Meeting and Brainstorming Session on Assessment in the Library

August 19, 2011 at 12pm

In Attendance: Bill Shuluk, Kevin Coughlin, Tim Bishop, Steven Kolberg, Frank Dowd, Jane Bigelow, Cindy Campbell, Peggy Phetterplace, Chris Ludvigsen

Purpose: Brainstorm on how to assess the effectiveness of various aspects of library services.

Bill began by saying that he wants the library to tie their assessment into unit planning better and to use the data we are collecting in more effective ways. There also needs to be a new tool for assessing reference service.

Dean Coughlin presented his planning review model that is currently in use in different departments around the college. One aspect of this is a progressive chart where the progress can be copy-and-pasted to each succeeding level to give the department an overall picture by the end of the year. He mentioned the confusion that sometimes arises between “tasks” and “goals and outcomes.”

The library group as a whole expressed their desire to understand how this could be implemented in the library. In order to facilitate this discussion, Bill brought up one particular unit plan: developing and implementing a new webpage which improves access for students and provides easy navigation to library research and technical service guides. This will facilitate students improving their research skills.

Dean Coughlin questioned the library faculty/staff on what kind of data the library has been collecting. He noted that the Student Observation Surveys conducted after the instructional sessions are indirect measures.

A debate ensues on whether database hit statistics are bogus or not. An “International Standard for Database Count” is discussed.

Dean Coughlin reminds all not to pay attention to absolute counts but to look at the increases in the counts from one year to another.

Steven brought up the point that there should be a survey that focuses on the new website. Dean Coughlin stresses that it’s not a good idea to conduct an *additional* survey, but it would be better to add questions relating to the new website to the existing student survey conducted every spring in the library. He also stressed the importance of having the answers formatted as follows:

1. - Strongly disagree
2. – …
3. – …
4. – …
5. – Strongly Agree

A discussion on faculty surveys and input ensued. Kevin Coughlin suggested a Faculty Focus Group and later revised his idea to “Guided, Cognitive Faculty Interviews” with an intentional selection of faculty members. The goal of this, aside from the knowledge gained from the cognitive interviews, would be at least ten fully refined questions for an additional survey, and the creation of a baseline of counts from reference that we hope to increase from year to year.

Bill brought up another service he wants to assess better: Reference desk service.“Is it doing what it’s supposed to be doing?”

A discussion ensued on what kind of outcome we would be assessing, and there is mention that there is no measurement for outcomes currently in place.   
Bill wants to assess the Reference desk service as a Learning Outcome but is not sure how to proceed.

Dean Coughlin explained, through the metaphor of electricity moving freely through a house and being slowed down by resistors such as ovens, lights, etc., that the more you give the student to do before they leave the more it will slow them down and increase the amount of time they are spending at the reference desk. He explained that another way to do this would be to uphold a standard skill that you would hope they would achieve. The skill would be measured on a 1 - 4 level that would rate their mastery of the skill. He asked the library group what we hope the students would learn from the reference transactions.

Tim explained that they should expand their own researching skills and be able to find tools for research more easily (eBooks, databases, etc.). The hope would be at minimum that the student would learn how to use these tools, and the ideal would be that they would learn how to use them efficiently.

Bill brought up another primary goal: To guide students to make a judgment about the validity of the material they are sourcing. Is it an academic source or is it rubbish?

Dean Coughlin pointed out that this is an aspect of critical thinking which means we are adopting a cornerstone of the QEP. “Wonderful!”

Frank brought up the LIS 2004 class which requires a test at the end to pass. He called it an extension of what we wish we could do at the reference desk.

A discussion ensued on the idea of a template for reference transactions, and both Jane and Bill were in agreement that a reference service template would be a bad idea and hinder service.

Cindy pitched going to ENC1101 professors who would target low skill students and would then send them to the library to be mentored. Frank and Bill expressed the feeling that this would create an additional burden of work for the faculty. Kevin Coughlin also noted that this would be difficult to make meaningful on a wider level of the student population.

A conversation ensued on how to assess learning in reference transactions. Dean Coughlin conducted some preliminary research online into how other institutions handle this during the conversation. He said that he would continue to research this in the interval between now and the next meeting. Preliminary research suggests that student participation in an exit survey after the reference transaction is a long held standard, and the library would have to be innovative in creating a new method of assessment.

Tim came up with an idea to get some student reflection on how they feel about the transaction- what Dean Coughlin called “Student self-assessment.” Dean Coughlin was in agreement with Tim that this is a good method, but he stressed that what is needed is an “artifact” of learning. He brought up a possible implementation of an Accu-track system that would track each student coming in for reference questions and how long they were there for. Bill noted that we do track how many students come in to the lab and how long the transactions are, but we need to focus more on how to track learning.

Frank mentioned using Accu-track data to find students with a high reference usage rate and then send them an electronic questionnaire. However, Tim expressed concern over tracking students by ID number every time they come in for a reference question, and Jane expressed concern that this might turn students off from wanting to ask the questions in the first place.

Dean Coughlin had an idea to type in the student’s initial question into accu-track, and then when they refine that question with the help of the librarian, type in the refined question as well. The results would then be assessed. It is noted that refining questions is a major part of the reference transactions.

Concluding Summary:

We are working on how to assess Student Learning Outcome for reference transactions. Preliminary research shows it may be difficult to find precedents beyond the exit survey. Innovation is needed.

LIS 2004- a method of direct observation.

No one likes the idea of the Reference interview survey.

Accu-track 1st and last question- would need to develop a rubric and have an outside scoring team assess. Students with a high use rate would be sent a skills test.

Frank to look into a reference skills test.

Dean Coughlin wants to meet again next week and keep the ball moving on this. A meeting time is set for Thursday August 25th at 11 am.