

Designing Comprehensive Assessment Plans: The Big Picture Leads to the Little Picture

Rachel Applegate

Is there a “culture of assessment” on your campus? At your library? An accountability climate is now a common fact of current academic life. Congress, in the name of students and taxpayers, calls colleges to account, accrediting agencies ask to see institutional goals and measures, and institutions ask their units to document achievement of mission, goals and objectives.

Assessment efforts can be ad hoc or organized. Having an overall organization for assessment at a library achieves three important goals: a) ensuring that assessment actually occurs; b) pointing the efforts and data towards an understandable end; and c) prioritizing so as to keep the process from overwhelming the library’s staff and users. In other words, *that* it occurs, *why* it occurs, and *how best* it occurs, can all be spelled out in a *plan*.

Having an **evaluation plan**, a deliberately designed approach to assessment, will allow the library’s staff to understand what data they need to collect, when—and why. Many of the available articles and presentations on assessment are tool-focused or situation-specific: how to evaluate this web page, that arrangement of services, that collection. ACRL

Standards for Academic Libraries present a series of options and considerations, rather than a specific plan for action.¹ Some approaches popular elsewhere on campus (such as strategic planning and departmental academic assessment) are sometimes an awkward fit with a library’s complex combination of purposes (research, teaching and cultural) and features (facilities, collections and services).

What is needed is not to be overwhelmed by the universe of possibilities or to become too narrowly focused. Every successful **evaluation plan** must be:

- Comprehensive: does it cover what the library does and has?
- Feasible: are the tools (techniques), staff requirements, and timing compatible with the library’s size, resources, and schedule?
- Organized: does it provide a framework that conveys the data from assessment to managerial decision-making?

Following are five basic approaches to designing an overall assessment plan. The first starts from the bottom: it organizes data streams that already exist in most libraries into a reasonable first overview of library operations, a way of easing into assessment.

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The second starts from the top, and organizes data around a strategic plan, while ensuring that day to day areas are not neglected. The third starts in the middle, focusing on each library department to see how its particular area of responsibility is faring. Fourth, two advanced options are for those who already have a creative and thorough grasp of assessment possibilities and seek to focus on key formative and summative measures: dashboards and balanced scorecards. Finally, there is the mission-goals-measures approach of the common academic departmental assessment grid, though libraries are generally more complex in both their parts and in their goals than a single academic teaching department.

Before You Start: The Library Position Description

There is a preliminary step that will make evaluation planning go more smoothly and quickly: creating a library's own "position description." Parallel to an individual's job ad or position description, this is a list of all that a library *does, has* and *offers*: its services, its collections, and its facilities. Creating such a list provides several advantages. First, just as strategic planning helps an organization understand better both what it is and what it wants to be, a list of all of a library's features helps ensure understanding for knowledgeable collaboration through the organization. Second, an evaluation **plan**, in contrast to a list of evaluation activities that could be done, entails prioritization: what is the most important to do? While thorough position descriptions include basic skills or activities ("answers phones"), most give emphasis to the most critical aspects of a job. Finally, thinking about the organization of the **evaluation plan** is easier if these components are agreed upon at the start of the process.

1. Existing Data

The **Existing Data** bottoms-up approach has the great advantage for most libraries of building upon work they are already doing. About 90% of four-year and 70% of community college libraries already participate in the Academic Libraries Survey of the National Center for Education Statistics—although there is a significant percentage who skip some individual questions.² The survey organized by the Association of Colleges and Research Libraries had an approximately 45% response rate.³ ARL libraries are committed to maintaining a set of quantitative measures.⁴

In addition, most four-year colleges and universities participate in institutional surveys such as the Common Data Set, Peterson's, and US News and World Report.⁵ These surveys include at least a minimal level of library information. Finally, a growing number of institutions survey their students with instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the College Students Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), each of which has questions related to library use.⁶

There are five steps to turning this existing data into an evaluation plan.

1. **Collect** library survey data and the library-related survey items.
2. Add **context**: keep track of, at the least: numbers of students (headcount, full-time, and part-time), numbers of faculty, and the institutional budget.⁷ Calculate simple ratios (students per librarian, faculty per librarian, circulations per student, spending relevant to overall institutional budget, etc.)
3. Track over **time**: first, see how the library's own data changes over time. Then, relate that change to the environment. If library volumes, presentations, or circulations are rising, falling, or remaining stagnant—how does that compare with the population the library serves or the resources it receives?
4. **Match** to the library position description: what collections, services, and facilities are assessed via this data? Generally, collection size and reference (and instruction) quantity are covered well.
5. **Add** the most important missing elements. What is the most important thing the library has, or does, that is not represented in the existing data? Set up data collection, as closely related to existing data-reporting timeframes and techniques, to address this area.

