

# Contextualizing Library Assessment Within a Broader Ecosystem

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## Proposed Models for Linking the Strategic to the Micro

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### Abstract

Between 2015 and 2017, the presenters have interviewed more than 75 library directors and leaders, library assessment practitioners, and academic experts on four continents about library assessment and its current state in their institutions. The results reveal a varied landscape, with libraries in widely varying stages of assessment performance and readiness. This paper will draw a picture of the current landscape of library assessment based on the data gathered in these interviews. The authors will focus specifically on the continuum between micro and strategic assessment and share the lessons learned from diverse institutions and geographies about how to build a culture of assessment.

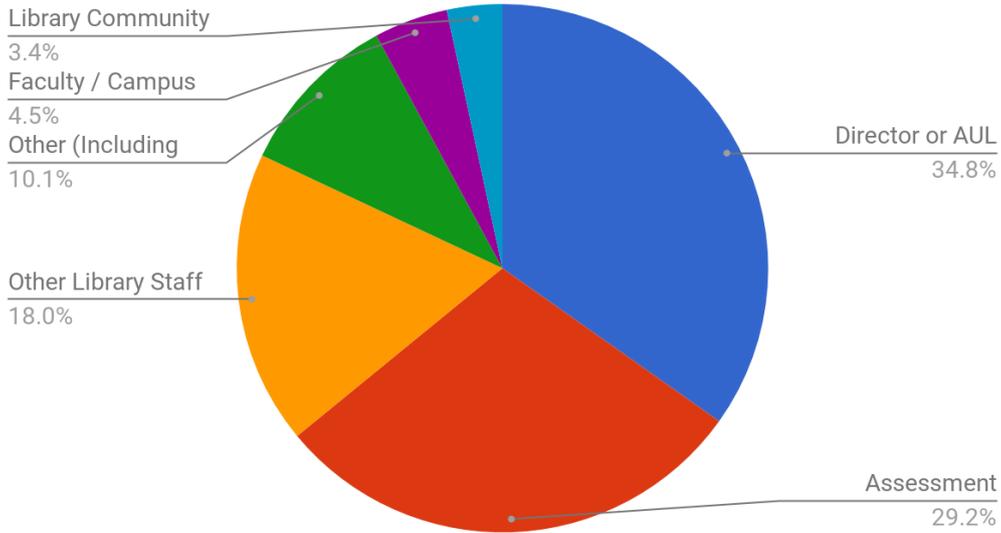
### Data and Methods

Between 2015 and 2017, the principals of Athenaem21 Consulting have conducted 96 interviews with 91 people about library assessment in academic libraries and its current state in their institutions. Interviews were conducted with library directors and leaders (associate directors, associate university librarians), library assessment practitioners, other library staff, faculty and other campus partners, and leaders and experts in the academic library community.

The majority of interviewees (35%) were library directors. Most of the interviewees were actively leading (directors or associate directors) or working in academic libraries. 30% of the interviewees were library assessment practitioners or professionals. Other library staff (managers, collections specialists, etc.) composed 18% of the respondents. And approximately 19% of the interviewees were not actively employed in libraries. This group of respondents included those who work:

