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Academic Libraries—Measuring Up: Assessment and Collaboration for Student Success

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Abstract

Purpose - To describe how the Florida State University Libraries used assessment data with other campus partners to gain funding and resources for new initiatives. When general funding sources were threatened, alternative funding sources from these campus partners were used to jump-start new initiatives designed to enhance student success.

Design/methodology/approach - This paper is a case study of how assessment data fueled the creation of a new late-night peer-tutoring program at the Florida State University Libraries. The three main data conduits that inspired a new tutoring program were: an ethnographic study of undergraduate students, undergraduate courses with high failure/high enrollment/high drop rates, and an environmental scan of existing campus tutoring.

Findings - Sharing assessment data with key partners can leverage funding and resources for new initiatives.

Social implications - In hard budgetary times, opportunities for funding and resources may arise when shared values between campus constituencies are met with assessment data. Libraries need to take a leadership role in gathering and sharing that data with other campus constituents in order to place libraries in a strategic position to receive alternative funding for shared initiatives.

Originality/value - Other libraries may use this case as a model, sharing their assessment results with the campus community, especially with those campus constituencies where there is a relationship already in place, to garner further support for piloting new and innovative services.

Keywords: academic libraries, assessment, budget, collaboration, partnerships, student success

Paper type - Case study

1. Introduction

In the grim economic climate of the last five years, academic libraries have been expected to do more with less, while simultaneously being required to demonstrate explicitly how their efforts increase student success. To answer this challenge, Florida State University Libraries sought campus partnerships to generate alternative funding and collected assessment data to provide evidence-based proposals for new programs and facilities. Assessment data supported the effort to establish campus partnerships by showing potential collaborators which shared efforts would have the highest impact to influence student success in ways neither group could do alone.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that in the context of economic decline and increased expectations for library accountability, the use of assessment data influenced new library programming in two important ways: (1) providing it with an evidence-based foundation and (2) securing alternative funding and resources (such as personnel), through campus partnerships.

This paper will begin with a brief empirical portrait of the recession affecting academic libraries, which the authors believe initiated the search for alternative funding and resources. Next, the adoption of assessment research to guide academic libraries' programming will be highlighted. Finally, a demonstration of the effectiveness of these efforts will be shown using a case study of a highly successful library-run tutoring program implemented and maintained in a time of severe budget crisis at Florida State University (FSU).

2. Literature Review

a. Academic Libraries Struggle During a Recession

In 2009 academic libraries at universities across the United States were suffering from dwindling budgets, as shown by three different surveys on academic libraries (Powell, 2011). One survey reported a 64% budget decrease for the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) that was assessed by a 2010 EBSCO survey. Another survey of 641 academic library budgets showed that 44% reported budget decreases for the 2009-2010 fiscal year (Anderson, 2009). The third survey, done by ARL and presented by Anderson (2009, cited in Powell, 2011:106), reflected even more dire budget cuts of 70% for its survey participants. This climate of scant resources forced libraries to justify their budgets and existing services, as well as any new, innovative programs.

FSU was also affected by this national trend and responded by creating a three year plan to cut 56.6 million recurring dollars from its budget to cover state decreases in funding (Florida State University, 2010). For the FSU libraries, budget decreases required cuts in services to students. This meant that the FSU library had to analyze and justify all the services they offered. In addition, it required all new initiatives to be supported by evidence-based research. Furthermore, the budget constraints drove them to reach out to other campus groups to form strategic alliances and partnerships.

b. Academic Libraries Adopt an Assessment Focus

Assessment has been a growing movement in many universities, largely due to a demand for evidence-based policy and programming on university campuses. For academic libraries on campus, a fundamental aim of assessment is to demonstrate an alignment with institutional goals for student success. This alignment requires the academic library to hold itself accountable for student success outcomes such as grade point average (GPA), retention/persistence, and graduation rates (Mezick, 2007; Oakleaf, 2010; Steiner and Holley, 2009) by developing programs toward this end. The effort of developing library services is challenging for institutions balancing budget cuts while simultaneously being pressured to demonstrate their influence on student success. As Mezick (2007: 561) states, “Libraries need to be able to demonstrate how expenditures for resources and services result in significant contributions to academic and social environments that positively impact institutional outcomes such as student persistence.” Below, two important applications of assessment are discussed: collecting and using data to develop evidence-based programming and forming campus partnerships to pool resources in light of budget restrictions.