Two to four years of this kind of basic tracking will show the library where evaluation does, or does not, provide sufficient data for managerial decision-making. At that point, expand into additional tools or progress to a different evaluation plan type.

2. Strategic Plan

Planning is an essential—often a required—part of academic administration. Accrediting agencies often include effective planning processes in their criteria for approval. Sometimes this takes the form of a perpetual or ongoing planning cycle, and sometimes exists as a discrete, time-specific, strategic plan. Simi-

larly, sometimes planning aims to be comprehensive (everything the organization does), and sometimes strategic in the selective, targeted sense: the organization will focus on THIS.⁸

Libraries can have their own strategic plans, library elements can be specifically included in a university plan, or the university's plan can have elements that the library contributes to. Using a strategic plan as a framework for evaluation presents benefits in two directions. The strategic plan provides an existing framework for the evaluation, and the evaluation informs the strategic plan about how it is progressing and accomplishing its goals.⁹

There are three steps, or considerations, in organizing evaluation around a strategic plan. This assumes that a library strategic plan, or an institution's plan with library elements, already exists.

1. **Insert quantity and quality** indicators.

Wherever it is possible, when a goal or objective or end-result is stated, try to identify some data or assessment that will show how much, or how well, the goal is being achieved. Use existing data if possible. Avoid—go beyond—*accomplishment* measures, where the “evaluation” question is, “Did you do this?” and the sole answer is, “Yes” or “no”?

2. **Map** as much of the library's position description to the goals and objectives in the strategic plan as possible. If you are early enough in the strategic planning cycle, you may be able to develop additional specific linkages between the position description and the strategic plan

3. **Append** a **separate** evaluation portion or **adapt** the evaluation plan to incorporate those parts of the library position description that do not make an appearance in the strategic plan.

Strategic plans that are either too vague or too specific can be difficult to match to evaluation planning. If strategic plans are vague (“Improve the learning of undergraduates”) it may seem as though everything can be included, which does not help much with the goal of having an evaluation plan that is *organized*. If goals are too specific (“Add a football team in three years”) much of what a library does and provides may be left out—again, leaving the planner with a large mass of evaluation and no overall organization.

With an “append” approach, evaluation planners acknowledge that some areas of the library are a difficult fit for a strategic plan or (conversely) that a stra-

tegic plan that is stretched to fit everything a library does may be too generic to be helpful. In a separate section, planners put the most important aspects of the library, to end up with an evaluation plan that has a main section which is a part of the strategic plan, and an appendix which ensures that the interests of the library as a whole—its most important functions and features—are represented.

With an “adapt” approach, a creative planner can re-interpret library functions so that they *do* fit the strategic plan's categories and approach. Library instruction, for example, serves “the learning of undergraduates,” and library instruction can be evaluated.

The choice between “append” or “adapt” depends on the specificity and the culture that is evident in the existing strategic plan, and also whether the evaluation planner and his or her audience at the library finds a separate section or all-in-one approach more readable and usable.

3. *Departmental*

The departmental approach appears in the middle of this list of evaluation plan options, and appropriately so. Where the first two frameworks jump-start evaluation by building upon existing efforts (surveys and strategic planning), a departmental approach to evaluation begins in and with the library, and often already has some forms at many institutions. A reference department counts transactions and survey some users; a cataloging department watches for error rates and calculates transit times; bibliographers evaluate their collections. Here is where the broad panoply of evaluative techniques can be found—all the tools libraries and others have developed for evaluation, from list-checking and citation analysis to observation, focus groups, and surveys.¹⁰

What a **department-oriented** but library-wide **evaluation plan** does is to ensure that evaluation progresses beyond isolated departmental actions into a *library-wide* effort which incorporates all departments and is understood by all of them, as parts of the greater whole.

The interplay between a departmental evaluation plan and the library's existing organizational structure is acute. A library enjoying a healthy relationship between departments, or one with an effective network of cross-cutting teams, and any library where all staff understand how the whole library functions, will find few barriers to the library-wide aspect. The

main challenge will be the normal challenge with any evaluation—that it is different from the primary focus of people's work lives: *doing*.

There are three steps in a departmental approach; they begin from within each department.

