

## **Librarian Performance Assessment: Both a managerial means and a reflection of the administration—A Case Discussion**

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the system and practice of performance assessment in academic libraries from both theoretical and practical perspectives. A descriptive analysis of an existing assessment system of a university library is conducted. Three system-inherent problems, i.e., weighting of criteria, the immediate supervisor as the rater, and the purpose of PA, are discussed. It is concluded that as the performance assessment system can be used as a managerial means, it can directly reflect the social and cultural environment of a work place as well as the managerial standards of that administration.

### **I. Introduction**

PA (performance assessment) in this study refers to the process of evaluating the performance of individuals in their position of employment. The specified mechanism, including the evaluation objectives, participants, procedures, criteria, and rating scales etc., used to guide and regulate the evaluation practice is referred to as the PA system. Other terms used interchangeably with PA in literature and in this article include appraisal, evaluation, and review.

PA has been a management topic covered by mainly library educators, personnel staff and library administrators (Aluri & Reichel, 1994). Its wide application in libraries and its influence on library employees, however, has made it a common concern of not only administrators but also librarians in general.

In the library and management literature, the managerial function of an effective PA system to an organization is strongly confirmed (See McGregor, 1960; Reneker & Steel, 1989; Anderson, 1993; Fletcher, 1997; Edwards & Williams, 1998, to name only a few). Evans & Ruggas (1982) have identified many beliefs about an effective performance appraisal system. According to them, such a system is essential to ensure good management and good job performance, to assist in organizational personnel planning, to assess an employee's future and potential progress, to maintain control of staff productivity, to help with personal growth, to be an effective system of motivation, to assess an individual's strengths and weaknesses objectively, and to identify areas that need improving. But a good understanding of a system does not come from theoretical generalizations. You will probably all agree if we say: PA should focus on the evaluatee's work performance not his personality; excellent work performance should be rewarded. But if we start a discussion on the subjective elements involved in PA and the merit pay practice in your libraries, we will expect to hear a lot of different opinions and arguments. Because of this reason and in order to touch upon some substantial issues in PA, we have chosen to start our discussion with reference to the existing evaluation practice and system used in an academic library, which I will refer to as Case Library, meaning the library used for a case study, or CL in short. We will focus on the PA of faculty librarians only.

## II. The Performance Assessment System of CL

CL has a dual-track evaluation system, with the Dean and the Library Council on the top. On the next level are the AD (Associate Dean) for PS (Public Services), AD for CTS (Collections and Technical Services), and the ETPS (Evaluation, Tenure, Promotion, and Sabbatical) Committee. The deans represent the administrative side; the LC and ETPS represent the faculty.

### The Dual-Track Evaluation System

<b>Administration</b>	<b>Faculty</b>
Dean	Library Council
AD for PS & AD for CTS	ETPS Committee

CL conducts annual evaluations of librarians who have faculty status. The assessment of a faculty member's effectiveness is based on three categories: (1) effectiveness in librarianship, (2) scholarly performance and achievement, and (3) service to the university, community, and profession. Sixty percent of the evaluation is based on Category 1. The remaining two categories are evaluated at a minimum of ten percent for each.

### Weighting of Categories

Category 1	Librarianship	60%
Category 2	Scholarly Activities	10-30%
Category 3	Service	10-30%

The first step of the PA process is preparation of the Annual Report, which consists of:

- a copy of the evaluatee's current position description;
- the evaluatee's self narrative summary of performance in librarianship;
- the immediate supervisor's commentary of the evaluatee's performance in librarianship;
- the evaluatee's response to the commentary, optional;
- a structured form for scholarly performance and achievements;
- a structured form for service to the university, community, and profession; and
- relevant attachments.

All completed reports are submitted to the ETPS Committee and reviewed by all participants involved in the rating, including the Dean, ADs, members on the Library Council and ETPS Committee.

A five-point numeric scale is adopted for rating in each of the three categories. The descriptors and their numerical equivalents are as follows:

### Descriptors and Their Numerical Equivalents

<b>Ratings</b>	<b>Descriptors</b>
5	Outstanding
4	Highly Satisfactory
3	Satisfactory
2	Satisfactory Minimally
1	Unsatisfactory

The Dean's performance review is conducted by the Library Council.  
 The ETPS and the Dean vote to give rating values to the ADs.  
 The ETPS and the AD for PS vote to give rating values to faculty in the PS Division.  
 The ETPS and the AD for CTS vote to give rating values to faculty in the CTS Division.  
 The administrative has 50% open vote, and the ETPS has 50% blind vote.

