The Value of Academic Libraries:
A Comprehensive Research Review and Report

Megan Oakleaf for the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), September 2010

Through assessment, librarians can gain the hard data they need to make decisions about what purposes they can meet and how well they can meet them. In addition, assessment offers librarians the opportunity to gain the "internal and external credibility that stem[s] from a fundamental organizational transparency that links mission to practice; it sends the powerful message, 'This is who we are; these are the skills and competencies that we strive to instill in students; these programs and efforts are how we do that; and these data illustrate the sum of our efforts'" (Keeling, et al. 2008, 74). Not only does assessment give librarians a venue for communicating with stakeholders, it determines "the fit" between institutional mission and achieved outcomes (Maki, Developing an Assessment Plan 2002, 8), articulates effectiveness, fosters improvement, increases efficiency (Dougherty 2009, 418), and demonstrates accountability. Additionally assessment provides "an opportunity...for organizational reflection, critique, and learning" (Keeling, et al. 2008, 91) and a chance to engage in "institutional curiosity" (Maki, Developing an Assessment Plan 2002, 8). Although assessment is a "process that may or may not give rise to evidence of success" (Streatfield and Markless, What is Impact Assessment 2009, 140), assessment also gives librarians the "hard numbers and accurate intel" necessary to advocate for greater resource allocations (Rogers 2009, 550) or to facilitate improvement (Dow 1998, 279; Saunders, Regional Accreditation 2007, 325). And, as Kassel states, assessment is the next step "in the evolution of information professionalism" (Kassel 2002).

Some librarians have the resources to conduct rigorous research. In contrast, librarians who operate without the benefit of these resources can be stymied by a perceived inability to design projects of sufficient rigor. Assessment rigor is strongly influenced by the theories, practices, and standards of qualitative research and evaluation (Lincoln and Guba, 2003). Although there is a great need for rigorous research to demonstrate library value, there is an equal or greater need for practical, local, less arduous assessment. So, what is the difference between assessment and research? Assessment "strives to know...what is" and then uses that information to change the status quo (Keeling, et al. 2008, 28); in contrast, research is designed to test hypotheses (Keeling, et al. 2008, 28). Assessment focuses on observations of change; research is concerned with the degree of correlation or causation among variables (Keeling, et al. 2008, 35). Assessment "virtually always occurs in a political context," while research attempts to be apolitical" (Upcraft and Schuh 2002, 19). Assessment seeks to document observations, but research seeks to prove or disprove ideas. Assessors have to complete assessment projects, even when there are significant design flaws (e.g., resource limitations, time limitations, organizational contexts, design limitations, or political contexts); whereas researchers can start over (Upcraft and Schuh 2002, 19). Assessors cannot always attain "perfect" studies, but must make do with "good enough" (Upcraft and Schuh 2002, 18). Of course, assessments should be well planned, be based on clear outcomes (Gorman 2009, 9-10), and use appropriate methods (Keeling, et al. 2008, 39); but they "must be comfortable with saying 'after' as well as 'as a result of'...experiences" (Keeling, et al. 2008, 35). In other words, "assessment does not need to prove that a certain...experience alone produced a certain...outcome—only that [users] who completed [an] activity had, at the end of it, the desired [outcome]" (Keeling, et al. 2008, 35).
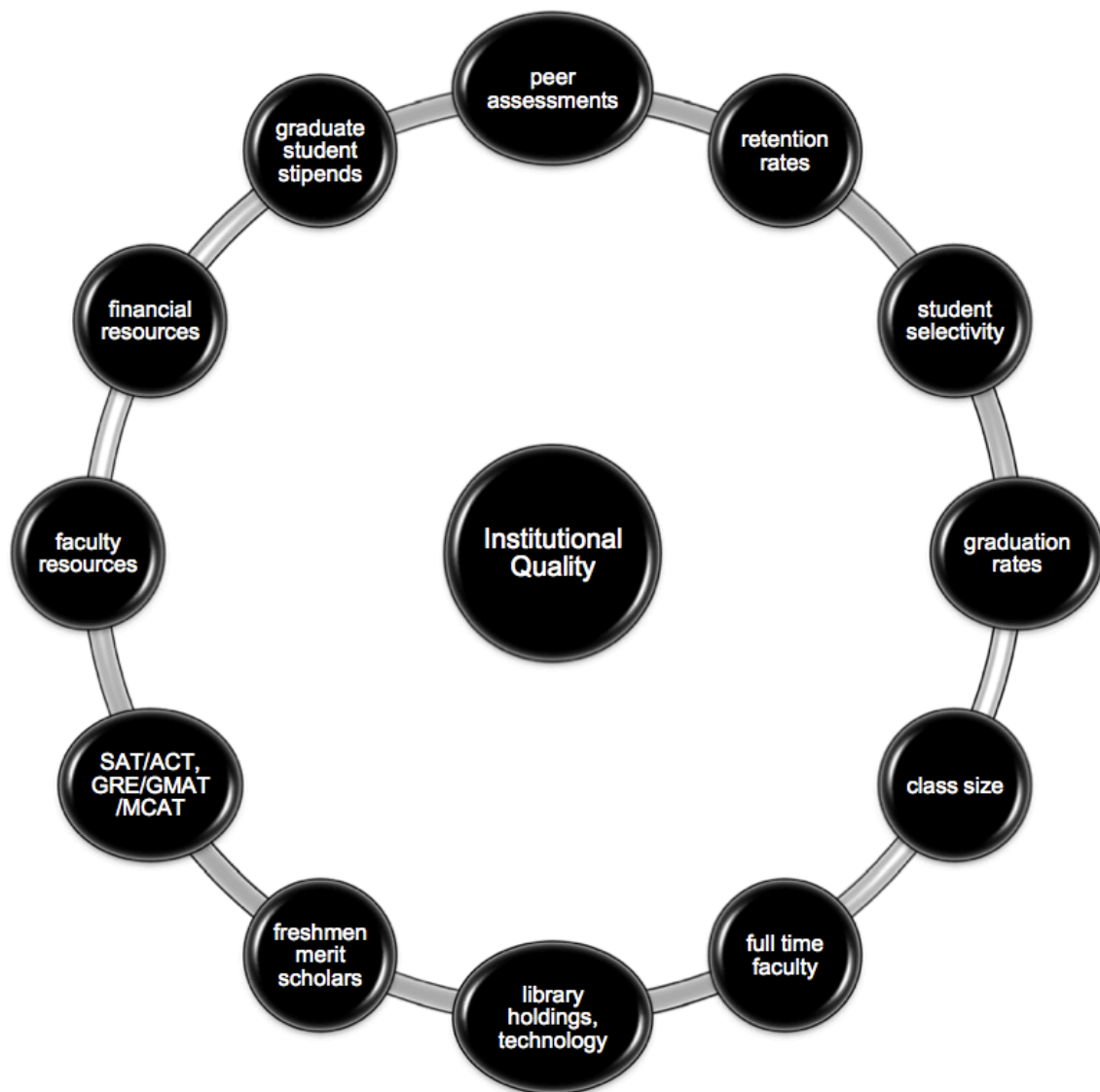
Figure 4. Potential Surrogates of Institutional Quality (Michael 2005, 368)

