Academic Librarians Engage with Assessment Methods and Tools

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abstract: Many academic libraries have actively sought to articulate their value to campus stakeholders for well over a decade, and this demonstration of utility has become even more necessary as college and university budgets are scrutinized and even imperiled. This article will examine the experience of several academic libraries that have sought multiple ways to employ assessment tools and techniques over time. Specific instances of methods and tools used to assess and to market the value of library services, spaces, and collections will be discussed in relation to their perceived impact and sustainability.

Introduction

The pressures and needs for methods and tools to articulate the value of academic libraries have fostered the growth of assessment throughout academic librarianship. From this growing body of work a series of questions arises. Have these assessment projects led to the creation and use of helpful data and insights? Have they created even more questions? How do the librarians at various institutions feel about the investment of time and effort in assessment projects, weighed against the utility of these endeavors? We were particularly interested in the diversity of assessment activities practiced in differing institutions. Therefore, we sought to explore how library professionals at all levels were inspired and motivated to create assessment projects, and how the results of these projects impacted their work and future activities.

Over the last decade, notable individual and collaborative endeavors have sought to initiate and promote library assessment activity. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has provided leadership with several initiatives to inform and assist librarians in assessment activities. ACRL has also articulated the expectations for contributions to institutional success by issuing the “Standards for Libraries in Higher
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The organization also sought to develop a community of action and support with the launch of the program Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries and Student Success. Funded by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, this program aimed to incorporate into the professional infrastructure assessment competencies and collaborations for the articulation of value at all levels, including self-directed frontline librarians. Assessment in Action sought to accomplish three goals:

1. Develop academic librarians’ professional competencies needed to document and communicate the value of the academic library in relation to an institution’s goals for student learning and success.
2. Strengthen collaborative relationships with higher education stakeholders, including campus faculty, academic administrators, and assessment officers.
3. Contribute to higher education assessment by creating approaches, strategies, and practices that document the contribution of academic libraries.

A consequence of framing assessment as an integrated professional responsibility to understand and engage with value articulation is that the perceived success, utility, or both of individual assessment endeavors rises in importance. While multiple tools and methods are deployed today in library assessment, we wished to investigate how individual librarians connected their assessment projects and findings to other library and campus assessment activities. These projects can be used not only for continuous improvement and for refined, data-informed decision-making but also for marketing and communication with stakeholders.

Until recently, a mere recording of inputs (including items held, money spent, and staffing) and outputs (such as circulations, downloads, and reference transactions) had been enough to demonstrate trends for most academic libraries’ missions of preserving, organizing, and making accessible the world’s collected knowledge. Indeed, these measures usually sufficed to demonstrate value to the institution. Although librarians have notably engaged in both formative and summative assessment for decades, in more recent years, multiple pressures have converged from within and without academic libraries that require new arguments, new evidence, and thus new tools and methodologies to support and inform those arguments. In addition to library-centric budget concerns and pressures, ACRL’s “Standards for Libraries in Higher Education” (2011) posits:

Current concerns in higher education include increasing demands for accountability within the academy; expectation for outcomes-based assessment of learning and programs; efforts to increase graduation rates; greater emphasis on student success; the acknowledged connection between student engagement and academic achievement; and the importance of pedagogical practices such as research and inquiry-based learning.

The need to engage in multiple types and levels of assessment due to external pressures, including actually evaluating programs (programmatic assessment), has led academic libraries to align their activities with the goals of their parent institutions. The 2010 Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report provides an extensive array of next steps for determining and articulating academic library value. These include creating an infrastructure for library assessment, integration into campus assessment and accreditation processes, and linking library influences to institutional
outcomes such as faculty productivity, institutional prestige, student success, graduation, and job placement.

