

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN LIBRARIES EVALUATION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE ASSESSMENT

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**A Report by Jim Self and Steve Hiller
Visiting Program Officers, Association of Research Libraries**

INTRODUCTION

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) Libraries is one of twenty-five libraries participating in the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) project, "Making Library Assessment Work: Practical Approaches to for Developing and Sustaining Effective Assessment." (http://www.arl.org/stats/newmeas/VPO_Hiller_Self.html). This two year project is under the aegis of the ARL Statistics and Measurement Program, Martha Kyrillidou, Director. ARL Visiting Program Officers Steve Hiller and Jim Self conducted the evaluation of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries assessment efforts which was capped with a visit on March 27-28. In addition to a presentation on effective library assessment, they met with library staff and discussed a wide range of assessment and measurement related issues. The UNL Libraries also responded to a request for information about assessment activities, needs, and issues before the visit. The following report summarizes the current environment and offers options and suggestions for developing effective and sustainable assessment at the UNL Libraries.

CURRENT ASSESSMENT ENVIRONMENT AND ACTIVITIES

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is the flagship university of the state and the upper Great Plains with membership in both the American Association of Universities (AAU) and ARL. The University ranks in the top 50 among public institutions in research awards and is actively pursuing growing the research enterprise. That same spirit seems to pervade the UNL Libraries which is involved in a number of externally-funded digital library projects and is also serving as a beta site for SUSHI. The Dean, Joan Giesicke, is known for her work with the library as a learning organization and is a strong proponent of using data for decision-making. Associate Deans Beth McNeil and Nancy Busch both have experience with assessment and research methodology. Indeed, Nancy Busch has, in the past, taught research methodology for several library schools.

During the past five years the UNL Libraries has participated in several assessment-related activities including LibQUAL+™ (2003), focus groups and usability on digital library efforts, observations on facility use, and some data mining, particularly with usage statistics. However, while there is recognition of the value of assessment, efforts have generally been spotty and uncoordinated. Library faculty and staff generally have not been involved in these assessment efforts.

IDENTIFIED ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

The UNL Libraries identified a number of assessment-related issues and concerns prior to our site visit.

- Strategies for setting assessment priorities
- Systematic processes for supporting assessment
- Ways of involving more library faculty and staff in assessment
- Creating a culture of assessment
- Better coordination of assessment efforts
- Better processes for collecting statistical data.
- Using data for improvement
- Better structure for managing assessment data
- More faculty and staff skill in interpreting and presenting results

During our visit other needs and issues surfaced. These included working with campus assessment partners, use of qualitative methods, and more effective utilization of data from the integrated library system.

SUGGESTIONS AND OPTIONS FOR MOVING ASSESSMENT FORWARD

We offer the following suggestions and options for moving assessment forward at the UNL Libraries. They are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather outline some best practices for enhancing and sustaining a viable assessment program at Nebraska-Lincoln.

1. Establish process for coordinating assessment
2. Develop an assessment plan that links to the strategic plan
3. Help library staff understand their role in the assessment process
4. Use assessment to enhance understanding and support of the research enterprise
5. Demonstrate value of the UNL Libraries to students
6. Further develop collaborative campus assessment and data use relationships
7. Use multiple methods to assess Digital Library/Institutional Repository initiatives
8. Examine and evaluate statistics collected and maintained by the UNL Libraries

1. Establish practices and procedures for coordinating assessment, including designation of an assessment coordinator

While there is substantial interest in moving assessment forward at the UNL Libraries there is no established structure in place to establish assessment priorities, advocate for good assessment practices, coordinate assessment activities and communicate results to staff and the academic community. It is our strong view that assessment at the UNL Libraries will not advance until it becomes an identifiable part of the organizational structure with an individual given the responsibility for assessment coordination.

Effective assessment requires leadership and resources. It is important to have someone, with standing in the organization, who can take the lead in promoting and coordinating assessment.

Given the lean staffing levels of the UNL Library, it is probably not feasible to appoint a full-time or even a half-time assessment coordinator but rather to include assessment coordination with other responsibilities. We suggest formation of an assessment committee or group to provide support for the coordinator and advocate for good assessment practices throughout the organization. The coordinator would chair this group.

