

## **Library External Review Process: Conducting Effective Assessment for Self-Study Preparation**

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**Abstract:** Library External review process is periodically undertaken by academic libraries to assess how well services and resources are meeting users' needs. This review process is focused on the library as a department and not to be confused with institutional program review. Though some libraries choose not to do this, many libraries use the external review process to gauge their operations in preparation for accreditation visit. This paper outlines the assessment activities conducted by an academic library as it prepared a comprehensive self-study document for an external review process. Data comparison to prior self-study reports are done to highlight trends in the Library's services and resources.

**Keywords:** External Review, Assessment, Self-Study, Staffing, Information Literacy, User Satisfaction, Collection

### **1. Introduction**

Academic libraries, periodically, plan and prepare for an external review process as part of its goal to maintain the highest quality programs and services for users. The review process begins with the preparation of an extensive self-study report which details many facets of the library's operations. Leaders in similar sized academic libraries are invited to makeup the external review committee who study the report, then visit the library for an evaluation, and culminate the review process with a detail report of their findings. The external review process closely mimics the accreditation process and is thus a highly recommended practice in preparation for accreditation.

External review (aka program review) at the library department level has not been discussed much in the literature. Most discussion in the literature focused on library's role and involvement in institution-wide program reviews. According to Costello et al., (2013) "Both the education literature and the library literature provide ample evidence of a significant shift in the understanding of how higher education is measured and evaluated, as well as in

the nature of the relationship between the academic library and its parent institution.” However, less evidence is presented on the operational role of academic libraries in the program review process. In a survey conducted by Gregory (1990), the level of input by academic libraries in the institutional program review process varies widely, from short statements to elaborate evaluations of holdings and budgets. A blog by Fister (2013) targeted discussion about the external review process at the library department level and stressed that this process works and that more library should be practicing it.

This paper details the assessment activities undertaken by the Stephen B. Luce Library at Maritime College in the State University of New York (SUNY) as it prepared for three external review processes. Maritime College is a small sized specialized college with an enrollment of approximately 2,000 FTE. The discussion focuses on the 2009 external review, but retrospective details are provided for reviews done in 1998 and 2004. This paper emphasizes assessment and the importance of conducting activities to generate outcomes data to demonstrate strengths and weaknesses in library services and resources. Thus, areas that are conducive to assessing are targeted for discussion and include staffing, research services, information literacy, collections, and user satisfaction. Luce Library administration developed comprehensive self-study reports for each external review which included detail analysis and insights of the assessed areas as well as overview of the facilities, technology infrastructure and distance learning operations. The author’s intention is to demonstrate how effective assessment of the library’s services and resources can help the review team understand the inner details of the problems and best practices which will shape a more accurate reviewer’s final report.

## **2. History and Mission**

In 1948 the Maritime College hired its first full-time librarian and in doing so recognized the need for information specialists to support the academic programs of the college. Since that time librarians have worked closely with the faculty to provide bibliographic, physical and virtual access to cumulative recorded knowledge. They have carefully selected and organized a collection of more than 90,000 volumes; acquired and developed the finding tools required to locate specific resources physically located in the library as well as virtually located through electronic access to scholarly databases and digital depositories; taught users how to locate and evaluate information resources; and created a place conducive to congregate, study, learn and research.

A most unique Library satellite location is a Ship’s Library aboard the Training Ship EMPIRE STATE VI. With a collection of approximately 4,000 cataloged titles and an automated library online catalog, LibrarySoft. In addition, the Ship’s Library public terminals run on an intranet server and provide students with electronic resources downloaded locally. The Ship’s Library supports the college’s Summer Sea Term academic program during the annual training cruise of the T.S. EMPIRE STATE VI . The Ship’s Library, staffed by a professional

librarian and student assistants, provides service to students, officers and staff seven days a week when the ship is under way.

