

BOOK REVIEWS

LANCASTER, F. W. *If You Want to Evaluate Your Library . . .* Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science, 1988. 208 p. \$34.50. ISBN: 0-87845-078-5.

Much of F. W. Lancaster's substantial and deserved reputation in library and information science is the product of a consistent flow of contributions to our understanding of the techniques and problems involved in measuring and evaluating library services. Wide recognition among health sciences librarians began with his evaluation studies of MEDLARS in the late 1960s [1] and the AIM-TWX system [2] a few years later. These studies were important not only because of their role in the development of the National Library of Medicine's online bibliographic services, but also as methodological models for analysis of systems performance. Many of the techniques used by Lancaster in those studies remain viable today. Many of the problems encountered along the way continue to confound contemporary efforts to assess library systems and services.

Beginning with an explanation of principles for analyzing the cost-effectiveness of bibliographic retrieval systems [3], Lancaster's steady output of papers and books reflect a continuing concern with approaches for investigating the performance of a variety of common library and information services. *The Measurement and Evaluation of Library Services*, even though it appeared in 1977 and is now a little dated, remains the single most comprehensive and insightful review of published studies, common techniques, and methodological problems in the design and implementation of evaluation of libraries [4]. *Investigative Methods in Library and Information Science: An Introduction*, which he coauthored with John Martyn, was among the

first texts in the field to describe the variety of techniques available for gathering evidence of library and systems performance [5]. Like *The Measurement and Evaluation of Library Services*, it remains a basic source for librarians interested in the subject.

The broad appeal and influence of Lancaster's contributions over the years can be attributed to three factors. First is the scope of his work. No other writer in library and information science has developed so concentrated a body of published work in the area of measurement and evaluation. It is almost impossible to delve into the literature without encountering relevant contributions by Lancaster. Second is the consistency and coherence of thought represented in his many writings. Although the particulars of technique and conceptual frameworks have undergone some revision over the years, the fundamental perspective on problems and issues has varied only in minor respects. Finally, and probably equally important, is the clarity of Lancaster's writing. Whether critical review, conceptual exposition, or discussion of methods and problems, his work is accessible even to those unfamiliar with the jargon and inexperienced in the practical aspects of measuring and evaluating library services.

Assessment of systems and services has been a topic of occasional discussion among health sciences librarians for many years. However the events of the 1980s have prompted greater awareness of the need for evaluating library services, and have heightened concern about basic issues and problems in assessing the performance and impact of libraries in health sciences settings. A new book by Lancaster on measurement and evaluation of library services would normally attract attention, but due to current circumstances, it is certain to provoke even more

interest among health sciences librarians today than might have been the case a decade ago.

If You Want to Evaluate Your Library . . . attempts to fill an important gap in the literature of measurement and evaluation. Intended primarily as a text for use in courses on the subject, it provides a general overview of the goals of evaluation, many of the methods commonly employed for assessing services, and some of the associated limitations and problems that are encountered in the process. Study questions for students appear at the end of each chapter. Although references to published studies are included, the text does not extensively review the literature and does not attempt to replace, but rather to complement, *The Measurement and Evaluation of Library Services*. As Lancaster notes in the preface, even though it is intended as a course text, the practical focus of *If You Want to Evaluate Your Library . . .* suggests its potential usefulness to librarians interested in conducting their own studies.

If You Want to Evaluate Your Library . . . does not try to cover all aspects of the evaluation of library services. It opens with a broad introduction to the purposes and goals, basic concepts, and contexts for evaluation. The major portion of the text discusses the various issues, problems, and methods related to evaluation of library collections and document delivery services, including: methods for assessing the collection; analysis of collection use, with separate chapters on in-house use and periodical use; obsolescence and space utilization; catalog use; and shelf availability. In fact, over half of the reading content of the text (ninety pages) is devoted to various aspects of library collections and their use. In comparison reference and computer-assisted search services receive meager attention, with two chapters totaling about thirty

pages. Even less space is allotted to resource sharing, and cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit studies. In an afterword, Lancaster refers to the reader to other sources for discussions of some important topics, such as technical services, library standards, and library surveys, none of which are discussed at length in the text due to space limitations. However some areas of established effort in modern libraries are omitted because Lancaster considers them to be programs "beyond the scope of 'traditional' services"; user education is perhaps the most notable example, but specialized information services and consulting services also fall into this category of excluded topics. The text cites about 300 relevant publications, many of which report results of studies. It closes with a brief index, dominated by personal names associated with cited studies, but it does offer adequate access to the major topics and methods covered in the text.

If You Want to Evaluate Your Library . . . shares many of the qualities of Lancaster's previous publications. The writing is remarkably clear, direct, and readable; criteria and measures are consistently established; terminology is defined; and the many figures and tables are both relevant and informative. The author discusses a variety of well-selected published studies, which exemplify commonly used techniques, as well as reported results.

