



Aslib Proceedings

Library evaluation: some options for academic libraries

A.A. Alemna,

Article information:

To cite this document:

A.A. Alemna, (1999) "Library evaluation: some options for academic libraries", Aslib Proceedings, Vol. 51 Issue: 7, pp.243-246, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EUM0000000006983>

Permanent link to this document:

<https://doi.org/10.1108/EUM0000000006983>

Downloaded on: 24 January 2019, At: 06:06 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 0 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 2281 times since 2006*

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(1996),"Total management: integrating manager, managing and managed", Journal of Managerial Psychology, Vol. 11 Iss 2 pp. 4-21 https://doi.org/10.1108/02683949610110523

(2000),"Conflict management strategies of principals in site-based managed schools", Journal of Educational Administration, Vol. 38 Iss 2 pp. 142-158 https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230010320109

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:534301 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

Library evaluation: some options for academic libraries

A. A. Alemna

Department of Library and Archival Studies, University of Ghana, Legon.
Email: balmo@libr.ug.edu.gh

Abstract *This paper provides a review of various types and levels of library evaluation. It attempts to stimulate a debate on the pros and cons of these methods of evaluation in order to provide options for academic libraries, especially those in Ghana. Other issues discussed in the paper include concepts in library evaluation, criteria for evaluation, and problems in evaluation. The writer concludes that despite the acknowledged importance of evaluation, accounts of actual library evaluations are few.*

Introduction

The ultimate aim of all management principles, methods and techniques is to help attain the objectives of the organisation efficiently, effectively, economically, and in time. It is evaluation that testifies whether the objectives are achieved and if so, to what extent. Evaluation also includes accountability to the funding authorities, the patrons and other stakeholders as to whether the resources spent have resulted in the attainment of the desired objectives.

Evaluation is basically a judgement of worth. Thus, it means assessing the worth or value of the unit to the people for whom it is meant. It is the assessing of performance against users' expectations. It could also be interpreted in the narrower sense of whether the output is commensurate with the input. In the context of a system, it means the degree of usefulness of the set-up in meeting various objectives the system has to achieve. By and large, evaluation means testing the service or system for effectiveness and efficiency¹.

Library evaluation

Lancaster² has prescribed three possible levels of library evaluation. These include the measurement of effectiveness, cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit.

Similarly, Vickery and Vickery³ have provided a useful framework for assessing performance in reaching objectives. These include the effectiveness of a system, the eco-

· nomic efficiency of a system and the value of
· a system. By effectiveness, they mean the degree to which it minimises costs in achieving an objective. The combination of the two results in cost-effectiveness. According to Vickery, value is the degree to which a system contributes to user needs, and where it is expressed in monetary terms and compared with cost, it becomes a cost-benefit analysis.

· A look at the latter's framework shows that it is not different from what Lancaster has prescribed, and therefore they fit well into Lancaster's effectiveness, cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analysis, respectively.

· According to Lancaster, a library's effectiveness is measured in terms of how well a service satisfies the demands placed upon it by its users. Saracevic *et al.* consider it to be how well a library does what it is intended⁴. Ralli on the other hand argues that 'effectiveness essentially measures how we are going, to what extent we are meeting our goals and objectives'⁵.

· A system's cost-effectiveness is concerned with its internal operating efficiency. It measures how efficiently in terms of costs, the system satisfies its objectives. A cost-benefit evaluation on the other hand, is a measurement of the value of a service to ascertain whether the service is worth more or less than the cost of providing it. It thus creates a basis to justify the provision of the service.

· Moore⁶ concedes that there is a considerable confusion that surrounds the various forms of measurement, particularly the termi-

nology used to describe them. According to him, there are three levels at which one can evaluate a library. These are the measurement of efficiency, performance and effectiveness.

The former is concerned with how well the library performs. It is a consideration of how a library could utilise fewer resources to achieve the same level of service. It is therefore a measure of cost-effectiveness, which is itself an assessment of the impact which a service has on its users, or an examination of how it is fulfilling or satisfying the needs of its user community.

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the user is at the centre of all these measures of evaluation. Be it cost-effective evaluation or cost-benefit evaluation, evaluation of effectiveness, efficiency or performance – all end up finding ways of better serving the library user, and this is the satisfaction of the demands he places upon the library.

Methods of evaluation

As it stands now, there are two main methods for the evaluation of a library's effectiveness or the measurement of its performance. These are the subjective and the objective methods.

