

## Getting to Know You (and Me!): Assessment and the Archival Metrics Toolkit at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library

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### Abstract

In the past decade, the interest in library assessment has expanded greatly—particularly as a method to gather evidence and context for strategic planning and decision making. As has been the case with our counterparts across the nation, assessment of the quality and effectiveness of services and collections has grown exponentially at Columbia University Libraries (CUL). While campus-wide LibQUAL+® surveys have been administered since 2003, a user-based evaluation of the RBML had never been conducted before. LibQUAL+ surveys have been useful in generating broad feedback on a wide range of library activities, but they do not adequately assess the patron needs and service delivery for special collections and archives. Recognizing this problem, we decided to implement a survey to gain insight into the highly specialized needs of archives and special collections users.

To conduct this assessment we adapted the Researcher Questionnaire from the Archival Metrics Toolkit. Between September 1, 2011 and August 30, 2012, the Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML) staff distributed the paper survey to any new researcher who came to our reading room as well as to returning researchers who had not been here since the start of the survey period. The survey was distributed to 910 researchers and completed by 566, a response rate of 62%.

The survey findings verified anecdotal evidence about the shortcomings of the reading areas, as well as the highly favorable way in which patrons view the staff that works with them at all levels. Results highlight the value of archives as a community outreach mechanism for the university, as well as demonstrate the university's mission of providing a distinctive and distinguished learning environment. Our recent implementation of the web-based Aeon registration and request system will most certainly impact any future assessment initiatives undertaken by the RBML.

### Purpose

Established in 1930, The Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML) is Columbia University's principal repository for primary source collections. The range of collections span more than 4,000 years and comprise medieval and renaissance manuscripts, cuneiform tablets, papyri, art and realia, some 500,000 printed books and 14 miles of manuscripts, personal papers, and records. The collections of the RBML are open for use by all members of the university community and the public.

In the past decade, the interest in library assessment has expanded greatly—particularly as a method to gather evidence and context for strategic planning and decision making. As has been the case with our counterparts across the nation, assessment of the quality and effectiveness of services and collections has grown exponentially at Columbia University Libraries (CUL). Over the past several years, library staff at Columbia has been collecting and analyzing an array of quantitative data, including card swipe<sup>1</sup> access, reference transactions, and circulation statistics, in an attempt to understand library visit patterns and collection use. Since 2003, campus-wide LibQUAL+<sup>2</sup> surveys have been administered to measure student and faculty perceptions of library service quality and to solicit feedback. LibQUAL+ surveys have been useful in generating broad feedback on a wide range of library activities, but they have not adequately assessed the patron needs and service delivery for special collections. As indicated in an article by Dupont, et al.,<sup>3</sup> special collections and archives contribute unique value to research and learning, but their value has not been effectively communicated due to a lack of standardized tools to assess their impact. Recognizing this problem, the RBML decided to implement a survey of its own to gain insight into the highly specialized needs of archives and special collections users. While the establishment of the department dates back to 1930, a user-

based evaluation of the RBML had never been conducted before.

### Project Creation

The idea of an RBML specific assessment project was approved by CUL administration and, in January of 2011, a working group of five RBML staff members, led by the CUL assessment librarian, was formed to figure out how best to proceed. To prepare for the project the group began by conducting a review of the current literature in both library assessment and user satisfaction studies more generally to understand the shape of the field and to see what other institutions were doing and how they were using their findings. Among the most influential readings was an article entitled “The Development, Testing, and Evaluation of the Archival Metrics Toolkits,”<sup>4</sup> reporting on the Archival Metrics Project, which tested and evaluated a set of toolkits designed to conduct user-based evaluation in college and university archives and special collections.

In addition to background reading the group also undertook training on conducting research on human subjects and sought project approval from Columbia University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). At Columbia, the surveys we anticipated distributing to our patrons are considered a form of human “testing” and if we wanted to have our project approved by the IRB board, and be able to share our results publicly, we had to be formally trained in the protocols of human testing. Once background reading and institutional requirements were completed we began asking ourselves what we wanted to learn from the project, what our concerns were, and what we ultimately wanted to do with whatever information we gathered.

To do so, the group undertook a series of exercises, which forced an articulation of specific goals and needs. Our small working group generated 67 individual “information needs” for the RBML during this planning phase, ranging from simple questions such as, “Who are our users?” and “How did they find us?” to more specific questions such as, “Do you think the desk staffing is adequate?” and “What do you think of the condition of the collections?” We compiled our answers onto a brainstorming worksheet, and then polled the RBML staff and library administration to determine what information other critical stakeholders wanted to gain from such an

undertaking. It was very important that all of our stakeholders had a sense that they would gain something from the project, and this helped give all staff members and administrators a sense of investment in the project and its outcomes.