Also consistent with Lancaster's earlier publications, *If You Want to Evaluate Your Library . . .* reflects a circumscribed, if very common, perspective on the evaluation of library and information services: evaluation is presented not so much as a process of assessing value, but as a disparate array of techniques for accumulating data. As was true of *The Measurement and Evaluation of Library Services*, *If You Want to Evaluate Your Library . . .*

concentrates on measures and methods of measuring. There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach. Many library administrators and consultants think it preferable, if not necessary, to incorporate evaluation into an overall planning and management context, deriving evaluation measures and criteria from the priorities and needs of the library, its clientele, and its institutional roles. Researchers, on the other hand, often view evaluation as a mechanism for investigating practices and their impact, stressing the need for objectively meaningful and comparable criteria, and more controlled study methods. Lancaster recognizes the potential potency and practicality of evaluation in decision-making contexts as well as the usefulness of evaluation research. His presentation in *If You Want to Evaluate Your Library . . .* like that in *The Measurement and Evaluation of Library Services*, offers what may be most useful to the greatest number of readers. Library administrators and researchers alike can adopt and adapt those measures and techniques they consider most relevant to their needs. However some liabilities related to professional practice may also be noted. First, without the planning context, the discussion of evaluation measures and methods may perpetuate the perception that evaluation is an occasional and not particularly integral element in library management, undermining its usefulness as an effective decision-making tool. Second, the stress on measures and techniques may perpetuate the notion that evaluation is a data-oriented process, largely indistinguishable from research, rather than a value-laden practical endeavor. Thus, health sciences librarians may wish to supplement Lancaster's text with works that stress context (usually at the expense of method), such as those by Charles McClure [6-7], and Michael Quin Patton [8-9].

As is true of most writers on measurement and evaluation, Lancaster's work reflects a point of view expressed explicitly in the introduction to *If You Want to Evaluate Your Library . . .*. That point of view is based largely on a traditional vision of libraries: financial resources are committed to information resources, which consist primarily of publications; facilities are dedicated for storage of materials; and personnel are made available to exploit these resources by providing services intended to benefit users. The library is, thus, seen as an interface between available information resources and library clientele. The purpose of evaluation is to determine the extent to which the library succeeds in that role as interface. As a consequence of this perspective, it is reasonable to give greatest attention to collections and their use, and to address services as means for easing access to materials and their informational content. There is little doubt that this perspective on both libraries and evaluation of library services accurately reflects current professional practice, particularly in public and academic libraries. There is also little controversy concerning the functionality, strengths, and limitations of many of the methods and measures discussed by Lancaster in this book. There is, however, evidence suggesting that a different perspective is evolving for special and health sciences libraries, and that, as a result, less "operational" and mechanical notions of evaluation may be required to encompass adequately that perspective. The literature and the shifting priorities of the Medical Library Association substantiate concern about the need for innovative approaches for assessing health sciences library services [10-12]. Even more revealing is the examination of roles health sciences librarians are envisioning and implementing; these new roles are marked by a declin-

ing emphasis on collections and delivery of materials, and increasing emphasis on specialized information products and services, such as user education, consulting, and integrated information management services. These newer services place the librarian in the role of *primary* information source, rather than as an intermediary between the user and the literature; the library has become a source of expertise, as well as of materials. The usefulness and applicability of the evaluation methods presented by Lancaster may, therefore, vary considerably among health sciences libraries, depending on the extent to which they have implemented innovative services.

Finally, it should be noted that the practicality of Lancaster's text depends to a large extent on the needs and previous knowledge of the reader. Librarians intending to use questionnaires and survey methods for evaluating a service will find the text filled with examples of studies employing that approach. Librarians seeking examples of evaluation studies reporting analyzed results will find many cited. However questionnaire design, basic statistical analysis, survey sampling, and reporting of results are not among the many practical aspects of evaluation discussed by Lancaster. The works of Ronald Powell [13] and Swisher and McClure [14] may prove more useful, as well as those cited by Lancaster.

If You Want to Evaluate Your Library . . . serves as an excellent general introduction to the most common and most widely applied evaluation methods for libraries. Health sciences librarians unfamiliar with the variety of methods for evaluating their collections will find the text valuable reading, particularly if they also consult the relevant works cited by Lancaster, including those by Orr et al. published in the *Bulletin*. Health sciences librarians seeking to evalu-

ate standard information services, such as reference and basic online search services, may also profit from the text's introduction. All librarians should be familiar with the fundamentals of measuring and evaluating their services: *If You Want to Evaluate Your Library . . .* is an excellent introduction to those fundamentals. However health sciences librarians attempting to evaluate innovative or specialized information services, to place evaluation within a planning context, or to evaluate services such as user education and technical services, will find it necessary to supplement the text with other sources.

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SNOW, BONNIE. **Drug Information: A Guide to Current Resources.** Chicago: Medical Library Association, 1989. 243 p. \$25.00 member, \$32.00 non-member. ISBN: 0-912176-24-5.

Bonnie Snow's *Drug Information* began as the syllabus for a Medical Library Association continuing education course. In its present form, the book is designed to serve as a text for similar formal courses on