If an evaluator or an evaluatee is an ETPS Committee member, he/she shall leave the meeting while the discussion and the vote on this evaluation is being conducted.

**ETPS-AD Rating**

Areas	ETPS* (50%)	AD (50%)	Final Rating
Category 1 (60%)	4,5,5,4,4,5,5=5	5	5
Category 2 (20%)	4,4,4,3,3,4,4=4	4	4
Category 3 (20%)	3,3,4,4,4,4,3=4	4	4

\*The ETPS Committee consists of seven elected members, and thus 7 votes.

**III. Discussion—Problems in the PA System of CL**

The PA system of CL as described above has revealed a lot of controversies in practice. One issue that has been questioned and proposed for change is the weighting of the evaluated categories. The rating scheme and its results are presented below:

**Rating Results from the NL PA System**

Librarianship 60%	Scholarship			Service			Formula	Overall
	10%	20%	30%	10%	20%	30%		
5		5			5		$3.0+1.0+1.0 = 5.0$	5
5		4			4		$3.0+0.8+0.8 = 4.6$	5
5	3					4	$3.0+0.3+1.2 = 4.5$	<b>5</b>
5			4	3			$3.0+1.2+0.3 = 4.5$	5
4		5			5		$2.4+1.0+1.0 = 4.4$	4

As we can see, with the 60% allocated weight, category 1 has the overriding power over criteria 2 and 3 for a composite rating of 5. In real practice, the actual rating does not coincide with the standards specified in “Descriptors and Their Numerical Equivalents”, where 3 is equivalent to “Satisfactory Performance”. The numeric 3 is given to Category 2 for no evidence of scholarly publication and achievements; a rating of 3 is given to Category 3 for no evidence of service at all. Thus, a rating of 5 in librarianship guarantees the final 5 rating with no publication and with minimum service, or with minimum publication and no service at all. Instead, if you have a rating of 4 in librarianship, your composite rating can be no higher than 4 no matter if you have 5 books published and serve as ALA president in the evaluated year. The philosophy of such a system does not encourage scholarly development and professional service.

CL is not the only library setting up 60% weight for librarianship. The UNM (University of New Mexico) (See Baldwin, 2003, p. 133), for example, has established the following range of weights:

**Criteria Weighting of UNM**

Criteria	Weighting
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Librarianship	60%
Research	25%
Service	15%

Despite having 60% weight for librarianship, the assessment system of UNM is different from the CL system in two important ways. Firstly, research and service have fixed weight values of 25% and 15% respectively. As a result, with a rating of 5 in librarianship, the evaluatee needs a second 5 rating in either research or service to have an overall rating of 5. One phenomenon observed in both systems is that the overall outstanding performance rating allows a rating of 3 in either research or service, where 3 may equate to “very poor performance”, as in the CL evaluation.

#### The Rating Results of the UNM PA System

Librarianship (60%)	Research (25%)	Service (15%)	Formula	Overall
5	5	3	$3.0+1.25+0.45=4.7$	5
5	3	5	$3.0+0.75+0.75=4.5$	5
5	3	4	$3.0+0.75+0.6=4.35$	4
5	4	3	$3.0+1.0+0.45=4.45$	4
4	5	5	$2.4+1.25+0.75=4.4$	4

The practice of giving the most weight to librarianship is supported in the library literature. Baldwin (2003), for example, argues that “Librarianship will be considered the most heavily weighted of the three major areas” (p. 133). This statement has proposed more combined weight allocation possibilities for a PA system than one can imagine. However, he also writes: “An individual must achieve the minimum standard of excellence in librarianship before they may be considered for merit in any other area.” (p. 133). To follow all three key concepts (i.e., most weight, minimum standard of excellence, and merit) in both statements is not an easy task. Although the CL system gives the most weight (60%) to librarianship, it can be flawed because it requires the top most rating, not “minimum performance of excellence” in librarianship, to guarantee a composite rating of 5, based on which merit raise is given.

Weighting structure of evaluated criteria deserves serious attention, as it reflects our philosophy about what makes a faculty librarian, and our expectations of an outstanding faculty librarian.