We aggregated all of the information needs that we had identified in our various brainstorming sessions, ranked them, grouped them into broader categories, and prioritized these into a manageable subset of information needs. Through this process we identified the following goals for our evaluation project:

- Assess RBML’s performance in support of CUL/IS strategic plan goals, especially supporting teaching and learning; supporting research; building and describing collections; and discovery, access, delivery, and service.
- Support the libraries’ commitment to assessment, by using a tool that would help inform our decision making, evaluate our service, monitor our effectiveness, and aid in thinking strategically for the future.
- Understand our patron needs, motivation, and expectations; demonstrate our value and impact; inform our planning and decision making; and support changes that benefit our patrons.
- Build the culture of assessment into RBML in a programmatic, repeatable way, using a standard tool that would allow us to compare to other intuitions.

Once we knew what our goals were, we could then figure out if we could meet any of them through analyzing data already at our disposal. Our data collection practices at the time were, admittedly, haphazard. We had done some user testing on our finding aid design when we implemented Encoded Archival Description (EAD), so had a sense of how users responded to online finding aids, but not to any of our other descriptive tools. Similarly, we did have some collection use data available to us in the form of web analytics, ad hoc reference tracking, and an in-house database that tracked reading room use, but it was scattered and hard to interpret. One thing we very clearly did not have was information about patron demographics and user satisfaction.

After examining these existing data sources, analyzing the feedback from staff, and continued discussions among the members of the working

group, it was decided that the easiest way to proceed was to work with the existing “Archival Metrics Researcher Questionnaire”<sup>5</sup> created as part of the larger Archival Metrics Toolkit that was jointly developed by University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and the University of Toronto. By adjusting the questions slightly to reflect specific information needs of the RBML, we quickly realized the broad service categories addressed by this survey—understanding users’ evaluation of staff, discovery tools, and experience using the library itself—overlapped enough with the questions we wanted to have answered to make it a worthwhile option. Additionally, using a standardized, pre-validated tool also meant that we did not have to formulate, test and validate a survey ourselves—which would have considerably lengthened the timeline of this project. It also provided us with the option to more easily share and compare our results with other institutions that might be using the same tools.<sup>6</sup>

### Methodology

The “Archival Metrics Researcher Questionnaire” survey form is divided into six distinct sections: use of the repository (RBML), staff, services and facilities, feedback on your visit, background information, and general feedback. There are a total of 22 questions asked, the majority of which are closed-ended questions, though there are several open-ended questions throughout the questionnaire to allow for more specific feedback.

This study relied on visiting researchers who volunteered to participate in the project. Only patrons over 18 years old were included to insure IRB standards were met. Between September 1, 2011 and August 30, 2012, the RBML staff distributed the paper survey, printed on vividly colored paper, to any new researcher who came to our reading room as well as to returning researchers who had not been here since the start of the survey period. Researchers filled out the survey only once, even if they were repeat visitors. It was up to the patron whether they completed the form during that initial visit or at a later date. While the original plan had been to provide every unique visitor with an assessment form, logistics, staffing, high demand, and other variables conspired to make that goal unattainable. The survey was conducted over a yearlong period because of the many different cycles of

researchers throughout the year at the RBML. It was decided that a full year of feedback would give us a sufficient baseline for any future assessment efforts, though we anticipate that any future efforts will not be conducted over such long a period of time.

Handing out these paper surveys yielded an incredibly high response rate. During the data collection period, 5,627 visits and 1,545 unique visitors were registered. The survey was distributed to a sample of 910 researchers and, of those, 566 researchers participated in the survey. The overall response rate for the survey was 62%, although the response rate at the item level varied as noted in the findings. To the best of our knowledge, this is the largest sample size collected using this questionnaire, providing a confidence in the breadth and depth of our results.

### Findings and Discussion

The key findings indicate that a broad range of patrons from across the university and the general public use the RBML’s collections. The RBML staff is ranked as excellent in delivering service—they are helpful, efficient, available, approachable, and knowledgeable. Overall, a substantial number of visitors are completely satisfied with the facilities, services, and staff of the RBML, but key areas for improvement are increasing hours and upgrading the overall environment in the reading rooms (e.g., temperature, noise, space, comfort, etc.).

Below, we provide our findings in detail from selected sections of the survey and discuss their practical implications for the RBML.