What About Accreditation?

Although the focus of any assessment effort should be future improvement, there is no denying the persistent emphasis on accreditation as a major driver of assessment in colleges and universities (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment 2009). Regional accrediting agencies motivate institutions to continuously improve. They outline guidelines that serve as a structure for ongoing assessment and improvement; they encourage colleges to articulate goals and demonstrate proof that they are using those goals to seek feedback and improve (Commission on Colleges and Universities 1999). They want educators to respond to broad questions like, "What are students learning? What difference are you making in their lives? What evidence do you have that you're worth our investment?" (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions 2003).

CONCLUSION

According to Hisle, academic librarians need to "spend as much time thinking about our future as we spend remembering our past...and... work toward our vision of the future...knowing our results will be rooted in the values of our profession" (2005, 14). One way to work toward a positive vision of the future is to engage in the demonstration of library value, recognizing that the process is not one of *proving* value, but rather continuously *increasing* value. The Council on Library and Information Resources asks, "Can we move from the need to survive to something better? Can we change how we go about our work, rather than just continue to seek more money?" (2008, 4). Indeed, librarians can shift from asking "Are libraries valuable?" to "*How* valuable are libraries?" or "How could libraries be *even more valuable*?" Making this shift is **the right thing to do**, for both users and librarians. Why? Because as librarians learn about library value—that is, what library services and resources enable users to do, what outcomes libraries enable users to achieve—they improve. When academic librarians learn about their impact on users, they increase their value by proactively delivering improved services and resources—to students completing their academic work; to faculty preparing publications and proposals; to administrators needing evidence to make decisions. Indeed, **the demonstration of value is not about *looking* valuable; it's about *being* valuable**. By seeking their best value, librarians do their jobs even better, and that's a goal worth pursuing all the time. By learning from higher education colleagues and expanding their efforts to not only *show* value but *be* valuable, librarians can do just that—move from a future of a surviving academic library, to a thriving one.

APPENDIX A – ACADEMIC LIBRARY VALUE CHECKLIST

Outcomes
- Define library outcomes in the context of institutional mission.
- Map library outcomes to institutional, department, and student affairs outcomes as well as accreditation guidelines.

