

# Implementing an Assessment Program in Response to Stakeholder Need

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## Introduction

More than ever, due in part to financial pressures and tightening budgets in post-secondary education, it has become essential that libraries communicate and demonstrate value. The idea that libraries are good, worthwhile, or deserving of funding simply because they are representative of a “public good” is not as widely accepted as it may have once been. Libraries require significant investment from stakeholders, who in turn expect a return on their investment in terms of better educational and post-programme outcomes for students and top-notch support for research within the competitive U15 Canadian university environment.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, libraries have gathered statistics around budget allocation, number of staff, information technology, and facilities and equipment, and reported them in annual reports. In the Canadian post-secondary context, traditional statistical collection practices have been informed to a great extent by the requirements of the *Canadian Association of Research Libraries* (CARL) and the *Association of Research Libraries* (ARL).

The indices collected by the University of Manitoba Libraries (UML) in fulfillment of CARL and ARL reporting requirements are, on their own, insufficient for assessment and benchmarking its local activities. Furthermore, they do not communicate value to the end user, show accountability for the vast resources that libraries are responsible for, or demonstrate the Libraries’ contribution to the overall organizational mission. It is under this challenging set of circumstances that the authors found themselves in September 2018, as they received a mandate to design and implement a robust assessment programme within nine months.

This paper outlines the steps that the authors have taken as leads on the University of Manitoba Libraries’ Assessment initiative to create favourable conditions for the smooth deployment of a complete assessment strategy where the conditions are anything but ideal, and time is in short supply.

## Background

A recent institutional move toward a decentralized, responsibility-based budgeting model at the University of Manitoba has necessitated an accelerated approach to establishing a formal library assessment program. The University’s new budget model is guided by several fundamental principals, including “...aligning resource management, planning, and allocation with the University’s mission and strategic priorities...” and “... incenting creativity, innovation and the pursuing of revenue opportunities to position the University for a strong, sustainable future...” (University of Manitoba, 2018). Under this model, the UML is positioned as a “central support unit” and the allocation of operating revenues and central support costs to academic units are based on algorithms (University of Manitoba, 2018).

Directives from university administration required that the UML move quickly to collect and communicate a variety of purposeful measures that would serve to demonstrate the impact that the UML is having on academic success and research output at the University of Manitoba. While the UML has been working toward implementing a formal assessment

programme for some time, the new institutional fiscal reality placed practical and achievable timelines out of reach. Like so many other publicly-funded universities in Canada, provincial/public funding has been shrinking, leaving institutions to make up for budget shortfalls through private funding and other ventures. Neoliberal ideologies, which hold that the free market should extend into every part of public and personal life, have permeated the values of the post-secondary institution (Harvey, 2015). The neoliberal university has a redefined role in society that involves meeting capitalist demands for tangible value derived from the educational enterprise (Luka *et al.*, 2015). The university libraries that serve under these shifting institutional values necessarily inherit these strategic directives that may serve to move them away from their core professional values and priorities.

The UML assessment team found themselves needing to balance stipulated institutional priorities within a new budget environment against national collection and reporting requirements, and the UMLs own values and vision for the future. The team had nine months to assess current collection and reporting practices, devise or suggest a homogenous tool or process for all-unit reporting, develop key performance indicators, and implement a data dashboard. Compounding this challenging situation was the fact that the UML had been without a strategic plan for several years. The assessment team moved forward with a document containing strategic priorities that had been drafted by a recently departed university librarian.

### **Design, methodology or approach**

Upon receiving the mandate to design and develop an assessment program, a small and strategically-appointed team was assembled. The group comprised the associate university librarian with assessment in their portfolio, the collections coordinator, user experience librarian, project manager, and two unit heads, and was purposely limited in numbers and representation in order to move the project forward rapidly. In light of this necessary limitation, the team agreed that as the primary drivers of the vision and outcome for the entire system, that an opportunity for consultation with coordinators and other stakeholders would be facilitated once preliminary plans and infrastructure were in place.

Two members of the team had previously conducted a survey of library heads regarding statistical collection practices for a report they prepared for senior library management in order to recommend that the UML move to collect meaningful measures (Shaw and Vokey, 2016). This work allowed the team to review and summarize current practices in an expedited manner and focus on mapping timelines and deliverables. It also facilitated quick agreement on the chosen approach: the balanced scorecard.