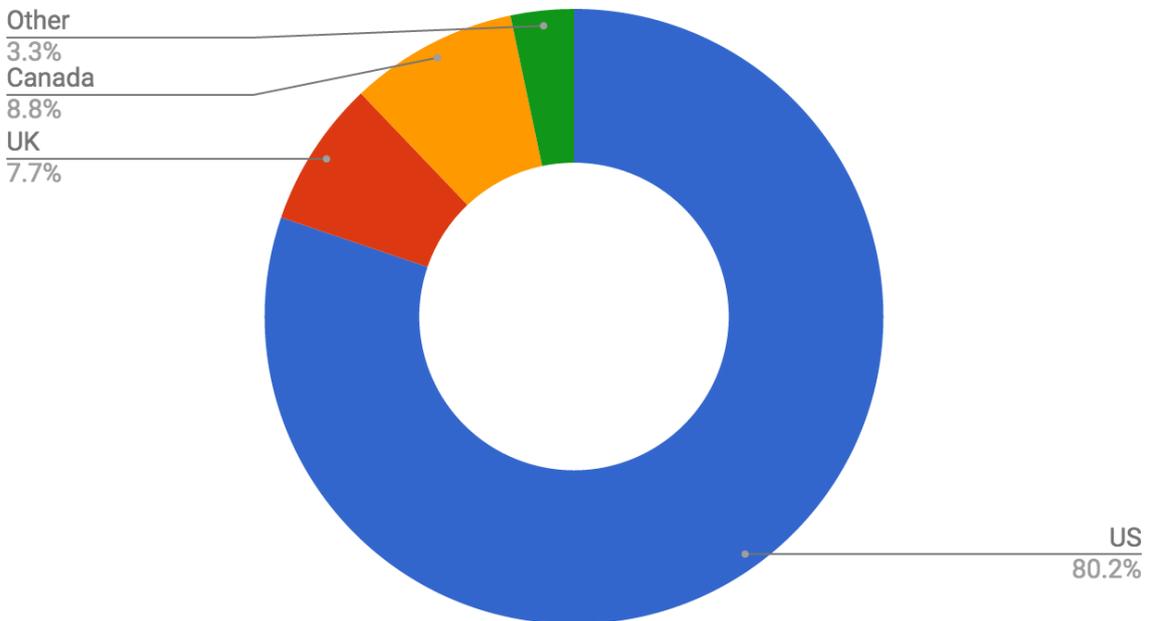
- for private foundations who commonly fund projects in libraries
- non-profit organizations that support libraries
- as faculty members (of various subjects) but frequently partner with their library around areas of assessment
- as library science faculty

### Categories of Respondents



The vast majority of interviewees were in the US (80%) or Canada (9%), but overall there were respondents from six continents.

### Location of Respondents



The first set of 17 interviews were conducted in 2016 as part of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation-funded project "Library Assessment Toolkit & Dashboard Scoping Project", a six-month research project in collaboration with the University Library of the University of California, Davis (UCD); the Bodleian Libraries of the University of Oxford; and the Staats und Universitätsbibliothek, Göttingen, Germany. The research project examined how libraries currently assess their resources and services, and explored areas of opportunity to streamline and visualize library performance through a common and

customizable set of key performance indicators (KPIs) and dashboard modules. The research team interviewed library assessment leaders and practitioners across diverse institutions and geographies, and reviewed the current landscape of technology, tools, and services currently addressing their needs.

The other 79 interviews were conducted in 2017 on behalf of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) as part of a collaboration with their Assessment Program Visioning Task Force in the development of a forward-looking assessment program that advances the organizational outcomes of the 21st-century research library. ARL is a non-profit organization of 124 research libraries at comprehensive, research institutions in the US and Canada that share similar research missions, aspirations, and achievements. ARL's mission is to influence the changing environment of scholarly communication and the public policies that affect research libraries and the diverse communities they serve. ARL pursues this mission by advancing the goals of its member research libraries, providing leadership in public and information policy to the scholarly and higher education communities, fostering the exchange of ideas and expertise, facilitating the emergence of new roles for libraries. While not all library directors and staff interviewed were from ARL member libraries, most were; and the interview data in particular does largely reflect responses from large academic libraries.

The ARL Assessment Program Visioning Task Force is charged to consider all current and potential ARL assessment-related services, including the goals, outcomes, deliverables, staff, and other resources related to the existing metrics and tools. The interviews were a key component of the data-gathering phase targeted at understanding the key types of issues ARL libraries will need to address in their measurement and evaluation program in the context of contemporary movements in higher education.

The questions differed slightly between the two sets of interviews, but the methods were the same. Each interview was semi structured and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The majority of the interviews were conducted by telephone and recorded with the permission of the respondents. The interviews were not fully transcribed, but there were usually two interviewers present for the interviews and one person led the question-asking while the other took notes. The recording were used to clarify any points that may have been missed during the interview.