1. Each library department identifies (at least) its **key function** and a way to **evaluate** it; some may select a suite of important tasks or features. The term "department" can be adapted to the terminology and organizational climate of that institution. In one case it might be the traditional, "Public Services" and "Technical Services," in another, "Academic department liaisons A, B...Z" and "Client Services/IT Support."

2. Each method of evaluation can be specifically **tailored** to the specific characteristics of that department (e.g. process evaluation/TQM for technical services, testing for instruction, and so forth).

3. At the *library level* managers review all departmental proposals as a whole, to ensure three things:

- a. Avoiding **duplicated** or overlapping or colliding efforts, as when several departments are interested in patron surveys.
- b. Organizing a **schedule** that makes sense for the library as a whole
- c. Ensuring, by comparison to the library position description, that nothing important has been **neglected**.

That is, not too much, not too little, and everything at the right time.

While the great strength of a departmental approach is that it naturally comes out of and is closely tailored towards the specific characteristics and needs of each department (library function), it is essential that the library management, at the director and department head level at least, view the plan as one coherent whole. That will ensure equality among departments, where participating in the evaluation plan is part of their equal importance to the library itself as a whole.

4. *Advanced*

"Advanced" is an umbrella term used here for two different options that begin with the same step, diverge into quite distinctive formats, and present libraries with frameworks that require a lot of adaptation but which may be particularly useful in campus climates which value business-oriented planning and evaluation.

The two options are dashboards and balanced scorecards. Both are generally better suited to a monitoring, rather than an accomplishment, approach to evaluation: that is, how are we doing? are we in danger or doing well? rather than, what have we done?

Both dashboards and balanced scorecards begin with managers identifying important performance indicators. This means finding or creating some quantitative measures that convey what the library is doing. Fortunately, library systems provide a continuous stream of many quantitative measures (inputs and outputs). Unfortunately, qualitative measures are far more difficult, and are not usually process-oriented.

For a *dashboard*¹:

1. **Identify** measures analogous to **speedometers, check-engine lights, and odometers**. That is, how fast is the library going (budget balances?)? Is there anything that should trigger an alarm? (satisfaction levels?). How much have we accomplished? (circulation, reference, or teaching transactions?)

2. Individuals should be responsible for **reporting** each of these measures. While some organizations can set up real-time automated graphical presentations, the idea of a dashboard can be effectively met with a periodic meeting or group report in which each indicator's status is noted.

3. If and when any indicator shows either alarm or unusually good performance, some manager should investigate underlying **causes**. For example, if numbers of in-class presentations (on the dashboard) drop, are departmental liaisons making contacts with faculty?

The primary goal of a dashboard is to summarize current performance and to provide timely alerts about problem areas. It appears to be a more difficult match for library features or collections (compared to services), but with some creativity and a sufficiently long perspective, it can be made to serve that purpose. For example, a library may have goals for the strength of different subject areas of the collection. These can be expressed in conspectus categories (minimal, basic, instructional, research). The areas can be evaluated on a periodic basis (several areas each year), and the *dashboard* indicator can show what percentage of a library's subject collections are above, below or at the desired level.

A balanced scorecard makes use of the same type of performance indicators as a dashboard—these make up the "scores" for its "card," very similar to a

dashboard. The distinguishing feature of the balance scorecard approach is the *balance*. Not just any indicators will do—they must provide a deliberately broad perspective on the organization.

For a *balanced scorecard*¹²:

1. Identify four areas of the organization.

The classic scorecard, from a business perspective, includes: fiscal, efficiency, customer, and innovation aspects. For academic libraries, the following are possible interpretations:

- a. Fiscal: income or expenses
- b. Efficiency: such as processing time or error rates.
- c. Customer: customer satisfaction or needs.
- d. Innovation: this is usually conceived as a “personnel” issue, with the assumption that high-quality personnel will be the source for future innovations.

2. Specify quantitative summative measures

for each of the four areas. Examples:

- a. Fiscal: spending per student; library materials per student or faculty member; percent of budget from institution, grant, or endowment funding.
- b. Efficiency: time from order-to-on-shelf for monographs; original cataloging volume and error rate.
- c. Customer: customer satisfaction scores (e.g. LibQUAL+™)
- d. Innovation: personnel turnover; qualifications held by librarians; publications, presentations or offices held per librarian.

3. Optimize.

The scorecard should not be a laundry list, but a selection of a very few measures that accomplish two purposes—the scorecard and the balance.

- a. First, each should be a succinct summary (score) of a large range of underlying measures. For example, librarian publication rates probably are affected by

faculty-librarian ratios and research support. Once a problem is identified by the scorecard measure, managers drill down to find possible causes.

