



Sustainable Progress through Impact: The Value of Academic Libraries Project

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Abstract:

Given the increasing emphasis on impact and outcomes, higher education administrators are making difficult decisions regarding the funding of programs and units and investments in libraries are questioned more than ever. Librarians must demonstrate their value in clear and measurable ways to leaders in higher education and information technology, funding agencies and campus decision makers in order to secure funding for their operations. The Value of Academic Libraries project by the Association of College and Research Libraries seeks to identify what research exists documenting library impact and where gaps occur in research about the performance of academic libraries.

1.0 Introduction

In the current economic climate and with the increased emphasis on impact and outcomes, higher education administrators are forced to make difficult decisions regarding the funding of programs and units at their institutions. Many libraries are facing budget reductions and staff layoffs resulting in decreased user services and diminishing collections. The relevance and usefulness of investments in libraries are questioned more than ever. Librarians must demonstrate their value in clear and measurable ways to leaders in higher education and information technology, funding agencies, and campus decision makers in order to secure adequate funding for their operations and to promote sustainable progress.

2.0 Rationale for the Value of Academic Libraries Project

The Value of Academic Libraries project has been undertaken by the Association of College and Research Libraries in order to provide library leaders with a clearer understanding of what research exists documenting library impact and where gaps occur in research about the performance of academic libraries. It will be a multi-pronged project developed over time. The guiding question for this project is: “How does the library advance the mission of the institution and contribute to student success?”

The first phase of the Value of Academic Libraries project is a “Comprehensive Research Review and Report” in order to identify findings in the professional literature and program evaluation studies, identify available statistical repositories, and surface any nascent best practices. Specifically, in order to provide a firm foundation for further work in the Value of Academic Libraries project, this first phase includes:

- reviewing and outlining literature related to the demonstration of the value of all types of libraries, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method studies;
- identifying which existing methodologies are predominant and those that have not been used or are underused;
- identifying best practices, as evidenced in the research base, for demonstrating the value of libraries;
- assessing the applicability of existing methodologies to the academic library environment; and,
- identifying gaps in knowledge and information about this topic.

Guiding the investigation of the current research and practices in this area are the following principles:

- Value is defined in terms of institutional, not library, goals. The purpose of this research is to help academic libraries demonstrate their value to the institutions in which they are embedded. Libraries need to identify institutional goals (e.g., increasing student retention and graduation rates; increasing student achievement; increasing faculty research output) in order to communicate value in terms that institutional administrators will appreciate.
- The project will identify measurable surrogates that demonstrate the library’s impact on institutional goals. Gate count, circulation statistics, and many other data libraries collect rarely help demonstrate the impact of the library on institutional goals and so librarians need alternative measures that can be used in consider impact. As an example, one might ask what are the appropriate, measurable surrogates for student learning? A review of existing data (for example, data available through the National Center for Education Statistics IPEDS site and Academic Libraries data collected by the NCES Library Statistics Program) for correlation between library variables and institutional measures may be useful in identifying these surrogates.
- Libraries need best practices on measuring identified surrogates. The project needs to highlight ways for all types of academic libraries (community college, college, and university) to collect data to measure surrogates that

reflect impact on institutional goals. For example, always defining “library” as the total of its collections, physical spaces, and services, what are the best methods to answer questions such as:

- Does the library’s reputation influence enrollment? (Increased tuition?)
 - How does the library factor into retention of students? (Student achievement/student success?)
 - How does the library increase the quality of students? (e.g., Improve ratings in the National Survey of Student Engagement)
 - In what ways does the library influence student’s attitudes about the community college, college, or university, and the overall quality of campus life? (Future alumni as donors?)
 - How does the library increase the amount of funding for research granted to the campus through its departments? How does the library increase the output of the institution’s researchers? (Increased publications / patents and inventions?)
- The project should explain how the findings should inform data collection decisions of academic libraries in the future.

To summarize, the specific topics investigated include the library’s impact on student learning, faculty success and institutional impact and, in particular, how national and governmental data sets and assessment initiatives can provide statistical evidence of library impact. The goal is to identify useful tools and strategies to demonstrate the value of academic libraries to their institutional leadership. The findings from the Value of Academic Libraries “Comprehensive Research Review and Report” will inform local, regional, national, and international efforts to use statistics, research findings, and assessment data to promote sustainable progress as well as the next phases of the Value of Academic Libraries project.