The subjective method or approach primarily depends on users' opinions or attitudes to measure the effectiveness of a library. Normally, such opinions or attitudes are ascertained by methods used in marketing research, which are basically the use of questionnaire or interviews or both. As a result, the subjective approach takes the user as the unit of analysis. The assumption here is that these user evaluations are valid indicators of library performance. This view, however, lacks consensus. There are two powerful schools of thought representing the pros and cons.

Arguing for the cons, Stecher contends that users are not competent to give valid evaluations of library services. He argues powerfully that: 'it seems doubtful, to say the least, that results from subjective satisfaction measures could be taken seriously'⁷.

Lancaster and others share the opposite opinion. They argue for the necessity of soliciting these user evaluations for a host of reasons. They contend that some demands for materials are either too complex or too am-

biguous to cope with the constraints of the objective measures, which tend to be predicated upon demands for specific items. Secondly, some of the services that people use do not have objective measures of performance. In such a case, it is imperative that the user, as the ultimate user of these services, becomes the most qualified person to evaluate the performance or effectiveness of such services.

These potent arguments bring the subjective approach to the fore as a useful complement in evaluating library performance. It is therefore effective and most important once its methodological application is sound and scientific. Stecher, one of the most ardent critics of the subjective approach, corroborates this. He argues that 'subjective satisfaction as expressed and tested in more realistic form of user preferences, has in fact found methodological application in a number of studies'⁸.

It is therefore safe to conclude at this point, that, in determining the degree of success with which a library performs, the ultimate authority, the library user, is the most logical source of an answer. This is well noted by Vickery and Vickery that, 'in the social process of information transfer ... the ultimate evaluation must be from the viewpoint of the potential recipients'⁹. User opinions therefore, remain a valid and potent measure of user satisfaction.

Performance measurement of a library, and in this context the evaluation of a library's effectiveness in the services it renders can also be accomplished quantitatively. With this approach, performance measurements of a library adopt the tools of the management sciences. In fact, it is an integral part of the management process.

As its wide and extensive use testifies, it is now accepted as an answer for the numerous problems and shortcomings of the traditional measures.

For a complete and objective evaluation of a library's effectiveness, three important things need to be done.

1. Specification of a purpose or goal of the system and of the parts studied.
2. Selection of a measure or measures reflecting this purpose and specification of

the units of measure.

3. Specification or construction of measuring instruments and the implementation of a measuring method.

At this point, one may conclude that the major criteria by which to evaluate the effectiveness of a library's services is the degree to which it maximises either accessibility or exposure or both. This is true because it is in an attempt to satisfy these objectives that each library provides physical facilities for study; provides books and related materials for study, teaching and research; provides information needed and demanded by readers; and provides core and auxiliary reader services.

What is to be measured?

This is a fundamental problem akin to all processes of library evaluation. But the problem becomes exacerbated in the measurement of effectiveness. The reason is that the measurement of effectiveness is a complex issue, particularly for social systems of which the library is one. There is a great diversity of approaches, methods and techniques that present a bewildering and confusing picture, all because 'as yet, there are no universally accepted measures, measuring units, or methods for the study of library effectiveness. In part, this is because there is little agreement as to what is to be measured'⁴. It is even doubtful if consensus would be reached about measures which have the most utility and internal validity.

According to Orr, quality and value are measurable both directly and indirectly:

'Measures of quality and value may be characterised as direct when they are based on these ultimate criteria, and indirect when some presumably related criterion is substituted as the basis for judgement.'¹⁰

In fact, the ideal situation, as explained by Stecher⁷, would be one in which measures are used for measuring these ultimate criteria. In practice, however, it has proved difficult if not impossible. Invariably, this implies that one would have to find things, processes, and phenomena, which are measurable, and where the measures derived would be valid indicators of effectiveness and benefits.

Concepts in library evaluation

In broad terms, the following approaches may be used for library evaluation.

1. Library input

The level of library input in terms of facilities, organised services, buildings and other resources is taken as a measure of performance. The input data is used as the principal means of comparing the services with those rendered by other libraries and seeking more money. The assumption is that the effectiveness of a library is directly proportional to the resources utilised. Library standards and statistics are taken to indicate the effectiveness and efficiency of the library.

2. The relationship between the pursuit of organisational goals and the required tasks of individuals

This approach assumes that the efficient use of a library's personnel resources results in maximising of library performance. Motivational forces, managerial style and other behavioural approaches are considered to maximise the efficiency of staff.

