Project title: Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries and Student Success

Partners: Association for Institutional Research (AIR) and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU)

Overview

As part of its Value of Academic Libraries Initiative, a multiyear project designed to assist academic librarians in demonstrating library value, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) began work in October 2012 on "Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries and Student Success" (AiA). A National Leadership Demonstration Grant of $249,330 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funds the AiA program for three years. The AiA program builds on the outcomes of an IMLS 2011 National Leadership Collaborative Planning grant (LG-62-11-0216-11) by designing, implementing, and evaluating a professional development program to build the competencies of librarians for demonstrating library value.

In the first year of the AiA program, ACRL made progress toward achieving all three stated goals:

1) develop the professional competencies of librarians to assess, document, and communicate the value of their academic libraries primarily in relation to their institution's goals for student learning and success,
2) build and strengthen collaborative relationships with higher education stakeholders around the issue of library value, and
3) contribute to higher education assessment work by creating approaches, strategies, and practices that document the contribution of academic libraries to the overall goals and missions of their institutions.

Project Activities

In the grant proposal narrative, the primary activities that would meet each goal were listed as:

- Goal 1 activity: Librarians participate in professional development activities and apply the learning to a library value project on their campus.
- Goal 2 activity: Librarians will lead their institutional teams in the design and implementation of a library value project.
- Goal 3 activity: Institutional teams led by their participating campus librarian will design, implement, and evaluate library value projects on their campus, resulting in multiple approaches, strategies, and practices for documenting the library's impact on student learning and success.

We made significant progress on each of these activities, as described more fully below.

Facilitation/Design Team

As planned, in fall 2012, we conducted an open search and application process to identify three facilitators to join those identified in the grant proposal as lead facilitators – Lisa Hinchliffe, Deb Gilchrist, and staff program lead Kara Malenfant. The three additional facilitators selected are April Cunningham, library instruction coordinator at Pomona College in Claremont, California; Carrie Donovan, head of teaching and learning for the Indiana University Libraries in Bloomington, Indiana; and Libby Miles, associate professor of writing and rhetoric in the

Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island in Kingston, Rhode Island.

We actively recruited applicants both inside and outside the library profession. Our selection of Miles, who is not a librarian but serves as disciplinary faculty member, provides complementary strength for the facilitation team. With a solid team of designer/facilitators in place, work began in earnest in January 2013 to develop the professional development curriculum for the librarian team leaders. We have used a variety of techniques and tools to maintain our momentum and connection, including in person meetings, regular phone calls, and online tools to test out approaches we are considering implementing within the program.

Teams Selected
In mid-January 2013 the online application was available and was promoted broadly by ACRL and our partners. We received 99 applications for the 75 available slots by the early March deadline, and a review panel of ACRL member leaders selected the 75 teams in early April. (AiA facilitators were excluded from the review process.) The institutional teams for AiA were selected through a competitive application process designed to ensure representation from an array of geographic regions and postsecondary institutions (i.e., community colleges, colleges, and universities).

The teams come from 29 U.S. states and 3 Canadian provinces spanning 7 time zones (from Hawaii to Nova Scotia). The colleges and universities these teams represent are accredited by the full spectrum of regional accrediting bodies: 15 by Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Middle States Commission on Higher Education; 9 by New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education; 21 by North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, The Higher Learning Commission; 4 by Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities; 12 by Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges; 3 by Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges; and 6 by Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities. There are also four accredited by Canadian bodies, and one institution is accredited by a medical accreditor.

In addition to geographic diversity, the selected teams represent all types of postsecondary institutions, as follows: 10 are two-year/technical colleges, 9 are four-year/baccalaureate-granting colleges, 31 are comprehensive (undergraduate/graduate) institutions, and 25 are universities (research/doctoral granting).

The strongest applications can be characterized in several ways:
- They were distinguished by the team composition and their readiness.
- They contained clear project goals with specific topics to investigate and close alignment with institutional priorities.
- They had the most potential to contribute to the greater library and higher education community.
- They contained statements of specific institutional support to help the teams see their projects through to completion.

- Librarian team leaders of the most robust applications provided evidence of how they would contribute to a collaborative learning experience for the good of all.

