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Building an Assessment Program in the Liberal Arts College Library

Lucretia McCulley

University of Richmond, lmcculle@richmond.edu

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LUCRETIA MCCULLEY
Boatwright Memorial Library.
University of Richmond, Virginia

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Building an Assessment Program in the Liberal Arts College Library

N OW IN ITS FOURTH YEAR, THE LIBRARY ASSESSMENT COMMIT-
tee at the University of Richmond has made great strides in establishing
a sustainable assessment program within Boatwright Library. Prior to 2008,
limited staff, time, expertise, and commitment were barriers to establishing
an ongoing assessment program.[1] As with many other liberal arts college
libraries, most of our assessment efforts had focused on information liter-
acy, since instruction is integral to the library and the university's mission.
Library surveys and other assessment methods had only received close atten-
tion when the university was embarking on its re-accreditation process. With
the growing emphasis on assessment within higher education and the emer-
gence of a new strategic plan for the university, the university librarian made
a commitment to build a formal library assessment program.[2] Jim Self and
Steve Hiller, Association of Research Libraries consultants, visited the Uni-
versity of Richmond in the fall of 2008 to offer the "Effective, Sustainable and
Practical Library Assessment" analysis, their first visit at a small liberal arts
institution.[3]

Librarians at liberal arts college libraries perform multiple duties, and
it is rare to find a library staff member totally dedicated to assessment and

trained in statistical analysis at such institutions.[4] Our goals for the Hiller-Self visit were to identify strategies and ideas that might work and prove sustainable in our unique institution. As a result of that visit, the library formed an assessment committee, composed of five individuals representing various departments of the library. Since that time, the committee has made numerous advances in building a culture of assessment in the library. This chapter will describe one model of creating an assessment program in a liberal arts college setting.

Institutional Context

The University of Richmond is a private, highly selective, nationally ranked liberal arts university. Located in Virginia's capital city, the University of Richmond offers the atmosphere of a small college with strong academic, research, and cultural opportunities. It also provides a unique combination of undergraduate and graduate programs through its schools of arts and sciences, business, leadership studies, law, and continuing studies. The institution has an enrollment of 3,900 students and offers 60 undergraduate majors and a small number of graduate programs (i.e., MBA, Law, and School of Continuing Studies). Over 350 full-time faculty members teach at the university, and the average student-faculty ratio is 8:1.

Boatwright Memorial Library's mission is "to provide University of Richmond students, faculty, and staff with information resources and services that enable them to excel in their academic and intellectual pursuits." The library includes major collections in the sciences, fine arts, music, humanities, social sciences, film, maps, theater, government documents, and rare books and manuscripts. At present, there are over a half a million volumes of books, more than 30,000 electronic and print periodicals, and thousands of multimedia items in the collection. Numerous electronic resources are available through the library and the college's computer labs, as well as from outside the library through the library's website. The library is an extremely popular destination on campus, serving as a social, study, and cultural center, and had over 557,000 visits in 2010–2011. In 2010 the library created a five-year strategic plan, focusing on "creating inspiring space for student, staff and faculty; providing resources to promote learning; and emphasizing communication and education to accelerate innovation and discovery."[5]

Creating a Library Assessment Committee

The Library Assessment Committee has provided the primary impetus and enthusiasm for establishing a culture of assessment within Boatwright Library. Chaired by the director of outreach services, the committee consists

of five members who represent a variety of positions and departments within the library. Our first task as a committee in 2008 was to establish the committee's charge and assessment goals. (See figure 10.1.)

In addition to creating our charge and developing goals, we also devoted time to educating ourselves about library assessment. Steve Hiller and Jim Self had provided numerous readings, reports, and websites during their visit and we followed up on many of their recommendations. We also read other books and articles on the subject and shared our collective knowledge on assessment among the group. In those first few months of the committee's existence, we focused on the assessment data that the library had readily available, such as annual statistics, reports from an internal "think team" process, and faculty/student interviews conducted by liaison librarians. Reviewing and analyzing the existing data gave the group a sense of focus and purpose, in addition to helping the group solidify its working relationship.

