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Pathways to Impact

Anticipating Action in Library Assessment

Making Assessment Matter is a four-part *C&RL News* series focused on maximizing the impact of academic library assessment. The first article outlined four key strategies for launching assessment projects designed for action and impact. The second article focused on enabling librarians to use the results of their assessment projects. This third article outlines eight distinct outcomes or "pathways" that can guide libraries in converting assessment results into action. The final article in the series will explore how to design communications that present compelling results to key decision-makers, providing evidence that drives meaningful change and encourages ongoing investment and engagement in assessment for continuous improvement. Together, the series equips librarians to use assessment to drive meaningful change.

Introduction

A major principle of assessment is the notion of "closing the loop." Closing the loop refers to a key goal of any assessment: not to just **do** an assessment, but to **learn** from the assessment and use that learning to **make decisions** or **take actions** that lead to positive impacts. Librarians engaged in assessment should be open to unexpected results, avoid prejudging the outcomes of an assessment, and stay vigilant against results that confirm existing biases. At the same time, it is helpful to have a general knowledge of common outcomes for library assessment projects. The ability to anticipate likely outcomes, while remaining open to new possibilities, can help librarians **smooth the path from assessment to impact** more quickly and effectively. Understanding how assessment results will be used can help shape the design, guide the framing of user stories or questions,[1] and identify which stakeholders should be involved from the outset.[2]

The sections below highlight **eight distinct outcomes or "pathways"** that can guide libraries in converting assessment results into action. These pathways build on the content in the "Realizing Outcomes of Assessment: Decision-Making and Action Taking" module in the ARL Research & Assessment Cycle Toolkit.[3]

Pathway 1. Inform Changes to Policies, Procedures, or Practices

Library assessments can inform updates to library policies, procedures, and practices, which serve as the operational frameworks that shape how library services, resources, and spaces are offered. Written policies and procedures delineate the levels, limits, and priorities of library services, define employee roles, and model desired behaviors. To remain effective,

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these documents must **continuously be adapted** to meet the growing and evolving needs of libraries, their environment, and their users. Through the assessment process, misalignments between current practice and organizational values, priorities, and aspirations are sometimes revealed. Assessment results can inform library efforts to ensure that these documents and library practices remain responsive, relevant, and aligned with the library's mission and values. Librarians conducting assessments with implications for organizational guidelines can keep the following questions in mind:

- What **policy, procedure, or practice changes** might be needed?
- How can we **prepare staff** for these changes?
- When might **exceptions** apply?

Pathway 2. Prioritize Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Cultural Competence

Assessment results can be used to prioritize diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), belonging, and cultural competence in library services, resources, spaces, or the library organization itself. When librarians plan projects that are intentionally multidimensional, intersectional, and inclusive of voices that may otherwise be omitted, assessment results can point the way to making library offerings more **equitable and supportive of previously underserved users**. DEI-conscious assessment projects can help librarians ensure that all user viewpoints inform library offerings, rather than relying on librarian-centric perspectives or assumptions. In contrast, assessment projects that omit DEI, belonging, and cultural competence from study design considerations are likely to have diminished capacity, or no capacity at all, to effect change in these areas. Librarians might prepare for this use of results by thinking through the following questions prior to commencing an assessment project:

- Are we planning a one-size-fits-all approach to our assessment design?
  - If so, what **limitations** does that put on the usefulness of the results?
  - How might we **redesign** the project to be more inclusive of diverse perspectives?
  - How can we ensure that **all relevant participants and communities** are included in the assessment process?
  - How can the library **maintain collaborative action** with those communities after the assessment project is complete?
- If a more refined, intersectional, and multidimensional process were used, how might those results be used to **increase equity and inclusivity** in the library?
  - Do the insights gained from the assessment apply only to this project, or are they broadly generalizable?

Pathway 3. Guide the Reallocation of Resources

Assessment results often highlight the need to allocate or reallocate resources to **align with library priorities and values**, based on a dynamic understanding of services, spaces, resources, and user needs. As indicated in other pathways outlined in this article, insights from assessment can drive changes in strategic goals, DEI initiatives, policies, staffing models, and more, all of which may require reallocating financial and human resources, including staff time and effort.

Library personnel are among the most important resources for creating impact, so any **changes to roles or responsibilities should be supported**. Assessment sometimes uncovers opportunities that lead to shifts in staff effort and attention. These reallocations may feel disconcerting or, in other cases, desired and long overdue. When assessment-driven changes impact job roles, libraries should support their employees with adequate resources, professional development opportunities, and recognition. By planning for these implications early, libraries can deploy financial and human resources where they matter most.

Pathway 4. Shape Revisions of Strategic Plans

Assessment results can help libraries achieve desired outcomes by influencing strategic planning priorities, activities, and processes. Results can shape strategic planning by:

- Demonstrating **progress** toward existing strategic priorities.
- Revealing **new understandings** that can be reflected in new or revised strategic goals.
- Checking **alignment** of stated and tacit goals and intentions with planned activities.
- Demonstrating that a strategic plan, or activities identified in the plan, should be **rebalanced or realigned** for better effect.
- Uncovering **unintended consequences** of strategic decision-making.
- Librarians seeking to explore whether assessment results can be used for this purpose might ask themselves:
- Do the assessment results indicate that **goals** identified in the strategic plan are being realized?
- Are there **new understandings** revealed by assessment results that could be incorporated into strategic planning?
- Could the strategic plan benefit from **rebalancing or realigning** based on new realizations derived from assessment results?

