

# **Building Collective Capacity for Assessment and Advocacy: A Model for Academic Library Consortia**

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## **Abstract**

*CARLI Counts: Analytics and Advocacy for Service Development* is a continuing education library leadership immersion program, funded in part by grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, that prepares Illinois librarians to make effective use of research findings on the impact of academic libraries on student success for service development and library advocacy. In three consecutive program cohorts, CARLI Counts participants learned how to use local library data analytics to improve their services, demonstrate library value, and build their confidence in the ability to do so. Two program cohorts consisted of teams in which each participant worked on an issue or topic specific to their local campus; a third program cohort had teams undertaking a collaborative project that focused on a specific topic (e.g., OER, online tutorials, and library space). *CARLI Counts* was evaluated using multiple methods, quantitative and qualitative, that addressed participants' perceptions and uses of evidence-based library practices, their leadership role around evidence-based practices at their library and on their campus, their level of engagement with CARLI, and their perspectives on the roles of an academic consortium in advancing cross-institutional and collaborative assessment initiatives. This paper discusses the evaluation findings in relation to building collective capacity around assessment among academic librarians and the potential contributions of academic library consortia in fostering collective impact.

## **Introduction**

*CARLI Counts: Analytics and Advocacy for Service Development* is a multiyear 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. The Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI), which consists of 128 libraries (39 community colleges, 13 public universities, and 76 private colleges and universities/special libraries), received an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program grant to fund the project and is

working in partnership with the University of Illinois Library at Urbana-Champaign and Lewis & Clark Community College.

The program, which began October 1, 2018, initially featured two cohorts, Cohort 1 in calendar year 2019 and Cohort 2 in calendar year 2020. 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 CARLI Board of Directors as well as the savings from travel that was canceled in 2020 due to the pandemic (approved by IMLS as a no-cost extension). Planning for a fourth cohort is underway.

CARLI Counts is structured as a cohort experience organized around a set of scaffolded learning experiences as well as more informal opportunities for dialogue and networking. Each cohort is active for about 15 months and consists of teams of five to seven members, along with one mentor, for a total of six to eight people on each team. Program participants learn how to use local library data and analytics in alignment with institutional data, goals, and strategic priorities to improve their services and demonstrate their value. CARLI Counts deliverables include a portfolio of local case studies, an evaluation of the collective statewide impact of those cases, and a replicable state/regional training model for equipping librarians to be campus leaders in assessing library impact on student learning and success, all of which are made openly available on the CARLI website.

Cohort One (2018–2019) had 48 participants/8 teams, and Cohort Two (2019–2020) had 37 participants/7 teams. Cohort Three (2021–2022) had 23 participants/7 teams and followed a similar structure of immersive workshops, monthly webinars, and team meetings with mentors; however, in this third iteration, each team undertook a collaborative project, focusing on a specific topic of broad interest in the consortium (e.g., OER, online tutorials, ebooks, chat reference service, and library space).

### **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 evaluations were conducted throughout each cohort year, using a variety of methods in order to gather different kinds of data and enable triangulation of the findings, including:

- Program participants' completion of three online surveys (preliminary, midpoint, and post program) about their understanding and use of evidence-based library practices, the effectiveness of the professional development, and their learning experience.

- Program participants' completion of rapid evaluations each day during the in-person and online professional development sessions to identify learning gains, concerns, and questions.
- Review of project reports completed by participants to identify areas of focus and the data collection methodologies of evidence-based investigations, involvement of campus stakeholders, impact of project findings on library service, and leadership development.<sup>1</sup>
- One-on-one interviews with the team 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 training and resources for potential CARLI programs with mentors.

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

In July 2022, alumni of Cohort 1, 2, and 3 completed a survey designed to investigate if project participants have continued to develop and implement evidence-based practices and, if so, what types of projects and with whom. For example, participants indicated if they were initiating projects within their library, with other CARLI Counts participants, through collaborations with others on their campus (but outside of the library), or with other institutions or libraries. The evaluation also investigated how participation in CARLI Counts has influenced their leadership and advocacy work in their library, on their campus, and through collaboration with other institutions and organizations. Finally, participants reported how they are sharing the results of their evidence-based work. Although some questions on the survey produced a low response rate, and as such the survey findings cannot be generalized to all alumni, the findings do capture aspects of CARLI Counts' impact on participants after completion of the program.

These multiple means of evaluation tracked participants' gains in learning evidence-based practices and also increases in advocacy and leadership development. With the additional data from the alumni survey, insights about building collective capacity and impact through collaborative, team-based assessment and advocacy programs are emerging.

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<sup>1</sup>The team project reports can be found on the CARLI website at:  
<https://www.carli.illinois.edu/products-services/prof-devel/carli-counts/cohort3>.

## Participants' Learning of Evidence-based Library Practices and Library Leadership

Survey responses from the three cohorts reveal increases in participants' perceptions of their understanding and use of evidenced-based library practices during their year-long participation in CARLI Counts. These gains are highlighted in Table 1 and Table 2.

