CHAPTER 7

Collection Assessment Is for Everyone!

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WHO NEEDS COLLECTION ASSESSMENT? EVERYONE! CUSTOMARILY, libraries acquire new materials through both purchases and gifts. A tenet commonly held in libraries is that none of these materials should ever be thrown away. However, collection development is an active term; it implies the collection is constantly being reshaped through acquisitions and weeding, growing in some areas and shrinking in others. One method of determining if the collection is timely and useful for the library's current constituencies is to do an assessment of the collection. Collection assessment is the tool that provides the data or information to shape the collection. Collection assessment asks questions such as, "Should all the items that are currently in our library be part of the collection?" or, "Does that pastoral care book from 1953 really contain information that contributes to the knowledge of 21st-century practitioners?" For a vibrant, growing collection, assessment should always accompany collection development.

Why Collection Assessment?

Collections are made to be used. This does not mean, however, that collections gathered over the years have the materials that support their communities' actual use today or support the curriculum and mission of their institutions. Since usage and users change over time, the collections must evolve to match those changes. Collection assessment makes this evolution possible. Information gleaned from assessments can contribute to overall collection development goals. For example, if a previous collection development policy states that there is a strength in a subject area, an assessment of that subject area can determine if the strength still exists.

The term *assessment* can be daunting. Sometimes it is immediately equated with huge costs and considerable amounts of personnel time. Yet, there are many types of assessment that can be done with the local catalog or software on hand in most libraries. The assessments can be structured in a manner that does not demand many staff hours, so that resources can be deployed for an assessment in a manner that aligns with a given library's financial realities. Intentionally designed assessments can, therefore, maximize the resources already at a library's disposal to account for most of the necessary elements of assessment.

Information or data is an integral part of the assessment. Data about the collection allows for an analysis that answers an assessment's questions and helps library staff achieve assessment goals. Data can be gathered using either quantitative or qualitative techniques, or both.

Quantitative measures involve numerical inquiries about a library. These methods may include usage statistics for access, comparisons of titles, and budget numbers (Kohn 2015, 13–14). Circulation numbers can also provide useful information about usage of library materials, while an investigation of interlibrary loan statistics may give clues to gaps within a collection. Other quantitative data is also accessible within the library's environment. Network information from logons can reveal whether acquired materials are being accessed. Authentication tools such as Open Athens and OCLC's EZ

Proxy Analytics provide usage and user information. Counting Online Usage of Networked Electronic Resources (COUNTER), a system generally used by vendors such as JSTOR, Brill, and Alexander Street Press, also supplies user access data to customers. The software indicates which titles are accessed, which are turned away, and any access denials. Cost-per-use statistics can be derived from COUNTER reports (Mellins-Cohen n.d., 3). Data on access and cost is valuable for collection development decisions by providing information for decision making regarding future purchases, subscriptions, and weeding the collection.

The quality of a collection can also be another area of assessment. Qualitative data methods include using devices such as surveys, focus groups, library narratives, or other means of investigation that give insight into the way patrons value the collection (Kohn 2015, 6–7). Administering user surveys is a means to amass data about library collections. For example, a survey may ask questions such as "Is the collection robust enough to support user needs for a given topic?" or "Are print titles preferable to e-books?" Even asking patrons questions like "Do you use library serials?" will reveal information about the library collection's usage. Sometimes it is best to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative information. Kelly and O'Gara (2018, 20) suggest using such a combination or a "holistic approach." This type of assessment examines the formats of a collection and its use by the library. A "holistic approach" provides a larger view than a single subject or a subset of users; it examines the entirety of all involved in the endeavor, both users and materials. Clarifying what type of measurement to use—quantitative or qualitative or both—helps lay the foundation for a successful assessment. Since any given library is inundated with internal and external data, the key is selecting the proper data that supports the assessment being performed.

Elements of Collection Assessment

A successful assessment organizes the methods and data in a manner or narrative that can lead to useful information about the collection. The process begins by asking a question about the collection. The next step is to use that question to formulate a goal that is tied to the mission of the library. The goal can be used to decide if the measurement should be qualitative, quantitative, or a combination of the two. This step is followed by creating or using an assessment tool or process that will complete the goal and answer the question. Next, the information is gathered and the assessment is done. Then findings should be shared with pertinent persons. The final step is to take actions indicated by the assessment findings.

Developing the Question or Subject of the Assessment

As mentioned above, the process begins by asking a question about the collection to determine what needs to be answered (Kohn 2015, 2–3). A question that is too broad can lead to inaction or mismanagement of resources due to the scope of the activity. The question should be derived from the library's context. A database that has heavy usage in one library may not have the same usage in another library. For example, say it is time to renew a subscription for database X. Library A may automatically renew because every month the statistics reveal very heavy usage. Library B will have to do an assessment because the usage data is not as readily available. Therefore, the question for library B might be, "Are online users using database X?" A focused assessment can lead to a specific answer that can lead to an action to improve the collection, either by weeding, by adding titles, or by making other adjustments (3–4).

