than patrons in many prestigious universities. This was rationalized to be a product of UNLV's ambitious program to become a research intensive university and vigorous hiring of faculty from research institutions.

*Benchmarking

Although the LibQual+ questions have changed to some degree from the Libraries' first participation in 2002 to the second in 2004, it is clear that its stability over time will afford the ability to track changing perceptions and hopefully draw some conclusions about the impact of changes in the Libraries collections and services and changes in UNLV patrons' needs and expectations.

The data from the participation in 2002 and then in 2004, as well as the norms provided by LibQual+, were used to support the Libraries' requests for the next biennial budget. This concrete connection between data and budget is an important element leading to the eventual institutionalization of assessment at the UNLV Libraries.

Peer comparisons – a promising direction

Even before the campus mandated peer data as part of the budget requests for the 2005/6-2006/7 biennium, the Libraries, thanks to the leadership and support of its Dean, had determined that it would be advantageous to explore an in-depth peer collaboration. Using a list of peers generated by the University's Office of Institutional Analysis, and after doing some basic research on the institutional characteristics, the UNLV Libraries

selected the University of Central Florida as a likely peer. The selection of University of Central Florida was based on several factors: it is included in UNLV's list of peers; it participated in LibQual+ in 2002 and again in 2004; it is young and growing, as is UNLV (its first classes were offered in 1968 and it has grown rapidly to an enrollment in 2003 of 41,000); and it is in a tourist economy environment similar to that of UNLV.

A second institution was also selected to serve in peer comparisons – the University of South Florida. It too is a young institution, graduating its first cohort in 1964. It has grown quickly into a large research institution, which is where UNLV is heading. It is approximately one hour from the University of Central Florida, and has the potential to offer examples of contrasting development.

This in-depth comparison effort will hopefully yield critical insights into areas such as resources and their allocation, selection of services, interaction with the campus, and development of information literacy programs – far beyond what might be achieved by simply looking at statistics in isolation without the context of the institution's services and collections. In addition, working with these select institutions provides the opportunity to obtain up-to-date statistics for a more realistic and current comparison than would be possible with NCES statistics.

Conclusion

Although sufficient human resources for a comprehensive assessment program are not yet in place, the UNLV Libraries is well on its way in that direction. An assessment and planning librarian has been requested for the 2005/6 – 2006/7 biennium which, if approved, could mark another “defining moment” in the path to the ultimate goal of uniting assessment, planning and marketing into a coherent program.