

## **Building a Culture of Assessment in Academic Libraries**

*Panelist: Betsy Wilson, Associate Director of Libraries Public Services, University of Washington Libraries*

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### **Abstract**

For academic libraries to succeed in the new educational and information environment, they have to become more client focused, more efficient and more effective in delivering their services. Libraries have to take responsibility to incorporate into their work environment a culture of ongoing assessment, and the willingness to make decisions based on facts and sound analysis. This session will examine ways to build a culture of assessment into the academic library environment.

### **Paper**

Welcome to "Building a Culture of Assessment in Academic Libraries." This panel presentation will address why a culture of assessment is critical to a preferred future for libraries; strategies, obstacles, and action relevant to building a culture of assessment; and practical assessment techniques. We have constructed the session to allow plenty of time for audience participation. We hope that we all will be able to learn about each others' assessment experiences.

### **(Introduce the panel)**

Betsy Wilson, associate director of libraries for public services at the University of Washington, was originally scheduled to be one of our panelists. She is unable to attend the conference, and sends her regrets and regards. Amos/Cathy will be presenting her paper in her absence.

### **(Betsy's presentation)**

#### **(Slide 1)**

When we think about the culture of libraries, one can conjure up many images. The culture of the book. The culture of knowledge. The culture of control. The culture of equal access. The culture of detail. The culture of community. The culture of quiet. The culture of technology. The culture of change. Today, I would like us to think about libraries within the culture of assessment.

What is a culture of assessment? Our panel put together its collective heads and developed this definition.

#### **(Slide 2)**

*A Culture of Assessment* is an environment in which decisions are based on facts, research and analysis, and where services are planned and delivered in ways which maximize positive outcomes and impacts for library clients. *A culture of assessment* is an integral part of the process of change and the creation of a user-centered library.

To begin our panel, we are asking you to fill out a brief culture of assessment IQ test. The "IQ", in this test, stands for Institutional Quotient, not Intelligence Quotient. The test is designed to measure your institution's current readiness in creating a culture of assessment. Filling out the test is straightforward, should take a few minutes, and is not nearly as traumatic as those real IQ tests we took as children. Simply answer all the statements on the front of the sheet, true or false. Total those statements that you answered "true" and then flip the sheet over. On the reverse side you will find five categories, each distinguished by a range of scores. Match your total score with the corresponding stage. This should give you an instant read of where your library may find itself on a continuum of assessment.

**(Give the audience five minutes or so to complete test)**

The five stages are intended to help you recognize where your library may be in relation to others. The first two stages, "First Steps" and "On Your Way" are critical stages in preparing your library to understand and embrace assessment as a component of its culture. The "Experimenting" and "Full Speed Ahead" stages are the realization of the earlier steps. And the last stage, the "Model Program", is the ultimate goal. Under each of these five stages, are a series of strategies you may wish to consider for moving your institution to the next stage.

Our panel will expand upon some of the strategies and conditions outlined in the IQ test. We hope to answer the most common and critical questions asked when designing assessment programs in libraries.

Why is building a culture of assessment important to the future of libraries?

We are all aware of the shifts and changes in the higher education environment. The world in which academic libraries operate is undergoing unprecedented change. This fluid environment directly shapes our future. I would suggest that our current environment is the major impetus for explicitly putting the user at the center of our libraries and surrounding them with a culture of assessment.

***Let's take a quick look at the major shifts and opportunities.***

**(Slide 3)**

### **Changing demographics**

- We are seeing an older, more diverse student body.

- We are no longer talking about 4 years and out, but life-long learning needs.
- Continuing education is emphasized in addition to "traditional" degrees.
- Flexible curriculums and episodic degree programs are desired.
- An older, experienced student body demands relevance in education.
- With students as customers, affordability has become a focus.

**(Slide 4)**

**Information technology**

- Distributed education and networked information have created invisible users.
- We have seen the emergence of non-traditional competition and self-study programs because of information technology.
- Digital, electronic, and virtual libraries are now being realized.
- Information technology requires the modernization of physical and human resources. We are all scrambling to re-conceive space and support continual learning for our staff.
- Bricks and mortar are becoming an unfunded liability.

**(Slide 5)**

**Changing economy**

Declining or flat public appropriations for education are the norm.

Federal research and development funds are being awarded with different emphasis.

Our institutions are looking beyond geographic borders for export opportunities.

There is a call for better value in education.

Industry-academic partnering is a driver.

Fundraising is critical to changes in the economics of higher education.

**(Slide 6)**

**Intense competition (within and outside of the university)**

- Productivity improvement is expected.
- There are mandates for increased accountability particularly from elected officials.
- Inter-university alliances are introducing new competitors.
- We are experiencing a consolidation of disciplines; re-focus on core disciplines; and a divestment of non-core activities.
- Outsourcing facilities and functions is an option.
- And greater market orientation and expanded market scope are operational givens in the academy.

**(Slide 7)**

In addition, assessment in higher education has received greater attention over the past decade due to some major events and mandates. There has been myriad commissions on the shortcomings of the educational system at all levels. Perhaps the most influential was the *Nation at Risk Report* in 1983. This was followed by Secretary of Education William Bennett's book *To Reclaim A Legacy* in 1984. Assessment was mandated by the the National Governors Association Task Force on College Quality in 1986 and further emphasized by the Association of American College's *Integrity in the College Curriculum* in the late 1980s.

