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Demonstrating Library Value: An Overview of Effective Assessment and Communication

Methods

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Methods

Particularly with the shift from service-centered to user-centered assessment, libraries have needed to propound their value beyond quantitative measures and justify their previously assumed inherent value. Service-centered assessments are strongly numbers-based – you can measure circulation data quite easily, for example. As libraries have evolved to focus on users' experiences, "there has been a shift toward examining what factors our users perceive as necessary in order for a library to be a place suitable for their needs" (Elteto et al., 2008, p. 325). What's more, libraries must use this data to create narratives that demonstrate their value and "promote an organization's relevance to their larger community" (Lewin & Passonneau, 2012, p. 85). By examining methods of assessment and communication, this paper addresses potential solutions to the question: How do libraries demonstrate value to the community in which they serve?

Types of Value Assessment

First and foremost, it is important to address that there are two categories from which value can be measured: outcome-based and impact-based. Both types of value assessment methods identify aspects of value, but the categories differ based on whether you are measuring economic consequences (outcomes) or social consequences (impacts) (Rooney-Browne, 2011).

Outcome-based Assessment Methods

Outcome-based assessments primarily focus on the economic value of tangible assets. These assessments "provide actionable information about the connections between libraries and areas of institutional focus in an effort to demonstrate library value" (Oakleaf, 2013, p. 127). We

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will highlight several methods of assessing economic value before moving on to impact-based assessment methods.

Return on Investment (ROI)

Return on investment quantifies how much value an organization generates for each dollar invested in it. As an example, the Library Research Service conducted individual return on investment reports for eight public libraries in Colorado in 2009 to determine each library's return on investment. The researchers looked at areas such as: cost to use alternatives, lost use, direct local expenditures, compensation for library staff, and halo spending. The results indicated that "for most of the libraries participating in the study, the return on investment (ROI) was approximately five to one---that is, for every $1.00 spent on public libraries, $5.00 of value was realized by taxpayers" (Lance et al., 2009, p. 9). Utilizing ROI data is one assessment method libraries implement to communicate value through clear and direct numbers.

Library Use Valuation Calculator

Another useful quantitative assessment tool to implement is a library use valuation calculator, which quantifies the value of libraries by way of calculating the estimated worth of services provided. This can be done at the user-level and is oftentimes included on library websites. Library users are encouraged to input information such as: computer use (per hour), number of audiobooks borrowed/downloaded, total programs attended, etc., and the valuation calculator determines the overall value of the patron's library usage (Ewagner, 2021).

Contingent Valuation

Contingent valuation is a survey-based assessment method that "estimate[s] the [library user's] value of various nonmarket goods" (Lee & Chung, 2012, p. 74), in order to understand the library user's willingness to pay (WTP). Where the library assigned value to library services

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when using the library use valuation calculator, this method essentially allows for library users to assign value.

Outcome-based Assessment Considerations

Understandably, outcomes-based values are more easily assessed and communicated to stakeholders due to the ease of collecting and analyzing quantitative data. However, communicating only these metrics does not fulfill the focus on user-centered experience that most types of libraries require, and does not paint a clear picture of what makes libraries so valuable in one's community. As stated in the paper *Theories of Value and Demonstrating their Practical Implementation in Academic Library Services*, "most models fell short in assisting libraries to justify their existence, demonstrate their worth, their value to the broader institutional goals, and social goals" (Malapela & De Jager, 2018, p. 779). To bridge this gap, one must also utilize impact-based assessment methods to highlight a library's social value on both the community and individual level.

Impact-based Assessment Methods

Impact-based assessments focus on the social value of library assets. The article *Methods for demonstrating the value of public libraries in the UK: a literature review* highlights a multitude of examples of social value impacts, such as: social cohesion, empowerment, employability, community engagement, informed citizens, and so on (Rooney-Browne, 2011). These values are what have begun to replace the previously mentioned "assumed value" that libraries possess.

Social Auditing

One method used for assessing social value is social auditing. Previously only used in the public sector, social auditing has been modified to "assess the social impact of its museums,

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libraries and archives" (Bryson et al, 2002). Social auditing examines how a library's services

contribute toward their stated social impact objectives.

Ethnography

This immersive methodology is focused on understanding how patrons use the library by

way of observation, in order to discern what is valuable/important to library users. Though more

commonly applied in the field of anthropology, ethnography is a useful tool for understanding

value on more individual level. As an example, the Pilkington Library at Loughborough

University used ethnography to determine how patrons were utilizing a new flexible learning

space. Results indicated that the space was primarily used for studying and social gatherings,

which in-turn allowed librarians to adjust resources as necessary in order to meet the needs for

what users found valuable about this new space (Bryant, 2009).

Social Return on Investment (SROI)

Branching off the aforementioned return on investment method of assessing value, social

return on investment seeks to measure social impacts by way of assigning monetary value to

intangible library services, thus giving the value of impact in libraries greater influence. Much

like the earlier example of conducting return on investment reports to measure economic value

surrounding common library services, libraries can conduct a social return on investment to

measure and give weight to how libraries benefit their community beyond these tangible

services. One common social value I have personally discussed in a number of graduate courses

is the value of the library as a space. As one of the last available sites where community

members can visit and congregate without pressure to purchase anything, libraries are valuable

for the inherent nature of acceptance without constraint, and this should surely be recognized and

included in conversations about library value.