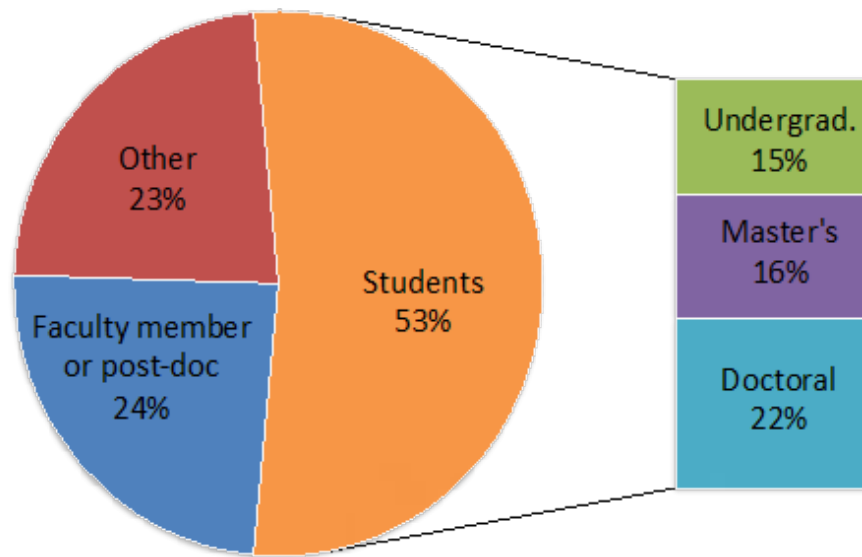
### Background information

In the survey there were several demographic questions that helped us learn more about the on-site researchers and interpret results in a meaningful way. In response to the question, “are you affiliated with Columbia University?” we learned that the majority of the researchers were non-affiliates. Sixty-three percent of the researchers indicated that they were not affiliated with the university, and 37% of the researchers indicated that they were affiliated with Columbia University. The high number of non-Columbia researchers communicates the value of archives as a community outreach mechanism for the university.

The responses to the question, “Which best describes your position?” revealed that the researchers include a student majority (53%), followed by faculty member or post-doc, and then university staff or members of the public

(see Figure 1 for details). The high number of graduate and undergraduate students speaks to the university’s mission of providing a distinctive and distinguished learning environment.

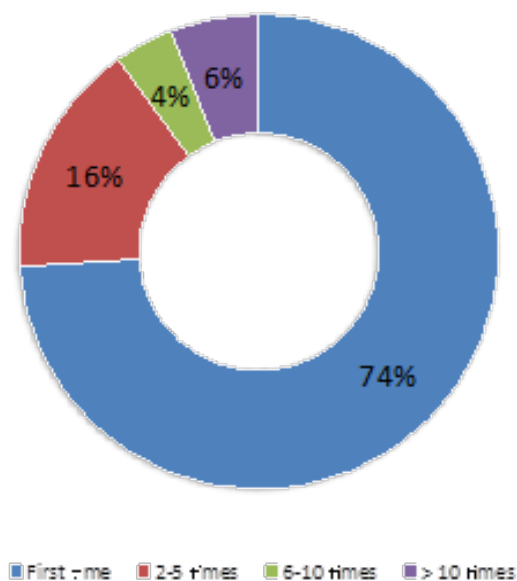
**Figure 1:** Result summary for question, “What describes your position?”



Responses to the question, “How many times have you used the Rare Book and Manuscript Library,” indicate that the patrons are newer and younger

than commonly thought: 74% were first-time users of RBML, and 50% of those were under 40 years old.

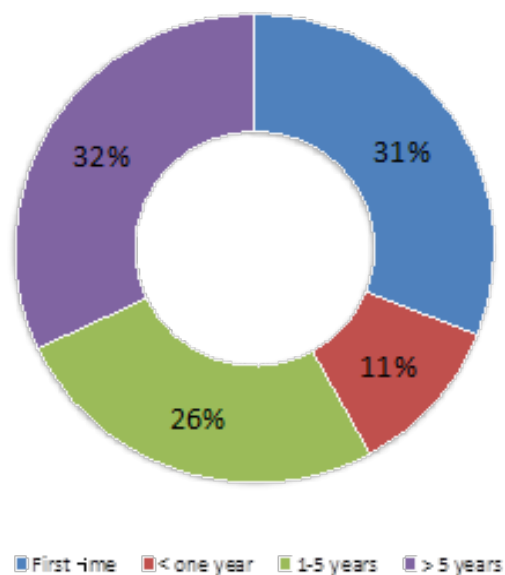
**Figure 2: Result summary for question, “How many times have you used the Rare Book and Manuscript Library?” (n=514)**



We also learned about our researchers' level of experience in using archival materials. Thirty-two percent of researchers indicated that they have been using archives more than five years while 31% indicated that they were using archival materials

