

CASE IN POINT 5:
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK, UNITED STATES
MEASURING THE VALUE OF THE LIBRARY



Better measures for better management



Brought to you by
LibraryConnect
Partnering with the Library Community

“What gets measured gets managed”, says an old adage which has at its core the wisdom that any business process or operation benefits from being quantifiable, in terms of both its outcomes and its costs.

If the latter exceed the former the operation becomes vulnerable. An evident conclusion is that any operation that values its continued success must ensure that its positive outcomes are measurable and verifiable. >>>

Visit www.powertothelibrarian.com to learn more



>> Academic libraries face particular ongoing challenges in calculating and presenting their value to their parent institutions, primarily because of the dramatic effect on their traditional role of advancements in technology. The availability and dissemination of academic content has been greatly simplified by computerisation and the internet. Adequately gauging the value of a library in today's world requires a more subtle and considered approach to the work of libraries and librarians than hitherto, especially in the current recessionary economic environment.

These challenges have been taken up by Dr. Megan Oakleaf, Assistant Professor in the iSchool of Syracuse University in New York. Oakleaf is the author of a report, delivered in 2010, entitled *The Value of Academic Libraries*, commissioned by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), the professional association for academic libraries in the US.

"Libraries need data and evidence both to prove and improve their value," says Oakleaf. "There was a time when people trusted higher education implicitly and valued academic libraries without question. Culturally, we live in a less trusting time. It may be commonsense to say a university needs a library but it's not a given any more. You have to produce data and evidence to demonstrate that need."

The report was born, she says, of the need to clarify both the economic and academic cases for investing in library services. "Academic libraries can do a better job of articulating their value within their institutions. Libraries should consider the perspectives of senior leaders and other stakeholders at their

parent institutions, rather than limiting their perspective to a library-centric point of view."

The report makes several recommendations, the first of which is the "institutional goal audit". That is, identifying what are the key goals of the institution as a whole so that the library can align its services to them. Although most institutions have broadly similar goals in terms of delivering courses to students, there are essential differences between institutions.

"For research-focused universities, a major goal is seeking grants and endowments to pursue faculty research," says Oakleaf. "Whereas student-centered colleges focus on the institutional goals of student learning, degree or program completion, and job placement. Different institutions have different goals, and their libraries should help achieve those goals."

Whatever the goal it needs to be clearly defined in the librarian's consciousness, Oakleaf insists. Her report says that "Libraries cannot demonstrate institutional value to maximum effect until they define outcomes of institutional relevance and then measure the degree to which they attain them."

"We need to be able to identify patterns and combinations of events that result in positive outcomes"

DR. MEGAN OAKLEAF, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF INFORMATION SCIENCES, ISCHOOL, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

Identifying the institutional goals can be a simple matter of looking up the college's formal mission statement or other strategic documents, listening



to what its leaders say in speeches, and finding out which aspects of the college are being supported financially.

More difficult recommendations to implement for libraries are those that entail collecting data systematically on individual library user behaviour, while maintaining privacy. Recommendations urging librarians to document library influences on increased student achievement and to enhance library contribution to student job success are predicated to some degree on information obtained by collecting data on individual behaviour. According to Oakleaf this is difficult to implement because librarians are trained to be conservative about data privacy.

“Other parts of the campus gather behavioural data, strip out the personally identifying information and run the analysis,” says Oakleaf. “Librarians are beginning to embrace that concept but traditionally do not maintain records of who accessed what. They didn’t keep the data; now we need to keep it, but, of course, keep it safe.”

Oakleaf does not underestimate the challenge libraries face in modifying such long held and instinctive practices but says that change is taking place steadily.

“We need to be able to identify patterns and combinations of events that result in positive

outcomes,” says Oakleaf. “It may not be as simple as saying that you will do better if you take a library instruction class or download x number of articles from a database or check out y number of books. It’s likely a more complex combination of library interactions that will result in significant impact.”

“You have to have data now to back up any claims you make”

DR. MEGAN OAKLEAF, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF INFORMATION SCIENCES, ISCHOOL, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

Over time, librarians will be able to look for correlation between library data and outcomes such as program completion, test scores, or career placement records and to ascertain whether the connection is causative.

The report has myriad other recommendations including adopting systems for assessment management, recording the impact of the library on student enrollment and improving library support of faculty teaching.

“The report has many different options,” says Oakleaf. “You have to choose the right one for your situation.” She receives ongoing feedback from librarians enthusiastic about the report’s recommendations and eager to engage in change to improve the services they offer and to verify their value. ■



Data delivers insights

Although the report on *The Value of Academic Libraries* (http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/value/val_report.pdf) was released in 2010 there is already much evidence of libraries in universities around the world taking a greater interest in collecting data to attempt to gauge their impact on the university as a whole.

One who welcomes the Valuing Academic Libraries report is David Shulenberger, a Fellow of the Association of Public Land Grant Universities in the US. "The report is brilliant because it just points out method after method after method for evaluating libraries. We don't have good ways to evaluate libraries now and it points to better ways to do so."

The interest of the APLU, says Shulenberger, is in overall educational performance "especially increasing student learning. The problem that American public universities have now is their budgets are being cut. But when you cut funds, you don't have to cut everything. Presidents and provosts need really good data on where best they can cut." ■



Adding value to libraries

Megan Oakleaf is an Assistant Professor in the iSchool at Syracuse University where she teaches Reference and Information Literacy Services and Planning, Marketing, and Assessing Library Services. Her research interests include outcomes assessment, evidence-based decision making, information literacy instruction, information services, and digital librarianship.

Previously, Oakleaf served as Librarian for Instruction and Undergraduate Research at North Carolina State University. She earned her PhD in library and information science at UNC-Chapel Hill and her MLS from Kent State University.

As well as her teaching duties, Oakleaf acts as a consultant to academic libraries, travelling several times a month to hold seminars and workshops advising library professionals on topics discussed

in her 2010 report *The Value of Academic Libraries*. She is Co-Chair of the ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries Committee, established in 2011 to help librarians implement the measures described in her report of that year into the methods of evaluating academic libraries. She is also on the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)-funded Lib-Value management team.

As part of her ongoing commitment to the task of valuing the importance of academic libraries, Oakleaf writes frequent articles and is a regular speaker at conferences, including the Library Assessment Conference. She was also the main designer and facilitator of a summit in Chicago in November 2011 entitled *Building Capacity for Demonstrating the Value of Academic Libraries*, which was funded by the IMLS and attended by the Provosts or Presidents of 22 academic institutions along with their library directors, and representatives from their offices of institutional research. ■



Visit www.powertothelibrarian.com to learn more