

# Professional Librarian Performance Review

## A Redesign Model

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An innovative performance review process was implemented at Steely Library, Northern Kentucky University (NKU) and can serve as a model for other academic libraries. In response to a presidential mandate that all salary increases be based solely upon meritorious performance, the library faculty began to build a new reviewing process as a basis for merit awards. In the effort to develop a feasible system for ranking a growing faculty with increasingly diverse roles and responsibilities, concerns regarding consistency in reviews rose to the forefront. The resulting system provides greater consistency in the reviews prepared by various supervisors, as well as an increase in the level and amount of professional accomplishments among the library faculty. Grassroots discussions, investigation, and implementation of the review structure were keys to its success. The collaborative construction of peer-developed standards provides all supervisors clear measurements to apply. Moreover, the review process, which is usually closed, is now open and transparent. All librarians know how merit awards are determined for themselves and their colleagues. With this knowledge, significant improvement in the level of achievement across the faculty has been encouraged.

### Preparing for the Redesign

Any library's performance review system, by definition, attempts to encourage meritorious achievements. However, over the years the faculty of Steely Library had experienced some level of dissatisfaction with the traditional review system used for this purpose. Concerns grew as the library grew. At one point, all professional librarians reported to the library director and reviews reflected that a single supervisor's priorities and understanding of each librarian's day-to-day work. As the library grew in staff

size (currently nineteen library faculty) as well as program diversity, middle manager positions were added, and performance reviews were under their purview. Reviews were based upon subjective conversations between librarians and their immediate supervisor. Subsequently, narrative reviews performed independently by a variety of supervisors, were pooled for comparison and salary increase decisions. Most of the faculty's concerns centered upon how to ensure consistency in these evaluations. Four years ago, with the implementation of a new expectation that all salary increases be based solely upon meritorious performance, an effort was initiated to address these concerns resulting in a ground-up revision of the faculty reviewing process. The outcome has been a new approach that addresses these long-standing concerns about consistency in review comparisons and has proven successful in encouraging enhanced excellence in performance.

During the deliberations for creative solutions, ongoing research and benchmarking of other libraries' professional review processes supported the redesign efforts. Although there has not been significant literature published in this area, a few relevant reports regarding improving these processes were uncovered and are noted with annotations in the References and Notes section at the end of this paper. The body of professional literature regarding performance reviews in higher education generally focuses on student evaluation of course instructors. This literature is not directly applicable to library organizations.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, research from management fields, while offering suggestions of performance evaluation tools, cannot be directly translated into the unique organizational structure of an academic library. Collegial management, academic roles, and operational management, when combined, require unique reviewing systems. Reports from two academic libraries, Colorado State University and the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, describe the struggle to build an effective review system for library professionals.<sup>2</sup> In comparing background information provided in these articles, concerns of Steely librarians were similar; however, the new processes developed at Steely are unique. All three libraries are concerned with enhancing consistency; however the specific mechanisms to address the issue vary.

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## Processes for Achieving Consistency

### Numeric Ratings

The first of three tools developed to support consistent evaluation rankings for all librarians is a numeric grading scale. At the beginning of the project, the head of the library suggested such a system, and point scales were investigated. How could a point scale avoid “bean counting” and emphasize quality over quantity? How could points be predetermined for specific types of professional activities? Despite significant and widespread resistance among the faculty, experimentation led to an acceptance of this method. The scale developed addresses these concerns and has become a baseline tool supporting objective comparison of performance reviews. Individuals receive a score from 0 to 100 for their performance in activities listed in their position description—that is, their primary job assignment. This score is arrived upon through a collaborative discussion with immediate supervisors. Librarians at NKU have full faculty status and also have scholarship and service performance requirements. In the revised performance review process, these scholarly and service activities are also evaluated by a point system. Scores from all three areas—primary assignment, scholarship, and service—are totaled for each individual.

Given the commitment to represent performance levels by numeric scores, consistent application of those scores is crucial to ensuring an effective system. At NKU, the committee charged with leading the redesign began with an experiment to see if a point system could work for the scholarship and service activities given that all librarians have similar requirements for these areas. At this early stage, it was not evident whether a point grading system could be extended to activities of job responsibilities, as these varied among all librarians. Even in the selected fields of professional scholarship and service, coming to a consensus regarding relative values of those activities was not a quick or simple process. Some of the questions that arose were how does teaching stack up against publishing a peer-reviewed article? Is developing a website’s content appropriate for academic review? Should volunteer activities outside of library-related fields count toward service commitments?