All interviews had a series of questions that were aimed at gauging the current state of assessment activities at the library (including top assessment needs and questions), including current tools and services used and current sources of data. In both cases, these questions were aimed at understanding:

- What are the primary questions that the library is trying to answer with its assessment activities?
- What is the relationship between assessment activities and the library's strategic plan?
- What are the tools and data sources that are being used in trying to answer these questions?
- How well are these current tools and data sources meeting the library's needs?
- What else would be useful?

Both sets of interviews also asked a series of questions about the library's relationship with the broader university or institution. These questions were based on uncover the formal and/or information relationships between library assessment activities and the larger institutions goals and assessment activities. These questions were intended to uncover:

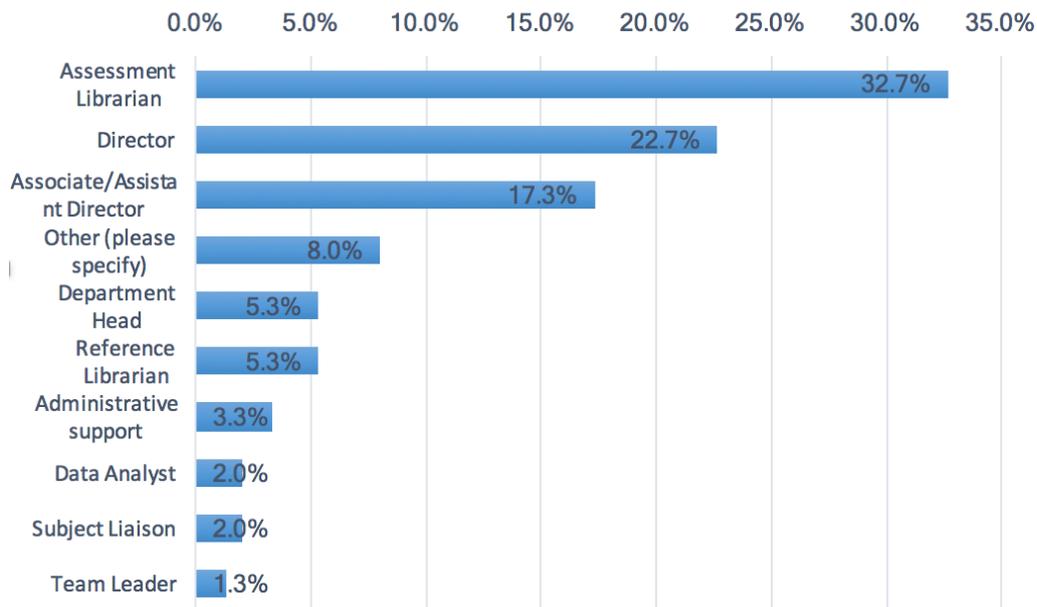
- What is the nature of the relationship between the library and the broader institution (e.g., formal vs informal; what offices are involved)?
- Does the library's assessment activities tie in directly to the university or parent institution's strategic plan?
- Does the university or parent organization have institutional solutions (e.g., business intelligence software, data warehouse, etc.)? If so, does the library have access to it?
- How important is it to your library to integrate with your institutional assessment solution?

The interviews differed in a few key areas. The interviews for the Library Assessment Toolkit & Dashboard Scoping Project (hereafter referred to as the UC Davis Project) went into some significant detail around technical and data needs. That is, what does the library have or want access to on a daily, weekly, monthly, or annual basis and what in form do they want this reported (spreadsheet, dashboards, etc.)? While the interviews for the ARL project that were conducted with assessment practitioners did go into some technical detail, the bulk of the interviews focused on current and desired use of ARL's assessment data, tools and services. The interviews with library directors similarly focused not only on what they would like to see the future of assessment activities look like, but specifically how ARL can and should support their needs.

Similarities and Differences Between the Questions in the Two Projects	UCD	ARL
Current assessment questions	X	X
Current tools and services	X	X
Current data sources	X	X
Desired data, tools, and services	X	X
Institutional assessment activities	X	X
Relationship with institutional activities	X	X
Frequency of data currently available and desired	X	
Nature of data reports desired	X	
Specificity around ARL data and tools		X
ARL support for assessment activities		X

In April of 2017, Atheneum21 also conducted an online survey for the ARL assessment program visioning project. The survey consisted of 21 questions, three of which allowed for free-text responses. The survey was sent to ARL members and non-members alike via the ARL-ASSESS listserv, an open email list for anyone engaged or interested in library assessment topics. The number of overall responses was 211 (approximately a 9% response rate), with most questions having a response rate above 140. Most respondents were assessment librarians (49), followed by library directors and associate or assistant directors.

