
The Right Study of the Right Issues at the Right Time: Conducting In-House Studies in Public Libraries

ELEANOR JO RODGER

ABSTRACT

THE RIGHT IN-HOUSE STUDY of the right issues at the right time is a valuable managerial resource for library administrators. Effective studies are characterized by clear statements of the study questions, careful translation into measurable terms, appropriate study design, adequate staff training, timely data analysis, and targeted reporting. Studies that are done within a library's existing management and communication structure are most likely to have the desired impact on decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

The skylarks of science offer corroboration of their truth through their similarity; the skylarks of artists and poets through their dissimilarity.

—*Rabindranath Tagore*

To be a good public librarian means, in part, to provide “the right book (or information) for the right person at the right time,” either by directly assisting the enquirer or through management decisions that ensure that the resources are available and easy to locate without staff intervention. One of the hallmarks of our professional commitment has been a dedication to the particular, to meeting the unique needs of an individual user, to finding a specific fact or item. Our professional education and practice has instilled in us the instinct to look for what is unique or different; this book is different than that one so it gets a particular Dewey number; this anthology of quotations is enough different from the six we already have so we should buy it; this format is different enough from the format in which we already have the information so it might reach new users; and, most importantly, each interaction with a user is different because of users' unique personality and

needs. This cultivated discernment of uniqueness that enriches the transaction level of professional practice must be supported by a scientific look at the similarities which are subject to managerial decision-making if the best possible library services are to be provided for our communities. In-house studies are managerial tools which provide occasions for describing, understanding, and improving public library services by focusing attention on the similarities in our practice rather than on the differences.

DECIDING WHAT TO STUDY

In-house studies always start with questions from someone. What do people actually *do* when they visit this branch? Who are the video borrowers? Are they new library users? Do they ever borrow books? How do children use this library? Why don't people ask for help when they can't find something? How can users be given a better chance of finding what they are looking for? What is the average time it takes to get a book from the shipping carton to the shelf?

Some questions can be answered by data that simply describe behaviors, resources, or patterns. A short user survey can answer the questions of what people do in the library by asking respondents to check everything on the list they did on their visit to the library. A well designed study addressing these questions will provide a fairly comprehensive answer—*X* percent borrow books, *Y* percent read periodicals, and so on. Similar studies can be done to describe video borrowers demographically, to depict library use by children, or to answer any other question that merely requires a count of behavior, resource use, or interaction.

Other questions relate to planned changes. If a library administrator wants to know whether changing from providing separate service desks for adults and children to providing a single service desk for all patrons will decrease service to children, data collection "snapshots" must be taken before and after the change. A well designed study for questions of this sort can reduce anxiety about change and hedge the necessary risks, but must be linked to judgment and staff politics too.

In-house studies are often motivated by a desire to demonstrate the value of the library or of a particular service. Demonstrating the worth of a summer reading program by measuring the impact on participants is a worthy goal but is the sort of study usually beyond the scope of most public library staff because the measurement of impact requires sophisticated statistical skills and research design. If such studies are needed, consultants can usually be hired or advice can be sought from statistics experts in the fields of education or business.

The purpose of this article is to address issues of concern to librarians contemplating fairly simple in-house studies utilizing staff with key, but very basic, skills. Such studies are an important resource for management. If done effectively, these studies help managers make

good decisions. They are different in intent and in implementation than basic research studies. In-house studies arise from the need to make decisions about a particular situation. Basic research studies are grounded in a theoretical construct and, it is hoped, have at least cautiously generalizable results. The audience for in-house studies is the people involved in the decision-making process or those affected by them. The audience for basic research studies is, more often than not, other researchers. In-house studies are designed with a primary focus on using methodologies that are "good enough." The study design for basic research must stand up to critical review by professional researchers.

However, in-house studies are not merely poor excuses for research studies any more than convenience stores are poor excuses for large supermarkets. They simply have different purposes and different indicators of success and excellence.

Deciding on the In-House Study Question

An in-house study question rarely arrives on the management agenda clearly stated, awaiting only study design and implementation. Focusing and clarifying the study question is crucial to conducting a successful study but often is given little attention. For example, a library board member asks why there are never any new books on the shelves at the library. He/she knows the library buys books all the time; in fact, he/she walked through the processing department on the way to the board meeting and saw cartons of books stacked up there. Responses a library director might offer could include the traditional statements about not having enough money for books, the public always borrows the new books so only the old ones are left, and so forth. Such statements probably would not lead to in-house studies. However, an astute director might discover that the trustee's real question is why all the books are in the processing department rather than on the shelf. Such a reframing of the question could easily lead to an in-house study and perhaps even lead to justifying an additional position in technical services.

