

Academic Libraries and the Commitment to Assessment

The Insight

Academic librarians are committed to using assessment to understand and communicate their impact on student learning and success.

Implications

Academic librarians need to determine what factors have a positive impact on student learning and success as well as retention and other priorities of their institution.

“Academic libraries provide critical direct and indirect value to institutions of higher education.”

(Value of Academic Libraries Executive Summary)

Across the curriculum, library faculty have the opportunity to support student learning in all disciplines and levels of study. For the faculty librarians, assessing student learning happens at the micro level, within specific courses or research consultations, and broadly, through institution-wide initiatives. Efforts in instruction and assessment for librarians are a result of collaboration with classroom faculty, student affairs professionals, and colleagues across campus who also support student learning through curricular and co-curricular offerings. Faculty librarians often partner with classroom faculty to teach information literacy concepts and assess student learning of the research process. The most successful of these collaborations lead to course-integrated, discipline-specific understanding of how to access, evaluate, and use information sources to create new knowledge. Despite the best intentions and the most engaged collaborations, however, librarians rarely see the final output of student research or have the opportunity to document the results of their engagement with the students and faculty.

However difficult it is for librarians to assess their impact on student learning, we are collectively a very assessment-focused and data-driven group of faculty. I recently attended the Library Assessment Conference in Arlington, Virginia, and learned a lot about the ways in which librarians are working to gauge the impact of their work on student success and how they are contributing to campus-wide assessment initiatives. Now in its fifth meeting, the conference has grown from 200 attendees in 2006 to nearly 650 attendees in 2016. There were over 100 papers and panels on topic such as analytics and methods as well as assessment of facilities, services, collections, and of course, information literacy, learning, and instruction.

One trending topic at the conference and in academic librarianship in general is the connection between frequency of use of the library and student GPA or retention. Though we cannot easily demonstrate causation between library use and student success, librarians are very eager to determine what factors and indicators show positive, significant correlation in order to demonstrate the value and impact of libraries in higher education. While enhancing student learning and supporting faculty research and teaching are the most obvious areas where libraries and librarians demonstrate their value, there are many other areas libraries could contribute.

In 2010, as evidence of the library profession’s commitment to assessment, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) launched an initiative called the Value of Academic Libraries. An early result of that initiative was the publication, *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*. The purpose of this report was to inform the collection and analysis of library-related data going forward – to determine how to measure library value within an institutional context rather than focusing on standard measurements of inputs and outputs, service quality, and user satisfaction.

Most recently ACRL has commissioned a follow-up report. The first draft of this report, *How Far Have We Come and What Do We Do Next? An Agenda for Action-Based Research on Student Learning and Success*, was released in November, 2016. The findings of this report show that libraries still have work to do, particularly in our efforts to measure impact in areas that are important to the university through mixed methods of measurement.

Because librarians work with everyone across campus we are in a unique position to collaborate deeply with faculty and students across disciplines as well as with staff in other organizations and departments who care about student engagement and active learning. These initiatives will help libraries like FLITE align their assessment and impact studies within the priorities of their institutional context, both in terms of the initial research question and the methods used to study the question. In the coming months and years, Ferris faculty librarians look forward to working to applying sound assessment practices to help FLITE, Ferris, and faculty partners assess library impact in a variety of areas including recruitment, retention, and graduation, student learning, research and teaching, and the institution’s visibility and contributions to the community.

References:

Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report

http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/issues/value/val_report.pdf

How Far Have We Come and What Do We Do Next? An Agenda for Action-Based Research on Student Learning and Success

<http://www.oclc.org/research/themes/user-studies/acrl-agenda.html>