

The State of Performance Measurement in Libraries: A Report from the 2nd Northumbria International Conference

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In September 1997, Northumbria was the venue for an international conference to discuss various library measurements and assessment issues and activities, to exchange experiences, to increase awareness of current research, and to identify issues for further study and work. The conference, sponsored by the Department of Information and Library Management at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle and by the British Library, focused on outcomes and impacts, moving from research, definition, and standardization matters to actions and implementation. Total attendance was 141 persons from 24 countries – nine of which were from North America – a truly international gathering.

The creation and draw of this conference is just one indication of the greater role that performance measures are playing in libraries today than they have in the past. Measures are being applied in a wide variety of settings and in a number of locations. Further, the 46 papers of this conference, including five poster sessions and five keynote speakers, note the trend of increased cooperation between libraries across national boundaries in developing appropriate measures, especially among those supported by the European Union. Major themes covered during the conference were:

- Performance Measurements – General Analysis and Criticism
- Defining Relevant Performance Indicators and Developing International Performance Standards
- Benchmarking
- Qualitative Measurement Activities
- Comparability Across Sectors and National Boundaries
- Service Level Agreements
- Management Information Services
- Electronic/Digital Library and Assessment of Library Networks

A brief summary of some key papers presented follows. For more detailed information, as well as for information on papers not described here for lack of space, please see <http://library.uwaterloo.ca/~aalakos/Present/North97/norsum.html> .

Performance Measurements–General Analysis and Criticism

The first keynote paper, “Does Performance Measurement Improve Organizational Effectiveness? A Post-Modern Analysis,” presented by Rowena Cullen of Victoria University in New Zealand, set both the tone and the standard for the conference by asking: After all the research is done, the data gathering activities and analysis undertaken, and reports presented, are libraries more effective? Cullen’s model of organizational effectiveness used a focus/value/purpose matrix to reach the following conclusions:

- performance measurements are political activities, taking place both on a macro and a micro level;
- how institutions act is dependent on their relative internal to external focus, the culture of the organization, and the resolve they bring to their activities;
- the profession seems to be reactive – dependent on rewards and incentives;
- performance measurements are multidimensional in nature and each library will use the measurements that suit its social construct, environment, and goals; and
- action, leadership, and initiative are needed for organizational effectiveness.

The question is, then, what kinds of measures will best support a successful institution? Stephen Town’s (Cranfield University) paper, “Performance or Measurement?”, took a critical look at the current state of performance measurements and their impact, criticized the over-reliance on traditional library quantitative data series, and advocated that more attention be directed to service quality indicators and to the development of assessment measures both in the digital environment and for networked services. Town also suggested increasing attention to the diverse needs of stakeholders, a concern Ian Winkworth (University of Northumbria on Newcastle) raised as well, in his paper, “Making Performance Measurement Influential.” Winkworth provides an excellent overview of past and current performance measurement activities, primarily focusing on U.K. public and academic libraries and the development of international standards. Winkworth saw the need for outcome and impact measurements that have real management utility and feels that libraries may be collecting too many quantitative indicator data without relating them closely enough to stakeholder’s needs and concerns. However, Winkworth pointed out that, in spite of deficiencies, libraries are well ahead of many other public services in developing effective performance measures.

The role of stakeholders in performance measures was, in fact, a theme that speakers came to time and time again. The use of stakeholders in constructing, conducting, evaluating, and, finally, acting on measures (including making plans for the future) were all discussed. Speakers emphasized the need for more qualitative measures, and ones that serve more practical purposes than performance measures have in the past. The stakeholder focus in electronic environment studies has gained special attention, as this medium offers greater possibilities of further tailoring services to stakeholders’ needs.

