

Assessing the Social Value of Library Services at Drake University

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One of the goals of the ACRL's report, "Value of Academic Libraries,"¹ is to provide librarians with the evidence necessary to tell the story of their library's value. Given the importance of this goal, little has been written on the mechanics for accomplishing this task.² Part of the challenge in telling the story is that many of our instruments are taken from the private sector and as such, are ill-fitted for assessing the social value of higher education and academic libraries. Subsequent reflection by Oakleaf and Kryillidou³ suggest that one solution to this problem is for libraries to set the scope of their assessment on contextually based institutional priorities. Building upon this suggestion, we propose that the framing of value in terms of organizational theories of legitimacy provides one with the means of addressing this challenge of assessment and communication of library social value.

Organization theory proposes that legitimacy is one means through which non-profits sustain themselves as durable social institutions.⁴ The concept of legitimacy is particularly well suited for communicating the value of social institutions, such as libraries, in that it conceptualizes value from a community, rather than an individual perspective. This approach supports our efforts by aligning with Oakleaf and Kryillidou's suggested contextually based institutional approach. To begin telling this story of library social value, we will introduce a narrative framework based upon the following three elements of legitimacy: (a) the cultural-cognitive; (b) the normative; and (c) the regulative. The goal of using these three narrative elements as the basis for our story is to create the impression of the library as a legitimate means for realizing the general will of our stakeholders.⁵

Drawing upon institutional theories of legitimacy, this paper will present a framework for communicating the story of the social value of libraries in terms of three institutional elements. Given the practical nature of assessment, and librarians in general, we will support the development and application of our model through examples drawn from the author's home institution. The structure of the paper is broken into two sections; the first section defines key assumptions and concepts, and the second section of the paper will introduce the individual elements of legitimacy in terms of our narrative framework.

Value

The story of library assessment is the story of value, or as we shall see, values. As such, before we begin to compose this story, we should develop some understanding of the value around which the story is based. Within our legitimacy based framework, we begin with the assumption that value is created through the act of a patron consuming some form of library service. This act of consumption creates two types of value. The first concerns the value that accrues to the individual through the act of finding a desired book, or having a reference inquiry resolved. To a large degree, many of our private-sector-based instruments focus on this type of value through the assessment of actions, such as circulation or reference counts. The second form of value created is the value that accrues to the patron's community. For example, a library service that benefits a first-generation student or a LGBTQ student provides value to not only the individual student, but also the community to whom that patron belongs. For-profit measures have difficulty capturing this form of value, which is one of the reasons we turn to a concept of legitimacy as a means of conceptualizing social value in terms of its contribution to the chosen values of our institutes or communities.⁶ Our next step in telling the story of the social value of library services is to define the communities of import within our story of library assessment.

The assessment and communication of library social value centers around two communities; the first is the community that benefits from the library service and forms the target of our assessment. The second community is the stakeholders to whom we are communicating our assessment efforts. In terms of our communicating our story of value, the patron community serves as the subject of our story, the stakeholders

the audience. For example, within a university, we would form communities around individuals with common characteristics of interest to our stakeholders, such as first generation students or students of color. In a similar manner, if we start with faculty and staff as our basic building block, then the audience for our story includes not only administrative communities such as the Office of the President or Dean's Councils, but also line level communities, such as an Office of Community Engagement. The advantage in this approach is that it accommodates both the constructed nature of social value⁷ and Oakleaf and Kryillidou's suggested contextually based institutional approach. Having identified the subject and audience of our story, we will now turn to the value of that story to the library.

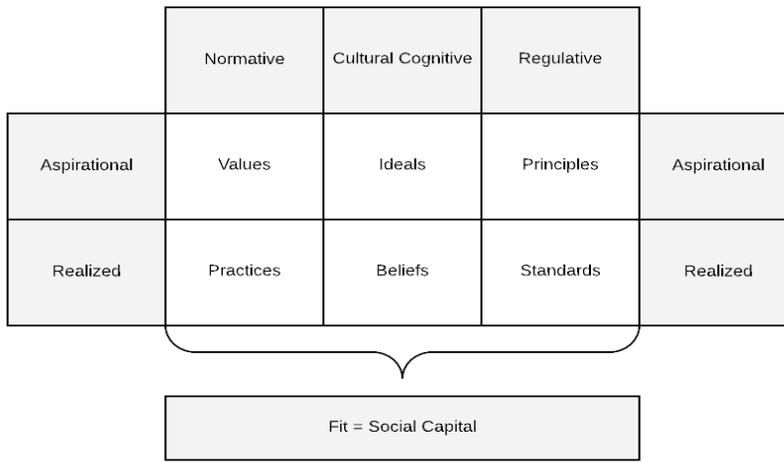
In terms of our legitimacy based storytelling framework, we need to take into account that the value that the library receives through its delivery of social based services is accrued indirectly through our stakeholders, rather than directly from the patrons or their communities. To account for this indirect form of payment, we will assess the value in terms of social capital, a form of resource that a library uses in order to have its views accounted for in decision-making.⁸ One of the advantages of using social capital as a measure of value is that it broadens the types of resources accounted for when considering the success of our story of social value. For example, in assessing the success of a service, we can take into account whether the delivery of that service leads to an increase in library influence on external committees that can provide resources to support the delivery of that service. With this concept of value in hand, we can begin to think about the composition of our story concerning the social value of the library by first defining the value or values of our story in terms of the value that accrues to a community, rather than to an individual patron. We next establish our unit of analysis in terms of the subjects of our story being student communities, and university units being the audience. Lastly, in defining the goal of our story in terms of social capital, we have established the means for determining the success of our story. Given these assumptions, let us now turn to the legitimacy based framework through which we will tell our story of library social value.