The first step in deciding what to study is to determine what the real question is, a process which often requires the same probing skills as a reference interview. If the earlier mentioned director assumed the trustee's question really was why there weren't any new books on the shelves, he/she might have responded by offering an analysis of circulation records by copyright date to prove that the new books were in the hands of users and not on the shelf. If he/she assumed a need to demonstrate the inadequacy of the book budget, he/she might offer an analysis of book budget trends, book price trends, and numbers of titles acquired. Neither of these information pieces would have answered the trustee's real question.

Assuming the real question is finally understood to be, Why is there such a backlog? it now becomes important to identify related questions.

Is the backlog temporary or chronic? Is it due to unusual conditions such as a temporarily vacant position? Where in the loading-dock-to-shelf chain are things being held up? Why?

Beneath most management questions is a sense either that something is broken and needs fixing, or that something is acceptable but could be improved. In this case, the trustee's question has indicated that something is broken and needs fixing. New books belong on the shelf or with the patron and not in the processing department. It is appropriate at this stage for the library director to reflect on what decisions one might make to solve the problem and to be certain any data gathering effort will include information needed to take the most effective action. Assuming the director has support to hire another processing clerk if the board can be persuaded to add the position, the director will need to plan a study that demonstrates that the bottleneck is in processing—not cataloging—and will need to complete the study in time to reflect the board's reaction to the findings in the budget for the next fiscal year.

The first steps in conducting the right study of the right issues at the right time are to carefully and comprehensively outline management concerns by identifying the basic question, determining related questions, understanding what and how decisions will be made using the information, and establishing a time frame for the study based on when the information is needed.

If these first four steps have been carefully done, framing management concerns in measurable terms—the next step—will be easier. The question about the backlog in processing has several quantitative aspects:

- Just how big is the backlog?
- Should the backlog be quantified in terms of number of items?
Number of titles? Type of material? Length of time it has been awaiting attention?
- Is it regularly this big?
- Is the backlog bigger in processing than in other sections of technical services?
- How long does the carton-to-shelf trip usually take for new books?

Recalling that the trustee's question is why new books are in technical services rather than on the shelves, it appears that all of the earlier questions need to be answered by the study—and a few more.

After identifying what primary data need to be gathered, managers should identify additional information from the management setting or from secondary sources which will be helpful in designing the study and/or in understanding the outcomes. In the backlog example, the usual flow of materials through technical services should be documented in terms of who does what to each book and when. It would also be helpful to know if other comparable libraries have information about their average carton-to-shelf time.

In-house studies always tend to be political. At this very early stage, some of that can be minimized. Studies carry an air of evaluation even if they are not presented and described as evaluative studies. Once initiated, studies are perceived as either being done to a person or group or with a person or group.

The performance of one or more individuals is under examination no matter what part of the library's operation is being investigated. In the case of our example, surely the manager of technical services as well as all persons working in the department would feel uneasy about a study of backlog. At this point the director should take two steps if the study is to contribute to the solution of the problem and not just to document its dimensions. Key people whose work lives affect the area under study should be gathered for a discussion of the issues, background, and study design. Often people closest to the problem are aware of it and will welcome the opportunity to contribute to its solution. They may also be aware of related problems which could be solved at the same time with little additional effort. The second step the director should take is to invite those with related problems to submit them to the study development team, as much to broaden ownership of the study as to get the biggest "bang for the buck" in information gathering and analysis. For example, the technical services manager might note concern about the pace with which audiocassettes move through the department. As long as a methodology is being developed for tracking books, why not apply it to audiocassettes as well?

The first major stage of the in-house study is complete when the management concerns are clearly identified and translated into measurable terms, other key information is available, and appropriate staff are properly informed and involved.

Designing and Implementing In-House Studies

Designing the right study of the right issues at the right time requires a careful and realistic look at the resources that either are available or that could be made available to do it. Study design and implementation require expertise and time.

The search for expertise in study design should begin with the literature from the fields of librarianship, business, and the social sciences. There are any number of good basic books in statistics, market research, and the like. There are very few resources that give start-to-finish directions applicable to in-house studies. The Public Library Association's *Output Measures for Public Libraries* is one such manual, and it covers only twelve measurement efforts. It provides good basic instruction about conducting studies even if different data are needed. A similar manual is under development for academic libraries by the Association of College and Research Libraries.