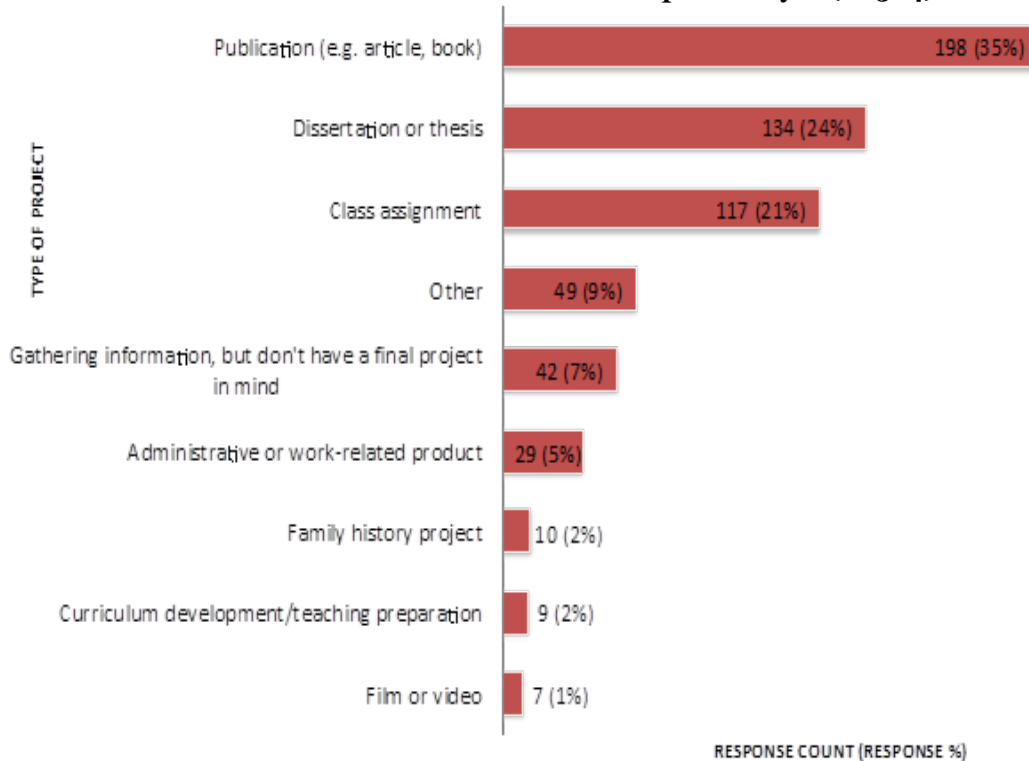
for the first time. The high number of researchers using the archives for the first time speaks to the learning mission of the organization, and it also helps us assess training needs.

**Figure 3: Result summary for question, “How long have you been using archival materials?” (n=512)**





**Figure 5: Result summary for question, “Which best characterizes the project that motivated this visit to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library?” (n=564)**



**Services and facilities**

Overall, a substantial number of on-site researchers (98%) indicated that they were highly satisfied with

the facilities, services, and staff at the RBML. Table 1 shows, by average scores from highest to lowest, the rank staff received from visiting researchers in five areas.

**Table 1: Result summary for question, “Please provide feedback on our staff on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).”**

	Mean	S.D.	No Opinion	n
Availability of the staff				
Helpfulness of the staff				
Efficiency of staff in retrieving materials				

Note that 151 respondents selected “no opinion” option for “subject knowledge of the staff.” Hence, the validity of this item may be low. The high percentage (28%) of “no opinion” for this item could be due to a genuine lack of opinion or item ambiguity, but we know from experience that

many researchers go directly to collections they have identified without engaging staff subject matter experts. These unmediated interactions are the norm among many experienced special collections patrons.

**Table 2: Level of satisfaction with facilities and services**

Questionnaire items	1 (completely dissatisfied)                      5 (completely satisfied)					No opinion	Response count
Study areas	0%	0%	4%	16%	72%	8%	495
Noise level	0%	2%	6%	21%	71%	0%	502
Furniture	1%	1%	7%	18%	71%	2%	498
Physical Access to the building	0%	1%	4%	18%	70%	7%	489
Lighting	1%	3%	8%	21%	67%	0%	504
Informational/ navigational signs	0%	2%	8%	20%	60%	9%	491
Temperature	2%	5%	12%	20%	60%	0%	502
Internet access	0%	1%	1%	7%	57%	34%	479
Hours of service	1%	5%	16%	26%	51%	1%	499
Website	0%	1%	6%	21%	50%	22%	477
Catalogs/ indexes/ findings aids	0%	2%	5%	20%	43%	30%	467
Exhibits	0%	0%	1%	10%	41%	47%	466
Reference books	0%	0%	2%	5%	28%	65%	465
Photocopying / duplication services	1%	2%	2%	5%	24%	67%	455
Microfilm and fiche viewing facilities	0%	1%	1%	3%	19%	76%	466

