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ONLINE DATABASES The Value Gap

By Carol Tenopir

IT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ever, suggested several companies in the annual Database Marketplace Survey (*LJ* 5/15/09, p. 22–25), to measure collection use fully and better evaluate the value of the library to its constituencies.

Many libraries already emphasize a variety of evaluation techniques. A look through the offerings of library conferences this year shows a number of programs on the topic. Strategies range from focusing on usage statistics to guide collection development to measuring (and improving) users' perceptions of the library.

Quantity and quality

Surveys by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) show over time a fairly steady increase in materials budget expenditures (although that may be slowing this year) and an increase in use of library collections (notably e-collections). In studies worldwide, faculty and graduate students report dependence on e-journals. These are positive signs—the more we spend, the more the collections get used.

On the other hand, qualitative studies such as reports by Ithaka and JSTOR show a diminishing public appreciation of the roles and value of the library.

Other studies, such as those by OCLC, have confirmed that the library is declining as the starting point for research, especially for students. Although students may include the library as a later step, it can be inferred that if the Google search is successful, the library may figure in only as an afterthought. So, as search engines improve, the perception of the library as gateway likely will continue to decline.

The Ithaka report actually shows a slight increase in the public perception of the library in its roles as a “buyer” of materials and as an archive or repository of resources, so perhaps the situation may not be completely grim. However,

the library is clearly seen less and less as a “gateway” or starting point for locating information.

Looked at historically, the increase in spending versus the decrease in perceived value has created what can be called a “value gap.”

preted widely: for university libraries, an increased success rate for faculty research grants; for public libraries, a more productive city or county that comes from an educated workforce. At the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, the ROI for each grant dollar spent is \$4.38.

Demonstrating the value of libraries via ROI or contingent valuation can help libraries bridge the gap

One response to this is LibQual+, which is used by libraries all over the globe to measure users' opinions of library services and provide them with a guide to improving services.

Looking at ROI

Another strategy is to focus on return on investment (ROI), which has been analyzed in recent studies concerning public, academic, and special libraries. I am currently working on an ROI project in eight countries (partially funded by Elsevier) that examines how university investment in the library helps generate grant income for its parent institution or community.

The ROI for a library can be inter-

In public libraries in Florida, the estimated ROI is \$6.54.

Another method to assess ROI is contingent valuation. It attempts to calculate what users would spend in terms of their time or direct costs to get needed information if the library were not available. It can be used to calculate benefit to a community in terms of time and money saved by using the library services compared with the total cost of operating the library. In Florida, the benefit to cost ratio for using the public libraries was calculated at 7.2:1.

Bridging the value gap

When perceptions of the importance of a product or service decrease, but the price of that product or service increases, a gap is formed. Although most users don't pay for the library directly, they do pay indirectly through taxes, tuition fees, or departmental resources.

That gap puts pressure on libraries to justify their budgets in the future or to decrease their expenditures. Many libraries are being forced to reduce expenditures.

Improving perceptions is often mostly an exercise in sound marketing and public relations. Demonstrating the value of libraries through methods such as return on investment or contingent valuation can help libraries bridge the value gap.

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LINK LIST

- ARL surveys**
bit.ly/18ERG8
- Florida ROI report**
bit.ly/7XEys
- Ithaka report**
bit.ly/mDueZ
- JSTOR survey**
bit.ly/uuU9S
- LibQual+**
www.libqual.org/index.cfm
- OCLC report**
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