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Prioritizing Inclusivity and Transparency in Revising the Proficiencies for Assessment in Academic Libraries

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Prioritizing Inclusivity and Transparency in Revising the Proficiencies for Assessment in Academic Libraries

This column provides an overview of the newly updated *Proficiencies for Assessment in Academic Libraries* (approved June 2023) and outlines the steps and rationale for each phase of the revision process. It is our hope that you will not only apply and share these assessment proficiencies in your own organizations and practice but also consider how you might adapt the strategies for inclusivity and transparency that were used to update the *Proficiencies* in your own work such as strategic planning, updating or revising programs, or creating new services.

Keywords: assessment, proficiencies, inclusive practices, transparency, social justice

Introduction

Burgeoning trends toward evidence-informed decision-making have brought about a shift in how organizations, including libraries, think about what we do and how we do it, in order to enact positive change. Diminishing resources and an increased call for accountability are impacting libraries across the country, requiring them to demonstrate value and impact to the institution. In response to these trends, many libraries have created new positions to manage library assessment activities, some libraries are adding assessment responsibilities to one or two existing positions, and other organizations are assigning assessment activities to a committee and/or including assessment as an expectation for all employees. Acknowledging the evolving field of library assessment and its requisite responsibilities and proficiencies, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association, appointed a task force in 2014 to develop the first set of *Proficiencies for Assessment Librarians and Coordinators* (approved and published in 2017) to provide academic libraries with a common definition of library assessment responsibilities and proficiencies.

In the six short years since the initial *Proficiencies for Assessment Librarians and Coordinators* were approved in 2017, it became apparent that there was a growing need for

proficiencies centered around social justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. Research by Owen, Oakleaf, and Gray, which was presented at the 2021 Central NY Library Resources Council Annual Conference in their session titled, "*We Can Do Better, Analysis of Social Justice in Library Professional Standards*," illuminated the fact that the 2017 ACRL Proficiencies for Assessment Librarians and Coordinators were devoid of proficiencies related to social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Oakleaf, one of the aforementioned co-presenters and a library and information science professor, shared the findings of this important student-led research with two ACRL goal-level committees, the Value of Academic Libraries Committee (VAL) and the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (EDI). Subsequently, these two committees formed a working group in early 2022 to address these gaps. The working group was expanded to 35 members and included professionals from both academic libraries and higher education assessment communities who have expertise in equity-centered assessment. During an 18-month process, the working group dismantled the initial set of proficiencies and rebuilt them to ensure social justice, equity, diversity, and accessibility are centered in assessment practices. This revised set of proficiencies, renamed *Proficiencies for Assessment in Academic Libraries,* was approved and published by the ACRL Board of Directors in June 2023. (https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/assessment_proficiencies).

As you review the *Proficiencies for Assessment in Academic Libraries*, take note of the parallels between the reflective and inclusive **processes** the working group used to update the document which are described in this column, and the **components** of the newly updated *Proficiencies.* This column will begin with a discussion of the scope of the revised proficiencies, followed by an introduction to the working group membership and roles. The steps and rationale

for each phase of the revision process will be discussed, followed by valuable lessons learned and practical applications.

Definition, scope, and recommended uses

The *Proficiencies* provide a common definition of assessment responsibilities and describe the ethics, knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and mindsets to empower both those with and without formal leadership positions to engage in library assessment. They focus on broad areas rather than a comprehensive list of skills; they outline an approach to assist individuals and organizations in selecting the proficiencies most appropriate for their environment and situational context, rather than identifying tasks for specific job positions. The definition of assessment practitioner in these proficiencies includes any library employee or stakeholder (e.g., student, faculty, or staff) with assessment duties. In some cases, a library position may encompass the entire span of assessment proficiencies and may involve coordination and supervision of others. In other cases, individual library employees may need only a portion of the proficiencies to complete an assessment project.

