Book Review

Review of *The Community College Library: Assessment*

John Barnett, *University of South Carolina Upstate*

ABSTRACT

A review of the book Pinkley, Janet, and Kaela Casey, eds., *The Community College Library: Assessment*. Chicago, Illinois: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2022.

KEYWORDS

Community colleges, academic libraries, assessment

SUGGESTED CITATION

Barnett, J. (2023). Review of *The community college library: Assessment,* by J. Pinkley and K. Casey. *Journal of New Librarianship, 8*(1), 69–75. https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/13/8

This edited collection is a new volume in the series, *The Community College Library*. This volume, edited by librarians Janet Pinkley and Kaela Casey, offers a collection of research studies and "how-we-did-it" essays on formally assessing services and initiatives in the American community college library. Chapters provide guidance on assessing library instruction (Angela L. Creel, Wendy Hoag, and Kendra Perry, pp. 67-109), reference (Amanda M. Leftwich, pp. 163-171), and library spaces (Sharell Walker and Joanna Thompson, pp. 131-141) in particular, but many of the chapters offer blueprints for assessing multiple types of library activities.

While the focus is on formal assessment practices in community college libraries, the examples provided are relevant to libraries that serve four-year institutions as well. Each chapter features detailed plans and processes, along with examples and illustrations of how to put into practice various types of assessment. Individual chapters illustrate a variety of formal practices: data collection and analysis, focus groups and interviewing, self-reflection through reflective practice, benchmarking, and program reviews.

Throughout the book, chapter authors stress the importance of internal- and external-to-the-library collaboration to foster successful assessments. Such collaborations may include involving library staff in assessment to ensure practical approaches and buy-in (Michael J. Krasulski, Elizabeth Gordon, and Courtney Raeford, p. 37); having library graduate students and student workers help facilitate focus groups so as to build comfort and trust when seeking student opinions (Walker and Thompson, p. 139); and working with community college- and system-level units (e.g., information technology, disciplinary programs, institutional research, and vendors, et al.) to gather, understand, and share data (Robert Holzmann, Gwetheldene Holzmann, and Joseph Harris, p. 54). Collaboration can also serve to build capacity and confidence in assessment (Aryana Bates, Mary Ann Lund Goodwin, Jacquelyn Ray, and Melinda McCormick Coslor, pp. 173-182).

Several authors also stress the importance of connecting library assessment initiatives to institutional strategic goals and objectives (R. Holzmann and G. Holzmann, p. 20; Krasulski, et al., p. 36; Creel, et al., p. 68). Still others note the need for library assessment in order to meet U.S. regional accreditation standards (Krasulski, et al., p. 31; Melinda [Mindy] Wilmot, p. 42; Joseph Eshleman, p. 121).

Assessment in Action

Detailed examples of assessment initiatives guide the reader.

Krasulski, Gordon, and Raeford relate the Community College of Philadelphia's challenges with assessment of administrative, educational support, and student support services, including dissatisfaction with previous assessment efforts (p. 32) and library personnel fear of being set up to fail due to unremarkable or unsatisfactory assessment outcomes (p. 35).

To build a framework for assessment, units were prompted to create, refine, or confirm mission statements, contemplating easy to understand questions that get at unit purpose ("What do you do?"; "Who do you serve?"; "How do you make a difference to the college community?"; p. 34). Subsequent rounds of simple questions helped units form goals and support outcomes (p. 35), upon which units developed qualitative and quantitative measures (p. 36), and then aligned goals and support outcomes to institutional master plans.

Wilmot describes the program review process at Bakersfield College (California) and how it can be used for "self-assessment and continuous improvement of any instructional institution" (p. 41). The challenge at Bakersfield is similar to many other higher education institutions, especially those with a strong teaching mission: The library's hybrid role as both an instructional program (which requires the development of service-learning outcomes [SLOs]) and as an academic support service unit (which requires the development of administrative unit outcomes [AUOs]). The SLOs and AUOs required different data to be collected and assessed. Administratively, there was no way to illustrate both on the same form. This resulted in the development of a hybrid form to convey the importance of both outcomes and to better illustrate how the library assessed them. Wilmot provides an example of the hybrid form in the chapter, but whether you use a form or not, the chapter illustrates an effective approach to assessing the library's duality.

