Assessing for Alignment
How to Win Collaborators and Influence Stakeholders

Stephanie Mikitish, Rutgers University

Vanessa Kitzie, University of South Carolina

Lynn Silipigni Connaway, OCLC Research

MORE THAN EVER, academic library administrators and staff must demonstrate and communicate their library's value to institutional stakeholders, funders, and governance boards. An essential area for library administrators and staff to explore is how the library advances its institution's mission and goals, particularly those related to student learning and success.[1] This chapter reports on findings from an action-oriented research agenda project that examined how academic libraries can contribute to student learning and success and demonstrate these contributions.[2] The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) commissioned the project, entitled *Academic Library Impact: Improving Practice and Essential Areas to Research*, and awarded it to OCLC Research.

The three data sources that informed findings from the report included a substantive review of literature published from 2010 to 2016 on this topic, including all projects from the ACRL program Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries and Student Success (AiA);[3] focus group interviews with academic library administrators from diverse colleges and universities; and semi-structured, individual interviews with provosts[4] from these same institutions.

This chapter identifies how researchers and professionals can leverage the AiA approach to advance three key priority areas: communication, collaboration, and institutional mission and alignment. The chapter summarizes these priority areas, discusses the major differences between AiA and non-AiA projects, and suggests ways the AiA approach can contribute to effective practices and investigate selected research questions from the report. The team has based these recommendations on analysis of provost interviews. These interviews provide researchers and professionals with the needed perspective of higher education administration, which often is missing in current work.

Methods

The report employed a mixed-methods approach; the use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods strengthened the research design, results, and findings. The literature review included documents published between 2010 and 2016 and retrieved from library and information science (LIS) and higher education databases that addressed the impact of library resources on student learning and success.[5] The project team retrieved a total of 535 documents.

Of these documents, 166 (31%) were theoretical (i.e., literature reviews, discussions of a theoretical model or framework, thought pieces), and 369 (69%) were research (i.e., empirical studies), including 178 AiA projects.

To supplement the literature, the project team recruited an advisory group of library administrators from fourteen institutions for an online focus group and in-person brainstorming sessions. Library administrators represented community colleges ($n = 2$, 14%), four-year colleges ($n = 2$, 14%), and research universities ($n = 10$, 71%) from secular ($n = 11$, 79%), nonsecular ($n = 3$, 21%), public ($n = 9$, 64%), and private ($n = 5$, 36%) institutions representing the four geographical regions of the US. Focus group questions elicited how the members of the advisory group supported their institutions' mission and goals and communicated both this support and their library's value to high-level stakeholders. The advisory group then participated in two follow-up brainstorming sessions to provide feedback on the preliminary results of data analysis. Each advisory group member also connected the project team with a provost from each of their institutions for individual, semi-structured interviews by telephone. Focus group responses informed the questions for these interviews. Specifically, advisory group members wanted to know how the library's communication of value compared to those of other departments or units within each institution, as well as elements of a successful, modest funding request. The data related to the interviews and sessions include recordings, transcriptions, and detailed recorder notes.

The project team imported the data from the literature review and interviews into NVivo and coded, or categorized them by relevant themes.[6] These themes consisted of outcomes (e.g., student learning, success); library resources (i.e., collections, spaces, services); and, when applicable, research document characteristics (e.g., data analysis methods, institution types, etc.). Once the project team coded the data by themes, they calculated descriptive statistics to compare how often each data source discussed the themes. Post hoc analysis techniques identified trends and patterns within the data sources.[7]

Based on results from coding and statistical analyses, the report identified six priority areas that represent the codes, or themes, most identified by the data sources. These priority areas are interrelated; addressing one priority area often effects change in other areas. The report also provided effective practices for library implementation and research questions requiring further study.[8]

This chapter addresses three of these priority areas: communication, collaboration, and institutional mission and alignment. The authors chose these areas because there were statistically significant differences[9] between how AiA and non-AiA studies approached these themes. The differences suggest that future studies targeting these priority areas could benefit from using the AiA approach of team-based collaborative assessment. Key differences between AiA and non-AiA approaches were in how researchers conducted the assessments; how administrators, faculty, and staff outside the library were involved in the assessment; and how researchers reported the assessment results to stakeholders.

