Statement of Competency N

N. Evaluate programs and services on specified criteria

The variety of services and programs and the advent of new means of providing existing services as well as implementing new ones mean that libraries must be able to evaluate them to see if they meet the needs of their user populations.

Library services and programs are created with the end goals of providing equitable access to information, and meeting the needs of the user populations that they serve. Some services fulfill the basic functions related directly to user access, such as circulation and the mechanisms by which different groups of users can apply for and receive library cards. Others are geared towards specific user groups, such as users with special accessibility needs, for which libraries provide services that assist users with gaining access to and utilizing the variety of materials in the library’s collections. Services are also designed based on the information needs of users who are seeking specific types of information, such as children, teens, users seeking information on jobs and career changes, and those who require or wish to use material in languages other than English. In these instances, many libraries create distinct sections within their facilities, such as areas for children that contain age-appropriate books and materials as well as furniture and other amenities designed just for children, or areas where teens can study.

Programs that libraries provide include exhibits that highlight specific materials in the collection that are related to a subject or theme or lecture series in which speakers are invited to present a talk on subjects of interest to the local community. Libraries also host classes, such as writing classes for teens, ESL classes and computer literacy classes.
The advent of the Internet as a widely used tool of disseminating information has created new opportunities to expand the reach of libraries in new ways, and to larger groups of users than ever before. Libraries have replaced card catalogs with online public access catalogs (OPACs) that allow users to both check the status of library holdings and reserve books remotely, and now offer users the ability to both apply for and renew library cards online. Libraries are able to offer electronic media, such as e-books, and access to databases and other electronic reference resources that users can access from their homes, offices or any place they have access to the Internet connection.

Due to the variety of services provided, libraries must be able to evaluate existing ones to determine whether or not they are continuing to meet the needs of users. When implementing a new service or program, libraries need to be able to determine if there is a need for it. For example, is there a user group in the community that may require different sets of services than those currently being provided? Are there groups within the community who are not being represented by current services or programs? The need to implement new services and evaluate existing ones also stems from the fact that service populations change over time. For example, a distinct cultural group living in a city served by a public library may grow significantly in population to the point where its members may come to rely on the public library’s services. If the library does not expand its services to include materials that are either in the group’s native language (if the native language is not English), or that relates to the group’s culture and traditions, then the group in question will not be able to have its information needs met. Furthermore, a library is a meeting ground for people from all walks of life, and provides much valuable information regarding public and social services (such is information about public schools, health care, taxes and voter information). If the group does not feel that it is represented at the library,
then it will not turn to the library for its information needs, and may miss out on access to these services, which may prove detrimental to their personal well-being or full participation in society.

Services may also need to be re-evaluated as new theories regarding a particular discipline or the means of providing meaningful services and programs to a specific user group becomes known. This is the case when providing services and creating programs for children and teens. As new educational theories are periodically being developed, it is important for libraries to incorporate them into new services, or when revising existing ones. New best practices for providing service to user groups with special needs are also revised periodically when as new theories are developed. It is important for libraries to be able to evaluate and revise their practices to stay current, otherwise the programs and services will cease to be relevant. Libraries may therefore run the risk of not being seen as a valuable resource.

When providing new services that make use of new technologies, it is important that they be usable. Library websites provide information about services and programs as well as access to the OPAC, databases, e-books and means by which users can renew their library cards and request items. The website therefore must be designed in such a way that it is easily navigable, so that users can find these services. A website that is difficult to navigate renders the services about which it is trying to provide information that much more difficult to find, meaning that users may not be aware of the services and benefits that the library has to offer.

Evaluation of programs and services is most often done by means of surveys and user testing. Surveys are distributed to both library users and library staff to obtain different perspectives on the efficacy of programs and services. The San Francisco (Calif.) Public Library (SFPL) has a link for its survey for library patrons available at the bottom of its homepage and many other pages throughout the
The survey is available in English, Chinese, Spanish and Russian, which are the major languages spoken by San Francisco residents. This allows SFPL to gain user feedback from as broad a segment of its user population as possible, and sends a message to users from different cultures that their opinions and information service needs are valued.

The Public Library Association publishes annual statistical reports that pool data received from surveys distributed to administrators at public libraries in the United States. The surveys gather information relating to the population of the library’s service area, its income and expenditures, the size of its holdings, circulation figures, and information about facilities, such as the number of branches and bookmobiles. Being able to aggregate the data in a statistical report provides library administrators with tools that can be used when making decisions regarding funding of programs and services, including revision of existing ones, implementation of new ones, and elimination of programs and services that may no longer be needed or relevant for a variety of reasons, including changes in demographics of the user population. Statistical reports also provide libraries with a way of tracking changes in library expenditures and services over time.