### What is your current role in the library? (Please choose the role that represents the majority of your work)



#### Findings

Taken in aggregate, the 96 interviews and survey conducted in the last two years have uncovered a varied landscape in library assessment. The authors have spent some time in trying to create a model for understanding the key factors for creating a successful library assessment program and that is presented here. In addition to the emergence of a model, some clear indicators for future trends and trajectories in library assessment have been uncovered and are also presented.

#### Characteristics of Library Assessment Programs Today

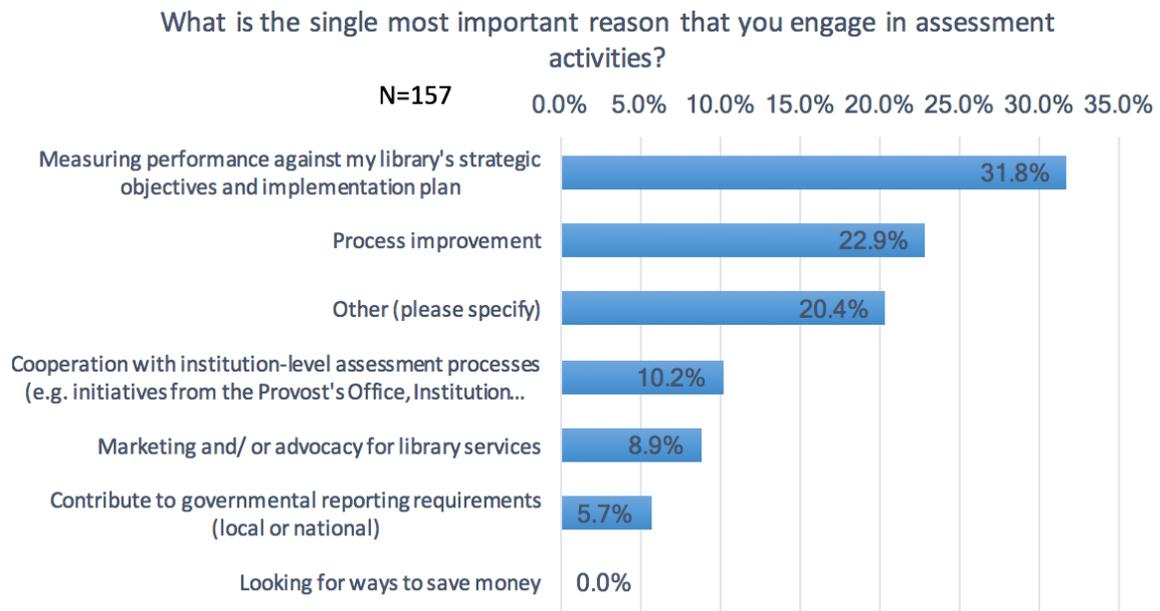
It was clear from the data that the library assessment landscape, mind-set, culture and technologies have evolved substantially over the last decade but remain uneven. A greater focus on end-users and improving services quality have been widely adopted and operationalized by some libraries (largely these are medium to large-sized research libraries) but not by others. The data indicated that a large number of library managers approach assessment and evaluation in an ad hoc and reactive manner as questions arise. Managers spend valuable time manually collecting, cleaning, and normalizing data from diverse systems, and then perform one-time or static interpretations. While this is seen as an improvement on not engaging in assessment activities at all, there was general consensus that improvements can be made in the data, tools, and methods.

In the libraries we engaged with, there were two different areas of assessment methodologies and data: one to facilitate process and service-quality improvements within the library (micro); the other is to communicate the value of the library to extra-library stakeholders (strategic). Those libraries who have engaged in assessment activities for a number of years, have largely started with the former. This is reflected in the development of library assessment tools and methodologies over the last 15-20 years, which focus on measuring library “inputs” (size of collections, number of interactions, expenditures, etc.) as well as evaluating and benchmarking service quality.

