Statistics: Or, What Numbers Do You Have?

Some people get uncomfortable when the topic of "statistics" comes up. They envision complicated mathematical formulas and jargon they don't understand. In the library, however, statistics basically have to do with counting. Statistics are used as one way to measure how the library is doing in meeting the needs of its community.

There are basically two kinds of measures that are used. One kind of measure tells us what the library provides. Some of these measures would include the number of volumes owned, the number of hours the library is opened, and the number of staff members. This kind of measure is sometimes called an input measure.

The other kind of measure tells us how much the library is used. Some of these measures include: number of people visiting the library, number of items circulated, and number of reference questions answered. This kind of measure is sometimes called an output measure.

Statistical measures can be very useful in helping evaluate library services. Using statistics, libraries can compare themselves to other libraries in similar communities. They can also compare how they have done in one period of time with a similar period of time in the past. For example, it is not unusual for a monthly library report to show how the present year's monthly circulation compared with last year's.

Typical Statistical Measures for Libraries

Some of the typical statistical measures that school libraries use are:

**Collection Figures:** These statistics show how many books and other kinds of materials the library makes available to its clientele. To determine the number of items that they have, librarians typically start with a base figure for the year, subtract the items that are known to be weeded or otherwise eliminated from the collection, and add the number of items that have been purchased or otherwise added. If you are not certain what your base number is, you can look on your last annual report.

**Attendance:** Two different attendance measures are taken. First, the number of total people who visit your library, regardless of reason, is taken. This would include persons attending activities, meetings, and those requiring no staff services. The second attendance number is a count of people who come to library programs. During open check out, students might be asked to sign in, and
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thus, these signatures could be counted. For programs, count classes or students that attend the event.

Circulation: Circulation is measured simply by counting the number of materials that have been checked out each day. If you use an automated system, the computer should do this for you. If you use a manual system, this is usually done at the end of each day by counting the cards for the books that have been checked out. The statistics you keep will depend on what you are trying to evaluate. For example, if you are just starting a video collection, you may want to keep separate statistics on the circulation of these items.

Interlibrary Loan: Your library's involvement with the interlibrary loan system is measured in two ways: first in how many items you borrow from other libraries, and second the number of items you lend to other libraries. Typically, these statistics can be kept on a monthly basis, simply by counting the number of forms for the items received and the items loaned. Sometimes to check the effectiveness of interlibrary loan, libraries also count the number of items they requested from other libraries as compared to the number that they actually received.

Computer Usage: On-line materials are available in every library. Use of these resources should be tracked. Knowing how often these resources are used can help determine the best use of library dollars.

Daily, Monthly and Annual Statistics

Some statistics, most notably circulation, reference transactions, computer usage, and library attendance can be collected on a daily basis. Libraries can either purchase forms for collecting these statistics or make up their own. A computer program can also be used to eliminate time consuming arithmetic. At the end of each month, daily statistics are compiled into a monthly report. Often it is useful for the principal or district librarian to see the month's statistics compared to the same month of the previous year, as well as recent trends from the previous months, especially when defending budget proposals.

At the end of the fiscal year, school librarians are asked to complete an annual report and send it to the Idaho Commission for Libraries. These reports, while time consuming, are not difficult to fill out, if good monthly financial and service statistics have been kept. Many school libraries must complete a similar report for their school district. Much of the same information is used on both reports.
Using Statistics

Many of comparative statistics are expressed in "per capitas." A per capita statistic is simply the average number of whatever you are measuring for each person in your services area. For example, let's say that your library circulates 10,000 items a year, and you serve 1,000 students. To get the per capita circulation, we divide the circulation (10,000) by the number of students (1,000) and come up with a figure of 10 circulations per capita. In other words, for each person served, 10 books were circulated, or the "average" person in your community checked out 10 books last year.

By using this kind of statistic, you can demonstrate the value that your library is providing to your school community. At times you may also be able to appeal to community pride to gain support for the library.

You need to realize, however, that statistics can cut both ways, and they normally need to be explained. For example, let's say that Library A has 5 volumes per capita, and Library B has 3 volumes per capita. Does this mean that Library A is a better library? Not necessarily. It may mean that Library A has never been weeded, and that a large number of its books are old, dilapidated and will never be checked out.

Thus, while statistics are useful tools in evaluating library services, they should not be taken out of context. In evaluating how the library is doing, it is best to look at a wide variety of measures. When statistics change radically from one year to the next, it is an indication that something changed in the library or the community, and you should try to find out what it is, if you don't already know. Statistics, then, serve as a kind of weather vane that helps you to know which way the wind is blowing for your library.