Another early priority of the committee was to educate and inform the staff on what assessment means to them, the library organization, and the institution. Many staff felt threatened by the term and thought it meant that they would be constantly evaluated. We tried to alleviate these fears by sharing minutes of our meetings; sending out informative e-mails to the entire staff; and holding all-staff assessment forums. During that first year, we were also instrumental in establishing a goals process for the library and worked with an organizational consultant to plan an annual retreat, focusing on the revision of the library's annual goals and the creation of a vision statement for the library. As the months passed, all of these components came together with the creation of an assessment plan to guide our work within the library.[6] The plan includes the library's mission statement, vision statement, annual library

FIGURE 10.1
Library Assessment Committee Charge and Goals

Committee Charge

The Library Assessment Committee is responsible for coordinating and providing oversight of various assessment activities in Boatwright Memorial Library; educating staff on library assessment; publishing and promoting assessment results; collaborating with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness; and promoting a culture of assessment that is user-focused.

Committee Goals

- To respond to the needs of our users.
- To maintain and improve our programs, collections, and services.
- To assist all library staff in "taking action" to monitor and improve services.
- To assist staff in using data, not assumptions, to make decisions.
- To identify library services that relate to the library goals and the university's strategic plan.

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goals, and the committee's charge as well as assessment goals and priorities for each year. The plan is updated on an annual basis.

A high priority for the committee was to design and create a library assessment web page, in order to promote our assessment efforts to the library staff, provide transparency of assessment data, and share our progress with the university community.[7] This resource has become an important component of our emphasis on assessment for both the library and the university. Our vision was to create an assessment page that was more than statistics and numbers, and offered colorful and interesting graphics to appeal to viewers. After reviewing numerous assessment web pages at other academic and public libraries, we decided on a design that would highlight specific statistics with rotating graphics and that would then link out to detailed statistics. We also post SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) assessment plans, reports and studies on various surveys and interviews, and other pertinent assessment information. The web page provides a central place for library staff, the university community, and other libraries to discover our assessment efforts and statistical data.

Collaboration with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) at the University of Richmond has been an important component of our assessment program. Assessment specialists from OIE have met with the director of outreach services frequently, offering advice and guidance through the annual SACS assessment plans and reports. The OIE staff members have enthusiastically endorsed the library's interest in assessment and they often refer to us as a model unit on campus.

Continuing education has also played an important role in the establishment of our program. The director of outreach services has attended all of the ARL Assessment Conferences (2006, 2008, 2010), in addition to special programs and workshops on assessment at ALA and ARCL conferences. In 2009 she attended the Immersion Conference on Assessment and Information Literacy, sponsored by the ACRL. The social sciences and humanities librarian on the assessment committee also attended the 2010 Assessment Conference, and both librarians made presentations at this conference. The stacks, building, and interlibrary loan supervisor attended a Council on Library and Information Resources workshop on ethnographic methods in the spring of 2011. The entire committee takes advantage of webinars, books, journal articles, blog postings, and other opportunities to increase our knowledge of assessment.

Assessment Tools and Methods

Since the fall of 2008, the committee has initiated several assessment projects, both large and small. Assessment tools have varied, but in these first three years, we have primarily relied on survey methods. Without a statistician on

the library staff, we were creative in identifying options for surveys that offer built-in analyses and results. For example, in the last three years the library was involved in utilizing three national survey packages, the Counting Opinions LIBSAT Survey, the HEDS/NITLE Research Practices Survey, and the MISO (Measuring Information Service Outcomes) Survey.[8] Small-scale surveys for various specific library services, such as course reserves, document delivery, and library space issues, have been accomplished using Student-Voice/CampusLabs, a survey software provided by the Student Development Division at the University of Richmond. StudentVoice/CampusLabs is a user-friendly survey system that combines elements of data collection, reporting, organization, and integration. In addition, assessment specialists at Student-Voice/CampusLabs are available for consultation and review of surveys. The service is in the process of changing its name to CampusLabs to emphasize its broader commitment and focus to assessment. Not only does it offer survey software and analysis, but tools for assessing learning, including rubric creation, are available on the website. Other tools include Project Dashboard, which provides appealing graphics on statistics, survey results, and studies that can be used on a web page or inserted into a document.

In addition to online surveys, some library departments have found value in using brief print surveys to obtain user feedback on specific services, such as netbook circulation in the library. The library's main service desk has circulated laptops to students within the building for many years and when there was a need for an equipment upgrade, we chose to purchase netbooks, rather than laptops. In order to gauge student satisfaction/dissatisfaction with this change, the staff asked students to fill out a brief paper survey after each checkout session. This method offered a quick way to obtain user feedback on an important student service.

Other assessment tools include observation studies and the continued analysis of library statistical data. For example, the library's electronic resources librarian regularly uses database and journal use statistics to assist liaison librarians in making decisions about canceling print journal subscriptions, or ordering new electronic journals. Library Systems staff regularly share data on library catalog use and circulation statistics.

