Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Library Impact on Student Retention is Often Not Well Documented or Communicated

Murray, A. L., & Ireland, A. P. (2017). Communicating library impact on retention: A framework for developing reciprocal value propositions. Journal of Library Administration, 57(3), 311-326. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01930826.2016.1243425

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A Review of:
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Abstract

Objective – Identification of trends in documenting and communicating library impact on student retention. Presentation of a framework of library stakeholders with examples of how libraries can communicate their value to each stakeholder group.

Design – Survey and presentation of framework**.**

Setting – Comprehensive universities in the USA**.**

Subjects – 68 Academic library deans/directors**.**

Methods – A survey on current methods of documenting and communicating library impact on student retention was sent to all 271 comprehensive universities with a Carnegie classification of Master's level. The response rate was 25%. Emergent themes were identified using NVIVO for the qualitative data analysis.

The six markets model was presented as a framework for identifying library stakeholder groups. Examples of reciprocal value propositions (RVP) for each stakeholder group were provided.

Main Results – Analysis of the survey results identified a number of themes about documenting library impact on student retention: use of information literacy

assessment, use of satisfaction or feedback instruments (eg: survey, focus group), library-use data, and lack of knowledge of methods. Several responses indicated the methods used for information literacy assessment were not a direct measure for documenting impact on retention. A few institutions piloted more direct methods by combining library use data and student success metrics. A number of institutions said they struggled with how to use library-use data to calculate library impact on retention.

Methods for communicating library impact on retention included formal presentations, annual reports, annual assessment reports, informal communication, and none. Communication was often tied to documentation; if a library did not collect or document impact on retention, they were not able to communicate anything. The authors noted communication tended to be unidirectional rather than being a multidirectional discussion between the library and its stakeholders.

Based on the six markets model, the authors identified six library stakeholder groups that would benefit from understanding library impact on student retention. The authors postulated that identifying these markets would allow the library to define value propositions for each market. The value propositions for each market would be reciprocal because value would be co-created when the library engages with each stakeholder group to fill a service need. The authors proposed that identifying and engaging with stakeholders, and defining reciprocal value propositions for each, would provide the library with an opportunity to advocate for itself.

Conclusion – Some libraries are documenting and communicating library impact on student retention but many are not. There is a lack of knowledge of how to document impact. The authors suggest more direct methods of measuring library impact are needed, as are more deliberate approaches to communicating impact.

Commentary – This commentary uses the CAT critical appraisal tool (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014) to guide the appraisal. The authors situated this study by referring to the 2010 report by Oakleaf, *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*. According to the authors, this report is a call to academic libraries to promote the library's value to their stakeholders. The authors provided background on studies investigating library impact on student retention including a 2016 study by the first author. They identified a gap in the literature around using these findings for library advocacy. The authors asked how library value is currently being documented and communicated by library deans. The authors do not explicitly state the connection between library advocacy and communication.

The authors conducted a survey to assess how library leaders are currently assessing and conveying library impact on student retention to stakeholders and in particular to institutional administration. The survey tool was not published. The authors provided minimal information about their survey population. With only a 25% rate response rate, it would have been helpful to know the characteristics of the non-responders. There was no quantitative analysis of the themes provided, rather the authors used "highly prevalent", "less prevalent," or "prevailing" to describe the frequency of the themes. In particular seeing how many libraries did not document or communicate impact on retention would have been revealing. A visual aid would have illustrated this at a glance.

The authors provided detailed information on the origin of the six markets model from the marketing literature and explained what the six markets are in terms of library stakeholders. They clearly explained the reciprocal nature of a value proposition and gave many examples for each stakeholder group including some based on the survey findings. The authors suggested library leaders could use these tools to strengthen their advocacy role when communicating with senior administration.

The authors discussed future research topics but did not discuss the limitations for the current study. There was no discussion of why only comprehensive universities with a Carnegie classification of Master's level were included nor what impact the 25% response rate could have had on the results. The analysis of the data was sparse in this paper; it would have benefited from a more granular analysis and visual presentations. The paper offers a unique contribution to the library literature with the introduction of the six markets model and reciprocal value propositions as tools to help with communicating library value. According to the authors, reciprocal value propositions can help with "altering traditional mindsets – an important activity for libraries struggling to be viewed as a service provider with value beyond their collections." Therein lies the real value of this paper.

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