The development of assessment in libraries has become a fast-growing and essential piece of the profession at multiple levels. In more recent years, a hope sometimes articulated was that assessment activity would be an iterative experience for librarians, going beyond the creation of a few specialized assessment positions. As Megan Oakleaf and Neal Kaske suggest:

Practicing continuous assessment allows librarians to “get started” with assessment rather than waiting to “get it perfect” . . . Each repetition of the assessment cycle allows librarians to adjust learning goals and outcomes, vary instructional strategies, experiment with different assessment methods, and improve over time.6

Thus, the more that library professionals at all levels engaged in assessment, the better equipped they would find themselves for future assessment projects and higher-level collaborations with other departments and units within their institutions.7 One example of the realization of this hope is the increase of librarian job postings with “assessment” and “evaluation” responsibilities.8 Another example of increasing interest and continued growth is seen in the size of the annual Library Assessment Conference, as well as the growth of attendees with “assessment” explicitly in their job titles, from 15 in 2006 to 96 in 2014.9 The areas mined for evidence in library assessment today have grown remarkably. There is growing interest in refined “big data” curation and usage for alt-metrics—nontraditional measurements proposed as an alternative to more traditional metrics, such as impact factors—and learning analytics—gathering data about learners and using the data to improve instruction. There is also new emphasis on user experience investigations (capturing both in-person and virtual library experiences) for use in articulating library value.

Another example of how assessment and value articulation in libraries have grown and crossed into new areas of librarianship is found in assessment of archival and special collection libraries, where Elizabeth Yakel and Helen Tibbo called out the lack of user-based evaluation in 2010 and declared assessment of such libraries in its infancy.10 In 2012, Martha O’Hara Conway and Merrilee Proffitt made a comprehensive argument for widespread assessment practices in archival collections.11 In 2016, Sara Stigberg, Michelle Guittar, and Geoffrey Morse demonstrated their creation and usage of a qualitative tool for such assessment,12 while Peter Carini followed Paul Victor Jr., Justin Otto, and Charles Mutschler’s 2013 article on assessment of library and archival instruction with an argument for specific primary source information literacy standards.13 In this discipline-specific example, we see the ascending arc of library assessment and value articulation, with initial examinations of gaps and activities met with calls for comprehensive action, followed by the specific development of methodologies and tools, all resulting in studies of impact and outcome analysis.

For us to gain a sense about how those on the forefront of practice adjudge the utility of these activities, we needed to speak to library professionals about their recent experience. We identified possible case examples, taking into account the various kinds of assessment activities in a range of academic institutions, as categorized by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, including both public and private, as
well as residential and urban settings. We reached out to individual librarians to see if they would share their insights and experiences. We explicitly did not seek to capture, re-share, or reinterpret the results or the findings of individual assessment projects, but rather to gain an understanding of the life cycles of these projects. Just as we endeavor to understand the ecosystem within which our student or faculty users experience and receive our resources or services, so too we must strive to grasp how librarians experience and participate in assessment and their own articulation of value.

We spoke with special collection librarians at DePaul University in Chicago about their program on instruction with archival primary sources. We also interviewed the assessment coordinator and individual subject specialists at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to discuss assessment activities at the library of one of the nation’s largest residential universities, with particular interest in their efforts in instruction and the use of surveys. To discuss user experience and qualitative investigations of students’ research experience, we talked to the chief librarian and department chair of the Ursula C. Schwerin Library at the New York City College of Technology, part of the City University of New York (CUNY) Library System, as well as the head of information services at Brooklyn College in the CUNY Library System. Finally, we will present the authors’ own experience at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago, combining our personal observations with a unique campus-wide comparative study on student experience and perception of our library, measured against other campus offices and departments.

