
Introduction

THOMAS W. SHAUGHNESSY

AS ALL OF THE CONTRIBUTORS to this issue of *Library Trends* will agree, writing on quality in libraries is a very challenging assignment. This is not because quality is lacking in libraries or because it is unknown or unknowable owing to its metaphysical nature, but because it has been so difficult to describe and measure. Peter Senge, in his public addresses, will sometimes ask the question: "What do fish talk about?" His answer is that we will never know, but one can be fairly certain that it is not water. Perhaps there is an analogy between libraries and quality: quality services, collections, and programs are a given; quality is a basic value of our profession; libraries strive to deliver the highest quality service even though they may sometimes fall short of this goal. In the final analysis, quality is what libraries are all about.

Part of the challenge in writing about quality is also due to the variety of ways one can approach the subject. From an engineering perspective, quality means conformance to specifications. High quality products do what they are supposed to do. While this perspective does not have much application to library services, it can be applied to equipment, software, physical plant, furniture, and other components of a library's infrastructure.

A second approach is more customer or consumer oriented. Quality becomes a judgment of the customer, but this is by no means a simple evaluative process. According to the article by Seay, Seaman, and Cohen, research has demonstrated that there are at least ten factors that influence the customer's appraisal of a product or service. It is interesting that most of these relate to the processes between the customer and the provider rather than on the quality of the products or service.

Thomas W. Shaughnessy, 499 Wilson Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455

LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 44, No. 3, Winter 1996, pp. 459-63

© 1996 The Board of Trustees, University of Illinois

Third, quality is sometimes defined as conformance to standards. While this definition is similar to the engineering definition of quality, it differs in that standards are more reflective of so-called best practices, while specifications are typically derived from external objective criteria such as laboratory testing. Sarah Thomas, in her article on the Library of Congress' efforts to produce bibliographic records of the highest quality, addresses quality from a standards perspective. Philip Tompkins takes a similar approach in his article on quality initiatives in community college libraries.

Finally, quality can be approached from the perspective of inputs to an organization, an approach that has characterized librarianship for too long according to Philip Tompkins. Traditionally, we have assumed that the greater the inputs to our libraries, especially research libraries, the greater (that is, the higher the quality) will be the outputs. In this construction, "more" implies "better." While some library users might agree that this is correct, there are many who will disagree. According to the latter group, relevance is more important than recall.

The difficulty that libraries have experienced in coming to terms with what is quality is not entirely due to problems of definition, however. Measurement has been an equally baffling problem. Several of the contributors to this issue have addressed the matter. Williamson and Exon provide a fascinating description of an attempt by the Australian Ministry of Education to measure the quality of higher education in that country. Libraries were quickly recognized as a key factor in determining that quality, but as the assessment process progressed, the evaluators focused their attention on the colleges' and universities' internal self assessment or quality control systems rather than on external qualitative criteria. Although this federal initiative did not really succeed in measuring the quality of higher education institutions in Australia, it did succeed in bringing quality to the forefront as an issue to be addressed. Williamson and Exon describe the initiative's impact on academic libraries and some of the outstanding progress that has resulted in assessing quality.

Measurement, however, continues to be a major impediment to improving the quality of our libraries. This problem has two sides to it. First, it is not possible currently to describe the library's goals for quality in any meaningful way. This is one of the issues that Glen Holt addresses in his article on public library quality. Second, libraries do not have a tool box of tried and true methods for measuring quality or their progress toward quality over time. Some libraries have attempted to collect patron satisfaction data on a yearly basis, but the data tend to be so general in their focus that they are not very useful; nor can they be compared with patron data from other libraries due to methodological variations. Sarah Pritchard addresses this issue in an article that is sure to have a significant impact. One result of these deficiencies is that benchmarking

among libraries of the same type is impossible. We really do not know (and cannot even guess with any accuracy) which libraries excel in their overall performance. Consequently, the profession lacks models of outstanding performance or highest quality. Interestingly, we do have a wide range of quantitative measures—some of which are claimed to also indicate quality. One can speculate whether any other type of service is so devoid of performance benchmarks or service exemplars, a point that is clearly made by Alan Gilchrist and John Brockman in their article on quality initiatives in the United Kingdom. Even hospitals and clinics are now being rated against performance criteria such as morbidity. Contrast the situation in libraries with those found in the commercial sector. L.L. Bean, for example, has set an extraordinary quality standard for mail order services. Federal Express has done the same with respect to rapid mail and package delivery. These industry leaders are regularly visited by their competitors and by those in cognate service sectors to learn how such performance can be attained. Why is it that there are not similar exemplars within librarianship?