The Stephen B. Luce Library contributes to the mission of the college by providing resources and services to meet the intellectual and academic needs of students, faculty, and staff, ashore and afloat. The primary focus of the library is to support the undergraduate and graduate instructional programs, academic and professional of SUNY Maritime College through its resources and services. Furthermore, the focus of the library is one of a teaching library, a partner in education with the academic departments through information literacy, through professional activities/scholarship of the library faculty and through their participation in the college faculty governance. When possible, the library extends services to those outside the college community. The continuing goals of the Luce Library are:

1. To select, acquire, organize and maintain information resources in all formats that best support the needs of the academic and professional instructional programs; to access resources beyond the immediate collection through interlibrary loan and electronic retrieval systems; to incorporate technology wherever appropriate to expand the library's collection and services
2. To facilitate the utilization of these resources by providing quality on-site reference service to assist and instruct library users in identifying, locating, evaluating and using information resources
3. To provide bibliographic instruction to prepare students to retrieve and evaluate information and foster lifelong learning
4. To provide access to resources with a broad range of perspectives, viewpoints, and approaches in keeping with the university's commitment to a climate of diversity
5. To maintain a safe and comfortable facility with an environment conducive to study and research and for the care and preservation of the library collections
6. To maintain capable, motivated and highly skilled staff through systematic programs of career development and effective utilization of individual talents
7. To promote the use of the library and information resources and to be a vital part of the Fort Schuyler community.

### **3. Personnel/ Staffing**

Regazzi (2012) analyzed the shift in staffing in academic libraries for the period 1998 – 2008. He found that there has been changes in staff composition over the 10-year period where the makeup of professional staff (non-librarians) have increased at a much more significant rate and librarians. Luce Library staff composition has also experience this shift. Table 1 shows the trend in staffing at the Library over three program reviews. Since the self-study review in 2004, the library's personnel composition has increased by 1.5 with one part time (daytime) reference librarian and with one full time professional support staff

(Coordinator of Online Distance Learning Services & Library Instructional Technology). The Library has assumed the responsibility for faculty technology training in the distance learning program and for the management of the instructional services for distance learning. Also, in 2004 the external review team cited staffing level of 7.6 FTE as being significantly under minimum standards. In 2009 staffing level showed a positive trend to 9.2 FTE, a case in example of how the outcome of program review convinced administration to improve a dire situation. However in 2009, with the increase of student population, library staffing was still disproportionately below the national standards for academic libraries and below the staffing levels of 1998.

<b>Program Review 1998</b>	<b>Program Review 2004</b>	<b>Program Review 2009</b>
4 Full-Time Librarians (4.0 FTE)	4 Full-Time Librarians (4.0 FTE)	4 Full-Time Librarians (4.0 FTE)
4 Part-Time Librarians (.60 FTE total)	2 Part-Time Librarians (.60 FTE total)	3 Part-Time Librarians (1.2 FTE)
Weekend/Evening Reference Librarian (.20 FTE)	2 Full-Time Clerical Staff (3.0 FTE)	4 Full-Time Support Staff (4.0 FTE)
Government Documents Librarian (.2 FTE)	Student Library Aides	Student Library Aides
Archivist (.20 FTE hourly bases)		
2 Full-Time Professionals (2.0 FTE)		
5 Full-Time Clerical Staff (5.0 FTE)		
1 Part-Time Clerk (.20 FTE)		
Government Documents Collection clerk (.20 FTE)		
Student Library Aides		
<b>TOTAL 12.6 FTE</b>	<b>TOTAL 7.6FTE</b>	<b>TOTAL 9.2FTE</b>

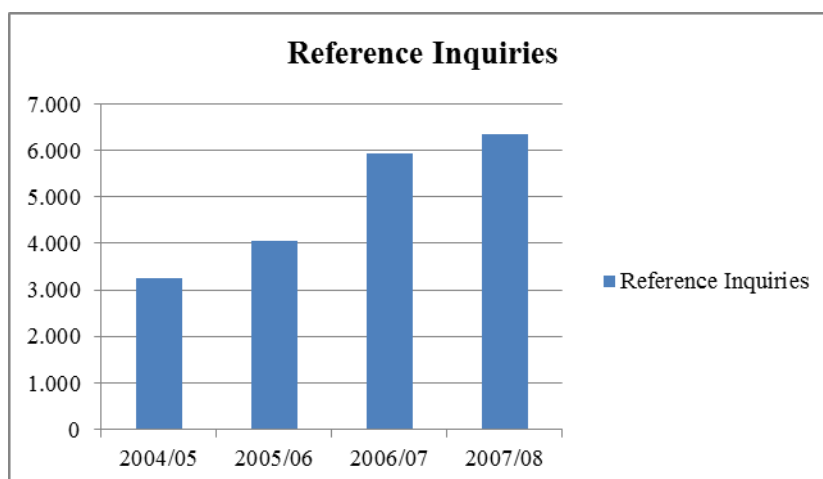
Academic libraries are experiencing a cultural change, one that is data-driven and focuses on assessment, and this shift in culture calls for renewed attention and support for professional development. Lakos and Phipps (2004) suggest that staff must be supported to improve their capability to serve customers, and went on to state that “Continuous learning is becoming part of the job of each person. The library has to plan and design each job to include enough time and opportunity to build new knowledge and new skills.”

