THE COMPLETE COLLECTIONS ASSESSMENT MANUAL

A Holistic Approach

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Introduction

How to Use This Book

In today's climate of slim budgets and ever-increasing accountability, library personnel are looking for straightforward, implementable solutions to the complex challenge of collections assessment. After all, assessment is an essential piece of building, managing, improving, and communicating about library collections, giving us a concrete foundation upon which to base decisions and build narratives. Unfortunately, assessment can also be a daunting undertaking, too often tackled in a hasty, ad hoc manner as issues arise. If we manage to consult the literature, we can quickly become overwhelmed by the breadth and depth of assessment articles, books, webinars, and standards that are available. When it comes right down to it, few of us have the bandwidth—especially mid-assessment—to perform an extensive literature review, let alone to undertake the time- and thought-intensive process of synthesizing, prioritizing, and applying what we've read. With libraries to run, users to serve, and stakeholders watching, it can feel difficult to justify the up-front effort.

To that end, I have set out to create a one-stop-shop for practical, actionable collections assessment that not only guides readers step-by-step through major assessment methods but also provides concrete guidance on how to contextualize those methods within a broader assessment framework. Although my own experience has been primarily in academic libraries, my audience includes any library personnel who work with collections, be they department or unit heads, assessment specialists, subject specialists, or generalists, working in any type and size of library. *The Complete Collections Assessment Manual* can be a crash course in getting an assessment program or project running, or a refresher for the seasoned practitioner. Ultimately, my goal is to bridge the divide between the big picture and the nitty-gritty—the why and the how-to—in a nuanced and flexible way, delving into the theory that should underpin every assessment decision, as well as how those decisions might play out in a variety of concrete scenarios. As Blaine Hall so succinctly described his own 1985 assessment manual, "This is a training manual, not merely a procedures manual" (vii). The end result is a

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choose-your-own-adventure that empowers the reader to develop and enact meaningful assessment projects and programs at any library.

Part I of the manual leads readers through the development of an assessment program or project by way of chapters on holistic collections assessment, goal-setting, stakeholders, selecting data and methods, project planning, communication best practices, and special considerations. Each chapter combines conceptual overviews with practical, hands-on considerations, including checklists and examples. After reading part I, readers can use the components developed over those first seven chapters to build assessment programs that include project plans, stakeholder engagement time lines, and communication plans. (Templates for these are included in appendix A). Part I also lays the foundation for readers to assemble a custom portfolio of tools and methods tailored to their specific assessment needs or to use one of the sample portfolios provided in appendix C as their starting point. Because it's critical that assessment be customized to meet local need, each sample assessment program in this appendix is framed around commonly used assessment goals and provides a variety of options for specific methods, depending on available resources.

Part II of the manual is where the rubber meets the road, providing in-depth guidance for implementing twenty individual assessment techniques, tools, or methods. Each of these chapters provides step-by-step instructions for preparing and analyzing assessment data, as well as recommended visualizations for communicating results. Readers can follow a linear trajectory, reading through each approach, or pick and choose based on need. To facilitate non-linear reading, each assessment method is prefaced with some basic information, including how resource-intensive it is to implement, to what formats it can be applied, what kinds of goals it supports, its strengths, and its shortcomings. Each chapter also provides information on complementary assessment methods and suggestions for further reading. Readers can use this information to pinpoint the most relevant methods for their needs.

As you read this book and embark on—or continue with—your own assessment endeavors, remember to start small, leverage your strengths, and be willing to fail. Let the overall principles and best practices of assessment guide you, but don't forget that libraries, collections, and user communities vary, so adapt the tools, strategies, and methods in this manual to your collection and your constituents' needs. Give yourself time at the outset to plan each project, and time afterwards to evaluate. Build a network of assessment colleagues within and beyond your organization. Ask challenging questions. Be willing to change. Even with a manual in hand, assessment is learned by doing, and each project you undertake will teach you something new. If you're like me, maybe you experience a hint of imposter syndrome: Who am I to analyze complex library data? What do I know about statistics? Do I even know what I'm doing? I hope this book can be your leg up over that first hurdle. Choose your own assessment adventure. The learning process betters us all, so why not start somewhere?

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Hall, Blaine H. 1985. *Collections Assessment Manual for College and University Libraries*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.