The team agreed on six key milestones: 1) the development of a data inventory for the entire library system; 2) the creation of strategy maps, key performance indicators (KPIs) and sample balanced scorecards (BSC) representing four pillars (Collections, Indigenous Achievement, Learning and Instruction Support, and Research Services) taken from the libraries' strategic priorities document; 3) structured interviews with key stakeholders working within the library system; 4) further revision of scorecards by the committee based on feedback from stakeholders; 5) approval of revised scorecards by libraries' management group; 6) creation of a prototype data dashboard.

The balanced scorecard approach measures performance across four perspectives (financial, customer, process, and learning and growth) which is derived from the organizational mission, vision, and strategy. Strategy maps served to complement the BSCs by illustrating the causal relationship that connected the four distinct perspectives, and they were integral to keeping the team mindful of competing interests and the need to resolve them. Key questions that were explored included: how well do the UMLs strategic priorities fit with a BSC approach; what are the meaningful measures, or KPIs that should be considered; what metrics are currently collected and why; what additional measures need to be gathered to properly inform proposed KPIs; and how can the chosen KPIs be appropriately displayed in a data dashboard (Gottschalk, 2019).

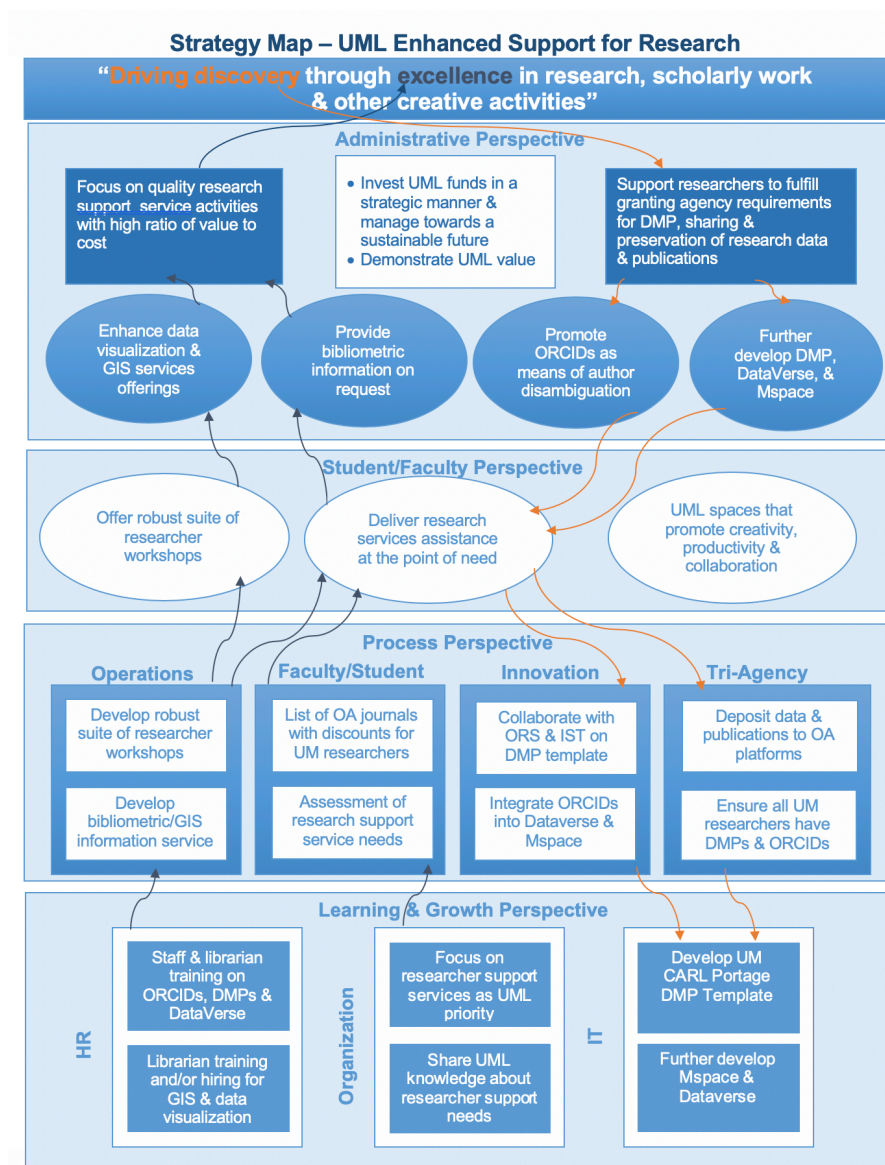


Figure 1: Sample strategy map for research services.