Information Literacy beyond Undergraduate Learning Outcomes

We contacted a number of librarians at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), a large land-grant public university with a Carnegie Classification of “Research University (Very High Research Activity)” and an enrollment of 43,000. We asked the UIUC librarians to discuss the variety of their initiatives and methods utilized to assess information literacy and instruction. We spoke to the assessment coordinator, Jen-Chien Yu, and her colleagues Kelli Trei, biosciences librarian, and Erin Kerby, veterinary medicine librarian, about the diversity of their experiences and methods in utilizing assessment. To demonstrate a comprehensive assessment of both program and outcomes, a mix of methods is often required. Historically, librarians have focused on tools and instruments to assess individual student learning, and now it can be argued that librarians need to concentrate on larger-scale assessment methodologies. The field of academic librarianship specifically describes information literacy as the ability to recognize when and what information is needed, and the knowledge of how to identify, retrieve, evaluate, judge, use, and value information and ethically use information in all formats. The UIUC library has an Information Literacy and Instruction portal that provides information about initiatives and methods to improve teaching for librarians, faculty, researchers, and students. Campus faculty were surveyed using the Ithaka S+R US Faculty Survey to collect feedback about library services and to discover and access attitudes about library instruction. The survey asked questions to tease out faculty beliefs about student research skills and who should teach students these skills. From this survey, librarians learned that faculty valued the library as a resource for students
to learn how to find and access information, to develop student research skills, and to support undergraduate learning. Faculty also saw the library as the place on campus where faculty output would be made freely available by serving as the campus buyer and repository for academic resources. The survey was a step in determining where the entry points lie for librarians to provide information literacy skills.

Changes in library spaces have allowed the library to reconceptualize how to provide services such as research help and instruction. At one time, the campus had 45 departmental libraries, and it has moved toward a more centralized, embedded library model. Now, collections are stored in subject hubs, and librarians provide liaison services by spending their days within their department buildings. Librarians also surveyed science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) researchers about their research ecosystems by using a STEM module for the Ithaka S+R Graduate Student Survey. The librarians were primarily interested in discovering the resources researchers used to locate information and why they chose those particular resources. The veterinary medicine librarian has also utilized a part of the Ithaka S+R Research Support Services to assess scholars’ use of resources on agriculture.

One area identified as needing more clarity specifically regarded the disciplinary or programmatic expected instruction outcomes for graduate students. The library mission statement says, “First-year graduate students are provided with basic orientation to the University Library structure, the general library website, and the online catalog. In addition, first-year graduate students are instructed on the basic information tools and strategies of their respective disciplines.” The librarians wanted graduate students to see the library as a resource that could help them develop the skills needed to think critically about how to search for information. The librarians described tailoring teaching sessions that focused on thinking about searching more broadly, so that students would leave with the understanding that these skills can apply to any topic. Ideally, both undergraduate and graduate students should leave the university with critical thinking skills, the ability to evaluate sources, and knowledge of how to find librarians when they need assistance with their research.

The librarians utilized various methods for large-scale programmatic assessment and for smaller-scale continuous improvement. For example, after one of their workshops for researchers, a survey asked participants:

1. What did you learn?
2. What were you confused about?
3. What did you wish you learned about?
Although assessment initiatives had mixed methods, at this very large institution there seemed to be a tendency to utilize more surveys and large-scale standardized instruments. In fact, the librarians often felt that their investigations were not large enough, expressing a desire to expand the surveys from their current limits on total participants, so that they could collect feedback from more students. Librarians identified barriers to deeper assessment due to limits on access to the students and to student data. They also identified some difficulties that occur at a large institution in coordinating or implementing larger projects, due to decentralized organizational structures. The librarians focused on continuing to collect data in order to address how to embed library instruction at points that will allow them to better assist students in developing critical thinking skills.

Primary Source Information Literacy

At DePaul University’s Special Collections and Archives, librarians consider themselves fortunate to have a long-standing practice of working with faculty and to have built valuable relationships within the departments they serve, which lead to a robust instruction program. Their private, urban institution holds a Carnegie Classification of “Doctoral/Research University,” with an enrollment of 16,150. Their Special Collections department serves over 1,000 researchers each year. They offer more than 60 instructions per year that reach over 1,400 students in such subject areas as history, English, art history, music, theater, modern languages, women’s studies, and more. The Special Collections department has four full-time archivists, one rare books librarian, and two part-time librarians on staff.