The *Proficiencies* provide ethical guidance and enable assessment practitioners to recognize strengths and identify areas for professional growth. Use of the proficiencies will vary depending upon the institution, context, and needs of an organization. The proficiencies can be used to write job descriptions, identify candidates for a position, plan for onboarding, establish baseline measures and gauge progress towards goals, provide clear expectations, assess performance, identify skill gaps, and design professional development programs. For current assessment practitioners, they can be a helpful communication tool for describing their work to colleagues, leadership, and university partners. For library and information studies educators, the proficiencies may help guide student learning outcomes and course design. The proficiencies are

a step forward in establishing library assessment as a field that is grounded in an understanding of purposes, values, and theories around assessment.

Working group membership and roles

In Fall 2021, the ACRL VAL committee agreed to take the lead on forming a working group to update the proficiencies. Becky Croxton, 2021-2022 VAL chair, in collaboration with Jung Mi Scoulas, 2021-2022 VAL Vice Chair (2022-2023 VAL chair), agreed to lead this working group and reached out to the ACRL EDI committee to collaborate. Je Salvador, 2022-2023 EDI Committee chair agreed to participate in this working group and represent the EDI committee member perspectives. Acknowledging that we could not do this work alone, a core group of VAL and EDI representatives met in November 2021 and brainstormed a list of known individuals in both academic libraries and across higher education with expertise in equity-centered assessment to participate in the working group. Higher education experts working outside of libraries were identified so that broad perspectives that were both student and institutionally-focused would be represented.

Throughout Spring 2022, the identified individuals were invited to participate and also asked to put forth names of other experts to consider for the working group. In all, 35 individuals agreed to participate in one or more of the roles outlined below. Two participants were also members of the initial assessment proficiencies task force (Emmons & Oakleaf, 2016). As an added incentive to participate, librarians who were on the list of invitees but were not already ACRL VAL members were offered an opportunity to serve a one-year term on the VAL committee. Six of the 35 working group members were non-library higher education professionals with expertise in equity-centered assessment. Members selected how they wanted to participate, with many individuals serving in more than one capacity (Literature and

Environmental Scan, Focus Group Planner or Participant, Writing Team, Review Team) as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Working Group Member Roles and Affiliations

Member Affiliation	Working Group Roles				
	Literature & Environmental Scan	Focus Groups	Writing Team	Review Team	Total Members
ACRL VAL Members	2	5*	10	7	17
ACRL EDI Members	1	--	--	1	1
Library Experts (external to VAL)	--	7**	2	8	11
External Non-Library Experts	--	4**	--	5	6
Total	3	16	12	21	35

