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Ideas, Hints, and Tips: Advocacy: The Essential Tangent to the Assessment Cycle

Jean Cook
University of West Georgia, jcook@westga.edu

Ideas, Hints & TIPS

Ideas, Hints and Tricks: Advocacy: The Essential Tangent to the Assessment Cycle

By Jean Cook

Imagine the situation: It's the end of a town council meeting and the mayor asks, "Is there any new business?" You're at a faculty meet-and-greet and the president of the institution pauses to shake your hand, asking, "How are things in the library?" You're in line at the local coffee shop behind your library director and he turns to ask, "What's new with you?" You now have twenty seconds of a decision-maker's attention. What do you say?

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing emphasis on regular assessment in libraries. Libraries were encouraged to measure their effectiveness and efficiency. We regularly gathered this data for annual reports to our reporting agencies (whether they were the public government, college institution, or even relevant library association). Gradually this emphasis shifted to the idea of an assessment cycle. That is, assessment was no longer an activity; it was a continual process. Libraries should determine what they want to measure, create assessments to measure their effectiveness in reaching those outcomes, and then use the data from that assessment to improve their desired outcomes. This model could apply to everything from learning outcomes measuring teaching to circulation statistics influencing collection development to gate counts and reference statistics guiding staff training. In each case, libraries were using data-driven assessment to improve their operation.

However, this assessment cycle features one essential gap. When libraries focus only on internal improvements, they neglect to realize the full potential of this data. Librarians are not the only decision-makers in modern libraries. Budgets, staffing levels, hours of operation, and technology investments can be and often are determined by external stakeholders. At Ingram Library at the University of West Georgia, librarians recognized this and began using internal statistics to advocate for resources from external administrators.

For example, Ingram Library houses the largest computer lab on our campus. The reference desk was originally the lone monitor for this lab and staffed solely by accredited librarians. To improve our staffing distribution, we began counting the number of lab-based technical questions and library-based reference questions we handled each shift. About 50% of the nearly 4200 questions we received in a single semester were low level technical questions. We used this statistic to ask for student assistants to help monitor the lab. In other labs, the monitors are supervised by our IT department. Since these students would also be trained in providing basic reference assistance, we were able to insist that they be supervised by a librarian. Hence, since fall 2009, we have had externally funded but internally managed student assistants providing basic reference services for all the hours that we are open. In fall 2012, this meant the library gained the equivalent of about seven full time employees to cover our two reference desks. The additional staff provided much need jobs on campus and allowed the library to dedicate our limited budget to other projects.

This success has encouraged the library to use our internal data for other external advocacy. When campus administrators began focusing on improving student success rates, we ran statistical analyses looking at the graduation rates of students in our library credit course. We used these statistics to create what the business world calls "elevator speeches." An elevator speech is a prepared statement that you can give to influence someone in a short amount of time. We could bring up these statistics at faculty meetings, in university surveys and feedback, and even when in line at Starbucks. After talking up our very encouraging results to various stakeholders, we became increasingly involved in the first year programs, culminating in our inclusion in the campus' pilot Summer Bridge Program. As a direct result of this, we were allowed to hire two new fellows and two new adjuncts to help teach the credit course in the fall of 2012. In another example, our library director compared our librarian-to-student ratio to our sister institutions in and out of the state. She used our numerical deficiency to advocate for and ultimately receive new permanent faculty lines. We are currently gathering data to push for everything from more printers for the labs to more calculators for checkout to more janitorial service at night.

In each case, we use our internal data that we would normally gather and report in order to promote our goals to our external stakeholders. We utilize hard numbers to create short but memorable statements about our successes and our needs. Whether it's "we checked out our 25 laptops almost 3,000 times last month; we could really use some new equipment" or "we had 80,000 people walk through our doors in September alone! We desperately need more staff," such brief, bold, and most importantly, honest statements make a memorable impact on those who have the power to grant these requests. Libraries of all types can use this model. Determine your need, look at what you gather, and prepare something catchy for your next twenty second opportunity.

Jean Cook is an instruction librarian and reference coordinator at Ingram Library at the University of West Georgia.