

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Stoddart, R. (2014). A Community of Curiosity: The New OLA Library Assessment Round Table. *OLA Quarterly*, 19(1), 11-13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1380>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

A Community of Curiosity: The New OLA Library Assessment Round Table

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Sharing best practices in assessment and library advocacy are crucial for 21st century libraries.

—OLA Member

In February of 2013, the Oregon Library Association Executive Board approved the formation of the OLA Library Assessment Round Table (LART). This is an important first step in helping Oregon libraries continue to demonstrate impact and value to the communities they serve. As one OLA member¹ noted in supporting the formation of this new round table, “assessment is becoming a critical component of our culture. People want to see the value of the investments they make, and assessment is one means through which people can see that.” A library assessment round table will provide a forum for Oregon librarians to build skills and capacity for effective evaluation of programs and the means to communicate this value to their stakeholders.

Assessment touches on many areas of the library. As such, the OLA Library Assessment Round Table has the potential to assist in documenting impact throughout Oregon. Recent assessment related presentations by librarians at the OLA annual conference and Online Northwest have emphasized library value. These presentations attempted to answer the questions: How does the library save time and money (Vik, 2013)? How does the library justify budget proposals, determine equity of services, and demonstrate value (Ackermen et. al. 2012)? These are just a few of the assessment concerns in public libraries. Academic libraries have embraced the recent *Value of Academic Libraries* (Oakleaf, 2010) and *Standards Libraries in Higher Education* (ACRL, 2011) reports that suggests ways libraries might have impact on student success and faculty productivity in the academic setting. With the recent closure of many school libraries and devaluing of school librarians in Oregon, library assessment takes on an even more critical role. OLA members are keenly aware of all of these issues and have suggested specific areas where assessment plays an important role in libraries:

- library budgeting
- library strategic planning
- accreditation
- demonstrating library value or return on investment
- improving library services
- better understanding the communities libraries serve
- reaching goals
- fund-raising
- marketing




Assessment is viewed as both an essential and challenging activity in Oregon libraries. OLA members communicated the trepidation that librarians often feel when tasked with library assessment: “We all know assessment is an essential piece of marketing the value of what we do in libraries and verifying that we are indeed meeting the needs of our patrons. However the ‘how to’ of assessment can be intimidating and out of the zone of comfort for many of us ...” Part of the problem is that assessment is not made up of one skill set, but many that touch on every library facet such as services, collection, instruction, programming, and outreach. It is definitely challenging to stay up to speed with the most effective techniques to assess libraries. An OLA member noted: “There are of course a million ways to skin the library assessment cat, and a round table would help us to put our heads together to talk through our motives and methods.” Because there is a common need for library assessment across all libraries, a robust and interactive OLA Library Assessment Round Table has the potential to facilitate an increased assessment capacity across Oregon libraries. In fact, when members were asked what value they saw in forming an OLA round table on library assessment, a significant number of the responses included the word *sharing*:

- “A place to share ...”
- “Sharing assessment techniques ...”
- “Developing a shared understanding ...”
- “Sharing strategies for drafting practical assessment plans and assessment tools ...”
- “... share ideas and practical implementations of assessment.”
- “Sharing best practices ...”

It is significant that sharing is seen as one of the foundational values of this round table as well as library assessment in Oregon. At first glance, assessment asks libraries to look inward to capture data and translate that into evidence-based change, but true assessment has as much an outward focus as inward. Assessment is not an isolated activity but a participatory and inclusive one that not only captures library interactions from our community but facilitates them. Library assessment does involve numbers, stories, and performance goals, but the end result of these evaluation efforts is sharing with our communities the resulting changes either through meaningful reporting, enacting refinements on existing programs, or developing new services entirely. Assessment is about creating and demonstrating a greater connection to the needs, values, and aspirations of our stakeholders. The idea is to move assessment from being perceived as something that is being *enacted on* our libraries and patrons to something that is being *participated with* our libraries and patrons. Our community members are not only the customers of libraries but also the embodiment of our efforts to make the communities we serve a better place. As such, it makes sense that we should involve our stakeholders more implicitly in the process of library assessment as partners. Library assessment is as much a community-building exercise as one that involves statistical analysis and number crunching.

It is heartening that this idea of community building with Oregon libraries and sharing is embraced in the formation of the OLA Library Assessment Round Table. This approach will allow libraries within the state to begin to share data and data-gathering tools, metrics and key performance indicators, and assessment resources and techniques in order to better engage our patrons in a shared understanding of library value, impact, and return on investment. As one librarian succinctly put it: “We could learn a lot from each other.”



To get involved with the OLA Library Assessment Round Table contact Rick Stoddart (richard.stoddart@oregonstate.edu) or visit the OLA website (<http://www.olaweb.org>) for more information. 

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Footnote

¹All quotes are derived from the OLA member responses to the question: *What value do you see in OLA creating a Library Assessment Round Table?* from the OLA Library Assessment Round Table interest survey.