Surprising differences were revealed that had been influencing not only performance evaluations by individual supervisors, but also the choices individual librarians were making as they planned their own professional activities. Through the planning discussions, supervisors and librarians realized that they were operating with differing priorities for professional activities. What was more worrisome was that among supervisors there were different assumptions regarding the relative values of those activities. Through several months of discussion, research, and at times compromise, a consensus set of values was devised (see table 1). A recent survey of Steely faculty indicates

**Table 1.** Point Values for Selected Scholarly and Service Activities\*

<b>Published Reviews</b>	
Minor Review**	2
Minor Review**	5
<b>Published Refereed Articles</b>	
Minor Publication	10
Major Publication	20
<b>Conference Presentation</b>	
Minor Presentation	10
Major Presentation	15
<b>Teaching 3-Credit College or University Course</b>	
Initial Course Development + First Time Taught	22
Major Revision of course + teaching	20
One Section Taught	18
Two–Three Sections Taught	27
Four or more Sections Taught	36
<b>Chair of Professional Committee</b>	
International/National	6 (Minor), 8 (Major)
Regional/State/Local	4 (Minor), 6 (Major)
<b>University Committee Membership</b>	
Minor Committee	2
Major Committee	5
<b>Professional Consulting</b>	
Minor Project	2
Major Project	4
<b>Funded Grant Writing</b>	
Primary Writer	10 (Minor), 20 (Major)
Adjunct Writer	5 (Minor), 10 (Major)
<b>Honors</b>	
Minor	5
Major	10

\*Thirty-five unique categories of activities are assigned point values. The authors of this article will be willing to share the full document upon request.

\*\*Criteria for determining major or minor value may include length, place of publication, audience, and so on.

that this was perhaps the most successful aspect of the redesign.<sup>3</sup>

Developing a shared vision of relative values for specific types of activities was one method for emphasizing quality over quantity. The idea of peer review among librarians was investigated. As discussions progressed, it became clear that the larger community of professional

peers was already performing this review through acceptance of projects for publication, for funding, for conference presentation, and so on. This was the foundation for the decision to award different points corresponding to the level of the professional venue in which an activity takes place. Activities accepted for broader audiences—a national conference versus a regional one, a refereed versus non-refereed publication—would be assigned higher scores. In addition, it was for this reason that no points would be awarded for projects in-progress or those that never come to fruition.

During the development of the point scale, it also became obvious that point values would not be static. A standing faculty committee was initiated, with rotating membership, which serves as the repository for new issues to be considered, ensuring the continued relevancy of the scale. Annually the committee examines the portfolios of librarians and proposes any changes to the values or the list of acceptable activities, thereby continually refining the system. Vigorous discussions take place within this committee, yet at the end of the day, there is widespread support for the system. Even for those holding perspectives outside the consensus on the value of specific activities, having a transparent scale and being an active participant in the continuing development of the review system is preferable to the more subjective narrative reviews of the past. This process fosters consistent application of merit scores and promotes a perception of organizational justice, a concept frequently discussed in management texts as a crucial aspect of positive work environments.

## Defining Job Performance Excellence

With a workable point scale for scholarly and service activities in place, it was important to consider whether a similar system could be developed for the many unique job responsibilities of the librarians—the primary assignment side of the reviews. The first stage of the redesign dealt with activities that were undertaken by all librarians (writing articles, serving on university committees, and so on). However, the majority of a performance review addresses activities within unique work assignments. Could a scoring system be developed to accommodate this uniqueness while producing objective, comparable scores? What type of point scale could address cataloging activities as well as reference work?

In researching performance review systems in a variety of organizations, peer review was considered again as a means for bringing a consistent perspective to reviews.<sup>4</sup> No one in the library was convinced that a true peer evaluation system, in which an archivist would review the performance of a systems librarian, for example, would improve the situation. The decision was made that job activities should be evaluated by immediate supervisors, who would have the clearest understanding of the significance and demands of any accomplishment. However, there was still a need for

objective reviews that could be compared across library departments and across supervisors. As the discussions progressed, *characteristics* of performance, rather than specific activities, began to be the focus for this part of the review, termed primary assignment. By focusing on characteristics such as innovation, leadership, and professional development, the unique work assignments of librarians in different areas of specialization could be directly compared.

