January Five College Libraries Innovative Learning Symposium

[SLIDE 1]
The title of my talk today is Efficiency or Jagged Edges: The Logics and Possibilities of Assessment.

[SLIDE 2]
Assessment seems to be one of the biggest trends in libraryland right now. I ran some searches in the various LIS databases just to get a sense of the big picture. There were about 7300 results in LISTA for “assessment and librar*” and nearly 4000 of them are from the last 10 years. In Library Literature, for which coverage begins in 1980, there were about 4000 results, 2400 from the last 10 years. In Library Literature Retrospective, which covers from 1905 to 1983, there were 160 results.

Jon Hufford’s 2013 exhaustive review of the literature on assessment in academic libraries suggests that this might be due to the 2006 publication of the US Department of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education’s final report, which called for “improved accountability.” Regional accreditation agencies revised their standards in response, which influenced ACRL’s (2013) *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*, which directly speaks to assessment of academic libraries. Hufford (2013) identifies 3 key publications in academic library assessment: the ACRL’s *The Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*, ARL’s *SPEC Kit 303: Library Assessment*, and CLIR’s *No Brief Candle: Reconceiving Research Libraries for the 21st Century*.

These organizations have continued to work on assessment. ACRL’s report has become the Value of Academic Libraries initiative (http://www.acrl.ala.org/value/) and ACRL also coordinates the Academic Library Trends and Statistics survey (https://acrl.countingopinions.com/), which is connected to IPEDS data collection. Assessment in Action (http://www.ala.org/acrl/AiA) had been part of the Value of Academic Libraries initiative, but has been discontinued. ARL sponsors the Library Assessment Conference, a library assessment blog, and has at least 7 different ongoing assessment initiatives (https://acrl.countingopinions.com/), including LibQUAL+, which is probably one of the most widely used assessments. CLIR does more specific assessment projects - for example, of particular organizations or institutions - but has also been a strong advocate for qualitative, anthropological, and ethnographic approaches to assessment. Other organizations, such as Ithaka, have also become interested in and started publishing on academic library assessment in the last 10 years.

In addition, many academic libraries have their own assessment projects and practices. Hufford’s (2013) literature review covers some of these (and helpfully groups them by topic) and others show up in LISTA and Library Literature, but there also undoubtedly numerous internal reports and documents that haven’t and won’t be turned into articles or books.

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Although assessment is trendy right now, it is also not entirely new. Libraries have been counting the number of volumes, circulations, people entering the library, reference questions, instruction sessions, and so on for a long time. ARL has been collecting its statistics since 1907. Hufford (2013) suggests that the first major publications on assessment begin appearing in the 1970s, and in 1990, ALA published *Measuring Academic Library Performance: a Practical Approach*. Hufford (2013) also notes that historically, there has been some slippage between the meaning of the terms "assessment," "evaluation," and "measurement." My searches were, frankly, quick and dirty, and could undoubtedly be improved on by including these other terms, but it is also interesting to consider how and why "assessment" seems to have become the predominant way of referring to it.

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What is newish is a focus on outcomes or impacts, but basically the results of what we do rather than just what we do. Hufford (2013) contrasts books purchased/chairs available (inputs) and books circulated/ILL requests (outputs) to student learning outcomes or service quality (outcomes or impacts). ACRL's *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* distinguishes between performance indicators, which are library-centric and more akin to inputs and outputs, and outcomes or impacts, which are user-centric. Outcomes are defined as "the ways in which library users are changed as a result of their contact with the library's resources and programs" (ACRL, 2013). (I will be returning to this idea later, so keep it in mind!). The focus on outcomes or impacts seems to have led to assessment trends that I think are valuable, like using qualitative methods borrowed from anthropology and sociology. These open-ended methods provide incredibly rich data that is often surprising. Nancy Foster's studies at the University of Rochester exemplify this approach, which is often but not always referred to as needs assessment. The focus on outcomes has also led to assessment trends that I think are more problematic, like the emphasis on return-on-investment or the unthinking use of business-oriented UX methods and goals. These are also often qualitative, so we have to think about more than just the methods we use in our assessment.

