Creating Sustainable Assessment Practice through Collaborative Leadership: Informing and Being Informed by Higher Education Leaders

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Abstract

Meaningful and sustained assessment is best achieved when the academic library takes a collaborative leadership role on campus. Simply developing and implementing assessment for the library is not enough. While the value of collaboration among diverse campus constituents is widely recognized, it is not easily achieved. This paper synthesizes the results of the *Assessment in Action* (AiA) program that involved over 200 campus teams led by librarians, shares the reactions of executive directors of higher education and research associations to the results, and discusses how the Association of College & Research Libraries will be further developing professional development for assessment as a result.

The Association of College & Research Libraries' (ACRL) Value of Academic Libraries Initiative has been flourishing since its inception in 2010 with the publication of the *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*[1] The *Assessment in Action* (AiA) program is a cornerstone of that success, supporting more than 200 campus teams in investigating the impact of the library on student learning and success.

Assessment in Action

Funded through a National Leadership Demonstration Grant by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, AiA was undertaken in partnership with the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU). The grant supported the design, implementation, and evaluation of AiA in order to strengthen the competencies of librarians in campus leadership and data-informed advocacy, to foster collaborative campus relationships around assessment, and to build an evidence base about the impact of academic libraries on student learning and success as well as document effective assessment practices and strategies.

Assessment in Action Program Design

The AiA program design emerged from the discussions at the national summits that ACRL hosted in 2001, funded by an IMLS Collaborative Planning Grant, in partnership with AIR, APLU, and the Council of Independent Colleges. The summits were attended by teams from 22 postsecondary institutions, including senior librarians, chief academic administrators, and institutional researchers, for discussions about library impact. Fifteen representatives from higher education organizations and associations also participated in the discussions as well. Four themes emerged about the dynamic nature of assessment in higher education from the summits:

- Accountability drives higher education discussions.
- A unified approach to institutional assessment is essential.
- Student learning and success are the primary focus of higher education assessment.
- Academic administrators and accreditors seek evidence-based reports of measurable impact.

Details about the summits and the resultant themes and recommendations are in the freely available

white paper *Connect, Collaborate, and Communicate: A Report from the Value of Academic Libraries Summits.*[2]

Community of Practice
AiA facilitators[3] worked with Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Bev Wenger-Trayner in designing the AiA program, drawing on their concept of communities of practice. They define communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."[4]

Unlike traditional educational models that spotlight an instructor's central role as the "sage on the stage" with primary authority and content expertise, AiA's blended learning model emphasized the facilitative role of instructors (i.e., "guide on the side"). AiA participants worked collaboratively in face-to-face sessions, webcasts, and asynchronous online environments to create, share, and build content and products. This network supported collective learning, shared competence, sustained interaction, and a climate of mutuality and trust. In the process, a strong community of practice developed. The focus on active learning also led to a deeper understanding of what happens when knowledge and skills are applied in practice.

Action Research
The design of AiA also drew on the concept of action research.[5] Action research is understood as "a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes... it seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities."[6] Key concepts in this definition that were emphasized in the curriculum of AiA are participatory, democratic, and practical solutions.

AiA was aimed at identifying important questions about library impact on student learning and success, designing assessments that reveal information about library contributions, and taking action based on what has been discovered. Action research challenged AiA participants to go beyond library use and satisfaction and examine questions of impact and outcomes. It was understood that not all projects would demonstrate that there is in fact a library

impact but that developing and implementing a project as part of the AiA program would engender learning, spur action, and build capacity for continued work.

Each of the AiA teams submitted a report about their project, which is available online along with an interface for filtering results based on institution type, geographic location, enrollment, accreditation body, library budget, and library staffing levels, among other criteria.[7]

Assessment in Action Findings
In addition to the individual reports, for each year of the AiA program, ACRL produced a synthesis of the findings.[8] These findings comprise a body of evidence about the impact of academic libraries on student learning and success, but also about effective practices in library leadership and campus collaboration on assessment.