The application process required prospective participants to list a librarian team leader and at least two team members from campus units other than the library. It required applicants to explain the composition of their team and why it was appropriate in light of their proposed inquiry areas. Team members come from a variety of campus units such as: assessment office, institutional research, teaching faculty, writing center, information technology, academic technology, student affairs, residence life, and campus administration. Many teams include additional librarians or library administrators.

Scope of Action Learning Projects
These 75 teams are investigating questions related to student learning and student success that matter to their institutions. They are examining the impact of a variety of library factors, such as: instruction (games, tutorials, single/multiple session, and course embedded), reference and individual research assistance, physical space, discovery of library resources through institutional web or library-based resource guides, collections, and personnel.

The AiA program creates space and support for teams to use a variety of tools and methods, gathering both direct and indirect data. In this way teams choose the means of assessment that are most credible, trustworthy, and practical given their institutional context. Some methods and tools being used include surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, and pre/post tests. Evidence is gathered from many sources including rubrics, student portfolios, research papers/projects, other class assignments, test scores, GPA, degree completion rate, and retention rate.

There is a wide range of inquiry questions, which are refined and reworked in the early stages of the AiA program. A few examples from application essays follow:
- Do students who attend information or media literacy sessions attain higher grades than students who did not?
- How does students' work with special collections materials affect their ability to think critically and develop intellectual curiosity?
- Do re-admitted students (who have appealed dismissal) improve their academic performance and persist at a higher rate due to mandatory meetings with a librarian for research assistance?
- Does our new library/learning resource center facility have an impact on the student community, contributing to student enrollment and excitement about completing skills sessions and library orientations?

We do not expect that all projects will yield generalizable results as one would expect of findings from social science research conducted from a positivist perspective. However, many projects will be replicable at other libraries or contain elements that will be transferable to other settings. While not all projects will demonstrate that there is in fact a library impact, our key criteria for success are a bit different. Developing and implementing a project as part of the AiA program will engender learning, spur action, and build capacity for continued assessment work. For those

reasons, we are intentional in describing the work institutional teams undertake as "action learning projects" and not "research projects."

Building a Community of Practice
The AiA project design includes a sequenced set of experiences to promote and support the creation of a community of practice. The facilitators are strongly committed to establishing an environment that supports collective learning, shared competence, and sustained interaction. Etienne Wenger-Trayner, who pioneered the concept with Jean Lave, explains, "A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."[1]

We broke down the 75 teams into small cohort groups of 5 to foster a climate of mutuality and trust. The facilitation team was very fortunate to be advised by Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner. While we initially proposed in the grant that we would seek advice from a community of practice expert for a brief initial phase, we sought a more extensive period of engagement. The Wenger-Trayners provided coaching to the facilitation team over six months. They attended the first in-person meeting of the 75 librarian team leaders, held in conjunction with the American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference and described more fully below, in order to provide richer, better-informed guidance to the facilitators.

Engaging With Librarian Team Leaders
To create a dynamic, authentic learning experience, the AiA program uses blended learning, peer-to-peer collegial relationships, and action learning projects. The librarians are leading their campus teams in the development and implementation of a library value project that is informed by the skill-building activities and designed to contribute to assessment activities on their campus. Details on the particular activities participants have experienced in the first five months of their 14-month experience follow.

Webcasts
To formally kick off the program, and at key junctures throughout, the facilitators present live 90-minute webcasts using the Blackboard Collaborate online meeting software. We ask team leaders to gather their full AiA project team at one location on campus and watch together. The webcasts typically include presentation on a topic, time for breakout conversations by teams, reporting back to the full group, and a closing question-and-answer period. The webcasts thus far have been:
- April 18: Assessment Cycle
- August 5: Design
- September 5: Instruments/Evidence

In Person
Librarian team leaders met in person for the first time in conjunction with the ALA Annual Conference. The meetings lasted for four hours on Thursday, June 27, and four hours on Friday, June 28. Participants built a community of practice and developed knowledge and skills in the areas of assessment and leadership through a variety of in-person activities:

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[1] Source http://wenger-trayner.com/resources/what-is-a-community-of-practice

- Cohort Poster Creation
- Gallery Walk of the Posters
- Generating Themes and the Learning Agenda
- Direct Instruction on Community of Practice
- Cohort Leadership Roles
- Direct Instruction on the Assessment Cycle
- Direct Instruction on Writing Outcomes
- Developing Outcomes from the Case Study
- Developing an Outcome for Your Own Project
- Getting Cohort Feedback on Your Outcome
- Giving Cohort Feedback on Their Outcomes
- Direct Instruction on Writing Criteria
- Developing Criteria with Your Cohort

