

## Guest Editorial

# Assessment + Analysis = Accountability



Have we seen the worse of the budget cutting? Probably not. Don't be surprised if reports of more hiring freezes, staff reductions, and layoffs become more common during the next year or two. The deteriorating financial health of many campuses is likely to increase the call for libraries to document their contributions to the mission of their campuses. Some officials label such calls as seeking greater "accountability" while others talk in terms of "assessing" a library's contribution to such measures as student learning outcomes, and graduation and retention. It troubles me when terms such as accountability are injected into the conversation. Being accountable begins to sound a little like a politically motivated politician challenging a college president to: "Prove you're worth the money."

There seems to be little doubt that more and more library administrators are beginning to hear officials raising questions such as, "What are the benefits the campus receives for its investments in the library?" Library directors know full well that responding to such questions in objective and quantifiable terms is extremely difficult. Nevertheless such questions are likely to keep coming, and efforts by librarians to provide answers are also likely to intensify.

A small group of members of the Association of Research Libraries is currently working to modify an evaluation technique known as the Balanced Scorecard.<sup>1</sup> This evaluation strategy was developed in the 1990s, and has gained some followers in the corporate sector. Time will tell whether or not this approach can be usefully modified to meet the needs of libraries.

A recently reported ROI (return on investment) study conducted at the Uni-

versity of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, has also received attention. The objective of this study was to determine what role information resources played in the grant-generating activities at the University, and whether the University was receiving a worthwhile ROI on its library investments in that single arena.<sup>2</sup>

When Bill Parton, director of the library at Arkansas Tech University posted on COLLIB-L listserv offering to share his assessment plan, his posting generated over seventy responses.<sup>3</sup> Such a response implies to me that assessment of library services is finding its way onto the radar screens of campus officials.

It shouldn't be much of a stretch to suggest that more and more libraries will be asked to show just how the library is contributing to the student educational experience. Some librarians are already urging that assessment ought to become an integral part of a library's culture. While I agree, one also has to keep in mind that assessment is not effortless undertaking. Those interested in library assessment should examine a recent book authored by Joe Matthews entitled *Library Assessment in Higher Education*.<sup>4</sup> He identifies numerous studies that produced only marginal results, or results that weren't significant at all. I believe Matthew's would agree that while assessment isn't impossible, it requires a sizable commitment of time, money, and patience.

In the assessment plan crafted by Bill Parton and his colleagues, I believe one particular statement merits highlighting: "Perhaps the most important and fundamental guiding principle that is common among all effective library assessment plans is this: the purpose of assessment is continuous improvement. We have ad-

opted this philosophy as the foundation of our new assessment plan."<sup>5</sup>

This statement leads me to recommend that librarians view assessment as a continuous improvement process; moreover, those engaged in assessment would be well-served to adopt detailed process analysis as one of their key tools. Such analyses should include studies designed to increase operational efficiency, identify and eliminate activities that are no longer necessary, and streamline those activities that are deemed essential. It also wouldn't hurt if the library were able to talk intelligently about its costs and ideally how its costs compared to comparable libraries.

Analysis of library activities has never gained wide popularity among librarians. This is probably true for a variety of reasons. For example, while saving money through greater operational efficiency has traditionally been a goal in the corporate sector, efficiency hasn't enjoyed a high priority among service-oriented organizations. It is possible that by using such terms as "efficiency" and "saving money" analysts have emphasized the wrong

goals. What if the goals emphasized improvement of services over saving money, even though improving efficiency and/or saving money might be by-products of the analyses? Would such changes in language alter perceptions toward process analysis? Could be because so many librarians are really committed to improving the quality of their public and support services.

While a library director who is able to gain the trust and confidence of campus officials is still the best antidote against unreasonable budget cuts, carefully constructed assessment and analysis efforts can also go a long way toward answering questions about how the library benefits its students and faculty. Assessment coupled with analysis can lead officials to agree that libraries are contributing and are indeed accountable.

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### Notes

1. Balanced Scorecard is: <http://www.balancedscorecard.org/Home/tabid/36/Default.aspx> I
2. Paula Kaufman and Sarah Barbara Watstein, "Library Value (Return On Investment, ROI) and the Challenge of Placing a Value on Public Services." *Reference Services Review* 36 no. 3 (2008): 226-31.
3. Arkansas Technical University, Ross Pendergraft Library: An Assessment Plan prepared by the library's staff. Copies of the plan can be obtained by contacting Bill Parton, Director <[wparton@atu.edu](mailto:wparton@atu.edu)>
4. Joseph R. Matthews, "Library Assessment in Higher Education." Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007, 61-96.
5. Arkansas Technical University, Ross Pendergraft Library: An Assessment Plan, p.2.