

Demonstrating the value of academic libraries

The need to demonstrate 'value' – to users, to universities, to government, and to the wider public – is an increasingly high priority for university libraries. Summarising a new report from the United States, **Megan Oakleaf** considers how libraries might respond to this growing agenda.

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In September 2010, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) released the *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*. It is the first step in an initiative to support the perception, and advance the reality, of academic library value. By commissioning the report, the ACRL acknowledged changes in North American higher education environments. In recent years, government officials have come to view higher education as a national resource; employers see it as a producer of a commodity – student learning. Parents and students expect higher education to propel students into successful careers with high earning potential, and the general public expects it to change lives through cutting-edge research. Not only do these constituencies expect higher education to achieve these goals, they also require it to demonstrate evidence of doing so. These constituencies, who do not consider academic libraries disparate entities from their overarching institutions, expect the same from libraries – and so academic libraries must also provide evidence of their value.

But what is library 'value'?

Certainly there are a variety of definitions and methodologies used to gauge it. The *Value of Academic Libraries* report provides a review of these definitions and methodologies, spanning all types of libraries: school, public, special, and academic. It includes suggestions for immediate 'next steps' in the demonstration of academic library value, a 'research agenda' for investigating value, and a checklist for examining an individual library's value proposition.

All three elements are predicated on a specific perspective on value, namely that library value exists within the context of overarching higher education institutions. Certainly, academic library value exists independent of this context, but the current economic and political climate underscores the reality that 'few libraries exist in a vacuum, accountable only to themselves. There is always a larger context for assessing library quality, that is, what and

how well does the library contribute to achieving the overall goals of the parent constituencies?'¹

An outcomes-based approach

Because the report is focused on the articulation of library value within higher education contexts and to external constituencies, it doesn't emphasise measures of internal library processes such as input and output, external perceptions of quality, and satisfaction with library services. Internal, service quality, and satisfaction measures are useful to librarians who seek to manage library services and resources, but they may not resonate with external stakeholders as well as outcomes-based approaches. Instead, the report highlights a number of recommendations for adopting an outcomes-based approach to demonstrating academic library value.

A menu of recommendations

Because academic libraries are as diverse as the higher education institutions of which they are a part, a wide array of recommendations are listed in the report. Academic librarians can choose from these recommendations; a 'one size fits all' approach is not intended.

Define outcomes Libraries cannot demonstrate institutional value to maximum effect until they define outcomes of institutional relevance, and then measure the degree to which they attain them. Academic librarians can establish, assess, and link library outcomes to institutional outcomes in the following areas: student enrolment, student retention and graduation rates, student success, student achievement, student learning, student engagement, faculty research productivity, academic staff teaching, service, and overarching institutional quality. Each of these institutional outcomes is explored in depth in the full version of the report.

Create or adopt systems for assessment management Assessment management systems help higher education educators – including

librarians – manage their outcomes, record and maintain data on each outcome, facilitate connections to similar outcomes throughout an institution, and generate reports. Because assessment management systems aggregate data by outcomes, they can generate reports that demonstrate how well the library is contributing to the mission of its overarching institution. Ideally, assessment management systems are used by an entire institution, but libraries can take the lead and pioneer their use at individual institutions. These systems can be developed by individual libraries or institutions; several assessment management systems are also available for purchase.

Determine what libraries enable students, faculty, student affairs professionals, administrators, and staff to do Librarians can conduct 'help' studies that collect information about the impact libraries have on their target audiences. Librarians can also explore existing products, such as 'MINES for Libraries', that enable libraries to collect information from users. Results from these investigations can demonstrate library value and provide essential information for continuing improvements.

Develop systems to collect data on individual user behaviour, while maintaining privacy In order to determine the impact of library interactions on users, libraries can collect data on how individual users engage with library resources and services. Currently, most libraries do not maintain records on individual users' behaviour. Consequently, they cannot easily correlate behaviours with the outcomes of those behaviours. For example, they do not track data that would provide evidence that students who engage in more library instruction are more likely to graduate on time, or that academics who use library services are more likely to publish or obtain funding. Of course, any such data systems need to protect the privacy of individuals by following appropriate and ethical practices.

Record and increase the library's impact on student enrolment Institutions of higher education want to admit the strongest possible students, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, for a variety of reasons. The char-

acteristics of new students are major predictors of institutional rank, prestige, graduation, alumni donations, and other positive markers. At least one study indicates that libraries are an important consideration when students select a university or college and, as a result, academic libraries can help institutional admissions boost enrolment. Certainly, librarians at many institutions take part in campus-wide recruiting and orientation efforts. However, in the future, libraries can play a more prominent role in reaching key prospective student groups and communicating the ways in which librarians can help students attain academic success. Libraries can assign incoming students to librarians as 'research advisors' and provide assistance based on students' enrolment records or individual characteristics. Such services could target students both of great need and of great potential, thereby helping institutions attract and retain students.

