The Evaluation of Service Activities in Academic Libraries and Criteria for Evaluation Selected by Administrators of Those Libraries

Sally Ann Strickler

Administrators of academic libraries encounter financial challenges today as during no other period in recent years. Institutional leaders demand accountability for costly materials, personnel, and services expenditures. Library administrators have the significant responsibility of carrying out academic library functions with inflated costs and decreased funding. Libraries are being challenged to prove their worth. Effective allocation and use of resources becomes a necessity.

The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Office of Management Services (OMS) suggests that libraries must assess library services on either an ongoing or periodic basis. The *Standards for College Libraries* and *Standards for University Libraries,* prepared by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), both require evaluation of the library program. Each of the six regional accrediting commissions states that services of the library should be regularly evaluated to determine the library's effectiveness. Mindful of the needs of administrators of academic libraries, ACRL has prepared a manual of output measures for academic libraries which will assist librarians in measuring the impact, efficiency, and effectiveness of academic library activities.

The difficulty in assessing library service programs lies in the fact that available assessments do not measure the quality of service and must be cautiously interpreted. The literature reveals a great concern regarding the topic and is replete with research on "evaluation of library services," "measurement of library services," "quality values of library service," and "indices of effectiveness of library public services." None of the research, however, has fulfilled the assistance promised, that is, to produce suitable, serviceable

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guidelines for the qualitative assessment of the effectiveness of academic library services to be used for measurement of service, effective planning, and assessment of user needs.

Whether librarians want to evaluate their institutions or not, service agencies are currently on trial in a culture that is developing a deep skepticism, subjecting academic organizations to scrutiny as never before. Librarians will need to

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come forward with evaluative data to support their case, or fiscal authorities will assume that evaluation. Library directors must look for criteria other than quantitative or financial to determine the success of their institutions. What are these criteria? How do contemporary library directors, faced with a complex, dynamic organization, ensure that these criteria are met?

The following questions reflecting my interest in this dilemma formed the major purposes of my recent research project. I sought to determine:

1. Which library services are now being evaluated?

2. How extensive is the current involvement of academic libraries in evaluation?

3. What are the attitudes of academic library administrators toward the evaluation of library services?

4. What criteria do academic library administrators consider important for evaluating the effectiveness of library services?

5. What are the relationships among attitudes toward evaluation, the perceived importance of evaluative criteria, and actual participation in the evaluative process?

6. What are the relationships between the organizational and administrative characteristics of the academic libraries and the levels of participation in evaluation? How do these characteristics relate to the attitudes of academic library administrators toward evaluation?

The research survey involved one instrument designed by the researcher. The items composing the questionnaire were based upon the literature review for this study to obtain information relating to the following major areas of research concern:

1. *Management information* — Included were questions designed to determine the extent to which libraries evaluate services, what services are being evaluated, and what types of evaluations are being used.

2. *Perception of evaluation information* — Included were statements describing evaluation of academic library services placed on a Likert-type scale to allow the respondent to indicate agreement or disagreement with the statements.

3. *Evaluation guidelines information* — Included were factors considered by library administrators to be important as meaningful criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of academic library services. A Likert-type format enabled the respondent to indicate the degree of importance of each factor.

4. *General information* — Included were questions relating to the distinguishing characteristics of academic libraries which do or do not evaluate library services (e.g., size of collection, size of library staff, size of student population, public, independent, or church-related institution). This information was used to define subgroups for comparison and analysis.

The population from which the sample for the study was drawn consisted of the chief administrative officers of 734 academic libraries whose institutions are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and are listed in the member directory of the association. A random sample of 417 was selected from this group using a computer-generated table of random numbers.

A pilot study was used to test the preliminary draft of the instrument. Revised questionnaires were sent to each of the chief administrative officers in the random sample of SACS institution libraries in September 1985. From the sample population of 417, 348 responses were received

for a return rate of 83.45 percent. Of the 348 responses, 325 were usable for analysis, a valid response rate of 77.94 percent.

Several aspects stand out as important in the results of this study. First, as indicated in Figure

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FIGURE 1.

Library Services Evaluated Most and Least Regularly, by Library Services Area

O   Designates most regularly evaluated.
X   Designates least regularly evaluated.

Catalog
O Observe catalog use unobtrusively.
X Monitor computerized catalog use statistics.

Reference Service
O Observe reference staff performance unobtrusively.
X Study reference staff performance using a test set of questions.

Collection
O Compare collection against recognized bibliographies.
X Examination of collection by subject specialists who assess the adequacy of the collection.