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PART I

Planning a Collections Assessment Program

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1 Holistic Collections Assessment

Collections assessment is a huge undertaking, and half the battle is simply figuring out where to start. There are a number of approaches to assessing a library collection, from focused ad hoc projects to sweeping comprehensive assessment programs. Assessment can slice a collection along subject lines, by format, or based on patron demographics. It can be informal or rigidly codified. Odds are, you're already conducting assessments in some or all of these categories. One of my hopes for this book is to help corral and streamline your existing efforts in a more focused, goal-oriented way. To that end, I present a holistic approach to collections assessment that can be overlaid onto any of these other strategies. Flexible in nearly every way, holistic assessment takes a big-picture approach and can be applied to any aspect of libraries, from collections to services to operations. In the context of collections, holistic assessment entails mixing and matching a variety of metrics to build a broad yet nuanced understanding of a collection's composition and impact. This means you can weave in the routine or ad hoc assessment you already do, add strategic components to your assessment portfolio, and answer the big questions you need answered. Whether you complete a project once a year or only once, the holistic approach provides the structure to accommodate any assessment need. Consider it your blank canvas or empty framework. Fill it with pieces that make sense for you. The next six chapters will help you wrangle your existing efforts and harness them holistically to suit your specific assessment goals.

Over the last few decades, as the need to demonstrate and articulate library value has increased, the profession has seen a proliferation of assessment case studies. These studies have largely focused on a single format (e.g., electronic journals) or assessment method (e.g., circulation analysis). These case studies are an essential source of how-to knowledge, providing proof-of-concept for assessment techniques we can all use. However, more recently, there has been an increasing understanding of how limited these focused case studies can be as a body of literature. As straightforward as they are to digest and recreate, these studies are necessarily one-dimensional and do not capture the full complexity of the assessment landscape. In response to this

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need for more contextualized decision-making, we have seen a growing literature in favor of a broader approach: holistic collections assessment.

Frameworks for holistic collections assessment have emerged noticeably since the early 2000s. Scott Nicholson's 2004 article "A Conceptual Framework for the Holistic Measurement and Cumulative Evaluation of Library Services" serves as one of the early examples. Nicholson explains the concept of the library as a system in which each piece affects all the others and emphasizes the corresponding need to assess all the components of that system in order to make sound decisions. Although your assessment projects are likely to focus primarily on collections, it can still be helpful to think of collections as a system where users, formats, and subjects are interlinked in complex ways. The holistic approach outlined in the next six chapters will help you do this.

In "The Library of Babel: Making Sense of Collection Management in a Postmodern World" (2005), Sonia Bodi and Katie Maier-O'Shea identified three components of a holistic and flexible assessment model: breaking a collection into chunks for more meaningful assessment, combining multiple assessment tools appropriate to each format or discipline, and collaborating with constituents to map collections to user outcomes. All three of these components, which operationalize the holistic systems thinking from Nicholson's 2004 article, will be present throughout the remainder of this manual. You will be encouraged to scope your assessment projects thoughtfully, engage with stakeholders, and, in part II, assemble a portfolio of methods and metrics from twenty possible options.

Jacqueline Borin and Hua Yi's 2008 article "Indicators for Collection Evaluation: A New Dimensional Framework" pushed the concept of holistic assessment even further by identifying six specific dimensions of the collection that should be included for comprehensive assessment: general capacity, subject standards, scholarly publishing, environmental factors, users, and usage (these dimensions are outlined in greater detail in chapter 4). Borin and Yi's framework for collections assessment is only one of several you can choose from to ensure that your assessment is as holistic and balanced as it should be. More recently, Michael Luther's article "Total Library Assessment" (2016) explicitly expanded holistic assessment beyond collections to the library as a whole. As you work with colleagues throughout your organization, watch for potential "total library" synergies that can strengthen decisions and streamline operations.

These four articles are only a small sample of the literature, but they demonstrate the evolution and ongoing refinement of the theory underlying holistic library assessment, as well as some of the ways assessment theory will underpin what you learn in this book.

In addition to these theoretical explorations of the holistic model, there have also been a handful of case studies demonstrating practical approaches to holistic collections assessment. A few examples include Michelle Wilde and Allison Level's "How to Drink from a Fire Hose without Drowning: Collections Assessment in a Numbers-Driven Environment" (2011), Cheri Duncan and Genya O'Gara's "Building Holistic and Agile Collection Development and Assessment" (2015), and the author's own 2014 article, "Applying the Tiers of Assessment: A Holistic and Systematic Approach to Assessing Library Collections." In all three examples, the authors describe specific applications of the holistic collections assessment approach. Reviewing them will give you a sense of what others' assessment strategies look like.