The consideration of these different characteristics of quality performance provided another opportunity for librarians to develop a shared definition of excellence. For example, one of the major discussions revolved around finding an appropriate balance between encouraging individuals to experiment and take risks while still rewarding continued performance in proven programming. Should innovation be emphasized over maintaining established services? Again the development of point values allowed the group to move toward consensus, and a set of standards was realized that could be applied consistently by different supervisors (see table 2). The reality of the merit system used prior to this process redesign was that supervisors' reviews often reflected different emphases. These inconsistent priorities were barriers to comparable merit rankings. Once again, the struggle to implement a point system was a catalyst for building a shared definition of how faculty should balance these responsibilities.

To enhance the consistency of scores applied for excellence in these work characteristics, supervisors jointly developed a three-level rubric for scoring individuals. Figure 1 shows how the points available for Level of Technical/Specialist Expertise are allocated. Similar rubrics are used for the other four primary assignment evaluation criteria.

**Table 2.** Point Values for Characteristics of Primary Assignment Performance\*

Performance Characteristics	Point Range Available
Level of Technical/Specialist Expertise (i.e., providing services, developing materials, managing library projects, and programming)	0–40 points
Innovation/Program Expansion	0–20 points
Leadership/Cross Divisional Collaboration/Support of Library-wide Missions	0–20 points
Collegiality	0–10 points
Professional Development Efforts	0–10 points
<b>Total Points Possible</b>	<b>100 points</b>

\* These scores are awarded for accomplishments in the areas of unique job responsibilities, which are described in each librarian's job description. This primary assignment score is then added to any points awarded for scholarly and service activities.

## Primary Performance Emphasis

As the new reviewing system began to take shape, concern developed regarding the impact of implementation. Specifically as developed, the system had a cap of 100 possible points for supervisors to award in an individual's area of primary job responsibilities. However, there was no cap on the number of points that one could accumulate through the scholarship and service side of performance (publishing, committee membership, and so on). There was concern that this sort of dual scoring deemphasized contributions made toward achieving the library's primary missions. The planning committee discussed using caps in these categories of activities. However, at the time of this redesign, the head of the library was committed to encouraging an expansion of scholarly and service involvement by the library faculty. This goal paralleled a university-wide focus on broader professional community engagement. Limiting rewards for expansion in these areas was viewed as counter-productive. At the same time, the issue of maintaining quality in ongoing library programs needed to be addressed. For this reason, a mechanism was put in place to emphasize primary job responsibilities. Individuals are required to attain a minimum score of 50 out of 100 in primary assignment; otherwise the person is not eligible to receive points for any scholarly or service projects.

This mechanism has continued to be discussed and reviewed for desired impact. Despite establishing 50 points as the satisfactory level, actual scoring has varied significantly. Some supervisors used 50 out of 100 points as a satisfactory score, another used 70 as the satisfactory level, and a third used 80. A standing committee of librarian supervisors has been formed to address these differences.

Their discussions have recently expanded to consider the appropriateness of capping primary assignment merit points at 100. This investigation is a response to concerns voiced by librarians as well as published research. Terpstra and Honoree's study indicates that performance levels are enhanced in institutions which equally emphasize research and teaching effectiveness (primary assignment), rather than in those schools which unequally emphasize either research or teaching performance in merit rankings.<sup>5</sup>

## Encouraging Higher Performance

Each year the faculty has become more invested in this process, as it has proven to achieve in large part the desired

consistency. In addition, three other unforeseen benefits that are supporting higher achievement levels among the library faculty emerged in the process and are discussed below.

## More Effective Performance Review Discussions

The use of a point scale in assessing performance brings a new level of clarity to the evaluation. Narratives are still written by the individuals in self reviews and by supervisors in response. Both partners in this evaluation process apply numeric scores to the year's accomplishments as well. The addition of numeric ratings to the discussions immediately makes the review more concrete. These numbers carry more meaning and shades of meaning than verbal descriptors such as "positive contribution," or "useful project," and so on.

