The Collective: Assessing a Statewide Training Program on Library Impact

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Abstract

"CARLI Counts: Analytics and Advocacy for Service Development," is a continuing education library leadership immersion program that prepares librarians to make effective use of research findings on the impact of academic libraries on student success for the twin purposes of service development and library advocacy. While a growing body of evidence supports the assertion that academic libraries positively impact student success, libraries must make the argument individually to their stakeholders in ways that are meaningful to local administrators. CARLI Counts is being evaluated using multiple methods, quantitative and qualitative, and includes feedback from participants, evaluation of program materials, and performance outcomes from participants. Methods include interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and pre, post, and during program surveys. The evaluations take place before, after, and during the year-long experience of CARLI Counts participants. The evaluation is designed to assess participants' understanding and use of evidence-based library practices, the impact of the projects at their institutions, the effectiveness of team-based professional development, and the collective statewide impact of the program.

I. Introduction

CARLI, the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois, began operating on July 1, 2005, following the consolidation of three separate Illinois academic library consortia. CARLI libraries serve 92% of Illinois higher education students, faculty, and staff. Governing members include all Illinois public universities, all Illinois community colleges, and 76 private, research and special libraries. The CARLI Strategic Plan, which was adopted by the Board of Directors in 2019, states as a goal "establish and communicate the value proposition for academic and research libraries in Illinois." CARLI Counts: Analytics and Advocacy for Service Development is one of the strategies for achieving this outcome.

Specifically, CARLI Counts is a continuing education library leadership immersion program that prepares librarians to make effective use of research findings on the impact of academic libraries on student success for the twin purposes of service development and library advocacy. CARLI Counts is funded in part by an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program grant and is modeled on the ILEAD leadership program and the ACRL Assessment in Action program, both of which were also funded in part by IMLS grants. These programs align with IMLS efforts in capacity building and advocacy training.

CARLI Counts addresses the need of academic librarians to demonstrate their libraries' impact on student learning and success in competitive campus budgeting processes, accreditation reports, and program reviews. Doing so requires thoughtful service design and delivery based on clear goals and outcomes that are informed by documented best practices and that reflect local institutional priorities and strategies. While a growing body of evidence supports the assertion that academic libraries positively impact student success, libraries must make the argument individually to their stakeholders in ways that are meaningful to local administrators. Program participants learn how to use local library data analytics to improve services and demonstrate their value and to build confidence in their ability to do so.

II. The Program

CARLI Counts is structured as a cohort experience. Each cohort is active for about 15 months and consists of teams of approximately five members, along with one mentor, for a total of six people on each team. Cohort One (2018–2019) included 48 participants/8 teams; Cohort Two (2019–2020) included 37 participants/7 teams.

In addition to the team members and mentors, the CARLI Counts project is managed and implemented by a collaborative team of CARLI staff and external consultants. The team includes:

- Anne Craig, Principal Investigator, Senior Director, CARLI
- Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, Co-Principal Investigator, Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library
- Deborah Campbell, Program Sustainability for CARLI Counts, Senior LibraryServices Coordinator, CARLI
- Michelle Haake, Administrative Support for CARLI Counts, CARLI
- Taylor Anderson, Graduate Assistant for CARLI Counts
- Karen Brown, Grant Evaluator, Professor, Dominican University School of Information Studies
- Dennis Krieb, Curriculum Advisor, Director of Institutional Research & Library Services, Lewis & Clark Community College
- Beck Tench, Speaker and Team/Mentor Coach, University of Washington

The project is also guided by input and feedback from an advisory board:

- Kara Malenfant, Interim Executive Director, ACRL
- Greg McCormick, Director, Illinois State Library
- Cindy Fuller, Library Director (Retired 2020), Millikin University
- Cate Kaufman, Library Services Director, Illinois Central College
- Fred Barnhart, Dean, University Libraries, Northern Illinois University

Each cohort is organized around a set of structured learning experiences as well as more informal opportunities for dialogue and networking. Though changes to the delivery mode were necessary due to the challenges of the pandemic prohibiting travel and gathering in person, the overall structure was maintained for both cohorts:

- Immersive Multi-Day Workshops (February and July)
- Webinars (March, April/May, June, September, and October)
- Regular Team Meetings (Led and scheduled by Mentors)
- Poster Session at CARLI Annual Meeting (November)

Based on the evaluation of Cohort One, a one-on-one meeting with Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, the lead instructor and curriculum designer, was added for each Cohort Two participant. Though time-intensive, this coaching session helped solidify the participant's project design earlier on in the overall timeline of the program.