- b. Second, the scores must cover the important functions and purposes of the library. The scores should be compared to the library position description. Are there important features or functions that are not represented on the card, even indirectly? They should be added, or should appear in an appendix.

It is inaccurate to assume that the top-level indicators are the only things that matter. The balanced scorecard approach emphasizes having managers examine cause and effect relationships that lead to the top-level indicators. Those cause-effect chains also need their own assessment tools, which can be specifically tailored to each area’s particular circumstances.¹³

Librarians should become familiar with evaluative frameworks on their campuses. Often a balanced scorecard or dashboard approach is a campus-wide effort.

5. Academic Departmental Assessment Grid

With the assessment movement rolling across academia, many campuses have adopted a simple schema for academic departments to assess themselves at a program (departmental) level, rising above simple individual-student in-class performance evaluation. The goal is to see how each department is doing in accomplishing student learning objectives.

A common academic department assessment grid consists of four columns, under an overall header which is the department’s mission statement. (Insert Table 1).

Departments are encouraged to include multiple measures of goals, which should also encompass multiple domains—knowledge, skill or behavior, and affect (attitude).

Although simple, this incorporates all of the important elements of academic assessment: explicit

| TABLE 1 Academic Departmental Assessment Grid | | | |
|--|--------------------|---------|----------------|
| Mission | | | |
| Goal (objective) # 1 | Measurement method | Results | Use of results |
| Goal # 2 | Measurement method | Results | Use of results |

goals, specific measures, reporting of results (accountability), and the essential “closing of the loop”—the purpose of assessment, which is to provide not only proof, but a means for improvement.

Its focus on student learning however presents a problem for academic libraries. Libraries are only partially, and indirectly, about student learning. Even in thoroughly teaching-centric institutions, research (both faculty and student) requires library resources; even library instruction is not an end in itself but is a tool to achieve general, disciplinary, or life-long learning skills. Therefore, an academic departmental assessment grid will readily accommodate only part of a library’s position description.

Why even consider this option?

A cultural argument is that most librarians consider themselves to be part of the “academic” function on campus. Libraries most often report to academic officers—sometimes along with other “support” units such as advising, sometimes as the only non-disciplinary unit. They usually do not, and do not aspire, to be grouped with administrative departments such as food service or facilities. Using academic plans highlights the tie to academics.

To use the *academic departmental assessment grid*:

1. **Begin with the easiest: information literacy** (library instruction) goals, expressed as a campus-wide plan or as embedded within departmental assessment plans. The goal is to achieve information literacy; set up measures of student learning (direct if possible); include some mechanism for reporting results and adjusting the information literacy program.

2. Check the institution’s **general education goals**, or strategic plan goals, to see if there are objectives that the library can address. Doing so shows that the library understands and is committed to campus success. Measures of the library’s support for the goals will be more difficult to design, but try to have at least one measure for each important goal.

3. Examine the library’s position description. Are there important areas that do not appear in the list of goals-measures? If it is reasonable, create a goal and measures and add them to the grid. If it would be a very awkward fit, add them to a separate section.

Using this format lets the library speak effectively to important constituents using their language rather than keeping to a library-centric perspective.

The Plan of Action

The final step for each evaluation plan is to turn it into a **plan of action**. From the existing, departmental, strategic, performance-indicator, or academic assessment structure, create a through-the-year/s schedule of *what* should happen *when*, and *who* will be responsible.

Data streams will be of four basic kinds.

- **Continuous/automatic.** This is where some computerized system collects data; it includes all integrated library system data such as circulations, reserves, and interlibrary loans; vendor data for databases; web counters; and electronic reference traffic. Here collection is not the issue, but a schedule for compiling and examining the data at reasonable intervals is needed.

- **Continuous/manual.** Data here is collected continuously, but by humans either with the trusty tally sheet or with spreadsheets. This includes reference transactions, library presentations and attendance, and sign-in sheets (for special collections or possibly computer labs). These need to be turned into spreadsheet data and also examined periodically.

- **“Typical week” special data collection.** For those libraries which do not keep some data streams continually, such as for reshelving/in-house use, library visit surveys, or reference transactions, those typical weeks should be selected and organized.

- **Intensive collection:** These are specially focused data collections. They can be of services (e.g. by patron surveys or focus groups) or of collections (e.g. list-checking or collection strength measures). The goal is to schedule these so that they make sense in terms of the library’s workload and the patterns of those involved. Freshmen surveyed in the first week of classes will be different from those surveyed at the end of the second semester.

