GETTING STARTED WITH EVALUATION

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Evaluation Questions

Peter Hernon and Ellen Altman view measurement in terms of eleven evaluation questions that cover a range of metrics. Figure 1.2 lists these questions, which can be divided into three broad categories: those

1. under the control of the library;
2. jointly decided by the customer and the library; and
3. decided by the customer (see table 1.1).

The "how questions" under the control of the library include:

- How valuable?
- How satisfied?
- How courteous?
- How much?
- How many?
- How reliable?
- How accurate?
- How prompt?
- How well?
- How responsive?
- How economically?

**Figure 1.2 The “Hows” of Measurement**

How much? The cost of providing a service should always be a concern for any library. All libraries (in fact, all organizations) are constrained by restrictions on resources. The resources budgeted for a particular service, be they personnel, space, collections, and so forth, determine in large part the quality of service that is planned to be delivered.

How many? Counts of various activities and processes help determine the “How many” questions. Daily, weekly, monthly counts of circulation, reference questions, people attending programs, number of items cataloged, and so forth, are examples of “how many.” Such measures are often used to justify staffing levels by showing funding decision makers how busy staff members are. These counts are sometimes referred to as workload metrics.

A library can determine what percent of its community it reaches by comparing the number of registered cardholders against the total population of the community. Such a metric is often referred to as market penetration. Perhaps an even more helpful metric, sometimes called percent of active customers, compares the percent of registered library cardholders who have used the library in some way over the last month, quarter, or year to the total number of registered cardholders. In addition, use counts have been used historically as a surrogate measure for the value of the library.
Table 1.1
Components of the “How” Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIBRARY CONTROL</th>
<th>How much?</th>
<th>How many?</th>
<th>How economical?</th>
<th>How prompt?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magnitude</td>
<td>Magnitude</td>
<td>Resources used</td>
<td>Cycle times</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of change (compared to last year)</td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Units processed</td>
<td>Turnaround time (Anticipatory)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of overall change</td>
<td>Costs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIBRARY AND CUSTOMERS DECIDE</th>
<th>How valuable?</th>
<th>How reliable?</th>
<th>How accurate?</th>
<th>How well?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effort expended</td>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>Completeness</td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost-benefit obtained</td>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Comprehensiveness</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>meeting expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CUSTOMERS DECIDE</th>
<th>How courteous?</th>
<th>How responsive?</th>
<th>How satisfied?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attentive</td>
<td>Anticipatory</td>
<td>Expectations met</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming</td>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>Materials obtained</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empathetic</td>
<td>Personal interaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ease of use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Equipment used</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Environment (facilities)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Willingness to return/use again</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Efficiency metrics answer the question: Are we doing things right? The results identify the cost per use or transaction. Examples of such metrics include the cost to add an item to the collection, the cost to catalog an item (copy cataloging versus original cataloging), and the cost to lend an item. Efficiency metrics are often used to compare the operations of one library against the performance of a group of peer libraries in a process usually referred to as benchmarking. In this time of fiscal constraints, it is important for a library to demonstrate that it is operating efficiently.

How prompt? Time, the foundation for this type of metric, conveys the speed with which an activity or transaction is completed. Examples include the elapsed time to order and place an item on the shelf, the length of time to catalog an item, and the amount of time to fulfill an interlibrary loan request and to wait in a checkout line. Time may be expressed in terms of minutes, hours, or days depending on what is being measured. Relevant data may be found in the automated library system in the form of a report or it may be necessary to gather time-related data using a sample of transactions.

There are several “how questions” that both the library and the customer decide. These include:

How valuable? The dominant approach to determining the value of the library is value-in-use as determined by the user of the service. The individuals using the service set the value of the service they receive. The benefits that arise from the use of the service occur first to the individual user. The possible benefits are categorized as being direct benefits (cost saving, time saved, new revenue generated, and gained information or knowledge), indirect benefits (e.g., leading to better grades in school, passing the GED, doing better on graduate aptitude tests, getting better jobs, graduating sooner, and generating new ideas), and nonuse benefits (someone can use the library at a later time or others in the community can use the library). The value of the library from a financial viewpoint is explored in greater detail in chapter 8, while chapter 9 discusses the value of the library from a nonfinancial perspective.
Another important viewpoint for the "how well" question pertains to how customers benefit from using the library. For an academic library, the focus might be on identifying metrics related to student-learning outcomes. In a public library, outcomes might include the number of people attending instructional classes who pass the GED exam, the number of individuals attending a series of programs about entrepreneurship who actually start a local business in the 18–24 months following the last program, and so forth.

And the "how questions" that are in the sole domain of the customer are:

How courteous? Customers come to the library with a set of expectations, including those about staff courteousness. Customers compare their expectations with the quality of service they actually receive. If the actual service does not meet expectations then the customer is disappointed and perhaps frustrated. The customer might be pleasantly surprised when the quality of service exceeds their expectations. Over time, customers build a mental model of expectations, and library staff, with training, can become sensitive to meeting or exceeding customer expectations. Another aspect of courtesy is whether the customer is greeted when entering or leaving the library.

How responsive? Responsiveness can be considered from two perspectives: how well the library has thought ahead to provide solutions to potential problems before they arise, and how well the library responds to a problem after it has arisen. For example, assuming the library charges fines, can customers pay using cash as well as credit cards? Can they easily determine what copies are theirs if multiple customers are using a shared printer? Staff helpfulness in resolving problems or providing a service is one manifestation of responsiveness. Staff members who actively assist the customer in finding (or attempting to find) something in the collection are preferable to the staff member pointing in the direction where the resource is likely to be found (and leaving customers on their own).