In "Benchmarking and Peer Assessment," Sam Suber makes the case for this approach to assessment by sharing the experience of the library at Moraine Valley Community College (MVCC) (Illinois). Using ACRL Metrics (now ACRL Benchmark: Library Metrics and Trends) and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) Data Book, 20 benchmarks were selected, the data for which were then compared to "specific libraries within the Network of Illinois Learning Resources in Community Colleges (NILRC) consortium and with a specific peer group defined by the ICCB" (pp. 112-113). Suber explains MVCC's approach, focusing the discussion on four benchmarks used to demonstrate the library's impact on student learning: Total library materials expenditures; collections use; reference transactions; and instruction sessions (p. 113).

Subar details the importance of each benchmark to student learning and shares the formulas used to derive benchmarks. Subar also notes how results from one of the benchmarks were used to successfully make the case for increased library funding for physical collections while others were used internally by the library to improve its services. As Subar notes, "While not all results necessarily shone a positive light on MVCC, they still served a meaningful purpose and were used as opportunities for improvement" (p. 119)—which should be a guiding principle of all library assessment.

In "Assessing User-Centeredness with Focus Groups," authors Sharell Walker and Joanna Thompson provide a play-by-play on the development of focus groups to "gather qualitative data pertaining to student use of the library space" by commuter students (p. 131) at

the A. Philip Randolph Library, which serves the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), City University of New York (CUNY). The library organized several student focus groups, recruiting participants through email blasts from the college's student affairs office and posted flyers.

Walker and Thompson provide exceptional and highly useful details, making their approach adaptable to many libraries: The number of focus groups; the number of students in each group; the intake form used to vet participants; the "rewards" given to students for participation (refreshments, a 30-day unlimited public transportation card); the questions the students were asked; and how the responses were codified and categorized (pp. 133-136). The authors are clear minded about the purpose of the focus groups, how the information gathered might be used to improve library spaces, and the limitations of using focus groups in assessment. They also provide a short tip sheet on how to succeed with a focus group approach.

A particularly exciting example of assessment appears in Amanda Leftwich's chapter, "Mind the Gap: Using Reflective Practice for Reference Consultations" (pp. 163-71). Advocating for mindfulness and self-assessment in a harried work world, Leftwich encourages librarians to reflect upon individual reference consultations, "… which require unique focus and attention" in order to "… create a sense of connection and understanding between us and our students" (p. 164). Leftwich suggests that we can use reflective practice to "… [build] better connections with students while bringing our awareness to closing gaps in reference services" (p. 165).

In "Development and Design: Fostering Growth through Collaboration," authors Jamie Holmes and Amy Lagers relate how Tulsa Community College (TCC) (Oklahoma) Library also employed reflective practice to assess and improve information literacy instruction. In addition to observing teaching practice by peer observation partners and library management, TCC Library's IDeA approach (Instruction Development and Assessment) called for the creation of collaborative mentoring groups and a professional development community.

Their chapter provides step-by-step guidance on creating a library instruction assessment program in their specific context (non-faculty status instructor librarians in a large community college system) but encourages the reader to modify the approach in order to make it applicable to local needs. Holmes and Lagers stress the need to understand the purpose of the assessment (is it evaluative or is it intended to provide feedback and opportunities for growth?; p. 184) and to carefully frame feedback as "the evaluation of one's teaching practice is a highly personal process" (p. 188). The authors also encourage the assessment process to be managed by participants as much as is feasible (p. 191).

In "From Standards to Framework: What Are Your Students Learning?" authors Joy Oehlers, Joyce Tokuda, and Erica Dias (Kapi'olani Community College, Hawaii) also assess instruction, in this instance in the context of moving from the *ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards* to the newer *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher*

Education. In the chapter, they explore their experience shifting from "focusing on student performance indicators and checking off what students can do … toward an attempt to guide students to question and explore the information landscape" (p. 143).

The authors see the *Standards* as useful for a "pre-internet, pre-crowd-sourcing, and pre-social media era" (p. 143). Employing the *Framework,* librarians at Kapi'olani Community College developed an information literacy vision, then formed student learning outcomes to set goals to achieve the vision. The librarians then created assignments—including "Show Me the Evidence," website evaluation, open-ended problem solving and generating solutions through action projects and essays—to operationalize these goals. Assignments have guidelines and assessment and grading rubrics, examples of which are provided in the chapter and are easy to understand and apply.

The authors conclude that this approach to qualitative assessment focuses "on outcomes, not outputs" and "on a change in information-seeking behaviors and permanence of transferable skills, rather than discrete skills" (p. 160). "Measuring outcomes provides some assurance that students will apply critical framing and be aware of cultural, social, and political dimensions in the information landscape" (p. 160).

A Broader View

Some chapters take a more high-level view of assessment and how libraries might reimagine their approaches and how they might tie assessment to the ever-important student success and retention.