AiA projects provide compelling evidence that students benefit from library instruction in their initial coursework, library use increases student success, collaborative academic programs and services involving the library enhance student learning, information literacy instruction strengthens general education outcomes, and library research consultation services boost student learning. There is an evidence base developing to demonstrate that student retention improves with library instructional services, library instruction adds value to a student's long-term academic experience, the library promotes academic rapport and student engagement, and use of library space relates positively to student learning and success.

AiA reports also reveal that a team-based approach to assessment leads to meaningful collaboration and problem solving. Each team, consisting of members from different campus departments and units, engaged in important conversations about different attributes of student learning and success. A collaborative approach also builds understanding of the functions and roles of different campus constituents in advancing the institution's academic priorities. In addition, the assessment work tends to promote sustainable organizational change and move beyond a single project, because a team-based effort recognizes the multifaceted nature of student learning. Compelling findings about student learning and success emerge that have campus-wide significance.

For librarians leading campus teams, analysis of AiA reports provides insight into emergent leadership practices for collaborative assessment, including ability to achieve common understanding about definitions and attributes of academic success, produce meaningful measures of student learning, keep collaborative assessment activities aligned with institutional priorities, and create a unified campus message about student learning and success. Many AiA projects modeled these types of collaborative leadership approaches to conducting assessment and using the results to create transformative and sustainable change.

Building on Assessment in Action

As the three-year AiA project came to a close, the success of the projects motivated ACRL to identify next steps that would build on the AiA program. In order to continue to align ACRL's efforts with both member needs and higher education at large, AiA project leaders conducted exploratory interviews with the executive directors of 12 higher education and research organizations in fall/winter 2015.[9] In each case, the project leaders shared the findings of the AiA program and then held a semi-structured discussion with the higher education leaders in order to gather input for planning next steps.

Four themes emerged from these conversations regarding key trends in higher education related to the assessment of student learning and students' academic experiences that inform library leadership and engagement with campus constituents:
1. Astute Use of Data: Significant effort within the higher education arena has been focused on collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, but we now need to know if the yield in student learning improvements is proportional to the effort. Energy is now being directed towards better use of evidence to make improvements rather than conducting new research.
2. Leadership as Advocacy: It is essential to have leadership in using evidence to make improvements at the program director level. Higher education institutions need individuals who know how to identify and use the appropriate data in collaboration with others on campus. Think of these leaders as ambassadors and advocates.
3. Contextual Nature of the Educational Experience: The emphasis is now shifting to how students are achieving general learning outcomes related to critical thinking across disciplines and through experiences in and out of the classroom. How do different educational experiences correlate to learning? Many students need a rich array of learning experiences to complete a degree.
4. Role of Higher Education: New questions are emerging. How does higher education contribute to an individual's lifelong learning for careers and general life satisfaction? What is the role of higher education in our national life? If higher education associations can show the impact of colleges and universities on the education of students broadly, then members of these associations will benefit.

The findings from AiA were well-received by higher education leaders in this context, and ACRL was encouraged to focus its efforts on communicating these findings broadly and supporting librarians in using the findings in advocating for libraries.

As a result of these recommendations, as well as input from the ACRL Board of Directors and the ACRL Value of Academic Libraries Committee, two new programs are being developed on the basis of the AiA design and findings.

The first program supports the need for an ongoing professional development program for libraries to continue to develop their assessment skills and competencies. Currently titled "The Action Research Roadshow," this day-long workshop will first be offered at the ACRL 2017 Conference as a preconference and thereafter be available for contracted delivery onsite in a region, state, or institution. Focusing on strategic and sustainable assessment, participants in the workshop will identify institutional priorities and campus partners, design an assessment project grounded in action research, and prepare a plan for communicating the project results.

The second program is aimed at supporting librarians in using the findings for evidence-based advocacy for academic libraries. Primarily conceptualized to serve the needs of library administrators, this program is in development. Its initial offering will be at the ACRL 2017 conference and will be for directors of those libraries that participated in the AiA program. Future offerings will be designed based on the assessment of that program.