## Findings

Several insights and challenges arose throughout the development of the assessment programme. Assessment team members realized that there were longstanding challenges within the organization that could hinder the timely deployment of the assessment program; however, the situation was worse than anticipated. For example, an assumption had been made that all units were collecting and reporting some measures and outputs, albeit in a haphazard manner. In reality, there were several critical gaps in data collection across units that required dedicated attention and time, thereby placing tight timelines in jeopardy.

Furthermore, the collected statistical measures were not sufficient to inform KPIs. The UML currently collects less than ten percent of the measures that were included in the final BSCs (see figure 2). In several cases, the collection of newly-identified required data will require an investment of time from the affected unit or department.

Balanced Scorecard – UML Enhanced Research Support	
<span style="color: green;">■</span> Currently collected internally	<span style="color: red;">■</span> CARL data
<span style="color: black;">■</span> New data not currently collected	
Bold text are priorities as currently worded in UML Strategic Priorities document	
Key Strategic Priority	Key Strategic Measure (KPIs)
Administrative Perspective	
Focus on quality research support service activities with high ratio of value to cost	
<b>Provide bibliometric information on request and in support of grant applications, accreditation, reviews, etc.</b>	• # of bibliometric information requests completed
<b>Enhance UML data visualization and GIS service offerings</b>	• # of training sessions offered on data visualization or GIS by faculty or department
Support researchers to fulfill granting agency requirements for DMP, sharing and preservation of research data & publications	
• <b>Promote ORCIDiDs as means of author disambiguation and research consolidation</b>	• # of training sessions (individual or group) delivered on ORCIDiDs by faculty or department
• <b>Further develop Portage CARL DMP template; Dataverse; and MSpace for storage and sharing of UM researcher data management plans, data sets, and research publications</b>	• # of uses of UM Portage CARL Data Management Plan template <span style="color: green;">• # of data sets added to Dataverse</span> <span style="color: green;">• # of open access publications added to MSpace</span>

Figure 2: Sample of a portion of the BSC for research services from the administrative perspective.

It became apparent during the structured interviews and in discussions with the libraries' management group that UML librarians and staff were unfamiliar with BSCs. The interviews served as a learning opportunity for some, and in other cases, the team sensed some resistance and pushback toward the idea of creating indicators to monitor and assess outcomes. This called for an ongoing effort on the part of the team to address misinformation and put doubts to rest.

Developing an assessment programme without the benefit of a library-specific strategic plan was challenging and led to two key issues. In developing the KPIs, the team had to work with a "strategic priorities" document, which was much more time-limited in terms of scope. In other words, the strategic priorities document was not future-focused, nor did it articulate a mission or values for the Libraries. Consequently, some of the KPIs were very time-limited and lacking in longevity, and the team was left to make assumptions about value and mission. Furthermore, the team felt that due to the external mandate from university administration to complete the project and because the Libraries' strategic priorities document was constructed to fit within the University's strategic plan, that there were certain limitations in what they could achieve. Without an articulated vision, mission, and strategic plan, the development of KPIs responded primarily to institutional imperatives at the expense of library-derived goal-setting and future-focused growth.

One of the most unanticipated outcomes of the drive to implement an assessment programme was the degree of contention that arose over data collection and associated tools, and areas of reporting responsibility. Local practice amongst those in Collections, Technical Services, and Public Service, for example, vary widely and have developed in keeping with tools and methods, both formal and informal, that reflect their different contexts and reporting requirements. Corraling all inputs into a single environment has led to prolonged evaluations of software trials and debate. Additionally, the team found themselves having to make decisions around where some inputs and outputs would reside under the four-pillars configuration. For some measures, there was obvious overlap in reporting responsibility, but in the end, only one could be chosen. These have been trying and politically-fraught conversations.

Finally, creating strategic data dashboards involves substantial time and effort, but is critical to the success of a robust assessment programme. At a minimum, developing an excel spreadsheet with a supporting data dictionary can meet the needs of many academic administrators for a data dashboard.

