Guest Editorial

Do the Right (Write) Thing: Engaging in Academic Library Value Research

Last fall, ACRL published the *Value of Academic Libraries Comprehensive Research Review and Report*. Since then, many librarians have cited the report's literature review; even more have commented on the variety of recommendations and the breadth of the research agenda laid out in the report. The literature review captures our past efforts to explore the return-on-investment and impact of academic libraries; the recommendations and research agenda give direction to our future work in articulating and increasing academic library value. Although the report is a static document, the library value conversation can be dynamic. The report can serve as a foundation for a lively professional and scholarly dialogue, but how might librarians engage and develop that dialogue?

Certainly, ACRL can take a role in the library value conversation; it is already doing so by commencing a major initiative around academic library value issues complete with presentations, partnerships, professional development offerings, and grant proposals. But librarians, individually and in concert with others, can also engage rigorously in the value conversation. Librarians and library science faculty can collaborate; in addition, librarians can also seek research partnerships with other higher education stakeholders including institutional researchers, higher education associations, and grant funders. Large-scale, rigorous research studies can be initiated whenever possible. Such studies are often perceived as "objective", apolitical, and generalizable to multiple academic library contexts. They can also deliver the holy grail of "statistical significance." However, large-scale studies represent only one facet of the academic library conversation.

Individual librarians can take part in the academic library value dialogue as well. To institutional decision makers, small-scale, local studies can be just as convincing, and sometimes even more compelling, than large-scale studies involving other institutions. Local studies also have the advantage of being easier to initiate, less expensive to implement, and more applicable to an individual library context. Even the major disadvantage of local studies, the perception or reality of "self-serving" results, can be counteracted by following ethical, responsible research practices and by clearly stating all study limitations.

The ongoing academic library value conversation is dependent on librarians engaging in the value research agenda, both individually and in collaboration. Indeed, value research can be integral to professional practice. Librarians might begin their value research by asking themselves the questions, "What part of my job makes the biggest difference in the lives of students, faculty, or administrators at my institution? In what ways does my work impact their ability to meet their goals, outcomes, or missions?" Once librarians articulate library value in these terms, they might also ask themselves, "Do I have evidence of my impact? How might I gather that evidence in an ethical and purposeful way? Who might I share that evidence with?" By answering these questions, librarians can form a plan to engage in evidence collection, formative or summative assessment, and purposeful research to determine the extent to which they are achieving value and impact and,

if not, how they might move forward to do so. Finally, librarians can present and publish their findings in indexed venues. The profession as a whole can benefit from successful and not-so-successful investigations of library value; both move the value conversation forward.

Naturally, librarians who shoulder the challenge of exploring academic library value may experience a degree of anxiety about the findings of their investigations. This anxiety is not uncommon amongst higher education professionals, indeed it is quite pervasive. The inquiry process can leave librarians in a "state of uncomfortable ambiguity" as described by Keeling, et al. in *Assessment Reconsidered: Institutional Effectiveness for Student Success*.[1] According to Keeling, "The process of 'putting yourself out there' to have your efforts examined is disconcerting, even when conducted with the best of intent….But assessment of one's program(s) is not a personnel evaluation. While we may be eager to have our favorite…program examined to determine if it is meeting our…objectives, it is threatening to think that it may not be, and any good process of inquiry can almost be guaranteed to produce results that are both positive and negative."[2]

So, librarians may wonder, "What happens if we can't demonstrate that academic libraries and librarians are valuable?" First, it is unlikely that academic libraries in their entirety have no value; existing research already provides evidence to the contrary. Rather, librarians must determine *to what degree* libraries have value and *which* library services or resources are most—or least—valuable.

Second, librarians new to value research may find that initial results are less than revealing; many pilot assessments return "inconclusive" results. Inconclusive results typically occur due to flaws in research tools or processes. In such cases, librarians can just improve their research tool or process and engage in another cycle of assessment.

Third, even valid negative findings can have positive results! Value research

is not a "seek and destroy" mission, and negative findings do not mean that a library service or resource is "bad". Rather, they may indicate that a library service or resource is not impacting users as intended. Reflective librarians will acknowledge that some library services and resources may not be reaching their value potential; they may require careful examination to determine whether they can be made more valuable or are no longer worthy of expenditures. According to Keeling , "it may be very difficult for established, long-serving staff members to discover that some legacy program does not perform as intended, [but] that knowledge is essential to program integrity and the fulfillment of institutional mission.[3] In some cases, research may identify services or resources that do not appear to have significant value to users; librarians encountering this situation might ask themselves, "Is this resource or service more important than other ways we might meet the needs of our students, faculty, staff, or administrators? Is this service or resource worth continuing? Or is it a service or resource whose time has come and gone?" If the service or resource is worth continuing, value research can help librarians make changes to increase library value beyond the status quo. It can also reveal the need for new services or resources that better meet stakeholder goals, outcomes, and missions.

Value research means hard work: hard work conducting research, hard work reflecting on results, hard work fine-tuning existing services and resources, and hard work developing new ones. However, it is certain that **not** engaging in the value conversation puts academic libraries in an untenable situation. It is also certain that **investigating and demonstrating library value is the right thing to do**. Why? Because as librarians explore the value of library services and resources they provide, they learn. When librarians learn, they proactively deliver top-notch services and resources where they're needed—to students completing their

academic work; to faculty preparing publications, grant proposals, or tenure packages; to administrators seeking decision-making evidence. And when librarians deliver excellent services and resources, they make a difference for their users—they are valuable. In truth, **the investigation and demonstration of value is not about *looking* valuable; it's about *being* valuable**.

So do the right thing: engage in the value conversation and conduct research. Then do the "write" thing so the rest of us can learn how to be more valuable too!

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Notes

1. Keeling, Richard P., Andrew F. Wall, Ric Underhile, and Gwendolyn J. Dungy. *Assessment Reconsidered: Institutional Effectiveness for Student Success*. International Center for Student Success and Institutional Accountability, 2008, 78.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid, 73.

Errata

In the March 2011 article "Contradictions and Consensus—Clusters of Opinions on E-books" by Aaron K. Shrimplin, Andy Revelle, Susan Hurst, and Kevin Messner, table 3 was mistakenly left out of the print version.

The article can be viewed online in it's entirety (including table 3) at: http://crl.acrl.org/content/72/2/181.full.pdf+html

We regret the error.