Priority Area: Communicate the Library's Contributions

The library administrators and provosts interviewed identified the library's ability to effectively communicate its contributions to student learning and success to institutional stakeholders as a central priority. The project team coded the communication theme most often in the data as compared to the other themes. Despite its importance and prevalence, the highly contextual nature of communication eludes reduction to a series of best practices. For this reason, library administrators and staff experience difficulty getting the attention of potential stakeholders, such as faculty.

Provosts recognized this difficulty and identified a gap between stakeholder perceptions and how the library contributes to student learning and success, adding value to the institution.[10] This gap results in a series of "myths" about the library if stakeholders recognize only certain resources the library provides, such as collections. The following provost discusses one myth about the library that many of her colleagues adopt:

> The big myth …is that, that many faculty don't engage with the library, because they feel that, "Well, the library is online." Right? Students can access everything from a distance. (Provost PP04)

Another gap in perception regards the language used to communicate library value. A key finding from the report was that library administrators and staff use the word *service* as a catch-all term to describe the library's resources, whereas provosts prefer more specified terms, such as *teaching and learning*, *customer service*, or *space*. A recent large-scale study of how teaching faculty and librarians view the library suggests that better communication can decrease these gaps.[11]

The literature reviewed addressed communication less frequently than library administrators and provosts. This theme ranked fourth among the themes identified in this data source, and its frequency was not significant, defined as being one or less than one standard deviation from the mean of all theme frequencies. However, the communication theme was more prevalent in AiA projects than any other theme. The difference between the frequency of the theme in AiA projects versus non-AiA projects was also statistically significant.

One of the reasons AiA projects focused more on communication as compared to non-AiA projects was that the AiA program required the applicants to form teams of "senior librarians, chief academic administrators, and institutional researchers,"[12] with at least two members working outside the library. This partnership guaranteed communication started from the earliest stage and continued throughout the life of each project, with team leaders raising awareness over time about the library's resources and programs with these outside stakeholders. In addition, library administrators and staff could learn what terms stakeholders used when describing library value and adopt these terms to better communicate with them. Partnerships with outside stakeholders also fostered collaboration, an interrelated priority area discussed in the next section.

The action research design of AiA projects also may have contributed to their focus on communication. Since different types of data and different approaches will appeal to different stakeholders, using a variety of methods can facilitate communication with more audiences. AiA projects used a greater variety of methods (i.e., more quantitative methods, including correlation) and were twice as likely to use mixed methods as non-AiA projects. These differences were statistically significant. Having more options to communicate research findings is crucial, given the highly contextualized nature of how individuals in different areas and levels of an institution communicate value. The following provost account exemplifies the importance of context for library administrators and staff when communicating with others:

> There is not one specific thing a library can do because the environments are so different. Thinking of how these new learning environments work, and how the library would enhance students' and faculty's ability to access and process knowledge, data, [and] information in those particular kinds of environment[s] …that is what libraries need to do to be successful. (Provost PP02)

Changes at the administrative level in an institution signify that the type of data one administrator prefers to receive may differ from a replacement's preferences.[13] For this reason, library administrators and staff should embrace the use of varied and mixed methods to increase the ability of their research findings to communicate value regardless of context.

Communicating with various institutional stakeholders also addresses an effective practice identified in the report: Librarians should "explore ways to effectively communicate both up and out, regarding both message and the method" of how the library affects student learning and success.[14] Studies that adopt the AiA approach of involving collaborators and audiences from areas outside the library (e.g., presenting findings at a higher education conference) have a greater likelihood of being noticed and read by administrators.