Creating the Assessment Goal

After formulating the question, the assessor creates a goal. The goal could also be as simple as, "Determine if library B should renew database X." On the other hand, any given library may have a more complex goal, such as "The goal is to determine whether database X can be dropped and if the subsequent funds saved can be used to buy other necessary resources." A clearly defined goal helps organize the project around the proper assessment method for investigation. Thus, such a goal will "guide the process" (Gregory 2019, 106).

Selecting the Assessment Tool

After the goal is determined, the assessment tool must be selected. If a tool is not readily available through previous assessments or subscriptions, the assessor determines tools, software, processes, or devices that can be used to do the assessment and fit within the realm of the resources available to the library. Since libraries are set in a specific context, each assessment requires tailoring the study to specific conditions and goals. Elmer E. Rasmuson Library at the University of Alaska Fairbanks offers an example of using a qualitative assessment method. The library had hired a full-time person to repair circulating books. However, the number of books sent for repair was lower than anticipated (Rinio 2016, 193). The librarians suspected that a large number of items needing repairs were being reshelved rather than routed to the repair person, so they created a two-part assessment of the collection to determine if there was a need to employ a full-time repair person. One part of the assessment examined the physical condition of the entire collection and another part examined the condition of circulating books. The assessment revealed that indeed many of the circulating books should not have been re-shelved upon return to the library. Several items were damaged and should have been routed to the technician (207). A qualitative assessment tool selected in the case at Rasmuson was the proper tool to use in that context.

Reporting the Assessment Findings

Once the assessment is completed, the results are shared with others. Depending on the reporting structure within the organization, information can be shared with your team, supervisor, or other parties in the library. The assessment data may indicate that budgetary resources are needed to address the issues found in the collection. Personnel training may be needed. Even if a librarian is in a one-person shop, there may be other stakeholders such as administrators, faculty, or students that could benefit from learning about the outcomes of an assessment.

Post-assessment Actions

The last thing to do is take necessary actions indicated by the assessment and the existing collection development policies. For example, if an assessment reported that database X had little use, the action may indicate the database should be dropped. The library may need to replace database X with a different database to fulfill the collection development needs in a given subject area.

Not every assessment has to be designed and carried out by a sole library. Vendors or various library associations may also be able to provide statistics, software, or other tools to be used in examining a library's holdings. For example, Gold Rush, a product of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries, has software that can be used in assessments. The product contains title lists from several sources. This component allows the titles of a library to be compared against other title lists from services including aggregators, publishers, and indexing and abstracting sources (Colorado n.d.). The fee for Gold Rush's MARC record comparison tool can range from free to "at cost" (Machovec 2021). Eastern Academic Scholars' Trust (EAST), an organization concerned with maintaining a collaborative print collection for long-term access, used Gold Rush to analyze the number of member library holdings to identify any unique titles and any overlap (Stearns 2021).

Some vendor products may have costs associated with usage. Worldshare Collection Evaluation, available through the OCLC Worldshare Platform, may be used for collection analysis. The program allows participating libraries to examine their own holdings and compare holdings with other libraries. An institution can use title lists to identify unique and shared titles. The library's subscription level with OCLC determines its cost of access to the Worldshare Collection Evaluation product (OCLC n.d.).

Proquest also has an assessment tool called the Intota Assessment Platform. The product is distributed by ExLibris Knowledge Center, a Proquest company. The Intota Assessment Platform provides quick access to usage statistics such as COUNTER reports for e-books and journals with turn-away data, usage by fund, and database information. Library reports include cost by subject, publisher, and circulation data. Intota also has a component named 360 Usage Statistics that provides title-by-title information for journals and databases.

The various features of the Intota Assessment Platform are available depending upon the subscription level of the library (Proquest, n.d.).

Lack of funding or the inability to acquire external vendor resources should not be a deterrent to collection assessment, however. Free tools and workflows can be adapted to answer some of the questions of assessment. Many characteristics of a collection can be revealed by simply using the local catalog or integrated library system (ILS). Reports can be run for certain classification areas or subject headings for lists of titles in that area. A combination of reports with circulation counts and classification and/or subject headings can reveal which materials from an area in the library have circulated. Acquisition reports can be created to determine areas of large costs. If the goal is to reduce expenditures in a library, the ILS can provide a comparison of costs within the various fund codes. A great deal of useful assessment data about the collection, then, can be derived from the ILS.

Librarians are the most valuable sources of information about assessments, assessment tools, or processes. Formal or informal assessments are generally ongoing in many libraries. Questions about expenditures, weeding, space for new materials, formats, and so forth are central to the continuous process of collection development. Thus, consulting with and learning from librarians at other institutions, regional associations, or consortia can be a fruitful way of refining and enriching your own assessment process.

