



Understanding, Demonstrating and Communicating Value: The Leadership and Management Challenge

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Abstract:

This paper presents the role of the library leader in understanding, demonstrating, and communicating library value and impact. Libraries and librarians are experiencing calls for accountability and justification with increasing frequency and increasing intensity. Those who allocate resources to libraries are increasingly asked for accountability and justification for their allocations. And, indeed, those who invest in libraries and their institutions are right to be concerned about the outcomes and impact of the investments. Librarians themselves benefit from identifying effective practices and the opportunity to correct strategies that have gone off course. Resources are scarce for even the most well-funded library and investing them wisely and effectively is the hallmark of a well-managed organization.

Introduction

Libraries and librarians are experiencing calls for accountability and justification with increasing frequency and increasing intensity. Those who allocate resources to libraries are themselves increasingly asked for accountability and justification for their allocations. And, indeed, those who invest in libraries and their institutions are right to be concerned about the outcomes and impact of the investments. Librarians themselves benefit from identifying effective practices and the opportunity to correct strategies that have gone off course. Resources are scarce for even the most well-funded library and investing them wisely and effectively is the hallmark of a well-managed organization. This paper presents the role of the library leader in understanding, demonstrating, and communicating library value and impact

The Value Challenge

Megan Oakleaf described the challenge for academic libraries succinctly in “The Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report” (2010) issued by the Association of College and Research Libraries when she stated:

Academic libraries have long enjoyed their status as the “heart of the university.” However, in recent decades, higher education environments have changed. Government officials see higher education as a national resource. Employers view higher education institutions as producers of a commodity—student learning. Top academic faculty expect higher education institutions to support and promote cutting- edge research. Parents and students expect higher education to enhance students’ collegiate experience, as well as propel their career placement and earning potential. Not only do stakeholders count on higher education institutions to achieve these goals, they also require them to demonstrate evidence that they have achieved them. The same is true for academic libraries; they too can provide evidence of their value. Community college, college, and university librarians no longer can rely on their stakeholders’ belief in their importance. Rather, they must demonstrate their value.

Demonstrating value requires evidence based on data collection and analysis. There is a danger, however, that bureaucracy of data collection, analysis and reporting can obscure the mission of the library and the impact and value that derive from that purpose – what matters may become what is measurable rather than an approach that measures what matters. In such circumstances, library staff will likely become alienated from the assessment activities because they are seen as lacking meaning and lacking meaningfulness. Keeping a focus on what matters is the challenge for librarians in management and marketing positions and is key to long-term decision-making, strategy selection and library staff buy-in.

The Leadership and Management Challenge

The role of the library leader is a vital in crafting a mission-driven assessment strategy for determining library value and impact. Doing so is not easy but it is necessary. As stated by Katherine Everest and Philip Payne in “The Impact of Libraries on Learning, Teaching and Research” (2001):

Assessing impact is not easy and it is not an exact science. We are dealing with a changing environment where people, services, and needs are constantly evolving. Any research will inevitably provide a snapshot of what is happening at a particular point in time. It is very difficult to prove that the actions taken by library management have led to improvements in learning, teaching, and research. This is particularly the case as we deal with the extent of integration between our resources/services and learning, teaching, and research. As we achieve more integration, it is going to be intrinsically more difficult to identify our specific contribution to students’ learning or to the research of a member or staff.

The library leader, and here it is meant someone in positional leadership – a dean, director, associate director, etc., is the nexus between the library organization and the larger parent organization. Sarah Pritchard (1996) reminded librarians that:

Few libraries exist in a vacuum, accountable only to themselves. There is always a larger context for assessing library quality, that is, what and how well does the library contribute to achieving the overall goals of the parent constituencies?

The importance of this larger context for the library leader is reflected in the draft of the new *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* principle of institutional effectiveness, which states that “Libraries define, develop, and measure outcomes that contribute to institutional effectiveness and apply findings for purposes of continuous improvement” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2011). The performance indicators for this principle make clear the responsibilities of the library leader:

- 1.1 Libraries define and measure outcomes in the context of institutional mission.
- 1.2 Libraries map outcomes to institutional, departmental, and student affairs outcomes.
- 1.3 Libraries develop outcomes that are aligned with accreditation guidelines for the institution.
- 1.4 Libraries develop a body of evidence that demonstrate its impact in convincing ways.
- 1.5 Libraries articulate how they contribute to student learning, collect evidence, document successes, share results, and make improvements.
- 1.6 Libraries contribute to student retention and academic success.
- 1.7 The library communicates with the campus community to highlight its value in the educational mission and in institutional effectiveness.

