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Evidence-based Management: Assessment to Plan to Budget to Action

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Abstract

For the past two decades, the University of Northern Colorado's (UNC) University Libraries has utilized an Assessment Committee to assess user satisfaction. In recent years, they have implemented an evidence-based management model that involves a cycle of assessment, planning, budgeting, and action. This use of this model has resulted in successes in a variety of library areas.

Introduction

The University of Northern Colorado's (UNC) University Libraries has implemented an evidence-based management model that relies upon assessment of collections, services, and instruction as an integral step. This cycle of assessment, planning, budgeting, and action has proven to be a valuable and insightful tool over the past five years.

A Carnegie Research-Intensive institution, the University of Northern Colorado, with a student FTE of 12,000 and a nationally-recognized undergraduate business program, as well as a critically-acclaimed music program, is the teacher education university in Colorado, offering graduate degrees in a number of disciplines. The University Libraries include the Howard Skinner Music Library, supporting the Music and Musical Theater programs, and the James A. Michener Library, which supports the majority of curricula across campus. The combined University Libraries hold more than 2.5 million items, and have made significant investments in digital collections.

In 1988, the first Libraries Assessment Committee was formed, conducting a survey of user satisfaction that fall.[1] Since then, numerous instruments have been implemented, including locally-designed surveys and questionnaires, focus groups, and LibQUAL+®, which was first deployed in 2003, then again in 2004, 2005, and 2007. Findings of the Assessment Committee have informed planning within the Libraries for the past two decades, providing evidence of the changing needs of faculty and student patrons.

The Libraries' Evidence-based Process

In 2003, "Charting the Future," an initiative of the University President, spurred even greater interest in accountability and evidence of rationale for planning and budget requests, resulting in an initiative for evidence-based management at all levels of the university, including the libraries. UNC's Libraries must submit a budget for each academic year, requesting not only those ongoing funds that support staffing and collections, but also special projects such as furniture upgrades and remodeling plans. "Charting the Future" created an opportunity for the Libraries to position itself as a Teaching Library, collaborating with academic colleagues across campus to attain "our shared educational objectives".[2]

The Libraries designed an evidence-based management process, as seen in Figure 1 to facilitate university-wide collaboration in redefining and reinvigorating the role of the academic library. The intent was to move the perception of the library from a traditional and generic role characterized by a warehouse mentality, isolationist perception, exclusion from institutional priorities, limited funding, and lack of stakeholders to a role incorporating the exuberance of the Teaching Library concept, the characteristics of which were identified as:

- The intellectual heart of the campus;
- A welcoming place for all students;
- An outstanding resource recognized both on and off campus;
- Student-centered and dedicated to fostering student success;
- An essential partner in producing students with the information literacy skills necessary to be productive members of society;
- Cost effective in providing excellent services; and
- Responsive to internal and external change.

The evidence-based management process was specifically designed to foster university-wide acceptance of the Teaching Library role, including its importance to the recruitment and retention of faculty and students. Incorporating this redefined role into the university culture became a major function of the Assessment Committee as it pursued the realities of campus perceptions and needs.

Figure 1. The Evidence-Based Planning Process.
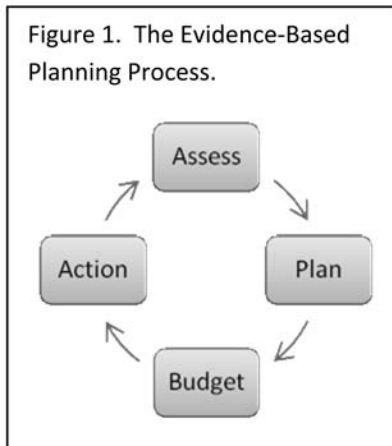
The Cycle: Assessment

Assessment, and consequently the role of Libraries' Assessment Committee, became the focal point of the evidence-based cycle. Historically, the committee has been comprised of both faculty and classified staff, with staggered three-year terms. Past chairs of the committee stay on for an additional year as the new chair becomes accustomed to the role and responsibilities. This additional service is particularly important to the success of LibQUAL+® in that administering the Survey can be complex. To counter survey fatigue in campus populations, incentives and promotion have been used to increase participation. Sampling of the population has involved a greater degree of collaboration and cooperation with the campus Information Technology unit.