At Luce Library, the newly-hired library faculty and staff brought to the library fresh ideas, directions and ambitions. The Library Director sought this new wave of scholarly interest and worked with the college leadership to secure the funds needed to complement the staff’s scholarly ambitions. The library faculty

are among the most scholarly-engaged faculty on campus. They continue to publish scholarly and scientific studies in refereed journals, they continue to apply for grants in digital library projects, as well as for travel and conference attendances, they continue to present in national and international conferences around the world as well as serving on regional SUNY committees and on national library committees of the American Library Association. Professional opportunities are also made possible to the support staff through library training venues such as METRO and other SUNY affiliated agencies.

#### **4. Library Research Services**

At the Library, the key areas of research services include reference (in-person, phone, and email) and interlibrary loan services. For on demand and in-person reference the weekly average of reference questions presented to librarians averaged from 350-400 questions which were a significant increase (40%) of reference activity from program review 2004 to 2009. Electronic references were done primarily via email from the library's web portal, with some phone reference. These inquiries averaged from 5-10 reference questions per week, and were usually in-depth research questions, generated by off-site individuals conducting historical research which requires the use of the Archive collections. Chart 1 shows the marked improved in quantity of reference inquiries between program reviews in 2004 and 2009. Though this can partially be attributed to higher student enrollment, most of the increase in reference questions was because of more hours of librarian's presence at the reference desk. This was a result of direct critique of the understaffed situation by the 2004 external review team, which urged the provost to hire part time librarians.

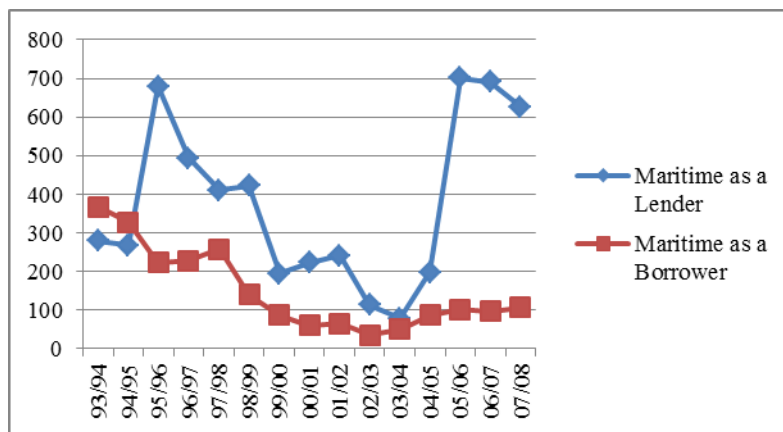


**Chart 1: Increase in reference inquiries between program reviews 2004 & 2009**

Interlibrary loan is another area of assessment that demonstrates service to not only the Library's users but to the international network of resource sharing. Materials not available in the library may be borrowed through interlibrary loan

services. Resources of other libraries are accessed through the nationwide Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), computerized resources sharing system and on site referral of patrons to member libraries of the local and regional library agency (METRO). In 2007, the Library entered into a partnership with the IDS (Information Delivery Services) project for ILL operations. The partnership with IDS project allowed the library to transmit items with high quality reproduction and bibliographic accuracy utilizing common systems among SUNY and non-SUNY libraries including the ILLiad ILL management software. The Library also participated in a statewide delivery system (LAND) which provided direct access to the IDS Project Systems and ensured fast turnaround delivery time.