One of the most exciting recent developments of the Library Assessment Committee has been the establishment of a three-person ethnographic team in the library. This development is the perfect example of establishing a culture of assessment in the library. Not only is the Library Assessment Committee keenly interested in assessment, but we now have other staff members who are committed to the program. One member of the ethnographic team serves on the Assessment Committee for coordination and communication purposes. The team has been instrumental in establishing observation studies in the library, and they have formed an excellent collaboration with a professor in the university's Sociology and Anthropology Department who is

interested in studying library culture. During the spring of 2011, the team worked closely with an anthropology student who designed focus groups to receive feedback on the library building. During the fall of 2011, the team worked with the professor and her entire anthropological field methods class to study student behavior in the library. This is an excellent example of collaborating with others on campus to increase our knowledge, but to also take advantage of expertise that we do not have among the library staff. Similar to the above-mentioned statistician example, we could not afford to hire a full-time anthropologist, but we are making the most of the resources that we do have available to us.

Assessment Findings

Boatwright Library's areas of assessment emphasis include student learning, user services, and building facilities. Student learning assessment strategies in the past two years focused on data collected through the HEDS/NITLE Research Practices Survey. Currently, we are focused on assessing the information literacy goals of the university's new First Year Seminars, where library workshops are required of each first-year student. We collaborate with faculty in assessing the information literacy component of the First Year Seminars with the use of a rubric tool. Librarians are also receiving usage statistics for newly created LIBGUIDES and feedback on the effectiveness of course-specific LIBGUIDES from brief in-class surveys asking students how they used the LIBGUIDE to prepare papers and projects.[9] To assess user services, over the past three years we have used the Counting Opinions LIBSAT Survey, the MISO Survey, and focused StudentVoice/CampusLabs surveys. To assess building facilities a variety of methods have been used, including observation studies, data extracted from the Counting Opinions and MISO Surveys, and feedback collected from the library's suggestion box.

How have we used the above assessment tools and how have our findings made a difference in our library services and sources? While thorough, detailed analysis of all our results cannot be shared in this chapter, I would like to share representative examples of our various tools, including a description of the tool, why we chose it, what we learned, and practical implications.

Counting Opinions LIBSAT Survey

Counting Opinions LIBSAT Survey is an instantaneous, continuous customer feedback system that enables libraries to measure customer satisfaction and the impacts and outcomes of various endeavors over time. We have used the Counting Opinions LIBSAT Survey for the past two years to obtain ratings and comments from students, staff, and faculty at the university. We chose

Counting Opinions because we wanted to use a national survey package that would give us feedback on overall customer service satisfaction, easily compile results, and offer the opportunity to compare our library against similar libraries. Many libraries across the United States and Canada use the software, and support for implementation has been excellent. After viewing various demonstrations of Counting Opinions at conferences and through webinars, we decided to move forward with using the survey for three years. Counting Opinions also acts as a continuous feedback survey, since it is on our website for most of the academic year.

The Counting Opinions LIBSAT Survey was available on the library's website from October through April for both the 2009–2010 and 2010–2011 academic years. Targeted e-mail messages were sent throughout the year, reminding students, staff, and faculty to complete the survey. In the first year, 191 users responded to the survey; 57 percent of respondents were undergraduates and 31 percent were faculty/staff. The remaining numbers included graduate students, alumni, visitors, and other students. Our goal for 2010–2011 was to increase our response rate, so we advertised more specifically to our major user groups (faculty, staff, and students) and we offered a gift certificate to a local café as an incentive. We nearly doubled our response rate with 404 responses (68 percent were undergraduates and 20 percent were faculty/staff).

Results from both years were very similar. Many questions in the Counting Opinions survey asked participants to rank their answers on a scale of 1 to 7. A rank of 7 means "strongly agree," a rank of 6 means "agree," and a rank of 5 means "somewhat agree." Other questions focused on satisfaction with and importance of various services, and those responses are also on a 7-point scale (Very Satisfied [7] to Very Dissatisfied [1] or Very Important [7] to Very Unimportant [1]). Overall results indicated that Boatwright Library is viewed favorably by faculty, staff and students. (See figures 10.2, 10.3.)