Pathway 5. Inspire Innovation

Assessment results that highlight areas where libraries fall short in supporting their users can motivate librarians to take a **reflective, problem-solving approach** that serves as a catalyst for inspiring innovative ideas about what libraries could do differently or better.

Assessment data can be used to inspire innovation in a number of ways. For example, assessment projects often require clearly articulated outcomes and impacts. Helping libraries define their intentions and evaluate whether those intentions are met encourages librarians to be **explicit about what they are achieving and what they are not**. When gaps are clear, new ideas can emerge to fill those spaces. Indeed, understanding where gaps exist between user needs and library offerings is foundational for making changes, enacting improvements, and fine-tuning library services, resources, and spaces for various user groups. In other cases, libraries might discover that they're meeting or surpassing their intended outcomes. Such a scenario might lead to transferring practices found to be effective in one area to another library offering, adapting effective practices to meet the needs of additional user populations, or systematizing an isolated one-off success into a more intentional, scaffolded program that can "scale up" and serve additional users or make a

longer-term impact. Librarians seeking to use assessment results to drive innovation might ask themselves these additional questions:

- Are we, as the library, the **right ones to make the changes** we've envisioned? Who else might be a **good fit for collaboration**?
- What will doing something new or differently mean that we need to **stop** doing?

Pathway 6. Plan Sunsets

Assessments may reveal that a library service, resource, or space is no longer achieving its intended outcomes. In such cases, sunsetting, or "planned abandonment," can be necessary for a **healthy organization committed to evolving with changing needs**.[4]

Assessment evidence should guide these decisions and ensure coordination with those who provide the offering. Sometimes, **scaling down** to specialized services for targeted populations may be more appropriate than discontinuing services altogether. Done well, planned abandonment illuminates what to reduce, redesign, or retain and offers **opportunities for innovation** by freeing resources for new priorities.

When planning or reporting results that suggest a sunset, consider:

- What data show the **impact** of the offering?
- What would be **lost or gained** by ending the offering?
- Could improvements **delay or prevent** a sunset?

Thoughtful planning, grounded in assessment results, helps libraries make informed choices that balance finite resources with emerging needs.

Pathway 7. Decide Not to Act

Generally, the goal of assessment is to make decisions or take actions that lead to improvements. However, not every assessment culminates in a clear action; sometimes deciding not to act is the appropriate response to assessment results. In some situations, an assessment does not produce actionable results. Perhaps the assessment design omitted a crucial element and the appropriate next step is to **redesign and redeploy an improved assessment approach**. Or perhaps the results are inconclusive, flawed, or unintentionally skewed and the best path forward is to **alter the assessment method, include different constituents, give a process more time** to develop before repeating an assessment, and so on.

Other times, assessments reveal that taking action is not desirable or appropriate because the library offering assessed is functioning well and **does not require any changes**. In all of these situations, it's necessary to **communicate to stakeholders** that the action resulting from the assessment is an intentional decision not to act; not to do so would be to risk sending a message that the assessment was not valuable for decision-making. Deciding not to act is sometimes the best path forward, and, even when an assessment goes awry, learning how to improve an assessment approach for future projects is a valuable outcome.

Pathway 8. Develop New Understandings and Affective Outcomes

In addition to informing decisions, assessment often leads to **new ways of thinking** about users, practices, policies, and even the assessment process itself. These shifts in understanding

can be powerful outcomes on their own. Assessment may also produce **affective outcomes**. Participants, colleagues, and practitioners may develop more positive attitudes toward assessment, greater trust in evidence, increased buy-in on actions resulting from an assessment, and stronger connections with others. These experiences can reduce uncertainty and foster feelings of **agency and empowerment**.

Finally, nearly every assessment enhances understanding of the process, including what worked well, what did not, and where capacity needs to grow. Anticipating cognitive and affective outcomes during planning helps libraries leverage them, reinforcing assessment as a tool for **learning and continuous improvement**.

Conclusion

Anticipating pathways to impact is a key element in ensuring that assessments lead to meaningful impact. **Thoughtful planning**, including **awareness of common uses of results**, increases the likelihood that assessment will spur action in impactful ways. Envisioning outcomes helps libraries prepare to leverage findings, make informed decisions, and avoid missed opportunities for improvement. At the same time, the reality is that **assessment rarely comes to an end**. To gain maximum benefit from assessment, it must be embraced as an ongoing, iterative process that drives meaningful change. The ability to anticipate potential outcomes, while remaining open to new possibilities, can help librarians "close the loop"—a practice essential for both organizational learning and meeting evolving user needs.

The final installment in the series will explore how to design communications that present compelling results to key decision-makers, providing evidence that drives meaningful change and encourages ongoing investment and engagement in assessment for continuous improvement. ✐

Notes

1. Megan Oakleaf and Becky Croxton, "Start at the End: Strategies for Actionable Assessment Results," *College and Research Libraries News* 86, no. 9 (2025): 382–85. https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.86.9.382.

2. Becky Croxton and Megan Oakleaf, "From Subjects to Partners: Centering Participants in Library Assessment," *College and Research Libraries News* 86, no. 10 (2025):449–54, https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.86.11.449.

3. Megan Oakleaf, Emily Daly, and Rebecca Croxton, "Research and Assessment Cycle Toolkit," Association of Research Libraries, December 17, 2024. https://www.arl.org/research-and-assessment-cycle-toolkit/.

4. John Watts and Sierra Laddusaw, "Robust to Overwhelming: A Case Study on Planned Abandonment for GIS Services," *Journal of Library Administration* 61, no. 3 (2021): 347–57. https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2021.1883371.