CARLI Counts has multiple deliverables. Each participant in the program implemented an assessment and advocacy project at their institution and submitted a progress report at the conclusion of their cohort experience. The exception to this is one team of participants in Cohort Two that pursued a collective project across the consortium rather than individual projects and so reporting was adjusted accordingly. In addition, each team created a poster for presentation at the CARLI Annual Meeting that represented their learning and development as a group. All of the reports and posters are publicly available on the CARLI

Counts website (https://www.carli.illinois.edu/products-services/prof-devel/carli-counts). In addition, CARLI Counts will also be releasing an open version of the curriculum that can be utilized by other groups, and CARLI Counts personnel will make themselves available to consult with other consortia or libraries that may wish to adopt and/or adapt this model.

The enthusiasm for CARLI Counts and its impact across the consortium led to the decision to continue the program beyond the two cohorts, using funds allocated by the Board of Directors as well as the savings from travel that was canceled due to the pandemic (approved by IMLS as a no-cost extension). Cohort Three will follow a similar structure of immersive workshops, monthly webinars, and teams with mentors; however, in this third iteration, each team will undertake a collaborative project, focusing on a specific topic (e.g., OER, online tutorials, library space).

III. Program Evaluation

The CARLI Counts program evaluation is designed to assess participants' understanding and use of evidence-based library practices, the impact of the projects at their institutions, the team-based professional development, and the collective statewide impact of the program. Multiple means of evaluation have been conducted throughout the first two years of the program, including:

1. Project Advisory Board review and feedback of the curriculum learning outcomes, instructional materials, learning activities, learner interaction, and course technology.

2. Three online surveys during each of the two cohort years—preliminary, midpoint, and post program—to assess program participants' understanding and use of 13 evidence-based library practices, the effectiveness of the professional development, and perceptions of their learning experience.

3. Rapid evaluations completed by program participants at the end of each day during the in-person and online professional development sessions to identify learning gains, concerns, and questions.

4. Review of each cohort's project reports completed by participants to identify focus areas and data collection methods of the evidence-based investigations, involvement of campus stakeholders, impact of project findings on library service, and leadership development.

5. One-on-one interviews with cohort mentors to learn about their initial motivations and expectations, understand their experiences as a CARLI Counts mentor (i.e., successes, challenges, professional and personal growth), and identify potential training and resources useful for mentors in future programs.

The findings of these evaluations have been used by the program leadership to address identified learning needs, build the professional development content and activities, and provide support to the program participants.

IV. Collective Impact

The same set of evaluations will be administered for Cohort Three, but additional assessment will focus on the collective impact of the project. Cohort Three will move the projects from assessment of library impact at individual institutions to multiple institutions working as teams, each team focusing on a central topic. This shift presents an opportunity to approach the project evaluation from a different angle.

Rather than focusing solely on "isolated impact," which results from the effort of one organization to address a problem or issue, "collective impact" involves multiple entities coming together to solve a

complex problem and create deep, lasting change. While there is a large, and growing, body of literature that documents the contributions of libraries to students' academic success at individual institutions, initiatives that are designed as a multi-institutional effort to create sustained results are lacking.[1] CARLI Counts presents an opportunity to assess the collective impact of a statewide effort by academic libraries to contribute to the student learning and success at Illinois' higher education institutions, bolstered by the momentum of member enthusiasm and the organization's commitment.

To inform the develop of this assessment, we are incorporating key attributes of the Stanford Social Innovation Review's (SSIR) concept of collective impact.[2] As Kania and Kramer note, "Unlike most collaborations, collective impact initiatives involve a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants."[3] These elements are central to the CARLI Counts project.

Figure 1: Isolated impact versus collective impact[4]

Isolated Impact vs. Collective Impact

Isolated Impact	Collective Impact
◆ Funders select individual grantees that offer the most promising solutions.	◆ Funders and implementers understand that social problems, and their solutions, arise from the interaction of many organizations within a larger system.
◆ Nonprofits work separately and compete to produce the greatest independent impact.	◆ Progress depends on working toward the same goal and measuring the same things.
◆ Evaluation attempts to isolate a particular organization's impact.	◆ Large scale impact depends on increasing cross-sector alignment and learning among many organizations.
◆ Large scale change is assumed to depend on scaling a single organization.	◆ Corporate and government sectors are essential partners.
◆ Corporate and government sectors are often disconnected from the efforts of foundations and nonprofits.	◆ Organizations actively coordinate their action and share lessons learned.

