Assessing the assessment: how institutions administered, interpreted, and used SAILS

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Introduction
As the teaching and learning of information literacy skills gains greater attention across campuses, so does the need to measure student learning. Determining the appropriate assessment instrument, administering it, and interpreting the results can be a challenge for librarians. Our paper provides the results of a research study examining the administration of one large-scale standardized information literacy assessment (SAILS) and the usability of the results.

Goal of the study
It is hoped that the results of this study will provide practical guidance for other librarians who are using SAILS or other standardized tests of information literacy to assess student information literacy skills on large-scale levels.

Methodology
Web survey
A survey instrument was developed to assess the administration of SAILS, the use of SAILS report data, and the respondent perceptions of the utility of SAILS at their institution. The survey was comprised of two major sections (see Figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>QUESTION TYPES</th>
<th>QUESTIONS / TOPICS ADDRESSED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>1. Radio button</td>
<td>Demographic info about institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>2. Checklist</td>
<td>Types of groups assessed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Survey</td>
<td>3. Sampling methods employed</td>
<td>Sampling methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Test taker recruitment methods</td>
<td>Test taker recruitment methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>5. Data analysis</td>
<td>Data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative/</td>
<td>6. Publicity of findings</td>
<td>Publicity of findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>7. User level</td>
<td>Perceptions of utility of SAILS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. The survey was developed using the commercial web survey service, SurveyMonkey. The survey was comprised of two major sections. The first section was quantitative and the second section was both quantitative and qualitative.

The survey was distributed via email to the library instruction coordinators at each of the 83 institutions included in the “List of Institutions in the All Institutions Benchmark,” published in the Project SAILS Results of the Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills reports dated Spring 2007. The survey was open for five months (Dec 3, 2008 through May 1, 2009). See Figures 2 for response rate and Figure 3 for responses by institution type.

Major Findings
Convenience sampling in administering SAILS
Survey results showed that the large majority of institutions used convenience sampling in administering SAILS (See Figures 4 and 5).

Despite its apparent prevalence, convenience sampling may not provide the most accurate measurement of information literacy skills. In convenience sampling, institutions are likely to target specific instructors and courses that are “library-friendly,” which can result in higher test scores than from a true random sample (Bradley 2006).

Usefulness of SAILS data by institution type
In the responses to the following statement on our survey, we found that doctoral and associate level institutions were much more likely than masters and baccalaureate institutions to find SAILS report data useful (See Figures 6 and 7):

When is SAILS most effective?
Our research suggests that SAILS can be most effective when an institution has:

- support to conduct the assessment so that results will have an impact on information literacy planning;
- statistical/institutional research office support for the analysis of data;
- the means to recruit a random sample that truly reflects student population;
- another assessment tool to use in conjunction with SAILS; and
- the ability to correlate SAILS data with other existing institutional data to provide more meaningful results.

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank their colleagues at the Hunter College Libraries — John Carey, Laura Cebus, Sarah Lalman Ward, Mei-Lin Hing, Ingrid Bondie-Joseph, Jean-Jacques Strayer, Claiborne Williams — for assisting with the survey and for providing feedback on the manuscript draft.