Example of an Assessment

The collections staff at John Bulow Campbell Library (JBCL) at Columbia Theological Seminary (CTS) used an assessment strategy that has been employed at libraries worldwide—a comparison between the local catalog and catalogs at other institutions. Quick questions regarding collection development funds needed to be answered. A free assessment would save time and money. Recently, CTS added an online component to its Master of Arts (Theological Studies) (MATS) degree program. A MATS student can now seek a degree as an online-only student or as a residential student. The program has five areas of concentration: Old Testament, New Testament, theology, church history, and ethics (MA(TS), n.d.). To support the addition of an online component to the MATS degree program, the library was given a slight budget increase. Allocation of these new funds needed to happen judiciously. The question was whether additional online reference materials might need to be purchased for each area. An assessment of each program area was needed to determine if the existing online reference titles in the CTS library catalog were adequate for the new program.

In order to keep the assessment manageable in terms of time and personnel, the church history area was chosen as the first area of assessment. Over the years, this program had been well supported by acquisitions, making it the best area to examine first. Therefore, the goal of the assessment was to determine whether CTS has adequate online reference materials to support the church history online MATS program. Lessons learned from this assessment could be used for examining the other areas of the MATS. The assessment goal ties into CTS's mission to prepare students for leadership in ministry in the world (CTS n.d., "Mission"). The titles would be limited to Christianity, as most of the students at CTS are Christian. Furthermore, only titles from the last five years would be included in the assessment to increase the probability that the titles would still be available for purchase if necessary. The assessment was done by comparing titles in the CTS catalog with titles in peer libraries. A qualitative assessment used existing and available resources. A single staff person, the librarian that works in collection development, did the assessment. No cost was associated with checking catalogs. Peer comparison of similar libraries using lists was the best fit for this assessment because it offered verifiable evidence of the presence of reference titles purchased by other libraries.

The library catalogs of five seminary or divinity libraries were examined. The Association for Theological Schools (ATS) website and information gathered from the CTS administrative body helped determine which five libraries would serve as peer libraries. Two of the five were considered peer institutions due to similar areas of study, similar historical denominational ties, and similar seminary community sizes. The other three were larger and considered by some to be the "standard bearers," or some of the best theological libraries in the country. The larger schools' libraries are considered aspirational peers and served as controls for the evaluation. If a title found in a peer library was not found in either of the larger libraries, further study would be warranted. For example, the publisher and publication year, as well as how the title might fit into the MATS program, were areas considered.

After the peers were selected, the assessment was ready to start. Titles were searched in the similarly sized libraries' catalogs and then searched in the larger libraries' catalogs. One Library of Congress subject heading, Church History, served as the search term. The term was combined with two subdivisions: Encyclopedias and Dictionaries. The terms were used as subject headings and also searched as title and keyword combinations: "church history encyclopedia" and "church history dictionary." The last search examined the subject heading and each subdivision term singularly as a keyword and title search. Each search was limited to the specific area of the history of Christian churches. Limiters were used if available in the catalog to fit the specifications of the assessment. For example, if the term "dictionary" was searched, the limiters used were "Christianity," "electronic," or "e-books" and "date range including the years 2017 to 2021." After a list of titles was compiled from the findings, the titles were then searched in the CTS catalog.

The comparisons of lists of reference titles in Christian church history proved to be useful by identifying titles that did and did not need to be added to the CTS online collection. For instance, each of the peer institutions and two of the three larger institutions owned an encyclopedia on early Christianity that CTS did not own in print. However, CTS had access to an e-book version of the title through a subscription, so no action needed to be taken for the collection with regard to that title at this time. Another encyclopedia on the history of Christianity in the United States was held by each of the five libraries. One of the peer institutions and one of the larger libraries had e-book holdings of the title. CTS owned a print copy of the encyclopedia. After gathering more information on the book owned by all the libraries, the assessor determined that CTS should buy the online reference edition for the online MATS church history concentration. The assessment, in this case, led to an action that addressed a collection development need. The result was shared with acquisitions so that the necessary title could be purchased.

Conclusion

Everyone needs collection assessment. Students change, curricula change, and the culture changes, so the collection must change. Though there may be a case in a specific context when a library needs to pay for a tool in order to perform an assessment, neither the assessment at Rasmusson nor the assessment at CTS had exorbitant financial strings attached. Regardless of the cost, it is important to remember that the library holdings have to be tended to. As the collection grows, it must be weeded. Assessment tools, whether paid or free, can lead to a vibrant, thriving collection. Colleagues, vendors, and the local ILS may provide the tools for assessment. Whether it be a large, complex look at the collection or a small examination of a degree area, an assessment can help keep the collection dynamic and evolving as it seeks to continually serve its community.

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