"Assessing Digital Library Services" is a Fall 2000 Library Trends theme issue containing eight articles on the evaluation of emergent digital resources. Several common lessons can be drawn from the articles. First, evaluation hasn't received sufficient attention in the development of DL (digital library) sites. As Tefko Saracevic notes, "evaluation is more conspicuous by its absence (or just minimal presence) in the vast majority of published work on digital libraries, in either research or practice" (351). Second, all of the issue articles emphasize the difficulty of the DL evaluation task. In his article on online reference services, issue editor Thomas A. Peters defines assessment as "the deliberate process of comparing the reality of a service against both its stated goals and the realm of the possibilities for such a service" (335). The need to take into account "the realm of the possibilities" as online reference services are being defined and to view online reference as something more than a simple extension of traditional reference services underscores the difficulty of assessment in this area.

The theme issue is unique because it provides a relatively current review of assessment in a range of DL projects. Its content is similar to project reports appearing in ACM/Joint Digital Libraries conference proceedings, but with a more defined focus on assessment. (A forthcoming title of note in the DL assessment area is Digital Library Use: Social Practice in Design and Evaluation, which is edited by Ann Bishop, Barbara Buttenfield, and Nancy Van House and is scheduled for publication by MIT Press in 2002.) The Saracevic article is particularly valuable, in part because of the author's creation of an integrated list of evaluation elements and a review of contextual issues. Gary Marchionini's article on the Perseus Digital Library (PDL) is valuable because external evaluation has been a core part of the Perseus DL project since planning efforts began in the mid-1980s. He notes that "what is important for evaluation research is to gather and integrate as many specific measures as feasible without depending too much on any single measure" (326). Thus, the results of quantitative and qualitative research should be accumulated over time and reviewed together, if resources permit. Additionally, Marchionini notes that the quantitative data typically used for DL evaluation, such as information extracted from WWW use logs, "demonstrate operational effects of the library but do not explain how this usage impacts stakeholders" (328). The bottom line is that assessment providing more valuable information providing requires a greater commitment of
resources and effort. A third article of note, because of its relationship to a mature DL project, is a report on the planning and early implementation of the Alexandria Digital Earth ProtoType (ADEPT). ADEPT is an extension of the Alexandria Digital Library (one of the six DL projects funded under the 1994-1998 NSF Digital Libraries Initiative) and is designed to support undergraduate education efforts in the earth sciences. The theme issue is recommended reading for academic and research librarians interested in learning more about the assessment process in the electronic environment.

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