The assessment coordinator, would not necessarily conduct assessment activities, but would serve as the assessment spokesperson and leader. An assessment coordinator can help in moving efforts forward, integrating data into the decision making stream, and providing both guidance and support to assessment practitioners. This person would coordinate efforts, advocate for assessment, serve as a resource person, know best practices, promote understanding of the value of assessment to the organization. Sufficient support should be provided with additional resources and a re-assignment of some current responsibilities. Staff perception that this individual has strong administrative support is crucial to success.

The following interests and abilities are important for the coordinator position:

- Interest in assessment and commitment to the library as a customer-centered enterprise
- A broad perspective on issues that affect academic libraries and higher education
- Understanding of the value of assessment in improving library services
- Skill in summarizing and presenting results effectively to diverse audiences
- Ability to work effectively with staff, managers and administrators throughout the organization

The coordinator would work with the assessment group to:

- Identify and prioritize assessment needs through widespread consultation within the organization
- Develop an assessment plan with clearly defined goals, objectives, support and benchmarks
- Obtain training and skills necessary to understand and do good assessment and support others
- Participate in appropriate professional venues
- Ascertain best methods and support needed for staff involvement and participation in assessment
- Initiate assessment activities that address priorities and can be accomplished in a timely fashion
- Support strategic planning process
- Evaluate the success of the program and resources needed
- Present results to staff, stakeholders, customers and the broader library community

Coordination of assessment should be undertaken with sensitivity. It should not appear as coercive; rather it should be seen as positive and supportive, as the UNL Libraries move forward with a more effective assessment program.

2. Develop an assessment plan that supports the UNL Libraries strategic directions

The University has established a structured and iterative strategic planning process which calls for a “focus on measurable outcomes for achieving strategic priorities.” The assessment plan should assist in the development of outcome measures or indicators that can show progress in meeting strategic priorities and objectives. We offer some suggestions in the ensuing recommendations that deal with strategic plan support.

3. Help library staff understand their role in the assessment process

Assessment is essential for libraries to ensure that services and resources support customer needs and institutional goals. Reducing or eliminating customer barriers means looking at library services, facilities, and resources from a customer perspective. The Libraries should continue to cultivate an appreciation for the value of assessment through effective communication, appropriate training, and demonstrating the use of assessment data to improve services and resources as well as showing how the UNL Libraries adds value to the academic enterprise and the people of Nebraska.

While there is interest in doing good assessment, we found a need to raise the knowledge base of library faculty and staff in such areas as research methodology (especially qualitative methods), and data analysis. Awareness and understanding of different methods is critical in taking a nuanced approach to assessment that produces results that can be used to demonstrate value and lead to improved services and programs. This would be an excellent opportunity for a library assessment coordinator and group to help address these needs. Staff understanding of the value of assessment also fits within the learning organization philosophy.

As with any individual or group that has a range of other responsibilities, creating sufficient time for assessment and maintaining or enhancing assessment skill sets remains a continuing challenge. Opportunities to acquire assessment-related skills are often available on campus through such units as statistics or computing. Additional workshops and sessions are often presented at professional conferences and meetings. The ARL Service Quality Evaluation Academy provides a more intensive weeklong workshop in using and understanding quantitative and qualitative data. Regardless of the type of training provided, it is important for staff to have an opportunity to use these skills, whether in design of assessment efforts or in critical examination of the results and methods used by others. More complex methodological and analytical skills can either be handled internally by knowledgeable staff or through the use of external consultants.

As part of the tenure and promotion process, library faculty are expected to engage in research and publication. Consideration should be given to encouraging library faculty to conduct research related to the UNL Libraries. The findings of a good research project could well be used to improve delivery of library services to UNL students and faculty.

4. Use assessment to enhance understanding and support of the University research enterprise

Large universities, including the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, are placing great emphasis on growing the research enterprise. We feel the UNL Libraries should pay special attention to understanding the role of libraries in supporting those academic areas that receive substantial research funding or notable awards. Such qualitative methods as interviews, focus groups, and regular reports from liaison/subject librarians are very appropriate to find out the library and information needs of these faculty, the impact of the Libraries on their research, and their satisfaction with library collections and services. This assessment effort will help support a major priority of the UNL Libraries strategic plan which calls for an assessment “of overall

collection strengths and funding allocations to match purchases to campus priorities and to balance support for different disciplines.”