FIGURE 10.2

Counting Opinions LIBSAT Survey—Overall Results

Statement	Satisfaction/Agreement	
	2009–2010	2010–2011
Overall impressions I will reuse the services of this library.	6.0	6.0
This library is very important to me.	5.9	6.0
I will recommend the services of this library to others.	5.9	5.7
The quality of library services is very high.	5.7	5.7
I am very satisfied with the services of this library.	5.7	5.6
The services of this library consistently meet or exceed my expectations.	5.6	5.5

FIGURE 10.3

2010-2011 Counting Opinions LIBSAT Survey—Overall Results by Patron Type

Statement	Satisfaction/Agreement		
	Undergraduate	*Graduate*	*Faculty/Staff*
Overall impressions I will reuse the services of this library.	6.0	6.2	6.3
This library is very important to me.	5.9	5.7	6.1
I will recommend the services of this library to others.	5.9	6.2	6.1
The quality of library services is very high.	5.5	5.8	5.9
I am very satisfied with the services of this library.	5.7	5.8	5.9
The services of this library consistently meet or exceed my expectations.	5.6	5.8	5.9

The Counting Opinions LIBSAT Survey provided feedback that our services are ranked highly and they are appreciated by the university community. The survey results also highlighted areas for improvement, especially with our physical facility and the need to add more study space, additional tables, and computers. We used the feedback to share evidence of users' requests for additional and improved space. For example, many users were concerned about restrooms in the library, and University Facilities has now planned future improvements for that space. During the summer of 2010, the Library Assessment Committee gathered comments and ratings from Counting Opinions on physical space and combined it with our observation studies and other data to create a focused report on physical and environmental needs in Boatwright Library.[10]

Document Delivery Satisfaction Survey

Document Delivery provides delivery of books, articles, and reference book chapters for items that Boatwright Library owns in print format to all faculty and staff. Articles are scanned and sent to faculty and staff via e-mail, while books are delivered on campus to departments. The Document Delivery service is a cooperative effort between two library services, Interlibrary Loan

(ILL) and the Media Resource Center (MRC), and makes use of both full-time and student employees. During the 2008–2009 academic year, the library chose to assess the Document Delivery service as one of the outcomes for the SACS Assessment Plan. To evaluate the service, ILL and MRC staff tracked the number of books processed for document delivery and the number of books delivered within two working days. A short, two-question survey was also developed using the StudentVoice/CampusLabs Survey software. The first question focused on delivery time to offices and the second question asked about their overall satisfaction with the service. A section for comments was also provided.

The Document Delivery service is very popular on campus, but we wanted to make sure faculty were receiving materials when promised and if there were any suggestions that would improve the service. It also gave us the chance to initiate the first use of the StudentVoice/CampusLabs survey tool on a small scale, since the survey would only be taken by faculty and staff that had used the service.

The statistics collected by ILL and MRC staff revealed that between January and April of 2009 over 1,000 books were delivered to faculty and staff. Of the books delivered, 99 percent were delivered within two business days. This was significantly higher than the predicted target of 80 percent and validated the efficiency of the service. The StudentVoice/CampusLabs survey data closely matched the data collected by ILL and the MRC. It was e-mailed to all users of the service and responses were anonymous. Results revealed that 88 percent of items were delivered within two business days, well above the target of 80 percent.[11]

We found that although users were very satisfied with our Document Delivery service, they did not fully understand various aspects of the service, such as why library staff could not deliver more than five items per day, or why items could not be picked up from office departments. They also lacked understanding on how to search for DVDs in the library catalog, and indicated they were dissatisfied with the online form for both interlibrary loan and document delivery. We chose to respond to all survey respondents and provide clarification on the above issues. The faculty comments about the online form helped interlibrary loan staff explore other options, such as ILLIAD software, for the service's interface.

We were very pleased with the use and performance of the StudentVoice/CampusLabs Survey software. It was easy to create a survey and distribute it to a specific population. Assessment specialists advised us on question wording and provided excellent support in using the system. We were pleased with the automatic gathering of data and the reports, both text and graphic, that the software provided for us.

Quiet and Group Study Observations and Survey

Boatwright Library is a popular place on campus, and students often complain that more study space, both quiet and group, is needed. As another outcome measure for the library's 2009–2010 SACS assessment plan, the Assessment Committee decided to gather information on quiet and group study area use using observation studies and a StudentVoice/CampusLabs Survey. Facility use is often difficult to measure and we felt that the combination of two methods, an observation study and a student survey, would offer different perspectives, but it would also offer a chance to compare the data to identify common or different trends. This method was also our first effort with observation studies, and its small-scale focus was an excellent way to begin learning more about observational methods.

The observation study took place during the 2009–2010 academic year at Boatwright Library. The observers (library staff and student library assistants) noted user behavior in the quiet and collaborative areas of the library using a standard form. The primary question to be answered was "Are users using group and quiet spaces as intended?" Observers recorded key information such as locations, day, time, and number of patrons on the form. They also were free to record observations from their perspective. Observations generally ranged in time from five minutes to a half hour depending on activity in the observation area.