The Special Collections instruction librarian, Morgen MacIntosh Hodgetts, and the head of Special Collections and Archives, Jamie Nelson, collaborated with DePaul’s Office for Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA). TLA works with departments and campus units to articulate departmental learning outcomes. The librarians coordinating the study conducted a literature review for history professors of the courses in the study that contextualized the project and highlighted the intersections with the Department of History’s learning outcomes. The project consisted of pretests and posttests, plus analysis. It was conceived and developed in-house, but in consultation with colleagues and after reviewing library literature on best practices. The librarians created a rubric or scoring tool that provided clear descriptions of the performance expectations at varying levels of mastery to assess the progress of the student’s understanding of the material, focusing on learning outcomes. They wanted to measure the quality and depth of the student’s answers, not just if the student learned something about the materials or the process for handling the materials.

The intention of this study was to see if students’ abilities to correctly analyze a primary source document improved over the course of one instruction session in which they studied the materials of their choice. The study looked at two sequenced classes, both required for history majors. Students with a history minor or secondary education students with a focus in history needed only one of the classes. Overall results showed that the students in the second of the two courses, all of whom had at least one Special Collections and Archives instruction session prior to the assessment, posted higher scores in their responses than the students in the first course. Students with repeated
instruction and exposure to Special Collections and Archives performed better on both pretests and posttests, especially on tasks requiring deeper analysis. The librarians suggested several factors that could lead to this difference, with an understanding that correlation is not causation.

The study was not intended to be a longitudinal study or tracking exercise, but rather a one-time assessment. The results and interactions with the classes did provide useful information that the librarians can use to alter the way they teach in the future. This might be framed as action research, wherein a study is designed and implemented, and then the analysis of the data provides information for alterations of future studies, as well as immediately actionable data for service quality improvements. Results of their study were summarized in a report that was shared with the TLA.

Evaluation, interpretation, synthesis, and even the exhibiting of curiosity are fundamentally important concepts in document analysis and primary source usage. While the librarians were aware that they cannot possibly address the components of every type of primary source, they also sought to teach sources, so that the students’ understanding is increased for the next time they encounter such materials. The librarians conceive of these Special Collections and Archives instruction sessions as more like a laboratory class where students can apply their document analysis skills, such as close reading or the verification or corroboration of an item using secondary sources. It is particularly important to DePaul’s Special Collections and Archives that the students gain the skills and confidence to become effective users of primary sources. The librarians also encourage researchers and students to use other collections throughout Chicago. The librarians found some difficulty in measuring and capturing what the students have learned and understand. While they expressed that determining how to get usable data and building student confidence with their skills were important, the study also provided a good self-reflection for the librarians. Having a structure to observe and measure which instructional methods worked has allowed them insight to change, edit, and adapt their methods and teaching style.

While the librarians suggested the students’ interactions with Special Collections are most importantly about discovery and exploration, they noted that when librarians visit the class, there is more involvement in the activities. Prompts from the librarians tend to lead the students into deeper discovery. Working with the materials is a new activity for students, but the Special Collections staff found that they themselves sometimes have a difficult time remembering what one termed the “novice state of mind.” It is difficult to roll back the clock to a state of unknowing after years of practice, and investigations like this can provide better understanding, assistance, and instruction to the users of archival and special collections.

This was the first formal project administered by the Special Collections and Archives librarians and was part of the library’s assessment cycle. Fitting the project into the librarians’ daily work was sometimes difficult, but they would like assessment to become a normal part of what they do. For future projects, the librarians expressed a desire to
build upon what they had learned as soon as the winter term of 2017. The librarians did suggest that, as a profession, more development in their area of specialization is needed. The same lack of standardization that has made archives and special collections unique also inhibits the adoption of standards that would establish best practices for all.