In spring 2008 Luce Library implemented Illiad (Interlibrary Loan Internet Accessible Database) system with the electronic document delivery component Odyssey to manage all aspects of the ILL lending operation in a paperless environment. This system, especially with the facilitation of electronic document delivery, improved the average turnaround time for lending. The borrowing module of Illiad facilitated patron borrowing as an online web-based operation. Chart 2 shows the Library's interlibrary loan activities over three program reviews – 1998, 2004, and just before 2009. With a very specialized collection in maritime subject areas, the Library is always a net lender to other institutions. As cited by the review team in 2004, the Library needed to do more in promoting ILL services to its users; the chart reflects an upward trend as a borrower since 2004.



**Chart2: Interlibrary loan borrowing and lending**

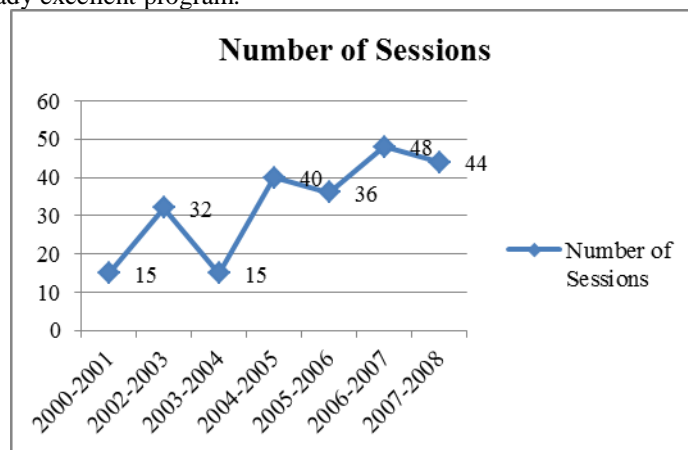
### 5. Information Literacy and Learning Outcomes

At the turn of the century accrediting agencies, such as Middle States Commission on Higher Education, revised their standards to reflect less emphasis on libraries and learning resources, but heavily weighted emphasis on student learning outcomes (MSCHE, 2011). Saunders (2007) describes the

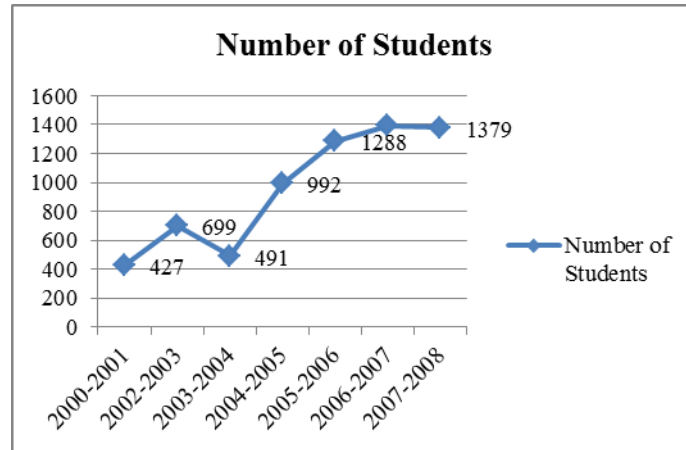
implementation of the Middle States Information Literacy Framework and discusses the important link between learning outcomes and information literacy instruction. Learning outcomes assessment should now be an embedded practice at academic libraries and be discussed during external reviews prior to accreditation visits.

The philosophy of the Stephen B. Luce library is one of a "teaching library." The library is a visible and a critical partner in the college's teaching and learning mission. The Library faculty teaches information literacy classes on library research skills and critical thinking in evaluating information. This includes, but is not limited to strategies for reaching out to teaching faculty and administrators, increasing visibility, publishing research guides and bibliographies on related academic disciplines, designing hands-on exercises and offering course-specific instruction. The Stephen B. Luce Library Instructional Program serves the teaching and learning needs of the entire Maritime College. The library strives to offer the skill and knowledge that is required to be a successful life-long learner. It is the library's firm belief that the result of the Information Literacy efforts contribute to student retention, improve students' academic performance and graduate generations of life-long learners. These are principles which are intertwined with the Maritime College's short and long term goals.