Data Management
- Create a library assessment plan.
- Conduct an institutional impact audit (Oakleaf, Are They Learning? 2010).
- Conduct an existing data audit.
- Develop or purchase an assessment management system.
- Populate the assessment management system with outcomes and available data.
- Develop systems to track individual user behavior (after removing personally identifiable information from data to protect user privacy).
- Organize and present assessment results in ways that resonate with stakeholders (MacEachern 2001).

Student Enrollment
- Collect data demonstrating the library's role in recruiting prospective students and matriculating admitted students.

Student Retention and Graduation Rates
- Collect data demonstrating the library's role in retaining students until graduation.
- Pair institutional retention and graduation data with academic library data (e.g., NCES IPEDS data, National Student Clearinghouse data, Academic Library Survey data).

Student Success
- Collect data demonstrating the library's role in helping students do well in internships, secure job placements, earn salaries, gain acceptance to graduate/professional schools, or obtain marketable skills.

Student Achievement
- Collect data demonstrating the library's role in contributing to student GPA or professional/educational test scores.
- Conduct test audits; identify test items that measure information literacy skills.

Student Learning
- Collect data demonstrating the library's role in producing student learning. Conduct "help" studies targeting various user groups.
- Review course and cocurricular content to analyze the integration of library services and resources into student learning environments.
- Use products like MINES for Libraries to determine what library services and resources enable students to do.
- Participate in higher education assessment initiatives like the AAC&U VALUE rubric assessment project.

- Assess student learning using authentic, integrated, performance assessments— with results recorded and organized in assessment management systems.

Student Experience, Attitude, and Perception of Quality
- Collect data demonstrating the library's role in improving student experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of quality.
- Integrate library services and resources into high-impact practices.
- Augment national engagement surveys with information literacy or library questions.
- Augment senior and alumni surveys with information literacy or library questions
- (MacEachern 2001).

Faculty Research Productivity
- Collect data demonstrating the library's role in supporting faculty research productivity.
- Investigate the library's role in assisting faculty to gain tenure and higher education professionals to attain promotion.
- Use products like MINES for Libraries to determine what library services and resources enable faculty to do.

Faculty Grants
- Collect data demonstrating the library's role in developing faculty grant proposals.
- Conduct citation analysis of institutional grant proposals focusing on the role of the library in providing cited resources.

Faculty Teaching
- Collect data demonstrating the library's role in enriching faculty teaching.
- Document integration of library services and resources into faculty teaching (e.g., guest lectures, online tutorials, and LibGuides) and collaborations with faculty on curriculum, assignment, and assessment design.

Institutional Reputation or Prestige
- Collect data demonstrating the library's role in augmenting institutional reputation or prestige.
- Document how library services and resources help recruit faculty, earn awards, impact institutional rank, and support institutional engagement in service to their communities.

Library and Institutional Leaders
- Establish a culture of assessment (Lakos and Phipps 2004); use evidence-based decision making (Hiller and Self 2004).
- Communicate clear expectations regarding assessment (Keeling, et al. 2008, 94).
- Integrate assessment into planning, budget, and reward structures.
- Communicate how the library and information literacy fits into broader strategic initiatives (Saunders, Future of Information Literacy 2009, 110).
- Dedicate assessment personnel.
- Provide resources for assessment efforts and professional development.
- Create regular collaborative opportunities for employees from different units (Keeling, et al. 2008, 94).
- Communicate assessment results to stakeholders.

Higher Education Conversations
- Participate in Tuning USA, NILOA, VSA, VFA, U-CAN, and AHELO initiatives.
- Attend and present at higher education assessment conferences; publish in higher education assessment journals.
- Provide liaison librarian services to key institutional decision makers.
- Engage in institutional accreditation processes.
- Work to infuse information literacy into accreditation guidelines.
- Encourage academic library journals to become indexed in databases that include higher education literature and vice versa.
- Encourage academic library conferences to include presentations and proceedings in library literature databases.

Financial Perspective
- Collect evidence to demonstrate excellent management of financial resources.
- Demonstrate financial value of services and resources (e.g., special collections).
- Capture library value data that can be expressed in financial terms (e.g., grant funding or faculty time saved).

Professional Development
- Inventory librarian assessment skills (Oakleaf, Are They Learning? 2010).
- Encourage attendance at ACRL Assessment Immersion or the ARL Library
- Assessment Conference.
- Engage in professional development (e.g., invite consultants, participate in webinars, and establish assessment resource collections).
- Replicate research on library value included in this report.
- Investigate areas of library value included the Research Agenda.