
Proving value in challenging times

Review of the ninth International Northumbria Conference on Measuring Performance in Libraries and Information Services, York, 22 – 25 August 2011

Heather Marshall
Senior Librarian
Glasgow Caledonian University
Email: heather.marshall@gcu.ac.uk

We had discussed establishing key performance indicators at Glasgow Caledonian University Library in the weeks preceding this conference: our initial approach was to gather together a bundle of statistics. We looked at what we count for SCONUL reporting and the National Students Survey scores along with other surveys such as the i-Barometer. We intended to count the number of visits, loans and downloads per full-time equivalent student to show that we were of value and contributing to our institution and to the student experience. Attendance at this conference changed my perspective, prompting me to think about how we could move from the base of counting towards examining how we could measure and evidence the impact and outcomes of our service in terms of our institutional mission and strategic goals. A statement in a session on 'The value of academic libraries initiative', given by Lisa Janicke Hinchcliffe and Mary Ellen Davis, resonated for me: 'The library has gone from a core value to cost centre and the university had sent the bill.'

The opening keynote speaker, Trevor Sheldon, described how the library as a service may be an invisible resource to stakeholders in the same way that it is difficult to fund a public service such as parks: the benefits are for all rather than being felt on an individual basis. The physical size of a library collection will no longer be the distinctive signifier of quality but rather the access to information; this makes it important both to distinguish between and to report separately to stakeholders on the value of the library as a place and as a service, and to link the outcomes to individual needs. The next speaker, Carole Tenopir from the University of Tennessee, discussed the traditionally held view that the value

of the library was assumed but that we are now in an environment of decreasing resources and budgets with ever more choices to be made. She outlined the IMLS Lib-value project '[to] develop a quantitative measure of the library's return on investment (ROI) by tying faculty's use of library materials to the generation of grant income'. She also spoke about the need to contextualise our counting – for example, are the higher hit rates in a universal online search due to higher numbers of individual users or users not finding what they need on first searches?

In the 'Managing and understanding data in libraries' workshop, the following were given as reasons for the collection of statistics: to inform our services, to avoid the risk of making assumptions about user needs, to demonstrate value, to enable choice from among alternatives and to improve services. There was discussion around the importance of evaluating new services and ensuring that any key performance indicators must be essential to your institution. It was recommended that you ask a question of your service then collect the data to answer it – the reverse of my initial approach. We were advised to keep the bigger picture in view at all times and to balance carefully quantitative and qualitative measures to give a truer assessment.

Later sessions expanded on this theme, demonstrating how difficult it is to show true correlation between service provision and satisfaction of needs. Another strand running through the presentations showed that users' needs are at the core of service provision and real efforts are made to view services from a user's perception. Librarians are engaging with our users and endeavouring to provide the services they require, as stated in the title of the presentation from Leeds Metropolitan University: 'It's their library not ours.'

I was very interested in the presentation by Graham Stone and Dave Patten of the University of Huddersfield on their Library Impact Data Project and the toolkit to measure the correlation between library usage and final grade awarded. They used use of e-resources, book loans and entry to the library as indicators of library use; the data set was anonymised and they allowed for variations – for example, they didn't count small classes. As at Leeds Metropolitan, we at Glasgow Caledonian have an open-use policy and users do not require a card to access the library; we are open to the community as part of the university's mission statement of commitment to the 'common weal' or the common wellbeing of our community.

We do not have an accurate picture of our users' physical use of the library – when they visit and for how long, but we do have a more accurate picture of the use of e-resources and book loans. I have been discussing with our IT department whether and how we could apply this information to examine our student body and identify their needs more accurately.

Meredith Taylor in a session on 'Strategy development with the balanced scorecard' asked us to discover what our institutions required from us – do they need a report card giving a review of the year with annual data, or a tool to enable decision-making with real-time data?

HOW TO MEASURE, WHAT TO MEASURE, WHY? WE NEED TO DO IT BUT HOW TO BEGIN?

I am very glad I stayed for the workshop on Friday presented by Joe Matthews and Megan Oakleaf, a practical combination of discussion and exercises. It gave me an action plan to take back to my institution and a list of questions I needed to investigate before taking the next steps – some more easily answered than others! We looked at how campus needs, goals and outcomes, along with library contributions in the form of resources and services, create impact, which can be evinced and documented using library assessment and record keeping.

Megan Oakleaf has written an excellent report giving the current picture of assessing library impact and suggestions for what to do next. I downloaded it on my way home from the conference and it has been a useful roadmap. Those of us who stayed till the end of Friday's session also received a badge stating that we were now assessment gurus! Here is my initial list for 2012:

- What is most important to the institution?
- What impact does my institution need from the library?
- How many of our students never come to the library?
- Are virtual e-visits recognised as library use?

On returning to Glasgow Caledonian I met with our policy and planning department equipped with a newly informed action plan; I wanted to establish how I could make our library measures meaningful and specific to our institution. What is important to our university? Attracting students, their retention and progression, employability, the overall student experience and contribution to the 'common weal' – a list common to most higher

education institutions. Glasgow Caledonian University's high-level key performance indicators fall into seven themes: institutional sustainability, internationally networked, excellence in education, excellence in research, delivering for business and the public sector, valuing our people and commitment to the 'common weal'. Our process is turned on its head now – we initially looked at what we were already counting but now we shall look at these strategic strands and begin to develop meaningful evidence of the library's impact.

We are instituting a set of library key performance indicators which will be published on our website and we are now auditing our measures to identify which of the institution's strategic goals they align to, developing new ones if necessary.

The conference was an excellent networking event, particularly for me as I am new to the academic field. The venue was very good and the hard work of the hosts was evident, as was their warm welcome. I'd like to thank SCONUL for giving me the opportunity to attend the conference as a sponsored delegate. It has been of value to me and continues to have an impact on the assessment and future plans of our service.