

# Anything I Can Do, You Can Do Meta: EDI Tools to Evaluate Your Libraries' Assessment Practices

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## Introduction

Assessment is indispensable for libraries seeking to create inclusive programs, evaluate policies, and substantiate ongoing initiatives. However, despite this importance, it is not inevitable that library assessment practices (including methods, instruments, and platforms) are themselves rooted in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). As public and academic libraries move towards EDI, every facet of library work must align in this direction— including assessment work. Without EDI-informed assessment practices, libraries risk possible harmful consequences to marginalized community groups we supposedly aim to equitably serve. With this challenge in mind, this paper represents the product of a year-long working group tasked with defining and executing an EDI-informed meta-assessment process. This means: examining the means, gaps, and limitations of our current libraries' assessment practices and exploring ways to shift our practices to be aligned with our libraries' stated values around EDI. In this paper, while we will touch upon all aspects and results of our work, we will primarily focus on our process of meta-assessment, including: grounding anti-racism and anti-oppression frameworks; determining effective assessment methodologies, highlighting reproducible survey and analysis materials, and offering next steps. We believe that this focus will provide readers a clear model of meta-assessment that can be selectively reproduced at their own institutions, which will enable practitioners to develop findings and next steps that are tailored for their libraries.

## Meta-Assessment Working Group

In the Fall semester of 2022, senior leadership at New York University's Division of Libraries (DoL) announced they would be launching a Meta-Assessment Working Group, located under the Libraries' Inclusion, Diversity, Belonging, Equity, and Accessibility (IDBEA) steering committee<sup>1</sup>. Briefly, meta-assessment is “the evaluation of our assessment practice. It is used to help us understand and improve the quality of our assessment at all levels.”<sup>2</sup> Ideally:

“mature assessment cultures [can] focus on the use of [meta-assessment] results to improve teaching, learning, and assessment... It can provide a broad description of the types of assessment practices in use, including evidence of efforts to use assessment results to improve programs. Findings can be used to guide future professional development efforts and campus interventions that promote the adoption of mature assessment practices.”<sup>3</sup>

Based on these typical definitions of meta-assessment, the working group charge was informed by the following questions:

- What does assessment look like for the Division of Libraries right now, and in what ways are our assessment practices harmful?
- How can our practices better reflect our commitment to IDBEA? What are helpful interventions towards this goal?

- How can the organization proactively conduct assessment projects while reducing harm to end users?

Our scope included assessing the assessment approaches across all 10 of NYU's libraries (totaling 31 departments), including our global sites Abu Dhabi and Shanghai. The charge left the following up to the interpretation of the working group:

- Defining and implementing a meta-assessment process fit for NYU Libraries
- Choosing what frameworks (e.g., theoretical, practical) to inform our work
- Choosing which methodologies to conduct the internal assessment
- Scoping the depth and breadth of the research recommendations

Working group members were selected by the senior leadership team, and encompassed a diverse range of experiences including: staff and faculty roles, early career and mid-career experiences, and library departments. The Libraries' Instruction Assessment Associate and User Experience Analyst (Researcher) were chosen as co-chairs of the group; however, all seven members of the group were connected with assessment in their day-to-day work in some type of way.

### ***Working Group Process and Goals***

One of the first tasks of the working group was to define a meta-assessment procedure that best fit the goals and scope of our charge. Of the limited meta-assessment scholarship published, the majority of available articles focus on meta-assessment to promote student learning. Most procedures create rubrics for meta-assessment that focus on evaluating the ability to accurately measure outcomes and adherence to common student learning outcomes (SLO) quantitative frameworks.<sup>4</sup>

There are a few compelling examples of how a meta-assessment process can be applied in a library context. One example utilized the ARL assessment ecosystem as a basis for conducting a meta-assessment process to Montana State University's library assessment practice, highlighting areas of strength and growth. By using a variety of self-assessment prompts, the authors qualitatively evaluated whether each ARL ecosystem element was established, emerging, or non-existent at MSU Libraries. Their analysis distilled concrete areas of improvement and areas for further research.<sup>5</sup>

Given that meta-assessment is just a process of assessment in and of itself, we also examined library assessment best practices. We draw heavily on the following seven basic tenets of good library assessment: "devising a set of performance standards based on the values of your library; determining what questions you want answered; making sure to see the most appropriate data-gathering tool for your questions; defining plans for data use; triangulating the data; endeavoring to maintain statistical validity; pretesting data collection instruments."<sup>6</sup> Further research pointed us towards understanding the variety of outcomes from assessment work, helping us frame *how* we want to approach our meta-questions. Outcomes we drew on included: knowledge and understanding; skills; attitudes and values; activity, behavior, and progression.<sup>7</sup>

Mapping our research on predominant meta-assessment projects onto our working group's scope, we conceded that unlike projects, our working group was *not* tasked with evaluating the efficacy, robustness, or maturity of our assessment practices and culture. Furthermore, we were not tasked with providing individualized recommendations to each department due to the wide variety of intentions and outcomes related to each department's practice. Rather, our main objective was to better understand what types of assessment practices currently exist, and how they are in service to or against our IDBEA values.