Results revealed that quiet and group study areas were being used for the intended purpose 80 percent of the time. The study noted several other trends, such as users' tendency to carry a lot of items with them. These items include multiple bags, purses, food, multiple forms of technology, and books and notebooks for class work. Most of the time, the items were crowded around a library user, limiting the useable work space for them and occasionally their classmates at a shared table.

The StudentVoice/CampusLabs survey had a very high response rate of over 600 responses. Although most students were satisfied with the quiet and group study areas, the satisfaction rates are not as high as we would like. The survey comments were valuable in helping us identify the need for more tables and more space.

Results from the quiet and group observations and survey, combined with information from other sources, assisted us in writing a complete report on user comments and opinions about user space. This report is proving to be very helpful to library administrators as they find a solution to crowded stacks and crowded user space.[12] In October 2011 we learned that the university has awarded the library $2.5 million for a partial renovation on two floors of the library. We hope this renovation will provide the additional group study and quiet study areas that students requested.

First Year Seminar Information Literacy Assessment Rubric

As mentioned earlier, liaison librarians collaborated closely with faculty on the development of new First Year Seminars (FYS) during the summer of 2010. Information literacy is one of the five major goals of the program, and each seminar class has a librarian embedded within the course to teach and support information literacy assignments. We worked closely with staff in the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and the FYS Faculty Committee to create a rubric for faculty members to use in assessing information literacy. Although not perfect, feedback on the rubric has provided preliminary data that we can use to follow up with faculty and perhaps develop a more specific assessment in the future.

The stated outcome for the assessment rubric was "First Year Seminar students will be able to effectively access and utilize information from a variety of sources." Students' achievement of this outcome was assessed by using a writing assignment selected by the instructor during the spring semester seminars and applying the standardized rubric. The assessment goal was that 70 percent of students would be rated as "meets expectations" or "exceeds expectations" for each criterion on the rubric. The target for this assessment was met, with 70 percent of students rated as "meets expectations" or "exceeds expectations" for each criterion on the rubric. (See figure 10.4.)

FIGURE 10.4
Information Literacy Rubric Assessment Results

Rubric Rating	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Fails to Meet Expectations
Determine the extent of information needed	32% (241/762)	57% (438/762)	11% (83/762)
Access the needed information effectively and efficiently	32% (246/777)	60% (467/777)	8% (64/777)
Evaluate information and its sources critically	28% (213/762)	58% (442/762)	14% (107/762)
Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose	32% (252/778)	57% (447/778)	10% (79/778)
Access and use information ethically and legally	32% (251/777)	62% (484/777)	5% (42/777)

Library Statistics

Gathering and sharing pertinent library statistics has been of interest at Boatwright Library. While collection statistics are important, they do not hold the emphasis that they might in a research library institution. We are more interested in "telling our story" with our service statistics, that is, how many research consultations we have provided for students, how many full-text journals, how many uses of our website, or how many times our group study room was checked out. We constantly ask ourselves how our statistics and assessment data can show our value to the community. Recently, we brought together several staff and librarians together for conversations focusing on such questions as (1) what statistics do we need for national surveys, such as the ACRL's Academic Libraries Trends and Statistics Survey? (2) what information do we need for internal decision making? and (3) what data do we need to tell our value to the campus community?[13]

Conclusion

Assessment can be accomplished in a small liberal arts institution with support from the library director, commitment to assessment at the university level, and motivation and desire among the library staff. Boatwright Library's successes in the past three years have shown that persistent and focused activities have resulted in a sustainable program. However, it is important to recognize that implementing an effective program must be taken in small steps, using the staff time that is realistically available. Staff interest and appreciation of how assessment can help librarians understand our users' perspectives have benefited the library staff, both internally and externally. Boatwright's Assessment Committee is enthusiastic, energetic, and committed. The assessment web page has enabled the library to share key assessment data with the larger community. We have also created a regular electronic newsletter and a digital annual report, which provide further ways to tell the library's story and value.

The committee's focus is changing as we have become confident with how assessment fits into our organization and with our goals. Our first year focused on how to form a committee or how to write an assessment plan, and the group met twice a month in order to establish a ground level of functionality. As we complete three years as a committee, we are spending more time on analyzing data and developing methods supporting more "hands on" assessment with other library staff. We have also noticed that various staff members around the library are embarking on their own assessment projects. Slowly but surely, a culture of assessment is taking root in our environment.

NOTES

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