**Table 1: Growth in Understanding of Evidence-based Practices**

Growth indicated by a response of *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* to the statement: *I have a basic understanding of the following aspects of evidence-based library practices on the Preliminary and Post-Program surveys*

<i>Evidence-Based Practice</i>	<i>Cohort 1</i>	<i>Cohort 2</i>	<i>Cohort 3</i>
Identifying campus priorities	83% to 100%	13% to 30%	13% to 87%
Connecting campus priorities to library services and programs	73% to 97%	8% to 48%	78% to 86%
Identifying research variables	4% to 74%	8% to 39%	47% to 87%
Difference between quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis	68% to 92%	16% to 70%	78% to 87%
Measuring research variables	19% to 87%	3% to 22%	36% to 86%
Identifying data needs	47% to 100%	3% to 39%	43% 80%
Determining sources of data	53% to 100%	5% to 39%	64% to 73%
Determining data collection method(s)	39% to 85%	0% to 43%	46% to 93%
Collecting data	47% to 92%	3% to 43%	57% to 93%
Analyzing and interpreting data	36% to 80%	3% to 17%	50% to 66%
Communicating research/assessment findings to campus stakeholders	46% to 77%	11% to 35%	39% to 67%
IRB/human subjects requirements	44% to 93%	16% to 35%	65% to 99%
Data ethics and privacy	63% to 88%	16% to 57	2% to 86%

**Table 2: Use of Evidence-Based Practices**

Change from Preliminary Survey (participants who indicated *Somewhat Frequently* or *Frequently* about their current use of specific evidence-based practices on a five-item rating scale from *Never* to *Frequently*) to Post-Program Survey (participants indicated *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* to their likelihood of using specific evidence-based practices on a five-item rating scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*)

<i>Evidence-Based Practice</i>	<i>Cohort 1</i>	<i>Cohort 2</i>	<i>Cohort 3</i>
Use of research or assessment findings about the impact of libraries on student success to improve library services and programs	20% to 81%	21% to 91%	21% to 80%
Library's collection of data about the impact of services on student learning and success	24% to 54%	21% to 69%	21% to 34%
Use of learner analytics to understand student learning	7% to 46%	5% to 69%	5% to 74%
Use of logic models for program and service planning, implementation, and assessment	2% to 39%	3% to 39%	3% to 27%
Use of local, institutional data to align the library with institutional goals and strategic priorities	52% to 81%	44% to 82%	44% to 73%
Use of research or assessment findings about the impact of libraries on student success to develop strategies for library advocacy	52% to 81%	16% to 87%	16% to 87%
Contribute data to institutional reports about the connection of library services to student learning and success.	17% to 88%	31% to 83%	31% to 54%

At the completion of each cohort program, participants reported gains in perception of their library leadership and advocacy. They indicated more confidence about assessing the impact of the library on student academic success, and they perceived themselves as a leader at their library and on their campus. Table 3 highlights each cohort's gains in perceptions of library leadership and advocacy.

**Table 3: Library Leadership and Advocacy**

<i>Library Leadership and Advocacy Factor</i>	<i>Cohort 1</i>	<i>Cohort 2</i>	<i>Cohort 3</i>
Gains in participants' perceptions of their leadership at their library with assessing library impact on student learning and success, from the start to the conclusion of the program, as reflected by <i>Agree</i> and <i>Strongly Agree</i> responses on the Preliminary Survey and Post-Program Survey.	49% to 77%	36% to 74%	40% to 47%
Gains in participants' perceptions of their leadership on their campus with assessing library impact on student learning and success, from the start to the conclusion of the program, as reflected by <i>Agree</i> and <i>Strongly Agree</i> responses on the Preliminary Survey and Post-Program Survey.	36% to 50%	31% to 69%	22% to 33%
Post-Program Survey: Participants' perceptions that they understand how they might better advocate for the library on their campus, as a result of participation in CARLI Counts, as indicated by <i>Agree</i> and <i>Strongly Agree</i>	85%	96%	80%

Additionally, the Alumni Survey responses document an increase in alumni's collaboration on their campuses with individuals external to the library.

### **Collective Capacity and Impact**

While developing the curriculum and evaluation approaches for the third cohort, more attention focused on assessing how the program might be developing collective capacity among Illinois' academic librarians and having statewide impact.

The National Council of Nonprofits describes collective impact as “an intentional way of working together and sharing information for the purpose of solving a complex

problem.”<sup>2</sup> Collective impact is different from simply collaborating in five essential ways,<sup>3</sup> and these aspects of collective impact were part of the CARLI Counts program.

