Whither the Statistics? Supervising an MPA Capstone Project to Improve Library Data Gathering

by Abigail Goben and Emily Johnson

Data-driven or statistically-based decision making.

These phrases are floating around libraries and higher education, encouraging reflection on what faculty and staff value and measure. For the Library of the Health Sciences' four locations, examples of information gathered include how many patrons are in the library, types of questions they ask, how many books are checked out, etc. This collection of data helps in defining services and collections for the Library's patron base.

However, it has become apparent that there isn't centralized documentation on statistics gathered, methods of data capture, and reporting needs between the locations. Casual conversation suggested some items are being captured on paper and others in different electronic ways (Google Forms, Excel) and how data points are defined varies. Further, it is not clear which numbers and information must be reported within our organization and to our overseeing agencies; pooling the data together consistently between locations to give to these groups is increasingly difficult. Finally, there was an identified lack of documentation to help with transition when someone left the institution or moved to a new role.

Sorting out these myriad processes and developing a path forward seemed an overwhelming task. Fortunately, the University of Illinois at Chicago Masters of Public Administration (MPA) program has come to the rescue. Each semester, the MPA program sends out a call for group capstone projects which seek to give a practical, team-based experience in problem-solving within public or nonprofit organizations. With the support of the Assistant University Librarian and the Department Heads, we submitted a proposal and were accepted for the Spring 2015 semester.

Our two students are tasked with interviewing faculty and staff, identifying all of the statistics currently gathered and the methods of capture; collating a list of terms and definitions used in statistics gathering; clarifying what statistics are needed for various reporting bodies; developing a list of statistics not currently gathered that would be useful in demonstrating value; and suggesting methods for homogenization of data collection, in collaboration with faculty and staff, to improve quality without adding significant documentation burden.

The projected deliverables will include:

- Comprehensive list of statistics presently gathered, with recommendations for additions, clarifications, subtractions.
- Standard list of definitions for services and other data tracked
- Identification as to how services fit into categories for ARL and AAHSL statistics
- Recommendations for standardizing data capture (software, charts, etc)
Outline of any records retention issues.

The MPA students will complete this project by the end of their spring semester. With the Library collaborating with an external department, this project offers the potential to develop awareness for more partnerships with other program capstone projects on UIC campuses. By engaging in these projects, the Library can offer a unique learning opportunity for the students as well as strengthening faculty connections across colleges.

This project has also opened up other questions within the Library, including the need to explore institutional policies surrounding the data gathered at each of the locations, in order to develop standard practices if data is requested internally or externally for research use. This project is also intended to inform statistics gathering done by the main library so that the five libraries making up the University of Illinois at Chicago University Library are presenting a complete, diverse, and unified picture.

Abigail Goben
Assistant Professor & Assistant Information Services Librarian
agoben@uic.edu

Emily Johnson
Assistant Professor & Regional Assistant Librarian
emj11@uic.edu