User Experience in Library Assessment

User experience in academic libraries, broadly defined, encompasses not only usability and website evaluation studies but also services, spaces, and all academic library touchpoints from the users’ perspectives. Pierre Bourdieu and Monique de Saint Martin conducted qualitative studies of the users of the Lille University library in France all the way back in 1962–1963 for a chapter in Academic Discourse. The last decade has brought a remarkable upswing in the use by academic libraries of ethnographic investigations, in which researchers closely observe the activities of library users or other groups, and the use of participatory design techniques, which involve current or potential users in the design. Alvin Schrader has some useful insights into how these user experience contributions have been conceptualized in his call for more user-centric assessment practices, noting, “Library user value is not just value added by the library but value experienced by the library user . . . Library user satisfaction is not the same as library user benefits, outcomes, differences and impacts.” To properly comprehend the users’ perspective and their valuation of the library, this growing field of assessment has incorporated user experience, usability studies, and design thinking tools and methodologies. Ethnographic and anthropological approaches to gathering qualitative data have grown in size and scope since Nancy Fried Foster’s Studying Students report at the University of Rochester in New York in 2007. Foster’s ethnographic approach helped clarify the shift in library users’ service model expectations and demonstrated how an investigation of the undergraduate students’ actual journey in research and writing could benefit the academic library.

We spoke to two librarians in the City University of New York System, which is an urban, public, four-year institution. The first academic library is part of the New York City College of Technology, which carries a Carnegie Classification of “Baccalaureate Colleges—Diverse Fields” with an enrollment of 17,394. The second academic library is part of Brooklyn College, holds the classification of “Master’s Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs” and has an enrollment of 17,390. Both Maura Smale, chief librarian and department chair at the New York City College of Technology, and Mariana Regalado, head of information services at Brooklyn College, reported that they possessed backgrounds (and graduate degrees) in anthropology and acknowledged the inspiration that Studying Students provided. Their space study aimed to understand the library’s role in the student’s research ecosystem, which required studying the entirety of the student academic experience. They used mapping diaries, photographic surveys, and retrospective research process interviews for observational study of the students, rather
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than benchmark-seeking measurements of institutional success. While their studies were not commissioned or created for a specific report or recommendation, the information gathered proved helpful with smaller decisions. One of the librarians remarked that the study gave me exactly the information I needed to push forward something that we were talking about, which was putting in place more express printing machines on the first floor, so that students could dart in and dart out . . . the moment when they print out in the day is when the knot gets really tight, and [the results have] been fantastic.

Another noted that the timing of the study was “really fortuitous . . . it’s given us a lot of data [for the argument that] we do need to expand the library and here’s why. We don’t need more stacks, but more study space, more computers.”

A notable insight involved the debate over staffing professionals at public desks. When the librarians observed that service desks get an unusually wide variety of questions, they explained, “We have a desk with a person that is nice that will talk to you.” As a result, despite the time and money required to staff a service desk, they felt that “it is really important to have that person there, who can really listen to the student and hear what the real question is, behind the ostensible question.” Furthermore, when the library possesses a better comprehension of how the students actually work, it can guide its decisions wisely and avert mistakes. For example, old carrel desks can look ungainly in newer library spaces, but “the students really like them and it provides the private space they need.” In short, there are times when the library will provide the most assistance to its users by being informed enough to simply not make a change. When looking at the entire student research experience through diaries and interviews, the librarians found that the students have limited spaces for studying on an urban campus. The importance and centrality of the academic library as a place for study was underlined for these librarians when they found that “students are commuting for 45 minutes, with no private space at home to study, and while we have a beautiful campus, if it’s raining, the library is one of the only places they can come.” Additionally, the level at which students study on their commutes, and even write their papers on their smartphones, was particularly noteworthy. While the nature of this study does not provide a quantitative measure of the value of a library, it did provide useful evidence for a narrative about how the libraries provide the students from the different colleges and universities access to study. It also revealed that this library system could further remove barriers and enable the students to maintain and develop their academic momentum.

These librarians have embraced the gathering of qualitative data through observational activities, despite the time, effort, and planning it requires. They went so far as to say that they would “never go back” to solely quantitative assessment projects (such as large-scale surveys), because qualitative study provides the context to properly understand the quantitative data that might be gathered. Another immediate outcome of this study was that, after instruction sessions, one of the librarians now asks to attend
the students’ final presentations so that she may better understand the outcomes of the student research process. For these librarians, the number of possible future assessment activities ultimately exceeds the available time to conduct them, so they have to prioritize their next assessment project.