Moreover, the point-based review system seems to have become an effective professional development tool in the library. In the years since this system has been implemented, the average number of points achieved for combined job, scholarship, and service activities has steadily increased.<sup>6</sup> Supervisors have found that more of the review discussion focuses upon "next-step" goals. Particularly when maximum point values are not achieved, it is incumbent upon supervisors to guide librarians with suggestions for performance enhancement. When annual score rankings are revealed, it is apparent that the threshold for substantial rewards is being raised by the most accomplished performers. To compete, everyone is pushed to the next higher level. Individuals are more readily experimenting with new approaches to standard services. Writers of articles are considering book-length projects. More members of the faculty are compiling applications for full professorship. The measurement of performance by numeric scores has clearly been a motivational tool.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, although this was not a primary goal of the redesign, the reviewing process has become notably streamlined. Priorities and relative values of activities and work characteristics have been established and are communicated widely. The process of defining these evaluation tools, organizing reviewing time lines, addressing any needed changes in the system is now conducted through the standing merit committee. Individual supervisors and librarians are not burdened with devising unique sets of expectations for each position in the library. In addition, the group process of developing shared interpretations of

**Figure 1.** Sample Scoring Rubric Used by Supervisors in Primary Assignment Review

40–31 points	30–20 points	19–0 points
Performance that consistently and significantly exceeds expectations for satisfactory contributions to division programs.	Consistent performance at a satisfactory level of contribution to division programs.	Performance requiring additional attention and development.

quality performance has taken on some of the professional mentoring that supervisors often carried alone. Discussion of valued professional accomplishments now takes place in a broader arena supporting the one-on-one goal-setting sessions a supervisor holds with each librarian.

## Increased Job Satisfaction

As the redesigned system has developed, each librarian is more actively involved in the entire review process. In a 2008 survey of faculty concerns regarding merit pay, Terpstra and Honoree identified the need to build full faculty participation into the processes which define performance levels as a means to enhance acceptance of merit rankings.<sup>8</sup> As discussed earlier, the standing faculty committee that manages a point-based review ranking is a key factor in establishing a sense of organizational justice. By rotating membership on this group, all maintain an active role in the application of these standards. An increased sense of job satisfaction surprisingly is also supported by other features of the new review system.

The fact that individuals must now score their own performance in preparation for the discussion with their supervisor has offered opportunities for more authentic input into the merit award decision. Some welcome this opportunity; some are daunted by it. Regardless, the contribution of the individual's own scoring provides a more complete picture of performance accomplishment.

Likely more important in boosting job satisfaction is the fact that individuals are beginning to utilize a greater level of freedom in planning professional activities that this explicit and transparent valuing system allows. When all the librarians' scores are revealed (anonymously) to the faculty in a ranking, individuals can see the difference between their score and the top number achieved. Because point values for each type of activity are known by all, the choices an individual can make to move up in the ranking became clear. Moreover, each member of the faculty can individualize those choices, focusing upon activities that suit individual strengths. If one prefers editorial work to teaching, one can cultivate opportunities to expand work in that preferred field. If one's score indicates a weakness in the area of collaboration, projects can be pursued that will connect to other division's programming. There is a baseline performance level required in each area of faculty responsibility; however to build excellence, individuals can map their careers based upon their own choices.

## Changes in Organizational Culture

Almost immediately upon implementing the first stage of the revised review system—the point scale for service and scholarship work—the library experienced a much higher level of volunteerism. Librarians clearly realized that each additional service activity—from joining search committees to workign on Friends of the Library projects to chairing work groups—mattered in the final ranking for merit

increases. Previously many had fallen into the mentality that they did not have time for these additional projects, claiming they needed to “do their job.” This narrower definition of responsibilities was no longer functional. The number of cross-divisional committees and working groups increased. In what seems to be an organic process, these groups are taking on robust roles in the programs and services of the library.<sup>9</sup> More and more, it is in these cross-divisional groups that decisions are being made and programs are being designed. Even when a decision is developed within one department of the library, input is more likely to be solicited from other areas and communication of changes is more widespread.