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Let me briefly say here that even though I am not a fan of some approaches to assessment, I do understand that they are sometimes required for strategic reasons, such as asking for additional funding or fighting back against budget cuts. I understand why we might want to suggest that there is a return on our investments in electronic resources, monographs, reference desks and staffing. I do maintain, however, that if we do approach assessment strategically, we must simultaneously approach it critically, and that critical and strategic are not contradictory. Assessment must always include a political awareness of the work it is performing both explicitly and implicitly. That political awareness is crucial to being both critical and strategic.

[SLIDE 6]
Thinking of librarianship as a political project is central to much of my scholarly work, and assessment is not an exception to this. In many ways, it might be the most important thing to

grapple with politically. Assessment often deals with quantitative data, even outcome/impact-focused assessment. ACRL's *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*, which explicitly moves away from inputs and outputs, nonetheless emphasizes that outcomes/impacts, even those assessed qualitatively, "should be measurable" (ACRL, 2013). The unquestioned and uncritical use of the language of quantification and measurement does several things. First, data is an abstraction of the social world, and as such, is necessarily incomplete, but tends to appear and be understood as truth. Data is shaped by the questions we ask - whether they are survey questions or open-ended interview questions - and being able to measure something requires that that thing is able to be measured in some way. These assumptions and limits are inherent to any sort of data, but are not always foregrounded in discussions of either data or assessment.

Jeff Lilburn's article in the January 2017 issue of *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, "Ideology and Audit Culture: Standardized Service Quality Surveys in Academic Libraries," very nicely unpacks the assumptions and limits embedded in the LibQUAL+ survey of academic libraries, as well as the political work performed by this specific instance of assessment. He argues that "LibQUAL+ views library assessment through the lens of customer service. It emphasizes efficiency and customer satisfaction and encourages libraries to compare and rank their scores in relation to those of other libraries" (p. 103). This is essentially a summary of the assumptions made by the survey, and the limitations inherent to the data it collects. Lilburn goes on to say:

"More specifically, this article situates the growing popularity of the standardized service quality survey LibQUAL+ within the broader setting of the pressures universities face to accept neoliberal principles and to operate more like private-sector businesses. Neoliberal principles, described in greater detail later, include an emphasis on free market competition and privatization of public services, and recast citizens as consumers. Recent scholarship examining systems of accountability and the ideological principles driving their implementation in higher education raises a number of questions about the impact of accountability systems on teaching, learning, research, faculty autonomy, and the meaning and value of university education. This article considers how these questions are relevant to library assessment practices and, in particular, to the use of one-size-fits-all assessment measures such as LibQUAL+" (2017, p. 90-91).

Here, Lilburn focuses on the political work performed by LibQUAL+. It affirms neoliberal ideology (and this quote gives a nice rundown of what that entails) and rejects other ideologies, politics, and values. Because of its orientation towards market values, business, and consumption, neoliberal ideology is particularly invested in notions of quantification and measurement and tends to disregard those things that cannot be quantified or measured. Because neoliberal ideology is pervasive in American discourse generally, it tends to not be questioned, which means quantitative data and measurements likewise tend not to be questioned. This is somewhat of an oversimplification - there are reams of things written about neoliberalism, quantification, market values, etc. - but Lilburn argues, and I would agree, that neoliberal ideology is antithetical to the missions of both higher education and libraries generally. But in order to even have a discussion about this and in order to be strategic and critical of our assessment practices, we need to develop a broad political awareness of librarianship.

