Greg MacAyeal

A culture of assessment
Five mindsets

The Northwestern University Library recently established a committee to coordinate efforts related to assessment. Of course, assessment and evaluation have taken place at Northwestern's libraries for a long time. However, recent calls for more accountability in academic libraries and higher education made us realize that we need to increase our efforts with regard to assessment work.

The newly formed committee at Northwestern is tasked with facilitating assessment activities. I was appointed chair of this group, building on my own interest and prior work, but, at the time of the appointment a year ago, I considered myself an assessment novice. I still do. Many of us working in assessment are beginners, and every year, more and more librarians find themselves with assessment responsibilities.

Like the library at Northwestern, academic libraries everywhere are formalizing their approach to assessment by establishing committees, assigning new work to existing staff, or creating new positions entirely. Attendance data for the ARL Assessment Conferences lend credence to assessment as a growing focus. In 2006, the first year of the conference, 215 people attended. In 2008, 375 attended, and in 2010 there 460. The 2012 conference had roughly 560 attendees.[1] Assessment efforts in libraries are clearly growing, and at a rapid pace.

The phrase "culture of assessment" has been in use for years, but many librarians new to assessment (and many others in higher education) grapple with what it really means. Wendy F. Weiner states it concisely in her writing for the AAUP titled "Establishing a Culture of Assessment: Fifteen Elements of Assessment Success—How Many Does Your Campus Have?"[2] A culture of assessment is a set of attitudes, approaches, and understandings that support the evaluation of student learning outcomes. It's a set of mindsets that help create a positive response to the wider call for accountability.

Since chairing the committee, a few important aspects of assessment have become clear, and my observations below are important mindsets.

1. Assessment needs to live in the ongoing, daily work of everyone. Committees, workgroups, or assigned staffers cannot "own" assessment and retain all responsibilities. Ideally, they act as resources for everyone else. Libraries, departments, and individuals need to include assessment as part of their expected work and build assessment activity into their goals. Initiatives should grow organically out of continuing work and should be completed by those engaged in that work. Assessment begins with questions "How will I know if this is

Greg MacAyeal is assistant head of the Northwestern University Music Library, e-mail: g-macayeal@northwestern.edu

> **. . . academic libraries everywhere are formalizing their approach to assessment by establishing committees, assigning new work to existing staff, or creating new positions entirely.**

successful?" "Has this improved," or "Is the result worth the time and expense?" All of us can ask these questions about what we're doing in the day-to-day of our work.

2. Assessment skill sets need to be cultivated in more library staff. As stated above, there are now many librarians involved in assessment initiatives, but not all have developed appropriate skill sets. As we move forward, many of us find that our skills in research methods, data gathering, analysis, and reporting are not strong enough. We're learning on the job as the work dictates. Staff members who already possess assessment skills can be overwhelmed with consultations. The resulting bottleneck may cause work to slow or stop. More people working across all functional areas in libraries need to have well developed assessment skills. This needs to be a priority for training and staff development.

3. Assessment implies a willingness to change. Whatever we assess must be changeable, and at the onset of making any assessment, there must be an attitude that supports making changes. A valid outcome may be that no change is required or possible because of political or practical reasons, but even in such cases, the assessment itself still may be considered successful. Good assessment will lead to an informed decision. Efforts leading to anything less will be a waste of time.

4. Assessment needs to align with institutional goals. Libraries traditionally have been measured using data such as collection size, gate count, and staff size, but it's now generally understood that this is not enough. Institutions of higher education create knowledge through student learning and faculty research. Traditional library assessment data does not demonstrate the impact a library has on student learning or faculty research. When traditional assessment data align with institutional goals, they remain valuable. If not, we need to stop committing precious time and scarce resources to collect and report it.

5. Assessment reporting allows libraries to participate in a campus-wide dialogue about evaluation. In many of the ways in which a college or university now looks at its own effectiveness, we see an increased need for accountability. There are many drivers for this, such as new accreditation standards, and it's felt in the library as campus leaders look to the library for indicators of student success.

When asked what value a library adds to the campus community, libraries need to be able to quickly respond. Libraries can demonstrate value as partners in creating knowledge and disseminating information using solid research expressed in a language that is clearly understood by campus administration.

I realize that these five mindsets are not the only formative aspects of a culture of assessment. It's my belief, however, that the mindsets alone provide fertile ground from which a positive and engaging culture of assessment can grow.

Notes

1. Jim Self, Martha Kyrillidou and Steve Hiller, "Monday Morning Metrics and Don't Forget the Qualitative: Library Assessment Conference Participants and Other Numbers," opening speech delivered at the 2012 Library Assessment Conference, October 29, 2012, accessed August 12, 2013, http://libraryassessment.org/bm~doc/selfkyrillidouhilleropening.pdf.

2. Wendy F Weiner, "Establishing a Culture of Assessment: Fifteen elements of assessment success—how many does your campus have," accessed August 9, 2013, http://www.aaup.org/article/establishing-culture-assessment#.UgUSoUqgbe4. ℀