Another positive outcome for the library has been that performance reviews parallel the requirements of the university tenure process. In the past, some librarians saw a disconnect between the type of activities required for attaining tenure and those rewarded by individual supervisors in the performance review process. As each process had a different reviewing body—that is, an immediate supervisor for the annual review and a committee of peers for tenure application—some believed that different values were being applied. Now that supervisors apply the numeric scale developed by the library faculty peers, there is assurance that consistent values are used for both processes.

## Conclusion

This article highlights the positive outcomes of a performance review system redesign. Certainly, it is not a perfect system, and necessary calibrations remain the topic of discussion at many faculty meetings. For example, last year the faculty voted to accept a new set of point values for grant writing. A current proposal to average merit points over a three-year period is being considered to support long term projects. One major concern remains whether the maximum 100 points available for primary assignment performance is an equitable balance to the average number of points being earned via scholarly and service activities. Yet with continual efforts to make appropriate adjustments to the original point scale, and with new review processes in place, the underlying principles of the redesign have been validated by a more recent expansion of the system to include non-tenure track faculty.

The performance review process described here may have application for other academic libraries. Even more likely, effective combinations of a variety of processes are being evaluated at different institutions. This article is offered not as a universal solution, but as part of the developing professional conversation.

## References and Notes

1. See, for example, Jeffrey L. Buller, “The Pros and Cons of Merit Pay,” *Academic Leader: the Newsletter for Academic Deans and Department Chairs* 25, no. 6, (June 2009): 7–8.

2. Lou Anderson and Donnice Cochenour, "Merit Salary Criteria: One Academic Library's Experience," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 1, no. 4 (2001): 475-79; Frada Mozenter and Lois Stickell, "Without Merit: One Library's Attempt to Put 'Merit' Back in 'Merit Pay,'" *College and Research Libraries* 70, no. 1 (Jan. 2009): 34-56.
3. In a 2009 survey of faculty who had worked at Steely Library prior to the review system revision, a strong majority (89.9 percent) of the respondents indicated that consistency in merit rankings had been improved due to the collaborative efforts to establish point values for specific activities and performance characteristics. One respondent commented: "This was the most important improvement we made."
4. Indiana University, "IUB Libraries: Peer Review in Annual Merit Evaluation for the Purpose of Salary Increments," Apr. 2, 2003, [www.indiana.edu/~libblfc/20022003/peerreviewrevised.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~libblfc/20022003/peerreviewrevised.html) (accessed Aug. 5, 2009).
5. David E. Terpstra and Andre L. Honoree, "The Effects of Different Teaching, Research, and Service Emphases on Individual and Organizational Outcomes in Higher Education Institutions," *Journal of Education for Business* 84, no. 3 (Jan./Feb. 2009): 169-76. When surveyed, several of Steely's faculty indicated concern about whether the requirement of attaining at least 50 points in the review of primary job responsibilities *adequately* emphasized the importance of quality performance in this area. Comments here included "I don't know of anyone who has ever scored below 50—so this threshold really hasn't made a difference," "I think it is important to require satisfactory performance in primary assignment area. I don't think that this 50-point level is enough. More points should be available for primary assignment scores," and "I think there still needs to be work done toward the balance between work performance and merit points—often one has the most merit but not a very good job performance."
6. In 2005, the first year of complete implementation, the average point score was 180; in 2006 the average increased to 210; and in 2007 an average of 218 points was attained. In 2008 a dip in the average point score (to 202) occurred. A portion of this lower point average is due to the fact that one category of activities was eliminated from the list of items for which points are awarded. Continued study is required to see if the further reduction in points is a temporary response to the severe restrictions on professional travel being experienced in the current economy or some other factor.
7. Karl O. Magnusen, "Faculty Evaluation, Performance, and Pay: Application and Issues," *The Journal of Higher Education* 58, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 1987): 516-29; Diana F. Topjian, Tavia Buck, and Regenia Kozlowski, "Employee Performance: For the Good of All," *Nursing Management* 40, no. 4 (Apr. 2009): 24-29.
8. David E. Terpstra and Andre L. Honoree, "Faculty Perceptions of Problems with Merit Pay Plans in Institutions of Higher Education," *Journal of Business and Management* 14, no. 1 (2008): 43-59.
9. With an average rating of 4.13 on a 5-point scale (5 indicating greatest improvement), the Steely Library faculty confirmed in the 2009 survey that the viability of having an increased number of cross-departmental planning groups has been supported by the revised performance review system.