



Using Metrics to Showcase Value

Best practices from the Cook County Law Library.

BY JEAN M. WENGER, MONTELL DAVENPORT, CAROLYN HAYES, AND DAVID SANBORNE

Public law libraries are an American phenomenon not replicated in other countries, including those of the common law tradition. Cook County Law Library in Chicago, which opened its doors in 1966, is a public county law library founded in state law and authorized by county ordinance.

State laws differ in how a law library is established. County law libraries are special district government entities, independent public agencies, judicial departments, or nonprofit organizations governed by a library board of trustees, or departments within government. Cook County Law Library falls into the last category. Organizationally, the Law Library is an office under the President of the Cook County Board of Commissioners. We are a special-fund department not supported by tax dollars. Like most county law libraries, our primary source of revenue is a portion (currently \$21.00) of the civil filing fee. In recent years, revenue has been reduced due to fewer court filings, emphasis on

alternate dispute resolution, and an increase in the number of filing fee waivers.

Communicating Value

An important component of conveying value is connecting the library's mission to broader policy goals. Establishing a connection between library services and public policy helps to solidify the idea that the law library is an asset to the community. It also establishes that the law library is using its funding responsibly. Our mission and key mandates include supporting access to justice by developing and expanding services for self-represented litigants, acquiring practice-oriented materials, identifying the changing needs of the legal profession and public through ongoing client contact and education, and ensuring optimal distribution of resources through regular review of collection development priorities and cost analysis. Within this framework, this article will track how a library, as a governmental department, can



One strategy is for the library to identify metrics that demonstrate how it advances important public policy goals like access to justice.”

measure and express its value to the legal community, the general public, and its parent institution.

Start with a Plan

What is the value of a library when “all a person needs is a computer connected to the internet to conduct legal research?” Like many libraries in recent years, we have

received this direct challenge to our relevance and value. As a small department in a large institution, a library can decide to make incremental changes or make a major move. We opted for the latter, employing a strategic and significant response. In early 2013, the Library developed a five-year business plan titled “Focused on Service—Driven by Technology.” The thought process was organic, looking beyond immediate needs to positioning the library for continuing changes in the information and legal arenas. The plan emphasized the need for reliable legal information, mission-driven space utilization, and the educational role of a public law library. The business plan was a three-phase project for the main library, starting with collection assessment, then space planning, and finally renovation for the development of education centers and conference rooms. As the first major renovation in the Library’s history, this strategic move helped to drive the discussion of relevance and value with the county, our parent institution.

Libraries must utilize all available venues to express their worth to relevant audiences. One way is to take advantage of local or institutional milestones. While our business plan was going through the county approval process, the Library chose not to stand idle. We wanted to frame the discussion of our value to the broader community—the legal profession and the public. The year 2013 marked 50 years since the passage of the authorizing statute and ordinance. To celebrate the milestone and communicate our accomplishments and goals for the future, the Cook County Law Library hosted a 50th Anniversary Rededication ceremony in September 2013.

After approval of the renovation plans, construction took place in mid-2015, creating an education center, a reconfigured public services

space, conference rooms, and space for self-help initiatives. All changes met evolving needs of attorneys and self-represented litigants.