Formal library instruction was given to students in all subjects and disciplines of the graduate and undergraduate core curriculum. Charts 3 and 4 show the Information Literacy progress from 2000-01 to 2007-08, indicating number of sessions offered and number of students attended the sessions. Steady progress is contributed to the Librarians proactive role as a teacher and the library's on-going partnerships with the teaching departments. External review teams in 2004 and 2009 consistently commended the Library's instruction program and its achievements. This served as assurance for librarians to continue building on an already excellent program.



**Chart 3: Number of Information Literacy sessions, 2000 – 2008**

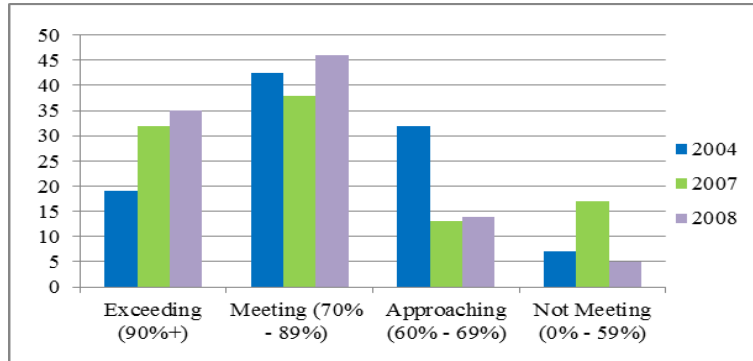


**Chart 4: Number of students reached in IL sessions, 2000 – 2008**

Assessment of the Library instruction program has been ongoing for the past several years. The Library participated in the SUNY-wide assessment activity “Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes in General Education” for 2003-04 and 2006-07 cycles and has continued assessment efforts thereafter. Information literacy assessment is based on the following student learning outcomes:

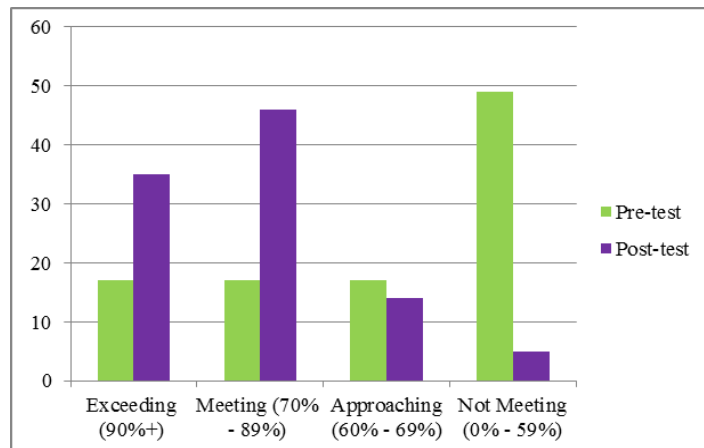
- Understand and use basic research techniques
  - Locate, evaluate and synthesize information from a variety of sources
- The methodology involves conducting course related library instruction sessions and then distributing a standardized test to the students. Targeted courses includes first and second year courses such as Leadership 101, English 90, English 101, English 102, History/American Civilization I & II, Engineering 102, Marine Biology, Meteorology 201, and Oceanography 302. The key assessment tool is the standardized test which features short answers and yes/no questions and has a rating scale of exceeding=90-100%, meeting=70-89%, approaching=60-69% and not meeting=0-59%. Chart 5 shows results for GenEd cycles for the years 2004 & 2007 and results for continued assessment for the year 2008.





**Chart 5: Information Literacy student learning outcomes**

Results show a continuous improvement in students exceeding and meeting expectations. However, there is still a significant group of students who are not performing as well – approximately a combined 20% of students in 2008 are either not meeting or just approaching expectations. In fall 2008, the Library incorporated an additional assessment process to measure the effectiveness of library instruction sessions. Standardized pre/post tests were the key assessment tools used to gather student performance data prior to library instruction sessions and after library instruction sessions. These data were compared to assess effectiveness of library instruction sessions on student learning outcomes. As outlined in chart 6, results show that library instruction is effective in improving student learning outcomes in information literacy; pre-test exercise shows 33% of students either meet or exceed expectations, but after sitting through library instruction sessions, 82% of students meet or exceed expectations.