Within this growing literature, librarians have identified and articulated the benefits of the holistic approach to collections assessment. One of the primary benefits is that it allows for stronger, better-informed decisions than those based on a single metric or indicator. This bolstering effect manifests throughout the assessment process and beyond, including during data collection and analysis, at the point of identifying action items, and in high-level strategic conversations. Put another way, holistic collections assessment can positively impact process, outcome, and organization.

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PROCESS IMPROVEMENTS

At the most basic level, holistic assessment helps mitigate many of the challenges associated with "messy" library data. By combining metrics from across the collection, you reduce the pressure on each specific metric to be perfect and create some breathing room for the odd data glitch, blind spot, or quirk. In an environment where staff are already stretched thin, building an assessment framework with reasonable and achievable expectations for data cleanliness can make or break an assessment project. For example, in a cancellation environment where cost per use is the only criterion, how do you handle resources for which use data is unavailable? Libraries must either accept that their decisions will be made blindly or commit a vast expenditure of staff time to tracking down use data for the long tail of non-standard or non-circulating subscriptions (see chapter 23 for more information on use statistics). If, on the other hand, cost per use becomes only one of several metrics— which could also include community relevance, uniqueness, annual cost increases, usability, accessibility, and more—then there's less need to collect every scrap of difficult-to-find use data. Instead, resources without use data can be judged by other metrics. The result is a more sustainable assessment practice and more reasonable data-preparation processes.

Another process benefit of holistic assessment is that it allows for a more flexible approach to collections assessment overall. Because it entails drawing input from a variety of sources, holistic assessment encourages the establishment of sustainable and strategic data collection practices. Ad hoc processes get a closer look and can often be fine-tuned, improved, and routinized. Although it might take time to build a holistic framework, once it reaches a critical mass, libraries can pivot quickly to meet internal or external data needs. As staffing changes, specific projects can be expanded or contracted based on the available skills and hours. As stakeholders' priorities change, so too can the focus of assessment. Faced with a highly specialized subject or format, staff can tweak the portfolio of metrics to highlight what's special, address what's challenging, and meet goals in a more targeted way. Holistic assessment encourages us to see the field of possibilities and draw from it to meet the need. Thus, we shift our data-gathering and analysis processes from passive or reactive to strategic, proactive, and forward-thinking.

ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES

Questions of process aside, holistic collections assessment also provides a more complete picture upon which to base decisions than a single metric alone can provide. Library collections are diverse and dynamic. Our users are diverse and dynamic. No single metric can adequately reflect a collection's value within our complex and evolving landscape and no assessment method or tool is so airtight that it could provide the sole basis for anything but the simplest assessment-related projects. The literature is replete with examples of the fundamental weaknesses of our most cherished metrics. Bibliographies are arbitrary, hard to find and labor-intensive to check. User surveys depend on the self-selection of participants and, depending on response rates, may not be useful for drawing broad conclusions. Interlibrary loan (ILL) analysis assumes that past use correlates to future use; use analysis assumes that each download (or circulation) is as meaningful as the last; and bibliometrics like Impact Factor take for granted the notion that "good" work will be cited while "bad" work won't. (These shortcomings are addressed further in part II, included alongside each method's strengths and other features.)

Across the board, assessment methods and tools are flawed, leading us toward a limited understanding of our collections. Rather than accepting this limitation, libraries can build a multitude of perspectives into assessment, thus reducing blind spots and strengthening decision-making. Mixing and matching methods helps us triangulate conclusions we can feel more confident about, situating what we're seeing within a broader and more balanced context. For example, consider the combined

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results of (1) checking a well-known bibliography; (2) analyzing ILL requests; (3) conducting a user survey; and (4) analyzing the citations in faculty publications. Perhaps your library owns 10 percent of the titles in the bibliography, which might at first glance suggest a need to purchase more of the core literature for the field. Perhaps there are even a fair number of ILL requests within the subject area, corroborating the need to backfill the collection. But imagine the user survey is completed by a significant portion of the target users and indicates high satisfaction with the collection as-is. Not only that, but patrons specifically praise the usefulness and convenience of ILL to meet their tangential needs. Given that input, perhaps in reality your user community is small enough that a minimal collection is satisfactory. Maybe it would be sufficient to purchase items that appear in both the ILL analysis and the bibliography. Consider the last piece: the citation data. Perhaps your users demonstrate a strong preference for journals, which were not included on the bibliography, thus undermining arguments to further build the monograph collection. Perhaps your users seem to work mainly with gray literature found outside the library altogether. Whatever the specifics, each metric informs the others, shedding light on what might be hidden or misrepresented in the data.