i. Evidence-based Programming

It is increasingly important for libraries to use assessment to demonstrate their programs are evidence-based and designed to create maximum impact from funding. As Mezick (2007: 561) states, “There is growing pressure on all academic library managers to be more accountable for how they use limited resources and to achieve institutional outcomes perceived as important by college and university stakeholders.” Meeting this pressure for accountability allows libraries to show “their relevance by extending beyond their own agendas to incorporate campus-wide initiatives” (Sullivan, 2010: 131).

Libraries can meet this challenge by developing and marketing programs that are designed to make quantifiable contributions to the broader academic outcomes of the institution. This can be done by measuring and documenting the library programs’ impact in campus-wide initiatives aimed at improving student success outcomes (Emmons and Wilkinson, 2011; Steiner and Holly, 2009). When using this perspective to develop new programs, student-centered pre-assessments can identify when, where, and how students study and learn, whether inside or outside the library.

To this end it is important to identify and target specific gaps in learning related to recognized student success outcomes. In assessing these factors, it is critical to consider potential stakeholder audiences, including students, faculty, other academic staff, administrators, and accreditors (Mezick, 2007). The library needs to use terminology around shared values that other campus entities can understand.

ii. Campus Partnerships

It is widely recognized that student learning and success requires the whole academic community to work together in collaboration (Schmidt and Kaufman, 2007). Libraries and other campus constituencies, such as student organization and support programs, embrace many of the same institutional goals and values to enhance student success outcomes (Forrest, 2005). One of the ways that libraries and student support organizations have formed cooperative partnerships is

to have libraries host student support services in their space, such as hosting the reading and writing center services, to complement the existing library research and resource services. Furthermore, these cooperative partnerships provide a myriad of services to students in one conveniently centralized and accessible location (Steiner and Holley, 2009).

Even though these kinds of cooperative partnerships form based on mutual values, there has been very little literature documenting the role assessment can play in the process. Assessment can be used to demonstrate commitment to evidence-based practice, creating the potential to deepen existing relationships as well as create new ones. This visible commitment to values can contribute to the start-up of new partnership initiatives addressing shared problems (Kezar, 2003). It can also pave the way for partners to pool monetary and non-monetary resources (Swartz *et al.*, 2007). The resulting increased integration of services and interdependence (Stoffle *et al.*, 2008) is identified as necessary to transform a cooperative effort into a true collaboration (Forrest, 2005; for a theory of collaboration see Montiel-Overall, 2005).

Collecting, communicating, and disseminating assessment data, then, is a key function in forming and maintaining campus partnerships by demonstrating that the combined effort will contribute to student success outcomes (Nitecki, 2011). In essence, the groundwork for forming deeper collaborations between established and potential library-campus partnerships can be laid in pre-assessments and environmental scan data.

3. A Case Study at Florida State University

In 2008, FSU Libraries received a direct challenge by the Provost to be accountable for outcomes of undergraduate student success. This challenge was accompanied by a one-time gift of money to create a learning commons on the first floor of the Strozier Library, the main library on campus. During the creation of this learning commons in 2009, FSU Libraries was impacted by the budget cuts to universities in Florida (Florida State University, 2010). Within the context of this financial hardship, library administration encouraged all library departments to collectively examine how they each might measurably increase faculty and student success with low cost, high impact services and programs. One such proposed service, which is the basis of this case study, was the creation of a library-managed tutoring program. This tutoring program was proposed on the basis of data collected from three assessments and was implemented through partnerships between the library and the Student Government Association (SGA) as well as other student organizations and academic departments.

a. Assessment Research Informing the Tutoring Program

Evidence had to be gathered and considered during the impact-cost analysis to justify the formation of new programming. This evidence included assessment data from all available sources both inside and outside the library. In this case, three assessments came together to aid in the formation of partnerships and to gain funding and resources: (i) An ethnographic study of undergraduate study habits, (ii) an assessment of high impact courses, and (iii) an environmental assessment of campus tutoring. This allowed for the creation of a library managed, nighttime peer-tutoring program, which was highly successful.