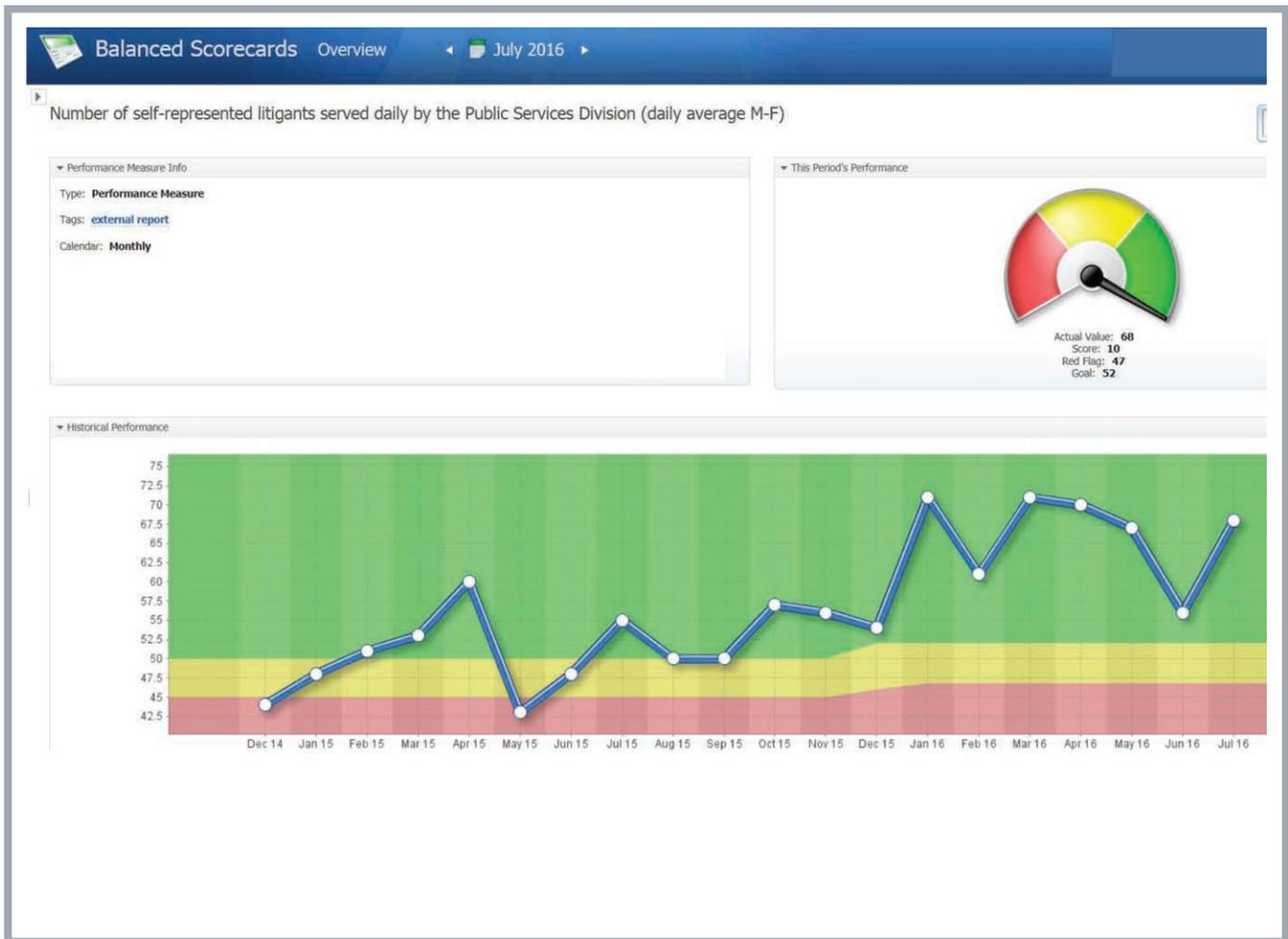
Measuring Value

As highlighted by AALL’s *The Economic Value of Law Libraries* report (hereinafter, *Economic Value* report), quantitative information and analysis is part of the value equation. A library, as a unit of government, may need to participate in a standardized system for collection and reporting of quantitative data. In that environment, it is imperative that the library selects and advocates for data points that are best suited to its work and mission. In 2011, Cook County government instituted a new performance management initiative, STAR (Set Targets—Achieve Results). In the STAR environment, all county offices and departments report progress toward pre-established goals of which improving performance is key. Bureaus and departments, including the law library, collect metrics monthly and report these quarterly on the county website.

