Assessment Practice in Canadian University Libraries: Survey Results

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Introduction

Accountability and data-informed decision-making are becoming paramount for Canadian public institutions such as governments and universities. Canadian university libraries are therefore focusing more than ever on evaluating and assessing their services and products. To discover more about the current assessment culture, Isla Jordan from Carleton University and Julie McKenna from the University of Regina[1] conducted an online survey of services assessment practices in Canadian university libraries. The goals of this project were to gain a sense of assessment practices within the libraries and to provide a baseline for future comparisons and research into services assessment practice.

The definition of academic library assessment by Martha Kyrillidou and Pam Ryan and on the ARL supported library assessment blog was used:

> "includes any activities that seek to measure the library's impact on teaching, learning and research as well as initiatives that seek to identify user needs or gauge user satisfaction or perceptions with the overall goal being the data-based and user-centred continuous improvement of our collections and services". <http://libraryassessment.info/?page_id=7>

Services were defined as any aspect of the relationship of the library's collections, services and programs with users. The assessment of staff performance was not considered.

Research Methodology

Research work conducted by Susan Beck[2] in the U.S. was used as a springboard to inform the development of a new survey aimed specifically for a Canadian audience. Experts in surveys and data analysis provided feedback and advice into the development of the survey and the project was approved by the Research Ethics groups at the University of Regina and Carleton University.

Deans and directors of university libraries across Canada were invited via email to participate in this online survey. Out of 77 emails, 43 valid responses were received yielding a 56% response rate. Survey results are presented at an aggregate level to maintain confidentiality.

Results

Section 1 – Demographic Information

The survey included questions about demographic data for the most recent annual reporting period required by CARL or other regional organizations. There were 43 valid survey respondents belonging to the 4 regional organizations: Council of Prairie and Pacific University Libraries (COPPUL), Ontario Council

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[1] Julie McKenna is now Deputy Library Director, Regina Public Library
[2] for example: Susan Beck, "Do Data Count? How Library Administrators Make Decisions " (presentation, American Library Association 2006 Annual Conference, June 22-28, 2006, New Orleans, Louisiana)