Storytelling & Legitimacy

For libraries, legitimacy is one of the primary means through which we justify the material resources required to sustain ourselves as durable social institutions. Legitimacy represents an organization's "social acceptability and credibility within their communities."⁹ A more formal definition of legitimacy concerns "... [a] generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions."¹⁰ Given this definition, the question at hand regards composing the story of the social value of library services, such that they are perceived to be desirable, proper, or appropriate. The answer lies in framing this story to align our internal normative value and services with the external cultural-cognitive ideals and beliefs and regulative principles and standards of our community.

The mechanism through which the social value of library services are connected to social capital is through the development of shared meaning, congruent values, and common goals and vision between the library and its community.¹¹ Storytelling, as Wikipedia notes, is a social and cultural activity for educating, preserving culture, and instilling moral values, and is a powerful means for critically realizing this mechanism. Using legitimacy as our mechanism for realizing social capital, we can begin to compose our cultural story of library social value in terms of three elements: (a) the cultural-cognitive; (b) regulative; and (c) normative. Each of these elements work at different units of analysis. The cultural-cognitive represents the **ideals** and **beliefs** of the community as a whole. The regulative element represents the **principles** and **standards** of the individual sub-communities within the larger community. Lastly, the normative element represents the **values** and **practices** of the sub-community, whose services are assessed and communicated. In terms of our storytelling analogy, the culture-cognitive element represents the plot, the regulative element the characters, and the normative element our protagonist. To relate this story to our audience, we need to further recognize that each of these elements has two aspects, an aspirational aspect and a realized aspect.

Legitimizing the Story of Library Social Value



Defining our elements of legitimacy in terms of these two aspects, we can relate the story of these elements in the following manner: the cultural-cognitive element represents the larger aspirational ideals of the community and the beliefs through which those ideals are to be realized. The regulative elements are the aspirational principles through which sub-communities express larger community ideals and the standards through which those principles are to be assessed. Turning to the library, the normative element represents our professional **values** as shaped by community ideals, and the normative **practices** for realizing those values. Given these definitions, we can state a positive relation between the degree to which these elements of legitimacy align or fit together and the creation of legitimacy:

$$\text{Legitimacy} = F_{\text{fit}} [\textit{normative, cultural-cognitive, regulative}]$$

Let us now turn to a closer examination of the elements of legitimacy and the assessment and communication of social value, beginning with the cultural-cognitive ideals and beliefs of our community.

The Elements of Legitimacy: Cultural-Cognitive Ideals and Beliefs

Scott defines the cultural-cognitive element as “the shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and the frames through which meaning is made.”¹² As culture is a socially constructed phenomenon, we use the concept of cognition to indicate a perception of culture rather than a truth. Our strategy in using the cultural-cognitive element in creating legitimacy is to both identify and communicate the social value of library services in terms that are perceived to be, as Suchman¹³ notes, “culturally desirable, proper or appropriate.” Applying the cultural-cognitive element into our story of social value requires that we create the cognitive perception that not only do our professional values align with the cultural ideals of our community, but that the services through which those values are also realized are appropriate within our community’s system of beliefs. Let us turn to our case study to illustrate the relationship between the cultural-cognitive and the normative elements of legitimacy.

Drake University Cowles Library identified the cultural-cognitive story of its community’s ideals and beliefs in three steps: (a) documenting the university’s ideals of its social mission; (b) capturing the beliefs through which those ideals were to be realized; and (c) describing those ideals in beliefs in terms of a community-based vocabulary. Combined, these three steps formed a toolkit of symbols, stories, rituals, and world views,¹⁴ through which we could begin to construct a story that connected library social values and services to our community’s ideals and beliefs. To begin this process, we first drew upon administrative-level documents as our key indicators of cultural ideals and beliefs. In particular, we reviewed university strategic

documents, administrative and unit level assessment and reporting documents—which in this case were associated with the balanced scorecard—and documents created for external stakeholders, such as alumni, the board of trustees, or the public. A review of these documents along with the committee’s knowledge of university gossip, rumors, and stories formed the bulk of the cultural artifacts used to identify the university’s ideals and beliefs. Through an iterative process, the committee quickly settled upon and constructed a rich understanding of the university’s ideals as encapsulated within the university vision statement, “Together we transform lives and strengthen communities.”