From a political standpoint, approaching assessment and decision-making holistically makes it easier to articulate decisions convincingly and transparently. Many stakeholders will feel uncomfortable with strictly quantitative data and will want to know that decisions have been made with other factors in mind. Other stakeholders will require hard numbers to back up any qualitative elements. With a balanced framework in place, it's much easier to demonstrate the logic and strategy of each decision, especially if you can work with stakeholders to develop that framework in the first place. Ultimately, decisions based on a variety of data constitute a much stronger outcome for the assessment process because they are more robust and justifiable than those based in limited or incomplete data.

Finally, from the perspective of diversity, equity, and inclusion, holistic collections assessment provides the necessary flexibility to challenge entrenched biases and power structures. Many traditional assessment methods and metrics (including use statistics, bibliographies, and bibliometrics) favor a predominantly white, Western canon, disadvantaging, or even excluding, other perspectives. By introducing alternative metrics and methods, we create space in our assessment practices for voices that have previously struggled to be heard. How this works in practice is introduced in chapter 4 and discussed throughout part II. For now, it's worth noting that its greater capacity for social justice is one of holistic collections assessment's most powerful potential outcomes.

ORGANIZATIONAL BENEFITS

Outside of a particular assessment process or project, the holistic approach has the potential for organizational improvements as well. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the approach encourages the gradual examination, refinement, and normalization of existing assessment practices, as well as the identification and development of strategic new practices. By conducting regular holistic assessment projects, libraries accumulate a broad, data-informed understanding of the collection as well as an extensive warehouse of baseline data. Trends become easier to see, and opportunities for change start to suggest themselves. Ongoing assessment projects can be sculpted in response to this evolution. As the pool of available data grows, the practices for collecting and maintaining it improve. Such routine assessment also encourages libraries to engage with their constituent communities regularly. Users and administrators, in turn, become accustomed to (and active partners in) this ongoing collections assessment, rather than experiencing the antagonistic relationship often generated by the too-common, reactionary cancellation or weeding project.

The long-term result is an assessment framework that accommodates, and even fosters, more nimble and socially just decision-making in a collegial environment. Libraries become better poised to answer sudden questions or respond to sudden

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issues without sacrificing the needs of users or undermining strategic goals. They can simply draw on their trove of available data and portfolio of tried-and-true assessment methods and face the issue head-on. It also paves the way for more strategic decision-making. Because it is high-level, holistic assessment encourages thinking across disciplines, formats, and locations. It encourages comparisons between different pockets of the collections, and among various stakeholder groups. With this wealth of context and foundational data, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats become easier to see. When a decision comes along, it's easier to act with confidence, because the necessary foundation has already been established.

The outcomes and organizational impacts of holistic assessment speak to one last benefit: the holistic approach encourages a culture of assessment. The phrase "culture of assessment" is often added to mission statements and strategic plans, but culture is tricky, and it often proves harder to build a culture of assessment than people expect. A holistic framework won't get you there instantly, but it can over time. When you consider a variety of metrics, you inspire regular conversations about what is important to measure, which help you to focus your priorities. You start asking questions. Others start asking questions. Conversations with stakeholders about specific assessment projects draw in colleagues, boost engagement, and normalize the holistic way of thinking. In fact, stakeholder engagement over the full span of an assessment project—or across multiple projects—is so central to the success of assessment as a whole that it will come up again and again throughout this book, in chapters on stakeholder engagement, project planning, and communication best practices. As you explore the data and collaborate with colleagues, visible and invisible support structures will emerge, including your warehouse of available data and the oft-elusive culture of assessment. In the end, this culture is critical to the full success of holistic assessment. Holistic assessment can help foster a culture of assessment, but only when that culture has taken root can assessment truly thrive.

Further Reading

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