Asynchronous Forums
Using the Moodle elearning platform, facilitators regularly post questions, resources, and exercises for the AiA librarian team leaders. The bulk of the threaded discussions take place within each cohort of five librarian team leaders, but some open general discussion forums are posted for broader sharing. Sometimes facilitators present a reading, video, or set of questions to prompt discussion, other times members of the cohort lead and facilitate discussion on key concepts. The discussion topics follow.

Cohort based threaded discussion topics
Campus Team Overviews (Due April 23)
Campus Team Project Description (Due April 26)
Key Concepts (Complete Discussion by May 3)
Background Research Reflection (Due May 10)
Local Information Gathering (Due May 17)
Research Ethics Exploration (Due May 24)
Project Commonalities and Differences across the Cohort (Due June 7)
Inquiry Questions (Due June 14)
Mapping Your Project (Due June 21)
Leading a Team (Due June 21)
Discussion Post-Chicago
The AiA Workshop Experience and Your Leadership Role
Developing a Community of Practice
Setting Criteria and Getting Feedback (Due August 14)
Leadership and Communication – Big Picture (Due September 13 and 27)

Cross cohort threaded discussion topics
Getting to Know Each Other
Librarian as Team Leader
Sharing Resources for Background Research

Jam Sessions

In July, we introduced optional Jam Sessions, which are live events, held in an Adobe Connect online meeting room with audio, text chat, and document sharing. These are intended to give team leaders another chance to talk through a topic and to engage in shared discussion and exploration with interested fellow team leaders and one facilitator. Topics have included the outcomes and criteria concepts in the assessment cycle and correlation/causation, which included discussion of commonalities and differences of assessment and research. Jam Sessions are approximately 45 minutes in length, depending on the number of participants and depth of discussion.

Informal meet ups

To foster collegial relationships and increase the ability to easily connect, we organized several informal (pay on your own) opportunities for participants to connect with one another during conferences, as follows:

- We invited newly admitted librarian team leaders to a "meet and greet" on April 12, held in conjunction with ACRL 2013 in Indianapolis, Indiana. Facilitators were present as were the ACRL president, executive director, and other member leaders.
- We asked librarian team leaders to tell institutional researchers from their teams to join in an informal dinner meet up on May 19, held in conjunction with the AIR annual conference in Long Beach, California. One facilitator was present, and our AIR partners helped us secure space and include the event in their schedule.
- We asked librarian team leaders to tell assessment officers from their teams to join in an informal dinner meet up on June 4, held in conjunction with the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education in Lexington, Kentucky. One facilitator was present.
- We organized optional "dine around" opportunities for librarian team leaders on June 27, held in conjunction with the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago, Illinois. By making reservations for tables of eight at several local restaurants and providing sign-up sheets on site, we encouraged groups to continue connecting and supporting each other by cohort, type of institution, project topic, or assessment method.

Analyzing Progress

Although ACRL has a long history of initiating and sponsoring innovative training, an approach that focuses on blended, peer-to-peer learning is an enhancement to the existing models. The AiA professional development program differs from other ACRL training by involving librarians in a 14-month long series of activities that merge learning with application and the opportunity for reflective practice.

Focus Group

We notified applicants of their status on April 3, and just a few days later, on April 11, held a focus group with 14 of the selected librarian team leaders during ACRL 2013 in Indianapolis. An outside facilitator met with newly selected team leaders, who reported a high level of early, proactive interest and support from campus partners. A report on the focus findings yielded information about the hopes and concerns of the team leaders, which was of immediate use to the AiA facilitators in further designing the curriculum.

Survey

In July, the facilitators asked all librarian team leaders to reflect on the first two-and-a-half months of the program and provide feedback. We asked team leaders how well specific aspects of the AiA program matched their learning and leadership styles. We invited comments on how the way the program is organized has helped their development. We asked about the extent to which particular resources and activities (webinars, Moodle prompts, and in-person activities) had helped team leaders to develop knowledge and skills. We asked about particular elements in the AiA program and which had most affected participants' perspectives on assessment and on leadership. As with the focus group report, this direct participant feedback was of immediate use to the facilitation team in refining our planned activities over the following months.