SSIR's model emphasizes the importance of a common agenda that provides grounding for a shared vision among the participating organizations about the change that is needed, as well as a similar approach to documenting the change. Kania and Kramer explain this need: "Collective impact requires all participants to have a shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions."[5] The participating CARLI Counts institutions are focused on the same goal—documenting the impact of libraries on student learning and success—and are using a common set of evidence-based practices to measure attributes of academic success. Perspectives on student learning and what needs attention may vary from institution to institution, depending on college or university missions and academic priorities, campus culture and context, and the student population. Library instructional programs and services at institutions also differ. These differences, however, do not detract from the broader shared aim of strengthening the contributions of libraries to improving student learning. In fact, the variances add richness to articulating ways that a library may impact academic success. Learning and building these practices of articulation about the impact is an important lesson for all participants.

The CARLI Counts initiative is sustained through mutually reinforcing activities. Institutional differences exist, but the combined efforts have a common goal. As Kania and Kramer note, "The power of collective action comes not from the sheer number of participants or the uniformity of their efforts, but from the coordination of their differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action."[6]

As noted earlier, CARLI's 89 members represent higher education institutions of all types, including community colleges, small and medium-sized colleges, large research universities, and public and private institutions, but there is cross-sector alignment around the project goals that is creating a community of practice to learn and share evidence-based library practices.

An essential component of successful collective impact initiative is a "backbone" entity that serves as a centralized infrastructure separate from the participating organizations. CARLI plays this essential role. More than simply providing administrative support, the organization is building a culture of problem-solving and learning through the project activities. Building this organizational muscle around critical areas like assessment aligns with CARLI's values, especially, "cooperation and engagement among academic and research libraries," and "advocacy for academic and research libraries at the local, state, regional and national levels." The project facilitates a coordinated approach and moves the collective effort forward. CARLI staff also manage the administrative activities of the project, including the budget, communications, meeting logistics, and report preparations.

V. Assessing Collective Impact

Collective impact involves numerous organizations addressing a complex problem, which means that an evaluation of the effort cannot focus on a simplistic "success" or "fail" approach to assessment. The evaluation should examine multiple levels: the initiative's context, the initiative itself, the systems that the initiative targets, and the initiative's ultimate outcomes.[7] Evaluation of the collective impact of CARLI Counts will be largely formative in nature and will focus on using data gathered from program participants to understand similarities and differences between a single institution's efforts and multi-institution approaches to demonstrating library contributions to student learning.

In addition to the online surveys described earlier, we plan to include questions that investigate if there are differences in learning and applying evidence-based practices among the participants in Cohort Three when compared to Cohorts One and Two. The team project reports will be reviewed to compare single-institutional and multi-institutional approaches to documenting the impact of a designated library program or practice (e.g., OER, research consultations) on student learning and success. We also plan to go back to participants in Cohorts One and Two to find out about assessment activities they have sustained or new types of assessment since the conclusion of their yearlong CARLI Counts participation. Finally, we will also examine and compare the three cohorts' perceptions of their leadership role related the use of evidence-based practices in their libraries and on their campuses.

VI. Conclusion

Assessments of the CARLI Counts program to date demonstrate that it is achieving its twin program outcomes of improving the ability of librarians to investigate and communicate the impact of academic libraries on student learning and success, and of improving the confidence that librarians have in their ability to do so. CARLI Counts has demonstrated that library consortia are well positioned to serve as a center for professional development on academic library impact on student learning and success. As the program enters its next phase, the opportunities for collective impact across all of higher education represent an exciting opportunity for the consortium, for member libraries, and the library assessment community. By working together, the potential exists for a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

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Endnotes

[1] Association of College and Research Libraries, Academic Library Impact on Student Learning and Success: Findings from Assessment in Action Team Projects, Prepared by Karen Brown with contributions by Kara J. Malenfant (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017), accessed August 19, 2021, http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/value/findings_y3.pdf; Association of College and Research Libraries, Academic Library Impact: Improving Practice and Essential Areas to Research, Prepared by Lynn Silipigni Connaway, William Harvey, Vanessa Kitzie, and Stephanie Mikitish of OCLC Research (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017), accessed August 19, 2021, https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/publications/whitepapers/academiclib.pdf.

[2] John Kania and Mark Kramer, "Collective Impact," Stanford Social Innovation Review (Winter 2011), accessed August 17, 2021, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact#.

[3] Kania and Kramer, "Collective Impact."

[4] Fay Hanleybrown, John Kania, and Mark Kramer, "Channeling Change: Making Collection Impact Work," Stanford Social Innovation Review (January 26, 2021), accessed August 17, 2021, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/channeling_change_making_collective_impact_work.

[5] Kania and Kramer, "Collective Impact."

[6] Kania and Kramer, "Collective Impact."

[7] Marcie Parkhurst, and Hallie Preskill, "Learning in Action: Evaluation Collective Impact," Stanford Social Innovation Review (Fall 2014), accessed August 17, 2021, https://sir.org/articles/entry/evaluating_collective_impact.