Library Statistics and the HAPLR Index

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irculation is up 5 percent this year. Visitors to the Clibrary averaged 20,000 people per month for 2005. Statistics such as these are commonly cited at library meetings and in discussions of libraries, but it is sometimes difficult to determine their practical significance. Statistics are important to library management, both in their collection and interpretation. Data are collected and compiled in many different areas, then analyzed using various methods. The crucial aspect of data management for successful library administration is the proper interpretation and application of statistics. One statistical tool that has received a lot of media attention is Hennen's American Public Library Ratings (HAPLR) index, which ranks public libraries by several criteria.¹ However, rankings can be tricky, and it can be argued that the HAPLR index does not give a full picture of a public library's story. All statistics tell a story, but some stories are more useful than others.

Keeping Statistics

Smith identifies two broad categories of library management statistics: financial data and library service data.² Public library financial data has to do with money–income, overhead, expenditures, and so on–and are reported in the budgeting and accounting processes required by law. Library service data, on the other hand, collect statistics relating to the quantifiable service functions performed by the library, including information about the staff, the collection, and library usage. These categories of data can be further subdivided by type: input data, output data, and service outcomes. All three types of data should be used in conjunction to make good decisions, as together they give a more complete picture of what is happening within the library.

Historically, the focus of library statistics has been on input measures. These are the most easily tracked statistics because they count the things the library puts into its operation, including allocations, the volumes in the collection, the number of staff hours, the number of programs held by the library, and so on. These all reflect forms of capital that the library invests in its operation. It has long been recognized that the drawback with input statistics is that they are purely quantitative and not necessarily qualitative. Simply having staff, programs, and books in the library is not enough. It is more important to know how these things are used (or if they are used at all).

The next category of statistics is output measures, which calculate the quantitative results of the inputs, such as the number of circulations, the gate count of library visitors, program attendance, numerical usage assessments, and so on. Often, the most compelling arguments reflecting the success of library services have to do with the number of people who use the library and its computers or attend its programs, and the somewhat limited, though highly accurate and consistent, circulation statistics. However, according to Hernon, "the numbers are devoid of any context and, in fact, mostly represent inputs."³ The actual or perceived benefit of the input is uncountable.

The final type of library statistics builds upon these outputs and examines their outcomes. These go beyond discrete events, evaluating how patrons use the library and seeking more information on whether those patrons are satisfied with their library experience. Smith refers to outcomes as "core elements that most libraries use to determine the effectiveness of the library in meeting the needs of its clientele."⁴ The key to the service outcomes is that they put the focus back on the patron and meeting the library community's needs. However, often variable, generally nonquantifiable, and sometimes subjective, these types of statistics are difficult to standardize, and the "practical use of outcome-based evaluation is still in its infancy . . . so quantitative measures should be combined with outcomes."⁵

With so many different aspects of services to measure, it could seem that libraries and library managers might be overwhelmed by keeping statistics and attempting to decipher what they all mean. Fortunately, each library can make its own decision on what statistics to keep, depending on individual needs. Beyond those statistics required by boards, institutions, consortia, and so on,

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libraries can choose to keep data on local aspects that are deemed important. Whether in support of short- or long-term goals, the most important factor is that the data collected reflect what administrators want and need to know, because "regardless of what argument you are making about your library, if the data support your position, you will find statistics to be powerful and eloquent allies."6 Some areas in which statistics are useful are planning goals, allocating resources (both within the library and within the municipality), benchmarking and making comparisons, and fostering public relations. Further, Clay notes that, as libraries increasingly adopt business management models, "The business community bases strategic decisions on data that answers the question 'how are we doing?' and libraries should borrow from that practice."⁷ Using statistics effectively allows libraries to quantify the value of their services and see how they are doing as they move forward.

Apart from discretionary statistics chosen by library administrators, data also are required at the state and national levels. State libraries keep statistics for libraries within their jurisdictions, and "every state library in the U.S. participates in a voluntary project called the Federal-State Cooperative System for Public Library Data [FSCS]."⁸ Because every state has different needs, each state requires different data from its public libraries; but only a few of these statistics are passed on to the federal level. These comparative few are the statistics that are represented by the HAPLR index.

The HAPLR Instrument

While libraries have collected and analyzed data for years, until recently there has been no national evaluation and no way to compare libraries of equal size across the country. The HAPLR index is Thomas Hennen's attempt to rectify this deficiency. In a nutshell, the index takes a set of fifteen statistics and, according to a weighted system, creates a ranked, comparative score between one and one thousand and yields data on how each library measures up to other libraries in certain key areas.