This question is raised not merely to underscore the need for greater attention to quality, performance, and measurement within librarianship and information science, but to call attention to the growing demand for greater accountability, particularly within the public sector. It seems as if all of our social institutions are being questioned as the end of the twentieth century approaches, and many are being asked to reinvent themselves. Institutional missions and charters are being evaluated and the lines that have separated these institutions (for example, type-of-library lines) are becoming blurred. Education, which had formerly been the province of the public or private sector, is now viewed as a prime growth and investment area for corporations, especially with respect to electronic or packaged learning programs. If corporations can attract students to their course offerings and deliver education as effectively as colleges, why shouldn't they? Or, if commercial document delivery services can be effective in meeting customer needs for information, questions will certainly be raised concerning the library performance in these areas. These are obviously not very sophisticated questions, but they underscore the need for institutions such as libraries to be accountable and to collect the data that establish their accountability. This not only requires a set of relevant performance measures, but it also requires that library organizations demonstrate a commitment to continuous quality improvement. This is a message conveyed by several contributors. Patricia Kovel-Jarboe, for example, takes a social science perspective and states that organizations that are committed to quality will necessarily change. In fact, she indicates that most strategies designed to improve quality can also have as their objective the redesign or reconfiguration of an organization. She surveys the literature on organizational change, comments on the

advantages and disadvantages of four types of change, and links each to specific strategies. Each strategy is designed to improve the quality of one or more organizational processes.

Barbara Stripling focuses on school library media centers. She argues that most, if not all, of the changes that have been introduced in school libraries and media centers during the past two decades have had as their ultimate objective the improvement of quality. The attention that is currently being focused on the learning process and the needs of learners for enriched interactive learning experiences presents an extraordinary opportunity for school librarians and media center staff to participate in, and contribute to, improving the overall quality of schools, their processes, and the quality of students' experiences.

Ellen Nagle takes a similar approach with respect to health science libraries. According to her article, the field of health science librarianship has embarked for many years on a course of action to improve the quality of services provided by medical libraries, to relate health science libraries more directly to clinical practice and, more recently, to new teaching methods. She argues that the broad programmatic themes within health science librarianship, while they may not have the specificity of strategies such as Total Quality Management, are nevertheless directed to improving the quality, timeliness, and relevance of library services to health care providers and educators. Unfortunately, an article which was to describe how special libraries and information centers have responded to the quality imperative was not forthcoming and therefore is missing from this issue of *Library Trends*.

The article by Sarah Pritchard, which was cited previously, presents an excellent review of attempts to improve and measure quality in academic libraries. Philip Tompkins echoes several of these points and at the same time argues forcefully that achieving library quality will be increasingly dependent on merging the print culture with the electronic culture.

Glen Holt reviews strategies for achieving quality in the public library sector. His article discusses the importance of the library's core values and staff training. With regard to training, he identifies ten training priorities for public library staffs which will enable staff to learn how to become essential to the communities they serve.

Two articles address methodological issues: Sarah Pritchard's and the article by Thomas Seay, Sheila Seaman, and David Cohen. The latter address quality from a public services perspective and their article is naturally oriented, therefore, toward library users. By surveying library users by means of a standard questionnaire and then classifying the open-ended comments of respondents, they were able to derive important insights and conclusions from the data. These findings underscore the importance of environmental and infrastructure issues in meeting the expectations of users.

The article by Alan Gilchrist and John Brockman echoes several of these themes but adds the perspective of Western Europe and the United Kingdom. These authors take a systems approach to quality and once again emphasize the importance of planning for quality and the entire information chain—vendors, suppliers, systems, intermediaries, and end-users. They conclude by providing data on the costs to an organization of providing products or services which do not meet the quality expectations of its customers.

The articles published in this issue represent an extraordinary set of perspectives on quality. Although the literature on quality in libraries is not large, there is very little duplication in themes or treatment among the articles. One conclusion that can easily be drawn is that quality has been, and will continue to be, an issue of strategic importance to librarianship and information science. Tactics such as Total Quality Management, organizational redesign, staff training and empowerment, or systems thinking will vary from library to library. But the goal of improved services or highest quality products remains an integral part of the profession's ethos.