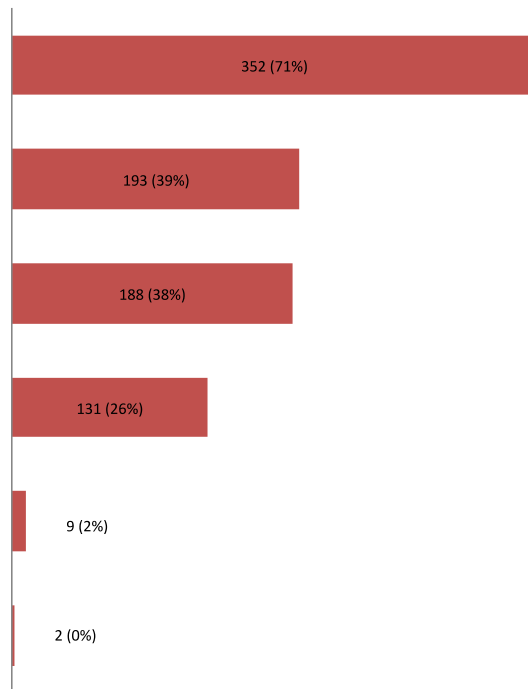
**Feedback on your visit**

Seventy percent of researchers reported that they accomplished what they set out to do, and 39%

of researchers said that they learned something new about the source materials on their topic/area of interest.



**Figure 6: Result summary for question, “Please indicate which statements describe your visit today.” (n=498)**



### Conclusion

Overall, this was a good first step in implementing an iterative assessment plan that can help us better understand RBML patrons, their needs, and gauge the effectiveness of our collections and services. The survey findings verified anecdotal evidence about the shortcomings of the reading areas, as well as the highly favorable way in which patrons view the staff that works with them at all levels. The high number of non-Columbia researchers communicates the value of archives as a community outreach mechanism for the university, just as the high number of researchers using the archives for the first time speaks to the learning mission of the organization.

But probably one of the most important results of this project is the institution of a formal culture of assessment at the RBML, which continues to influence how the RBML staff goes about its work. This culture of assessment has certainly played a role in our staff’s acceptance and use of new standardized tools such as Aeon (a web-based registration and request system providing us with far more accurate data concerning reading room

visitors, visitor demographics, and collection use) and Desk Tracker (a system used throughout the Columbia University Libraries to track non-reading room reference interactions and class sessions). These tools, while imperfect, are allowing our statistics to become more and more standardized, giving us the numbers our library administration wants to see and allowing us to methodically change the way we think about and serve our patron base. Whether these new tools obviate the need for formal assessment surveys like the one we used in 2011–2012 is still to be decided, but they will most certainly influence what kind of assessment will be necessary as we move forward.

An extraordinary amount of work and support, both from within our unit and from others within the library, was required to see this assessment project through to its successful conclusion. But in spite of the challenges of tackling such a large project, it was ultimately a very worthwhile exercise and has given us a much clearer sense of who our patrons are and how best we can meet their needs.

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**Notes**

1. Since 2007, students, faculty, and staff at Columbia University Libraries have been required to swipe their ID cards in order to enter the library buildings where the card swipe system is installed. Although the card swipe system operates primarily as a security measure, each swipe of a card presents the libraries with an accurate, continuous, and objective picture of library users.
2. LibQUAL+ is a web-based survey. This survey is created and maintained by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). For more information see: [http://www.libqual.org/about/about\\_lq/general\\_info](http://www.libqual.org/about/about_lq/general_info).
3. Christian Dupont and Elizabeth Yakel, "What's So Special about Special Collections?' Or, Assessing the Value Special Collections Bring to Academic Libraries," *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 8, no. 2 (June 11, 2013): 9–21.
4. Wendy Duff et al., "The Development, Testing, and Evaluation of the Archival Metrics Toolkits," *American Archivist* 73, no. 2 (September 1, 2010): 569–99.
5. See Archival Metrics Researcher Toolkit at <http://archivalmetrics.cms.si.umich.edu/node/5>.
6. Elizabeth Yakel and Helen Tibbo, "Standardized Survey Tools for Assessment in Archives and Special Collections," *Performance Measurement and Metrics* 11, no. 2 (July 6, 2010): 211–22, doi: 10.1108/14678041011064115.