Link libraries to improved student retention and graduation rates Most retention and graduation rate studies have focused on explanations for student persistence or departure, either due to personal characteristics or institutional practices. Because most librarians are not in positions that enable them to influence students' personal traits, they should focus on creating environments that foster retention and eventual graduation. Librarians can integrate library services and resources into high-impact educational practices, and embrace 'proactive early warning and intervention strategies for students with academic deficiencies'.²

Enhance the library's contribution to student job success Libraries support students' ability to do well in internships, secure job placements, earn salaries, gain acceptance to graduate/professional schools, and obtain marketable skills. Although it may be difficult to make direct and clear connections between academic libraries and students' educational and professional futures, these outcomes are of critical importance to institutions and their stakeholders. Consequently, librarians can investigate the linkages between academic libraries and student job success, and – if no linkages currently exist – librarians can form them. For example, many institutions place emphasis on students' job placements immediately after college and most invite employers to campus to interview students. Librarians can help students prepare for these interviews by sharing resources (such as company profiles, market analyses, etc.), with career units on campus and with students directly.

Track the library's influences on increased student achievement Libraries support student achievement in the form of GPA and professional/educational test scores. In order to demonstrate this impact, librarians can investigate correlations between student library interactions and their GPA, as well as conduct test item audits of major professional/educational tests to determine correlations with library services or resources.

Demonstrate and develop the impact of libraries on student learning Although librarians have long taught and assessed information literacy, most of the published evidence of the impact of libraries on student learning is sporadic, disconnected, and focused on limited case studies. To establish effectively the role of libraries in student learning, systematic, coherent, and connected evidence is required. The best learning assessments are performance assessments focused on campus learning outcomes, including information literacy. Capturing these in assessment management systems provides the structure necessary to establish a clear picture of academic library contributions to student learning.

Review course content, readings, reserves, and assignments Librarians can use course information to identify students who have had substantial library exposure and compare them to those who have not; to track the integration of library resources into the teaching and learning processes of their institution; and to answer questions such as: What percentage of readings used in courses or co-curricular activities are available and accessed through the library? How much do these materials save students? What contributions do they make to student learning? How many assignments do students complete that require use of information skills? What do library services and resources enable students to do or do better? Are academics assessing these skills in their own ways and, if so, what have they learned about student skill levels?

Document and augment the ways in which libraries advance student experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of quality In the US, national student experience studies tend to focus on the entire student experience. Often these do not include questions directly related to libraries. However, there are questions that are at least tangentially related to information behaviours, and these may reveal information about the impact of the library on student experiences. In addition, librarians can continue to develop library-related questions for

such surveys, especially those aimed at alumni and students in their final year.

Track and increase library contributions to faculty research productivity Librarians contribute to faculty research productivity in a number of ways. To some degree, librarians have investigated the impact of library resources on academics' grant funding, but librarians can also explore additional linkages between library services and academics' research productivity. How do librarians serve faculty who are preparing publications, presentations, or patent applications? How do librarians help academics prepare their promotion packages? Fortunately, surrogates for research productivity are well established; the challenge for librarians is to collect data on those surrogates for individual academics, and correlate them to behaviour and library characteristics.

Continue to investigate the library's impact on faculty grant proposals and funding: a means of generating institutional income Librarians contribute to academic grant proposals in a number of ways. Recent studies have documented the contribution of library resources to citations in grant applications. In addition, academic librarians can investigate other ways in which libraries contribute to the preparation of grant proposals.

Demonstrate and improve the library's support of faculty teaching Librarians contribute to academic teaching in many ways. As well as resources, librarians provide guest lectures and online tutorials; integrate library resources into course materials on a massive scale; and collaborate with academics on curriculum, assignment, and assessment design. Some libraries also partner in campuswide teaching and learning support centres. Librarians clearly support teaching; now they can also collect the data and communicate the value of that support.

Record the library's contributions to overall institutional reputation and prestige Academic libraries can augment their institution's reputation and prestige in at least four ways. First, they can help departments to recruit new staff or retain them. Traditionally, libraries contribute to academic recruitment by building collections that support their activities. In the future, librarians have opportunities to be more proactive in this area, by actively engaging in dialogue with 'star' academic recruits prior to their hiring to discuss their research interests and library needs. Second, strong libraries – especially those that win awards or other distinctions – may also impact their

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institutional rank by bringing attention to the institution and therefore potentially influencing the peer assessments that make up a large portion of well-known ranking entities. Third, libraries' special collections can bring significant prestige to their institutions. Finally, library services and resources support institution's engagement in community service activity, locally, nationally, and globally – from extending borrowing rights to local school pupils and developing public library partnerships, to involving community members in special collection exhibits – thus contributing to their institution's reputation and prestige.

