

Appendices

I. Introduction to Assessment

There are a few basic tenets to good assessment that should be followed regardless of what is being assessed and which tools are being used.¹

1. **Use known guidelines or standards as your benchmark.** “Typically you need to assess against some agreed upon performance standards. You develop goals for service and measurable objectives, and then determine whether the objectives are met.”² There are many guidelines or standards that you can use. RUSA, for example, provides a number of guidelines relating to reference and information service (<http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotools/referenceguide/Default2277.htm>). Your unit’s own rules about service should also be used (e.g., we answer any question by 5 PM the next business day). A number of standards and options are listed in Appendix V.³
2. **Determine what question you are trying to answer.** For example, if you are wondering how busy your desk staff are, first make sure you know exactly what you are asking. Do you want to know if your staff are spending their time efficiently? Or are you trying to determine whether the desk is sufficiently well staffed to meet customer demand?

Articulate the question you are trying to answer before choosing a tool, and before analyzing any data. Once you do determine the tool, try not to let the tool shape or redefine your question.

3. **Define how you are going to use the data** as well. Make sure that the data that you collect actually makes sense in the context of how you will use it, and that it suggests actions that can improve services.
4. **Determine what is measurable that will provide the answer.** Make sure that the data you are gathering really will answer the question you are asking.

Measures can be either quantitative or qualitative, and both are acceptable for assessment, depending on the question asked, and as long as the data is not extrapolated inappropriately.

¹ These tenets reflect knowledge accumulated over time. However, a bibliography of other sources is included in [Appendix IV](#), for further reference and for other background information.

² The idea of basing assessment on guidelines and standards is commonplace. This quote is from personal correspondence with Jo Bell Whitlatch, a well-known scholar in reference assessment, on July 1, 2005.

³ Whitlatch recommended that this tenet be considered first in any overview of assessment. In a personal conversation with Marie Radford, another scholar in this field, on June 24, 2005, Radford indicated the same viewpoint. Additionally, in a recent survey of over 1500 public and academic librarians across the country, the RUSA Evaluation of Reference and User Services (ERUS) Committee culled information regarding reference assessment. In the draft of forthcoming guidelines, it states, “Local application of . . . assessment tools will depend on . . . each [unit’s] assessment purpose and performance standards. Purposes for assessment may range from the simple need to measure the volume of reference activity and resources to the need to evaluate the process of service delivery or the effectiveness and quality of service products and outcomes. *Prior adoption of performance and quality standards is critical to the design and meaningful interpretation of any reference study. Performance and quality standards state explicitly the specific levels of achievement expected.*” [italics added].

5. **Triangulate.** You can be more confident of your results if you get data from several different means, rather than relying on a single assessment tool. Ideally, at least three forms of assessment should be done. However, it is valuable to use at least two methods, as each one can corroborate the data of the other, making your findings more likely to be accepted.
6. **Test your tools.** Have a subset of people actually take the survey, or respond to the interview, etc. Pretend that this subset of results is your complete response set. This goes back to tenet #4. Did these results answer your original question? Sometimes, as much as it seems as though your assessment questions make sense, the data gathered in response to the questions does not actually add anything to what you already know. Testing the tools helps to avoid that problem.
7. **Use the most appropriate tool for the job.** Each assessment tool does not serve every purpose. Consider what you want from your data when deciding which tools are appropriate. For example,
 - for perceptual and opinion feedback, surveys are useful;
 - for ideas for future improvements, focus groups and interviews are a good starting point;
 - for factual feedback, try not to rely on what people tell you. Instead, use machine stats, counts, tallies, and various other observation techniques (obtrusive or unobtrusive).⁴

When data is gathered only from a group that does not constitute a statistically valid sample, it cannot legitimately be applied to a large population. Results of a focus group can give impetus to make improvements, but cannot be used to describe the larger group from which they come unless the sample has statistical validity. Interviews can give perceptual information, but unless the group interviewed is a large enough sample, the data gathered cannot be used to represent the larger population. Survey data is also perceptual, although a limited amount of factual information can be gathered via a survey. For example, if 85% of people say that they visited the library 5-10 times in the past year, you cannot say that the population visited 5-10 times, but that they *said* they visited 5-10 times.

⁴ In Wallace and Fleet, "The Culture of Evaluation," *ibid.*, pp. 1-10. "Focus groups, for instance, are very useful in determining patron perceptions, are of limited use in determining patterns of use, and are of extremely limited value in assessing efficiency or effectiveness," p. 7.

II. Benchmarks and MIT Libraries' goals

The benchmarks meet the requested goals of the Delta Implementation team that:

- MIT Libraries' information services provide a good user experience in which the user is respected (benchmarks 1, 2, and 3),
- the staff are friendly (benchmark 1)
- and the user gets the information he or she needs or a prompt response to the issue (benchmarks 1, 2).

and support the Delta Implementation plan's stated "values ... most central to our core mission":

- Focus on user needs (benchmarks 1, 2, 3)
- Promote user self-sufficiency and life-long learning (benchmark 2, 3)
- Be practical/pragmatic (benchmarks 2, 5)
- Be proactive (benchmarks 1, 2)
- Create satisfying, realistic jobs; provide staff with the skills, resources, information, and organizational structure to meet expectations (benchmarks 4, 5)

The benchmarks also work within the Libraries' new strategic directions.

