

Adopting an Institutional Approach to Developing Social Justice Metrics for Libraries

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One way to approach the creation of social justice metrics for academic libraries is to start at the institutional level. Assessment planning best practices generally include working from broader institutional goals to the more specific goals of the program you are trying to assess so that everything aligns. For academic libraries, this often means focusing on campus-wide initiatives and aligning library goals to them. By starting with institutional goals to devise academic library social justice measures, we can ensure that we are communicating our efforts to local audiences in a meaningful way. In this mini-paper I will discuss the very preliminary steps I have taken as part of the social justice metrics discussion group to investigate how these kinds of measures might best be developed at my own library. This top-down approach to devising library metrics at the local level focuses more on investigating how to operationalize social justice metrics than on the theory behind them.

In the case of the University of Texas at Austin, a logical starting point is the [University Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan](#). Adopted in spring 2017, the plan is intended to lead colleges, schools, and units on campus in “making changes and embracing best practices to foster an open, positive and inclusive learning environment for all.”¹ The plan is divided into focus areas based on communities such as University Leadership, Campus Climate and Culture, Students, Faculty, and Staff. Reading through the focus areas reveals that multiple areas are relevant to the mission and vision of the UT Libraries. For example, campus climate action items that include pedagogy recommendations are relevant to librarians working to support faculty to integrate information and digital literacy into courses, and staff action items that address diversity and inclusion training are relevant to the entire library organization.

One challenge with assessing library contributions to social justice is that this work typically does not fall within the purview of a specific program or area of the library. While some aspects of social justice have a natural home, such as critical information literacy within library instruction programs, others, such as staff cultural competence, are infused throughout the organization. This creates challenges in mapping library intersections with larger campus initiatives since it is difficult for any one person to have the operational-level knowledge about individual work groups that would be necessary to identify all the pieces of the campus action plan relevant to library work. I determined that trying to do so myself would be impractical and would leave out the expertise of the library staff who would ultimately be responsible for assessing and driving improvement within social justice issues as they intersect with their work. Since most operational-level assessment work is designed and implemented within individual units in my organization, it makes sense to approach social justice metrics in this way as well.

I determined that the next step in implementing social justice assessment would be to partner with the UT Libraries Diversity Action Committee (DAC) to identify current group initiatives and areas of focus that align with the university action plan. DAC was started in 2014 as a staff interest group devoted to social justice issues and was eventually transformed into a permanent volunteer-based committee.² Incorporating this group into the identification of social justice assessment opportunities offers a natural way to engage colleagues from across the libraries in this work. I plan to approach DAC leadership and ask them to partner with me to pilot an assessment plan designed to measure success in their social justice initiatives in addition to a campaign to encourage staff to incorporate social justice assessment into their yearly unit assessment plans. With this approach, cross-library initiatives (such as trainings) as well as operational functions that intersect with social justice (such as hiring) will be represented in the assessment work we do that feeds into institutional assessment at the campus level.

Through my attempt at devising social justice metrics that would be meaningful for my organization, I learned that there is not a “one size fits all” solution or process that I can recommend. While I had hoped to have specific measures and metrics in mind by this point, I feel that encouraging staff to use their specific areas of expertise to build social justice assessment into our existing assessment cycle will be more beneficial in the long run. In general, I suggest using the following approach for determining how to identify data points in your organization:

1. Start at the campus level to see what social justice efforts might already be underway or how social justice fits into the mission and vision of your university.
2. Look for pathways between places where social justice efforts are being enacted and places where assessment work is operationally situated at your library.
3. Partner with colleagues invested in social justice work to build social justice metrics into their existing assessment practices.

With enough local level examples from specific libraries, perhaps a larger library-centric bottom-up approach could then be taken to devise common metrics that could be applied across institutions. I hope that as academic libraries become more intentional about assessing social justice contributions and begin to discuss our local efforts, we can identify commonalities among our practices and areas of focus.

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Endnotes

1. University of Texas at Austin, “The Plan,” University Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan, February 2018, accessed October 24, 2018, <http://diversity.utexas.edu/actionplan/>.
2. Jee Davis and Kristen Hogan, “Diversity Means Justice: Growing Grassroots Library Staff Diversity Leaders,” *ACRL 2015 Proceedings* (Portland, Oregon: American Library Association, 2015), 200–21.