* Focus group planners/facilitators
** Focus group participants

Project phases and activities

The project phases described below and illustrated in Figure 1 were conducted primarily in sequential order, though at times activities across phases occurred concurrently. During the final months of the project, phases 3 (Drafting) and 4 (Reviewing, Commenting, and Revising) were conducted iteratively, such that a draft would be created and then sent out for review, edits to the draft would be made, and the review process would ensue once more. Centering equity and inclusion, particularly during phases 3 and 4, helped to shape the process of multiple comment periods, ways to engage, etc. In other words, we were actually practicing an inclusive approach to assessment while revising the proficiencies.
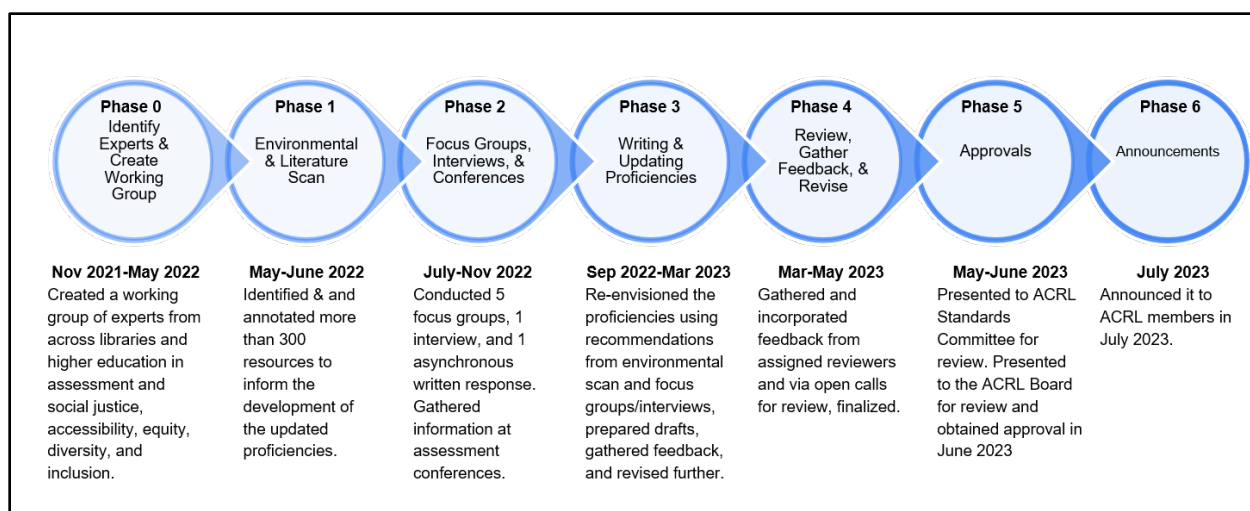
Figure 1. Proficiencies process and timeline

Phase 1: Literature and environmental scan

A team of three working group members conducted a comprehensive review of the literature and existing standards and created a list of more than 300 potential resources. Focus group participants also shared myriad resources that were added to the list for consideration. A few additional resources were added to the list that were recommended by individuals who provided feedback during the open comment phase. Under the supervision of two core working group members, two graduate assistants reviewed and annotated all identified resources under consideration. Ultimately, 98 resources were selected and included in the Bibliography and Suggested Resources that was published with the updated proficiencies (https://tinyurl.com/ProficienciesBibliography). Throughout the drafting phase, writing team members used many of the identified resources to inform their work.

Phase 2: Focus groups & conference information gathering

A team of five working group members organized and conducted a series of focus groups during Summer 2022 with both library experts (external to VAL/EDI Committees) and non-

library/higher education experts. The primary purpose of the focus groups was to elicit ideas for how assessment could help with larger institutional goals, particularly those connected to student success. Through a series of guided questions, and without referring to the 2017 proficiencies, participants were first asked to consider and discuss:

- Ways in which assessment can center social justice, accessibility, equity, diversity, and inclusion;
- How assessment can be used to drive positive change and create programs and services that serve students with the greatest needs; and
- Proficiencies, behaviors, attitudes, knowledge, and skills that assessment professionals should have and utilize to ensure that students can flourish.

After the initial brainstorming activities, focus group participants were then oriented to the 2017 proficiencies and asked to (1) identify areas for improvement, (2) note gaps in the existing proficiencies, and (3) share suggestions for ways the current document might be restructured for better usability and clarity. In total, five focus groups, one interview, and one asynchronous written response to the focus group/interview questions were conducted, written transcripts were prepared, and a summary of findings and top-takeaways report (https://tinyurl.com/FGTakeaways) was shared with the writing team members.

To gather early feedback and suggestions from a wider audience, sessions were held at two assessment-related conferences during Fall 2022. In October 2022, four working group members presented a poster, "*What Makes an Assessment Professional Proficient*?" at the 2022 Assessment Institute (Croxton, Oakleaf, Scoulas, & Salvador, 2022) which has a broad, higher

education assessment audience. Soon thereafter, Croxton, Oakleaf, and Scoulas (2022) presented a 90-minute interactive workshop, "*Present & Future Proficiency: Updating the ACRL Assessment Proficiencies to Reflect Current and Coming Realities*" at the November 2022 Library Assessment Conference. In this session, participants (1) actively proposed revisions to the proficiencies through a social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusive lens, (2) offered suggestions for new content, and (3) ideated suggestions for future use and application of the proficiencies. Feedback and suggestions from these conference activities were also shared and discussed with the *Proficiencies* writing team members.