The first edition was published in 1999; it was based on the data filed by libraries in 1997 for 1996. The idea behind the index is that these statistics are important enough to be collected at the state *and* national level, and thus could be used to demonstrate effectiveness in public libraries. Hennen contends that it is meant to "show libraries how they compare to their peer institutions."⁹ What are these peer institutions? Generally, they are other libraries that fall into the broad population divisions that are used in the ranking. Peer institutions are ranked on fifteen criteria–six input measures and nine output measures. The set of statistics that Hennen uses are those that are readily available through FSCS. The input measures are:

- 1. expenditure per capita;
- 2. percent budget to materials;
- 3. materials expenditure per capita;
- 4. full-time equivalent (FTE) staff per 1,000 population;
- 5. periodicals per 1,000 population; and
- 6. volumes per capita.

The output measures include:

- 1. cost per circulation;
- 2. visits per capita;
- 3. collection turnover;
- 4. circulation per FTE staff hour;
- 5. circulation per capita;
- 6. reference per capita;
- 7. circulation per hour;
- 8. visits per hour; and
- 9. circulation per visit.

Each factor is assigned a weight between one and three based on its relative importance. To calculate the overall score for each library, the weighed statistics are added up, divided by twenty-nine (the number of weighted points), then divided by the number of libraries within the population group, and finally multiplied by one thousand to get the library's index number. To determine the ranking, the index numbers are arranged from lowest to highest. The top ten scores within that population group would then become a part of the Top 100 Libraries for the year.¹⁰

There are various benefits to this. For example, the distinction of being ranked in the Top 100 Libraries presents a wonderful public relations opportunity for those libraries. This gives the directors of those libraries an opening to address the media about the positive aspects of their services, which helps attract staff or encourage greater community involvement. It is also a way for libraries that did not score well to demonstrate a need for greater funding and attention so they can aspire to reach the Top 100 Libraries. Either way, it sets standards and benchmarks.

The other side of the coin is that this index cannot be used to comprehensively rank libraries. For example, many of the statistics are heavily dependent on population, and population also is used to determine the peer group. Doing so makes some questionable assumptions, considering the fact that population is not a very closely controlled variable. Even Hennen concedes that FSCS makes some "rather arbitrary assignments of population."¹¹ While this classification by size determines the comparison group, a library in the Midwest may feel that its true peer group is other libraries in the region, regardless of size, not libraries of comparable size in another area of the country. Further, the peer groups with which to compare statistics will most likely change over time, independently of population changes, as do a library's goals and objectives. Snapshot comparisons with any given group may be more or less relevant depending on the time.

Another major issue is the decision to use the fifteen statistics and assigning weights to those statistics. Hennen used data collected by FSCS, and the criteria were used mostly because they were conveniently available.¹² There is no discussion of why or how these particular criteria demonstrate excellence in public libraries or any admission that the chosen sets of data are partially redundant (as with the sets of circulation statistics). Nor does the weighting system have a mathematical rationale. Some elements are weighted three times as others, but the reason for this is not clear other than that these weightings reflect the opinions of a survey group of PubLib subscribers.¹³

More broadly representative statistics need to be identified, collected, and standardized as quickly as possible, so that the HAPLR index (or an alternative national system) can be as accurate and as relevant as possible. Hennen has been criticized for not addressing many important library issues in his rankings. For example, the index is heavily slanted toward circulation, but does not address computer and Internet usage at all. Hennen's argument is that these data are not required at the federal level, and where the data are available (as a few states do require such data), they are not yet standardized. However, as Internet use becomes a more prominent library activity, any system that does not address this aspect is inherently flawed. In addition, the index does not address the quality of children's services at all, a major concern for youth services librarians.¹⁴ Furthermore, Lance and Cox go so far as to argue that "statistical evidence suggests there is not likely to be a single index of public library quality."¹⁵

Public libraries are part of their communities, with local needs and issues. The HAPLR index does not address these issues and makes comparisons that do not make sense at the local level. The index imposes outside standards on these libraries by evaluating them based on misleading population variables and factors unrelated to their priorities. Instead, librarians design services by learning from the community what issues they need to address and what they need to improve upon. Then they decide a course of action, involving goal setting and targeting a suitable set of statistics to monitor success. Rankings are easy to understand and used to gauge progress, and even if their emphasis is on the "outside world" (instead of measuring local initiatives), adopting new systems of assessment will be slow. But it is important to do so.