The latter assessment focus – on communicating the value of the library to stakeholders outside the library – was identified by Stephen Town (2011) as dating back to the 1970s, but was more recently popularised by Oakleaf’s “Value of Academic Libraries” report (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2010), and evolving from a longstanding sense of dissatisfaction with simply trying to measure, count, or improve individual services. This was evident in the number of interviewed library directors who said that their manager (provost, chancellor, etc.) was no longer convinced or compelled by the data they were being presented. Time and again, interviewees said that they are being pressed to tell stories not of

collection size or service improvement, but of impact. If the initial question driving many library assessment activities over the last few decades has been “how can we improve the services the library offers?” then the arising question now is “how can the library help improve the offering of the college or university?”

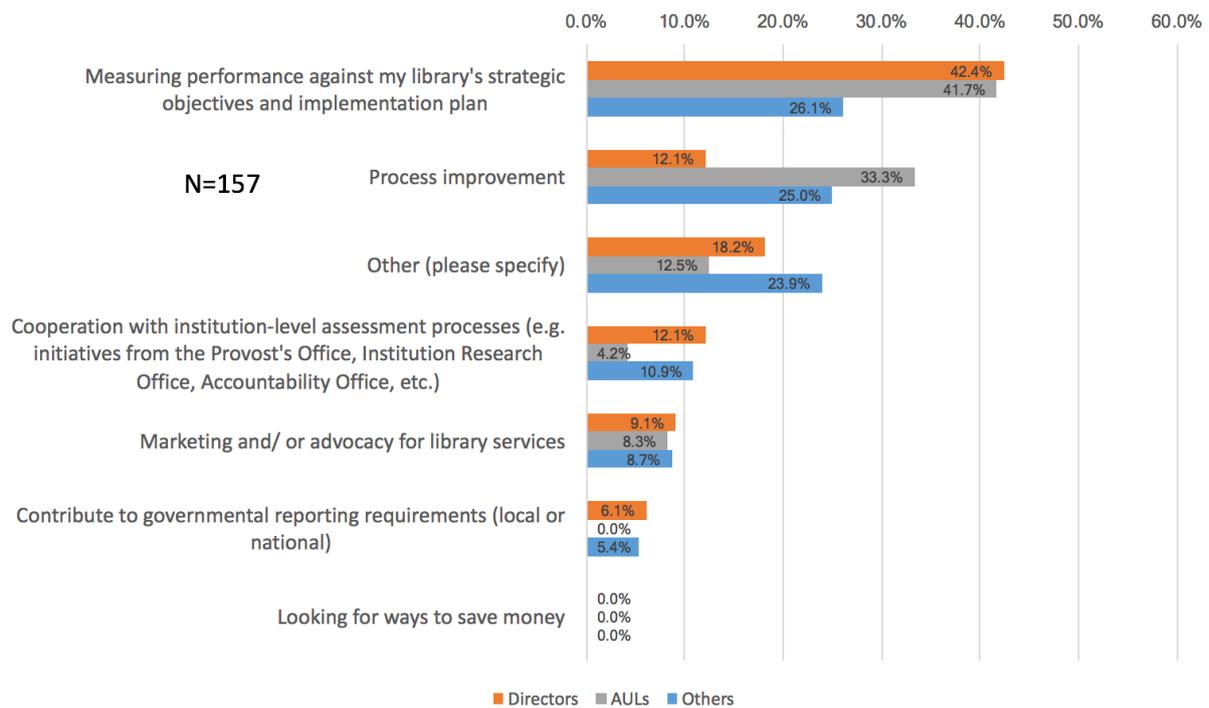
The survey results also reflected this trend, with a majority of respondents saying that their primary reason for engaging in assessment activities was to measure their strategic performance (that is, their success in meeting their strategic objectives).



Some differences in the responses were noted when looking at the data based on position, with AULs and library directors looking at measurement against strategic objectives and AULs particularly focused on process improvement.

PREVIEW

What is the single most important reason that you engage in assessment activities?