Gathering information via focus groups and conference activities was particularly valuable, as it brought forth perspectives and ideas that may not have otherwise been considered. In addition, the participants in the 2022 Library Assessment Conference workshop ranged from assessment novices to experts, which proved useful to the writing team as they considered how to write the proficiencies so they would be meaningful to individuals with a broad range of experiences.

Phase 3: Drafting

The writing team, which consisted of 12 members, was first convened at a kickoff meeting in July 2022. At this meeting, members were oriented to the (1) impetus for the revision efforts, (2) working group charge, (3) 2017 proficiencies, (4) suggestions and feedback gathered during the focus groups, and (5) the resources and key takeaways identified during the literature and environmental scan. It became apparent during this first meeting that writing team members also wanted to share their ideas and perspectives about what might be included in the newly revised proficiencies before actually putting "pen to paper" during the drafting process. Thus, a series of

additional focus groups with writing team members were held, and comments and suggestions were compiled and shared back to the larger group.

Early on, we formed small groups to draft specific sections of the proficiencies, though it soon became apparent that large-scale group decision-making about how the proficiencies would be framed (e.g., audience, purpose, sections, and how social justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility would serve as an overarching mindset) was necessary before drafting the revised proficiencies could begin. Thus, we paused the small group work, while a subset of the writing team drafted a series of different framing options that were proposed to the larger writing team. After large group discussions with the full writing team, the proposed models were revised and were put forward for two separate iterations of online voting and feedback until a final model was agreed upon. Through this months-long exercise, the original set of proficiencies which included 11 sections was simplified into 6 sections along with a new Self-Check section. The democratic voting process and providing all writing team members with multiple opportunities to share their perspectives, concerns, and ideas were instrumental in creating group cohesiveness and a pathway forward.

With the new model in place, the small groups reformed, small group conveners were assigned, and the drafting ensued through the early Spring 2023 months, with monthly large group check-ins. A separate team of two individuals drafted the introductory sections of the new proficiencies as well as the reflective, self-check questions. As a working group, we found that some activities like drafting specific sections of the proficiencies were well-suited for small groups, while other activities, such as drafting the introduction sections were more efficiently accomplished by smaller teams of two or three. Once all sections of the *Proficiencies* were drafted, they were compiled into a single document. Group members were then asked to review

the full document and prompted to look for duplication of concepts across different sections to ensure each proficiency was in the most appropriate section.

Phase 4: Reviewing, commenting, and revising

A first full draft of the *Proficiencies* was shared with the 21 designated review team members, as well as via several ALA Connect listservs (ACRL Membership, Assessment Discussion Group, VAL Committee), the ASSESS Listserv (Higher Education), ACRL Insider posts (Malenfant, 2023a; Malenfant, 2023b) and ACRL's social media channels. Feedback was collected using an online form that asked reviewers to read through each section and indicate, using open-ended response items, whether (1) clarifications were needed, (2) anything was missing, (3) relevance of content, and (4) any additional comments and suggestions. In all, 30 individuals provided comments on Full Draft 1. All comments were collated and thoughtfully considered by the writing team in small groups; with myriad revisions made to the proficiencies document using a side-by-side feedback processing document (see Figure 2 for an excerpt). This side-by-side revision process created an important degree of transparency about the decision-making process and ensured all comments from reviewers were carefully and holistically considered.