UML ENHANCED RESEARCHER SUPPORT - "Driving discovery through excellence in research, scholarly work, & other creative activities"										
STRATEGIC PRIORITIES		STRATEGIC MEASURES	2019-2020				Type	Lead / Lag	Data Source	Data Collector
			Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4				
ADMINISTRATIVE	Provide bibliometric information on request and in support of grant applications, accreditation, reviews, etc.	• # of bibliometric information requests completed					number	lag	Virtual Ticksheet	Research Services Librarian
	Enhance UML data visualization and GIS service offerings	• # of training sessions offered on data visualization or GIS by faculty or department					number	lag	Virtual Ticksheet	GIS Librarian
	Promote ORCIDiDs as means of author disambiguation and research consolidation	• # of training sessions (individual or group) delivered on ORCIDiDs by faculty or department					number	lag	Virtual Ticksheet	Research Services Librarian
	Further develop Portage CARL DMP template; Dataverse; and MSpace for storage and sharing of UM researcher data management plans, data sets, and research publications	• # of uses of UM Portage CARL Data Management Plan template					number	lag	DMP template	Head Library Systems
		• # of data sets added to Dataverse					number	lag	Dataverse	Head Library Systems
		• # of open access publications added to MSpace					number	lag	Mspace	Head Library Systems
STUDENT / FACULTY	Offer robust suite of researcher workshops and services to support their research needs	• # of workshop sessions delivered to graduate students					number	lag	Virtual Ticksheet	Coordinator Learning & Instruction
		• Assessment by graduate students of workshops					percent	lag	Survey Monkey	Coordinator Learning & Instruction
		• # of workshop sessions delivered to faculty					number	lag	Virtual Ticksheet	Coordinator Learning & Instruction
		• Assessment by faculty of workshops					percent	lag	Survey Monkey	Coordinator Learning & Instruction
	Deliver research services assistance at the point of the need	• # of librarian consults with faculty members and graduate students					number	lag	Virtual Ticksheet	Heads in Academic Engagement
		• # of reference questions at UML client service desks from faculty or grad students					number	lag	Virtual Ticksheet	Heads in Academic Engagement
	UML spaces that promote creativity, productivity, & collaboration	• % change in learning & collaboration spaces in the UML (seats, group study rooms, computer labs, etc.)					Percent	lag	CARL Data	Heads in Academic Engagement
		• # of bookings of group study rooms					number	lag	Room Booking System	Head Library Systems

Figure 3: Partial prototype data dashboard for research services.

### Practical limitations or implications

The limitations of this project primarily centre around the concise timeline, the need to negotiate the tension that arose from meeting the requirements of an externally-supplied mandate while trying to remain faithful to the priorities and values of the UML, and the lack of strategic planning within the library system. Nonetheless, a robust assessment programme was developed, and several valuable lessons were gleaned from the process.

While the resultant product may be substantial, it is not perfect. Given the circumstances, the team agreed that it was aiming for "progress, not perfection." This approach allowed team members to accept some shortcomings and not get snagged by them while noting areas for further future adjustment. The strategy map (see figure 1) provided an avenue for incorporating the administrative perspective, but the project was lacking in full consultation with this vital stakeholder as well as other key academic administrators such as deans and department heads.

A number of key recommendations based on the results were developed: 1) the BSC approach should be a continual process that involves senior management in reviewing metrics and targets, as well as an annual review to determine if core elements are still appropriately telling the UML story; 2) the collective review should reduce the total number of KPIs that were generated no more than twenty per BSC; 3) there should be an effort going forward to incorporate more financial metrics with an eye to improving balance; 4) a need to achieve a better mix of input, output, and outcome measures over time, perhaps through the process of strategic planning; 5) assigning a target (high target = full success, low target = partial success, no target = no success) to each KPI that is aspirational and representative of the desired results of performance measures (Gottschalk, 2019).

Some takeaways from the experience of pulling together an assessment program with a quick turnaround and an externally-supplied mandate include:

- assemble a lean team
- select an approach that will help marry and make transparent the mix of institutional imperatives and library goals and values (especially critical in the absence of library-based strategic plan)
- work with library units and departments early in the project to identify current collection practices and foster awareness that local practice will likely be subject to change
- focus on strategic consultation with a limited few influential and essential stakeholders
- create a communication and education strategy for necessary stakeholders about the chosen approach and the importance of collecting meaningful metrics at the beginning of the project.

## Conclusions

It is possible to establish a robust, albeit imperfect assessment program on an accelerated timeline. While there are many excellent papers on the topic of assessment in libraries that focus on 'how to do it right,' this paper serves to convey a unique perspective on one institution's experience with 'how to do it right now' in response to externally mandated pressure. Though this is likely not how any library organization would wish to proceed with such an initiative, it is nonetheless increasingly realistic given ever-increasing demands for libraries to prove financial accountability in the context of the present neoliberal higher education setting.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> The U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities is a collective of some of Canada's most research-intensive universities. Collectively, the U15 comprise 80 percent of all competitive research in Canada, and is often used as a competitive benchmark. <http://u15.ca>