Guest Editorial

Special Issue Editors' Introduction

In 2009, responding to a new level of challenges to academic libraries brought on by the recession, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) created the Value of Academic Libraries (VAL) initiative and allocated funding for a systematic review of existing literature, resulting in the 2010 *Value of Academic Libraries* report by Megan Oakleaf.[1] To take this work forward, the value of academic libraries became a goal in ACRL's *Plan for Excellence* in 2011, with a committee dedicated to furthering work in that area.[2]

The 2017 publication of *Academic Library Impact: Improving Practice and Essential Areas to Research* marks the latest milestone for the VAL initiative.[3] The report, prepared for ACRL by a team from OCLC Research, analyzed existing literature in library and information science and higher education.[4] They built on that scholarship with focus group interviews and brainstorming sessions with academic library administrators and college and university provosts. The authors suggested six priority areas for new research in the field highlighting the impact of academic libraries on student learning and success. They are listed here:
1. Communicate the library's contributions;
2. Match library assessment to institution's mission;
3. Include library data in institutional data collection;
4. Quantify the library's impact on student success;
5. Enhance teaching and learning; and
6. Collaborate with educational stakeholders.

ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries committee decided to further that research agenda by funding Academic Library Impact research grants, the first of which were awarded in June 2018. Some of the recipients were selected as authors for this issue; their work is included here. This special issue is itself a response to the new research agenda, as all of the articles included relate to and reflect on those priority areas. Because each article often addresses more than one priority area, we grouped them and our following discussion around broader themes.

The articles in the first section of the issue—Collaboration and Communication—focus on collaborative practices in academic libraries, from sharing space, to building partnerships across the campus community, to engaging users. Katy Kelly surveyed peer institutions about their practices in planning and promoting co-curricular programming. The results speak to the ways in which libraries develop collaborative partnerships to contribute to wider institutional strategic goals. Theresa Westbrock's study resulted from the sharing of physical space. With both undergraduate tutors and a reference desk positioned centrally in the library, they ensured that students seeking assistance could get the help they needed by developing a strong referral system. Nick Faulk and Emily Crist also shared the goal of reaching users more effectively. They asked faculty and online students about their preferred methods of communication with and

from the library in a two-phase study. Their discussion offers insights into both the preferences of these key groups and implications for future service offerings. Jennifer Mayer and her coauthors' study examines library contributions to student success from a unique perspective that includes not only quantitative data, but also the voices of students in their qualitative analysis. They asked students how they defined success and the role the library played in it, showing that engaging in dialogue with users can challenge and change library perspectives.

Much of the literature on the impact of academic libraries centers on quantitative data collection and analysis. In the second section—Assessing Student Success—three articles make use of library and institutional data to examine possible correlations between library use and student success. Rebecca Croxton and Anne Cooper Moore describe how the library, along with student affairs and student success units, contributed student data to a repository that library and university leadership can use to identify resources, services, and activities that contribute to student success. The authors found a positive relationship between student success and engagement with university resources, including the library. Penny Beile and her coauthors likewise found a positive correlation between students' use of library services and GPA. They used those results to make program improvements and to advocate for inclusion in university-wide efforts. Linda Anderson and Susan Vega Garcia surveyed student attitudes toward the library and its role in their success. This data was later matched with student library usage and GPA, and the authors found that library use did not explain very much of a student's GPA. However, they did find that students who believe the library contributes to their success are also the students who tend to use the library more. The authors conclude that, in considering how and whether the library contributes to student success, perhaps assessments should look beyond GPA and focus more on student-centered measures.

Two other articles in the assessment section may provide a model for what those student-centered measures could look like. Sara Lowe, Abby Currier, and Steven Graunke examined first-year and upper-level students' information literacy competencies in an effort to establish a baseline and map information literacy across the curriculum. The authors sought to determine whether there was a correlation between NSSE information literacy responses and information literacy rubric scores that assessed students' end-of-semester assignments, and what (if any) indicators correlated to improved performance for first-year students. They found a statistically significant impact on first-year students' rubric scores when they had a librarian in their class. Maglen Epstein and Bridget Draxler conducted a mixed-methods study that included student surveys, reflections, focus groups, and interviews to examine the impact of a collaborative peer tutoring program for research and writing support. The utilization of student-centered assessment and student perspectives can highlight what large-scale GPA-based studies miss: the quality of instruction and the things actually learned. What we can most easily measure (such as grades or usage) is not necessarily what does the most good in learners' lives.