of University Libraries (OCUL), Canadian Atlantic University Libraries (CAUL/CBUA) and La Conférence des recteurs et des principaux des universités du Québec (CREPUQ). The distribution of responses from these four groups can be seen in Figure 1:
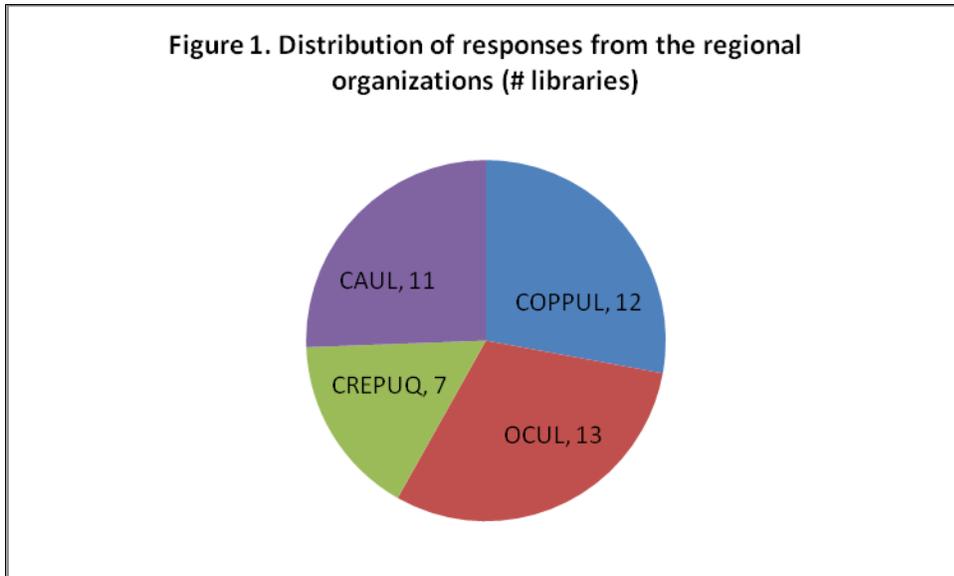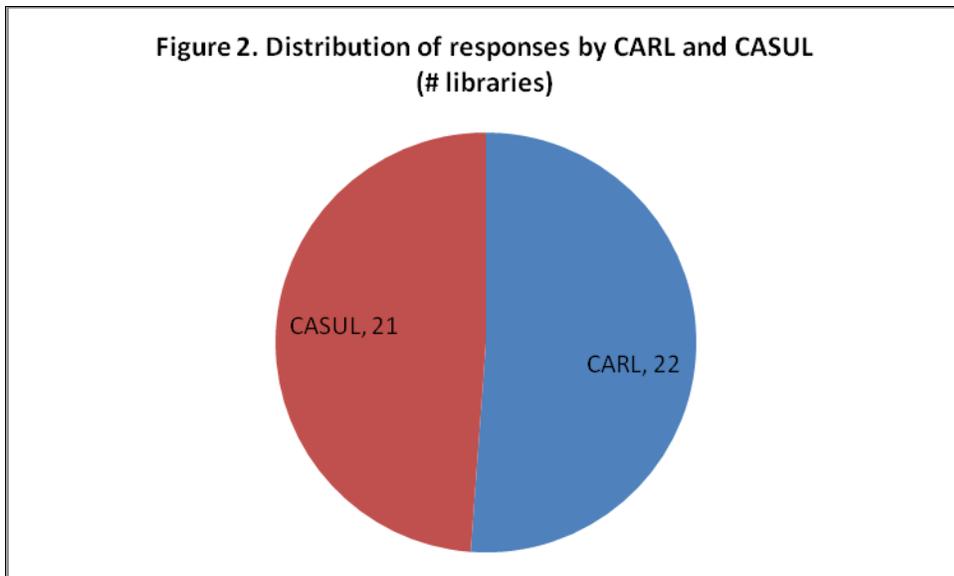
Figure 1. Distribution of responses from the regional organizations (# libraries)

COPPUL, 12
OCUL, 13
CREPUQ, 7
CAUL, 11

Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the large and small universities:

Figure 2. Distribution of responses by CARL and CASUL (# libraries)