Having defined the university community’s ideals in terms of its vision statement, “Together we transform lives and strengthen communities,” our next step was to capture the beliefs through which these ideals were to be realized. Drawing upon our review of the university’s strategic document and our knowledge of the university grapevine, we identified an initial pool of beliefs. To winnow this pool down to the beliefs that not only best fit with the library’s normative values and practices, but would also likely produce the most amount of social capital, the library needed to identify those beliefs with high levels of legitimacy within the library context. Our approach to this challenge was to rank the import of a belief in terms of the resources allocated for realizing those beliefs. For example, we targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion as a belief through which the university sought to realize its social ideals due to the new funding lines associated with the creation of an associate provost for equity and inclusion. Similarly, we also identified significant resources being directed towards units associated with global and intercultural learning, and lastly community engagement. By reviewing university strategic documents, we confirmed the legitimacy of these beliefs in two ways. First, these beliefs figured prominently in the story the university was telling to its external stakeholders. For example, in the public version of the university’s balanced scorecard, it cites that, “64% of seniors have a community-based project as part of one or more of their courses.”¹⁵ The second way we confirmed the import of these beliefs was the degree to which units, other than the units primarily charged with these ideals, referred to these ideals within their own strategic documents. With the identification of the community ideal of “transforming lives and strengthening communities” and the belief in equity, inclusion, and diversity, global and intercultural learning, and community engagement as the means for realizing these ideals, the library had a definition of its community’s cultural-cognitive ideals and beliefs in hand.

The cultural-cognitive element is a powerful factor in developing legitimacy as it informs both the normative and regulative elements. Institutional theory often describes the cultural-cognitive element in terms of the legitimacy that an organization accrues by having its place within a community as being “taken-for-granted.”¹⁶ An example of this could be the ideals and beliefs associated with the library being the “heart of the university.” To sustain and grow this cultural-cognitive legitimacy, especially in times of change, requires active steps to align normative values and practices with community ideals and beliefs. As we turn to the regulative element of legitimacy, we are moving away from the larger community ideals and beliefs and turning to the smaller communities who are bound together through a common will to realize those ideals and beliefs.

The Elements of Legitimacy: Regulative Principles and Standards

The regulative element of legitimacy refers to the aspirational principles and the realized standards of the individual sub-communities within the community as a whole. The difference between the regulative element and the normative element is one of perspective. For the regulative elements, we take the perspective of a unit examining the principles and standards of an external unit. Conversely, the normative element is taken from the perspective of a unit’s internal values and practices. Suchman¹⁷ conceptualizes this element as a pragmatic means through which community members assess the degree to which others are supporting community ideals and beliefs. In terms of our story of the social value of libraries, the regulative element is the means through which external university units determine the degree to which the library supports the university and the individual units themselves. The regulative element forms a pragmatic means for translating the normative values of library services into the principles and standards held by others within the community. This translation allows the library to overcome the significant challenge of effectively communicating the causal relationship between library services and university ideals. Part of this challenge is that connecting library social value to university ideals requires some understanding of library

values. For example, assessing the social value of instructional services requires that community members possess some understanding of the values associated with information literacy. As such, the effectiveness in communicating library social value is dependent upon the willingness of the community to learn about these values. The advantage in applying the regulative element to tell this story is that it places the educational burden on the librarian. In other words, rather than the community learning about library values, the librarians adapt and communicate those values in terms of an external units' principles and standards.¹⁸ Let us turn to our case study efforts to communicate library services in terms of the regulative element to see how this works.

The library began its efforts to compose the regulative element of its story of social value by identifying the services whose values and practices best aligned with the cultural-cognitive ideals and beliefs that we had previously identified. To begin to link these services to university ideals, we reached out to the units associated with these ideals and beliefs. Do not be shy in reaching out to these units, as we found them to be more than happy to work with the library as the outcome of our efforts support both units' strategic goals. To illustrate, let us look at the library's efforts to communicate the social value of its services in terms of diversity and inclusion.