Draft 1 Text	Reviewer Comments	Writing Team Revisions & Notes
4.2. Acknowledge how one's own positionality may have impacted the interpretation of the results.	4.2. I fear that comprehension of positionality is lost in this statement. Understanding one's positionality is key to acknowledging it. I wonder if that should be called out more. (Reviewer 1) 4.2 ...one's own positionality may impact the interpretation (Reviewer 2) 4.2. Add "bias" after "one's own positionality" (Reviewer 3) 4.2. Reflection on positionality should occur before assessment is even done as it impacts every step of the process. (Reviewer 4) 4.2. Acknowledge how one's own positionality may have impacted the interpretation of the results." This needs to be reworded to acknowledge that results should be presented with humility as one part of the picture. "positionality" is hardly the only issue that can affect results. (Reviewer 5)	4.2. Evaluate and acknowledge how one's own positionality and bias may impact the interpretation of the results. **Note:** Humility, as noted in the last comment for 4.2. Is addressed in the central tenets at the end of the preamble
4.3. Discuss and communicate limitations of the study, including those inherent in the study design.	4.3 ...including any inherent in the study design (Reviewer 2)	4.3. Discuss and communicate limitations of the assessment, including any inherent in the design.
4.4. Review results and interpret them in context of the original goals, questions, or needs of an assessment project.	4.4 Review results and interpret them in relation to the original goals, questions, or needs that served as the impetus for an assessment project. (Reviewer 6)	4.4. Review results and interpret them in relation to the original goals, questions, or needs that served as the impetus for the assessment project.
4.5. Identify stories that are present in the data and consider what stories or perspectives may be missing from the data.	4.5 Delete "from the data" (Reviewer 7) I'd also add a point about reviewing the data to determine if any voices or perspectives are missing. This could also be part of the data collection stage." (Reviewer 4)	4.5. Identify stories that are present and consider what voices or perspectives may be missing from the data.

Figure 2. Round 1 Reviewer Feedback Processing

A second draft of the *Proficiencies* was then shared for another round of feedback (April 24 - May 5, 2023) via the same channels used during the first review period. Comments were collected via a separate online feedback form that was simplified so that for each section of the proficiencies, reviewers were asked to indicate their overall impression using a multiple choice item with options (1) I love it!, (2) I can live with it, and (3) Needs significant work or revision. Open-ended questions inviting comments and suggestions were included for each section. Overall, 26 individuals provided feedback. Of note, there were several new individuals who responded to the call for round 2 feedback who identified gaps in addressing privacy and confidentiality. The writing team members carefully reviewed and thoughtfully considered all comments which were collated for processing in a new side-by-side document (see excerpt in

Figure 2), with many additional revisions made to the proficiencies document. Particular

consideration was given to addressing privacy and confidentiality in the revisions.

Figure 3. Round 2 Reviewer Feedback Processing

Phase 5: Sharing final draft for approval

After the two rounds of reviewing, commenting, and revising, the final draft of the proficiencies,

along with the bibliography and suggested resources were then shared with the full writing team

for final review and edits. These documents, along with a summary of the process, were shared

with the ACRL Standards Committee for review in May 2023 before they were shared with the

ACRL Board for review and final approval in June 2023.

Phase 6: Announcing final Proficiencies for Assessment to ACRL members

During the 2023 American Library Association (ALA) conference, the *Proficiencies for Assessment* was shared with the conference audience in a session of "News You Can Use" (Scoulas, Chavez, & Croxton, 2023). Later during this conference, we were informed that the ACRL Board approved the proficiencies. A public announcement was made to ACRL members via an *ACRL Insider* blog post on July 11, 2023 (Free, 2023a; Free 2023b).

Lessons learned and practical applications

Through our own reflections about the process for updating the proficiencies, we experienced the value of prioritizing inclusivity, providing opportunities for input, and creating time for decision-making and consensus-building. While there are myriad benefits of doing our work in these ways, we acknowledge challenges, along with ideas for practical application in our discussion below.