3.0 Sustainable Progress from the Association Perspective

All library assessment and evaluation projects are grounded in a fundamental goal to do what is effective and efficient in achieving goals and outcomes. Assessment and evaluation answers questions about how well goals and objectives are being attained and through what approaches and strategies. For individual libraries, assessment informs planning, budget prioritization, strategic investments and initiatives, and marketing and communication efforts. For a professional association the question is asked on a meta-level - “what is effective and efficient?” – in order to provide support, resources, and professional development opportunities that encourage development and use of best practices in a framework of data gathering and analysis that transcends the particulars of a given institution to understanding the ecology of libraries generally. The professional association asks what we need to know as a community in order to support sustainable progress throughout our sphere of expertise. A large-scale project of breadth and depth allows the profession to take stock of where we are collectively in order to promote development and progress of individual institutions. As such, the Value of Academic Libraries project undertaken by the Association of College and Research Libraries is an exemplar of promoting sustainable progress through professional association activity.

4.0 The Association of College and Research Libraries

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) is a division of the American Library Association, representing nearly 13,000 academic and research librarians and interested individuals. ACRL is the only individual membership organization in North America that develops programs, products, and services to meet the unique needs of academic and research librarians. It is dedicated to enhancing the ability of academic library and information professionals to serve the information needs of the higher education community and to improve learning, teaching, and research. Its initiatives enable the higher education community to understand the role that academic libraries play in the teaching, learning and research environments.

In “Charting our Future: ACRL Strategic Plan 2020” (<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/about/whatisacrl/strategicplan/index.cfm>), ACRL set out an ambitious goal to be “responsible and universally recognized for positioning academic and research librarians and libraries as indispensable in advancing learning and scholarship.” Specifically, ACRL set out strategic objectives to “expand ACRL research on the value of the library, the value of the librarian, and the value of information” and “increase recognition of the value of libraries and librarians by leaders in higher education, information technology, funding agencies, and campus decision making.”

5.0 “Comprehensive Research Review and Report” Staffing and Timeline

As mentioned above, in order to ensure recognizing the breadth and depth of scholarly investigation required to complete the “Comprehensive Research Review and Report,” the Association of College and Research Libraries Board of Directors issued a Request for Proposals in Fall 2009 “seeking proposals for the development and delivery of a comprehensive review of the quantitative and qualitative literature, methodologies, and best practices currently in place for demonstrating the value of academic libraries.” The proposals were reviewed by a team of staff and member leaders of ACRL who made a recommendation to the ACRL Executive Director.

Megan Oakleaf, Assistant Professor in the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York, was selected as the lead researcher for the project, working with a team of three research assistants with varied expertise as well as an advisory team of library assessment experts. The ACRL Board of Directors and its Executive Committee, along with the ACRL Executive Director, provide continuing oversight for the project and review progress on the research review and draft report. Milestones in the process included a progress meeting during the Midwinter 2010 Meeting of the American Library Association (ALA), a draft report and discussion at the Spring 2010 meeting of ACRL Executive Committee, and ongoing communication and consultation through e-mail and telephone calls. A final draft report will be submitted to the ACRL Board of Directors at the ALA 2010 Annual Conference and disseminated in the months following that meeting.

6.0 “Comprehensive Research Review and Report” Workplan and Methodology

As mentioned above, in order to ensure a firm foundation for the future work in the Value of Academic Libraries project, the “Comprehensive Research Review and

Report” is analyzing existing literature that demonstrates the value of all types of libraries. The report will, however, of course focus on strategies applicable to academic library. The final report will describe the “state-of-the-art” of proving and communicating library impact on the missions of their institutions as well as identifying significant gaps in the literature. The report will also make recommendations for future action that will help libraries define their value in terms of institutional goals, identify surrogates for library impact, suggest best practices, and describe methods for ongoing data collection and evidence-based decision making.

