Measuring Library Impacts through First Year Course Assessment

Introduction

Institutions of higher education are increasingly requiring libraries to demonstrate their value through ties between librarian-led instruction efforts and advances in student learning. This assessment is important not only for improving library services, but also for demonstrating the impact of the library to accreditors, the alignment of library services to institutional priorities, and the integration of library services throughout the curriculum.

The authors of the present study investigated potential correlations between students' information literacy skill development and participation in at least one library instruction session. Results of the study illustrate librarians as leaders in the important area of student learning outcome assessment, and they demonstrate a positive association between library instruction and IL skill development. Projecting forward, public services librarians who demonstrate that their efforts improve student learning can more easily create deeper collaborative and engaging roles with faculty and curriculum personnel.

Literature Review

The increasing demand for assessment of academic library services is well-documented. The literature includes the wide variety of assessments used to measure the impact of library use and services on student success. The most common form of library instruction to be assessed is the one-shot, in which librarians work with individual instructors to design and implement IL goals in a specific section of a single course. According to Oakleaf and Kaske (2009, p. 277), accrediting bodies are increasingly acknowledging “the importance of information literacy skills, and most accreditation standards have strengthened their emphasis on the teaching roles of libraries.” These authors also stress the importance of librarians choosing assessments that can contribute to university-wide evaluation and accreditation efforts.

In a 2015 report published by the Association of College and Research Libraries, Brown and Malenfant also argue for library assessments that align with institutional priorities and include participation from other campus departments and units. Projects of this nature are more useful and of higher quality than those that only impact libraries. This report
highlights findings from multiple libraries that participated in the Assessment in Action initiative, demonstrating that instruction programs have a positive effect on student success, particularly student grades.

One school that participated in the Assessment in Action program (2014), Kapi‘Olani Community College, found that the majority of students met or exceeded expectations for proficiency in four areas of IL following library instruction: finding sources, utilizing core print Hawaiian Studies texts, using print or online indices, and determining if information met their research needs. The results also exposed areas where students did not meet the anticipated benchmarks, such as evaluating and citing sources. The data showed that additional library instruction increased the number of students who achieved proficiency in IL skills and improved student research confidence.

Other institutions have taken a variety of approaches to integrating IL into the curriculum and aligning student learning outcomes to institutional goals. Stowe (2013) described the process by which the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University implemented an outcomes assessment program aimed at two different courses: freshmen English composition and a core seminar. Students were given a pre-assessment, multiple-choice quiz prior to their first library session, and an identical post-assessment following their second library session. Librarians found that library sessions improved students’ skills in several areas, including correctly identifying databases and their features, and defining an article abstract. Similarly, Colorado State University-Pueblo gave students an ungraded post-test after IL sessions (Seeber, 2013). The quiz measured student mastery of specific IL content, and the results were shared with the course instructor and other librarians. Seeber explained that sharing the results with the small audience built community with faculty who value IL, but limited the broader applicability of the results.

Lowe, Booth, Stone, and Tagge (2015) also examined librarian impact on student learning in the classroom, but did so through research papers drawn from first-year seminar courses across the five Claremont Colleges. Using a rubric that included three information literacy skill areas (Attribution – cited well; Source Evaluation; and Communication of Evidence – synthesized and integrated) and four levels of success, raters generated student scores that were then correlated with the amount of librarian involvement in the courses (e.g., helping write research assignments and teaching library instruction sessions). For all three information literacy learning outcome areas there was a significant correlation between librarian involvement and better developed IL skills. This phenomenon occurred all the way up to the moderate level of librarian involvement, but then the connection was not as great.
for the high level of collaboration. Thus, there seems to be a “sweet spot” between too little and too much librarian/instructor collaboration.

Beyond one-shot or course-specific outcomes, Rockman (2002) describes the value in forming strategic alliances across campus, integrating IL into higher education curricula, and tying assessment to student learning outcomes. In addition to tracing the development of IL integration, Rockman describes a multi-campus approach within the California State University system. Here, the Council of Library Directors worked with campus organizations to create an Information Competence Work Group that brought together faculty, administrators, assessment coordinators, librarians, and general education faculty. This group developed IL instructional materials and provided faculty workshops, with the goal of integrating IL into the entire college curriculum. Asserting that performance- or problem-based assessments hold advantage over other types, this work group conducted a telephone survey of 3,309 students across all campuses about real-world information needs. Data was also collected on students’ academic status, their comfort levels with writing papers, self-rated library skills, computer use, and reading comprehension. The researchers discovered that freshmen underperformed when compared to older students. The work group also conducted ethnographic research on students and faculty regarding their use of the online library resources. Rockman emphasizes that assessment is most useful when it examines performance-based demonstrations, when it is tied to clearly stated objectives, and when it can demonstrate how outcomes improve student learning.

The literature also offers many examples of matches between library instruction session participation and better grades. Soria, et.al. (2013, 2014) have conducted multiple studies that examined student help-seeking behavior and participation in library instruction, and the impact on first-year GPA and first-to-second-year retention. They found that students who used the library at least once during the first year had a statistically significant difference in GPA and were more likely to continue from their first to their second year (Soria, et. al., 2014). An additional study by the same authors also found that the strongest correlations between library use, GPA, and retention were connected to the number of library resources accessed, and to participation in library instruction (Soria, et. al., 2013). Additionally, a study conducted by Bowles-Terry (2012) found that there was a significant relationship between upper-level IL instruction and student GPAs upon graduation.

Other studies have sought to connect library instruction to specific student success measures. Vance, et.al. (2012) investigated the impact of instruction on student retention and first-year GPA. Studying two years of student data, they found that instruction did not
have a significant impact on retention from first to second year; they posit that it may be too difficult to isolate instruction as a single variable of impact. The study was successful, however, in finding a significant correlation between instruction and first-year GPA. According to their study, students who participated in library instruction earned a GPA on average 0.09 higher than their counterparts who did not receive library instruction. Wong and Cmor (2011) conducted a similar study at Hong Kong Baptist University, where they analyzed data for 8,000 students to see if library workshop attendance had an impact on students' GPA at graduation. They found that 24% of their sample groups showed a positive correlation between workshop attendance and GPA. More interestingly, they also found that attendance in more workshops equated to higher GPAs. Overall, they found that only one or two workshops had little impact on student GPA, but when students attended three or more sessions, a positive relationship between their GPA and instruction was more likely to exist. In conclusion, the literature demonstrates the continuing importance of measuring the impact of library instruction on different measures of student success.