Assessment Committee data has provided evidence to support an increased emphasis on library instruction, including the creation of new faculty positions and the design and implementation of LIB credit-bearing courses; increased investment in online and digital monographic, periodical, and reference resources; as well as furniture upgrades and remodeling project scheduled for completion in fall 2008.[3] Ongoing investment in assessment activities indicates the value placed on knowing what our patrons want and expect from the Libraries.

Information gathered by members of the Assessment Committee is disseminated throughout the Libraries, fostering a climate of communicative transparency and encouraging collaboration and consensus.

One of the more ambitious projects undertaken by the Assessment Committee in recent years was the 2006 implementation of a Library Summit.[4] This event brought together nearly eighty individuals from all areas of campus for a luncheon, followed by what was essentially two large focus-group activities. Attendance was based on invitations from the president, provost, and dean and resulted in over ninety percent of the invitees attending. Plus, the president and provost opened the Summit with presentations on the importance of the Teaching Library to faculty and student success and to overall recruitment and retention.

Building on the comments and scores of the previous year's LibQUAL+® survey, the 2007 Summit sought input from students, faculty, and administrators across campus to help address areas of concern. Generating more than seventy flip-chart pages of suggestions, many of which have since been implemented, the event was a success on many levels. The Libraries are now seen as genuinely concerned about satisfying the needs of the campus community, dedicated to solving problems in original ways, and committed to building community through directed collaboration. The Summit fostered relationships across campus, established the Libraries as a team player, and raised awareness of the libraries' teaching and learning role. Suggestions and recommendations made during the Summit were infused into library planning and budgeting, exemplifying the strength of evidence-based management.

The Assessment Committee approaches its work confident that recommendations will be taken seriously and be incorporated into the planning process fully aware of the importance of tracking changes in population, curriculum, and policies. For example, the most recent project, undertaken in spring 2008, used Appreciative Inquiry methods to determine how to better serve graduate distance students, a population that is overlooked by traditional methods of inquiry. The committee devised a way to obtain rich qualitative data from students pursuing graduate level degrees in Education and Nursing. This project was a direct result of the data garnered through LibQUAL+® surveys, and a reflection of the increasing

importance of distance education, primarily of graduate students, at UNC.

The Cycle: Planning

Every fall, the results of the assessment process are incorporated into an annual University of Northern Colorado Libraries Planning Goals Statement. The purpose of the goals statement is to establish priorities for Libraries' activities and to facilitate the budgeting process, which is the next step in the evidence-based management cycle.

Since 2003, the University Libraries Five-Year Plan planning goals have mirrored the organizational structure of the *University Plan,* with sections for organization and personnel, collections, services, instruction, technology, facilities, assessment, and external support. The objectives under each section have come directly from the assessment process.

Beginning with 2008, the University of Northern Colorado Libraries Planning Goals Statement[5] will mirror the Academic Plan,[6] which was drafted by a steering committee of students, faculty, and administrators and adopted by the university's Board of Trustees in the spring of 2008. The goals of the Academic Plan emphasize exemplary teaching and learning, a superior faculty of teacher-scholars, transformational learning, dedication to the teaching and learning community, and effective partnering with the local community. The Libraries will draft a five-year plan reflecting goals set by the university's academic plan and will be based once again, on the outcomes of library assessment.

