



Relationship of Library Assessment to Student Retention



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ABSTRACT

Using institution specific data related to library assessment collected as part of an Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Systems and Procedures Exchange Center (SPEC) survey, as well as fall-to-fall retention rates obtained from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), this study employs statistical measures of association to analyze the relationship of various assessment practices and policies, including evaluation of student learning outcomes and accessibility of assessment data and analysis, to student persistence.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1906 when James Gerould of Princeton began collecting library statistics for selected college and university libraries that eventually formed the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in 1932, academic libraries have had a tradition of assessment (Ackerman, 2007, p. 18). Until the 1990s, library metrics primarily focused upon input/output measures, such as volumes held and items circulated, rather than library impact (Emmons & Wilkinson, 2011, pp. 128–129). As demands from governmental bodies, regional accreditors, professional organizations and other external stakeholders for accountability within the academy have increased; assessment has begun to be used to demonstrate the contributions of academic libraries to student learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness.

Retention is viewed as a measure of institutional effectiveness. It is fundamental to the ability of an academic institution to carry out its mission. Retention affects influential university rankings and carries funding implications. Colleges and universities are intensifying their efforts to improve student persistence and expect all parts of the institution, including the library, to contribute to this institutional goal.

Do assessment activities of academic libraries have a direct impact on university-wide retention? Using data collected as part of a survey of ARL members carried out by Wright and White (2007), this study was undertaken to establish if any association exists between library assessment practices and policies, including adoption of library-wide assessment plans; provision of assessment training for staff; evaluation of student learning outcomes and accessibility of assessment data and analysis, and student persistence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review, while concentrating on the broad topics of assessment and retention, also focuses on subcategories of assessment practices and policies addressed in this study. Many traditional models that seek to explain the student persistence/withdrawal process are relevant to libraries, although they leave specific questions concerning the impact of libraries on student retention unanswered. While assessment literature is applicable to libraries, the number of works on aspects of assessment practices and policies unique to academic libraries are more limited. This review strives to integrate elements of assessment literature with institutional outcomes, among them student academic success and retention.

RETENTION

Early research, using methods varying in study design and based primarily on traditional input and output measures, suggests that library influences relate positively to persistence and student achievement. An initial discussion of the library's role in student persistence may be found in Kramer & Kramer's 1968 study at California Polytechnic College that showed a statistically significant correlation between library use, as evidenced by book borrowing, and persistence among college freshmen. Other early impact studies cited by Powell (1992) looked at the academic library's connection to institutional outcomes such as student academic performance and persistence (Hiscock, 1986; Knapp, 1966).

Library use, particularly in the early weeks of a student's first semester, has been shown to be associated with retention (Haddow & Joseph, 2010). First-time, first-year undergraduate students who use the library were found to have a higher Grade Point Average (GPA) for their first semester and higher retention from fall to spring than non-library users

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(Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2013). This study controlled for multiple variables, such as entering students' characteristics, and cited the work of several authors, including Whitmire (2001), that illustrated the importance of considering such variables in research examining the impact of libraries on student outcomes.

A prominent early model for explaining a student's decision to remain in or leave college is Tinto's (1975, 1993) model of institutional departure. The model assumes that persistence/withdrawal is largely determined by student integration into the social and academic systems of an institution. The greater the student's level of integration into these systems, the greater the commitment to the college and to the goal of graduation. These commitments have a direct, positive influence on persistence. Tinto's model maintains the importance of libraries to retention.

Literature indicates that the academic and social support that libraries offer to students can be an important factor in student persistence. Wilder (1990) identified student library employment as a strong incentive to academic success and student retention. This relationship between library work–study and retention was confirmed by Rushing and Poole's (2002) research on the impact of library employment on student persistence which concluded that “connectedness to the institution is seen as the most important factor in student retention” (p. 99).

While student attrition occurs for a variety of reasons, Beal and Noel (1980), Tinto (1996) and Braunstein, McGrath, and Pescatrice (2000–2001) all identify academic performance as a major, if not the most significant, cause of student withdrawal. In the second volume (2005) of their 1991 review of research on the impact of college on students, Pascarella and Terenzini state that research is unwavering in finding that academic performance, even when controlling for other factors, is a statistically significant and positive predictor of persistence (p. 438). Attainment of information competency and related skills, such as the ability to research effectively using print, online and electronic retrieval systems, is essential to the learning process and is a contributor to academic success. Provision of library instruction or information literacy programs has been identified as an important contributor to student academic engagement (Breivik, 1977; Mark & Boruff-Jones, 2003). The extent of library training was discovered to be an excellent early indicator of first-time full-time student engagement and retention, with training in how to use library resources having particularly useful academic consequences as a predictor of GPA in the first and second semesters (Gammell, Allen, & Banach, 2012). This analysis employed dichotomized ratings of student risk developed using multiple regression models that accounted for new student variables, such as Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores.