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Learning analytics, such as data collected from a student's interaction with library resources or from a learning management system, ID card swipes at the library entrance, and so on, are indications of what the student is doing, but cannot capture everything the student is actually doing or feeling. There are also concerns about privacy in the collection of these types of data, and we should again consider the political implications of allowing what are frequently for-profit corporations rather than the college or university to collect and perhaps even own student data. Entities like Amazon, Google and Facebook are able to monetize the personal data they collect on their users, data generally collected in the interest of personalizing the service. Learning analytics make similar claims about personalizing intervention for struggling students, but we should critically and strategically think about what will be given up, what will be acquired, and how that fits with our values.

[SLIDE 8]
The main focus on my talk today is what I have started calling the dominant logics of assessment. What I mean by this are the assumptions that underlie most conversations around assessment, and even the word itself.

We don't seem to spend a lot of time talking about whether or not we should do assessment, and I think this is because it tends to be seen as a good thing to do. We assess what we're doing to see if we're doing it well, and if we're not doing it well, we'll get information that will help us improve and make what we're doing better.

[SLIDE 9]
"Improvement" and "better" could really mean anything. But in our talk of assessment of libraries, that tend to focus on efficiency, ease, and effort. We sometimes talk about aesthetics, especially in assessment of spaces, but even spaces are often assessed in terms of efficiency, ease, and effort. I am not arguing that all assessment solely relies on these logics, but much discussion around and practice of assessment does. Lilburn (2017) points out in his critique of LibQUAL+ that the valuing of efficiency is symptomatic of neoliberalism, which I obviously find problematic, but I also think it's worth unpacking what other sorts of experiences, practices, and values are obscured in a focus on efficiency, ease, and lack of effort. I have had three recent experiences that have articulated dominant logics of assessment while opening up other possibilities.

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Experience 1:
Because we have multiple services points in my library, our assessment librarian has been working on bringing everyone's data collection into LibAnalytics, which is the Springshare data

collection service. This includes any questions asked at service desks, during office hours, via email, via phone, and research consultations, and includes both generic questions and questions directed at specific librarians/staff. Because we record all questions, we have standardized definitions for interactions and each semester, our assessment librarian reminds us what those are.

[SLIDE 11]
I work with six different departments/programs, and with American and European history, which, as it turns out, a lot of students take classes in, and so usually have a disproportionate number of research consultations each semester. Last year we also did a survey of students who had had research consultations and they all pretty much loved it, so there's been a simultaneous marketing push. Our numbers are very, very good, and the feedback from students is very, very good. There are students that I have seen at least once a semester from the time they were freshmen until they graduate and add me on LinkedIn (which is a DC thing but also fine).

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This fall, our assessment librarian told us that ACRL had changed its definition of what a research consultation was - the defining characteristic was now that the student made an appointment (https://acrl.countingopinions.com/docs/acrl/Instructions_definitions_2015.pdf). Up until then, if I had had a long back and forth conversation with a student via email - and I have had some that went on for multiple semesters or years - I had been recording them as research consultations. but now they were reference questions and we wouldn't send a survey to those students asking for feedback.

The following week, I began receiving emails from my baby American studies majors, who are required to find 18th century primary sources. I don't teach a session for them because the prof likes a bit of a trial by fire, but I heard from nearly everyone in the class via email. This semester, I'll see them in small groups for their Civil War memory projects. When they're seniors, I'll meet with their thesis support groups. All of the work I did with them via email last semester is now *just* reference questions. I'm not devaluing reference work (I do a lot and I think it's important), but strategically: library administration doesn't value reference work and we don't gather and assess feedback about reference work.

[SLIDE 13]
When I was recording all of those email conversations as research consultations and seeking feedback, I was trying to capture the relationships I was building with students, because relationships are the basis of so much of what we do. Teaching and learning is fundamentally a relationship, and building relationships with students makes that easier. Some students might be too busy to set up a meeting, or might feel weird about doing that (I definitely would have as an undergraduate), but that initial email to me is not so hard, and allows the relationship to begin. Teaching and learning is often emotional/affective - I know a lot of us probably do a fair amount of commiserating and soothing during midterms and finals, and feeling comfortable with someone usually allows us to ask questions we think are silly or admit we don't know anything

about a subject. Relationships basically help us librarian better, but to ACRL, the act of the student making the appointment is the important aspect to capture here. It might be about the effort that the student makes to set up the appointment, but it might also be an implicit devaluing of relationships and emotional labor. Frequent conversations via email - like informal chats in hallways, saying hello to faculty you run into on campus, students waving at you when you're at the reference desk - can't really be measured or counted. Moreover, building relationships especially takes time and is not usually efficient.

