



METRICS

Communicating Library Value – The Missing Piece of the Assessment Puzzle



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Services, resources, and expertise are analyzed, data are gathered, and assessments are complete – now what? It is time to communicate assessment data to demonstrate the library's value to library and institutional stakeholders. Communicating library value is often the missing piece when it comes to assessment. It is not enough to collect and analyze the data, a library must also communicate its findings – the good and the bad – with its institution in order to influence stakeholders and decision makers, and improve services and resources. According to Ballard (2008) libraries tend to limit reporting of assessment data to their annual reports, when accreditation rolls around, or when an issue such as a budget crisis arises. Oakleaf and Hinchliffe (2008) report that librarians face many barriers to using assessment results, and that while librarians may use results to improve instruction and increase student learning, they are not using results for purposes such as education, prioritization, and collaboration. The *Value of Academic Libraries Report* (Oakleaf, 2010) lays out proactive strategies that libraries can use to engage in honest assessment and increase the visibility of libraries by using data as evidence of library influence. The last piece of the assessment puzzle involves communicating and engaging with stakeholders, on their level, about library assessment findings. It is now more essential than ever, that librarians increase the visibility of the library and its services, use data to make evidence based decisions, and communicate the value of their services to their stakeholders' success.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

Using and communicating assessment data demonstrate transparency within the institution and makes assessment systematic and more effective. Communicating data is a component of visionary leadership on the part of library leaders, and a strategic way to create loyal patrons and advocates for the library. It can also increase library visibility, collaboration with other campus units, and a greater integration of library services and instruction into courses. This cannot be done without the strategic management, understanding, and commitment of leaders who emphasize assessment and communicating results as the heart of learning and library success.

Library leaders and administrators are increasingly advocating for this type of cultural and practical shift in libraries in reaction to

developments within the library and information profession including, the changing of information needs and services, and the external pressure academic institutions are feeling from stakeholders to prove their value – scholastically, financially, and even socially. Lakos (2007) states that the systematic collection and analysis of data are crucial components to entrenching assessment within the library philosophy; however it is not enough to truly create a true culture of assessment across libraries and academic institutions. Openly communicating assessment data in terms of library value contributes to the foundation of an assessment culture by demonstrating accountability, transparency and willingness to collaborate. Consistently opening up library assessment results to the university or college community “builds trust and interest in [library services]” (Morest, 2009), allowing for change in institutional organizational culture.

As the library and librarians systematically open up assessment results and effectively communicate library value to stakeholders, over time the organizational culture of the library will change resulting in a shared mental model of reflective assessment, embedded library value, and evidence-based decision making. A consistent behavior of communicating the library's value within the larger institution will then change attitudes about the library and its services. “People are more willing to put high levels of time, energy, and money” into “brands” they love (Starr, 2013). The more visible a library is and the more librarians communicate the value of the library to stakeholders, the greater investment those stakeholders will make.

Including other librarians and stakeholders in assessment and communicating results to them can increase trust and acceptance of new ideas. This creates an open and positive dialog that can inform evidence-based decision-making. Keeping decision makers in the loop can also help to establish key priorities for both the library and institution flexibly and systematically. As Marcum and Schonfeld state that, “the library leader is called upon to reconsider or reassert the roles and objectives of the library in a changing information environment and to develop the strategy, services, spaces, and staffing to support these roles” (2014). So, librarians and library leaders can collaborate with stakeholders, make decisions based off assessment evidence, and plan for a brighter future for the academic institution as a whole. One outcome of this collaboration may be an increase in opportunities for librarians to get a seat at the table and to be involved in strategic planning within the university. Another might see the potential for increased institutional spending on library budgets in terms of services, resources, and expertise (SERs).

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REPORTING ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Libraries must be able to show that they contribute to the overall institutional goals and outcomes at all levels. Librarians know how SERs impact user and institutional outcomes, as the library serves a support function to various departments on campus while also playing an active part in the teaching, research, and learning activities of students and faculty. Assessment gathers evidence of the difference the library makes in these and other areas, and communicates this evidence to the world. In order to share these results, librarians should participate not only in communication, but also in active engagement. The cycle of active engagement creates a feedback loop between stakeholder and librarian, allowing the librarian to share results, and the stakeholder to respond. By engaging the stakeholder about library performance, the library has the opportunity to hear directly about its successes and failures, and can use this information to demonstrate its commitment to assessment and improvement. The feedback loop emphasizes honest and transparent communication, and open access to information, binding the institution further to a culture of assessment. For example, when conducting a survey or focus group, [Farkas and Hinchliffe \(2013\)](#) recommended sharing focus group results not only with the targeted audience, but also with those who completed the survey or focus group. By highlighting the goals, results, and actions taken because of the assessment, customized to the target audience, the library demonstrates its commitment to assessment, improvement, and its stakeholders ([Fig. 1](#)).

