Mixed-methods assessment of user experience in a special collections library

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Objective:

The University of Louisville's Archives & Special Collections (ASC) has historically struggled to collect useful data on the user experience of their patron group. Many of this library's patrons are not affiliated with the university and thus not captured in other University Libraries-wide assessments and user research projects – a common challenge for this type of library. Collaboration between the Archives & Special Collections staff, campus office of Institutional Effectiveness, and Assessment & Analytics Librarian led to the development of an assessment strategy for this specialized population that would be both relevant to ASC specifically as well as replicable by other special collections libraries.

Methods:

Focus group interviews were conducted with Archives & Special Collections staff in Fall 2019, and the results of these focus groups informed the development the broader assessment plan. Themes drawn from the focus groups were grouped into four larger goals, which were then matched with related assessment activities, some of which were already in place and some of which were new activities for ASC, as well as potential outcomes for these assessments.

Results:

An Assessment Plan was developed specifically for UofL ASC, and modified into a generalizable framework as seen here. The Covid-19 pandemic caused a radical shift in the operations of ASC, and as a result our initial plan was updated during Summer 2020 and some planned assessment activities were delayed or modified.

Existing activities: Existing assessment activities that will continue or expand as a result of this plan include campus-wide user surveys and analysis of transactional data (including registrations/appointments, reference statistics, and web analytics).

New activities: Newly-developed assessment activities under this plan include a dedicated user survey for previous ASC patrons, post-appointment feedback surveys, structured interviews with patrons, citation tracking of materials and collections, and comparison to campus data.

References:

Association of College and Research Libraries. *Academic Library Impact: Improving Practice and Essential Areas to Research*. Prepared by Lynn Silipigni Connaway, William Harvey, Vanessa Kitzie, and Stephanie Mikitish of OCLC Research. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017.

Griffin, M., Lewis, B., & Greenberg, M. I. (2013). Data-Driven Decision Making: An Holistic Approach to Assessment in Special Collections Repositories. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 8(2), 225-238. https://doi.org/10.18438/B8D03M

Assessment Plan Framework			
Goal	**Themes**	**Related Assessment Activities**	**Potential Outcomes**
Better understand patron experience when visiting facilities.	• Process for registration, appointments, and materials requests • Physical space and technology challenges, including ADA concerns • Rules and policies • Campus visit logistics • Customer service • Interest in gallery space and exhibits	• User surveys • Post-appointment Feedback • Observational study / structured interviews	• Changes to physical space • Changes to policies • Changes to hours • Data to support fundraising
Better understand patron awareness and discovery of library.	• Referral sources • Value of various tools for outreach • Awareness of collections/services before appointment • Status of research process at appointment • Identify non-users and potential for outreach	• User survey • Analysis of web analytics • Comparison to campus data	• Changes to marketing/outreach strategies • Changes to web presence
Better understand population demographics of patrons.	• University vs. Community users • Level of research experience, technology skills • Enrollment in key programs • Future demographics of patron population	• User surveys • Analysis of transactional data • Observational study / structured interviews • Comparison to campus data	• Updates to registration system to collect additional demographic data • Changes to outreach strategies
Better understand collections usage and patron satisfaction with collections.	• Collections usage • Patron awareness of and satisfaction with collections • Digital vs. physical collections • Identify gaps in collections	• User survey • Post-appointment feedback • Analysis of transactional data • Citation tracking of materials and collections	• Set priorities for exhibits, digitization • Begin tracking requests for materials not held in collection

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