[SLIDE 14]
Experience 2:
I am a pretty big fan of our assessment librarian, and this fall we set up a pop-up survey on some of our subject guides to get a sense of how users are using them, since our LibGuides statistics and Google Analytics don't tell us much about that. I had done some usability studies on the subject guides a few years ago, and we had made some changes to the landing pages based on those studies, but there hadn't been much follow-up. We set up the survey in conjunction with a larger usability study of subject guides within our nine-member consortium, which will be happening in March and April. Unfortunately, the response rate for the survey wasn't very good, and the data wasn't ultimately that interesting or useful. Now we're focused more on the usability testing and will explore creating another survey after the testing is complete, because we still don't really know how people are using the subject guides, and they can be a lot of work to create and maintain.

For the consortial study, we're going to take a two-pronged approach: usability tests and evaluation of individual guides using a rubric. All of the usability questions and all of the rubric elements basically look at how efficient the guide is in getting users to where they think they need to go. Can they use the navigation (that is, does the navigation efficiently convey the content)? Is there jargon or unfamiliar terminology (is the language efficient)? And so on. This tendency is undoubtedly tied to the borrowing of usability testing from the business world and mapping the goals of commercial websites on to educational websites. I'm not advocating for library websites or subject guides that set out to confuse the user, but what we do when we're looking for something to buy on Amazon is not the same as what we do when we have to write a research paper.

Having thought about it more, I'm not sure why we have subject guides. I tend to treat them as a list of resources and when I describe them to students, that's what I say: this page has a list of primary source databases for American history. I don't expect subject guides or really any library website to teach students how to research, since research is complicated, recursive, and can't be reduced to a series of discrete steps, but nonetheless, the assumed goal of subject guides is to make conducting research more manageable and straightforward. That is, more efficient, easier, effortless. This is echoed in Springshare's LibGuides website, which focuses on efficiency and ease, albeit for the librarians using LibGuides ("easy maintenance," "make your worklife easier," "everything you need for easy publishing of information" (https://www.springshare.com/libguides/features.html)).

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Experience 3:
I assume many of you have been talking or thinking about fake news recently. One of my faculty members and I were chatting about website evaluation. He teaches an intro history class on the Italian Renaissance and his students have to find primary sources, both texts and images. One of his students in the fall clearly just Googled "Renaissance diary" and found a slideshow and "diary" written by a group of students at a different institution. It's obviously not a primary source if you just take a quick skim (the language is entirely modern American, and the students are listed as the authors) (https://www.mixbook.com/photo-books/education/diary-of-a-renaissance-woman-7651361)
He was flabbergasted, particularly since we've revised our approach to both the assignment and my instruction session almost every semester he's taught this class, which has been something like 7 or 8 semesters, and he's generally quite pleased with the quality of primary sources students use in their papers.

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I sent him some articles, including Mike Caulfield's blog post entitled "Yes, Digital Literacy. But Which One?" (https://hapgood.us/2016/12/19/yes-digital-literacy-but-which-one/). I really liked this post because Caulfield emphasizes that "evaluation of information" isn't some abstract thing. It has to happen within a context, since that context informs its use, but it's also difficult to evaluate something when you have little to no domain knowledge. Caulfield describes a couple of studies that try to assess students' ability to evaluate information and concluded that while students could assess the websites they were given using rubrics like CRAAP and RADCAB, they totally failed when confronted with a website that was less obvious. Evaluation rubrics are designed to make it easier and more efficient for students to decide whether something is good or not, whether they should cite it in their papers, or just look at it and not cite it. But in these assessments, the rubrics completely fail the students, and it turns out that evaluating information is not necessarily easy or efficient, nor can it be made that way via a rubric.

