

Book Review

Demonstrating Results:

Using Outcome Measurement in Your Library.

Rhea Joyce Rubin Chicago:

American Library Association, 2006,

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REVIEWED BY:

Beyza Aksu Dunya, Ph.D.

Bartın University

In an era of budget restrictions and rapid environmental change, libraries increasingly need to demonstrate their value. Outcome measurement is commonly used by libraries to measure how their services and programs affect users. There are many guidelines available for libraries that plan outcome assessment to evaluate their impact on users. *Demonstrating Results: Using Outcome Measurement in Your Library* by Rhea Joyce Rubin (2006) provides guidelines and examples of developing and implementing outcome measurement using two case studies in a hypothetical public library (Anytown Public Library) in the United States. Rubin often uses questions to guide readers and provides applications of the concepts presented in each chapter. She provides several questions within the text that give readers a more active role by making the book less narrative driven and more thought provoking. A total of 14 work forms are presented as an appendix to help readers apply information presented in associated chapters. There are six chapters followed by six tool kits for practitioners. A brief glossary is provided at the end of the book to support a common terminology for readers with various levels of content knowledge.

Rubin explains the concept of *outcome* by giving examples of changes that may occur as a result of library programs: knowledge, skills, attitude, behavior, or condition. Outcome measurement is defined as “a user-centered approach to the planning and assessment of library programs or services” (p. 16). The process of designing an outcome measurement plan is presented with the aid of solid examples that distinguish between outputs and outcomes. For readers who are new to outcome measurement, this introductory chapter helps develop a basic understanding of outcome and output concepts with examples and case studies.

Chapter Two addresses how libraries plan programs to meet intended user needs. During implementation and evaluation phases libraries assess whether the planned outcomes are met. This chapter clarifies the difference between interim and long-term outcomes. Interim outcomes that are sometimes called *outputs* (i.e., participation rates, user statistics) facilitate determining long-term *outcomes* (e.g., behavioral change). After presenting different outcome types, Rubin walks the reader through the outcome statement development process. First, she explains how to gather data to detect and define potential outcomes, which are referred to as “candidate outcomes” in the chapter. When writing a

candidate outcome statement, Rubin emphasizes not to use the word *library* but to focus on users, using general action verbs. She then provides sample outcome verbs and example if-then statements to explain concepts in more detail.

Rubin introduces logic models through a *so what* linkage in if-then statements. She emphasizes that people should keep asking “so what?” until reaching the last, long-term outcome. The chapter also exemplifies possible gaps in the logical chain while building if-then connections. For example, if there is something other than the proposed factor that can explain an observed change, there is a gap in the logic flow that should be fixed. Considering the importance of planning “if-then” flow as an initial step for building effective logic models, this chapter can serve as a guide for people who intend to create logic models for their programs. Yet, the discussion and examples used to illustrate candidate outcomes could have been explored in more detail in the chapter.

Assessments become more valuable and useful when they combine both purposes of accountability and seeking improvement.

Rubin describes steps in writing comprehensive and measurable outcome statements, specifying outcome indicators and setting targets in Chapter Three. She first explains the important distinction between an outcome and outcome indicator. An outcome indicator is a specific measure of change or action on the part of the user, and “a well-selected outcome indicator attempts to tell a story to emphasize the impact of the program on individuals” (p. 34). She provides specific examples to clarify the distinction between outcome and indicator. Then, she shows precise examples of four characteristics of an indicator: (a) verb, (b) object, (c) quantity of action, and (d) time frame. An outcome may require one to three indicators that cover all the dimensions of a concept. Rubin provides an example using a library program aiming to support the habit of reading. The potential dimensions of this outcome would be frequency of reading, positive attitude toward reading, and enjoyment. Each of these dimensions can be captured by measurable or observable indicators and compose an outcome statement. But, not all indicators are always direct. In some situations, “proxy” or “surrogate” outcome indicators can substitute for directly observable indicators and imply the outcomes. Some important considerations when specifying indicators and constructing indicator statements are a data analysis plan, timetable, and the context in which the library functions and the program is launched. In addition, external influences (e.g., economic, political, or social environment), program participant characteristics (e.g., literacy level, native language), and library setting (e.g., abilities of staff, funding sources) impact specific outcome indicators for a library program. Therefore, Rubin emphasizes that indicators should be decided by giving full consideration to the context of the library, program, and community. This is an important

point to emphasize, since public libraries are context-dependent, and one that applies to assessment situations in other context-dependent areas, such as assessment in higher education institutions (e.g. Suskie, 2009).

Prior to obtaining the data, when educators consider how they will use student performance data on these tests they are more likely to plan possible changes or action.

The other step to writing good outcome statements is to set targets for each indicator. Rubin describes targets as success indicators for the library which should be represented by both proportions and numbers of participants. She states that targets should not be used to make comparisons across different libraries, given the contextual differences, but to compare a program's functioning within a library over time. This statement overlaps with some other assessment professionals' (i.e. Banta & Palomba, 1999) arguments for the use of standardized methods for assessing accountability. Standardized measures can be developed to report retention, graduation, employment, and alumni satisfaction statistics; however, they should not be used to make comparative decisions for accountability purposes. After stating success indicators for individuals, and setting targets for the library, the last step is to compose outcome statements. In two separate figures, she lists components of an outcome statement and provides sample outcome statements.