Materials Use
O Maintain statistics on circulation of materials outside the library.
X Test document delivery success rate by use of Document Delivery Test (DDT).

Bibliographic Instruction
O Survey patrons on bibliographic instruction (how well it is presented, how important it is to patrons, what can be done to improve it, etc.).
X Measure effectiveness of bibliographic instruction by a pre- and post-test study.

Physical Facilities
O Study facilities use (physical arrangement of materials, service points, furniture, equipment, etc.).
X Survey patrons on their evaluation of surroundings (environmental climate, attractiveness, etc.)

Patron Use
O Compare hours of service with those of similar libraries.
X Measure average time patrons spend in the library.

User Needs/Satisfaction
O Analyze feedback from library committee or academic department liaison.
X Request diary-keeping of a sample of library users, describing library services needs/use.

Online Bibliographic Searching and Information Retrieval
O Maintain use statistics of online searching.
X Study search performance by comparing a search against "standard" searches conducted solely for the purpose of evaluation.

1, traditional quantitative activities dominate the limited evaluation programs being performed in the responding academic libraries, with few reporting less traditional evaluation activities suggested in the literature. Administrators apparently participate in less complex, easily collected statistical measures with little user involvement. There was strong agreement among institutions about the evaluation activities in which they do and do not participate.

Second, an overwhelming level of agreement exists for support of evaluation as an essential activity, even if the administrators do not participate extensively in evaluation (see Figure 2). Academic library administrators indicate that evaluation techniques are available and acceptable to librarians, that the profession is mature enough, and that there is sufficient commitment to formulate methods for evaluation. Their enthusiasm is restrained, however, by the lack of reward by their institutional administrations.

Figure 3 shows that strong agreement also exists on the importance of evaluative criteria with unanimity among all library levels on the most and least important criteria for evaluating academic library services. One interesting aspect of the study is the fact that the most important evaluative criteria are reflected in the least often reported evaluation activities and the presence of

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the least important criteria in activities in which academic libraries most often participate.

Finally, there was high positive correlation, a meaningful relationship, indicated among attitudes of the responding administrators toward evaluation, their perceived importance of evaluative criteria, and actual participation in evaluation. It appears that those academic libraries directed by administrators who indicate a positive attitude toward evaluation and evaluative criteria also participate in more evaluation activities. In addition, most participation occurs in academic libraries of medium size and budget, whose institutions are public and confer only bachelor's and master's degrees. Interestingly, those libraries with more automated functions participate in more evaluation activities, suggesting that library automation technology could be used to produce evaluative information, as well as to provide an

FIGURE 2.

Academic Library Administrators' Attitudes Toward the Evaluation of Library Services

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Agreed Most Often (in rank order):

1. The evaluation of library services is an essential activity.

2. The library profession is mature enough to formulate valid evaluation methods.

3. Imperfect measures can be useful if their limitations are appreciated.

4. To obtain useful administrative information, libraries should not hire highly trained outside evaluators to evaluate library services.

5. Evaluation techniques are available.

6. The use of non-threatening measures, such as standard bibliographies and quantitative numbers in statistical reports, are acceptable to the library staff.

7. Evaluation of library services is not over-emphasized today and counter-productive to the true mission of library services.

8. Library services are not a complex bundle of intangibles not amenable to evaluation.

9. The library staff does not resist library service evaluation.

10. Formula for evaluation are not too complicated for the mathematically uninitiated.

Agreed Least Often (in rank order):

1. Evaluation of library services is extremely threatening to the library profession.

2. Each library is not unique and should not be assessed in the context of its own particular history, constraints, uses, and environment.

3. The subjective judgment of library professionals should not be respected.

4. General professional consensus of the library profession is not necessary to achieve a commitment to evaluate library services.

5. Academic library administrators have been in the dark ages far too long by failing to recognize the critical importance of evaluation.

6. There are rewards from my institution for such a management approach.

7. Libraries are no more varied than other organizations where tools of management science have been applied profitably.

8. Evaluation is a high level of concern in my institution.

9. The difficulties in formulating universally applicable measures for evaluation are not seemingly insurmountable.

10. Evaluation should be the library manager's watchword.

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efficient delivery system for organizing and reporting this information, assuring better service to library patrons.

Speculatively, as far as evaluation of academic library services is concerned, bigger is not necessarily better. Larger institutions may find difficulty in initiating programs of qualitative evaluation while small schools may be more able to maintain


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patron-oriented public services and evaluation activities.