Staff in some libraries may have the requisite data collection and analysis skills to oversee in-house studies. Knowledge of sampling and

data collection methodologies and descriptive statistical techniques are the basic requirements. If no such skills are available on the staff, a look around the community may produce either payable or volunteer consultants who could ensure that adequate levels of validity and reliability are built into the study design, and that meaningful, appropriate data analyses are performed.

If the data produced by the study are extensive or require substantial manipulation, computer support should be identified very specifically at the study design stage to ensure that data are collected in a form that can be used by the computer software and operator.

The study designer needs to be familiar with good research methodology and willing to make tradeoffs which ensure that as little effort as possible is required to complete the study, but that validity and reliability are not compromised. In the backlog study being used as an example, a study methodology might be developed which selected for tracking all books on the loading dock each Tuesday for a month. In a large library system this might mean a total of hundreds of books, probably much more than necessary for study reliability. An alternative design would be to track all the books on one day determined by drawing a date out of a hat. This would provide a smaller but equally random sample. The path for some of these books might be subject to one time rather than repeated slowdowns or blockages, but participants in data collection would know this and could either repeat or adjust data collection. If the study question has been carefully translated into measurable terms, validity should not be difficult to achieve.

Many in-house studies fail because time is not made available for key participants to carry out their responsibilities. The considerations are obvious. Major studies should not be undertaken at times when there are extraordinary demands on many staff such as the installation of a new computer system, opening a new branch, or reorganization of staff. Staff who already carry full loads should not have study management thrust upon them unless some other responsibility is set aside. "One more thing" added to an already full agenda will probably not be tended with care. Thoughtful planning should be done ahead of time to identify how much of whose time will be required to complete the study by the decision-making deadline.

Communication needs to be thought through carefully if the design and implementation stage of the study is to go smoothly. The timing and extent of communication varies depending on the organizational site of the study, the content, and the audience. Generally speaking, each of the following study developers and participants need to know certain things:

Library Administration/Governing Board

- Questions the study will address
- Specific objectives

General information on methodology, including expectations of use of staff time

Time frame

Cost

Study Designer/Manager

Audience for the findings

Questions the study will address

Specific objectives of the study

Parameters of methodology such as amount of time and money available for support

Technical and logistic support available

Time frame

Staff in Affected Departments

Context and scope, including management's concerns and possible decisions

Expectations regarding availability of their time and expertise to support the study

General sense of the methodology

How they will be informed of results

There are many ways to inform people about studies. Established communication channels should be used whenever possible and appropriate. This does two things: it saves time and it keeps the existing chain of command in place, a reassuring thing if the study is perceived by some participants as threatening. It is better for the study manager to be on the agenda of the regular monthly meeting of the technical services department rather than call a special meeting. Use of staff newsletters, memos, board packages, and regularly scheduled meetings keep the study firmly within the management framework of the library, exactly where it should be to be effective.

If a study involves the public directly, there should be clear signage in the library facility once it is underway. Press releases and public service announcements should *not* be used. Effective use of sampling dictates that typical behavior be reflected in counts or answers to questions. People should not be encouraged to use the library any differently than they normally do.

Public library patrons often believe that, no matter what reason is officially given for a study, the *real* reason is that "they" are going to close the library. Library staff should not be surprised by this suspicion and should have a thoughtful response. If such questions seem particularly likely due to tight city budgets or major political changes, the jurisdiction's governing body should be notified about the study so they are not caught uninformed if upset patrons call city offices to express their concern.

The study plan must ensure adequate time for training people with data collection responsibilities. Too often this step is overlooked resulting in mistakes which either cast doubt on the validity of the entire study

or which make costly corrective actions necessary. It is not good enough to tell volunteers simply to stand at the door and hand out survey forms to everyone. They should be given a briefing about why the library is doing the study, some understanding of sampling, and brief scripts about what to say in the initial request to the user and how to respond to predictable situations. They should always know who is backing them up if a situation develops they cannot comfortably handle.

In studies involving the public, all staff should be trained to provide accurate but neutral answers to users' questions about the purpose of the study. They should be carefully instructed *not* to imply desired outcomes of the study which might bias user responses. A query about why a materials availability study is being done should *not* receive a response such as: "We're trying to get more money for books by showing that people can't get the ones they want." A much more appropriate reply is: "We are interested in finding out what kinds of materials people, who came to the library today, are looking for and whether they are able to find them."