These experiences didn't really cohere until recently when I was reading the draft of a chapter for the book I'm editing, written by an LIS student at the University of Washington, Nicky Andrews. She cites Linda Tuhiwai Smith's argument that indigenous understandings of knowledge production focus on the collective good, rather than individual effort and reward. The role that knowledge production should play is fundamentally a political question, and again, the emphasis on individual effort and reward emerges from and speaks to contemporary dominant ideologies. The logics that drive assessment are similarly political in nature, and must be unpacked so that we can make critical and strategic use of them. Efficiency, ease, and effortlessness are embedded in much of what we say and think about libraries and librarianship, but what are the possibilities if we define or think about "improvement" and "better" in radically different ways?

[SLIDE 17]
What if we understood reference and research consultations through relationship-building or emotional/affective labor rather than as something to be counted? At a smallish school like mine (and perhaps more so at yours), that is some of the most important work that those services perform. What would the assessment of reference or research consultations in terms of relationship-building or affective work look like? I'm not entirely sure, and I chatted with our assessment librarian, and she didn't know either, but I would suggest it might be a more interesting or productive question than the ones we have been asking. I would also suggest that assessment in these terms would more accurately capture what we do as librarians and what students get out of meeting with or talking to librarians. Moreover, assessment that focuses on relationships or emotional labor and that is able to show how and why they are important to the university or college pushes back against notions that only things that can be measured, counted, and monetized are important; it claims that librarianship matters.

[SLIDE 18]
What if we centered our subject guides not around efficiency, ease, and getting rid of effort, but around cultivating and fostering intellectual curiosity and openness, a willingness to click on random links, an interest in nosing around in Google just to see what's what? What if our subject guides pushed students to ask why and say "that doesn't seem right," or "huh, that's weird, let me look it up"? Subject guides cannot teach how to research or write a paper, but maybe they can do more to push students into what Alison Hicks in her critique of LibGuides calls the "twisting, infuriating and (occasionally) joyful process of research that is stifled by the way that most librarians structure and organize their LibGuides" (Hicks, 2015)

I've recently started explicitly talking about this in library instruction sessions. I coax students to try a bunch of different resources, different words, different topics, and note that so often we don't give ourselves time to explore, find something odd that you just can't let go of, and then poke around until it makes sense. Then I give them time to do that, and emphasize that the stakes in this particular session are nonexistent. I'm not grading them, and if they don't find anything, they will have other opportunities to work on their projects. As Hicks (2015), research is not linear, and it is often not efficient or easy, either. In "Being 'Lazy' and Slowing Down: Toward decolonizing time, our body, and pedagogy," Riyad Shajahan (2014) argues that "Slowing down is about focusing on building relationships, not about being fixed on products, but accepting and allowing for uncertainty and being at peace without knowing outcomes" (p. 10). It is about resisting market values and calls for productivity and efficiency; it is also about anti-oppressive pedagogy and returning "creativity and spontaneity" to teaching and learning (2014, p. 11). In their article "Beyond LibGuides: The Past, Present, and Future of Online Research Guides," Giullian and Zitser (2016) argue that "If we are to move beyond LibGuides, then we must figure out a way not only to design and use guides in a more pedagogically effective way, but also to change the information ecosystem that makes it all too easy for private companies to profit from the services provided by non-profit educational institutions" (p. 175). Decentering efficiency, effortlessness, and ease in subject guides might help us reach both goals.