The literature review began with identification of all relevant literature, including monographs, scholarly and trade articles, websites, statistical sources, data sources, white papers, and gray or fugitive literature. Next, the literature was categorized by library type and methodological approach to demonstrating the value of libraries (i.e., qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods). After reading the literature, each item was abstracted in order to identify those resources to be included in the comprehensive report. Literature included in the report will be evaluated for:

- ability to contribute to the documentation of academic library value;
- depiction of models for best practices in evidence-based librarianship;
- articulation of library impact of goals of the larger institution;
- emphasis on student/patron learning or development; and,
- outcome-based perspective, rather than a focus on inputs/outputs

Selected higher education resources related to assessment and evaluation are also being reviewed in order to position academic library contributions relative to institutional outcomes. Because academic libraries must articulate their values within the context of higher education institutions, not just within library walls, the report will also include a selection of literature covering higher education assessment relevant to academic libraries. Examples of higher education literature to be reviewed include strategies for communicating the value of services, facilitators of and barriers to assessment, major indicators of student success and institutional reputation, major movements in higher education accountability such as the Voluntary System of Accountability, the NILOA (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment) initiative, and the American Association of Colleges and Universities’ VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) project. By summarizing this broader literature, it is hoped that the report will have greater utility for the report’s intended audience - ACRL leaders, practitioners, and other members - and offer them tools and strategies to demonstrate the value of academic libraries to their institutional leadership.

Several data sources are also being investigated during the review of available literature. Such data sets include student survey data (NSSE, CCSSE, CSEQ, SSI, CIRP, FS, CSS, YFCY, FYI, BCSSE, CSXQ, GPI, UniLOA), faculty survey data (FSSE, HERI, CCFSSSE), student tests (CAAP, CLA, MAPP, WorkKeys, and iCritical Thinking), and other statistical data sets including IPEDS data from NCHEMS. These data sets will be analyzed for possible correlations with library and information literacy data points (such as information literacy results from the NCES Library Statistics Program) or additional measures, including library instruction, outreach, collection, or other data points. This analysis entailed a systematic study of relevant, available data; entering data in statistical software, and running appropriate statistical

tests. Due to previous research in academic libraries that has revealed potential relationships and correlations between library data points and improved student academic work (usually on a course level), persistence, retention, and other measures, relevant correlations are expected to emerge. In school libraries, studies focus on correlations between librarian staffing and student self-reported satisfaction and standardized test scores. Public libraries and special libraries also add community/client impact and financial return-on-investment surrogates to the list. The analysis of academic library and higher education data sets for these and other factors will assist librarians who must justify library budgets and allocations to statistically oriented higher education administrators.

By conducting a thorough literature search and preliminary data analysis, the “Comprehensive Research Review and Report” will identify and describe possible surrogates for student learning and library impact. As a starting point, ACRL’s request for proposal listed enrollment, tuition dollars, retention, survey ratings, attitude, alumni donations, research funding, and research productivity as surrogates. In addition, the analysis completed for the report may surface some of the following surrogates for student learning – typically a priority institutional outcome – that could be correlated with library services, spaces, or collections:

- Matriculation of admitted students
- Authentic assessment of library-related learning outcomes, including information literacy
- Classroom assessment strategies
- Overall academic achievement
- Professional/educational test scores
- Capstone/e-portfolio quality
- Internship success
- Job placement
- Faculty collaboration
- University ranking

As in school and public library settings, it is understood that any large-scale data correlations will tell only part of the story of academic library value. Librarians can use authentic, performance-driven measures of learning and teaching impact to add depth to the framework created by data and correlations. The “Comprehensive Research Review and Report” will provide recommendations on how to manage the meaningful, rich, and sometimes “messy” data generated from authentic assessments so that it is easily understandable and reportable to stakeholders and decision makers and can be articulated along with data and findings from large-scale analysis.

As such, during analysis of the selected literature, the predominant methods and best practices for demonstrating library value were identified and analyzed. The methods that best translate to the academic library environment were gleaned from the rest. The final report will list underutilized methods and gaps in the literature. Similarly, the results of what is known about the contribution of academic libraries to their overarching institutions will be summarized, and research questions describing what is not known will be included as well. Finally, the analysis will be used to extrapolate recommendations for how academic libraries should move forward in demonstrating

their value including what methods to use, practices to follow, statistics to collect, tools to employ, and entry points to influence stakeholders and decision makers.

7.0 “Comprehensive Research Review and Report” Dissemination and Next Steps

The “Comprehensive Research Review and Report” will be disseminated widely after it is reviewed and accepted by the ACRL Board of Directors. This is anticipated to occur during the ALA 2010 Annual Conference and dissemination will occur in the months following. The report will be made freely available on the web (see <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/issues/value/futures.cfm> to access the report after it is released) and will be the focus of a number of conference presentations and discussions over the coming year. The findings will inform the development of ACRL’s next strategic plan, through which the Board of Directors will identify specific follow-up projects based on the findings in this first phase of the Value of Academic Libraries project.