

# ACADEMIC LIBRARY IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING AND SUCCESS:

## *Findings from Assessment in Action Team Projects*

### Executive Summary

Since 2013, over 200 postsecondary institutions of all types have participated in the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Assessment in Action program (AiA) that created campus-wide partnerships at institutions to promote collaborative assessment and library leadership. The AiA program was launched by ACRL, in partnership with the Association of Institutional Research and the Association of Public Land-grant Universities, and with funding from the US Institute of Museum and Library Services.

At each participating institution, an AiA team, consisting of a librarian and at least two representatives from other campus departments or units, planned and implemented a project that aligned with institutional priorities and contributed to campus assessment activities. The extensive collection of assessment methods and tools used by the campus teams during the three-year AiA program point to multiple types of library factors and their potential impacts on students' academic outcomes. Higher education institutions are encouraged to replicate or adapt these approaches to expand understanding of student learning and to assess library contributions to academic outcomes at their institutions.

### Compelling Evidence for Academic Library Contributions to Student Learning and Success

The higher education community now has compelling assessment findings that tell a strong story about the multiple ways that academic libraries are contributing to student learning and success. While each institutional context is unique and the AiA project findings about library impact are not generalizable to all academic settings, the demonstrations of positive connections between the library and aspects of student learning and success in five areas are particularly noteworthy.

#### 1. *Students benefit from library instruction in their initial coursework.*

Information literacy instruction provided to students during their initial coursework helps them acquire a common set of competencies for their undergraduate studies. The assessment findings from numerous AiA projects that focused on information literacy initiatives for freshmen and new students underscore that students receiving this instruction perform better in their courses than students who do not.

#### 2. *Library use increases student success.*

Several AiA studies point to increased academic success when students use the library. The analysis of multiple data points (e.g., circulation, library instruction session attendance, online database access, study room use, interlibrary loan) shows that students who used the library in some way achieved higher levels of academic success (e.g., GPA, course grades, retention) than students who did not use the library.

#### 3. *Collaborative academic programs and services involving the library enhance student learning.*

Academic library partnerships with other campus units, such as the writing center, academic enrichment, and speech lab, yield positive benefits for students (e.g., higher grades, academic confidence, retention).

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#### **4. Information literacy instruction strengthens general education outcomes.**

Several AiA projects document that library instruction improves students' achievement of institutional core competencies and general education outcomes. The project findings demonstrate different ways that information literacy contributes to inquiry-based and problem-solving learning, including effective identification and use of information, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement.

#### **5. Library research consultations boost student learning.**

One-on-one or small-group reference and research assistance with a librarian enhances academic success, as documented by such factors as student confidence, GPAs, and improved achievement on course assignments.

Having overall consistent assessment findings of library impact in these five areas—across a body of over 200 projects—is strong in part because of the variation. Each setting is unique; each library program and service differed in its design and implementation (as appropriate for that unique local context); students had many difference characteristics and backgrounds; there was a multiplicity of methods for investigating the library impact on students.

Because the assessment findings are derived from action research, which situates the investigations in authentic institutional contexts, the results reflect “on the ground” practices in terms of resources available and campus priorities. While libraries should routinely assess for internal improvement, findings from the AiA projects lessen the need to question whether investments of time, resources, and energy in these areas will bring about a positive impact.

### **Promising Evidence of Library Impact**

The AiA projects continue to build evidence of library impact in other areas as well. Investigations in four areas point to evidence of promise. The assessment of library impact in these areas, however, tends not to have been investigated as extensively as those noted above or the findings may not be as consistently strong. Even so, the growing number of studies in these four areas have yielded promising results about positive connections between the library and students' academic success.

- *The library contributes to improved student retention.*
- *Library instruction adds value to a student's long-term academic experience.*
- *The library promotes academic rapport and student engagement.*
- *Use of library space relates positively to student learning and success.*

### **Advancing Library Leadership through Action Research**

The action research framework, which emphasized improving practice through systematic investigation of a question grounded in institutional context, engaged the librarians in an immersive process of ongoing interaction with one another and collaboration with their campus team members. The librarians led the design and implementation of assessment that related directly to their campus's academic priorities, creating opportunities for substantive conversations with campus stakeholders about student learning and resulting in meaningful findings that informed decision making about library programs and practices. The leadership qualities that were strengthened through this process include an awareness of the importance of inquiry and decision making grounded in institutional context, understanding and experience with the dynamic nature of assessment, and a recognition of the personal and professional growth that emerges through collaboration with others.