BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING: THE IMPORTANCE OF A WRITTEN ASSESSMENT PHILOSOPHY IN SHAPING AN ASSESSMENT PROGRAM
KIMBERLY BURKE SWEETMAN

Q. Why create an assessment philosophy?
A. To have a documented, shared understanding of our assessment priorities which can then serve as a foundation for an assessment program.

Challenges:
• Very few stated assessment philosophies, although some assessment plans where philosophical in nature
• Confusion about our charge to write an assessment philosophy, but that led to articulating a very clear purpose for the philosophy which has been helpful in the long run.

The assessment philosophy task force:
• Reviewed examples of the type of document we wanted to create and identified the edits we wanted to include.
• Read a variety of materials on approaches to library assessment and familiarized ourselves with our library’s strategic plan, mission statement and vision statement to be sure what we created was aligned with library strategy.
• Edited the list of elements to include in our assessment philosophy while keeping these guiding documents in mind. This edited list served as an outline, and from there we wrote the content of our draft philosophy.
• Sought feedback from our library colleagues along the way.
• Once approved by our library dean, posted the philosophy in the “foundational documents” section of our intranet so that our colleagues can use it to inform future decisions about assessment.

UNH Library Assessment Philosophy:
We strive to build a practice of documenting, assessing and communicating the library’s value.
We seek to build a culture of assessment that takes a sustainable, pragmatic approach.
Responsibility for assessment is distributed among all library colleagues and centrally coordinated and supported. All library employees are encouraged to consider how they could use assessment practices, starting small and building, to improve the library. We retain some statistics to create an historical record, but in general use a “just in time” model for studying areas where we could improve services, resources and spaces.

[Unforeseen] Benefits of Creating an Assessment Philosophy:
• Like a vision statement, our assessment philosophy serves to undergird all our assessment efforts.
• The process helped us to clarify who we are as an organization, which is valuable as we navigate times of rapid transition.
• Defined assessment for our organization.
• Recommended future work around assessment.
• Learned that supporting a new initiative with philosophical pre-work is applicable to any aspect of library work.

Contact information: Kimberly.Sweetman@unh.edu