In addition to these two programs, ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries initiative continues to further research on library contributions to student learning and success. In April 2016, ACRL issued a request for proposals for the design, development, and delivery of a new ACRL "Action-Oriented Research Agenda on Library Contributions to Student Learning and Success." In July, a team from OCLC research was selected to investigate and write a research agenda that provides an update on progress since the publication of the *Value of Academic Libraries* report in 2010 and examines important questions where more research is needed in areas critical to the higher education sector. The final research agenda document will also highlight programs and services in academic libraries that have evidence of effectiveness and of promise, which are informed by significant research or multiple project findings, clearly identifying transferrable knowledge.[10]

Conclusion

AiA was a highly successful program that achieved its goals to strengthen the competencies of librarians in campus leadership and data-informed advocacy, to foster collaborative campus relationships around assessment, to build an evidence base about the impact of academic libraries on student learning and success, and to document effective assessment practices and strategies. AiA also demonstrated that meaningful and sustained assessment is best achieved when the academic library takes a collaborative leadership role on campus. From these results, ACRL continues to develop its Value of Academic Libraries initiative, meeting library needs and responding to the needs of higher education at large.

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Endnotes

1. Association of College & Research Libraries, *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*, researched by Megan Oakleaf (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2010), http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/value/val_report.pdf.

2. Association of College & Research Libraries, *Connect, Collaborate, and Communicate: A Report from the Value of Academic Libraries Summits*, prepared by Karen Brown and Kara J. Malenfant (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2012), http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/value/val_summit.pdf.

3. AiA design/facilitation team was led by Debra Gilchrist, vice president for learning and student success, Pierce College, WA; Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, coordinator for information literacy and professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and Kara Malenfant, senior strategist for special initiatives, Association of College & Research Libraries. Additional designers/facilitators participated throughout the length of the project: April Cunningham, library instruction coordinator at Saddleback College in Mission Viejo, CA; Carrie Donovan, head of teaching and learning for the Indiana University Libraries in Bloomington, IN; Eric Resnis, organizational effectiveness specialist in the libraries at Miami University in Oxford, OH; and John Watts, undergraduate learning librarian at University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Libby Miles, associate professor of writing and rhetoric in the Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island in Kingston, RI, was part of the facilitation team for the first 18 months of the program. Project analyst Karen Brown, professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Dominican University, IL, worked with the team to document

replicable action learning projects undertaken by the institutional teams.

4. Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, *Introduction to Communities of Practice: A Brief Overview of the Concept and Its Uses*, 2015, http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/.

5. Kara J. Malenfant, Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, and Debra Gilchrist, "Assessment as Action Research: Bridging Academic Scholarship and Everyday Practice," *College & Research Libraries* 77 (March 2016): 140–143, doi:10.5860/crl.77.2.140.

6. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 1.

7. Database of AiA reports is available online at http://apply.ala.org/aia/public.

8. Association of College & Research Libraries, *Academic Library Contributions to Student Success: Documented Practices from the Field*, prepared by Karen Brown, contributions by Kara J. Malenfant (Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015), http://www.ala.org/acrl/files/issues/value/contributions_report.pdf; Association of College & Research Libraries, *Documented Library Contributions to Student Learning and Success: Building Evidence with Team-Based Assessment in Action Campus Projects*, prepared by Karen Brown, contributions by Kara J. Malenfant (Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016), http://www.ala.org/acrl/files/issues/value/contributions_y2.pdf.

9. The higher education and research organizations are Achieving the Dream, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Association for Institutional Research, Association of American Colleges and Universities, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts (Wabash College), Community College Research Center (Columbia University), Council of Independent Colleges, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, National Survey of Student Engagement, Pew Research Center, and Student Affairs Administrators of Higher Education.

10. Additional information about this program is available from OCLC Research at http://www.oclc.org/research/themes/user-studies/acrl-agenda.html and, in proceedings for this conference, see: Lynn Silipigni Connaway, William Harvey, Vanessa Kitzie, and Stephanie Mikitish, "What Do We Want to Know: Completing an Action-Oriented Research Agenda," in *Proceedings of the 2016 Library Assessment Conference: Building Effective, Sustainable, Practical Assessment*, October 31–November 2, Arlington, Virginia (Washington DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2017), 491–503, http://libraryassessment.org/bm~doc/proceedings-lac-2016.pdf.