Findings from the report denoted additional communication-related effective practices to implement at the library that complement the team-based component of the AiA approach. These practices are

- "Communicate with those outside of the library and high in the institution's administration because they can offer a bird's-eye view of what the library should be doing and can be advocates …and supporters …if they feel invested in and a part of the library."
- "Determine the terminology used by provosts to communicate the library's value and adopt this terminology in subsequent communications."[15]

Research questions for the communication priority area that would benefit most from leveraging the AiA approach are

- RQ1: "How do faculty envision the integration of library services, collections, and spaces for teaching and learning?"
- RQ2: "What are the main barriers to communication between library administrators and staff and educational stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty, administrators)?"
- RQ3: "How are other units effectively communicating with stakeholders?"[16]

Using the AiA approach, future studies exploring how the library contributes to student-centered outcomes should continue to involve project team members from outside the library. These members can provide the context critical for developing, executing, and reporting study findings in ways that resonate with institutional stakeholders. Possible team members include faculty and teaching assistants (RQ1); students, faculty, and administrators (RQ2); and administrators and staff in instructional support units, such as writing and tutoring centers (RQ3).

Team members also can suggest ways that other researchers outside LIS have framed topics or problems in non-LIS literature. LIS researchers can utilize these suggestions to identify important areas and methods addressed within non-LIS studies to better demonstrate the library's contribution to student learning and success. Library administrators and staff then will be able to showcase these new forms of data collection and analysis in outside venues, such as higher education outlets, directed toward provosts and higher education administrators. Outside literature applicable to the identified research questions include pedagogical research, which also may appear in the literature for specific disciplinary areas (RQ1); white papers, reports, and journals; and daily or weekly digests, such as Inside Higher Ed, which provide timely discussions and perspectives on student learning and success topics (RQs 2 and 3). Finally, the research designs addressing these research questions should continue to vary in their application to capture diverse institutional contexts, informed by the three communication-related effective practices outlined above.

Priority Area: Collaborate with Educational Stakeholders

Collaboration between library and non-library stakeholders represents another theme that the project team frequently identified in all three data sources. Both the literature reviewed and the interviews with library administrators identified this theme second-most, and both frequencies were significant (i.e., more than one standard deviation from the mean of all theme frequencies). Collaboration also became more popular over time within the literature reviewed; the proportion of documents including the collaboration theme doubled from 2010 to 2016.[17]

The project team identified collaboration less often in the provost interviews; further, the frequency of the collaboration theme in the provost interviews was not significant. Collaboration ranked fourth among the other themes, following communication, mission alignment and strategy, and teaching and learning. However, this finding does not suggest provosts do not envision collaboration as important. Instead, they view collaboration as facilitated by mission alignment and strategy. Therefore, when contemplating how to communicate value, library administrators and staff should consider how collaboration integrates into the goals and missions of their respective institutions. One area where provosts want library administrators and staff to collaborate is in using space. Library stakeholders can achieve such collaboration by offering meeting space to both institutional stakeholders and outside community members or by hosting writing and tutoring centers. This type of collaboration also provides provosts with a visual indication of the library's value. Per the following provost account

> I think [space] is one of the most effective ways to get the message out. That…
> might involve, as an example, making meeting rooms in the library more generally
> available for people to come and do projects. Creating …the library as this sort of
> center of intellectual activity. (Provost PP09)

This provost's account also highlights the interrelationship between the communication and collaboration priority areas. For library administrators and staff to effectively communicate their value, they must collaborate. Such collaboration fosters a mutual investment in creating and communicating library value that strengthens the library's position within the community.

There are several factors that library administrators and staff must consider when collaborating. These factors include whom to collaborate with (e.g., inter-institutional or intra-institutional collaborators) and at what level (e.g., individual, course, departmental, and program levels; sharing space versus coordinating services).[18] Like communication, the types of collaboration library administrators and staff adopt are highly contextual and vary based on institutional priorities.