Given the research briefly summarized above, we hand selected a core set of generic and meta- assessment practices that best fit our scope. Ultimately, our working group's processed was distilled into the following steps:

1. Determine assessment focus and research questions
  - a. Define what does our working group mean by “assessment” and “IDBEA” in order to clearly articulate the scope of our assessment and collectively sharpen our analytical lens.
  - b. Identify research questions that will drive the assessment methodology and design
2. Design and conduct assessment with all library departments
  - a. Select an assessment methodology that fits our scope and research questions
  - b. Design assessment tools and disseminate to all library departments
  - c. Take detailed stock of what every department defines as assessment
3. Analyze findings and conduct a literature review
  - a. Distill findings related to IDBEA concerns about assessment
  - b. Address the gaps and areas of further research that emerges from the internal assessment. This would be our recommendations for a more “IDBEA”-informed assessment practice.
4. Create a report with best practices and next steps
  - a. Collate recommendations thematically, and provide concrete ways for individuals to implement recommendations.
  - b. Pilot recommendations with one or two departments, tailored based on those departments’ practices

## Phase 1: Determining Research Questions

We started our work by conducting a literature review to explore and understand various aspects of inclusive and equity-driven assessment. After engaging in this reflective learning process, we decided that because our charge was broad and that our library departments likely use assessment in a variety of ways, it would be beneficial to create a survey that reflected all types of assessment practices. Therefore, in creating our survey, we aimed to make sure our questions represented and allowed space to acknowledge all types of assessment: internal assessment (e.g., staff evaluations), external assessment (e.g., user experience), passive assessment (e.g, circulation stats), active assessment (e.g., student surveys or interviews), has and does not have guidelines, and can range from simple (e.g., pen/paper) to complex (e.g., Qualtrics) data collection practices. In addition, we chose to include data maintenance and dissemination practices as part of our “assessment” scope, since ideas around data storage and reuse implicate aspects of user privacy.

In addition to defining the scope of assessment practices through an initial literature review, we also explored assessment challenges as it relates to self-determination and autonomy, racism, disability, homophobia and gendered oppression. Given the often ambiguous and unclear nature of the terms “diversity” or “equity”, it was important for the working group to construct a sharper analysis around what we mean by the shorthand “IDBEA.” By shifting our focus to systems of oppression, we were able to tailor our survey questions, and analysis, to focus on the ways assessment can cause *harm* across patrons of various social identities.

These explorations led us to develop the following guiding research questions:

- How does each department define assessment? What assessment projects do they conduct under their definition? How often?
- What do departments consider before starting an assessment project?
- What types of methods, tools, and approaches do departments use in their assessment practices?
- What are departments’ workflows for data use, storage, and disposal?
- How do departments use their data insights?
- How do IDBEA or anti-racist and feminist values, principles, or frameworks shape their assessment projects and workflows? How do they impact the questions above?

- Do departments have a workflow for disseminating data?

## **Phase 2: Designing & Implementing Assessment Methodology**

### ***Survey Rationale***

Our working group had to reckon with several constraints, including: a one-year turnaround for a full report; data collection across all thirty-one NYU Libraries departments (including global sites); and affording flexibility to accommodate departments' limited time and capacity.

After deliberation, we chose to conduct a survey as the best method for our assessment. To begin, surveys are popularly regarded as a versatile and efficient research methodology. Because surveys can easily include open-ended questions, they provide substantial capacity to investigate issues deeply. A well designed survey can collect data from many people at a relatively low-to-no cost, and can be completed in a short period of time.<sup>8</sup> Surveys also offer asynchronous participation which is vital for respondents who have limited time to spare day-to-day.

### ***Survey Design***

We chose to design our survey as a simple questionnaire, which is best suited for the balance of exploratory and evaluative questions we hoped to ask. Our questionnaire was designed with a clear navigational path that centered the respondent's perspective throughout.<sup>9</sup> This meant guiding respondents through exploring their own assessment processes more broadly, and then more specifically with an IDBEA-lens. As commonly advised, we wrote questions with our analysis in mind: what types of answers did we want to our research questions? What information would be helpful towards our goals? This framework allowed us to focus on the questions on what we need, and limit overwhelming our colleagues with unnecessary, unproductive questions.