The HAPLR index and the subsequent ratings force librarians to focus on the issues defined by the index. There are many problems, especially where cost/benefit analysis and funding decisions are involved. Because a large part of the index counts circulation, to improve the library's rating or to hold onto a good rating, libraries will have to continue to focus on circulation, even if their users have different needs. Larger amounts of funding will have to be allocated to sustaining or improving upon these measures. This is like teaching to the test, which is reflected positively in the scoring, but is ineffective in the long term. Further, these rankings could be used not only to show that libraries are doing their job, but also to show that some libraries are not measuring up to the standard. It may be used to support the closing of certain branches or the reduction of funding. Finally, the HAPLR index could increase competition between libraries by setting them up against each other. This does not reflect the reality that public libraries have always collaborated, and that increased competition between libraries will hurt, rather than help, every library.

Conclusion

A rule of thumb in statistics is to first determine what is to be investigated, and then decide what set of data will be needed to answer that question. Hennen has taken the opposite approach. He has found a set of data and then created a system to answer a question that no one asked. As long as it is accepted by the larger community, libraries will have to deal with the consequences of the HAPLR system.

Rankings are one valid method of using statistics; for example, the well-known, annual U.S. News & World *Report* rankings include the best graduate schools and best colleges and universities.¹⁶ As with the HAPLR index, they take certain factors into consideration and give a score that can then be compared with other schools or programs; however, this is a tool that is used to attract students (and therefore money) into different programs and is thus competitive in nature. By contrast, public libraries are not in competition with one another. Libraries serve their patrons better by cooperation (for example, through reciprocal borrowing and other collaborative efforts), so that in their missions, if not always their rankings, public libraries are for the patrons. The goal of libraries, and therefore the purpose of the statistics they collect, is to recognize the good things that already exist within that library and use the data they have to find ways to make that library great.

The mission of the public library has always been to "(1) support the education and socialization needs of society, (2) meet the informational needs of a broad spectrum of citizens, (3) promote self-education, and (4) satisfy the popular tastes of the public."¹⁷ The fulfillment of these goals is difficult to fully demonstrate through statistics alone. Because of this, many libraries have been minimizing inputs and outputs (although they are still required to keep these numbers by their boards and their state libraries), and starting to develop other methods of evaluation. Some of these newer methods focus on customer satisfaction or return on investment, which demonstrates the value of the service per taxpayer dollar to show how beneficial library services really are.

Some, however, take a different approach. Crowley, in his article "Suicide Prevention: Safeguarding the Future of the Professional Librarian," suggests that the role of the public library is not to fulfill the objectives set forth by the HAPLR index or other standards, but to serve as the community's educational center.¹⁸ When the public library is viewed as an educational institution, as it is in many states, the HAPLR index falls short as an effective method of evaluation. Crowley further suggests establishing an educational agenda that includes "discernment by state and national associations the need to study the effects of the HAPLR rating system to explore developing alternative procedures that better measure public library quality."¹⁹ The fact remains, however, that in order for public libraries to develop an effective rating and ranking system, clear missions and goals should first be stated, and only then can a system be created to evaluate how well those objectives are being met. There are currently several different approaches to this issue.

One particularly interesting approach to evaluating services is the secret shopper. This method has been used in other settings, but is particularly useful in libraries as they employ an unbiased third party to anonymously observe staff and evaluate customer service quality in the library. In the words of one library, "the secret-shoppers experience enabled us to view our service through the eyes of patrons in very specific ways. We evaluated every level of our organization."²⁰ It is possible that these methods can yield output measures.

Other options for obtaining qualitative data is to conduct surveys of library users and nonusers as to what they think of the library in regards to services they receive and services they would like to see offered. This kind of service-outcome approach is more future-driven than statistics, which measure past events. For example, the LibQUAL+ survey was originally used in academic libraries, but has also been successfully applied to public libraries. LibQUAL+ is helpful because it "gives your library users a chance to tell you where your services need improvement so you can respond to and better manage their expectations."²¹ This Web-based survey takes a sample of the library population and asks them to answer questions related to Service Affect, Library As Place, and Information Control.²² By directly questioning library users, this survey allows libraries to determine exactly what patrons want and how well the library is serving the communities' needs.

Going forward, statistics evaluation requires reconsidering which sets of data are really necessary and helpful to the library, and which sets of data have just always been kept. This is only the first step in the process, though. As public library leaders rethink their place in the community, they should also rethink how they demonstrate their value and how they evaluate their services. While some of that burden is placed on the state libraries to reconsider what kinds of data they require from public libraries, the rest of the decision is up to the individual library's management. Here, enlightened leaders will seek to maximize data value. Although the HAPLR index may continue to develop and be used as one way to evaluate public libraries, on its own it does not offer enough data to decision makers. It should be combined with other methods of evaluation to yield a fuller picture of the library.

There is a place for input and output measures, but the future seems to be in service outcomes, which reflect the *value* of the library to the community. By demonstrating this value in meaningful ways, whether at the local or the national level, the public library can grow with the future.

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