There were a few statistically significant differences between AiA and non-AiA projects related to collaboration. Thematically, AiA projects focused on collaboration more than non-AiA projects. However, only one AiA project involved collaboration between institutions, while nearly a quarter of non-AiA projects involved such collaboration. The AiA approach has demonstrated that a variety of institutional stakeholders will work with library administrators and staff on grants. Now, library stakeholders should extend this approach to similar stakeholders outside the institution. For instance, library administrators and staff could work with researchers on joint grant applications or publications.[19] Such collaboration invests outside stakeholders in the project's premise, execution, and results, while also augmenting the project with different disciplinary perspectives.

More specific collaboration-related effective practices to implement the collaborative aspect of the AiA approach are

- "Understand that there are different types and levels of collaboration and consider looking at literature from other related fields to see what is said about libraries and" similar issues that libraries are facing or may face.
- "[Partner] with academic …administrators, academic services staff, faculty, students, alumni, and other members of [the regional and] local communities" to reach shared institutional goals.
- "Partner with institutions outside the university or college, such as government and commercial institutions."[20]

Research questions for the collaboration priority area that would benefit most by strategically employing the AiA approach are

- RQ1: "How can library administrators and staff collaborate with [other educational stakeholders] to increase student learning and success?"
- RQ2: "What can library administrators and staff learn from institutional units that have [positively] increased student learning and success?"
- RQ3: "How can library administrators and staff contribute to areas that demonstrate the most promise for benefiting from library collaboration to increase positive student learning outcomes?"[21]

One way for library administrators and staff to approach RQs 1 and 2 is to collaborate with outside stakeholders to develop research questions and methods that resonate with the populations these stakeholders represent. Perhaps the most significant benefit of this collaboration is that these stakeholders, particularly teaching faculty and administrative staff, can connect library administrators and staff to *potential* library users normally not included in library studies. Projects investigating RQ3 might begin with a collaborative literature review discussing significant areas of interest to both library and non-library stakeholders and conclude by reporting study results in library and non-library venues.

Priority Area: Match Library Assessment to the Institution's Mission

A final priority area that aligns with the AiA approach is matching libraries' assessments to their institution's mission of promoting "institutionally identified student outcomes."[22] Unlike the other themes, the project team found only provosts to consider mission alignment and strategy a significant theme. The provosts focused on this theme slightly less than communication. The lack of focus on this theme in the other data sources suggests that it represents a gap between how provosts and library administrators and staff envision the library's contribution to student-centered outcomes. Namely, the latter conceive library value by effective collaboration and communication, whereas provosts envision collaboration and communication *in service of* mission alignment and strategy. If library administrators and staff align their spaces, collections, and services with the intuition's mission, they will engage in effective collaboration and communication.

In the literature reviewed, there was a significant difference between the proportion of research and theoretical documents focusing on this theme. Theoretical documents addressed this theme more than research documents, indicating that library administrators and staff say this theme is important, but do not actually study it.[23] Further, the proportion of all literature reviewed examining this theme decreased from 2010 to 2016. A recent study echoed this finding by reporting that

most of the 722 library directors surveyed felt less strategically aligned and valued by their supervisors and their administration than those responding in 2013 to the same survey.[24]

One benefit of the AiA approach as related to mission alignment and strategy is that it attracted project teams from diverse institutions. AiA projects had more proportional participation from the four areas of the US and more representation of community colleges and colleges than non-AiA projects. The grant-funded nature of the program may have facilitated the ability of the AiA approach to foster a more diverse set of project teams and may have been of greater benefit to less resourced and smaller institutions, such as community colleges. Since the AiA approach encouraged research on library value across various institutions, findings from AiA projects offer broader approaches for aligning the value of academic libraries with their institutional missions. Future researchers should maintain this diversity of approaches. Not all libraries have the resources to perform wide-scale studies, and for this reason, it is crucial that libraries collaborate intra-institutionally to capture the various contexts in which libraries must demonstrate their value.