In total, our survey consisted of 27 questions, 19 of which were qualitative (e.g., open-ended), allowing for flexibility in the length of their responses. We selected Qualtrics as our survey platform because: it is a more secure platform as opposed to Google Forms; it allows for powerful branching and display logic to better relay complex survey flows; it permits for easy group editing. The Qualtrics survey was formatted to meet digital accessibility requirements, as per our institution's digital accessibility department.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Survey Analysis***

Due to the size of our working group, we wanted to create a data analysis process that everyone could contribute to meaningfully. While our data set was large we decided to approach data analysis manually rather than using software such as MAX QDA or Atlas.ti. In order to break up the analysis equitably, we divided the data set by question and assigned each member up to two questions as a primary analyzer. Then, we assigned those same questions to a second person, who acted as a reviewer and engaged discursively with the primary analyzer's comments. This created more consistency in the analysis work across members, while ensuring an equitable distribution of labor that required accountability and commitment from each member. Next, we created a worksheet that guided members through a thematic analysis process starting with identifying high-level codes, distilling takeaways are themes from those codes, highlighting outliers in the data, and focusing particularly on IDBEA-related insights. Given that much of this work happened asynchronously we also provided space for individuals to provide questions and concerns in a more freeform manner. Finally, our initial research driving our research questions helped provide a clear lens through which we analyzed our data.

### Phase 3: Distilling Assessment Findings

Our collective data analysis revealed several themes across assessment at large and insights specific to our IDBEA goals. Given the scope of our project, our report primarily focused on the salient themes related to IDBEA concerns, questions, and strategies within departments' assessment practices. The following findings became the bedrock of our study, and were the exact questions that guided our following literature review.

**Ethical representation:** concerning the inclusion of marginalized or oppressed student communities in assessment projects.

- When planning who you want to assess, how do you approach the representation of marginalized groups ethically?
- How do you avoid or minimize various types of harm (e.g., stereotyping, tokenizing)? How do you approach demographic questions ethically?
- What do you consider a representative sample, especially when considering marginalized groups?
- When is representation meaningful for the populations you're hoping to include? Are departments thinking critically about "who" they want to represent, and *why*?
- How do we conceptualize power in decision-making around who we want to assess and why? Who benefits (or is at a disadvantage) from your assessment practice?

**Autonomy and safety of the user:** concerning patron consent and anonymization of their information.

- What actions do we need to take to ensure participants are fully aware of the scope of their participation and use of their data?

**Ethics and use of assessment methods and platforms:** concerning the inclusivity and accessibility of various assessment methods and the mechanics of data collection.

- What methods of data collection are considered to be accessible and ethics-based? Can data collection even be anti-racist, inclusive, and diverse?
- How can assessment practices be designed to be technologically accessible for students with disabilities?
- How does one craft ethical question design?

**Ethics of data retention, storage, and reuse:** concerning how patron information is maintained and used to protect their safety and autonomy.

- What do we consider personal or private user data? What guidelines should we follow for what counts as sensitive data?
- What policies should we consider around the retention of private, identifiable user data? Around non-identifiable user data?
- How long should data be stored for, and where? What should be considered when answering these questions?
- What do you consider when moving data from one platform to another?
- What are the ethics of reusing data (especially private, user data) for purposes different from why the data was originally collected?
- What guidelines should we follow for data that is "automatically" collected from various platforms or tools we use (e.g., gate counts, Aleph patron data). *Just because a system collects data, do we need to use it?*
- What guidelines are there for ownership and sharing settings for data? (Think: Google Drive).
- What policies should people look out for when deciding to use a particular data collection platform?

**Presenting Data:** concerning the way data is synthesized and presented, and whether it authentically reflects the data collected.

- How do institutional goals impact how we approach or synthesize data?

- How can an intended audience shape data analysis?
- What is our responsibility to promote IDBEA values with our findings? What is our responsibility to prioritize IDBEA-focused assessment?

## **Phase 4: Conducting a Literature Review**

In the penultimate phase of our meta-assessment process, we addressed the themes and questions that emerged from our assessment through a literature review. This research provided an initial foray into best practices, guidance, and information into the Libraries' concerns around IDBEA-informed assessment. From the onset, our literature review was not intended to be exhaustive: the resources provided were only intended to be a starting place for departments planning assessment projects or strategies. Our research had to be general enough to be relevant to most, if not all, departments. If we left any theme or question left unaddressed, it was because the subject was too complex to provide succinct guidance relevant for most departments' needs. By providing a generic foundation for best practices, we encouraged every department to conduct specialized research on ethical or IDBEA-informed assessment as it relates to their specific projects and needs. This framing in our report provided us, as a working group, more freedom to focus on the breadth of resources rather than depth—especially in subject areas where we may not have had expertise.