User testing is of particular use when new systems, such as library websites, are being updated or implemented. Groups of users are provided with a demonstration version of a proposed website and are asked to perform a variety of tasks involving navigation around the site. Users are asked to provide feedback as to which features work, which features need to be improved, and which ones were absent and should have been included in the design. Improvements and revisions based on user feedback are incorporated into subsequent rounds of testing until the both the site’s designers are able to determine that they have a successful site that can be launched.
1. LIBR 251 – Web Usability – Evaluation Seminar

For this assignment, I was asked to review a variety of library-related websites to see how well they functioned in terms of design principles described by Jakob Nielsen and Bruce Tognazzini. For one of the websites I also looked at how well it complied with principles of accessibility for users with special needs. Parts A and B called for comparison of sets of library websites based on principles of interaction design as described by Tognazzini, after which I selected the sites that operated in accordance with good design principles and those that did not. I tested each site from the perspective of a potential library user who may need to use the site to find records in the collection, or information about services. I evaluated each site on how easy it was for users to either navigate around the site. The first set of websites were evaluated on how well the user was able to know where they were within the site, and navigate back to the starting point. The second set of websites was evaluated on how well information about site content was conveyed through the use of icons and illustrations that users could recognize. Such illustrations are known as metaphors, and well-designed ones give the user an indication as to the icon’s function. A non-library example would be the use of a shopping cart icon and the “checkout” metaphor on commercial websites. Part B of this assignment evaluated the Library Online Tutorial for the School of Library and Information Science Students (LOTSS). All students entering the School of Library and Information Science are required to take this tutorial. I evaluated the LOTSS tutorial based on design heuristics described by Nielsen. As with Tognazzini’s principles, the heuristics describe desirable behavior in websites that make them easy and efficient to use without requiring
the user to take unnecessary steps to achieve desired aims, and while providing clear guides that indicate what the user is expected to do to achieve a desired end. In Part C, I evaluated the library orientation video located at the beginning of the tutorial to see if it complied with rules on accessibility, such as having subtitles synchronized with the speaker in the video. As it stood, there were no such subtitles, and a user had to click on a link that opened a separate page that showed the transcript without the video.

This evidence demonstrates my ability to evaluate Internet-based tools that provide access to information about library collections and services. Websites that provide access to information about library collections, programs and services are continuously growing in terms of the functionality they are able to provide. Consequently, users have continually greater expectations of website functionality, meaning that libraries need to continually evaluate and refine website designs lest they become obsolete.

2. LIBR 251 – Web Usability – Paper Prototype

This assignment called for the redesign of the LOTSS tutorial using a technique known as paper prototyping according to design patterns described by Jennifer Tidwell in her book, *Designing Interfaces: Patterns for Effective Interaction Design*. The pattern I chose to use as the basis for my redesign was Global Navigation, which calls for the placement of easily identifiable links on each page of a website that allow the user to easily navigate to any part of the website regardless of which page that they are currently viewing. Executing the redesign called for user testing, for which I recruited two of my neighbors and my partner as test subjects. I created a paper mock-up of the proposed website redesign using paper overlays for buttons and frames. Users were given a set of tasks to perform, and I made note of what actions they took to perform those tasks, and asked
for feedback regarding ways of making the tasks easier to perform. Post-it notes were used to note more efficient actions for subsequent stages of testing. After testing by each user, I made changes to the website design based on user feedback so that I could test it on the next user. There were three tests in all before I achieved a workable design using the principle of Global Navigation.

This evidence demonstrates my ability to conduct actual user testing by which I can gain feedback from users who have a stake in the maintenance of systems that provide access to information about library services, collections and programs. Periodic review of systems that provide an opportunity for the incorporation of user feedback is a necessary part of maintaining access to information to users.

*Note:* I requested and received written permission from the test subjects in this assignment to identify them by name for purposes of this e-Portfolio.

3. LIBR 256 – Archives and Manuscripts – Reference Sources Review

For this assignment, I reviewed five online archival databases to determine how usable they were from the perspective of potential users who would need to conduct online searches for specific materials. The main criteria that I used in evaluating these websites were ease of use and ease with which relevant results were found. The functionality of the websites ranged from those that provided direct access to digital collections through the website, to those that provide information about holdings in union catalogs (library catalogs made up of the records of more than one library). However, I found in many instances that ease of use of the archival databases depended not only on the ability of the user to use common search techniques (such as knowing which keywords to use), but also some knowledge of the subject matter in question. For example, I had difficult using the British National Register of Archives due to a lack of familiarity with some of the naming
conventions used for British businesses and organizations, though the website was generally well-organized. The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC), which is run by the Library of Congress has an incredibly difficult-to-navigate and unintuitive website, that also requires the user to have an understanding of MARC21 coding that is normally only used by library catalogers. After deciphering the MARC21 coding, the user needs to navigate to completely separate website to see if they can find a record of what they are looking for. This was an incredibly cumbersome process that requires way too much technical knowledge on the part of a researcher. Having to navigate a cumbersome and technical process reduces the ability for researchers to find relevant materials quickly and easily.

This evidence demonstrates my ability to evaluate library systems that are needed by lay persons to find relevant information. As libraries are meant to provide access, it is necessary to evaluate online database systems and OPACs when considering implementing them. Just is it is important to be able to evaluate a service for what does work, it is just as important to be able to have an idea of those systems that don’t work, so that libraries can avoid such mistakes when planning their own services.

**Conclusion**

Libraries are dynamic entities. They must embrace change in order to continue to provide services that promote access to information for their users. We live in an age where constantly emerging new technologies provide new opportunities to provide access to information. Furthermore, as the world grows and changes, libraries must be ready to implement new programs and services that meet the information needs of their users, and which users find relevant. However, libraries cannot act on a mere desire to provide service without consideration as to whether or not the proposed services will
Jonathan Leff – Statement of Competency N

actually work in the way they are meant to. Careful planning is required, including evaluation of programs, services and systems and gaining feedback from those who have a stake in new services or programs. Libraries must also periodically review existing services to see if they are still relevant as they are, if they need improvement and revision, or whether they have become obsolete and need to be replaced. It is important for libraries to be able to evaluate their programs to ensure that they continue to provide the best services and access to information for their users.