Assessment in Practice

Outcome Measurement in Libraries:
The Project Outcome Model

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Project Outcome is a free online toolkit designed to help libraries understand and share the impact of their programs and services. It provides simple surveys for measuring and analyzing patron-reported learning outcomes in four areas—knowledge, confidence, application, and awareness. Project Outcome also gives libraries resources and training support needed to make use of findings and confidently advocate for their future. Two versions of the toolkit are now available: the original version developed for public libraries by the Public Library Association (PLA) and a newly launched version for academic libraries developed by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL).

Libraries often struggle to realize the full potential of assessment. The range of assessment skills in the library field is broad but the need to use data for advocacy, planning, decision-making, and funding requests grows. Every library has its own unique set of operational or support challenges and most libraries have limited time and resources to engage in robust data collection and analysis. There also can be a lack of understanding at the staff level about what activities to measure or why. As a result, libraries sometimes measure what is easiest or don't sufficiently consider what is most meaningful to measure. For some, it is the challenge of initiating and managing the process, while others struggle to collect and use data effectively.

The Project Outcome model provides convenient tools for libraries to measure learning outcomes easily and consistently. We define an outcome as a patron-reported benefit gained from a library program or service. It can be quantitative or qualitative and is expressed as a change an individual perceives in themselves. Outcomes help libraries answer the question: what good did we do? Or, in other words,

how have users changed as a result of our interactions?[1] Outcomes document how the library impacts the learning and work of its users and can complement other forms of library data such as that related to offerings or usage.

THE PROJECT OUTCOME TOOLKIT

In order to facilitate low-barrier access to outcome assessment, the Project Outcome toolkit contains two types of standardized survey instruments: immediate surveys and follow-up surveys. The former are designed for distribution at the end of a program or service and aim to help libraries better understand the impact that the program or service has on patrons and their intention to change behavior as a result. They are six questions long and include both Likert-scale and open-ended questions. The follow-up surveys vary in length and follow a yes/no/please explain format. They also capture both quantitative and qualitative data. They are designed to be used four to eight weeks after completion of a program or service and aim to help libraries better understand whether patrons have changed their behavior or continued to benefit as a result of the program or service.

The Project Outcome surveys measure four key learning outcomes—knowledge, confidence, behavior change, and awareness—based on the social theory that performance is more adequately measured when capturing those elements.[2] The program and service areas for public and academic libraries are in the figure below. For each survey, libraries can choose to use only the standard questions, or they can add up to three custom questions of their own.
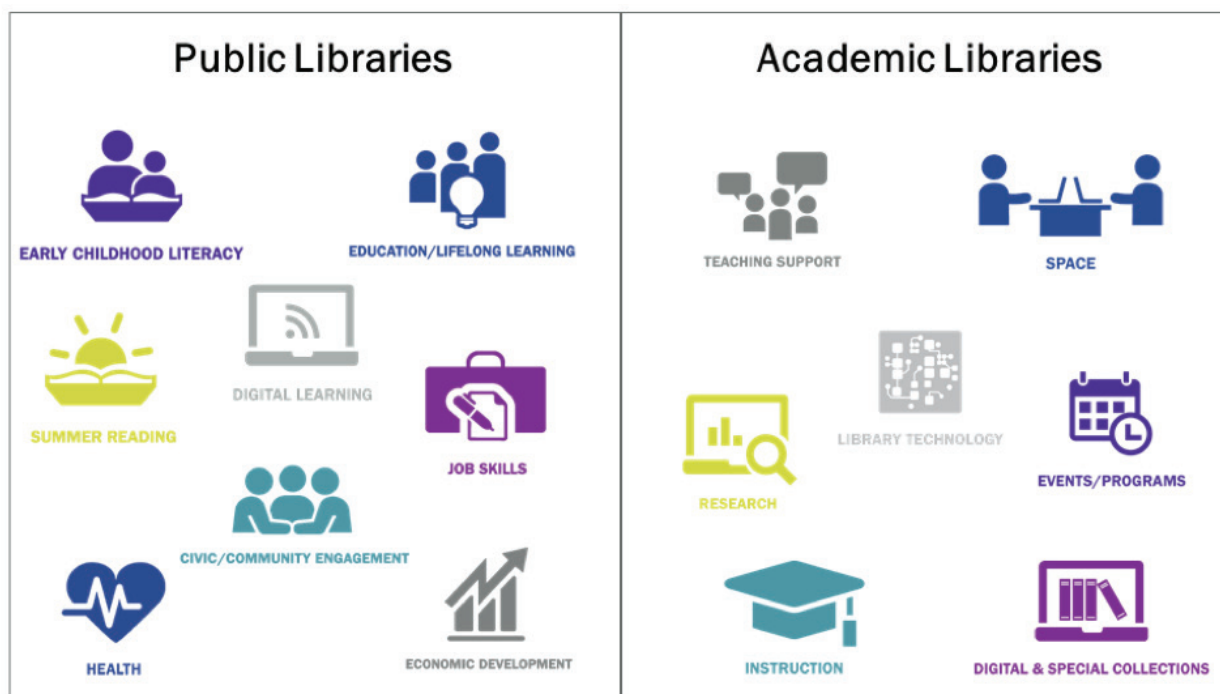