The Cycle: Budgeting

Assessment results, as reflected in the planning goals, comprise the basis of the Libraries' annual budget request. The university process requires that all requests for base increases and one-time allocations be fully justified in terms of enhancements to the university community. As such, all requests from the Libraries are divided into two evidence-based narratives, recruitment and retention or additional evidence. Both cite the assessment process and subsequent results. The global narrative that accompanies the entire request is based on the Teaching Library concept, the redesigned role incorporated into that concept, and how affirmative responses to the request will enhance the teaching and learning process, and subsequently, faculty, and student recruitment and retention.

Basing budget requests on assessment evidence and resultant planning goals has led to unprecedented funding for the Teaching Library. The materials budget has increased equal to or above the annual inflation every year since the Libraries implemented evidence-based management. In addition, allocations have been received for new positions and facility improvements.

The Cycle: Action

When the budgeting process concludes, with proposed new projects approved and funded, libraries personnel move quickly toward implementation. Not only does the "action" phase of evidence-based management provide proof that allocations are administered efficiently and effectively, it allows the Assessment Committee to analyze those actions in the next iteration of the assessment process.

The action phase also shows the entire university-community that the Libraries take the assessment process seriously and that their involvement does, indeed, result in change. This, in turn, stimulates the expansion of internal and external stakeholders who then emphasize, especially during the budget process, the importance of the Libraries being given priority for redirected and new dollars. This combination of evidence-based management and stakeholder development has resulted in, among other initiatives:

- Inflationary and curriculum-based increases to the materials budget;
- Additional library faculty positions and a development officer;
- Replacement of the circulation desk and remodeling of access services work space;
- Expansion of community events;
- Expansion of the Libraries' credit-generating curriculum and course-integrated instruction;
- Refurbishment, including technology upgrades, of group-study rooms;
- Refurbishment of general student-use space;
- Embedded Library faculty in college-specific buildings;
- Incorporation of instant messaging into reference/research instruction; and
- Improvement of scoping and resource management in the public access catalog.

Now What?

Over the past five years, improved LibQUAL+® scores have reflected the success of implemented projects and initiatives. The tailored research classes fill rapidly and generate waiting lists. "Library as Place" scores have reflected improvement as well as raised expectations through refurbished soft furnishings and enhanced access to electrical outlets. Collections scores improved, as did circulation statistics, as a result of retaining book jackets, weeding aggressively, and improving stacks signage. Perhaps the most significant single response to assessment findings that increased visibility of the libraries across campus and into the larger community was the creation of an advancement committee, which coordinates participation in the Homecoming parade, job fairs and other "welcome to campus" events at the start of each semester, and tailgating parties complete with miniature footballs imprinted with library information.

University of Northern Colorado's University Libraries is committed to continued use of the assess, plan, budget, act cycle of evidence-based management. Future assessment projects will continue to monitor trends as well as target areas of concern and new initiatives. Balancing quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection in order to garner a deep understanding of the needs of changing populations will continue to guide the assessment committee. Using methods that generate solutions, rather than simply collecting complaints, will introduce new ideas into the planning stage of the management cycle, while methods that measure the success of implemented projects will provide the evidence needed by administration, in the libraries and at the campus and state levels.

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Endnotes

1. Lisa Bankenship and Adonna Fleming, "A History of Library Assessment at the University of Northern Colorado: Fifteen Years of Data Analysis and Program Changes," *Advances in Library Administration and Organization* (2004): 267-282.

2. University Libraries Task Force on Leadership/Management, "Final Report," (Greeley, CO: University of Northern Colorado, 2005).

3. Blankenship and Fleming.

4. ARL Statistics and Service Quality Programs.,"The Library Summit: Now That You Have LibQUAL+® Data, What Will You Do With It?" (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2008).

5. University Libraries, "UNC Libraries Planning Goals for FY08," About the Libraries, July 5, 2008,. http://library.unco.edu/documents/ LibraryPlanningGoalsFY08.pdf.

6. Academic Plan Steering Committee, "Academic Planning," Provost Office at the University of Northern Colorado, November 2, 2007, http://www.unco.edu/academicplanning/ docs/AP_11-02-07%20Final.pdf.