

# Assesstivus: Assessment for the Rest of Us

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## Purpose & Goals

“Fun” is not the first word that comes to mind when most library workers think about assessment. In fact, when we heard our colleagues discussing their feelings toward assessment, they often mentioned anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. Our team provides information, support, and training to help ease fears and make assessment more accessible. This foundational support helps shift negative attitudes, but we also wanted to lighten the mood and infuse some fun into our institutional assessment processes. As our latest assessment cycle came to an end, we planned an event to thank our colleagues for their work, share effective assessment practices, and celebrate resultant changes. We wanted to create a hook to get our colleagues interested. After a few web searches focused on assessment word play, a new event was born: Assesstivus – assessment for the rest of us!

At our library, assessment is managed and supported by a central assessment team, but much of the work is carried out by practitioners spread throughout the organization who do not always have time to talk about their assessment practice. They tend to work deadline to deadline, and do not necessarily know what assessment work is happening outside of their areas of expertise. With this in mind, our goals for Assesstivus included:

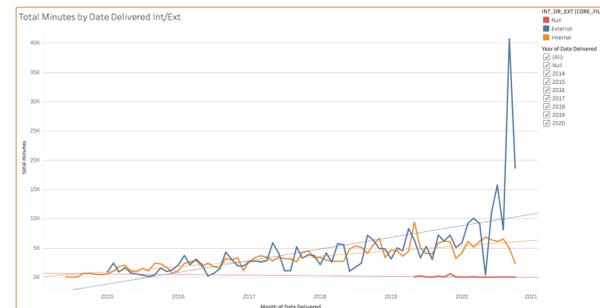
1. Thank our colleagues for time and effort devoted to assessment activities during the previous assessment cycle
2. Share examples of effective assessment that led to a change
3. Give colleagues an opportunity to ask questions and critique the process
4. Gather feedback to inform the next assessment cycle
5. Remind colleagues of upcoming deadlines



## Approach

Assesstivus is a play on words based on Festivus, a fictitious holiday created by a character in the 1990s comedy Seinfeld. Festivus, celebrated on December 23rd, is an alternative to Christmas (tagged “a Festivus for the rest of us”) that features an aluminum Festivus pole, airing of grievances, feats of strength, and Festivus miracles. We began our event by having several colleagues deliver short presentations about “feats of strength,” or assessment methods they implemented that led to changes in their units. Next, we held an “airing of grievances” and discussion of “Assesstivus miracles” in which we encouraged the group to share frustrations and high points they had experienced in the past assessment cycle. This portion of the event also served as an opportunity for us to gather data to inform a self-reflection document we needed to write for the campus office of institutional assessment on behalf of the library assessment program. Finally, in lieu of erecting an Assesstivus pole, we provided aluminum buttons to attendees emblazoned with the tagline “assessment for the rest of us.”

## Feats of Strength



This chart shows data collected as part of the assessment plan for Captioning and Transcription Services.

One of the challenges of assessment in a large complex organization is finding ways to bring assessors together to discuss their practice. To encourage sharing and discussion, we asked several units to share assessment methods that led to changes in their units.

We provided each participating unit with a template asking them to discuss the following aspects of their assessment:

- **WHAT:** Briefly describe the outcome that you assessed.
- **HOW:** Describe the method/s you used to assess your outcome.
- **RESULTS:** Tell us what you learned from your assessment method/s.
- **SO WHAT?:** Tell us what you changed or will change as a result of your assessment.

Colleagues reported that they saw lots of value in hearing directly from one another about their assessment experiences, and the presentations spurred conversation about new possible projects. One noted, “I liked Assesstivus because I liked seeing what other people measure and how they talk about results. It is nice to get out of my head.”

## Airing of Grievances

*“Defining practical strategies and methods of assessment are still challenging to get right, and carving out time for assessment activities over the course of the year proved more difficult than expected.”*

*“The plan seemed to lose meaning as time went on. There wasn't any reason to push the plan forward.”*

In order to learn more about our colleagues’ experiences doing assessment (and perhaps to invite a bit of venting) we posed the following discussion questions:

- What positive or negative experiences have you had with your assessment plan?
- Do your findings reflect the most important aspects of your unit’s work? Why or why not?
- How does this assessment process help or hinder your unit’s efforts to achieve excellence?
- What other assessment projects would you want to pursue that don’t fit neatly into this assessment process?
- Is there anything we could do to better support your assessment needs?

This portion of the event provided us valuable feedback about the assessment process and helped build trust among the group. While most feedback was positive, we also received some constructive ideas to take into the next assessment cycle.

## Assesstivus Miracles

*“The time spent plotting out a course of action for this is a useful exercise. And the prospects of getting at some of it actually elicits enthusiasm in the unit.”*

*“Discussing assessment planning with unit staff and my supervisor helps bring attention to long term goals, which is valuable as a rare opportunity in a unit keenly focused on operational tasks.”*

Branding our event as Assesstivus generated more enthusiasm for an assessment event than we had ever experienced in the past. Attendance was good, and there was a festive attitude in the room rather than a feeling of anxiety, dread, or boredom. Taking the extra steps to make an assessment event fun and memorable contributed toward building a community of practice. Lightening the mood enabled attendees to focus on learning from one another and to put their fears aside. Every colleague we asked to contribute to the “Feats of Strength” agreed to share and the relaxed atmosphere fostered a candid discussion. Some staff found the assessment process cumbersome or had trouble either fitting their work into the requirements or finding time to conduct an analysis. However, many staff reported they appreciated the motivation to prioritize assessment and focus on long term goals, and they recognized that their assessment helped them make positive changes. Colleagues even requested more opportunities to share assessment practices in the future.

## Future Implications or Value

Assesstivus is helping us build a stronger data culture at our library. We are seeing the long-term benefits of this type of event as we continue the tradition and hold our second Assesstivus. We expanded our goals and audience for this year’s event. We are still embracing the original essence of the inaugural Assesstivus. But now, we opened it up to all library staff (instead of just each unit’s assessment practitioner[s]) and we are also using it to increase awareness of what projects the assessment team is working on and the support services we offer. Since we sent out the email invite for Assesstivus 2020, several staff have reached out to us expressing how much they are looking forward to it. We are seeing even more excitement from our colleagues for this year’s Assesstivus.