Figure 1: Project Outcome Survey Topic Areas

[1]Association of College and Research Libraries. (1998). *Task force on academic library outcomes assessment report*. Chicago: Author. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/whitepapers/taskforceacademic.cfm; and Association of College and Research Libraries (2018). S*tandards for libraries in higher education*. Chicago: Author. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/standardslibraries.

[2]P. G. Schrader & Lawless, K. A. (2004). The knowledge, attitudes & behaviors approach: How to evaluate performance and learning in complex environments. *Performance Improvement*, *43*(9), 8-15. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2OBhiFI.

While these topic areas may seem broad, when administering the surveys, libraries set the context, which makes the responses meaningful. If the surveys are administered on paper, the immediate surveys would be handed out at the end of a program and patrons would be asked share feedback related to that program. Administering the surveys via a link sent to patrons also allows the library to set the context. For example, if sending a follow-up survey to all students who checked out a loaner laptop (library technology), the email might say, "help us improve library services by telling us about your experience using a loaner laptop this semester."

Once a library has administered surveys and collected responses, the toolkit contains interactive data dashboards for visualizing and analyzing data (see figure 2). The dashboards show the library's own results and aggregate benchmarks, enabling libraries to get a sense of how they are doing compared to their peers. In addition to the interactive dashboards, users can easily create reports to share their results with stakeholders and they can export their data for further analysis. The toolkit also contains a host of resources designed to help users learn more about every stage in the outcome measurement process.
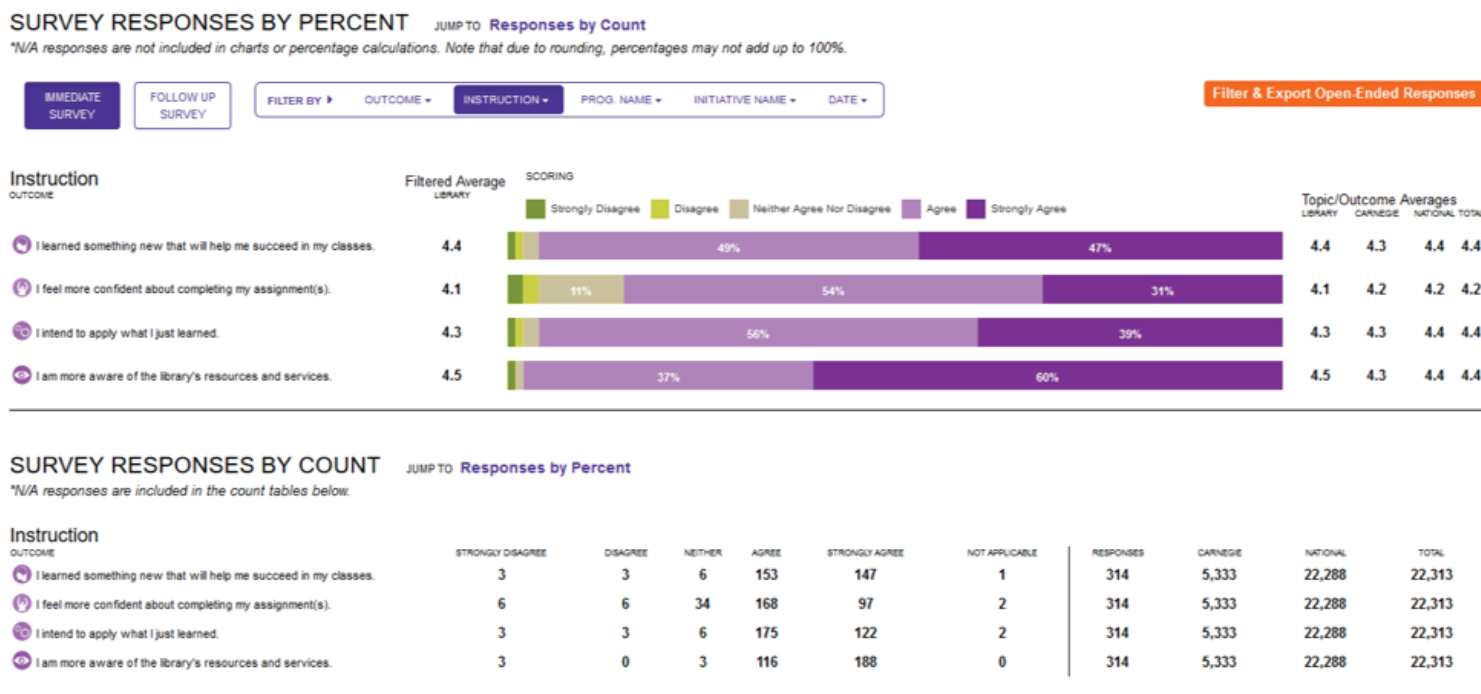