CASUL, 21
CARL, 22

There was a large variation of the libraries surveyed in terms of total budget and library materials budget, in FTE students, staff and librarians and in the number of branch libraries.
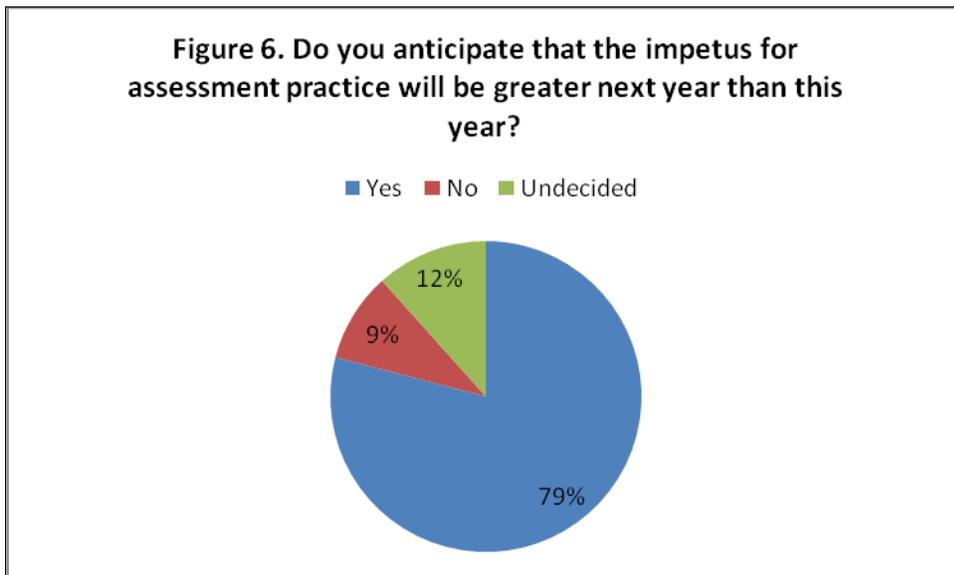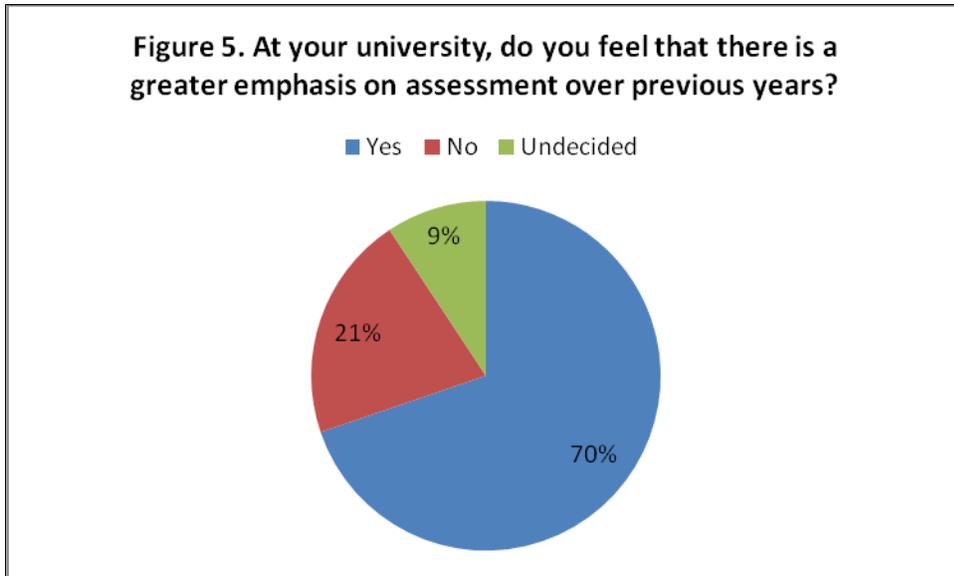
Section 2 - Assessment Planning