The library identified the university's ideals concerning diversity and inclusion in terms of "Redressing historic injustices that result in the continued marginalization of members of specific groups..."¹⁹ One of the beliefs through which the university sought to realize this goal was through the efforts of the Office of Equity and Inclusion. In working with this unit, one of the core principles through which they sought to realize the university's ideals was through "supporting and embracing all identities on campus and working towards systemic change that combats bias."²⁰ To determine the degree to which this principle was being realized, the office established four standards: (a) equitable and respectful treatment of all; (b) recruitment and retention of diversity; (c) recognition and addressment of discrimination and oppression; and (d) nurturing of differences and unique identities, with each standard being assessed in terms of good, better, and best. With this documentation of the principles and standards of equity and inclusion, it was now possible to communicate the value of library services in terms that could be both understood and valued by the university. For example, the library began to assess and communicate one aspect of library instruction in terms of the degree to which it supported the instructor's efforts to include diversity and inclusion content.

The regulative element is the means through which identified cultural-cognitive ideals and beliefs are translated into the principles and standards of the community. The advantage of applying this element is that it provides the librarian with greater control in translating the social value of our services into a story that makes sense of the often ambiguous link between library social value and community ideals and beliefs. With the cultural-cognitive and regulative elements in place, we now turn to the internal element concerning the normative values and practices of the library.

The Elements of Legitimacy: Normative Values and Practices

The normative element defines the goals of the service and the appropriate means of pursuing them.²¹ Another way of thinking of the normative element is in terms of moral legitimacy, a legitimacy that accrues to an organization when the community believes that the organization's actions, "effectively promote societal welfare, as defined by the audience's socially constructed value system."²² In thinking about the effective communication of moral legitimacy, the challenge revolves around aligning normative values and practices in a manner that fits with the moral norms of the community. Within our legitimacy based framework, we can identify community morals in terms of our previously defined cultural-cognitive ideals and beliefs and regulative principles and standards. To identify normative values and practices, we can draw upon professional codes of ethics and values, such as the ALA Core Values of Librarianship,²³ which itself notes that the foundation of modern librarianship rests on the essential set of values which reflect the history and ongoing development of the profession. Within this document, values such as those dealing with "social responsibility" are of particular interest in terms of communicating our story of social value. The ALA defines this value in the following terms:

... ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society by informing or educating the community of these critical problems, encouraging the examination of multiple views and facts, and a willingness to take a position on current critical issues.

Given these values concerning the library's social responsibility, our next step is to identify the normative practices through which they are realized. Normative practices specify how things should be done or the legitimate means of value creation.²⁴ As a profession, we are defined in terms of our values, and as such most professional practices will necessarily, though not always explicitly reflect these values. To conceptualize the link between normative values and practices, we can look at practices such as instructional services. For example, the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education²⁵ frames the information literacy concerning "Authority is Constructed and Contextual" in terms of social responsibility, by describing an information literate person's understanding of the biases "...[that] privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others' worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientation."²⁶ Given this normative value and practice, legitimacy is created, through the degree to which the perception of these values and practice fit community morals. We will turn to our case study to see an example of the role of the normative element in creating legitimacy.

The goal of our case study was to communicate the social value of library services in terms that would be understood and valued by our community. One element of our story was drawn from our cultural-cognitive analysis in which we identified our community's ideals of "transforming lives and strengthening community," and its beliefs in diversity and inclusiveness, community engagement, and global and intercultural learning for realizing those ideals. The second element of our story concerned the principles through which other units aligned themselves to the university's ideals, and the standards through which they assessed the degree to which others supported those principles. The last element of our story involves writing the narrative of the library's normative values and practices in terms that aligned with community morals. A simple example of this story was the documenting of our one-shot instruction in terms of the use of diversity-oriented resources such as LGBTQ, African-American, or Native American databases, and whether issues of social justice were discussed. The story of these instructional sessions was told in two manners. Firstly, it was framed in terms of the library's larger efforts to communicate its normative values and practices in terms of supporting the university's commitment to transforming lives and strengthening community through its belief in diversity and equity. More specifically, we reported these instructional efforts in terms of meeting the Office of Inclusion and Equity principles concerning the recognition and nurturing of different and unique identities through meeting the standard associated with the integration of information on marginalized communities within course work.

The communication of the normative values and practices becomes the story of the library through its alignment of the morals of our community. The success of that story is dependent upon the degree to which those normative values and practices fit with both the cultural-cognitive ideals and beliefs of the university and external community members' regulative principles and standards. The role of the normative element is, as Drabinsky and Walter²⁷ suggest, to balance the values that define our profession against the concepts of value through which our communities assess the worth of our practices.

Conclusion

The concept of legitimacy provides a rigorous theoretical framework for communicating the story of social value created through library services. To tell this story requires the inclusion of three elements: (a) the cultural-cognitive; (b) the regulative; and (c) the normative. The cultural-cognitive element is concerned with our community ideals and the beliefs. The regulative elements are the principles and standards through which community ideals and beliefs are assessed. Lastly, the normative element represents the values of the library. The goal of our story is to align the internal normative elements of our services with community cultural-cognitive and regulative elements. The greater the alignment, the greater social capital that will be allocated to sustain the library as a durable social institution.

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Endnotes

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