In "Exploring Modern Baseball Analytics to Reinvent Library Assessment," Joseph Eshleman discusses the history of baseball statistics and how the practice has transitioned from simple scorekeeping to new methods and parameters for assessing the sport (p. 124). Beginning in the 1980s, technology and computing further transformed baseball statistics (p. 125-26), leading Billy Beane, former General Manager of the Oakland A's, to use "different and newer statistics … to measure player worth, more so than anyone in the past" (p. 126). In doing so, the A's did not win the World Series during this era, but Eshleman argues they were a successful organization because better statistics allowed for a more efficient and effective use of money (p. 127).

As Eshleman notes, "… baseball (and its infatuation with statistical assessment) serves as an example of how to continually reevaluate parameters of assessment and creatively change ways to assess" (p. 128). Following baseball's lead, he suggests that libraries might move from the "direct tallying measurement and toward more meaningful measures that focus on how libraries contribute to the overall student experience" (p. 129).

In "Building Librarian Assessment Confidence through Communities of Research Practice," Aryana Bates, Mary Ann Lund Goodwin, Jacquelyn Ray, and Melinda McCormick

Coslor, share their efforts to develop assessment practice in the Washington State community and technical college system. Using the ACRL Assessment in Action (AiA) framework and with funding from a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant, project participants were provided with assessment mentors, which evolved into "… a supportive assessment community as librarians planned and implemented assessment or action research projects through an entire research cycle" (pp. 173-174).

The authors report on the results of their phenomenological study stemming from interviews conducted with project participants in an effort to discover, "What did grant participants learn by engaging in independent research projects?" The study reveals positive professional and personal outcomes for the participants. Participants gained a deeper understanding of the importance of assessment to library practice. Project participants also learned more about conducting research, gained confidence in assessment practices, and developed collaboration skills. In addition, participants gained an understanding of the relevance and importance of assessment to their own work, often resulting in change to their professional practice.

In their chapter, "Investigating and Community Library Instruction's Relationship to Student Retention," authors Holzmann, Holzmann, and Harris relate how Tulsa Community College used a statistical impact study to assess library services (p. 51). The authors convey "practical information about collecting library services data and coupling this library data with student academic and demographic data to provide statistical analyses that demonstrate the impact libraries have upon student success" (pp. 51-52). They do so by relating their experience constructing a quantitative study that targeted "library services that relate specifically to coursework and academic achievement" (p. 55) rather than broader and more generic data collection that might not show a correlation between the library and student success.

In the process, the authors provide a useful guide to conducting a quantitative study. They include information on developing the research question; having the survey methods reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board; and collecting, harvesting, and cleaning data.

Authors Angela L. Creel, Wendy Hoag, and Kendra Perry, underscore the library's role in student retention through assessment of the library instruction programs at Arizona Western College and Hagerstown (Maryland) Community College. Their chapter, "Investigating and Communicating Library Instruction's Relationship to Student Retention: A Study of Two Community Colleges," relates their experience conducting retrospective cohort studies (along with related tests and analyses) of "semester-to-semester and year-to-year retention rates for students enrolled in sections of classes that included LI" (p. 68). As with the Holzmann, et al., chapter, the authors, deeply aware of other studies on library services and student success, aim to go beyond correlation, striving to provide evidence of causation. They acknowledge their

study's limitations in attaining this goal and suggest ways to build upon their work to narrow the correlation-causation gap.

Tools of the Trade

Also highlighted in the book are the many library-oriented assessment tools and standards that already exist. These include the Association of College and Research Libraries "Project Outcome" initiative (https://acrl.projectoutcome.org/); ACRL Metrics (now ACRL Benchmark: Library Metrics and Trends); the ACRL *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education;* the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) Data Book; and the Shults Dorime-Williams (SDW) Support Outcomes Taxonomy. In addition, most chapters feature bibliographies, highlighting research and thought pieces on assessment by librarians, administrators, and agencies. Combined, these show the reader that while assessment can be challenging, even daunting at times, library personnel do not have to carry out the work without guidance or support.

The research and practice shared in *The Community College Library: Assessment* should provide both "veteran" and "newbie" library personnel with an up-to-date and solid grounding in the variety of approaches to and tools for assessing library services, initiatives, and personnel. The chapters offer plenty of ideas from easy to complex to help practitioners do the work, providing excellent examples of both quantitative and qualitative assessments that can be conducted to improve library services and convey library value. This book serves a useful contribution to assessment literature, not just for community college libraries but for all academic libraries that are feeling the imperative of illustrating their important role in student education, attainment, persistence, and success.