A review of evaluation literature indicates that complex and dynamic criteria have been introduced for the qualitative evaluation of library services in a seemingly endless list. The identification of acceptable measures, however, has proven extremely difficult. The criteria presented in the literature may be too complex to be useful, an obstacle to its value to managers. It appears that the criteria selected as a result of this research synthesize prior theory and information, combining these with the expressed preferences of the responding administrators. The resulting structure could be of value as the library profession moves toward the adoption of an evaluation program acceptable to academic library administrators.

The following evaluative criteria, selected by the responding academic library administrators in this study as the twelve most important criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of academic library services, are suggested as guidelines for formulating appropriate evaluative criteria. Listed with the guidelines/criteria are examples of suitable evaluation activities for gathering the pertinent information needed for evaluation.
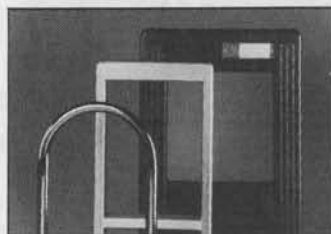
FIGURE 4.

Suggested Criteria for Evaluating the Effectiveness of Academic Library Services with Evaluation Activities

1. The adequacy of the collection in supporting curricular needs: (a) study distribution of funds for collection by formula for individual subject fields, (b) examination of collection by subject specialists who assess the adequacy of the collections, (c) analyze feedback from library committee of academic department liaison.

2. Interpersonal communication skills of the members of the library staff: (a) survey patrons on their evaluation of the personal assistance available for finding information.

3. The ability of the reference staff to answer questions completely and accurately: (a) maintain statistics on proportion of questions answered correctly, and (b) study performance of reference staff using a test set of questions.

4. The maintenance of the collection and indexes in an orderly arrangement: (a) survey patrons on their use of the catalog as an information finding tool, and (b) study materials accessibility (difficult or delay in obtaining materials).

5. The ability of the catalog and shelf arrangement to disclose the holdings of particular it ems of materials on particular subjects: (a) same as 4a and (b) same as 4b.

6. Job satisfaction of the members of the library staff: (a) survey staff members on the extent of their satisfaction with their positions as related to promotion, personal growth, salary, duties, etc.

7. The maintenance of adequate hours of access and professional staff assistance: (a) compare hours of service with those of similar libraries, and (b) analyze reference use patterns.

8. The provision of comfortable, attractive, quiet, well-equipped facilities: (a) study facilities use (physical arrangement opf materials, service points, furniture, equipment, etc.); (b) analyze use of space for stacks and seating by comparison with accepted standards; and (c) survey patrons on their evaluation of surroundings (environmental climate, attractiveness, etc.).

9. The ability of the bibliographic instruction program to improve effective patron use of the library: (a) measure effectiveness of bibliographic instruction by a pre- and post-test study; and (b) survey patrons on bibliographic instruction (how well it is presented, how important it is to patrons, what can be done to improve it, etc.).

10. The provision of loan policies of optimal opportunity for students and faculty: (a) analysis of circulation records, and (b) analysis of borrowing policy/privileges.

11. The ability of the online bibliographic searching staff to retrieve relevant citations/items: (a) request user to indicate which retrieved citations/items are relevant, and (b) survey patrons on their use of the online search service to find information.

12. The ability of the interlibrary loan service to meet user needs satisfactorily in a reasonable length of time: (a) analyze proportion of interlibrary loan requests satisfied, and (b) assess time required to satisfy interlibrary loan requests.

Previous studies underscore the ability to measure library effectiveness and the benefits of qualitative measurement methods. Research efforts have provided tools and methods for actual decision making on measurement and evaluation of effectiveness. No national standards have been set, however, and there seems to be no move toward general professional consensus on measurement and evaluation of effectiveness. Library administrators must explore all the possibilities for a satisfactory tool to support, with more than partial facts and figures, the previously intangible worth, benefits, and effectiveness of libraries. It will also be necessary for the library profession to renew and affirm a commitment to and enthusiasm for the goal of truly effective library service, strengthening its resolve to meet that challenge.

The true success of libraries must be measured by the services delivered to patrons. The ultimate purpose of our libraries is to provide information services. Evaluation can be a means to that end.

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4. Manuscripts must be double-spaced (text, references, and footnotes). Manuscripts should be typed on sixty-space lines, twenty-five lines to a page. The beginnings of paragraphs should be indented eight spaces. Lengthy quotes should be avoided. When used, they should be indented on both margins.

5. The name, position, and professional address of the author should appear in the bottom left-hand corner of a separate title page.

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