UNM also differs from NL in rating of librarianship and the other two categories separately by different evaluators. The rating for librarianship is assessed, proposed, discussed and finalized by both the evaluatee and the immediate supervisor together. The rating for research and service, instead, are conducted by a peer group. There is very sound legitimacy in letting the immediate supervisor perform the rater, because he/she knows about the evaluatee’s daily work performance the best. In addition, unlike research and service, which are quantifiable and measurable, librarianship in different jobs and at different levels of jobs cannot be compared uniformly cross the library.

In the CL system, the immediate supervisor is deprived of the rating authority. It is stipulated as such in order to eliminate supervisor bias against the subordinate in evaluation. We are facing two different issues here: one is concerned with individual interpersonal relationship,

and the other contributes to evaluation validity. We should not seek a solution to one problem at the expense of the other. When the immediate supervisor is ruled out of the rating process, rating is conducted by a peer group without a good understanding of the evaluatee's work performance. The results from such ratings cannot be valid and fair, and ethically and legally right.

Supervisor-subordinate interaction is reviewed as an important integrated component of the appraisal process (See Anderson, 1993; Moon, 1997; Edwards & Williams, 1998; Baldwin, 2003, to name only a few). The most discussed strategy to enhance supervisor-subordinate communication is the assessment interview. Baldwin (2003) argues that "The most significant benefit of a performance appraisal is that it offers the opportunity for a supervisor and employee to have a one-on-one discussion of important work issues that might not otherwise be addressed. For some employees, the appraisal interview may be the only time they get to have exclusive, uninterrupted access to their supervisor. The value of this scheduled interaction between a supervisor and employee is that it gives the employee an opportunity to have a discussion focused on performance issues in a way that just is not possible during the ordinary course of the workday" (p. 84). CL's practice segregates the supervisor and the subordinate in the critical rating process. As a result, the evaluation ratings, especially those of librarianship, lack objectivity and consistence, and are highly questionable.

The problems discussed above are obvious enough not to be noticed, especially by people involved in the evaluation. Many CL librarians have tried hard over the years to make changes to the system, but their efforts, so far, are unsuccessful. The reasons for not being able to make a change are multiple, the most critical lies in the purpose set for the implementation of PA. Do we assess to evaluate performance, or do we assess to put people on a manipulated performance curve, and single out a small group of prospective merit money recipients? This is a question every library administrator should ask and handle correctly. The argument here can be better illustrated by an analogy: when 2 out of 100 products are substandard, does the inspector accept the fact as is, or does he pick any 3 products, put them with the 2 defective, and label them as such, in order to meet a 5% defective standard, which is stipulated prior to the inspection?

The librarians at CL are not lifeless products. When they are labeled, they have questions such as:

- why with the same performance, one gets different ratings in different years;
- why a combined rating of 5/3/4 receives a merit raise while a rating of 4/5/5 does not;
- why one gets excellent evaluation by the supervisor and is rated 4 for librarianship.

All in all: why one gets the ratings one gets, good or bad? Many agree that the PA is no more than a popularity test.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In the literature of library and management, two types of problems are identified that make a PA system ineffective (See Baldwin, 2003). The first type of problems exists in the erroneous implementation of the performance appraisal (e.g., evaluator bias and lack of training in rating); and the second type is system-inherent problems. In our discussion, we have covered three system-inherent problems, i.e. weighting of criteria, supervisor as rater, and purpose of PA application. We believe that although both the PA system and practice are important, the former is primary. When a ruler provides wrong markings, how can you expect the user of the ruler to take the right measures?

Just as PA can be used as a managerial means (Reneker & Steel, 1989; Edwards & Williams, 1998; Baldwin, 2003), it can reflect facets of the organization. Edwards and Williams (1998), for example, although lacking faith in the function of PA systems to reflect work performance, claim that a PA system can tell us about the political and cultural environment of the work place as well as the managerial standards of that administration.

A sound system can effectively help to create a healthy work environment, establish nice interpersonal relationships, encourage active work attitude, and promote productivity. Conversely, a poorly constructed system may bring unfairness, arouse conflicts, and deteriorate interpersonal relationships at the work place. How to establish and continually improve a performance assessment system, therefore, is an urgent issue that needs to be adequately addressed and more closely examined in the library and management literature.

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