Prioritizing inclusivity

Benefits of prioritizing inclusivity

From the onset of the project, we adopted an inclusive approach, embracing and respecting diverse perspectives, expertise, and experiences from individuals both within and outside the realm of academic libraries. We needed the rich and diverse perspectives of many, along with their collective years of personal and professional lived experiences to understand the many complexities of assessment *and* issues related to social justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. Inviting individuals from outside of libraries allowed us to bring insights and learn common practices that are used across higher education that could be adapted into the field of library assessment. Bringing together individuals who were not already part of the ACRL VAL and EDI committees also helped us represent the interests and concerns of multiple parties. We

also invited members from the initial proficiencies task force in order to understand the context

of the initial approach and process for creating the proficiencies. Without recognizing the earlier

work and consulting with initial task force members, we risked repeating mistakes and may have

overlooked things that had been considered in the earlier process.

Challenges related to inclusivity

While our inclusive approach brought a great outcome, it was a challenge to manage a working

group of 35 individuals. From a management standpoint, it was helpful to allow individuals to

indicate how (and how much) they would like to be involved (see Table 1). This process allowed

individuals who may have limited time or capacity to still be able to contribute in meaningful

ways. The writing team, with 12 members, was large for a working group. It was helpful to form

small group writing teams who had responsibility for drafting specific sections of the

Proficiencies with regular milestones and checkpoints to report back to the full group. Each

writing team small group had an assigned convener who managed meetings and progress for

their assigned sections. Not only did dividing up the writing work into small teams and

milestones ease the administrative burden of the working group chair, but it also allowed us to

accomplish a great deal of work without falling into a state of overwhelm that may have occurred

if we had tried to accomplish these tasks as one single, large group. It also proved beneficial to

have all group members review the full document once it was compiled to check for consistency

in tone and style and accuracy in messaging. Because small groups were working on individual

sections without attending to what other groups were drafting, it was also important to spend

time with the fully compiled document to ensure each proficiency was in the most appropriate

section and not repeated across different sections.

Practical applications for prioritizing inclusivity

An inclusive approach can be applied or adapted across various scenarios within a library organization. When engaging in strategic planning or revising library policies and programs, it is crucial to thoughtfully identify the members of these groups. While putting out a call for volunteers is often a logical first step, it is equally important to ensure adequate representation from all relevant parties. The extent to which one can manage a sizable group depends on the project's scale, but consider how this effort will impact the broader community. The primary objective is to produce high-quality work that can enhance assessment practices. To achieve this, an inclusive approach is of paramount importance.

Providing opportunities to provide input

Benefits of gathering input

To seek and obtain feedback, we employed various methods, including focus groups, surveys, polls, conference presentations, and more. It proved useful to provide multiple opportunities and venues by which individuals, including working group members, could share their perspectives, ideas, and feedback. In addition to conducting several focus groups, we also engaged with potential community members through a conference poster session, a conference workshop, and two rounds of open review. By actively engaging with community members, we were able to increase awareness of the revision of the proficiencies and understand their unique challenges in the assessment practices. Also, this approach allowed us to gather myriad viewpoints and ideas that may not otherwise have been generated via working solely among working group members.

Challenges in gathering input

While gathering diverse insights and feedback proved to be highly valuable, what was not foreseen was the volume of data generated and the substantial time and effort required to collect,

organize, and condense this information into formats and processes that the writing team could readily utilize for drafting and revising the proficiencies. Too often, feedback that is gathered through assessment projects is not carefully reviewed due to restricted timelines or lack of capacity. It was important in our work to honor the perspectives of all individuals who provided input so that the revised proficiencies would be relevant and useful. The tasks required to process and share the feedback with writing team members largely fell upon the working group chair, with the support of a graduate student assistant.