While the team-based and collaborative aspects of the AiA approach can take many different forms (e.g., configurations of teams, levels of collaboration), the assessment aspect of the AiA approach must closely attend to the structures of mission strategy and alignment. In an example provided by Provost PP09, if library administrators and staff wish to develop buy-in for an open access policy, they must consider how this policy aligns with their institution's mission. Stakeholders, such as faculty, may not be interested to hear that open access provides a moral good. Instead, what might incentivize them is hearing that posting an early version of their study in the university's repository is likely to get them increased citations, which they need to meet institutional promotion and tenure policies.

Effective practices related to mission alignment and strategy facilitated by the AiA approach are
- "Work with teaching and learning support services and directly with faculty and students to build a culture of assessment using both qualitative and quantitative data for collection, analysis, and reporting."
- "Be open to adopting less traditional roles for services, collections, spaces, and staff to fulfill the strategic mission of the university."
- "Be aware of student and faculty demographics and respond to their needs and characteristics."[25]

Research questions for the mission alignment and strategy priority area that would most benefit from employing the AiA approach are
- RQ1: "In what ways have the support by library administrators and staff of the institution's mission and [specific] goals affected student learning and success outcomes?"
- RQ2: "How do libraries compare to other support units in demonstrating their impact on the institutional mission and goals?"
- RQ3: "How do library administrators and staff support accreditation efforts, and are these efforts recognized by the institution?"[26]

RQ1 directly addresses the need to frame findings using institution-specific goals that affect its mission. RQ2 emphasizes the importance of other contextual layers, such as comparing the impacts of library resources on student-centered outcomes to those of other institutional units. The collaborative assessment aspect of the AiA approach can ensure that the research questions, methodology, and discussion of the study facilitate comparison among these units. For instance, a project that partners libraries with writing centers may collect and analyze the same students' essays to compare the effects of their interventions on grades. RQ3 offers an example of one institutional goal—accreditation. Other student support services, such as information technology, want

to demonstrate how their resources support this goal, but the administration and other higher education stakeholders may not view these services as supporting accreditation. The AiA's team-based collaboration aspects can benefit libraries and these other units by identifying assessments that align with institutional priorities in a more comprehensive manner through the consideration of multiple inter- and intra-departmental contexts.

Conclusion

The AiA program contributed a diverse set of library impact studies that inform current and future work. These studies address three themes considered crucial to provosts in articulating library value: communication, collaboration, and institutional mission alignment and strategy. Researchers can harness the advantages of this approach in order to address several priority areas identified in the *Academic Library Impact* report as essential for library administrators and staff to explore. A key way the AiA approach can further research in the communication priority area is by using a wide variety of methods to appeal to different areas and levels of senior leadership. By using a variety of methods, researchers will be able to ensure they can communicate their empirical research in outside venues, such as higher education outlets. Another way that library administrators and staff can incorporate the AiA approach to communication is by establishing partnerships with stakeholders outside the library. Library stakeholders should recruit other stakeholders at a variety of levels and areas, both inter- and intra-institutionally. These partnerships allow library administrators and staff to solicit the input of these stakeholders when developing, executing, and reporting study findings.

Partnering with outside stakeholders also links to the collaboration priority area, illustrating how these areas are interrelated. This area can benefit from an AiA approach by emphasizing inter-institutional collaboration to foster a mutual investment in creating and communicating library value. Intra-institutional collaboration is also important to increase the diversity of perspectives and resources libraries can bring to bear and represents an area for improvement within the AiA approach. Library administrators and staff should collaborate with stakeholders from a variety of institutions to fully capture the various contexts in which libraries must assess and demonstrate their value. Such collaboration also augments the research projects with various disciplinary perspectives.

Finally, the AiA approach can strengthen research and practice in the mission alignment and strategy priority area. By adopting this approach, library administrators and staff can clarify library value and how it contributes to the institution's mission. Such clarification is important since provosts place a high value on this alignment. Further, library administrators and staff should communicate assessment and value in a way that resonates with this mission (e.g., by using terms included in the institution's mission statement and other institutional documentation). A final benefit of an AiA approach is that it engenders inter-institutional comparison of how library resources impact student-centered outcomes to other departmental units. Such comparison also facilitates collaboration, since library staff must work with these units, and communication, in order for libraries to demonstrate mission strategy and alignment in a comprehensive manner that embraces inter- and intra- institutional contexts.