Libraries do not need an evaluation plan in order to conduct some evaluation, any more than they need a collection development plan before they purchase materials. Not having a plan is bad both when there is too little evaluation and when there is too much.

Too little evaluation? Many librarians go on day after day relying on instinct and anecdote to manage. They do their best for each project and need that arises. Evaluation seems like something extra, or optional. Classroom faculty were—and often still are—of this mind: they research, they teach, so why do they have to spend time on assessment? An **evaluation plan** helps everyone at the library see **why** they should do evalua-

tion. A library that does no evaluation obviously does not love evaluation for its own sake, so it is important for motivation to understand why each evaluative activity is being done. Having a big picture helps people start on the small steps of actual evaluation.

Too much evaluation? Some people—even some librarians—are eager collectors of data. They yearn to find out what, and to speculate about why. They are constantly evaluating this or that area or feature or activity. An **evaluation plan** encompasses this enthusiasm and directs it three ways. First, it ensures that all that activity benefits the library as a whole. One librarian's project can enlighten the whole institution. Second, it helps ensure an even application of evaluation throughout the organization, since it would be rare indeed to have enthusiasts in every corner of the library. Evaluation needs to be keyed to what is important at the library, not (just) to what happens to be interesting to one librarian. Finally and most important, it prevents duplication of both effort and bother. It is especially important not to over-burden your human sources of information: how many surveys does your library do? Coordination is essential and impossible without a plan.

A library position description, an overall framework, a schedule and personnel assignments—that seems like a lot. Yet, just like preparing a house for painting, these steps make the evaluation itself effective and efficient.

Notes

1. Association of College and Research Libraries. *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*. <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/standardslibraries.cfm> Accessed 6 December 2008.

2. National Center for Education Statistics. Library Statistics Program. *Compare Academic Libraries*. <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/libraries/compare/Index.asp?librarytype=academic> Accessed 6 December 2008. Data on completion rates compiled by author.

3. In 2001. See: ACRL *Academic Library Trends and Statistics for Masters Granting Institutions, 2001*.

4. Association of Research Libraries. Statistics and Measurement. *ARL Statistics*. <http://www.arl.org/stats/annualsurveys/arlstats/> Accessed 6 December 2008.

5. Contact the college or university's "institutional research" office, the Registrar, or admissions.

6. National Survey of Student Engagement. <http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm>; College Student Experiences Questionnaire. <http://cseq.iub.edu/> Accessed 6 December 2008.

7. If not provided by an institutional research office, these numbers are available from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Service (IPEDS) Peer Analysis System <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/pas/>

8. Michael E. Porter, "What Is Strategy?" *Harvard Business Review*, Nov-Dec. 1996, 60-78.

9. For strategic planning, use the format and resources on your campus, or any library management text, or library strategic planning guide. Make sure that strategic planning is a functional part of intra-organizational communication: that is, that people understand what they are doing and why. J. Parker Ladwig, "Assess the State of Your Strategic Plan." *Library Administration and Management* 19, no. 2 (2005): 90-93.

10. The best overall resources for this are: the classic but still wonderfully clear: F.W. Lancaster, *If You Want to Evaluate Your Library...* (Champaign: University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science, 1993); Danny P. Wallace and Connie Van Fleet, *Library Evaluation: A Casebook and Can-Do Guide* (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 2001); and the up-to-date and comprehensive bibliography, Thomas E. Nisonger, *Evaluation of Library Collections, Access, and Electronic Resources: A Literature Guide and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003).

11. An excellent example of a non-profit with a clear and compelling dashboard is the Indianapolis Museum of Art: <http://dashboard.imamuseum.org/>; it appears primarily designed for marketing rather than evaluation. The Educating Illinois dashboard, not very succinct, uses a common "stop-light" indicator system (green, yellow, red, blank) displaying summary indicators. <http://www.ilstu.edu/reportcards/dashboard/index.phtml#home>. Accessed 7 December 2008.

12. The University of Virginia has a well-developed balanced scorecard system: <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/bsc/metrics/all0708.html>. Jim Self, "Using Data to Make Choices: The Balanced Scorecard at the University of Virginia Library." *ARL Bimonthly Report*, no. 230-231 (2003); Stratton Lloyd, "Building Library Success Using the Balanced Scorecard," *Library Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2006): 352-61.

13. Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton. *The Balanced Scorecard: Translating Strategy into Action*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996.