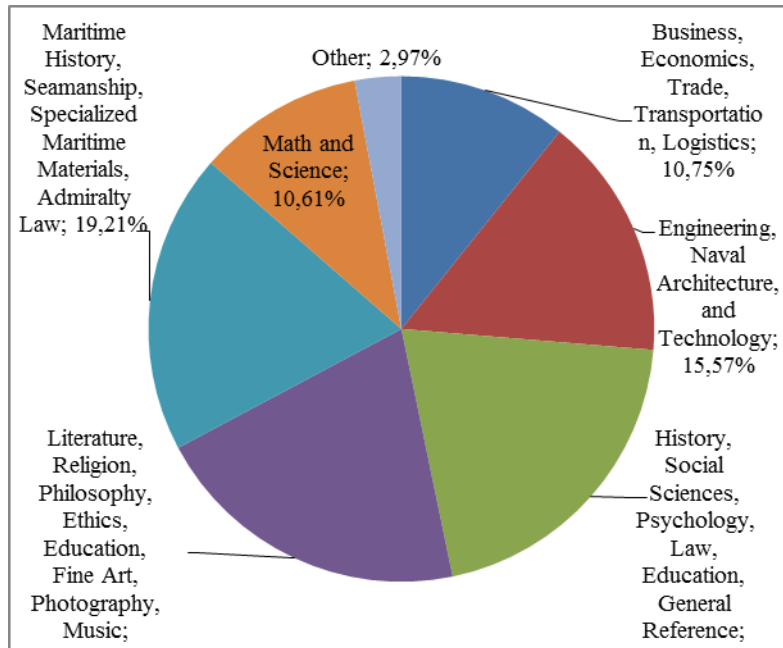
**Chart 6: Information Literacy pre-test vs. post test results, 2008**

## **6. Library Collection**

Collection assessment is essential data to share with the external review team for feedback on how well the library's resources align with the mission and needs of the institution. One of the more popular tools for collection assessment is OCLC's Worldcat Collection Analysis and Beals and Gilmour (2007) suggests that this tool can provide valuable insights into strengths and weaknesses of the collection.

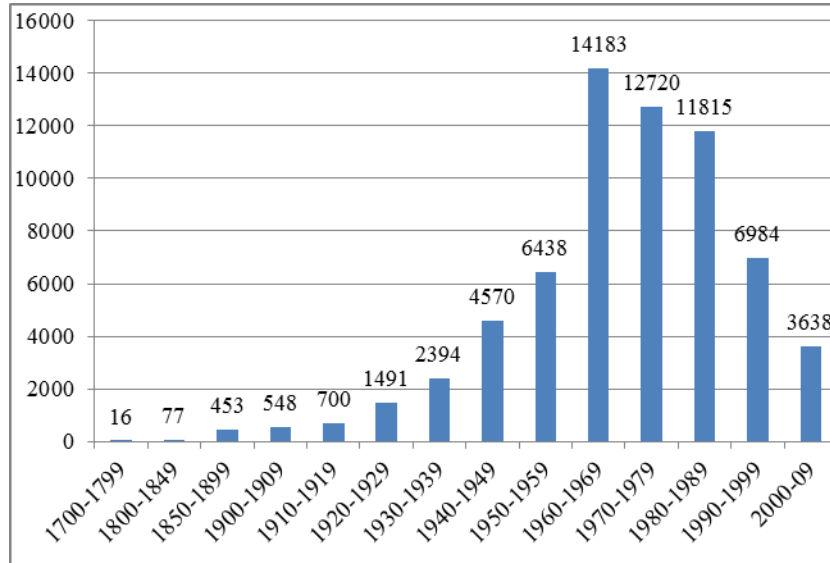
The Luce Library currently holds approximately 90,000 + volumes. The library also has 1,171 unique serial titles, and a total of 256 bound and stored periodical titles. In addition, there are over 1000 video titles, 2,000 maps/charts, and approximately 12,876 microform titles, including government documents. In addition, the library subscribes to the SUNYConnect databases providing remote access to over one million full text articles from variety of electronic databases.