- The service will "focus on providing immediate, quantifiable benefits to faculty and students in the availability of services and resources needed for their work" (benchmarks 1, 2, 3).
- The service will "strive to leverage the expertise of our staff by strengthening and building connections between expert staff and users, and by focusing on delivery of services and assistance to users while seeking efficiencies in managing operations" (benchmarks 1, 2, 3, 4, 5).
- And finally, any assessment helps to "work to shape the future," as we develop the service and the staffing model to meet our current and future needs (benchmarks 2, 5).⁵

⁵ These three items are paraphrased from Strategic Directions for the MIT Libraries, <http://macfadden.mit.edu:9500/lc/sp2005.html#strat>, accessed 6/16/05.

III. Examples of Possible Assessment Activities

The section clarifies what assessment might involve each year. Here are some suggestions and examples of what might be examined for the benchmarks listed above. This is not meant to be prescriptive, comprehensive, nor exhaustive.

Let's say that the first year, PSLG has chosen benchmarks 3 and 4. The CFG and ISG would evaluate these benchmarks at a system-wide level. Other public service groups would evaluate these benchmarks within their committees' scope. At the same time local units would consider the benchmarks within their local environment. These criteria are considered in more depth below.

3. Users are aware of and understand our services and policies.

System-wide assessment of this benchmark would be overseen by the CFG. As it is always critical to begin with the question that you want answered, before determining what data to collect, that group might consider questions such as:

- Do users understand our circulation policies?
- Are users aware of what services are available at each service point?

Once questions are determined, specific measurable objectives are defined or taken from our own policies and publicity materials. Let's say that we consider the questions on the above list. Here are some possible measurable objectives that could be examined in consideration of these questions:

- 80% of grad students are aware of our research consultation service
- 80% of undergrads know how that they can use ILB
- 80% of users understand our recall policy
- 80% of our users know how to search for articles

Possible tools to use in combination to get information on these topics:

- Surveys
- Focus groups and/or interviews with current and/or potential users
- Usability studies

4. Staff are supported and recognized for the work they do.

This assessment would be overseen by the ISG. That group might consider questions such as:

- Do staff participate in customer service training? How are they supported to participate in training? Does this support system work well?
- What are the rewards (whether abstract or tangible) for staff who have successful user-staff interactions? How are poor interactions handled?

Here are a few measurable objectives that could be considered for the first question:

- 80% of staff feel that they receive appropriate training.
- 80% of staff feel that they have the necessary materials and tools to be effective at customer service.
- Specialists in area of training find that questions answered by those trained are accurate 90% of the time.

In this case, there are a number of simple feedback tools that might be considered to assess these objectives:

- Pre and post-training testing to gather quantitative feedback about the effectiveness of the training
- Staff surveys or simple brown bag events to solicit qualitative feedback from staff
- Reviews by specialists of answers (through observation or transcript analysis)
- Regular user feedback to highlight especially effective staff

Any of these assessment tools could be done as a single time activity, or it could be determined that a running data collection might be preferred over the course of several years, with analysis of the data at regular intervals. The tools could be used for system-wide analysis, while the data could then be considered at local levels. Alternatively, local units might need something much more specific and could consider a single tool for their purposes.

In successive years, other benchmarks would be highlighted for specific assessment.

IV. Bibliography

American Library Association, and Evaluation of Reference and Adult Services Committee. 1995. *The reference assessment manual*. Ann Arbor, Mich: Pierian Press.

Hernon, Peter, and Ellen Altman. 1998. *Assessing service quality : Satisfying the expectations of library customers*. Chicago: American Library Association.

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Wallace, Danny P., and Connie Jean Van Fleet. 2001. *Library evaluation : A casebook and can-do guide*. Englewood, Colo: Libraries Unlimited.

Weingand, Darlene E. 1997. *Customer service excellence : A concise guide for librarians*. Chicago: American Library Association.

Whitlatch, Jo Bell. 2000. *Evaluating reference services : A practical guide*. Chicago: American Library Association.

V. Performance Guidelines and Standards for Comparison

ALA Standards and Guidelines

Standards and Guidelines for Libraries in Higher Education

<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/standardslibraries.htm>

Guidelines for University Library Services to Undergraduate Students

<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/ulsundergraduate.htm>

Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education

<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm>

Guidelines for Instruction Programs in Academic Libraries

<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/guidelinesinstruction.htm>

Guidelines for Liaison Work in Managing Collections and Services

<http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotocols/referenceguide/guidelinesliaison.htm>

Various reference guidelines

<http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotocols/referenceguide/Default2277.htm>

(Includes Behavioral Performance guidelines, and information competency guidelines)

Other ALA standards and guidelines

<http://www.ala.org/ala/ors/standardsa/standardsguidelines/standguide.htm>

Other Standards, Guidelines and Metrics

9 Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning, AAHE

<http://www.assessment.tcu.edu/assessment/aahe.pdf>

UVa Balanced Scorecard Metrics (2004-05)

<http://www.lib.virginia.edu/bsc/>