Selection of metrics requires strategic consideration of the message that each metric conveys. While it might be impressive to use a collection size metric to fill out a report with big numbers, these types of metrics can serve to reinforce negative stereotypes about libraries. We want to convey that our services and resources add to the legal system by creating efficiencies down the road as well as a better quality of life for residents.

One strategy is for the library to identify metrics that demonstrate how it advances important public policy goals like access to justice. For example, if a public law library closed its doors, the societal impact would be significant and irreversible. Where would the public, including self-represented litigants, go for legal information? A tactic is to respond that the library is a societal necessity and metrics support that position. Such a metric is the number of self-represented litigants served daily by the public services division. At the Cook County Law Library, this number has increased by about 50 percent since December 2014, when the data was first collected, to July 2016. As the library expands its outreach efforts and maximizes its communication channels, the expectation is that increasing numbers of self-represented litigants will use the library.

Figure 1: Cook County Law Library’s Balanced Scorecard



The library also collects data on the type of assistance requested by all patrons of public services staff at the main library. Categories of assistance include reference, technical, policy, and directional. Reference assistance is by far the most requested category. Quality reference assistance provides for the highest return on investment in personnel and resources. The more interactions an attorney or member of the public has with staff, the greater the likelihood that those users will learn about and use the print or electronic resources within the library. Similarly, increased usage of print and electronic resources will work to lower the cost per use. Other examples of metrics include number of patron visits at the main library and its five branches, number of patrons served by

time of day, number of educational offerings, and copy/print revenues.

Libraries can select from a number of different tools to gather statistics or report metrics. Whether selecting an off-the-shelf tool or creating a homegrown tool, consider the unique needs and characteristics of the library. For example, the county moved from a spreadsheet environment to QuickScore, a commercial balanced scorecard tool. The online product collocates and analyzes metrics submitted by all county departments, assigning each a numeric score based on their success or failure to achieve their goals. Figure 1 illustrates a selection from Cook County Law Library’s balanced scorecard. For other institutions contemplating a similar transition, the implementation of an online performance

“Connecting what the library does to what is going on in the larger community helps provide a point of reference for those unfamiliar with the library world, while demonstrating the library’s relevance.”

evaluation system does not relieve a library of careful planning and oversight. From the library’s perspective, it is critical that the parameters and collection methods are understood. It remains the library’s responsibility to define metrics and select goals along with the appropriate means to measure those goals.

Financial Concerns

A common concern for public institutions is the efficient use of funding. To help demonstrate this aspect, the library engaged in a basic calculation of costs per patron visit in which budget costs (personnel and non-personnel) were divided by the annual patron count system-wide (main library and five branches in outlying courthouses). For libraries considering this approach, several variables will influence this type of calculation. Across government law libraries, variations exist in the ratio of personnel to non-personnel costs along with differing methodologies for defining a patron visit or interaction. Some states’ authorizing statutes direct the county to provide space at no cost to the library, which accounts, in part, for differences in non-personnel costs. Costs per patron visit can be further broken out based on the level of assistance or resources the patron used on their visit.

Measuring qualitative data like the knowledge gained by patrons using subscription legal resources or the understanding gained with the assistance of a librarian is challenging. However, the library collects and uses subjective data to reinforce a positive return on investment, such as the 93-percent satisfaction rating on our semiannual patron survey. As one attorney respondent stated, “The staff, service, and legal resources are amazing. I appreciate the opportunity to level the playing field by using the library’s resources as well.”

Communication Is Key

The library works to raise its visibility through formal and informal communication channels. A venue for formal communication is the required STAR performance report that the library presents twice a year to other county government stakeholders. In addition to highlighting data and metrics, we view these presentations

as a marketing tool to articulate how the library contributes to the larger organization and its policy goals. We also look at how the library can collaborate with other departments to achieve improved performance objectives.