The final section of this issue—Researcher Perspectives—includes two articles that take a different approach to the theme. Prompted by the publication of the 2017 *Academic Library Impact* report with its focus on the perspectives of university administrators, Starr Hoffman and James Cheng saw a neglect of the perspective of the researchers studying the impact of academic libraries. Through surveys and interviews, they found tension in opinions about research methods and the overall purpose of work in this field. The authors from the Data Doubles team—Kyle M.L. Jones, Kristin Briney, Abigail Goben, Dorothea Salo, Andrew

Asher, and Michael Perry—likewise take a step back to review existing literature in the area of learning analytics, addressing its many challenges and critiques, specifically related to its incorporation into academic library services and research. They advocate for a stronger adherence to professional ethical principles and better training and support for researchers undertaking work in this area.

As a whole, we recognize that this issue contains internal tensions. Higher education institutions are calling on all units to demonstrate value as enrollments decline, costs rise, and budgets decrease or remain stagnant. This makes assessment unavoidable, and connecting the library to retention and success is the way most leadership interpret value and want to see it demonstrated. This brings associated risks: risks to students whose privacy may be disregarded or dismissed, and risks to libraries that may end up in a perpetual cycle of assessing and *proving* their value, but often without the resources or institutional culture that would allow them to *improve*.[5]

Where does this leave us? If we have no choice but to prove value through this monetary lens, can we find a way to improve within that directive? Can we push to broaden the definition of value and see it in a more holistic sense? And what if we cannot prove what we were asked to prove? Can we turn negative findings into opportunities for improvement? Can we look at what we are doing, determine whether it "works" or not, and make a determination to do more of it, stop doing work as we may have done it for a long time, or make changes and try again? The articles presented here suggest that these questions are far from settled. The best way forward may indeed be to continue asking questions and engaging in dialogue: with our users, with campus partners, and above all with each other.

In that spirit of engagement, producing this special issue was the collaborative work of more than 50 people. As guest co-editors, first and foremost our thanks go to *C&RL* editor Wendi Kaspar for her support and enthusiasm at every step in the process. Members of ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries committee gave their time to peer-review and select proposals for articles. Based on those selections, 11 teams of authors submitted manuscripts for inclusion. During the course of three months, the authors worked with reviewers in an open developmental peer-review process aimed at revising and improving the work. While *C&RL* had tried this approach on a much smaller scale before,[6] this is the first time it had been done for a whole journal issue.

From our perspective as the guest editors, we felt that the open developmental approach was a good decision for the special issue. It provided additional support in the writing and development phase, and the transparency improved the quality of the articles and helped the issue come together as a coherent whole. It was also a learning experience and a time-consuming process. While we established a timeline from the beginning, based on guidelines from *C&RL*, many details and questions arose along the way that we had to figure out. Coordination and communication with reviewers proved to be more time-consuming than we anticipated, from identifying willing reviewers to managing email communications with all authors and reviewers to keep the process moving along.

Nonetheless, the open developmental peer-review model by its very nature creates the space for dialogue in a way that traditional publishing models do not. In the comments and communications, we saw many of the themes and debates identified in this introduction play out—over the best way to discuss impact, the meaning of value, or the definition of success—in tones of respect, rather than rancor. In seeking to advance research in a profession that

values openness, collaboration, and improvement, open developmental peer review offers one possible way forward.

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Guest Editors

Notes

1. Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), *The Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*, prepared by Megan Oakleaf (Chicago, IL: ACRL, 2010), available online at www.ala.org/acrl/files/issues/value/val_report.pdf [accessed 18 February 2020].

2. Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), *Plan for Excellence* (2011, revised 2019), available online at www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/strategicplan/stratplan [accessed 18 February 2020].

3. Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), *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, IL: ACRL, 2017), available online at www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/publications/whitepapers/academiclib.pdf [accessed 18 February 2020].

4. The team was selected in an open and competitive request for proposals to investigate and write a research agenda that provides an update on progress since the publication of ACRL's 2010 VAL report and examines important questions where more research is needed in areas critical to the higher education sector.

5. Lise Doucette, "Acknowledging the Political, Economic, and Values-Based Motivators of Assessment Work: An Analysis of Publications on Academic Library Assessment," in *Library Assessment Conference: 2016, Arlington, Virginia*, 288–98 (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2016).

6. Wendi Arant Kaspar et al., "Editorial: Considering Developmental Peer Review," *College & Research Libraries* 79, no. 6 (Sept. 2018): 718, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.6.718.