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Impact-based Assessment Considerations

One overarching challenge to consider when implementing these impact-based methods is that "the value of library service is intangible and often intrinsic and hence difficult to measure" (Malapela & De Jager, 2018, p. 777). These impacts (sometimes called nonuse values) are critical to communicate the overall importance of libraries. A study done in 2004 found that forty percent of public libraries' total value is directed from nonuse values, stating "nonuse values are thus an important component, and the exclusion of such values in cost–benefit analyses of public libraries may grossly underestimate public libraries' overall worth to society" (Aabø & Strand, 2004, p. 351).

Research suggests triangulating assessment data to create a stronger message of value. This is why libraries oftentimes implement multi-method approaches to assessing value in order to back up their findings with proof that differing methodologies brought about similar results – in this case, that libraries have value both economically and socially. In *A Multilevel Approach for Library Value Assessment*, it is stated that "perhaps the classic example involves combining qualitative and quantitative approaches" (Schwieder & Hinchliffe, 2018, p. 429). This is due to their complementary nature – qualitative methodologies provide easily-digestible figures, but do not include individual perspectives. On the other hand, qualitative methodologies provide a clearer understanding of individual perspectives and illustrate a story, but the data is difficult to quantify and give clear meaning to.

Even still, there are challenges libraries face when proving their value that should be mentioned. Due to libraries' service model that focuses on the public good rather than delivering financial profit, the indirect benefits face the consequence of being a perceived benefit, which ultimately are held individually by the community and are therefore weighed differently

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depending on any singular person's perceived value (Rooney-Browne, 2011). Simply put –

without a firm number to stand behind, the idea of "the library as a space", for example, may

hold great value to some, and little-to-no value to others merely due to their perception of its

importance to the community as a whole. This is all the more reason why communication efforts

must be tailored to the audience they are being presented to.

Communicating Value

As stated in the article Demonstrating Library Value: Examples and Applications for Arts

Libraries, "how well librarians are able to demonstrate value has implications both for libraries

and for those they serve" (Brown, 2011). Just as assessment methods will change depending on

the type of library, so will communication methods change depending on whether you are

presenting your assessment results to your patron base, library administrators, board of directors,

and so on. As outlined in section six of the *ACRL Proficiencies for Assessment Librarians and*

Coordinators, assessment librarians must be proficient in "[utilizing] data visualization tools and

techniques with both qualitative and quantitative data to communicate assessment results"

(2017).

Infographics

A common cost-effective method of communicating assessment results is by way of

creating infographics, which allows you to organize the metrics in a way that tells the story of

value using minimal text, and instead relying on imagery and charts to speak for you. Not only

eye-catching, infographics are also popular for communicating data to multiple stakeholders, and

can be completely customized in a way that benefits your key data points.

Campaigning

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Another method to consider is collaboration through outreach events, like the Wallkill Public Library did through the "Geek the Library" (GTL) campaign. In the *Geek the Library Case Study* (2012), library staff wanted to engage with their community and remind them of what the library has to offer, and ultimately gain their support by showcasing the library's community value. This event highlights the importance of knowing about what is deemed valuable to the stakeholder audience you are connecting with and reflecting that in your communication/outreach efforts. Ultimately, the GTL campaign was a success, with "19 libraries, two library associations, and two library systems joined in to pay, promote, and take part in the event" (p. 2), which hosted an audience of over five thousand participants – many of which were identified as non-users of libraries prior to the event.

Communication Considerations

However your library chooses to communicate their assessment results, it is important that the stakeholders recognize and resonate with the results. Doing so is an important strategy that will lead to a stronger patron base who feel connected and committed to advocating the value of the library in their community.

Conclusion

Libraries are critical to the advancement of civilization and deserve a permanent place in society. As the purpose of libraries has shifted from a brick-and-mortar book repository to a community hub (in-person and remotely), so have the services (both direct and indirect) they provide in order to support their communities. An excerpt from *Assessment is Not Enough for Libraries to be Valued* (Nitecki et al., 2015) says it best:

The value of the library will continue to evolve amidst changing technological,

pedagogical, and economic conditions to ensure freedom of information, to

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> prepare information savvy life long learners, and to create environments for
>
> focused engagement with knowledge from its discovery to its dissemination. The
>
> library may change as an organization, but its essence will continue as core to the
>
> success of our society (p. 208).

From this quote I am reminded of why I chose to switch career paths and pursue a master's degree in library and information science. I see the inherent value of libraries because I understand their worth in the context of society (beyond economic value). I would argue that the vast majority of librarians do not choose to work in libraries because of the financial security – that is simply not feasible. Instead, we choose libraries because we recognize their importance within the bigger picture of advancing society by fostering opportunities for growth in the context of education, experience, well-being, and equity. Using the assessment methodologies and tools for communication outlined in this paper, we must continue to demonstrate the value of libraries within the community to secure their place in the future.

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