Respondents were asked what drives assessment of library services and facilities within their institution (they chose from a predetermined list and could also add their own replies). Although responses varied, the two largest drivers of assessment were library administration and the need for evidence (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The need to undertake assessment of library services and facilities at our institution is driven by:
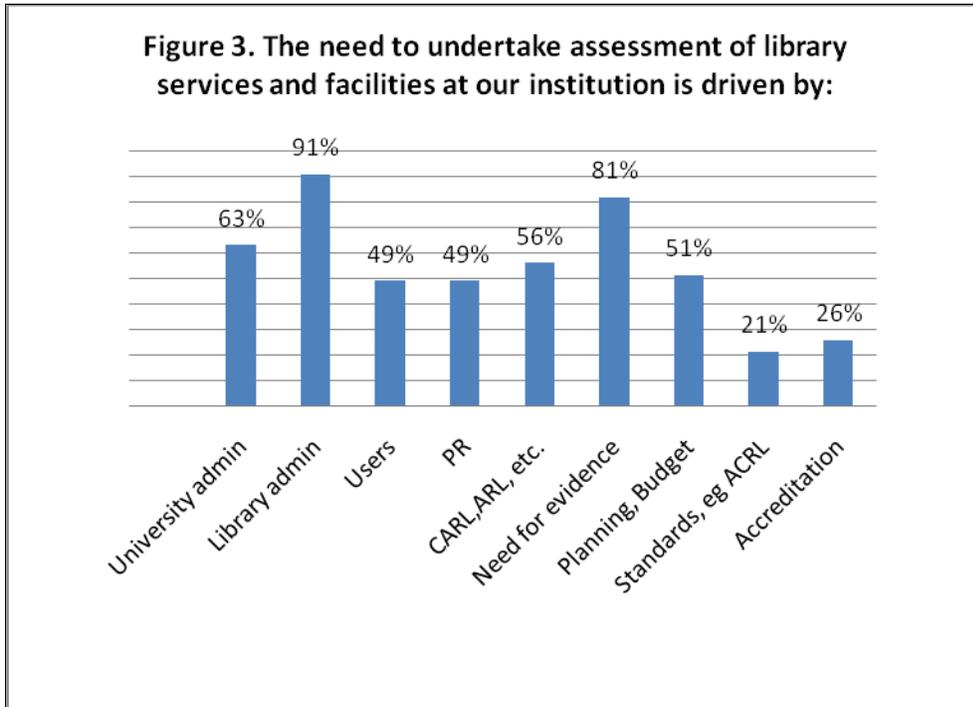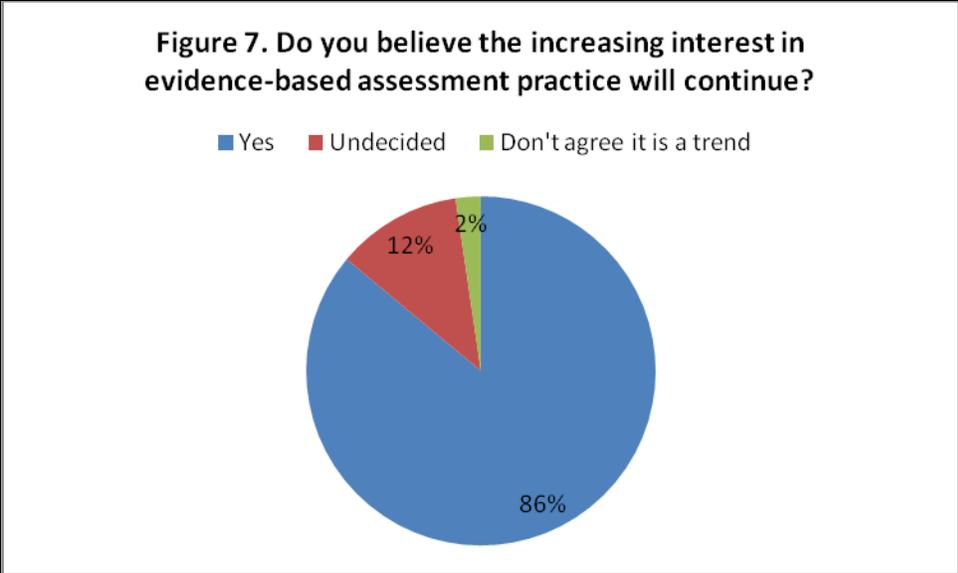
When asked whether their library had an assessment plan, 9% replied "Yes" and 37% reported to having one under development (Figure 4):

Figure 4. Does your library have an assessment plan?
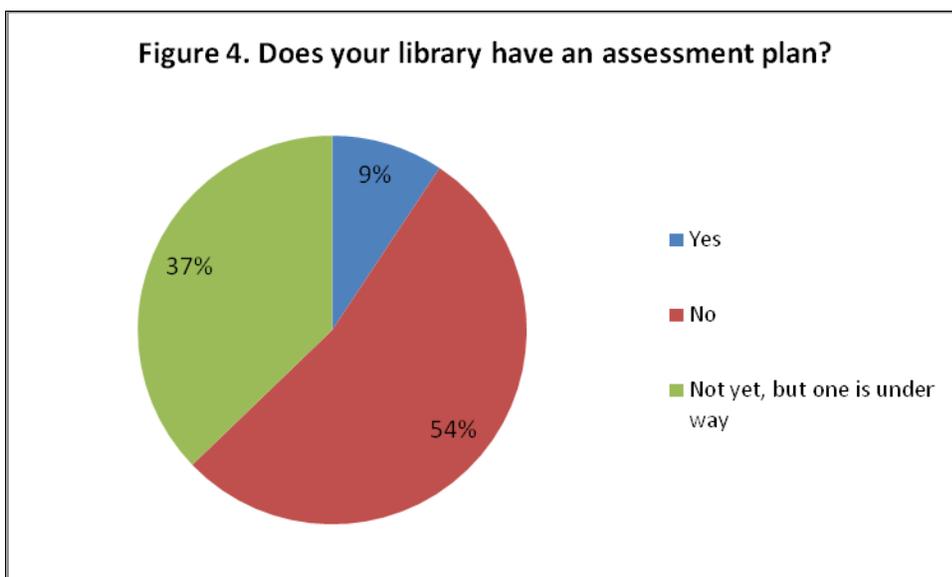
It was interesting to note that the majority of respondents felt that interest in assessment was growing, as seen by Figures 5 and 6:

Figure 5. At your university, do you feel that there is a greater emphasis on assessment over previous years?