Chapter Four starts with a discussion of the difference between outcome measurement and scientific, experimental research. Outcome measurement, as a specific type of assessment, is designed for assessing individual programs based on changes among participants and does not concern generalization of results. Outcome measurement is not grounded on a specific hypothesis and results should not/cannot be compared to larger populations. Rubin's stance on generalizability of the outcome measurement results corresponds with other authors in the assessment field. For example, Suskie (2000) encourages people to consider various factors such as cognitive style and cultural experience while assessing individual students. As each research design has specific approaches and data collection tools, outcome measurement often employs data collection tools which include: (a) existing records, (b) surveys, (c) tests, (d) interviews, and (e) observation. Under each data collection method, Rubin discusses their advantages and disadvantages. Despite the benefits of presenting cautionary issues associated with each tool for future users, though, I do not see those issues as *disadvantages*. For example, she lists the disadvantages of surveys as language burden, response rates, and social desirability concerns of respondents; however, each of these issues can be handled by careful survey design and should not be considered as *barriers* because surveys are an important data collection method for assessing attitude, behaviors, change, and even knowledge. Rubin provides a check list (work form) of relevant questions

to guide users while selecting an appropriate data collection method. She adds that some outcomes may be assessed using multiple instruments (e.g., survey followed by interview).

The next step after choosing the data collection method is creating or adapting appropriate data collection instruments. She emphasizes the importance of this step: "Your data will only be as good as your data collection instruments" (p. 53). In a separate work form, she lists several criteria for evaluating the relevance of each question on an instrument to prevent redundancy. At the end of the chapter, she briefly mentions data analysis, with commonly used descriptive statistics including percentages, mean, mode, and cross tabulations. She warned readers not to use associational findings obtained from statistical tests (e.g., *t*-test) to draw causal conclusions. I found this part essential for readers who are new to quantitative methods since causality is often confused with association.

Chapter Five addresses the challenge of outcome measurement—getting people involved in outcome assessment knowing that they usually overestimate the work required to complete the assessment efforts. According to Rubin, the best way to overcome this issue is to create an outcome measurement plan (i.e., logic model). A sample outcome measurement plan, created by the California State Library, is provided along with a straightforward and applicable blank template for readers. She points out the importance of addressing participants' questions of "why" before starting actual measurement activities. Then, she explains the need for an external data collector to avoid using the direct program provider as the evaluator, and the need for pilot-testing the data collection. At the end of this chapter, Rubin explains how to design an action plan. The action plan is the operational form of a logic model, designed for answering who, what, and when. I agree with her point that a well-developed action plan facilitates implementation of outcome measurement, and helps predict time and resources needed for the actual implementation.

Cognitive bottlenecks relate to the difficulties students have with specific content. Cognitive bottlenecks create obstacles to student success and persistence in a discipline.

Chapter Six starts with interesting information about the use of outcome measurement results: in 2000, it was found that only 44% of public libraries used their survey data for improvement. Rubin then mentions the factors underlying this tendency to underutilize results; I think those factors are still relevant in library assessment practices today. She proposes key suggestions to make the most of outcome data, including how to interpret and communicate results. First and foremost she outlines potential data interpretation tools and methods in a straightforward manner, and mentions which data and analytical methods fit which data interpretation tools. One uncommon tip she provides for readers about interpretation

of open-ended responses is very useful—she states that in open-ended responses the interpreter/evaluator should focus on minority responses rather than common responses, as minority responses may reveal important patterns about the services. She then explains strategies for communicating results to service providers, funders, volunteers, users, and the public. The outlets she mentions are still frequently used to distribute findings and demonstrate library impact to people (e.g., newsletters, anecdotes and success stories, fact sheets, and annual reports). However, this chapter should be updated to include modern technologies in further editions. Lastly, Rubin explains how outcome measurement results can be used to make informed decisions and modifications to outcomes, indicators, data collection methods, timeline, staff, and other resources if needed.

Student learning outcome assessment data also led to changes in operational goals, such as increased retention and graduation rates or curriculum revision.

At the end of the book there are six tool kits that can be extremely useful for applications. These tool kits provide sample outcome statements for various user groups; sample reaction and benefit surveys, measuring not only satisfaction but also overall training input to participants; sample confidentiality statements; information about developing item types including ordering and formatting; and guidance on data cleaning, coding, and processing issues as well as sampling, deciding sample size, and sampling method.

Conclusion

This book has some weaknesses that might be addressed in further editions. First, definition of quantitative tools and approaches are too limited and simple. Although this is not a methodology book, I would expect a bit more detail and examples on the common quantitative approaches in outcome measurement. Second, Rubin's repeated statement that "sophisticated sampling and data analysis methods are not needed because outcome measurement does not attempt to make generalizations" (p. 42) may mislead some readers. Such a statement might be discouraging for people who are new to outcome measurement and intend to learn/use sophisticated methods. It should be a priority to employ the most valid and credible approaches, which can be sophisticated. Third, the book was first published in 2006 and the chapters should be updated to reflect new technology and tools in data collection and reporting for library science.

Despite the weaknesses, I recommend this book as an introductory resource for readers with various levels of understanding of outcome measurement due to the strengths it carries. First, for those who are new to the field of outcome measurement and library assessment, Rubin breaks down each stage of outcome measurement into smaller components, and walks the reader through using thought-provoking questions, blank templates, and case studies.

Second, frequent use of figures throughout the book helps convey key points to the reader in a direct way. Third, the online work forms can be used in staff training activities and workshops on outcome measurement.

Demonstrating Results is a reference book for practitioners who aim to implement outcome measurement in public libraries. It can also guide other types of libraries such as academic and research libraries. It successfully extends discussion on the use of standardized measures, direct and indirect measures for evidence and contextual issues in assessment to the library field. Despite the weaknesses mentioned in this review, people who aim to learn about planning and conducting outcome measurement in libraries or conduct staff training should utilize this resource.

References

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