Connection to the Larger Community

As with many other academic libraries, the Paul V. Galvin Library at IIT has sought to embrace a culture of assessment. IIT is a private, urban university with a Carnegie Classification of “Research University (Very High Research Activity),” known for its STEM focus and international student body. The library is proud of its history of assessment activity, administering LibQual+ five times since 2004, partaking in ACRL’s Assessment in Action with a data project to correlate library use with student achievement and retention, and conducting library-developed assessment tools. Staff at the main library measure, analyze, and remeasure aspects and impacts of the services and resources utilized by their patrons. With a unique instrument that its parent university developed, a campus-wide comparative survey, the library has found a focus on action that enhances its reputation with students and administrators alike.

In 2009, students initiated a project that would ask for student feedback via a confidential survey, with a focus on improving university services. The Students Speak Survey was introduced, and from the start students considered it a vehicle for change that allowed the president and provost to advance their commitment to improving service quality and student satisfaction. Although originally designed and conducted by a student task force, the survey is now administered by the university’s Center for Research and Service. This instrument itself has had a number of successful outcomes, including having established benchmarks of performance, identified service priorities, assisted campus units in developing plans for improvement, and ensured accountability for implementation through successive testing.

The survey is sent to all undergraduate and graduate students at all campuses, and response rates register around 40 percent from both student bodies. This relatively high response is credited to the perception that students understand that their concerns are listened to, and acted upon, by university administrators and that there is a real effort to improve the student experience. The survey has been issued annually since 2009 in October, staying open for four weeks. Results are released in January in the form of a report that summarizes the survey questions that measure student satisfaction, provides an analysis of the open-ended comments section, and offers recommendations for units that require improvement. Foundational questions provided in each survey measure:

- provision of a timely response to my questions and concerns
- was I treated with respect
• accuracy of the information provided
• delivery of quality service (and programming).24

In addition to the questions asked of all units, there are also two to three unit-specific questions allowed and then two open-ended questions that ask for the positive and negative aspects of each unit. The library has collaborated to craft the questions and has used these opportunities to measure (and to market) awareness of new services, such as 3-D printing. The main library was part of the first survey administered in 2009, when 24 nonacademic units participated. A basic passing score was determined to be 70 percent. In the first survey, six units failed to reach a 70 percent level, but the library was ranked second among the 24 units with an 88 percent overall satisfaction rate. After the first survey, the library quickly implemented an expansion of leisure reading books and the creation of an enforced quiet zone. Other changes that were identified as desirable took longer to plan and implement, such as expanding library hours to 24 hours, five days a week. With the university’s priorities addressing issues identified with the lower-ranked units, the library was not surveyed again until 2012. That year, 18 campus departments were surveyed, and the library scored highest among the group with a 92 percent overall satisfaction level. Surveyed again in 2015, the results were even better; the library again came out on top with an increase to 94 percent satisfaction. This increase was additionally notable because the library also saw an increase in use from 75 percent to 81 percent.25 The combination of the library scoring as the most used and best-perceived department on campus despite its growing use provided a clear narrative of success. We presented this narrative to our provost at an all-library staff meeting, additionally supported by our LibQual+ results and our initial findings from our Assessment in Action investigation on student success and library use.

In terms of continuous improvement, the real value in the survey for the library lies in the open-ended questions. We could discover what we were doing right and hear where the patrons felt services could be improved, but the survey also exposed services that needed better marketing to correct myths or incorrect assumptions. For example, comments spoke of wanting the library to remain open extended hours, when in fact the library operated on a 24-hour, five days per week schedule, plus weekends. We also learned about negatives, such as the inconsistent wireless network, which is managed by the Office of Technology Services (and which they worked to improve after the survey) and the lack of furniture to meet student needs, which prompted additional funds given by the provost, as well as the 2013 Student Gift, which also provided money for new furniture.