The UNL Libraries can use both qualitative and quantitative information (surveys and use statistics) to demonstrate its support of the research enterprise to the University administration and other Colleges.

5. Demonstrate value of UNL Libraries to students

The imposition of a \$2 per credit hour library fee in 2003 has provided much needed funding flexibility for the UNL Libraries and adds approximately \$1 million per year to the library budget. The Libraries’ strategic plan acknowledges the importance of the student fee in its support of collections, programs such as GIS and multimedia, and adding specialized staffing. We suggest that the UNL Libraries use a variety of methods to demonstrate the value of students investing in their library – both quantitative and qualitative. These could include acknowledgement on the Libraries Web site and in the various campus libraries. For example, a number of university libraries have successfully set up student library advisory groups to provide more ongoing, structured input. Others have established library “research” awards which have evaluated student papers submitted for coursework. Ongoing involvement of students ensures that the UNL Libraries can remain responsive to student needs.

6. Further develop collaborative campus assessment and data use relationships

Our meeting with Jessica Johnson, University-wide Assessment Coordinator, and Bill Nunez, Director of Institutional Research and Planning, was highly informative and suggested opportunities for collaboration between their areas and the UNL Libraries. While the UNL Libraries is represented on the University-wide Assessment Committee, a closer working relationship between the UNL Libraries and the University-wide Assessment Coordinator could prove mutually beneficial. The Libraries would get sound advice on establishing and assessing learning outcomes which would help in evaluating individual course support as well as Library 110.

The Office of Institutional Research and Planning (IRP) supports academic, administrative and physical planning for the institution, providing research and reporting information about the institution. The office is responsible for the collection and maintenance of official institutional databases, internal and external surveys, and serves as the official reporting voice for the University of Nebraska- Lincoln. The office is interested in developing key indicators that can be used to define quality. IRP also operates the data exchange for the American Association of Universities. IRP can offer advice to the UNL Libraries on data warehousing issues, especially compatibility with other University data.

7. Use multiple methods to assess Digital Library/Institutional Repository initiatives

The UNL Libraries is a significant player in digital library development and has just started a major effort to establish an institutional repository. Both are identified as UNL Libraries priorities and are in need of good assessment methods and tools. Digital library development has

relied primarily on feedback from users and potential users. Consideration should be given to doing more rigorous usability testing, developing and employing outcome measures, as well as review of use data. In addition to these, institutional repository indicators might include core coverage and penetration by academic area, visibility among the UNL community, and number/use of previously unpublished information.

Some potential outcome indicators for digital library development might include use in courses at UNL or at other educational institutions; citations or references in books, journals, other scholarly publications and Websites; and community visibility and impact. Selective surveying can also be employed to follow-up with users as to the reasons they came to the digital collection, evaluation related to their needs, and potential applications. Baseline data in these areas can be established and change over time tracked.

8. Examine and evaluate the statistics kept by the UNL Libraries

A significant amount of time is spent collecting a variety of internal statistics and data not reported to external agencies. Many of these internal statistics are related to the traditional print-based library. However, it is not clear if there still is a need to collect these data or if they are still used. In addition to reviewing why they are collected, an analysis of the costs involved in data collection with the benefits of use should be conducted. Examination of alternate methodologies such as sampling and automatic data capture should also be encouraged.

As a follow-up to the review of statistics, the UNL Libraries might consider compiling, in printed or web form, a database of the important library statistics. Such a compilation would put the imprimatur of the Libraries on those statistics that are worthwhile, and might discourage the keeping of other less important data.

CONCLUSION

We believe that the UNL Libraries can establish an effective, practical and sustainable assessment program that can enable the Libraries to improve services and demonstrate value to the University community. We found strong administrative support for assessment and the willingness to commit some resources to moving assessment forward. We stand ready to work with the Libraries in this effort by assisting with a follow-up project, or the development of an assessment plan