Measuring Libraries’ Impact on a Community:
How well is your library serving the needs of your community and what is the value of your services?

Prepared by
Beverly Choltco-Devlin
Mid-York Library System, Mid-York, NY
Measuring and Demonstrating Your Impact Can Change the Way “the World” Views Your Library

Project GAIN (Global Access Information Network)
• In the early 1990s, Morrisville Public Library, New York, had a total budget of less than $20,000 and was in danger of closing its doors

• Project GAIN was funded by Apple Computer, which provided the library with all the skills and hardware needed to provide the community full access to the Internet
  – Five rural public libraries and one Native American library participated

• Project opened up the world to the Morrisville community
The Impact of Project GAIN

Both the funder and the libraries wanted to know what the impact of the program would be on their communities, which previously had little or no access to computers or the Internet

Findings:
- Increased library use
- Diversified the ways library visitors used the library
- Increased funding by positioning the library for a local election on special district funding
- Increased respect for the library within the community by making it a leader in the community, state, and nation
- Current library manager is now the mayor of Morrisville
The Impact of Project GAIN, cont’d

- Changed the type of patron using the library (more young people, men, seniors)

- Library hosted first online literacy discussion groups in the United States

- Received attention from Senator Paul Simon, *Newsday*, and *Washington Post*

- Library staff testified before Congress about the role of public libraries in providing access to the Internet in the United States
  - Testimony directly resulted in passage of Universal Service Act

- Even a small rural library can make a huge impact on its community and set an example for the state and even the nation
What Is an Impact Study?

• An evaluation that measures the effect of programs and services on the community

• Not the only type of evaluation but the most important type

• Ironically, it is the one done the least
  – Only a few full-scale impact studies have been done for public libraries
  – Those have been done on a statewide or large city level
    • Examples: South Carolina, St. Louis, Florida
Why Is There a Lack of Impact Studies in the Public Library Field?

- Requires time
- Requires money
- Often difficult to determine impact because impact is often not realized until long after a service is provided
- Other external factors and variables that are difficult for a library to measure may affect impact
- Libraries are usually not required to prove their accountability by either the organization or outside stakeholders and funding sources
- Many libraries perceive the process as difficult or requiring scientific or statistical expertise
However....

• It is critically important that some type of impact evaluation be done

• It is better to do something than nothing at all

• In the current fiscal environment for public libraries, accountability is increasingly being demanded by funding sources
Why Measuring Impact Is Important

- To ensure you are serving your community well
- To prove a library’s worth or that it is an essential asset to the community
- To measure the cost/benefit of a specific program (requested increasingly by funders)
- To show the changes in the lives of individuals and the community due to the library
- To use as a management tool to evaluate current services and plan future ones
Measuring Impact

Impact can take two forms:

- Impact on community
- Impact on individuals
Outputs vs. Impacts

• Outputs are a description of services provided:
  – Number of books checked out
  – Number of library cards applied for
  – Number of reference questions answered in a specific month

• Impacts are a description of the value of services provided:
  – Our public access computers helped individuals in our community to start three different small businesses
  – The teen night at our library has helped youth in our community connect with volunteer opportunities and read on average 30% more books that they used to
Potential Impact on a Community

- Return on dollar investment
- Increased number of jobs
- Increase in new businesses in community
- Literacy levels improved
- Population increase (increased tax base)
- Children participating in the preschool summer reading program enter kindergarten more ready to learn
- Patrons more informed about health issues
- Library seen as community center
- Community gets free Internet access, computer use, and instruction for the first time
Potential Impact on Individuals

• High school student gets into college of his choice and attributes his success to afternoons spent at the public library

• Job seeker obtains position after he is able to research potential employers before a job interview using electronic resources

• Senior citizen is able to find needlework pattern from a magazine from the 1950s to finish a pillowcase she began when she was first married

• Young pregnant mother whose first child died from SIDS researches causes and takes steps to keep this from happening to her second child

• Patron with heart disease discovers a drug interaction between her prescription drug and an over-the-counter medicine she is using
Potential Impacts of Public Access Computing in the Library

- Increase in use of electronic resources by business community
- Increase in the public library being seen as a source for value-added information
- People are using public access computing to develop computer skills and gain knowledge about:
  - Employment opportunities
  - Health information
  - Government information
Before Starting an Impact Study, Consider What You Already Do to Measure Your Value