An assessment of the print collection was done to show the strengths, weaknesses, and age. The calculation was performed by examining inventory lists of the collection and placing the materials into their specific categories. The general breakdown of the Library's collection by subject area is shown in chart 7, and the library's general education collection is strong with slightly over 40% of the collection consisting of various works of art, literature, history, and the social sciences. The library's specialized nature is revealed when looking at the other areas. Almost 20% of the collection is devoted toward maritime history, seamanship, admiralty law, and other specialized materials. In addition, there is a substantial collection of engineering, naval architecture, and technology works as well as substantial representation in math and science and economics.



**Chart 7: Subject breakdown of print collection**

With the College’s focus on Maritime programs, the question naturally arises as to why in the print collections there seems to be an overrepresentation of non-maritime curriculum related materials, such as in literature, art, general history, etc. This can be explained in two ways: First, these general collection works are older and do not necessarily get out-dated. For example, seminal literary works that the library acquired decades ago could still be counted as a valid part of the collection and were never removed. On the other hand, works in technology, engineering, and science are more likely to be removed as technology changes. Secondly, and coupled with this, are declining budgets to spend on materials. Over the past two decades, the library budget has been either cut or at best remained stagnant, even when accounting for inflation. As the prices of materials increase, it becomes increasingly difficult to replace outdated material. Therefore, by attrition, these areas of the collection have shrunken through natural library processes of removal while never being replaced for lack of funds. This is best revealed in Chart 8. It shows the breakdown of the collection by publication date. As can be seen, the greatest number of monographs is from 1960 to 1969 with a steady decline thereafter. This is reflective of the investment the college has put into the library over a long period of time and indicates clearly a need for new additional investment to bring the library up-to-date.

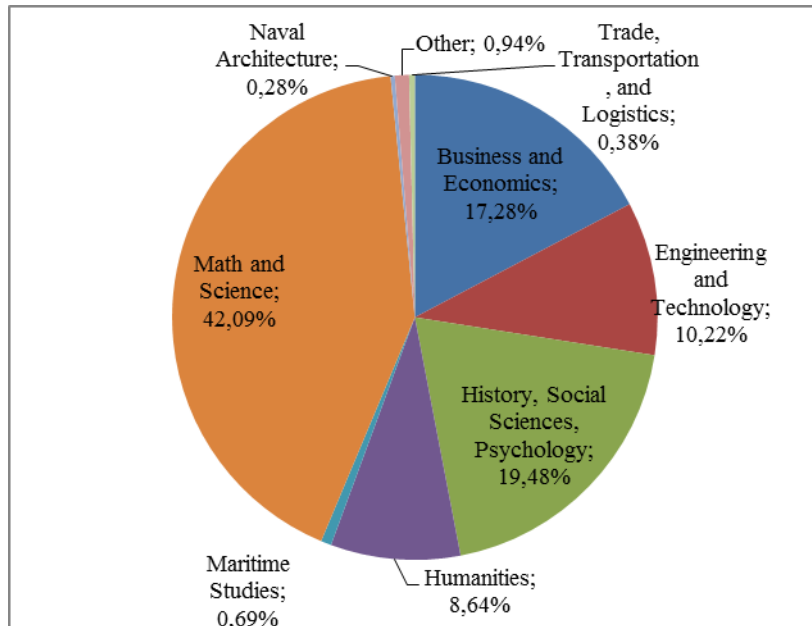


**Chart 8: Print collection breakdown by publication date**

Chart 9 reveals what our electronic holdings are through an analysis of Serials Solutions. As can be seen, this differs markedly from the print collection chart (Chart 7). This is due to the fact that the major database that the library subscribes to is acquired as part of a consortium through State University of New York. In addition, the specialized materials that a maritime curriculum would require are often drowned out by the total number of entries in serials solutions as well as possibly having a smaller total number of available databases. This may also indicate a need to invest in electronic databases that could further support the maritime curriculum.