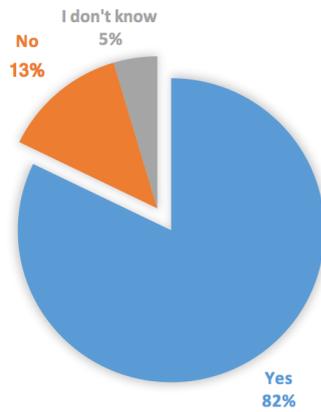


As is well documented by the academic work looking at library assessment, strategic assessment requires a fully-permeated culture of assessment, defined here not just as “where assessment is a regular part of institutional practice” (Farkas, Hinchliffe & Houk, 2015) but one in which the micro assessment activities (counting things, and measuring service quality) are inexorably linked with the strategic. In other words, the two assessment methodologies (micro and strategic) should not compete, but should be linked.

The interviews and survey conducted for the ARL project asked respondents directly about the culture of assessment in their library and their host institution. The interviews for the UC Davis project did not enquire directly about culture, but in many cases it was uncovered anyway. As with the focus of the assessment activities, the results were mixed.

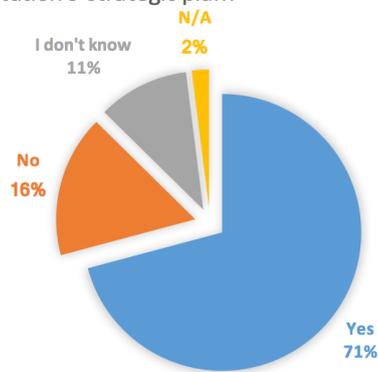
In order to judge the quality of the culture of assessment, questions were asked about the link between library assessment activities, the library strategic plan, and the host institution's strategic plan. The vast majority of respondents in the survey said that their assessment activities were directly tied into their library’s strategic plan, with fewer reporting a connection to their university’s strategic plan. The survey indicated a more robust link between assessment activities and strategic planning than did the interviews, but the connection was clearly there in the majority of interviewees institutions.

Are your assessment activities tied into your library's strategic plan?



N=151

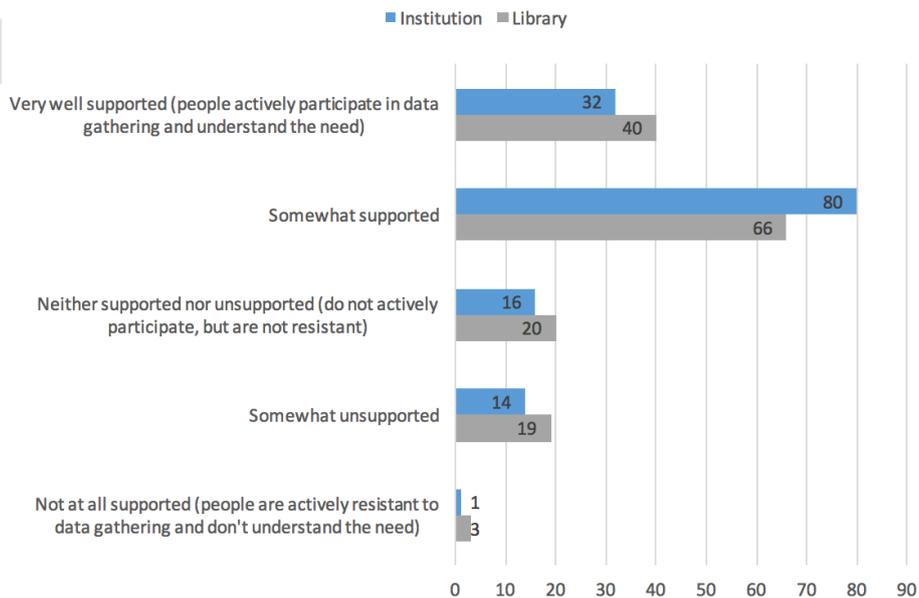
Are your assessment activities tied into your host or parent institution's strategic plan?



N=151

Interviewees and survey respondents were also asked more directly about the culture of assessment at their library and institution. In the survey, a majority of respondents felt that the culture of assessment was either very well or somewhat supported at both their library and institution.