• There are a number of ways to evaluate programs

• Many of us already do this with our reports to the board, county, and state

• What do we do with all of the information we gather and provide?
  – Do we ever use this information to measure impact or do we file the report and say, “Whew! Glad that’s over with for the year!”
Target Audiences for an Impact Study

• Political: County commissioners, mayors, town and village boards, other funding sources

• Economic: Businesses, chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, job-seekers

• Educational: Schools, colleges, home-schoolers, daycare centers, preschools, literacy students, continuing education students

• Social: Public assistance agencies, mental health agencies, senior citizens’ agencies, women’s assistance agencies

• Health: Local hospitals, physicians, health insurance providers, substance abuse agencies

• Consumers looking for information on personal health, retail products, recreational activities, cultural activities, travel, etc.
Sample Library Services and Programs on Which to Conduct Impact Studies

- Public access computing
- Summer reading programs
- Special services for special populations
- Electronic resources (in library and remote use)
- Programs and program room use
- Reference services
How Do We Measure Impact?

First steps:
• Due to limited funding, start with a small-scale or project/program-oriented evaluation

• Decide what your library needs and what you need to measure and explain that need

  Need
  > More public access computers

  Measure
  > Impact of current public access computing
    1) Who is using it?
    2) What are they using it for?
    3) How often are they using it?
How Do We Measure Impact?

There are two primary types of information to gather:

- Quantitative
- Qualitative
Quantitative Data

Statistics, numbers, finite measures

Examples:

- Number of registered library card holders
- Annual circulation figures for DVDs
- Number of children participating in the summer reading program
- Average wait time for public access computers
- Number of searches in the magazine/periodical database
Quantitative Measurement Techniques

• Gather data from:
  – Internal library databases
  – External local, state, and national databases and resources
    • Chamber of commerce, state library system, Census Bureau

• Convert statistics to measures of value—stats don’t tell the story on their own!

  – **Example statistic:** The wait time for a computer with a consumer health resources database is up to 30 minutes

  – **Example measure of value:** Nearly 100 users access our public access computers each week, with wait times of up to 30 minutes per machine throughout the day. Our public computers are being used at maximum capacity 100 percent of the time we are open to the public.
Qualitative Data

Opinions, views, perceptions

Examples:

• Perceptions of participants of a “poetry slam” about how the program added to the community
• Anecdotes from youth on how a summer teen reading program increased the percentage of time that they spent reading
• Survey attendees at a local business expo about whether they used the library, and if not, why not
• Responses from users of public access computing on how they are using the public library computers and the Internet, and how that technology has helped them personally
Qualitative Data Techniques

- Surveys
- Focus groups
- Community meetings
- Individual interviews

Use data gathered in qualitative studies to:
- Add to quantitative data to demonstrate full impact
- Incorporate into program reports to state library to show successes
- Use in grant proposals to prove effectiveness
Surveys and Survey Cards

A survey simply asks people to respond to a series of questions about the service or program you are trying to measure

- Make it simple
- Don’t include too many questions
- Do include open-ended questions
- Make it easy to return the survey to the library or place of collection
- Follow up
Rethinking Traditional Measures for Developing an Impact Study

• Example: Measuring impact of reference service

• Traditional method:
  – Keep a tally sheet of the number of reference questions
  – Keep track of the exact questions asked

• This information does not give your audience a sense of the impact of your reference service
How Can We Improve on a Traditional Method?

Small libraries have an advantage: proximity to their patrons

Measuring impact of reference service:

1. Ask the patron immediately if the information given meets their needs

2. Follow-up! When the patron comes in later, ask them if the answer to the reference question was what they needed and what the result of having that knowledge was

3. Document any responses or anecdotal feedback
Nontraditional Techniques to Measure Impact

- Get out in the community!
- Ask people who have used the library to write a letter about how the library has had an impact on their lives
- Ask library users to accompany you on visits to local or state legislators, town meetings, etc., and record their comments
- Compile an estimate of what it would cost to individually subscribe to each magazine that is in your electronic magazine database
- Put a simple form on your Web site asking for feedback on the impact of a service or program
- Form a small library computer user group and ask for input
- Use tools freely available on the Internet and in books
- Ask for testimonials from groups that use your library meeting room (i.e., quilters or genealogy clubs)
Measuring Impact Case Study #1: Regional Read

What:
A three-county community reading program that includes community discussions and telecast with author

