

1The Media Center

Data Gathering: Why You Need the Numbers ... and What You Can Do With Them

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Board members who study numbers to make tough decisions know the numbers mean program activity. It is all so simple and such common sense, yet not everyone gathers even the minimum numerical type of data. Count yourself among those that do.

Data gathering, data driven decision-making, and accountability are today's buzzwords. Media specialists should take note. Make ongoing data collection routine so that information needed for advocacy, decision-making, and gaining program support is quickly accessible when needed. Data ... :

- is a tool for program and job survival;
- can be used for strategic planning;
- is essential when presenting information to others;
- provides numbers that administrators and school boards can readily understand, and
- adds to your professional credibility.

State reports were required when I began my career. We tallied acquisitions, expenses, and circulation numbers to compile statistics needed for the annual report. Required state reports were eventually discontinued—a huge mistake as many media specialists found themselves scrambling when later there were statewide initiatives to gather copyright data to support legislative funding requests. More recently, media specialists scrambled to gather numerical information about numbers of students visiting the media center each day, budget trends, daily job patterns, and more, to provide information for the statewide Minnesota School Library Media Program Census. (2001 and 2004)

Fortunately, today most media centers are automated, making data about circulation and collections accessible in a matter of moments. Quite likely your system provides more information than you pay attention to or have time to deal with. At the very minimum, you should compile quarterly or monthly reports. They can be used to show how many students are using (or not using) resources, to support budget requests, to make decisions about future purchases, or to set program goals.

We've maintained an ongoing circulation spreadsheet for years; it's been expanded with columns to record:

1. Number of daily classes using the media center and labs
2. List or description of class activities that week
3. Total weekly students in classes (number of classes times average class size)
4. Total weekly students (numbers in classes plus a factor for average daily drop-in)
5. Media specialist instructional activities
6. Weekly totals
7. Daily averages
8. Special events (book fair, staff development, meetings etc)

It takes only seconds at the end of every school day to update the statistics. The invaluable data has helped us acquire additional support staff, recruit volunteers, maintain budgets, and most significantly, not lose any support staff time during two eras of district-wide budget cuts that impacted other media programs in the district.

The data supports what my principal already knows: our resources are well used. Last spring we prepared a presentation to our school board to explain why we needed to upgrade our computer labs and purchase mobile stations. His first item for the list was “500 kids a day use the media center.” Board members who study numbers to make tough decisions know the numbers mean program activity. It is all so simple and such common sense, yet not everyone gathers even the minimum numerical type of data. Count yourself among those that do.

Crunching Numbers, Boosting Budgets

Many automation systems have built-in collection analysis features. Companies such as Sagebrush Corporation and Follett Library Company offer collection analysis and development services. Our district has taken advantage of the Follett assessment system twice. Last fall we analyzed six collections using Follett’s Title wise. < <http://www.titlewise.com> > The results yielded an impressive amount of data with very little work by media staff. We used the results in presentations to the school board and at all elementary PTAs. The result is minor budget increases, which are major in an era of state and funding budget cuts. We also used the data to solicit donations from a private individual who contributed funding to our elementary media centers. Most importantly, there is a heightened awareness about the need for improved funding and the importance of access to a good media center collection.

Your own budget spreadsheet is an important component of media program administration. Whether it’s as simple as a running record of budget expenses or a complex record of budget and price trends, it’s helpful. I maintain an ongoing spreadsheet with a separate sheet tab for each year. We record purchase order numbers, prices, and average prices. Another sheet is used to record yearly trends.

Spreadsheets (or tables) can be designed to record the percent of time spent in scheduling, collection development, staff development, budgeting, troubleshooting, strategic planning, or whatever is significant for your program. If daily record keeping is impossible to manage, record percentages once or twice a week. Record anecdotes, too. That program log may be something you can turn to in a public forum such as a board meeting or other situations when people ask you what you do. Too many people base their knowledge only on that fleeting 18-second walk

by or hearsay. Your position may just be a line item in the budget to decision makers, but when they hear examples about what you do and whom you impact they are more prepared to equate a person with the job and support you. Good data accompanied with anecdotal evidence is a survival.

Documenting What You Do

We know studies document the positive relationship between media programs and student achievement. But how many of us have information carefully and thoroughly documenting our curriculum involvement and what we do? Our daily spreadsheet it shows curriculum patterns and depicts gaps and inconsistencies in how teachers or curricular areas infuse technology in the curriculum; there is also a column for information literacy activities. But all of this is only a start. Many media specialists have developed thorough and detailed qualitative data collection tools to record specific information literacy instruction and activities for engaging students in reading services, providing students with individual assistance or recording a record of participating in collaborative planning. Some use databases to link everything they do to specific curricular areas, district curriculum maps, and individual teachers. This higher level of data collection shows what you do for kids and learning and how media programs reach and impact specific curricular areas and units of study. It is also useful for planning for program improvement and curricular goals.

Numbers about attendance at technology staff development classes and Web site hits are important to our program's overall focus. Staff development numbers show that the need and interest are still there; the corresponding data about costs show how inexpensively we can provide our own training. Our district Web site does not come without expense; ongoing data about Web page hits helps us know which pages are worth doing and which are not. Information about resource sharing between buildings is helping me document the need for improved automation systems at our elementary schools.

Data doesn't always work magic. An elementary media staff person, her principal, and I met with our human resources director to discuss staffing needs at a small elementary school. The numbers clearly show this school's media center has five times the program activity that another school of equal student size has. Yet we did not win the argument for restoring 2 hours of eliminated staff time. The human resources director argued for equitable staffing based on student enrollment. We argued that staffing should also be based on program activity. A quality program that strongly impacts student learning will suffer in the name of numerical equity.

Getting Started

No clue about your data? It doesn't have to be that way. Start small, start simply, and build. Begin with the most compelling need or what makes sense for your situation. If you really need to increase the budget and improve the collection, concentrate on finances. If you want to show that the media center is well used, then be sure to document circulation and numbers of students who use it. If you're seeking better visibility in curriculum involvement, then take time to document that role. If you need more staff or support staff, document how you spend our time and important things you can't get done.

Start with a spreadsheet or database and get in the habit of using it, even if you only record a little bit of information. Notes scribbled on scrap paper will eventually become meaningless or too time-consuming to deal with. It's not necessary to be a spreadsheet or database guru to get started. You do need to know how to:

- enter and format data,
- set up basic formulas using basic mathematical calculations,
- create charts and reports,
- format the information for clarity and visual impact, and
- present the information professionally.

Now What?

I've got data, now what? Put it all in one place and save it! I have only two data folders on my computer; one is labeled BUDGET, the other STATISTICS. I refer to those folders daily; your work will come in handy some day. When the assistant principal asks "What's the average cost of a book today?" or wants to know how many students used the media center in a certain month, that information is there. When it's time for an annual report to the school board, or to speak to a PTA, that information is there. If the newspaper calls for publicity information, the facts are there. When I am planning staff development or writing a grant application, the data is there.

The start a new school year is the ideal time to begin gathering data. Spend time getting organized now plus a few seconds each day entering information, and you'll have provided yourself with the valuable data you may need later. Fire up that spreadsheet now . . . or scramble later!

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