Of course, the positional leader cannot rely solely on the respect that is due to the position per se in carrying out these responsibilities but must also exercise the personal characteristic of leadership. Warren Bennis’ definition of leadership is often quoted:

Leadership is a function of knowing yourself, having a vision that is well communicated, building trust among colleagues, and taking effective action to realize your own leadership potential. (Bennis and Nanus, 1985)

Or, as John Maxwell stated even more simply, “leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less” (1998). As such, the library leader who engages the challenge of understanding, demonstrating and communicating value exercises leadership through influence in the library and in the parent organization.

The Role of Library Leaders and Managers

Recent years have seen publication of a number of works on library leadership grounded in empirical research including *Making a Difference: Leadership and Academic Libraries*, *Academic Librarians as Emotionally Intelligent Leaders*, *The Next Library Leadership: Attributes of Academic and Public Library Directors*, and *Shaping the Future: Advancing the Understanding of Leadership*. In addition to revealing the characteristics of library leadership

and a myriad of other considerations, particularly useful for thinking about the library leader and value is the concept of managerial leadership, which Peter Hernon defines as “that activity in which managers help an organization establish and achieve its purpose and direction ... effective managerial leadership depends on individuals who continue to develop their talents as managers and leaders” (2010, 3-4).

The library leader is uniquely positioned to understand the value of the library and how the library serves its parent institution while preserving and supporting foundational library values that enable that service. By identifying key outcomes and performance indicators, the library leader is able to direct data collection, analysis and reporting efforts to those that clearly demonstrate value. Finally, the leader must communicate findings of value and impact in ways that align with the parent institution. These activities are not the sole responsibility of the library manager and as such the library manager must engage library staff throughout the process to ensure that the assessment data is meaningful and integrated into operational processes.

In *The Value of Academic Libraries*, a range of specific tasks and strategies are identified for academic library leaders in exercising this managerial leadership relative to demonstrating and communicating value:

- connect library value to institutional missions,
- communicate assessment needs and results to library stakeholders,
- use evidence-based decision making,
- create confidence in library assessment efforts,
- provide for assessment personnel and training,
- foster environments that encourage creativity and risk taking,
- integrate library assessment within library planning, budget and reward structures,
- ensure that assessment efforts have requisite resources,
- provide access to professional development opportunities, and
- mitigate employee anxiety by creating an organizational culture accepting of mistakes (2010, 99-100).

Many of these tasks and strategies can be successfully implemented through library leadership and management skills such as those detailed in *The Next Library Leadership* (Hernon, Powell, and Young, 2003), which also documents approaches to acquiring leadership qualities and preferences among possible approaches.

What is not yet clear is the skill sets that library leaders are working to foster within the staff of libraries. Scott Walter and Megan Oakleaf (2010) investigated the extent to which library leaders are expecting librarians to engage in assessment work through a study of job advertisements. Their findings indicate that assessment has not yet permeated the responsibilities of librarians, even as library leaders are increasingly concerned with demonstrating and communicating the impact of academic libraries. Only 65 of 395 positions (16%) posted in *C&RL News* (2004-2009) mentioned assessment as a job responsibility. Lakos and Phipps make the convincing claim that “assessment cannot be seen as a separate ‘management activity’ but must be appreciated and valued by all members of the culture and assumed to be part of their regular work” (2004). And, indeed, to carry out the full scope of work involved in understanding, demonstrating, and communicating value, library leaders will need to start by engaging the entire library organization in this work.

Conclusion

To fully engage the “Next Steps” in *The Value of Academic Libraries* report and pursue the recommended “Research Agenda” requires that library leaders exercise managerial leadership and fully engage all library staff in assessing and communicating the impact of the library. Though the library leadership literature demonstrates that library leaders have the skills and responsibilities to lead this work, evidence suggests that organizational development work is needed in order for assessment responsibilities to permeate the organization and for libraries to successfully attain a culture of evidence.

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There are many alternative service providers. The tragedy is that many library clients do not know what services are provided for their use. Effective marketing is the key to future survival followed by excellence in service delivery and library experiences which meet user expectations and requirements. There are many marketing examples and tips out there to follow. Strong leadership is required and a changed view of the role of the librarian. To return to those "re" words, revitalization, repositioning, refurbishment and rejuvenation are required. Sarah Anne Murphy has drawn attention to repositioning librarians as information consultantsⁱ. There is talk of embedded librarians and roving librarians. Many librarians are sidelined, unseen, hiding in their offices. It is time to come out and to engage with clients, wherever they might be. Messages are needed: *Cultivate your mind; There's a world of information out there; You'll find amazing things at your library; Find the best route to information; Get connected, be connected, stay connected; Make us your first information stop; Don't just Google; Find facts fast; Get success and solutions at your library*. Above all, do not be afraid to lead libraries to a never better future, even if it is part of an ongoing continuum. Lead from behind, lead from up front, lead from the middle of the pack - and follow the leader.

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ⁱ Sarah Anne Murphy. *The librarian as information consultant: transforming reference for the information age*. (Chicago, American Library Association, 2011)