Qualitative Measurement Activities

The growing emphasis on the use of qualitative measures to test performance were the focus in a number of papers examining aspects of service quality. Elisabeth Hart, Patricia Gannon-Leary, and Lorraine Noel's (University of Huddersfield) "The Use of Focus Groups in the Evaluation of Services" examined the use of focus groups as an assessment tool and detailed the value of this method in the assessment of lending services. Robert Bluck's (University of Northumbria at Newcastle) paper, "Team Performance – Measurement of Mystery?", pointed out that, although teams are increasingly used in many aspects of library work, performance measurement activities tend to concentrate on the individual or the organization as a whole, rather than as part of an overall system. Of particular interest is a study done by the CAVAL-Reference Interest Group Working Party in Victoria, Australia. "Performance Indicators for Reference and Information Services: A Study of Academic Libraries in Victoria, Australia," written by Barbara Paton, Eva Fisch, David Cunnington and Rosemary Cotter from LaTrobe University in Victoria, describes CAVAL's activities in identifying measures used to evaluate reference and information services in academic libraries. Further, Marjorie Murfin (Ohio State University) and Michael Havener's (University of Oklahoma) "Cronbach Revisited: Positive Bias: A Powerful Enemy to Validity in Library Surveys" tells of work done on the use of the Reference Transition Assessment Instrument (RTAI) in academic libraries. This instrument has been used since 1983 in the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program to evaluate reference services in 109 academic and 121 public libraries in the U.S. and Canada. Although the instrument's statistical validity has been proven, only 4% of U.S. academic libraries have chosen to participate in the program. In their paper, Murfin and Havener make a strong case for use of the RTAI in more research and academic libraries.

The applicability of the SERVQUAL instrument in the library environment was examined in two papers. The first, Danuta Nitecki's (Yale University) "Assessment of Service Quality in Academic Libraries: Focus on the Applicability of the SERVQUAL" is an overview of the instrument and its applicability to the study of service quality in academic libraries. According to Nitecki, in an environment where academic libraries want to be more responsive to their clients, the SERVQUAL instrument offers a strategy for defining and measuring quality of library services. Nitecki reviewed the results of eight academic library studies that used SERVQUAL to measure the quality of their ILL and reference services, but pointed out that the usefulness of the instrument in improving service management in academic libraries is only beginning to be discovered.

SERVQUAL was also the topic of, "Feedback from a Captive Audience: Reflections on the Results of a SERVQUAL Survey of Interlibrary Loan Services at Carnegie Mellon University Library." Presented by Joan Stein, this paper emphasizes the choice of the SERVQUAL instrument as a valid instrument to measure user perceptions. Stein reported that the Carnegie Mellon survey helped reshape staff perceptions of users' expectations, increased a sense of shared purpose, and helped staff set realistic priorities for ILL services.

Service Level Agreements

Another way to ensure that clients' needs are met are through Service Level Agreements (SLAs). SLAs may be defined as a set of agreements, or a working "contract," that establishes the relationship between the service provider and its clients, quantifying the minimum acceptable service to the customer. Malcolm Smith's discussion, "The Use of Service Level Agreements at the British Library," focused on the Library's effort to establish SLAs between its various departments as well as with external customers. He described the SLA format; the benefits, disadvantages, and obstacles to implementing SLA's; and how these are to be used and implemented in the British Library in the future. Smith concluded that SLAs are valuable tools in achieving a number of objectives, such as increasing the accountability of service providers, creating a customer-oriented institutional culture, and developing an internal quality chain in addition to better relations with customers.

Jo Aitkins' poster session, "Setting Standards and Monitoring Performance: The Experience of Information Services at the University of Sunderland," was an example of a variation of the SLA, where, instead of a contract, the library decides to self-impose unilateral standards focused on customer service. Among the cited benefits are: better customer service, heightened staff and client awareness of available and expected services, improved monitoring of trends, and heightened staff morale.

Developing International Performance Standards

It is no wonder that, with the concepts of international cooperation and digital libraries gaining in popularity, International Standard Organization (ISO) standards and their implementation are given attention. Two papers covered work undertaken by a number of groups in order to facilitate the creation and adoption of the ISO Standard for Library Performance Indicators. Jacob Harnesk's (The Royal Library, Stockholm) paper, "The ISO Standard on Library Performance Indicators" detailed the slow and difficult work involved in developing international standards and gives a description of the current situation. On a smaller scale was Reider Jan Zwart's (Delft University of Technology) paper, "Implementing the ISO Standard on Library Performance Indicators at Delft University of Technology Library." He described activities undertaken to develop a document delivery system (DocUTrans) in partnership with KN/Minolta, with the goal of acquiring the ISO 9002 certificate for quality service – which they did achieve, in January 1997.