Participate in higher education assessment initiatives Librarians can familiarise themselves with national movements. In the US, examples include: the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA); the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA); the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN); and the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

Librarians would also do well to stay up to date on international efforts such as Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO).

Engage in higher education accreditation processes Librarians can prepare for and participate in institutional accreditation efforts in their own institutions. They may also engage in accreditation processes at a higher level, perhaps working to increase the integration of information literacy concepts into regional accreditation guidelines.

Appoint liaison librarians to support senior institutional leadership and/or offices of assessment or institutional research Providing top-notch information services to key decision makers can help institutions achieve a culture of assessment and evidence.

Create library assessment plans Librarians can develop detailed plans that organise assessment efforts, keep them on track, and record assessment results and lessons learned. These assessment plans can be integrated into library budget, strategic planning, and reward systems.


Promote and participate in professional development Librarians learning to demonstrate their value require training and support to acquire new skills. Their attendance at existing professional development opportunities, such as the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Library Assessment Conference; the ACRL Assessment Immersion programme, the Indiana University-Purdue University

Indianapolis (IUPUI) Assessment Institute, or other higher education assessment venues, can be encouraged and supported. In some cases, inviting consultants, participating in webinars, and establishing assessment resource collectives are required to update librarian skills.

Academic librarians who seek to follow these recommendations require the assistance of their administrators and professional associations. Library administrators can help by taking a number of actions:

- Communicating assessment needs and results to library stakeholders
- Using evidence-based decision making
- Creating confidence in assessment efforts
- Dedicating assessment personnel and training
- Fostering environments that encourage creativity and risk taking
- Integrating library assessment within library planning, budget, and reward structures
- Ensuring that assessment efforts have requisite resources

Major library professional associations can also play a crucial organising role in the effort to demonstrate library value. They can:

- Create online support resources and communities to serve as a nexus of value demonstration activities
- Serve a 'pulse taking' role: learning how libraries are showing value and communicating this to the membership
- Orchestrate an 'all hands on deck' approach to assessment, helping librarians determine which part of the research agenda might be best suited to their institutions and ensuring that the agenda is covered
- Encourage producers of library-centric publications and conferences to index their content in library and education literature databases
- Identify expert researchers and grant-funding opportunities. 

¹ Sarah M. Pritchard, 'Determining Quality in Academic Libraries' *Library Trends* 1996

² Peter Ewell and Jane Wellman, *Enhancing Student Success in Education: Summary Report of the NPEC Initiative and National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success*, (2007), pp.9

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To access the *Value of Academic Libraries* report, visit www.acrl.org/value/

As I reflect on this issue's theme of adapting to change, my thoughts turn to 'people matters' within academic libraries, and how they are impacted by the global trend for internationalisation. Local, professional, and international contexts and cultures have significant influence on the human resource management of academic libraries.

While issues and challenges for library leaders are becoming more global in nature, local context remains critical to finding innovative responses to those challenges. The real success for the discipline of academic librarianship is achieved when those local innovations can be scaled-up, re-sized, and re-used to fit other contexts and cultures. So, start small and work up, but also pay attention to large-scale solutions and be confident to adopt the innovation to fit local contexts and cultures.

Some interesting futuristic reports – which identify trends, risks, and systematic change in higher education and academic librarianship – provide further insight. In 2010, for example, Flynn and Vredevoogd identified 12 emerging trends in higher education. Their number one was that 'Globalisation will influence and shape all aspects of teaching and learning'. Many of the other trends they identify can also be viewed through the lens of internationalisation – e.g. the average age of students will continue to rise; and the mix of cultures, ages, and learning styles will become increasingly varied and rich.

Another 2010 report, by OCLC Research (Michalko et.al.), examined risks and system change in research libraries. Using a methodology more commonly applied in corporate and government environments, it identified 17 high, medium, and low risks for research libraries. Surprisingly, six of the 17 were human resource related, and five of those six were rated high.

What does all this mean for library and institutional leaders? It means we need to pay **attention** to internationalisation; seek **results** to achieve organisational success in meeting the challenges and opportunities it presents; and identify **techniques** to develop local innovations that might be applicable in different contexts and cultures. Through the **ART** of people management, we can make a difference to the future of our human resource in academic libraries. 

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