**(Slide 8)**

Coupled with these reports is a growing public perception of curricular weakness in and distrust of higher education; work force trends which demand more employee skills in technology, information processing, and critical thinking; raging political accountability; and elementary and secondary school reform. These factors have all contributed to an institutional mandate for increased assessment.

Over 40 states now have some form of mandated assessment of education. Summative and formative assessment is conducted at a majority of US colleges and universities. Accrediting agencies have shifted their orientation away from inputs toward assessment of educational outcomes. If any of you have been involved in accreditation reviews lately, you know they want to know more than how many books you have in the library.

What does this mean for us in libraries? First, increased attention to institutional accountability and assessment activity is taking center stage. Second, what we are doing and how we allocate our resources is being scrutinized And, finally, we must find meaningful ways to gather information to inform our decisions and shape the preferred future of a user-centered library.

The relative merits of qualitative versus quantitative modes of evaluation become more critical than ever before. We must become even more versatile and flexible in our ability to deal with a variety of different assessment techniques. We must embrace the notion that different techniques are valid in different circumstances. We must be knowledgeable about the strengths and weaknesses of each. And we must be willing to mix and match methods so that assessment results in the greatest amount possible of usable information. As one assessment guru has said: "You can't fatten a pig by merely weighing it every week."

In this environment of change and new opportunities, we need to focus on the user. At the University of Washington, we felt we needed to explicitly define who our users were in order to determine if we were meeting their needs. We needed to be positioned to make the best use of diminishing resources, to select the best from a growing array of options, and to market services realistically. Most importantly, we needed to engage both staff and users in a decision-making dialog on what new services and programs would be introduced and what they will no longer do.

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**We have defined our users through collectively asking:** Who are our users? Everyone? Anyone who ventures into the library? Anyone who reaches us through the Internet? Who are we funded to serve? Who have we agreed to serve through consortial and cooperative agreements? Are there different categories of users? Do we serve these different categories of users differently? How do we reconcile conflicting user needs? Are we proactively user-centered or reactively user-driven?

**We have articulated a service policy.** We have defined and codified our service levels. We seek to make the user aware of services available to them. We have defined basic services for everyone and developed value-added services for our primary users.

**We genuinely have tried to acknowledge our limits.** We have asked: Are there limits to our services? Do we know our limits? Are we being realistic about what we can deliver given our available resources? Have we let the user know the limitations? How can we provide options and alternatives for services we can't deliver but for which there is user demand?

**We have built partnerships critical to a user-centered library.** We seek collaborations with the broader information community which strengthen a user-centered library.

**We have committed to creating a culture of assessment, because we have determined that this is the infrastructure for the user-centered library.** We have reallocated staff, dedicated resources, and developed in-house assessment expertise. In our working definition of the user centered library assessment is a defining characteristic.

**(Slide 10)**

A user-centered library is one in which quality services and user satisfaction are goals recognized and shared by all library staff. The user-centered library focuses explicitly on the user's information and communication needs. Planning, operations, management, and service decisions are made within an institutional framework which places the user at its center. User services are given emphasis through ongoing assessment, implementation of user satisfaction feedback mechanisms, empowerment of staff to respond to and solve problems, a high level of staff interaction with users, personalized service which responds to diverse user needs, and operations organized to facilitate the attainment of user-centered objectives.

We began talking about a culture of assessment when we realized that, although we thought we were listening to our users and making informed decisions, we were not doing so systematically or in a meaningful way. We had suggestion boxes. We received letters and phone calls from users. We got feedback at service desks. We did selector surveys. We had a good liaison program and faculty advisory groups. We did the

intermittent program review. But our approach was piecemeal, obtrusive, and function-based. Assessment was usually done during a time of stress or crisis. Seldom did our approaches allow input from invisible or non-users. Could we use systematic surveys, focus groups, process improvement, and other methods to listen continuously to our users? We set out to create what we began calling a culture of assessment.

We are not there, yet. But, we recognize that sustaining a user-centered library rests with the creation and nourishment of a culture of assessment. I think we will have attained a culture of assessment when:

**(Slide 11)**

- The library's mission, planning, and policies are focused on supporting the user's information and communication needs
- Assessment is evident in all library planning
- Library administrators are committed to supporting assessment
- Staff accepts responsibility for assessment
- User populations are continuously identified and diversity of users is recognized
- There is routine collection, analysis, use, and dissemination of meaningful data and user feedback

**(Slide 12)**

- There is a Management Information System or a Decision Support System in place to support assessment activities
- All library operations and programs are evaluated for quality
- Assessment is integral to routine programmatic and operational decisions
- Resources are allocated in accordance with user needs
- The organizational and work environment rewards cooperation and communication among individuals and departments who seek to dismantle user barriers
- Individual and organizational responsibility for assessment is addressed explicitly
- Assessment is not viewed as an add-on, but part of one's job

**(Slide 13)**

- There are support and rewards for staff who engage in assessment
- Staff continuously develop and upgrade expertise and skills in assessment
- On-going staff development in the area of assessment is provided
- There is an active cultivation of relationships between the library and its users

And when we create this culture of assessment, ask our users what they need, and nurture the library-user relationship, we must do something with what we learn, unlike Gary Larson's suggestion box in hell:

**(Slide 14)**

Thanks, etc.