Our literature review made up the bulk of our working group's final report, as the best practices and ethical assessment guidelines were the most valued outcome of our work. Given the specificity of our research to our institutions' needs, this paper will just summarize our findings per theme to give a sense of the breadth of the review.

### ***4.1 Ethical Representation***

Ethical representation concerns questions around how to conduct outreach and represent groups of people in your assessment without causing harm. This theme was of major consideration for nearly all departments, regardless of whether their assessment practice directly recruits participants. Ethical representation is a key theme across all parts of the assessment lifecycle: whether one is planning their research or interpreting their data. However, our research focused heavily on best practices for ethical participant recruitment, including: reflexive questions to challenge assumptive or normative strategies; culturally-appropriate labels and identifiers for marginalized communities; building appropriate stakeholder relationships. The research also shared best practices around question design, and optimizing the ability for respondents to self-describe—either their own identities or their general responses— as much as possible to avoid misinterpretation.

### ***4.2 Autonomy and Safety of the User***

This theme emerged from the two distinct ways our Libraries conduct assessment—either through direct participant interaction, or through collected patron data. The two-fold central question then was: how do we ensure that patrons feel physically and psychologically safe participating in assessment, *and* how do we make sure patron data collected is private and secured? By broadening the scope of this question, the results of our research are bound to apply to any department utilizing patron data *in any fashion* as part of their assessment portfolio. Our research revealed extensive best practices around informed consent, and articulating the purpose of data collection regardless of the methodology.

### ***4.3 Ethical Considerations of Assessment Methods***

This theme came up predominantly for those who conduct assessment directly with patrons, and are looking for guidance on the best methodologies in service of autonomy, safety, and ethical representation. Of all the respondents who indicated their assessment practices involve direct outreach to patrons, most utilized survey-based methods.

Therefore, concerns arose as to whether these methodologies can be adequately ethical. Our research focused on exploring critical quantitative studies and providing suggestions towards the best practices espoused in this field.

#### ***4.4 Ethics of Data Use and Retention***

The use, storage, and retention of data emerged as both a pervasive and universal theme for every department. This section of our research was the largest, and consisted of the following parts: definitions of personally identifiable information; common concerns and issues with data management specifically with library technologies; best practices for basic data management; reflexive questions around the value and practice of data retention over time. Our research focused heavily on articles that called to attention the dangers of large scale data collection and the endemic of little oversight or governance in libraries around this normalized practice.

#### ***4.5 Ethical Presentation of Data***

Many library workers are tasked with presenting the results and impact of their assessment project– including a presentation of the data collected. This theme addresses concerns around how to present data in an authentic and ethical way that serves those who participated, rather than our own institutional agendas. Our research focused on elaborating the differences between assessment and advocacy, and the best practices around how to accurately represent data collected.

#### ***4.6 Best Practices Checklist***

In our research, we came across a checklist that was created by the non-profit organization WestEd, which provides concrete recommendations towards anti-racist research and assessment design for every step of the assessment lifecycle.<sup>11</sup> This includes: assessment preparation, design, methodology selection, data interpretation, dissemination, and reflection. Rather fortuitously, this checklist aligns very closely to the best practices emerging from our research. Therefore, we recommended assessment practitioners at our library to use this checklist, in conjunction with the starting resources we provided and further research.

### **Phase 5: Next Steps**

Like any critical or reflexive process, it was important for us to scaffold a plan to share, implement, reflect, and reiterate on our recommendations. In the months following senior leadership’s approval of our report, we shared our report to the entire library through multiple means, including: dissemination of our report, multiple presentations tailored towards multiple sects of our library departments, and individual meetings with departments. Afterwards, we selected two departments to implement the findings from the report– the User Experience department of which Harini Kannan is a part of, and the Undergraduate Instruction Services (UIS) department of which Hafeezah Hussein is a part of. Using our own departments as pilots, we are able to ensure appropriate and consistent application of the reports’ findings to our own work. By the end of the year, we hope to reflect on this implementation process, including evaluating or understanding: the ease of digesting our report into practice; continued information gaps that require further research and guidance; and the efficacy of actually implementing the best practices from the research. We hope our reflections lead to interactions in our practice that we can share once again with our library community and that our pilot, upon revisions, can be a model for departments to reproduce for every assessment project they take on.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is our hope that with this paper, you will have a concrete example of what it means to conduct a meta-assessment process, focused on the values of inclusion, diversity, belonging, equity, and accessibility (IDBEA). Through

providing ample details of navigating both the theoretical and practical aspects of this work, we hope you have a robust foundation to begin thinking about what a meta-assessment process may look at *your* institution. Whether you're focused on a particular aspect of IDBEA you'd like to investigate, or are generally curious what your libraries' assessment portfolio currently looks like, an adapted version of our meta-assessment process may be of assistance to you. We look forward to hearing of your projects in the future!

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