Figure 6. Do you anticipate that the impetus for assessment practice will be greater next year than this year?

When asked about evidence-based assessment practice as a trend, most survey participants believed the trend would continue (Figure 7):

Figure 7. Do you believe the increasing interest in evidence-based assessment practice will continue?

Legend: Yes | Undecided | Don't agree it is a trend

- 86% Yes
- 12% Undecided
- 2% Don't agree it is a trend

Section 3 – Assessment Structure within Library

Forty-two percent of libraries reported having a unit or position responsible for the collection and analysis of data used to assess library services. There are three main types of positions where responsibility is assigned for assessment activities (Table 1).

Table 1: Types of positions that are assigned responsibilities for assessment activities		
Position	# Libraries	# Positions
Senior management or their administrators	13	17
Department heads	7	10
Assessment librarian/coordinator	6	6

Note: Some libraries listed more than one of the positions responsible for assessment.

Seven out of 43 libraries reported having assessment committees. Individuals are appointed at 4 of the seven, volunteers are sought at two, and at one, the committee is a mix of volunteers and appointees. In addition, there are several other types of committees with assessment responsibilities such as:

- LibQUAL+ Working Group; LibQUAL+ Committee

- Cooperative Planning Team

- Senior Management Group

- Accreditation Self-Study Steering Committee

- Statistics Committee

- PR/Communications Committee

Assessment is a regular practice for a variety of library functions as indicated by the following table:

Table 2: Activities where assessment is a regular practice		
Library Department	**# Libraries**	**%**
Borrowing/Lending	17	40
Interlibrary Loans	24	56
Reference	25	58
Data Services	7	16
Instruction	28	65
Collections	25	58
Electronic Resources	24	56
Distance Learning Support	4	9
Government Documents	3	7
Systems	10	23
Cataloguing	17	40
Acquisitions	14	33
Library Administration, including director/dean	14	33

A number of unique competencies are necessary for successful assessment practice. Survey respondents were asked whether they have staff with the skills to support specific assessment functions. For example, fifty-eight percent of libraries agree that they have staff members with the ability to select the appropriate research design:

- 63% agree that they have staff members with the ability to undertake survey design

- 56% agree that they have staff members with the ability to design focus group research

- 76% agree that they have staff members with the ability to facilitate focus groups

- 42% agree that they have staff members with the ability to design sampling plans

- 72% agree that they have staff members with the ability to undertake qualitative data analysis

- 77% agree that they have staff members with the ability to undertake quantitative data analysis

- 86% agree that they have staff members with the ability to draw summary conclusions and make recommendations

- 91% agree that they have staff members with the ability to write formal reports

- 95% agree that they have staff members with presentation skills

- 84% agree that they have staff members with project management skills

In addition, a few libraries report to having staff with the ability to promote a 'culture of assessment' within their library to all types of staff members. Others mentioned staff having technical skills in database design and maintenance, survey software, total quality management, and process reengineering. Two libraries mentioned abilities such as linking data directly to standards, choosing data that is useful, and putting statistics into a context that helps their meaning to be understood. Five of the 43 survey respondents (3 of these were CARL libraries) use a Management Information System to compile and manage statistical data and two other respondents intend to get a MIS.

Section 4 – Collection and Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

Many qualitative and quantitative assessment studies go beyond the traditional input/output statistics to inform decision-making. Table 3 shows studies that libraries have undertaken, used in decision-making, and/or intend to carry out in the next year.