How satisfied? The customer experience in using the physical or virtual library determines the level of satisfaction. Indicators of satisfaction
include the use of a service in an ongoing manner (repeat business), the willingness to encourage others to use the library, as well as the inclination to be an advocate for the library. An important consideration for any library is whether to collect customer satisfaction data on a regular but periodic basis or on an ongoing, daily basis. Regardless of the decision, it is important that the library management team read each comment that survey respondents make. Many surveys will have 30 percent or more of the respondents providing comments in response to open-ended questions.

In conclusion, not all of the eleven hows are of equal importance. Those of greatest importance are perhaps:

- How well?
- How valuable?
- How economical?
- How satisfied?

Still, libraries have traditionally focused on “How much?” and “How many?” Subsequent chapters in this book predominately address these six questions, with an emphasis on the first four. Note that “How courteous?” and “How responsive?,” to some extent, might be considered in the context of satisfaction.

Sources of Evidence

There are a number of ways for a library to gather the necessary data to answer one or more of the how questions. Some of the evidence gathered might result from the application of evaluation research and formal data collection. However, it is important to recognize that to identify the impact of the library in terms of outcome metrics, it may be necessary to identify the specific individual who has used a library service (e.g., borrowed materials, downloaded journal articles, and attended programs). The resulting data (with the unique identification number of the library customer) is maintained until such time as it can be combined with other data (e.g., student demographic and performance data) and the personal identification number can be stripped in order to protect customer confidentiality.

Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate this type of evidence relevant to measuring customer expectations, including customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. However, some sources of evidence for other chapters might not involve evaluation research and might rely, in part, on internal budgetary data (inputs showing the distribution of the budget to collections and services, staff, facilities, and technology; data that a group of libraries, perhaps ones perceived as peers, report; or usage data (outputs supplied by vendors, publishers, consortium, and individual libraries). If a library counts something, this activity may require evaluation research and a determination of the length of time for data collection, the accuracy of the data gathered, and the validity of the data collection process. It is possible to combine both budgetary and usage data and study economic efficiency such as by analyzing the return on investment. Further, customers or community members might be asked to participate in evaluation research to determine the value they assign to the use of the library.

In essence, the six how-questions can be addressed by using budgetary or usage data, or a combination of both. However, effectiveness and impact can be more complex and, when they address outcomes, the data may be qualitative and not so easily compared. Further, such data should not merely come from customer self-reports. In our view, librarians rely too much on self-reporting and far less on demonstrating what people actually do that they could not do before—the actual changes they have undergone (i.e., increased skills, changed attitudes or values, modified behavior, improved conditions, or altered status). Altered status might be gaining employment from attending library workshops about résümé preparation and employment opportunities.

Benchmarking and Best Practices

Benchmarking creates a point of reference against which something can be measured. Internally, benchmarking may be applied to evaluate services against performance standards, and it enables libraries to determine whether they are performing better than they did in the past. Expanding the focus of benchmarking, libraries might ask, “Are we performing better than our competitors?” Externally, with the collaboration of other libraries or organizations within local government,
benchmarking addresses a new question: "Are we performing as well as, or better than, other units on campus or in local government?"

Benchmarking can be undertaken in almost any area of organizational activity. The basic requirements are that key performance variables be identified, measured, analyzed, and compared to provide a basis for planned performance improvement. Benchmarking can also be applied internally to reflect change over time and changes in processes in order to determine whether service to customers improves.10

Best practices, on the other hand, refers to best management practices, meaning the processes, practices, and systems identified in different organizations that performed exceptionally well and are widely recognized as improving their organization’s performance and economic efficiency in specific areas. The goal is to reduce expenditures and improve operational effectiveness and efficiency.

Central to both benchmarking and best practices are change management, continuous improvement, and high-quality customer service. As leading organizations improve, they constantly look ahead and challenge themselves to perform better. In essence, they change and do not settle for the status quo. Benchmarking is not an end unto itself; rather, it should lead to the identification and enactment of best practices.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Planning is a critical activity for libraries as they embrace change and view the status quo as unacceptable. Anyone agreeing with Miller that the present, although full of challenges, represents an opportunity for change needs to create a vision of the future and work to achieve that possibility.11 Planning for the future brings together those inside and outside the library; however, planning by itself is insufficient. Two questions arise: "How well is the library achieving that plan?" and "Does that plan require any adjustments?" Neither question can adequately be answered without someone carrying out evaluation activities and reviewing the evidence gathered to assess progress in achieving stated goals and objectives. Corrective action may be required. As a result, evaluation should become a daily activity, one focused on achieving the plan.

**Exercises**

**Topic:** Covering the reference desk is no longer an essential component of the work of a number of academic libraries as students use library services remotely or contact reference staff in ways other than approaching the reference desk with a question. Further, librarians are increasing their contact with students and faculty in course-related interactions such as through subject and course guides available on the library’s website.

1. Given this situation what might be the focus of an evaluation study?

2. Is there a relevant literature on the topic?

3. If there is a decline in the number of reference questions asked, what types of questions do students and others ask?

4. Other than at the reference desk, how do students interact with reference staff? What is the number of these transactions?

5. Depending on the findings, are libraries pursuing other models of reference assistance, ones that provide service in a more timely fashion than the reference desk could ever provide and that focus on online contact with faculty and students?

6. The previous question links evaluation to planning. What are other models? Is one most appropriate to your library? If not, what do you do with the data gathered from questions 3 and 4?

7. Returning to the topic, which exercises are most relevant to a public library?

(Answers to these questions can be found in the “Appendix” at the back of the book. We encourage different members of a library staff to work on the exercises together and to discuss the results.)

**Notes**