Unlike a stand-alone law library, the Cook County Law Library, as part of a larger institution, has routine opportunities to communicate informally with other departments in the normal course of interdepartmental meetings. At these meetings or through chance encounters on the civic campus, we encourage visits to the library and attendance at educational programs. This outreach encourages other county departments to use the library’s reference services, training classes, and subscription databases. One result was that several departments have asked to hold their internal and external training and educational events in the library’s newly renovated space.

It is important to recognize that the language used to convey the library’s work and goals cannot be different from the larger organization’s, otherwise the library is misunderstood, or worse, considered irrelevant. Connecting what the library does to what is going on in the larger community helps provide a point of reference for those unfamiliar with the library world, while demonstrating the library’s relevance. The language needs to be about what the library offers rather than what the library has on its shelves. The use of verb-centric language instead of noun-centric language is strategic. Weekly reports of activities and accomplishments to government administration are framed with action verbs and tied into the library’s overall mission.

Showing Value

As stated in the *Economic Value* report, social media is an important communication method for government law libraries to reach end users. Earlier in the year, Cook County launched a new website that transitioned from an object-centered to a service-centered approach. This approach ties in with our shift of focus from “what we have” to “what we do.” In this new web environment, all county activities are described in terms of services asking the user “How can Cook County help you today?” Submitting queries asking for help with going to court, research, divorce, or entering the terms “law” or “legal” directs the user to the law library. Creating a closer nexus between the services desired and

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Establishing a connection between library services and public policy helps to solidify the idea that the law library is an asset to the community.

2 The use of verb-centric language instead of noun-centric language is strategic.

the services offered increases the chances that the user will discover the law library and its services. This usage will become an important metric for the library.

Value lies in what the user receives or perceives he/she has received. Looking ahead, potential metrics that county law libraries could capture include techniques to examine the impact of the law library on court congestion, outcomes for self-represented litigants, CLE cost savings, or any other outcome relevant to the library's mission and services.



JEAN M. WENGER is the deputy law librarian at the Cook County Law Library. Her primary responsibilities include library administration, performance management, continuing legal education, specialized research, and strategic planning. Wenger is actively involved in collecting and analyzing the library's metrics and data for the county's performance management program. She is a part of the Illinois State Bar Law Education faculty and is a presenter on administrative law and foreign and international law research. She is a past president of the American Association of Law Libraries and the Chicago Association of Law Libraries. Contact her at jean.wenger@cookcountyil.gov.



DAVID SANBORNE is technical services librarian at the Cook County Law Library. His primary responsibilities include cataloging new acquisitions, managing the library's electronic resources, and updating and writing content for the library website. Prior to working for Cook

County, Sanborne worked on special collections cataloging projects at Roosevelt University and the Newberry. He holds an MLIS from Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois and a BA in East Asian Studies and Religious Studies from North Central College in Naperville, Illinois. Contact him at david.sanborne@cookcountyil.gov.



CAROLYN HAYES, as head of technical services at Cook County Law Library, is responsible for the supervision, management, and coordination of acquisitions, cataloging, serials, and staff. She brings broad and varied experience to the library having worked in reference

and administration at Chicago law libraries for many years, including academic, large law firm, and most recently, government. Earlier experiences include setting up and running the library of a small international nonprofit organization and providing reference at an engineering firm library. She is also a past president of the Chicago Association of Law Libraries. Contact her at carolyn.hayes@cookcountyil.gov.



MONTELL DAVENPORT is the executive law librarian of the Cook County Law Library. During his 30-year plus career, his various positions have enabled him to have a wide view of the library, its patrons, and their needs. He has been instrumental in the integration of online

resources in the library, continuing legal education classes for attorneys, and coordination with cooperating entities to provide assistance to self-represented litigants. Empowering professional law librarians to innovate and focus on services that meet the needs of the broader legal community, is an ongoing priority for Davenport. His experience with law libraries provides expertise in maximizing use of library resources, collection analysis, access services, acquisitions, and personnel. Contact him at montell.davenport@cookcountyil.gov.