i. Study Habits

The FSU Libraries' Undergraduate Study of Student Study Habits in 2008 would impact not only the renovation of the first floor of the main library, but would give the Libraries' learning commons data to share with other partners to fund new and innovative programs and services. The Undergraduate Study commenced in response to the Provost's charge mentioned previously. Inspired by the ethnographic techniques used in the Rochester study (Foster and Gibbons, 2007), FSU Libraries' Undergraduate Services staff conducted a comprehensive study of over 1,300 subjects. Methods used were interviews, focus groups, maps of students' daily lives, photo diaries, design charrettes, photographs of students in their natural study environments, and furniture preference surveys. The results challenged librarian, staff and administrators' assumptions about student study habits and preferences and shaped the different services planned for the newly renovated floor.

The results from this study included three main findings that shaped the tutoring program: Firstly, FSU librarians and staff learned that students were eight times more likely to study between 8pm and midnight as to study between 8am and noon. Moreover, students were almost five times more likely to study between midnight and 4am as to study between 8am and noon. Thus, librarians and staff empirically supported their observations that many students, by necessity or by preference, studied in the evenings.

Secondly, the common conception of students as social creatures was supported by the data which showed students study communally with friends and classmates. The social factor, e.g., "being seen," was important when choosing where to study. Undergraduates revealed that they sometimes liked to study in the presence of other students to increase motivation. Further, they talked about meeting in the library to study with classmates. This social and group aspect to studying helped librarians and staff to understand the value of having tutoring in the library, since informal class support groups were already occurring there.

Thirdly, students put a high value on convenience. They wanted a space that supported "one stop shopping," giving them access to all the necessary tools and amenities when completing an assignment. Students not only wanted coffee and "comfy" seating but also wanted services to be available during times when they preferred to study. This resulted in the decision to keep the main library open 24 hours a day for 5 days a week.

The desire to provide users with services at all hours was communicated to FSU Libraries' partners, such as the Reading and Writing Center, so they could offer their services at non-traditional hours. Furthermore, when the tutoring project was being planned, the library employees knew that these student preferences and habits needed to be kept in mind.

ii. High Impact Courses

To make sure that programing was focused on influencing the three student success outcomes identified by the Provost as priorities, librarians and staff gathered high-enrollment, high-drop, and high-failure rate data from the University Registrar's office. The data in those three areas were compiled into one spreadsheet so that courses that satisfied all three criteria

could be identified. This allowed the library to ascertain where the libraries could invest resources to have the greatest impact.

All of this data and its analysis were shared with SGA and other partners. It also served to inform discussions among library departments as well as influencing communications with potential new partners. This data, introduced during the brainstorming for high impact, low cost programs, caused the library staff to identify tutoring as a potential “high impact practice,” which could positively influence student success (Oakleaf, 2010: 6).

iii. Environment

After combining the data from the 2008 Undergraduate Study of Student Study Habits and the high impact course studies, library employees started to form a plan for a tutoring program based on four criteria. The program would be offered between 7pm and 1am when many students study. It would focus on identified high impact classes, those with high fail, drop, and enrollment rates. Tutoring would be offered for free in a central location, addressing students’ need for convenience. Finally, it would be peer-based, reflecting students’ social preferences.

Librarians and staff sought to understand whether the existing, decentralized tutoring programs were meeting those five criteria on campus. At the time, only partial information was available about tutoring being offered. Thus, a systematic, environmental scan of existing tutoring types, times, and locations was performed.

The libraries began by contacting undergraduate coordinators for the programs with high drop, fail, and enrollment courses. This was to ensure that the proposed tutoring program would not compete with or duplicate existing services but rather supplement them. The results from this assessment showed there was an unmet need that the proposed tutoring program could fill. The library was in a unique position to offer late tutoring hours because the space was already open late at night and had high student traffic.

b. Campus Partnerships

From the environmental assessment work, FSU Libraries also discovered further bases for partnerships beyond the mutual goal of student success (Swartz *et al.*, 2007). The Libraries uncovered areas of strength and weakness in the academic programs’ infrastructure. This information was used to target the most likely candidates for partnership. Staff and librarians approached these candidates with partnership offers, providing them with resources that they lacked, such as centralized, highly visible space and wireless access. In return partners would share some of their resources, such as departmentally supported, trained tutors and subject specialized training for new tutors. This data driven approach was highly successful, and partnerships were forged with four targeted departments, Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, and Physics. Staff and librarians gained resources that would have otherwise been costly simply by assessing and leveraging the value of existing library resources.