3. Library's interaction with users

The sum of all encounters the user has with the library, including what is and what is not done for the user, is taken as effectiveness of a library (user studies).

4. Impact on society as a whole and its relation to the outcome of library service

Successful interaction between the library and its environment indicates the measure of effectiveness.

Criteria for evaluation

From what has been reviewed so far, it may be summarised that the performance of a library is evaluated primarily in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. Evaluation is also thought of, as weighing the goodness of results of a library service against the resources required.

As a summary, therefore, the criteria for library evaluation may be broken down into the following.

1. Effectiveness

This is a measure of how well the service satisfies the demands placed upon it by its users.

ers. It can be subjective (based on opinions of users), objective (success measured in quantitative terms) or a combination of the two.

2. Efficiency

This is a measure of cost minimisation in attaining objectives, which is determined as a ratio of output to input.

3. Cost

This is the monetary value of the resources expended to provide a service or a product.

4. Cost-effectiveness

This is a measure of how efficiently the system satisfies its objectives in terms of cost.

5. Benefit

This is the gain accruing to the individual or the organisation or the society at large from the use of the library.

6. Time saved

This refers to the time that the user of a library service saves.

7. Satisfaction

User satisfaction and dissatisfaction with a library service are related to the attitude and behaviour of the user toward the library services and collection.

8. Cost-benefit evaluation

This involves determining how far the value/worth of a library service is justified in terms of the cost.

Problems in library evaluation

The following are some of the problems to be expected in library evaluation.

1. Lack of a generally acceptable definition of performance evaluation and criteria of evaluation. Libraries being non-profit organisations, monetary yardsticks do not hold good.
2. The effects of library services are often not visible. They are indirect and subjective. The beneficiary of the service is the sole judge of its utility and effectiveness.

3. The difficulties in developing reliable, objective, and empirical tools and methods of measuring performance.
4. The problems involved in translating the desired goals into utilities and perceptual differences among the patrons, staff and promoters as to the quality, depth and relevance of services to be provided.

Conclusion

It may be pertinent to state that in spite of the importance of evaluation for funding agencies and the managers of libraries, accounts of actual evaluations made of libraries or information services are very few, despite the theoretical expositions. Whatever the method of evaluation adopted it is likely to be influenced by the type of library and the area of service required for evaluation.

References

1. Narayana, G.J. *Library and information management*. (Delhi: Prentice-Hall, 1991, p.257.)
2. Lancaster, F.W. *The measurement and evaluation of library services*. (Arlington, Virginia: Information Resources Press, 1977, p.4.)
3. Vickery, B. and Vickery, A. *Information science in theory and practice*. (London: Butterworth, 1987, p.261.)
4. Saracevic, T. *et al.*, 'Causes and dynamics of user frustration in an academic library. *College and Research Libraries* 18, 1977, p.8.
5. Ralli, T. 'Performance measures for academic libraries.' *Australian Academic and Research Libraries* 18(1), 1987, p.2.
6. Moore, N. 'Measuring the performance of public libraries.' *IFLA Journal* 15(1), 1989, p.17.
7. Stecher, G. 'Library evaluation: a brief survey of studies in quantification.' *Australian Academic and Research Libraries* 6(1), 1975, p.1.
8. Stecher, G., 'Library evaluation: a brief survey of studies in quantification.' *Australian Academic and Research Libraries* 6(1), 1975, p.5.
9. Vickery, B. and Vickery, A. *Information science in theory and practice*. (London: Butterworth, 1987, pp.262-263.)
10. Orr, R.H. 'Measuring the goodness of library services: a general framework for considering quantitative measures.' *Journal of Documentation* 29(3), 1973. p.320.

This article has been cited by:

1. Khalfan Zahran Al Hijji, Andrew M. Cox. 2012. Performance measurement methods at academic libraries in Oman. *Performance Measurement and Metrics* **13**:3, 183-196. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)]
2. R.S.R. Vara Lakshmi. 2003. Measurement of College Library Performance: An Evaluative Study with Standards. *International Information & Library Review* **35**:1, 19-37. [[Crossref](#)]
3. R.S.R. VARA LAKSHMI. 2003. Measurement of College Library Performance: An Evaluative Study with Standards. *The International Information & Library Review* **35**:1, 19-37. [[Crossref](#)]
4. Paul Sturges, Suzanna Wallis. 1999. Performance Measurement and Project Evaluation for African Rural Information Services. *Information Development* **15**:4, 205-211. [[Crossref](#)]