Practical applications for gathering input

Offering individuals affected by the outcome the opportunity to voice their ideas is a crucial step in the process of updating or developing strategic plans or policies. We frequently face time constraints, which compel us to seek ways to expedite the process without the necessary input from relevant stakeholders. The format for collecting feedback can vary, depending on the project's scale. One may opt for a traditional and formal approach, like using focus groups or surveys; informal lunch sessions with relevant stakeholders that involve activities to gather their opinions may also be useful. The key is to create a space or opportunity for participants to freely express their insights and opinions. Equally important is how participant input is handled. Though a substantial amount of data may bring a sense of overwhelm and uncertainty about the extent to which it must be reviewed, remember that people invest additional time to share their opinions because they are genuinely concerned about the work and aspire to enhance the project's outcomes. To respect participants' time and input, their feedback must be carefully reviewed, considered, and incorporated when possible.

Creating time for decision-making and consensus-building

Benefits of decision-making and consensus-building processes

During our 18-month process (see Figure 1), each phase required decision-making moments, from reaching an agreement on the scope of the proficiencies (Phase 3) to how we would address reviewer feedback (Phase 4). With respect to making "big picture" decisions within the writing team, allowing ample time for discussion among group members was important. To move things forward, we collectively decided to use a series of online voting processes until a group consensus was met. Using this democratic voting process, along with providing time between the two voting rounds for group discussion, helped to move the work forward.

It also became clear that some high-level decision-making about how the proficiencies would be framed was required *before* small group work could commence. The first author and working group chair learned the importance of spending time at the front end of any working group or task force to agree upon "big picture" items so that when smaller groups with specific assignments are formed, they know what is expected and how they should proceed.

The transparency of how we incorporated the feedback gathering and processing during Phase 4 (see Figures 2 and 3) proved valuable not only as a way to honor the perspectives and input from all reviewers but also in allowing the writing team to make revisions with a holistic view of the feedback.

Challenges with decision-making and consensus-building processes
Although we were mindful of the writing team members' valuable input and time, coming to a consensus via large group discussions within meetings proved challenging. Further, time and energy needed to be spent both in small groups and during full group meetings working through complicated questions facing the profession. The time required for this work was not anticipated and thus resulted in a compressed timeline during the final months of the work in order to have the final draft ready to share with the ACRL Standards Committee for review in May 2023 and

then put forward to the ACRL Board for a vote of approval by June 2023. Though the writing team members discussed and agreed to the compressed timeline, the shorter 4-month duration for actually drafting, seeking feedback, and then revising the proficiencies until they were finalized was challenging and produced additional stress for the working group chair and small group writing team members to accomplish the required tasks during an already busy season.

Practical applications for decision-making and consensus-building processes
Decision-making and consensus-building are important steps in any project, though the intentional focus required to lay a foundation and develop processes for working together is often overlooked. Too often, group or project leaders make the mistake of assigning tasks at the project onset without building in the necessary time for a group to learn to function as a team and create processes for decision-making. When creating a project timeline, it is recommended that you build in more time than you anticipate that it will take to complete specific tasks for decision-making processes. It is important to provide all members of your team with opportunities to share their perspectives and advisable to provide more than one venue for doing so. Some individuals will be willing to speak up during a meeting, while others may prefer additional time to think and share their ideas in writing. As a project leader, it is also important to respectfully acknowledge and honor the different viewpoints of team members before moving to collective decision-making.

Conclusion
We are proud of the collective accomplishments of everyone who contributed their time and expertise to create the updated *Proficiencies for Assessment in Academic Libraries.* When we first agreed to lead the proficiencies working group, we knew this was important work, but had not anticipated what a complex and fast-paced journey it would be. We learned a great deal

along the way and made a few missteps. We acknowledge that there is always room for improvement and more inclusivity in the way we do our work, but feel the processes used to update the proficiencies were sound. Preparing this article has reinforced the importance and value of taking the time to reflect on the process and the outcomes. This exercise has helped us "develop awareness about [ourselves] …, identify what is working well, uncover opportunities for adjustment and improvement, and stay actively engaged and present in [our] assessment activities" as outlined in the introductory paragraph of the Self-Check section of the *Proficiencies*. As we noted early on in this column, it has been a wonderful privilege to be part of this important work!

Acknowledgments

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