During the Summer 2009, Florida State University Libraries took this data and presented it to key leaders in FSU’s SGA, who made up the FSU Libraries Student Advisory Group. They have been the Libraries’ primary alternative funding source, largely because their mission and

goals aligned with FSU Libraries on this tutoring initiative (Allen *et al.*, 2010; Swartz *et al.*, 2007). Prior to the advisory meeting where high failure, enrollment, and drop course data was shared, they had, independently identified tutoring as a priority need on campus and had already gathered some data on another potential source of tutoring.

When FSU librarians and staff shared with SGA the data that was collected on tutoring on campus, it resonated with SGA's student-centric focus and their own desire for data driven initiatives. Data on user behavior and the data from the environmental assessment came together to form a peer-tutoring model which provided free, nighttime tutoring for courses which were shown to be challenging for a large groups of students. SGA was also pleased that the program complemented, but did not duplicate, existing tutoring services on campus and fulfilled a need that was not met elsewhere on campus. Consequently, they created a resolution to the student senate to win initial, non-reoccurring funds for the tutoring project.

4. Case Study Outcome

The foundational assessments used to build the program paid off more than just financially. Results demonstrated that 81% of students surveyed felt that the tutoring positively impacted their grades in class. The number of visits to the tutoring program grew 189% from the program's inception in the fall of 2009 to the end of spring 2010. It created a positive buzz among campus administration that was touted by the Provost, campus stakeholders, and the students themselves. Proving the data collected was valid, the participation rate of the libraries' nighttime tutoring ended up exceeding the participation rate of the day time tutoring program housed in the same space. As it stands now, the program is supporting the courses with the potential to have the highest impact on student success outcomes. The assessment data has helped FSU Libraries regain funding from SGA each year since the Fall 2009 to support the library managed tutoring program.

Presently, the library staff managing the tutoring program are analyzing data to see if there are any statistically significant correlations between the program use and student success measures. Specifically, do students who use the tutoring multiple times have higher course grades than those who use the tutoring rarely or not at all? Are students who use the library managed tutoring less likely to drop out of a course than non-tutored students? While there are numerous variables that influence student success, these correlations will begin to give insight into the relationship between library services and student success (Mezick, 2007).

5. Discussion

Assuming an assessment is valid, reliable, and relevant, there are still many obstacles that can make leveraging the data to gain partnerships and funding ineffective. For example, sometimes the data and plan proposed is innovative and might force library staff and campus partner(s) into a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1970) in their perception of their own or the library's roles. If there is a cause for competition, conflict, or mistrust between the library and a potential partner, this can cause the possible partner to disregard the data because they feel there is an

agenda behind the assessment (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006). In fact, a climate of constricted financial resources can lead to unproductive competition for limited resources between potential campus partners, as stakeholders attempt to delineate their unique contributions, roles, and successes (Forrest, 2005). Ignoring this threat can stifle the burgeoning “collaborations that might actually expand both parties’ institutional strength and value” (Forrest, 2005:12). Furthermore, if assessment data is presented in a dry manner outside any meaningful context (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006), it is less likely to engage the audience’s (a potential campus partner) interest or affect their understanding, lessening the impact of the data and plan.

Additionally, while the assessment-partnership approach has been successful in our case in gaining start-up resources, it does not guarantee long-term financial success. Funding sustainability, even within strong partnerships, is always a challenge. For example, SGA, the largest alternative funding source in the case discussed, cannot create a reoccurring source of funding for the tutoring due to limitations in the nature of SGA resources. This problem is exacerbated by SGA’s regular member turnover, which disrupts critical cooperative relationships. This means the assessments and data demonstrating the libraries’ commitment to SGA shared values must constantly be refreshed. FSU Libraries hopes to address this problem by showing statistically significant correlations between the tutoring program and student success outcomes discussed earlier. Data showing the established program provides measurable student success outcomes will, hopefully, allow the program to obtain funding from limited amount of stable, reoccurring funding sources available.

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