Biographies

Stephanie Mikitish, PhD, is the user engagement and assessment librarian at the John Cotton Dana Library at Rutgers University–Newark. Her work guides the development and improvement of spaces, services, workflows, and resources that support the instruction and research endeavors of the Rutgers–Newark community. Reach her at mikitish@libraries.rutgers.edu.

Vanessa Kitzie, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the School of Information and Communications, University of South Carolina. Her research interests center on how to improve information agencies and systems in meeting people's needs, particularly marginalized groups. She is the current Chair of the American Library Association (ALA) Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table (GLBTRT) Advocacy Committee. Reach her at kitzie@mailbox.sc.edu.

Lynn Silipigni Connaway, PhD, is a Senior Research Scientist and Director of User Research at OCLC Research. She is the Past President of the Association of Information Science & Technology (ASIS&T) and was the Chair of the American Library Association (ALA) Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Value of Academic Libraries Committee. Dr. Connaway is the co-author of the 4th and 5th editions of *Basic Research Methods for Librarians* and of the 6th edition, titled *Research Methods in Library and Information Science*. She has authored numerous other publications and frequently is an international and national speaker on how individuals get their information and engage with technology and the assessment and development of user-centered library services. To find out more about Dr. Connaway, visit http://www.oclc.org/research/people/connaway.html. Reach her at connawal@oclc.org.

Notes

1. Lynn Silipigni Connaway, William Harvey, Vanessa Kitzie, and Stephanie Mikitish, *Action-Oriented Research Agenda on Library Contributions to Student Learning and Success* (Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, January 10, 2017), http://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/themes/acrl-research-agenda-jan-2017.pdf.
2. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic Library Impact: Improving Practice and Essential Areas to Research*, prepared by Lynn Silipigni Connaway, William Harvey, Vanessa Kitzie, and Stephanie Mikitish of OCLC Research (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017).The report is available as a free PDF at http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/publications/whitepapers/academiclib.pdf for download, and in print for purchase through the ALA store website.
3. AiA was undertaken by ACRL in partnership with the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU). The program, a cornerstone of ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries initiative, was made possible by a three-year National Leadership Demonstration Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.
4. Throughout this chapter, the term *provost* is used as a catch-all to indicate all senior academic officers. See Appendix C of the main report, Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic Library Impact,* for more details.
5. Association of College and Research Libraries, "Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries and Student Success," accessed January 4, 2017, http://www.ala.org/acrl/AiA.
6. For further instruction about how NVivo can be used for coding of data, see Lynn Silipigni Connaway and Marie L. Radford, *Research Methods in Library and Information Science*, 6th ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2017), 290–96.
7. For more information about the data collection and analysis methods, as well as for the full codebook, see the report Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic Library Impact*.
8. For additional explication of these areas, as well as exemplary studies and proposed research designs, see the report Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic Library Impact*.

9.   Statistical significance is defined as $p < 0.05$ for Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic Library Impact*.

10. McGraw-Hill Education, *The Changing Role of Libraries*, white paper (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2016), https://learn.mheducation.com/rs/303-FKF-702/images/Whitepaper_AccessEducation_RoleofLibraries_10-2016_v4%20%283%29.pdf.

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13. Susan Resneck Pierce, "Producing Academic Leaders," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 26, 2011, https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2011/01/26/producing-academic-leaders; American Council on Education, "Chief Academic Officer Survey: The CAO Job," infographic, accessed August 3, 2017, http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Chief-Academic-Officer-Survey-the-CAO-Job.pdf.

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21. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic Library Impact*, 9.

22. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic Library Impact*, 50.

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25. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic Library Impact*, 51.

26. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic Library Impact*, 4.