Table 3: Past and Planned Assessment Practicess in University Libaries			
Assessment practice:	**% who have undertaken study**	**% who used results in decision-making**	**% who intend to undertake in next year**
User satisfaction survey	63	56	49
Borrowing outcomes/impacts	9	19	14
ILL outcomes/impacts	16	21	19
The nature of in-house use of materials	16	9	7
Electronic database use	40	35	28
Electronic journal use	35	40	33
Gate count	44	51	12
Other web statistics	19	33	12
Volume count	33	28	9
Reference surveys	35	28	12
Instruction Services study	28	30	23
Usability of the catalogue	19	19	12
Usability of the website (excluding catalogue)	37	37	35
Information Literacy study	19	12	28
Distance Learner study	7	5	9
Information Commons study	14	14	14
Institutional Repository study	2	2	19
Learner Outcomes Assessment	5	5	9
Library Service Hours study	37	35	21

The most common assessment practice is the LibQUAL+ study. As one respondent indicated, this study is a "gentle way to take baby steps to begin" the work of assessment. The following bar graph shows the use of the LibQUAL+ survey over time (Figure 8):

Figure 8. Past & Planned LibQUAL+ Surveys (# Libraries)
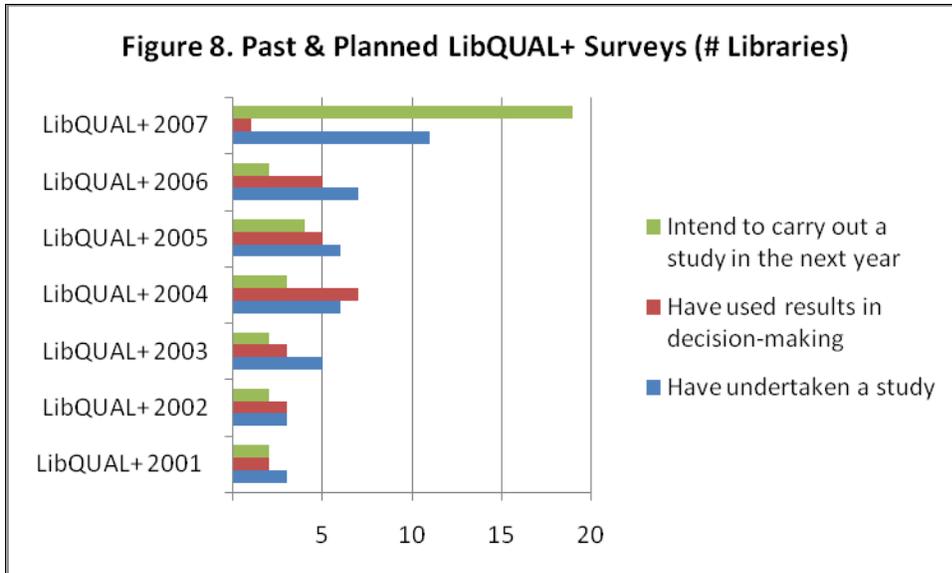
Note: Due to the timing of the survey, it is not surprising that only a few respondents had used the LibQUAL 2007+ results in decision-making.

A number of libraries reported use of other types of assessment practices. One university library has conducted focus groups on reference service and on website usability (e.g. working one-on-one with students and faculty members who describe their thinking processes while working their way through a series of tasks). Another library tracks downloads from their open journals system, use of their online learning modules and increased use of GIS versus circulation of paper maps.

Other assessment practices mentioned include:

- Service audits of library services
- Digital collection use study
- E-book user survey
- User needs assessment /service evaluation of PDA resources
- Study of science/technology library space usage
- Print journal usage (cost/person analysis)
- Emerging services survey (Prospective student expectations)
- Learning Commons (on-going user feedback on services)

- Library security (on-going analysis of user complaints/issues for policy development)
- Laptop loan program (use patterns, user feedback)
- Use of collections by constituency
- Comparison of print and e-materials use over time
- Staff assessments regarding orientation, IT needs and training, and usability of Intranet.

Although most of the libraries gather usage statistics for eResources, fewer analyze these statistics or utilize this analysis in decision-making (Figure 9). At one university library, eResource statistics are gathered as part of an overall journal review. Another library commented: "Documentation of use of electronic information resources resulted in replacement of all outdated computer equipment and implementation of planning for future maintenance and upgrading of technological infrastructure on campus".