Students Speak is a tool unique to IIT that allows for deep and focused feedback, and provides not only valuable evidence for our activities on campus but also access to a student population that may not respond to LibQual or library-developed surveys. We have found that the combination of all of these instruments (including our Assessment in Action study) has provided us with a robust narrative of library value, opportunities for immediate action for continuous improvement, and immediate connections to other activities on campus. We have found that the number of potentially useful assessment projects outstrips our available time and capacity to conduct them, but we will continue to prioritize assessment at our institution.
Discussion

When considering library assessment in connection to institutional success, it is increasingly important to move away from framing assessment as a series of benchmarks or performance evaluations and rather, as Schrader suggested, to regard assessment as a means of understanding our value to our users and stakeholders. Assessment activities can provide great insight for action research and immediate changes, as well as for value articulation. If understanding and valuing the work we do are seen as professional responsibilities, then the successes and momentum that result from librarians’ participation in assessment rise dramatically in importance.

The barriers and challenges the librarians encountered in our conversations often seemed parochial in nature, rather than systemic across institutions. For example, some librarians identified specific logistical barriers regarding coordination of large-scale assessment at very large universities and concerns about being allowed to gather data on students or being permitted to issue widespread and standardized surveys to students. Within archival and special collections, librarians spoke of the tension between the need to measure student learning outcomes and the difficulty of standardizing assessment in a field that has prized uniqueness as part of its functional identity. Among the more common challenges or difficulties of assessment in academic libraries are the seemingly endless number of research questions to be investigated (which both IIT and CUNY librarians have encountered). While external factors may impact library activities (one example might be subject libraries closing and consolidating at a large university), some librarians approached these external factors with curiosity rather than dismay. Librarians engaged in assessment seemed to have confidence that the message of the value their work would be articulated through study and research. Librarians continue to be inspired by the activities of others, even if they have to prioritize specific assessment projects over others. Encouragingly, almost all libraries discovered issues that were quickly fixed or concepts that changed their practice. These unintended “quick wins” were a common theme. In our conversations, all parties agreed that, despite the burden of time and effort, assessment initiatives were rewarding and worthwhile, especially if routinized and embedded into everyday practice.

Conclusions

In a diversity of academic libraries, we found assessment functioning at multiple levels. We see librarians of all types assessing their own effectiveness in activities such as information literacy instruction, while trying to understand their impact on student learning outcomes. At the same time, the growing use of individual ethnographic projects and the widespread use of both campus and national surveys illuminate the utility
of methodologies as qualitative and quantitative tools that assist in the articulation of value of the academic library.

These efforts not only provide evidence for value but also enable immediate action through small-scale improvements. At the CUNY Library System, librarians discussed the role of the academic library as an unconditional ally to students and looked to guard and improve resources that facilitated the students’ academic momentum. They gathered evidence for investing in their academic libraries and identified specific areas with high returns for their stakeholders, such as increased study spaces and computer workstations. Librarians at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign identified subject-specific instruction needs and opportunities despite changes to branch libraries, and utilized standardized surveys to identify the perceptions and needs of faculty, undergraduates, and graduate students. Special Collections librarians at DePaul University created a model for assessing the efficacy of their long-standing model for instruction with primary source usage, which will likely be refined in the future. More immediately, they gained insights into how to assist and instruct “novice” researchers, as well as how to refine their own instructional practices. At the Illinois Institute of Technology, we utilized the findings of a unique campus survey to complement our own assessment work with standardized surveys and data-gathering practices. We also made immediate changes because of the feedback gathered and incorporated these findings into narratives about our library’s value.

We saw common themes in our discussions of the interconnectedness of assessment and value articulation throughout these institutions. Furthermore, our outreach to individual librarians at institutions often dissimilar to our own was welcomed; our colleagues wanted to hear from us and exchange challenges, successes, and ideas. In these conversations, we not only see the growth of assessment in academic libraries take root in new areas, such as archives and special collections, but also see the hoped-for effect of the iterative nature of assessment practice succeed at all levels in academic libraries. In our diverse conversations and experiences, assessment and value articulation tools and methods in academic libraries proved useful to the professionals practicing them, and they will only continue to grow in use and utility.

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Notes


24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.