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Libraries and institutional research

Opportunities for collaboration

The heightened call for accountability from various stakeholders has increased the pressure on institutions to demonstrate how they fulfill their mission and achieve intended outcomes within a student-centered context. An effective institutional response involves a comprehensive approach, one in which academic programs and services establish strategic goals that collectively advance learning through evidence-based evaluation.

For libraries, documenting measurable impact on the educational mission can be complex and challenging work as they identify potential surrogates and correlations outlined in the 2010 ACRL report, "The Value of Academic Libraries."[1]

Large research libraries often have dedicated offices with resources and expertise to conduct data-intensive research, while smaller institutions carry out assessment activities as one of many job functions. Librarians have bridged the gap by partnering with administrative constituencies on campus. A 2010 study of libraries at private liberal arts institutions reported that 79.8% of the respondents collaborated with their campus institutional research (IR), planning, or assessment office.[2]

This article explores best practices from the perspective of a small liberal arts university and recommends strategies for building effective collaboration with institutional research professionals. It will demonstrate how pre-existing survey data can be used to assess library programs and services, and how this cooperative arrangement can be leveraged to plan and conduct assessment activities.

Survey landscape

Regardless of size, IR offices administer a number of surveys and generally serve as the central repository for data collection. The three national surveys below are frequently used by institutions and should be on every librarian's radar for their insights on the changing attitudes of students in several key areas.

• **CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program).** Part of the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, CIRP is a suite of instruments that monitor faculty and student attitudes, behaviors, and experiences. Student surveys include "The Freshman Survey," "Your First College Year" survey, and the "College Student Survey."

— *Relevance to libraries:* Responses provide a baseline understanding of students' needs in areas such as student stress, time management, study skills, academic honesty, and the demands of coursework.[3] The library

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can provide a supportive campus environment by offering services in these areas.

• **HEDS (Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium).** HEDS is a membership organization offering several surveys for small private institutions.

— *Relevance to libraries:* Most librarians are familiar with the "Research Practices Survey" (RPS) that assesses students' information literacy skills and research experiences. This important tool can be used to inform faculty about students' research abilities, as well as develop instruction programming. HEDS also offers the "HEDS Senior Survey," which focuses on final college outcomes. An information literacy question included in the instrument can help libraries assess its overall contribution to students' intellectual growth and development. Supplemental questions address level of satisfaction with library facilities, resources, and services.

• **NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement).** NSSE is a student survey aimed at gauging how undergraduates spend their time participating in college programs and activities.

— *Relevance to libraries:* In 2013 NSSE offered an optional add-on information literacy module about students' use of information and perceptions of library resources. This data can be useful in assessing how the library contributes to student learning. The "Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement" is administered at the start of the first year of college, and gauges student engagement upon entry to the results of the NSSE.

Collaboration at Puget Sound

The University of Puget Sound is a small liberal arts institution and, like many organizations, is focused on evaluation and assessment to demonstrate the library's value to the student learning experience. It has administered national surveys, like LibQual and the RPS; conducted focus groups; analyzed data; and implemented a modified version of the balanced scorecard to ensure internal accountability and efficiency. In 2011, the university hired a new director of IR, and the department's office was moved to the library. The shared space invites increased collaboration and advances the library's assessment efforts. The examples below illustrate how IR and the Collins Memorial Library have collaborated to increase visibility and accountability of library services. They can easily be adapted to your own academic community.

• **Survey scheduling.** Surveys are popular tools for soliciting feedback from campus constituents. In an effort to coordinate their administration and avoid survey fatigue, IR established a schedule. LibQual and RPS are included in the cycle, raising the visibility of the library's role in institutional outcomes. Peggy Burge, coordinator of information

Word cloud of article text demonstrating the partnership between the library and IR.

literacy at Puget Sound, notes that "Although the library has been administering the Research Practices Survey to incoming first-year students since 2006, it was only when we began working closely with IR that the RPS became an official part of the campus-wide student assessment process."

• **Survey software.** For many years, the library used inexpensive commercial software for administering surveys and collecting results. While somewhat useful, the tool limited our ability to create sophisticated questions and analyze data in a meaningful manner. As a direct result of our collaboration with IR, we were able to gain access to a more robust survey software package without incurring additional cost.

• **Support.** IR staff has a broad range of expertise to draw on for effective survey design. At Puget Sound, they have been particularly helpful in reviewing drafts of library surveys and recommending effective questions. They also shared their experiences working with focus groups, which informed our sessions on students' information literacy experiences. As needed, IR staff has provided analytical support for surveys. The library administered a modified version of RPS to seniors during their final semester, and the IR staff analyzed the data by major, providing valuable information for the librarians to share with academic departments.

• **Institutional data repository.** IR offices serve as the custodian for data that supports institutional effectiveness. At Puget Sound, IR has granted librarians access to selected reports that may not be the practice at other schools. This information has provided a broader organizational view of enrollment and student demographics, performance indicators, grades, and retention and graduation figures. The recent Campus Climate Survey reported on the experiences and perceptions of faculty, staff, and students on issues of social diversity, which helped librarians better understand the current environment and promote inclusiveness.

• **Supplemental survey questions.** Many standardized surveys permit supplemental questions that are institution-specific. By working with your IR office, you may be able to include more focused library-related questions. For example, our IR office conducts an annual spring survey of student experiences and attitudes about a variety of subjects, ranging from diversity to engagement. To this survey, the library added questions about students' learning experiences.

• **Using data to effectively communicate value.** Working with the IR department has made us more proficient in presenting data to our stakeholders. For example, the library used data snapshots on academic integrity at a faculty workshop. By modeling IR's data presentation style, librarians drew out faculty in a process of data discernment rather than clearly stating conclusions. These questions provided a springboard for discussion about improving student awareness of academic integrity issues. This technique was also used successfully to explore the results of RPS with faculty.

Conclusion

Whether IR is located in the library building or across campus, reach out to them, find out what surveys they are doing, and explore opportunities to collaborate. Working with IR is a win-win proposition for better understanding your students and institutional culture.

Notes

1. ACRL, "The value of academic libraries: A comprehensive research review and report," researched by Megan Oakleaf (Chicago: ACRL 2010), www.aclr.ala.org/value.

2. Gordon J. Hewitt and Rebecca Troendle Hewitt, "Ability, Assistance, and Collaboration in Academic Library Assessment" (2010). Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal), Paper 479 (2010), http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/479.

3. "YFCY Infographic," http://heri.ucla.edu/infographics/2012-YFCY-Infographic.pdf. *ẑ*