Narrative of the Planning Process*

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The assessment planning process can best be described as a sequence of five stages. This document narrates each stage in appropriate detail.

Vision: August-October 2013

The goal of producing the library's next-generation assessment plan originated with the library's dean in late August 2013. The dean's vision emerged at a time when the library organization faced at least three critical challenges. First, with the construction of a new building nearing completion, the library staff was preparing to occupy a facility that would not only be larger and more advanced than its precursor, but would also attract more scrutiny from institutional administrators. Second, the library staff, having gone through an internal strategic planning process less than a year before, had been tasked with developing a strategic plan that conformed to newly-released institutional guidelines. Finally, the institution was preparing to undergo a major accreditation review, and thus was focusing attention on organizational planning, execution, and evaluation in all departments, including the library.

Over the course of approximately five weeks, the dean articulated her vision for the shape of the assessment plan, while others contributed questions and suggestions that helped to refine it. A new body, the Library Assessment Task Force (LATF), was constituted to develop the plan. The LATF was expected to deliver results rather than engaging in endless deliberation. The new plan would support the development of a culture of assessment within the library. It would provide for continued evaluation of operational efficiency and customer satisfaction while purposefully reaching beyond these metrics to demonstrate the library's impact on its stakeholders. Ongoing responsibility for assessment could be vested in a standing committee or an expanded assessment unit.

Exploration: October-December 2013

From the inception of the planning process, it was understood that the LATF would not seek to reinvent library assessment. It would build on the library's past practices and consciously seek out best practices from other organizations. Accordingly, through the fall of 2013, the LATF's six regular members took steps to gain a better grasp of library assessment. Group members took online training, acquainted themselves with the literature, and shared what they had learned. Resources that influenced the LATF's thinking at this stage included those by Dugan and Hernon (2002), Self (2003), Lakos and Phipps (2004), Applegate (2009), and Smith (2015). The LATF also recognized that it needed effective mechanisms for sharing the assessment program's output. This led to the creation of a SharePoint document library capable of providing access to a broad array of assessment data and reports.

In the final months of 2013 the LATF undertook a critical project: compiling a list of 112 measurement and evaluation activities that were candidates for inclusion in the assessment plan. The list was compiled by analyzing external reporting requirements, reviewing the accountabilities implied by the library's strategic plan, and interviewing a cross-section of library employees about measurement and evaluation data that they considered valuable. About 70% of the items on the list were valued by one or more library departments, providing evidence that the library was well positioned to develop a formal, broad-based assessment plan.

Dormancy: January-March 2014

Development of the assessment plan slowed significantly in the early months of 2014 due to three factors. First, the library staff occupied and opened the new library building in January, consuming much time and energy. In addition, the chair of the LATF, who also served

as the library's lead budget officer, had to focus his attention on preparing the library's annual budget proposal for several weeks in January and February. Finally, the compilation of a long list of potential assessment activities, while a helpful exercise, had failed to identify a clear path towards the development of the desired product.

Members of the LATF had realized early in their work that they would need to choose between focusing on a limited list of key metrics (in the style of the balanced scorecard) and developing an assessment program that would encompass the breadth of the library's users, services, and resources. By the spring of 2014 it had become apparent that this was related to another important issue: where responsibility for implementing the library's assessment plan should reside. At issue was whether to centralize responsibility with employees who would have assessment as a main job responsibility or to spread responsibility across the library's various units.

The dormancy of the first few months of 2014 provided an opportunity for LATF members to gain some perspective on these issues. During this period of relative inactivity, minor progress was achieved on three fronts. First, managers throughout the library gained a better understanding of the university administration's expectations for the operation of the new building. Second, the chair of the LATF compiled a list of reports that the library's business intelligence system could easily generate. Finally, five LATF members attended a regional workshop on library assessment.

Resurgence: April-July 2014

The stated vision for the assessment planning process was that the LATF would complete its work by the end of the academic year (May 2014). Analysis of the situation in April and early May made it clear that if the planning process was to achieve the desired level of staff engagement and consensus, the timeline would have to be extended. This led the chair of the LATF to propose that affinity groups, each representing a cohesive group of library operations, be tasked with proposing the assessment plan elements that would apply to their respective areas. This proposal met with the dean's approval and began to be enacted in mid-May. It was also agreed at this time that the LATF would become a permanent body known as the Library Assessment Committee. Since the body's membership remained constant, for the sake of simplicity, this document consistently refers to the group as the LATF.

In preparation for the affinity groups' work, the LATF conducted a mandatory assessment training session for all librarians. This event provided an opportunity to share the LATF's vision for library assessment with an important group of stakeholders. Perhaps the most significant component of the workshop was an exercise in which participants worked in small groups to identify management questions for the functional areas they represented. A management question was defined as one that, if answered, would enable the library to achieve outcomes such as providing better services, reducing costs per unit, or demonstrating value.

The affinity groups' work began in late June 2014, but significant preparations took place before this. Early in June the LATF had the opportunity to discuss the development of the assessment plan with a consultant who had already been advising the library on strategic planning matters. The consulting process helped to solidify LATF members' understanding of the connections between strategic planning, budgeting, accreditation, assessment, and marketing. During the weeks that followed, the chair of the LATF compiled information and drafted resources that would help affinity groups carry out their planning task.

Four affinity groups were constituted, with each one being assigned two LATF members as liaisons. Collectively, the affinity groups included 22 library employees (not including LATF liaisons). The affinity groups assembled for an orientation event in late June. Each group was commissioned to take approximately one month to complete an assessment plan template for its respective areas of operation. This template elicited critical information about each data collection/analysis effort proposed for inclusion in the assessment plan. Specifically, the template prompted the groups to identify the source and nature of the data; the rationale for using this data for assessment; the names of persons or groups responsible for data collection and analysis; the expected output; and the frequency of the assessment effort. Participants were given detailed guidelines for carrying out the process. Significantly, each group was given copies of the assessment ideas that the LATF and other groups had compiled over the previous eight months.

The four affinity groups met independently over the next several weeks, submitting gradually more complete drafts of their templates to the chair of the LATF. By the time that the LATF met with each affinity group in late July 2014, the groups' assessment plan submissions had been compiled into a single template. By the end of the month, the assessment plan tentatively called for the execution of 80 distinct data collection and/or analysis efforts during the 2014-2015 year. However, eleven of these were tagged as lacking sufficient consensus and/or detail, and thus were subject to further review.

Refinement: August-September 2014

In the final two months of the process the assessment plan underwent a number of revisions. Most changes were editorial, doing little to alter the plan's direction. In August 2014 LATF members worked independently and in conjunction with various plan stakeholders to examine the suitability of each plan entry and resolve any concerns. In late August, at the dean's direction, affinity group chairs were directed to clarify the connections between assessment plan components and strategic plan entries. These connections were compiled with relatively little effort.

One substantive issue addressed in the final stage of the process was the aim that the assessment plan demonstrate the library's impact on its customers. As the plan took shape over the course of a year, contributors to the process wrestled with how to enact this aspect of the vision. In the final months of the process, an ongoing conversation led to the conclusion that the demonstration of the library's value was a function of both marketing and assessment. This led the LATF to collaborate with two library employees who were primarily responsible for external communication and plan for the creation of vignettes that would document the library's impact on its customers. These vignettes would be published at regular intervals and would incorporate quantitative and/or qualitative assessment data. Once this matter was resolved at the end of September 2014, the library's assessment plan for 2014-2015 was in final form, consisting of 76 distinct items. Over 30 library employees would share responsibility for implementing the plan.

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