



STATE LIBRARY OF
NEW SOUTH WALES

People, projects and perceptions

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While many major museums have had professional research and evaluation positions and departments for some time, libraries have generally been slow to follow suit. The development of the State Library's Research and Evaluation Program is a positive example of how a cultural organisation like the State Library of New South Wales can harness the skills of other professions, such as applied social research, to make an important contribution to the business of being a library.

The State Library's Research and Evaluation Program was established in 1997. The most critical decision made in establishing the Program was to recruit a research and evaluation professional from outside the Library, rather than relying on the more usual practice of moving someone with a librarianship background from within the Library into the position. This ensured that someone with the latest skills, experience and, most importantly, 'fresh eyes' gave the Program the impetus it needed. This position is supported by another research position; this time a qualified librarian from within the Library was recruited. Importantly, the incumbent has been provided with on-the-job and formal training in research and evaluation. To date, this combination has been very successful.

The Program's approach

Over the past three years the Program has conducted over 100 projects. These projects have ranged from small 'market tests' of new readers' cards to large evaluations of all reading room services and activities. One of the most important aspects of these projects is the approach that underpins them.

The Program's approach is holistic and library-wide, ensuring that any data relating to Library clients and services is either collected or co-ordinated by the Program. This results in a consistent, streamlined approach to information collection and reporting. It also means that all research and evaluation projects contribute to the broader body of knowledge about the Library and its services.

Part of this approach involves employing a Library-wide methodology that allows collection of comparable data, from service to service. This information has been very useful in not only highlighting some of the Library's 'best practice' services, but, importantly, understanding what constitutes a 'best practice' service from a client perspective.

The Program's approach ensures that the research goes beyond standard client satisfaction studies by focusing on the often-complex issues underpinning clients' perceptions of the Library. For instance, our reading room re-

search projects have highlighted the anxiety many clients feel regarding the Library's introduction of new technology. They are concerned that more technology will result in a different and less personal 'library experience'. While such a perception may not be directly related to library services, it is something we need to be aware of, as it directly impacts on clients' use of such technology.

Considerable effort has been focused on building support for research and evaluation within the Library. This support is fostered in a variety of ways. Firstly, a number of staff, who have been involved in previous research projects or who are interested in research, have participated in an introduction to research and evaluation course, developed by the Research Co-ordinator, in conjunction with the University of Technology, Sydney. This course provided a basic understanding of research and evaluation in the context of the Library's current situation. These informed staff have been invaluable in providing support and feedback regarding the development of Library projects. Training is now being developed for those staff who collect, analyse and report on data to ensure that all staff involved in these activities have the same standard of skills and are using the same methods, definitions, processes and formats.

Effective communication is the second critical way of ensuring organisational support. A report is produced for every research and evaluation project. These reports are available to staff and we are currently investigating ways of placing executive summaries of these reports on the Library's intranet. For large projects, communication of the findings often involves presentations to staff as well as articles in *Newsbreak*, the Library's staff newsletter. In most instances, to further explore and clarify issues and, most importantly, develop actionable recommendations, these presentations are followed up with staff workshops in the relevant work areas covered by the project.

Developing practical and actionable recommendations is the third element of building support within the organisation. Recommendations grow out of discussions with staff, ensuring that the recommendations are realistic and can be implemented.

Overall, the Program serves to inform policy and planning at the highest level, while at the same time providing practical on-the-ground information to all staff regarding specific services, products and programs. Furthermore, and most importantly, the Program has gathered critical and comprehensive information from and about the people who use the State Library's services. ■

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