In depth analysis and assessment of the Library's collection provided the hidden details for the external review team to grasp the strengths and weaknesses of its makeup. As a result, the 2009 review team made key recommendations, including:

1. Materials necessary to support the specialized maritime curriculum and licensing requirements are not kept up to date, leading to student frustration and an inability for students to obtain critical materials for their work at Maritime. This focus area of the collection needs updating.
2. The acquisitions budget needs to be increased as rapidly as possible in order to meet today's curriculum. Funds must be found to purchase the up-to-date required manuals and research books demanded by the curriculum.



**Chart 9: Electronic collection breakdown**

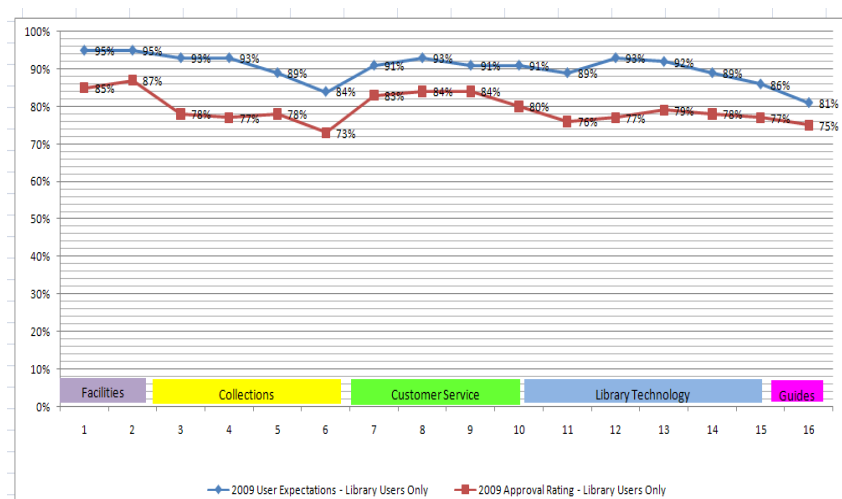
### 7. User Satisfaction

In the early 1990s libraries emerged more as user-centered facilities where management strategies focused on customer satisfaction and not on organizational inputs and tasks (Steve Hiller and James Self, p.137). According to (Stoffle, Renaud, & Veldof, 1996, pp. 220–221), quality of library services and activities will be determined by whether customer needs have been satisfied and librarians must ensure that their work add value to the customer. The Luce Library gauged its customer satisfaction through surveys and presented the results to the external review team.

In January/February 2009 the library sought direct input from the library users by administering a user survey. The purpose of the survey was to solicit user-satisfaction/approval in comparison to user-expectations for all areas of library operations and services. Users were asked to measure their level of approval against their level of expectations in the areas of Facilities, Collections, Customer Service, Library Technology and Library literature/publications (user guides).

The survey, consisting of 16 questions, was distributed to the entire college community. A total of 292 persons responded to the survey. The responses were analyzed by categories of all library users including the different classes of students. The survey focused on five key areas of the Library – facilities, collections, customer service, technology, and research guides. Chart 10 shows user expectations vs. user approval ratings for the five areas. Generally, user

approval ratings were fairly high with the lowest rating at 73%. The wider gap areas were in collections and technology, demonstrating that users expected more in these areas. The results demonstrated that users were not satisfied with books, journals, and audiovisual materials available for course assignments and research papers. In the area of technology, users expected more availability of printing equipment, better copier machines, and more computer workstations. Providing user satisfaction data to the external review team was very important since it helped to guide the conversations during team interviews with library customers (faculty, staff and students).



**Chart 10: Results of user satisfaction survey, 2009.**

## 8. Conclusion

In surveying the literature there are not much written on academic libraries and the external review process. Yet, conducting a web search reveals many external review reports for academic libraries, so obviously this review process is prevalent. Planning and preparing for an external review can be challenging for the library administrator, especially preparing the self-study document. As this paper discussed, assessing strategic areas of resources and services is critical to generating insightful data to present to the external review team. The aim is to provide as much information as possible so the team can accurately report their findings. After all, the final report can be a powerful document not only to negotiate with upper administration for funding, but also to get a true assessment of meeting users' needs. Finally, one of the underlining benefits of the review process is to gauge how the library stands in preparation for the ultimate review visit – by an accreditation team.

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