1. *Shared Goals*: With collective impact, a group of individuals shares a vision of change and a commitment to solve a problem by coordinating their work. For the CARLI Counts participants, they wanted to increase awareness of the impact of libraries on student learning and success, and they wanted to learn how to document that impact and apply it to service improvement and advocacy efforts.
2. *Measure/Monitor the Same Factors and Phenomenon*: To learn and share results across the entire initiative, those involved in collective impact agree to measure and monitor comparable and parallel factors and aspects of the phenomenon. In a similar approach, CARLI Counts participants focused on the library’s impact on student academic success. Each of the participants in Cohorts 1 and 2 measured library impact on their campus and, in Cohort 3, multiple institutions collaborated to measure a common aspect of library impact (e.g., OER, library consultations) on student learning and success.
3. *A “Backbone”*: To be most effective, the numerous activities of individuals working on a collective impact effort should be coordinated by some type of a backbone structure. This structure might be a single organization, a single person, or a steering committee. The CARLI Consortium served as the backbone for CARLI Counts by providing a centralized infrastructure that propelled a common goal and ensured financial support for the program through grants and internal allocations of resources.
4. *Mutually Reinforcing*: Collective impact activities are described as mutually reinforcing, because they are iterative, and the shared process reminds individuals and groups that they are dependent on one another to move the initiative forward. The multi-year design of CARLI Counts has been mutually reinforcing as each cohort moves through the program, building on the work of previous cohorts and with team mentors drawn from previous cohort alumni, and during each cohort year the teams continuously reinforce the work of its members.
5. *Shared Learning*: Finally, collective impact initiatives emphasize mutual learning and building collective capacity to address the shared issue or problem. At its

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<sup>2</sup> National Council of Nonprofits. “Collective Impact.” <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/collective-impact>.

<sup>3</sup> Kania, John, and Mark Kramer. “Collective Impact,” Stanford Social Innovation Review. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact).

core, CARLI Counts is a professional development program in which the participants have a vested interest in collaborative learning about library assessment and advocacy. They participate in numerous learning activities as a full cohort and as teams, with an emphasis on discovering and sharing together.

### **Lessons Learned**

CARLI Counts has provided an opportunity to gain an initial understanding of some facets of building collective capacity and documenting collective impact, which can contribute to the much larger and growing body of literature on the topic. Four “lessons learned” are presented as topics and issues for organizations to consider when embarking on multi-institutional endeavors designed to address a common problem or need.

First, a fair amount of time needs to focus initially on finding the common amidst the differences. The CARLI Counts program represented the CARLI membership, which consists of multiple types of colleges and universities—small and large, private and public, and community colleges, colleges, and research universities. The unique academic and research missions, student demographics, faculty structures, and campus cultures at each institution presented opportunities for participants to learn about assessment and advocacy in different institutional contexts. One alumni highlighted the value of this diverse institutional representation: “I appreciated the diverse representation of institution types on my team, as we can get [stuck] in our own bubbles quite easily.”

This diversity, however, can obscure the degree to which the libraries also share many common practices and interests. Building community and orienting participants to collective action required an iterative process of scaffolded discussions and opportunities for exploration in order to find common ground. A survey response from a Cohort 3 participant captures this process: “I had a real solidarity moment when talking with my group members and realizing that libraries regardless of size have similar problems and that the majority of problems we try to solve individually are systemic problems that should be solved with solidarity and profession-wide change.”

Additionally, an institution’s expectations of the library and the librarians’ roles and responsibilities varied from campus to campus. These differences were particularly evident with Cohort 3 as each team collaborated to develop a project focusing on a common topic. For example, were the librarians faculty or academic staff? Were their positions tenure track or not? How did these statuses impact their access to institutional resources and implications of campus policies related to research and assessment? Were the participants interested in a project that was based on more traditional research practices and methods or one that used an action research approach? How was IRB handled at each institution? These and other questions need to be parsed early in the team project planning process.



From the evaluations and our observations, a “backbone” structure for coordination and support is indeed essential. CARLI has played a critical role through the program by keeping the issue of library impact front and center among the consortial members, with higher education stakeholders throughout the state, and with other library organizations and associations at the national and even international levels. The consortium also provided the structure and means for the program’s ongoing planning, implementation of activities, communication, technology infrastructure, and fiscal management. The logistics of managing such a collective undertaking, from name tags to grant reporting, cannot be underestimated and requires drawing on a full range of organizational expertise, from strategic leadership to finance to events management.

In addition, the team-based projects required that the work be mutually reinforcing. Each participant contributed to the whole, and the teamwork required accountability among the participants to advance the work of the project. As one alumni said, “I can’t imagine doing this in isolation, so having more than one person contributing to the project was so helpful and collegial.” The learning experience for each cohort—and each team within each cohort—was scaffolded and collaborative.

Finally, collective impact does not happen overnight. Sustained focus on an issue gains momentum, which is particularly valuable when barriers or stumbling blocks come up, as they almost inevitably will. CARLI Counts was initially planned for two cohorts but was able to advance to a third cohort as the statewide impact of the program was realized and funds became available. A fourth cohort is now being planned for 2023. The survey responses from participants at the end of their cohort year and from alumni in this past summer indicate that participants plan to continue or have continued engagement with evidence-based practices, and they are collaborating on assessment projects with others on their campus and with others at different CARLI member institutions. As one Cohort 3 participant explained, “I definitely feel more connected to other CARLI librarians, which I think opens a space for future collaborations and initiatives.” After participants leave the program, they are sharing the results of their projects and program experiences through conference presentations and posters, journal articles, and campus presentations. We are discovering that a multi-year program, focused on learning about and documenting library impact on student academic success, is building collective capacity among Illinois academic librarians that will realize collective impact.

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