

# What's In It For Us:

## Assessing the value of participating in association-sponsored research projects

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## Purpose and goals

Two teams at the University of Pittsburgh's Library System (ULS) examine the value of their participation in two multi-institutional association-sponsored research projects (the Association of Research Libraries' Project Impact and the Ithaka S+R study on Teaching with Primary Sources) and highlight the benefits, pitfalls, and impact for team members, library units, and audiences served. Both projects, though with similar goals, were structured very differently, thus fostering development of a variety of research skills as well as cross-departmental and cross-institutional relationships.

The potential for cross-institutional projects to bring value to our organizations and make an impact on our institutions is undeniable. When these projects are designed and structured by a third party with its own goals, are the benefits equally as impactful? Are the costs of participation in these collaborations (in money and staff effort) offset by the perceived benefits? Through collective project management and individual critical reflection, these project teams identified benefits and pitfalls of engaging in the respective programs currently, as well as potential implications for future practice.

## Design, methodology, approach: a meta-analysis of team experiences

### • ARL Project:

- o Project participants designed and trialed new metrics for measuring the impact of teaching with primary sources. The sponsoring body grouped Pitt with UC Irvine and Johns Hopkins to work separately and collaboratively to create and test assessments for their respective projects.
- o Since UC Irvin wanted to develop tools for assessing impact of their first-year course (initial outcome) and Pitt was interested in the assessment of their Archival Scholar Program (intermediate outcome), the logic model approach for identifying and assessing outcomes (based on the RBMS guidelines) was adopted.
  - Logic models used to identify/track inputs, activities, outputs, and project outcomes and the impact of special collections over time
- o Pitt created a rubric aligning RBMS and ACRL Information Literacy Framework
- o Data analysis from student surveys and research deliverables was used to revise course and program procedures

### • Ithaka Project:

- o Ithaka project aimed to collect information about current practices of instructors teaching undergraduate humanities and social sciences courses with primary sources.
- o Faculty interviews determined practices and influences for teaching students with primary sources
- o Data coded and analyzed
- o Project findings around faculty lack of formal pedagogical training, importance of primary source use for critical thinking, and access to special collections in digital and print formats were used as recommendations for improving library instruction programs and partnerships

### • Reflections on Experiences

- o Both ARL and Ithaka have intentionally put us in contact with other institutions focused on the impact of primary source engagement in teaching and learning and on developing assessments
- o We as participants are encouraged to focus on new tools and methodologies in approaching our research
  - Ithaka: structured interview protocol provided by Ithaka that could shape our approaches to teaching and supporting teaching with primary sources
  - ARL: local institutional developed logic model framework to establish a toolkit to assess student learning outcomes



*"Our team has brought together people from different library units to collaborate. This is so powerful, because we have learned more about our own organization." - Jeanann*

*"With the set deadlines for the project, it kept us on-track for a completed study within a year. This was so helpful for time management and accountability." - Carrie*

*"The training and support offered by Ithaka and ARL made it possible to work on the projects with confidence and success. Having that pre-packaged experience with the Ithaka project transitioned us nicely into independent work on the ARL project." - Diana*

*"Breaking down silos and working across units and institutions resulted in the development of robust models and better rapport in general." - Clare*

*"I particularly valued opportunities to collaborate with colleagues from other institutions - both projects facilitated exchange of ideas and experiences among participants from different institutions. These connections will continue past the completion of the projects, I hope." - Berenika*



## Findings

- Factors involved in committing to a multi-institutional assessment program
  - o Human resources:
    - Re-allocation of staff time to focus on assessment-related activities
    - Adjust standard work roles to allow for the time required to complete assessment project and meet deadlines
  - o Funding considerations:
    - Ithaka S+R participation required direct financial support to the association from library and library-funded travel costs for participants for training and professional development
    - ARL Project required no direct financial support from library. The project was supported by an IMLS grant which covered the cost of travel, workshops, and consultants available to the participating institutions.
  - o Organizational requirements:
    - Supportive, flexible library environment in which work assignments/environments can be adjusted according to project goals.
- Pitfalls for project participants and library organization:
  - o Participants in larger cross-institutional projects do not have the opportunity in many cases to craft their own research question
  - Methodology and strategies for analysis are pre-determined
  - Structure of the project will be established prior to the call for participation, so experiencing an iterative design process is not always possible for participants
- Benefits for project participants and library organizations:
  - o The value of participating in association-sponsored research projects is evident through:
    - Practical implications or value
      - Projects are scaffolded to support novice researchers
      - Training is thorough and effective
      - Structured approach ensures adherence to best research practices
      - Learned methodologies, principles, and habits of mind are transferable to other research or assessment projects
      - Professional development enhances the entire organization's workforce
    - Situating Local Data in a Broad Context:
      - Lends credibility and authenticity to data and results
      - Highlights themes across findings from participating institutions
      - Allows for cross-institutional collaborations re: further research or scholarship
      - Supports ongoing learning and partnerships across institutions
      - Creates opportunity for sets of data that can be compared, reproduced, and communicated across institutions in order to promote the value of academic libraries

## Recommendations/Takeaways

- Participants in the studies gain new and transferrable research skills to share with colleagues and apply to future initiatives
- Participants in the studies have a new mindset toward research-based practice
- Library programs and initiatives are under review and revision for iterative improvement

## Sources

- Ithaka S+R Project on Teaching with Primary Sources <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/announcing-a-new-project-on-teaching-with-primary-sources/>
- ARL Project <https://www.arl.org/research-library-impact-pilots-2/special-collections/>
- RBMS Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/Primary%20Source%20Literacy2018.pdf>
- ACRL Framework for Information Literacy <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/iframework>
- University of Pittsburgh Summary Report of Local Findings: Teaching with Primary Sources (August 2020): <https://pitt.box.com/s/4cigzqc5plojsn26j4qahcb0pek9ot6z>

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