[SLIDE 19]
Caulfield's post, if you haven't read it, describes a study done by the Stanford History Education Group in which undergraduate students were shown a Tweet with an embedded link and more than half of them did not actually click the link in their evaluation of the tweet. I hadn't actually clicked on the link to this study in my first read of the blog post, but did later (ha ha), and discovered that Sam Wineburg, who is a scholar of history pedagogy and whom I've read a lot of recently, is one of the authors of the study. In his work, he talks about how history education shouldn't dull or gloss "history's jagged edges" but instead suggests that historical thinking "requires us to reconcile two contradictory positions: first, that our established modes of thinking are an inheritance that cannot be sloughed off; second, that if we make no attempt to slough them off, we are doomed to a mind-numbing presentism that reads the present onto the past" (p. 493). Historical thinking requires negotiating between the familiar and the strange, and although they are not the same, information evaluation or digital literacy or information literacy or whatever we call it also occurs within a landscape of complexity and "jagged edges" and is also a matter of negotiating these sorts of tensions, albeit within different spaces.

But in the interest of efficiency, effortlessness, and ease, the evaluation of information has been oversimplified and students have been told to trust an acronym rather than seek out information themselves. Rubrics, like subject guides, subvert the development of students' ability to work through the jagged edges of internet searches and scholarly research on their own. The failed assessments Caulfield describes clearly point to this. What if we tried to assess whether library instruction contributed to students' interest intellectual curiosity and exploration? How then might we talk about and teach website evaluation? How would we talk about fake news or Snopes or Twitter?

[SLIDE 20]
Tim Sherratt and Mitchell Whitelaw, both of whom work in digital history/humanities, point to the importance of "jagged edges" in interface design.Sherratt argues that interfaces that prioritize "seamlessness" (efficiency, ease, and effortlessness) "offer utility at the expense of critique" and instead suggests looking at the cracks and edges of interfaces. Whitelaw argues for "generous interfaces" that emphasize "exploration and interpretation over task and information retrieval." Sherratt specifically has designed interfaces that decenter textual search and prioritize, for example, the photographs of non-white Australians. The problem, then, isn't technological but political.

[SLIDE 21]
I want to suggest that we think about both creating and assessing library services/resources in terms of exploration, complexity, jagged edges, curiosity, openness, and so on, and not be limited by the logics of efficiency, effortlessness, and ease that underlie dominant understandings of assessment. Again, I don't know how we should assess for "jagged edges," but unpacking the assumptions made in much of the discourse around assessment and then

asking these questions are the first steps. These questions are closer to the heart of what we actually do and want to do as academic librarians. We want to have supportive and productive relationships with students. We want to teach them how to use the library and how to conduct research, but we want them to also discover it on their own, because that is a crucial element of learning and intellectual growth and moreover, it can be fun, frustrating, and empowering all at once. We want them to leave college as thoughtful, critical, and empathetic people. In short, their encounter with libraries and librarians should be transformative, which is, somewhat weirdly, the crucial element of ACRL's definition of outcomes that I mentioned at the very beginning of this talk: "the ways in which library users are changed as a result of their contact with the library's resources and programs" (ACRL, 2013). I say somewhat weirdly because while some of the possible outcomes listed in the *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* value transformation, others prioritize efficiency, effortlessness, and ease.

My librarian colleague Karen Nicholson recently pointed me to the literature on quality assurance, which seems to be more prevalent in Commonwealth countries. It sounds deadly, but it seems to offer other possibilities to thinking about, assessing, and articulating the quality and value of what we do. Quality can be transformative, which "assumes that higher education must concern itself with transforming the life experiences of students, by enhancing or empowering them" (Nicholson, 2011, p.2) or value-added, which is "the impact "on the student's knowledge and personal development and on the faculty member's scholarly and pedagogical ability and productivity" (Nicholson, 2011, p. 3). I think these might be more politically critical and strategic ways of framing library assessment, given the actual work libraries and librarians do, as well as some of the values we claim. Academic libraries are sites of teaching, learning, and generating new knowledge. Although dominant neoliberal ideology insists that everything be efficient, easy, and monetizable, our assessment practices should not uncritically accept this framing but rather seek to identify why what we do is already important.

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