### Culture of Assessment @ Institution vs Library



These results seemed to indicate that assessment activities are both present and well-supported at a majority of the institutions that were part of our dataset. In other words, most of the libraries we looked at had at least a reasonably robust culture of assessment.

Where great differences appeared between the libraries, though, was in *how* the culture of assessment started or was developed. Models such as the Quality Maturity Model (QMM) (Wilson, 2015) imply a linearity in an institution's progression to maturity, or at least a cascading effect. For example, in outlining five levels of quality maturity in the QMM,

1. Ad hoc
2. Repeatable
3. Defined
4. Managed
5. Continuous

there is an implication of a linear progression from one to five. Similarly, With a focus on the development of an actionable, measurable strategic plan, there is an implication of cultures of assessment developing from the “top down.”

The interviews conducted over the last two years indicated, however, that cultures of assessment had developed (and are developing) from a number of different approaches and places within the library. Creating a culture of assessment doesn't always come from the top - in the libraries or the parent institution. The table below provides examples of the development of strong assessment programs that were evident in the interviews.

How did the culture develop?	What did it look like?
Leadership from the top	Led by the library director and/or senior leadership, a strong and compelling strategic plan is developed. Associate directors and managers are required to take responsibility for implementing their relevant part of this plan and also responsible for developing the metrics that will indicate success. There may or may not be staff dedicated to assessment activities.
Parent institution culture	Similar to the above example, but with the requirements coming from the university leadership.
Leading from below	Individual managers or staff members are not <i>required</i> to measure their service quality but take the initiative of devising metrics to indicate how well they are meeting the library's strategic goals. In the next round of strategic planning, this requirement is cascaded to other parts of the library.
Passion, interest, and skills	Individual staff devise an assessment initiative based on their own passion, interest, or skills. These activities are then directly supported by the library leadership and held up as models of exemplar performance. Such assessment activities may not be formally introduced into the strategic planning process, but will continue to be supported and lauded.

While the authors' initial expectation was that cultures of assessment would stem from strong leadership, the data uncovered that successful and flourishing library assessment programs may include any of the following characteristics:

- the assessment librarians report directly to the dean or director of libraries
- the dean or director of libraries strongly values and reinforces continuous assessment throughout the library, but perhaps has no designated 'assessment' staff
- the day-to-day assessment activities tie into strategic plans and annual objectives,
- the assessment staff have strong working connections with other data-collection and data-analysis peers on campus.

It is clear that there is more than one way to build a culture of assessment. However, sustaining and fostering a culture of assessment has one universal trait: the strongest library assessment programs are those where assessment is inseparable from organizational change (that is, the results of assessment activities lead to action).

### **The Library Assessment Ecosystem and Library Assessment Success Models**

This last point, that strong assessment programs cannot be successful or sustained without being tied to cultural and strategic change do clearly align with The Quality Maturity Model (Wilson, 2014 & 2015) as well as its underlying model of Total Quality Management (TQM). The five levels of assessment maturity (Ad Hoc, Repeatable, Defined, Managed, Continuous) largely reflect what was seen in the data collected for these two projects. These interviews essentially substantiate the statement that a library with a strong and ubiquitous culture of quality will engage in continuous quality improvement (Wilson, 2014). As mentioned above, though, what was revealed in this data, was an indication that the progression *to* continuous service improvement was frequently non-linear. While recent research, such as Wilson (2014) and Farkas, Hinchliffe, and Houk (2015) have focused on drawing a picture of what a mature culture of assessment looks like, our proposed model is focused on the *origins* of mature assessment programs, and the multiple extra-library *contexts* which may present obstacles to, and/or opportunities for, library assessment success within their larger ecosystems.

The ecosystem relevant to library assessment extends well beyond the library to libraries' parent entities, higher education and research standards bodies, and advocacy organizations. Because each library's parent entity and standards context is different, there is no one-size-fits-all model for library assessment success. In fact, there are *multiple* models of library assessment success. Further, there are best practices within certain components that can be utilized or worked toward, when relevant to each library's specific context.