Impact measured:
Participation and benefits of the program for participants

Why:
To determine if the program was a good investment and is replicable

How:
• Provided a feedback form to participants at every program to record anecdotal comments
• Used both qualitative and quantitative measures (i.e., number of people able to attend the videoconference, number of participants in the senior continuing ed course on censorship, number of books borrowed from the library and bought at the local bookstore)
• Compiled results in a report to be used internally and for funders
Measuring Impact Case Study #1: Regional Read, cont’d

Key findings of impact measurement:
• Cooperation between businesses, schools, libraries, and other community organizations increased greatly during program and after
• Library generated new users
• Library generated new readers

How data will be used:
• Introduce new opportunities for community involvement
• Provide guidance on second Regional Read program
• Increase library’s visibility—library will participate in a regional development planning process
Measuring Impact Case Study #2: “Tell Your Story” Weblink

What:
The library wanted to show the breadth of library support to fight the 15 percent library funding cuts proposed by the governor of New York in 2003

Impact measured:
Qualitative impacts on individuals from library use

Why:
Quantitative data would potentially convince the governor and other state leaders to eliminate proposed budget cuts

How:
• A simple form was placed on the library Web site that allowed users to automatically send an email to the library director about why the library was important to them
• The director printed these letters and hand-delivered them to legislators

Use of findings:
For the first time in state history, legislators overruled the governor’s veto/proposal and restored library funding
Measuring Impact Case Study #3: NOVEL in the Community

What:
An LSTA grant trained 13 libraries how to raise awareness of their electronic consumer database resources in the community

Impact measured:
The amount the databases were used by community members and the types of use

Why:
To measure the value of the investment and libraries’ ability to stimulate more use

How:
• Library staff prepared a presentation on electronic resources and showed it to the “movers and shakers” in each community—town board, rotary club, computer user groups and … the local hair salon
• Staff handed out survey cards to community members and gave out an e-mail address where people could send their comments after they got to use the databases
Measuring Impact Case Study #3: NOVEL in the Community Survey Card

Thank you for attending a presentation on NOVEL (New York Online Virtual Electronic Resources) provided through the Mid-York Library System. We would appreciate your responses to the following simple questions about the presentation and the resource.

1. Who made the presentation for you? ________________________
2. Were you aware of the availability of these resources before this presentation? ______
   Did you use them? ________________________
3. Have you used any of these resources since the presentation? ______
4. If so, which one? ________________________
5. Have you found the resource useful? ________________________
6. (Optional) Would you like additional training in using the NOVEL Resources? 
   YES ______ NO ______
   If yes, what is the best way to contact you?
   Name ________________________
   Phone ________________________ Email ________________________
   Address ________________________

Important: To protect your privacy, if providing personal information in question 4 you may want to mail this card in an envelope or return to your public library or email your information to nld@nyvl.org. Your contact information will not be used for any other reason than to help you get additional training.

Thank you.
Measuring Impact Case Study #3: NOVEL in the Community, cont’d

Key findings of impact measurement:

- Results are still coming in—we won’t know the real impact for a while
- Use increased and awareness sessions made a big difference
- Library can see which databases are being used the most, which predicts general interests of users (business, health, reference, media resources)

How data will be used:

- Continue outreach around databases
- Continue “awareness raising” work and replicate for other programs
- Use knowledge of users’ main interests in other library decisions
How Do Results of Impact Measurement Demonstrate Value?

Data can be used to communicate your needs to decision makers, which can help you reach a local policy or funding goal.
How Do Results of Impact Measurement Demonstrate Value?

Examples of how to present value using data:

The value of a library:
• 70 percent of our chartered population to serve has a library card, and 90 percent of those people have used their library in the last six months

The value of public access computing:
• Our library computers are used 100 percent of the time when the library is open, with wait times of up to one hour
• Based on a community survey, 40 percent of people in our community do not have Internet access at home
• We are meeting some but not all of the need for public access computing in our community
How Do Results of Impact Measurement Demonstrate Value?

Examples of how to present value using data:

The value of a specific library program:
- Since instituting a teen reading program, participants report that they spend 30 percent more time reading each week and less time watching TV or playing video games.
- Research shows that youth who spend less time watching TV do better in school than peers who watch more.

The value of a reference program:
- Our library answered 40 health-related reference questions in the first three months of 2006; 75 percent of those patrons said that the information they learned from the library helped them to make an important decision about their own health care and improved their health.
Main Lessons to Take Away from Today

• Impact studies are possible even for small rural libraries
  – Do them in manageable ways
  – Begin in conjunction with specific programs and services you are already offering

• Impact studies are critical and becoming even more important for the survival of many libraries

• You know you do great work – Let others know what a great job you do!