Figure 9: Use of eResource Usage Statistics (# libraries)
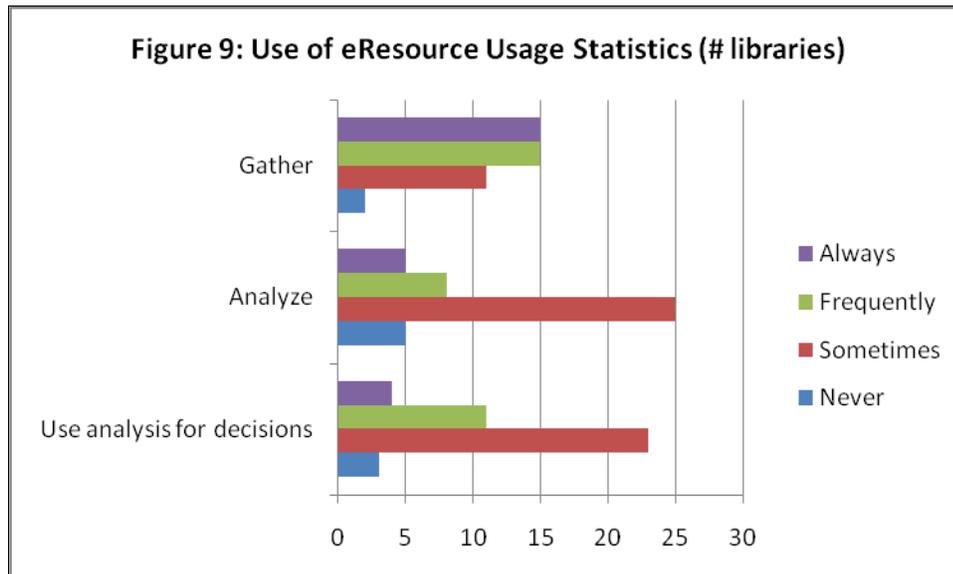
Respondents were asked to provide examples of situations where traditional output data collected was used to inform decision-making, to which they replied:

- Traditional output data was used to cross train staff in different units to respond to trends.
- Usage statistics were used to inform decision-making regarding equipment purchases, such as printers and photocopiers.
- In-house use of theses and circulation statistics informed storage planning and transfer decisions.
- Counts of items processed helped identify alternatives for restructuring the services.
- Usage figures influenced building design work.
- Productivity figures led to outsourcing.
- Data was used for publicity/lobbying efforts and to justify the request for more money to the library budget.
- Traditional output collected to inform decision-making on nature and timing of instruction sessions.
- Circulation data of individual issues of print journals helped to make decisions to cut print subscriptions in favour of electronic.
- Used gate counts and count of where patrons were in the building at various times (i.e. how many in group study, special collections, individual study, using computers, periodicals, teacher's resources center, etc.) to assist in planning of additional individual study rooms and small group study rooms.

- An analysis of trends in document delivery over five years was used to identify the magnitude of increased demand for these services. This evidence enabled the redeployment of staff resources to redress workload imbalances that were impacting negatively on delivery of other services.
- A patron-selected acquisition pilot project that involved records from an e-book vendor to be loaded into the catalogue (prior to purchase). After two accesses (or 'checkouts') by patrons, the e-book would be automatically purchased for the library collection. While employing new technologies, the PSA project used e-output measures in order to build the collection in a user-centred way.

Many respondents reported using gate counts for various purposes, e.g. to determine building hours, to increase open hours during exam periods, to evaluate a 24 hour opening, to determine staffing for the Information/Reference Desk and to review staffing outside of daytime weekday hours.

Conclusion

Assessment of library services is necessary to inform policy development, staff allocations, collection development, and the planning and evaluation of service delivery. The results of this survey illuminate what is happening in terms of assessment practices in Canadian university libraries, including data-gathering and analysis as well as using data to inform decision-making. The survey respondents were at various stages in assessing different services and products. They indicated that their libraries intended to increase their assessment activities in the future, particularly the LibQUAL survey. It is hoped that this report will provide a baseline for future studies as well as a tool for library administrators to plan and to set organizational priorities.

Acknowledgements