Based on our findings, we would therefore propose the following modular, flexible model to understand the library assessment landscape at its broadest, and to help libraries contextualize their own unique assessment efforts and measures of success within their larger ecosystems.



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The Library Assessment Success Model identifies library assessment best practices within each of the library and extra-library landscape core areas. The framework enables libraries to choose the areas relevant to them, and evaluate their situation against best practices for those areas.

Just one example of best practices and success measures for the core area of “Library’s Culture of Assessment” follows.



- Library's strategic goals align to parent entity's strategic goals
- Progress is consistently measured against strategic goals
- Strategic goals have key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure progress
- All staff consistently contribute data to, and/or analyze library metrics
- Library has dedicated staff or committee focused on assessment
- Library has a consistently updated data inventory
- Library performance, as measured by KPIs, is shared consistently with staff and stakeholders
- Library programmatically and repeatably assesses all or key library services and operations on a recurring schedule
- Decisions are consistently and transparently made based on data

Check all of the above that apply. Add the number of check marks for your library's score.



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Reviewing the associated checklist enables a library to identify where it falls relative to the best practices that we've identified that have resulted in robust cultures of assessment at other libraries. Each core area has similar best practices identified during the course of our research.

#### **Conclusion: Future Trends & Needs**

The interviews indicated that the progression towards "impact" assessment rather than "service quality improvement" will continue. Library directors, in particular, indicated a growing requirement to communicate their direct contribution to the strategic goals of their parent institution over their success as a library. Increasingly, the value of the library will be judged by its ability to help students learn and researchers research. While this has long been taken for granted as central to the functioning of the library, this will need to be made explicit -- particularly for those at publicly-funded institutions. There will need to be close alignment to the parent institution's priorities.

Trends in academic and research assessment may also have an impact (and provide an opportunity) for library assessment. Several recent initiatives are aimed at aligning what is measured in academia with what is actually valued. The [HuMetricsHSS project](#) is "rethinking humane indicators of excellence in the humanities and social sciences." The Center for Open Science (COS) aims to "increase openness, integrity, and reproducibility of research" by supporting a culture change in the way science is conducted and communicated. In addition to its role as an advocacy group, the COS is also creating new metrics for measuring scientists based on the values that they espouse - namely, scientific transparency, data sharing, and reproducibility.

This movement towards value-based and impact-focused assessment will continue and will require new methods and metrics. While much of the service quality measurements that have taken place in libraries to date are based on quantitative data and structured qualitative analysis, these new measures will require a much more mixed approach. Libraries will have to tell the story of their impact, just as academics will have to tell the story of their value.

In order to meet these challenges and tell their story, libraries will need better data. It will need to be consistent and compelling, but will also need to be easy to gather and interpret. This data will need to be paired with much better reporting tools. The library managers that we interviewed during our research felt that the availability of more modular tools and dashboards, for example, could free them to probe and interpret more data, think more strategically, and develop more meaningful questions about measuring and evaluating library performance.

This data will also need to be linked directly to the mission, strategies, and goals of the library and the parent institutions. This could be done through the development of a framework, which should provide a clear connection between the strategic goals and the data (qualitative and quantitative) that are collected to evaluate them. The framework should allow for the

definition of metrics and methodologies that can be used to locally illustrate a library's value, as well as the clear establishment of boundaries of data worth collecting. For discussion and proposal of such a framework, see Hurst et al (2016).

As Town pointed out in 2011, "the move from internal operational measures towards more strategic and cultural measures, generated to meet broader advocacy needs, requires a vehicle for communicating these effectively" (p. 309). Our data indicates that this trend is continuing and will continue, but also that the vehicle for measuring more strategic goals does not yet fully exist. Understanding not just the shape or character of robust cultures of assessment, but how and when they originate, will help provide libraries with the tools and framework for supporting this continued shift. Our findings in this area support those by Farkas et al. (2015) by providing a more nuanced understanding of the origin of strong library assessment programs. Earlier literature (Hiller et al., 2008) emphasized the role of strong leadership with an implication that this comes "from above" but our findings show, like the Farkas et al.'s (2015) research, that such leadership can come from anywhere within the organization.

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