Comparability Across Sectors and National Boundaries

A number of papers addressed the difficulty of comparing libraries across sectors and national boundaries. Antje Cockrill and Judith Broady's (University of Wales) "Practical Issues of Performance Measurement in British and German University Libraries"; and "Use and Interest in Performance Measures: Differences Between Library Sectors," by Sian Lambert, Jonathan Wilson and Tony Oulton (Manchester Metropolitan University) are two examples.

Management Information Services

Management Information Systems (MIS) and Decision Support Services (DSS) were topics in one session. John Blagden and Jane Barton's (Cranfield University) thought-provoking paper, "Can You Compare One University's Performance with Another?" describes a project whose aim was to develop a set of indicators to facilitate comparisons of university library performances. It builds on existing work done in the Follett Report, The Effective Academic Library Report, and the group of Concerted Action on Management Information for Libraries in Europe (CAMILE) projects – DECIDE, EQLIPSE, DECIMAL, and MINSTREL. The project is unique in its goal to develop indicators acceptable to university funding bodies, Vice Chancellors, and other senior staff within the U.K. educational sector. Issues studied are electronic library or networked resources measures, access vs. ownership, document delivery, "stock" utilization and availability, user population definitions, and how to assess and compare user satisfaction levels across institutional boundaries.

The CAMILE projects were discussed in more detail in the poster session "European Union Support Systems in Libraries Projects CAMILE." It is anticipated that the project's concerted action will lead to a greater and more effective use of management information tools and techniques in libraries in Europe, and that it will encourage the use of European-focused performance measures and contribute to greater communication of information between European libraries. More information about CAMILE is available on the Web: <
<http://www.dmu.ac.uk/~camile/>>.

The Electronic/Digital Library and Assessment of Library Networks

A number of papers examined various aspects of assessment as they pertain to the digital library, to electronic resources, and to issues of assessment of library networked services. All papers acknowledged their debt to the pioneering work of Charles McClure and Cynthia Lopata in the study *Assessing the Academic Networked Environment: Strategies and Options* (Washington, DC: CNI, 1996).

Peter Brophy and Peter Wynne (Central University of Lancashire), in their paper, "Performance Measurement and Management Information for the Electronic Library (MIEL)," reviewed the MIEL Programme, whose aim was to examine the need for new performance measures for the emerging electronic or digital library. Recommendations included: further testing of any proposed indicators in a live environment, agreement on core indicators and international standards, and the possibility of using qualitative assessment instruments such as SERVQUAL.

Amos Lakos (University of Waterloo) sought to create a framework of discussion on the new networked environment in his paper, "Identifying and Assessing Library Clients in a Networked Environment: Issues and Possibilities." In a networked environment, especially a

web-based one, traditional ways to identify and measure clients and their activities becomes much more complicated. Issues of identification and authentication of clients become essential to the delivery of services and to the development of service policies. Issues of privacy and confidentiality also must be addressed. In order to examine these concerns, various tools for tracking identities and activities on OPACs and websites are explored, as well as the possibility of using new and changing business intelligence tools for analysis.

F. W. Lancaster, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, brought the conference to a close with his keynote presentation, "Evaluating the Digital Library." Lancaster identified a number of concerns we have in the move toward the electronic library, among them changing clientele and a changing resource base. He also raised the issue of a change in professional front-line activities, with the major concern that technology not only forces but also enables users to use less library services. Finally, Lancaster emphasized the important role librarians will play in the educational process.

Peter Brophy, in his conference summary, pointed out the many future-oriented sessions that had been heard, the community's growing understanding of the library as a social construct, and the growing focus on measures of outcome and user satisfaction in the profession. He emphasized the need for constant change in order to shape effective roles for libraries in the future, and reminds us to keep in mind two key questions as we face this future: What are libraries for? What is at the core of information management?

Those attending the conference were encouraged to continue to look internationally for new ideas to assess library performance, since the issues are of interest worldwide.

For more information, see the published proceedings: Proceedings of the 2nd Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services, University of Northumbria at Newcastle: Information North, 1998. Information North's address: Information North, Bolbec Hall, Westgate Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 1SE, England. Tel: +44 (0) 191 232 0877. Fax: +44 (0)191 232 0804.

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