Hubbard and Loos (2013) documented the extent to which academic libraries currently participate in and assess initiatives to affect retention rates and identified a need for the creation of assessment tools to measure library impact on retention. A replicable study design that demonstrates how institutional data can be combined to examine library use and retention was employed by Haddow (2013). *The Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*, prepared by Oakleaf (2010) for the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), outlines a research agenda focusing on areas of academic library impact on achievement of institutional missions that demonstrates how libraries can establish their contribution to retention and other student outcomes through the collection of institutional and library use data.

ASSESSMENT

The significance of assessment in all of higher education was highlighted in 2006 with the publication of *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. This report, published by the U.S. Department of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, made several recommendations for reform intended to assure that future national economic and workforce needs would be met and

stressed improved accountability as being vital to the success of the proposed reforms. The report stated that “colleges and universities must become more transparent about cost, price, and student success outcomes, and must willingly share this information with students and families. Student achievement, which is inextricably connected to institutional success, must be measured by institutions on a ‘value-added’ basis that takes into account students' academic baseline when assessing their results. This information should be made available to students, and reported publicly in aggregate form to provide consumers and policymakers an accessible, understandable way to measure the relative effectiveness of different colleges and universities” (p. 4). The report significantly impacted institutions of higher education across the country as regional accreditation organizations modified their standards in response to it. In her 2002 analysis of the standards and relevant supporting documentation of regional accreditation commissions, Gratch-Lindauer revealed the greater emphasis being placed on outcomes assessment, discussed trends, and made recommendations for academic libraries. Alterations to regional accreditation organization standards that relate to academic libraries have impacted the way in which they are assessed today.

As early as 1998 Gratch-Lindauer stressed the importance of continuous assessment to demonstrate the value of the library and asserted that “assessment of library performance should be defined and shaped by its connections and contributions to institutional goals and desired educational outcomes” (p. 547). In recognition of the more recent national conversation on assessment, accountability and value, The Value of Academic Libraries Initiative was initiated in 2010 by ACRL. As a part of the Initiative, ACRL commissioned a comprehensive review of the quantitative and qualitative literature, methodologies and best practices currently in place for demonstrating the value of academic libraries. The report, *The Value of Academic Libraries* (Oakleaf, 2010), was the result of this review. It provides academic libraries with a survey of the literature on the value of libraries within an institutional framework, suggests immediate actions that may be taken to demonstrate academic library value and provides a research agenda for further articulating that value.

Suskie (2009) views assessment as an ongoing process of establishing clear, measurable expected outcomes of student learning and employing systematically gathered, analyzed and interpreted evidence to determine how well student learning matches expectations. Resulting information is used to understand and improve student learning (p. 4). Assessment needs to be carefully aligned with goals (i.e., the most important things for students to learn) and used to improve teaching and learning, as well as for telling the story of the institution (i.e., what makes it distinctive and how it is at meeting student and societal needs) (p. 5).

ACRL's *Standards for libraries in higher education* (2011) are “designed to guide academic libraries in advancing and sustaining their role as partners in educating students, achieving their institutions' missions, and positioning libraries as leaders in assessment and continuous improvement on their campuses” (p. 5). The *Standards* provide a comprehensive framework using an outcomes-based approach that articulates “expectations for library contributions to institutional effectiveness” (p. 5). Fraser, McClure, and Leahy (2002) discuss a challenge academic libraries may confront in demonstrating their impact upon institutional outcomes by stating that “libraries' contributions to actual university outcomes will typically be indirect and/or partial; thus, actual outcomes at the university level will not necessarily give a clear indication of achievement (or not) of success from the library level” (p. 520).

ASSESSMENT PLANS

Regional accreditation commission standards describe the need for institutions to have an assessment plan. Some commissions advocate that each program or unit within the organization have a plan of their own (Gratch-Lindauer, 2002). Detailed library assessment plans should be developed to “organize assessment efforts, keep them on track, and

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