All data collectors, whether they be volunteers handing out survey forms, reference librarians making check marks on a form, or catalogers date stamping a routing slip, should have a trial data collection period, followed by a conversation with the study director to air questions about any confusion that may have occurred. Situations that are "perfectly obvious" to the project manager may not be to anyone else. Forms may not be clear. Circumstances may occur which mean instructions for data collectors need to be revised. In addition to contributing to the accuracy of the study, a data collection dry run contributes to the confidence of the participants. How people feel about doing the study will affect how they feel about implementing its recommendations later on.

After the right questions are identified, the right study designed, and all data collectors properly trained, the next step is to conduct the study as planned, doing all that can be done to ensure that typical situations are being observed and measured. If this seems not to be the case, stop the study. Do not proceed until the abnormality is resolved. If library use is being measured and there is a huge snowstorm, don't collect data as planned. Select another time. If a cataloger is ill for a week, reschedule the backlog monitoring when he returns—unless you are trying to demonstrate the effect of vacancies on the flow of materials. This seems like an obvious point, but in the complex operations of even a small library, something is usually atypical every day. The study should be stopped only if the variation in routine is known to affect variables under study. The snowstorm shouldn't affect the backlog study unless staff can't get to work. A staff illness shouldn't affect an in-library materials use study since patron behavior won't be affected. Be aware, however that, for any measurement of quantity of service provided by staff, many staff will feel that their busiest days should be documented rather than typical days and so are likely to note that randomly selected days will not produce reliable data.

The study director should review completed data collection forms throughout the study to catch errors or misunderstandings before they accumulate and ruin the study. If reference questions are being sampled

one day each week for a month, the first batch should be reviewed before the second data collection day, etc. If the study goes on for a long period, participants should be kept informed and encouraged at regular intervals.

Timely correct data analysis is essential for an in-house study to be considered successful. Not only is the information needed for decision-making, but stakeholders in the process will want to know the results. A preliminary report should be available within a month after data collection has finished. If possible, the study manager should schedule a meeting with stakeholders to review the findings and suggest interpretations. This is particularly important if the study manager is not personally familiar with the events under study. Correctly analyzed but wrongly interpreted data may lead to bad decisions.

REPORTING AND USING IN-HOUSE STUDIES

Disseminating findings from in-house studies may be the responsibility of the study manager or of others. The managers will usually be asked to write a report, either for the study client directly or for the library director. Four guidelines for doing such reports successfully are:

- Be brief
- Be clear
- Report on what interests the client first (methodology never does!)
- Be graphically interesting

The report author/study manager should be very clear about whether or not the report is to include recommendations for action, and, if so, how specific these should be and from whom the recommendations should come. Sometimes in-house studies are intended to serve as background for action planning, so the responsibility for developing recommendations rests with an administrative council, board of trustees, or the director after the conclusion of the study.

Some in-house study reports may have several target audiences and others may have only two—the client and the stakeholders. Each audience should receive the information they need in an appropriate format with appropriate amounts of detail. Often study managers, having been immersed in the study for weeks, believe everyone needs to know all about everything related to the study. This is not true. Background information should always be available for those who want or need it, but trees shouldn't be felled to create long reports for people whose interest can be met with a three page executive summary.

It is a courtesy—as well as good management—to inform people whose jobs may be affected about study findings before sharing them in a public forum. The backlog study findings and recommendations should be reviewed with technical services staff before being taken either to a general staff meeting or to the board. Often report recommendations will be supported by staff participants, enabling an administrator

to go to the larger audience in a stronger position. If opposition to recommendations is expected, it can be clearly stated that the report is being shared with the department for information and not for endorsement.

The successful in-house study, as described earlier, has begun and stayed within the library's management structure. Library administrators should not permit in-house studies to be conducted if they are not willing to use the results in decision-making. If they are willing to do this, the project design should spell out authority, reporting relationships, budget, and time frame. Recommendations should be acted on. Action taken should be documented and reported. Staff time and energy are too valuable to waste. If staff are asked to do studies that don't matter, they will assume, rightly, that their time and skills don't matter. That is not a message an administrator wants to send.

Finally, when the right study of the right issues at the right time is finished, the study director should assemble a comprehensive file including the study plan, all related memos, a sample of all data collection forms, the report, and any other documentation that was generated. Completed data collection forms should be kept for a year, but the master file should be retained at least five years.

Effective in-house studies are like other effective projects. They succeed when communication is clear, when strategies are appropriate, and when implementation is thorough. They are a resource managers cannot afford to ignore.

REFERENCE

- Van House, N. A.; Lynch, M. J.; McClure, C. R.; Zweizig, D. L.; & Rodger, E. J. (1987). *Output measures for public libraries: A manual for standardized procedures*, 2nd ed. Chicago, IL: ALA.