Figure 2: Screenshot of the Project Outcome Detail Dashboard, one of the available data visualizations

PLA's Project Outcome toolkit launched in 2015 and ACRL's academic library version launched in 2019. As of June 2020, over 1,800 public libraries have created surveys and collected over 313,000 responses and over 500 academic libraries have created surveys and collected 43,000 responses. While most active users are based in the United States, the toolkits are open to public and academic libraries internationally. Public libraries in the US and Canada benchmark against other Project Outcome users in their state/ province and nationwide, while American academic libraries benchmark against institutions with the same Carnegie classification and nationwide. Other international libraries benchmark against all users in their country and internationally.

PROJECT OUTCOME IN PRACTICE

A lot can be done with outcome data. Most importantly, libraries successfully use their data to take action in a variety of ways: making improvements to programs and services; communicating the value of the library to funders, decision makers, or the public; informing or measuring progress on strategic plans; and supporting or engaging partners. Even a few patron responses on a survey can provide enough information to help libraries make positive changes.

Public and academic libraries across the U.S. and Canada have used Project Outcome to make improvements and increase their impact in the communities they serve. Here are some examples:

- The library at Nevada State College administered the space survey. From the open-ended comments they learned that students frequently use the group study rooms as a quiet place to study independently, because parts of the main floor of the library were too noisy. As a result, they requested and received funding to install sound panels in the group study rooms themselves, resulting in a 30% reduction in noise as measured by decibel testing.

- In the process of planning to build a new library, Central Piedmont Community College used Project Outcome's space and technology surveys to learn what amenities students find most useful and what additional features they would like to see. The results showed the importance of technology (computers, large monitors) and whiteboards in the study rooms to enable students to collaborate and study in groups, and that feedback will help the library design their new facilities.

- Iowa State University Library collected 458 responses to the space and technology surveys in fall 2018. They used the data to support funding requests for additional laptops to loan out to students, and to make the case for the creation of additional group study rooms during a renovation project.

- Leadership of Appleton (Wisconsin) Public Library (APL) viewed Project Outcome as an opportunity to extend outcome measurement to their summer library program and support improvement and communications with the library's board of directors. Surveys conducted in 2016 showed that patrons benefited from the summer program, but found some components of the online program confusing. APL has since improved the descriptions and layout of the missions, as well as sharing outcomes with their Board to paint a more complete picture of the library's impact.

- Pima County Public Library (PCPL) in Arizona uses the surveys to assess the workshops, classes, trainings and drop-in sessions they provide in the areas of business development, job skills, and digital literacy. It has led to new library partnerships because the library learned that patrons wanted a more structured learning opportunity in

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addition to one-on-one help. Library leadership approached an existing nonprofit partner and, together, they decided library staff would teach a new foundational business workshop during the library's drop-in hours. As a result, more community members can now access a continuum of services that match their evolving needs.

- Burnsville (West Virginia) Public Library (BPL) is an important community anchor within the rural county it serves. The library has used Project Outcome surveys to better understand the impact of its programs, while also developing new partnerships and programs based on community input. Survey results showed that parents and caregivers valued the library's programming for children and wanted more, leading BPL to work with the local school district to have two teachers offer tutoring at the library the following summer, and also to start a new after-school program.

- Plano (Texas) Public Library (PPL) uses Project Outcome surveys with a wide range of programs and services so they can better meet the needs of their diverse community and strengthen outcomes for patrons, particularly children, teens, and families. For example, PPL learned from the surveys that caregivers enjoy programming that includes books in different languages. In response, PPL added a new series called Storytime Around the World, in which library staff read books in Arabic, Chinese, French, and Spanish in three-week cycles. The added programming has attracted both new families and prior story time participants, and staff observed that families often stay to use other library resources.

These case studies and more are described in greater detail in the resources as part of the toolkit. Sign up for a free account to access them and learn more via Project Outcome for Public Libraries or Project Outcome for Academic Libraries.

CONCLUSION

Outcome data can help libraries demonstrate their value as learning hubs and critical community anchors. The Project Outcome toolkit is designed to help libraries by supporting their efforts to confidently measure the outcomes of their programs and services. The resources on the website are available to every library and include even more tips and training on how to plan for measurement, administer the surveys, understand the data, and take action using the results. All of these are instrumental for libraries measuring impact and making improvements.

The Project Outcome toolkit is designed to help libraries by supporting their efforts to confidently measure the outcomes of their programs and services.

Please Cite As:

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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