Communicating assessment results involves reaching out to stakeholders using various strategies in order to best persuade them with the data. Timing reports, reporting a broad picture of the data with quantitative and qualitative evidence, and reporting positive feedback are ways to effectively communicate assessment results. Other strategies include:

- Simplifying the message
- Appealing to the self-interest of the intended audience
- Creating a standout message, unique and incongruous
- Presenting the message with confidence in the evidence
- Personalizing the message and appeal to the intended audience's emotions and empathy.

COMMUNICATING LIBRARY VALUE

If creating value in libraries lies in adopting stakeholder priorities as library priorities and understanding and authentically measuring what matters most to stakeholders, then communicating that value involves sharing the results of assessment with stakeholder groups in a way that is most appealing and meaningful to them. It is most important that librarians identify their audience, and have “structures, resources, plans, and processes [...] in place” to continuously engage with stakeholders about their individual needs, expectations, and successes in using library SERs ([Lakos & Phipps, 2004](#)).

All library stakeholders are not created equal and therefore should not be communicated with in the same way or given the same messages. A canned message can demonstrate that the library is not interested in creating true influence within the institutional community. What might be interesting data for a university provost will bore a student to tears. Marketing theories can be used to further the idea that libraries offer an exchange of value to library stakeholders. For example, libraries can develop “stakeholder profiles” or targeted markets where the library can aim their value messages.

A typical target market might include demographic variables, lifestyle, values, attitudes, and specific needs. Knowing and understanding the demographics of students, faculty, and other stakeholders allows librarians to communicate results that are valuable to the individual demographic groups. A library can further specify how it communicates results by selecting specific measures that demonstrate how library SERs and institutional outcomes align. These measures include ([Abels, Cogdill, and Zach 2004; Matthews, 2003](#)):

- Input measures
- Output measures
- Process measures
- Performance measures
- Outcome measures.

For example, output measures represented by usage statistics can be made further specific by including data about specific user groups. These results might align with the institutional mission of providing access to information for all users. An institution might be concerned with providing excellent user or customer service to its students or faculty. Performance measures can be used to measure the quality of services a stakeholder experienced associated with specific outputs or outcomes. Outcome measures could document outcomes for individual users and the quality of impact at the institutional level. For example, a library could correlate SERs and graduation rates or school ranking, appealing to the college's commitment to high retention and graduation rates.

To determine the segmentation of stakeholder profiles and discover each market's essentials, test out several combinations of demographic variables, attitudes, needs, and measures. [Oakleaf offers one method in *Academic Library Value: The Impact Starter Kit* \(2012\)](#), asking librarians to segment its stakeholders into target markets by considering the specific questions each stakeholder might have as a way to get to the heart of their values or needs. In this exercise, the participant must decide what the desired reaction would be to the question, the possible *positive* library response, and evidence to support this response. The participant actively peers inside stakeholders' heads to align current SERs with each target market's values and needs, or create new SERs if possible. This also allows the library to tailor assessments to each market and SER, driving home the commitment to continuous improvement.

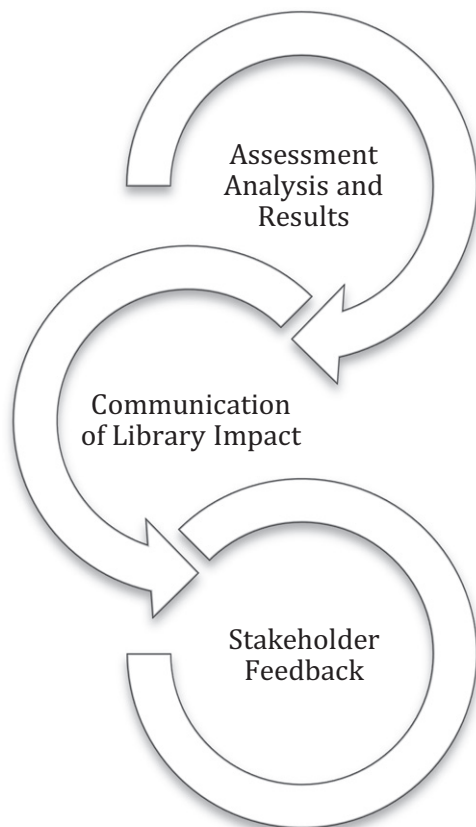


Fig. 1. The cycle of active engagement.

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