Through this feedback from librarian team leaders and our own observations, the facilitation team has begun to clearly identify program strengths as well as areas for growth and improvement. We have navigated challenges as librarian team leaders have resigned from their institutions and passed the reigns to new librarian team leaders. We have seen that the wide variety of action learning projects not only requires the program to be flexible enough to support differing student learning and success impact areas, library factors, assessment methods, and tools, but also to support differing timelines for the campus-based action learning projects. We have seen that forming cohorts to be highly diverse by institution type has advantages, but that affiliation around topic (inquiry area or library factor examined) may be more meaningful.

The facilitation team has been regularly reflecting on the strengths and areas for growth and improvement. We expect to modify the program design for the second group of teams, which will start the program in April 2014. Accordingly, the facilitators will hold an additional intensive planning session in conjunction with the ALA Midwinter Meeting in January 2014.

Communicating Broadly

As expected, ACRL and its grant partners AIR and APLU have used their well-established communication channels to promote the AiA program and encourage teams to apply. In addition, ACRL member leaders and senior staff members have presented at many conferences to raise awareness about the program. Presentations and poster sessions have been offered at the following library and higher education conferences:

- Library Assessment Conference (Charlottesville, Virginia, October 29, 2012)
- Coalition for Networked Information Fall Membership Meeting (Washington, D.C., December 11, 2012)
- ALA Midwinter Meeting (Seattle, Washington, January 27, 2013)
- Michigan Academic Library Council 2013 Spring Workshop on Imperatives of Library Leadership (Flint, Michigan, March 15, 2013)
- ACRL 2013 (Indianapolis, Indiana, April 12, 2013)
- Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education Third Annual Assessment Conference (Lexington, Kentucky, June 3-5, 2013)
- ALA Annual Conference (Chicago, Illinois, June 30)
- 7th International Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Conference (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, July 15-18, 2013)

- International Federation of Library Associations World Library and Information Congress (Singapore, August 17-23, 2013)

Next Steps

Our first 75 teams are nearly halfway through the 14-month long AiA program. We are still facilitating the team leaders in their learning, supporting them in carrying out their projects and fostering growth of the community of practice. As one example of how the program continues to be responsive, in October 2013 we will introduce Case Connections. Communities of practice often learn together by helping one member think through his or her project, coming together to problem-solve from different perspectives and with different experiences. Doing so not only helps solve the immediate challenge, but also allows others to contribute their own stories, experiences, and insights, further enriching their expertise.

On the near horizon, the facilitation team is designing the in-person experience for librarian team leaders to be held January 2014 in conjunction with the ALA Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This includes planning the prompts for the online component this fall that will build up to and best prepare team leaders for using this in-person time effectively. We are also beginning to plan for the end of the participants' 14-month long experience in June 2014 when team leaders will present posters describing the team's project and their learning in conjunction with the ALA Annual Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In addition to presenting a poster, institutional teams will prepare a final project report, which ACRL will analyze and disseminate. As they prepare those reports, all team members will participate in peer review and provide feedback about projects by other teams. We have begun working with our project analyst Karen Brown, associate professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Dominican University. She will compile a collection of replicable library value approaches and is working with the facilitation team to integrate this into the program design. In the months ahead, we will refine the project report framework, poster session guidelines and templates, and set in motion the peer review process.

At the same time that the facilitators are supporting the current 75 teams, we are working to improve the information about the AiA program for prospective applicants for year two so it is as clear and accurate as possible. In December, we will update the website with information about how to apply at www.ala.org/acrl/AiAapplication and the FAQs for prospective applicants at www.ala.org/acrl/AiAapplicationfaq. We expect to follow the same schedule for year two: the online application will be available in mid-January 2014 and due in early March 2014, reviewers will select an additional 100 institutional teams, and we will notify applicants in early April of their status.

ACRL, AIR, and APLU will continue to communicate about the opportunity to apply for the second year as one of the additional 100 institutional teams. In summer 2014, we will also promote the analysis of project reports, which Brown will be producing. Sharing the results of the AiA projects widely will contribute to grant goal 3 of contributing to higher education assessment work by creating approaches, strategies, and practices that document the contribution of academic libraries to the overall goals and missions of their institution.