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Murray, A. & Ireland, A. (2018). Provosts' perceptions of academic library value and preferences for communication: A national study. *College & Research Libraries*, 79(3), 336-365. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.3.336>

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Evidence Summary

A Survey of Provosts Indicates that Academic Libraries Should Connect Outcomes to University Goals

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Abstract

Objective – To understand how public and private university provosts understand and interpret the value of academic libraries.

Design – Electronic survey.

Setting – Public and private colleges and universities in the United States with Carnegie classifications of master's (small), master's (medium), master's (large), doctoral/research (DRU), research (RU/H), and research very high (RU/VH).

Subjects – 209 provosts and chief academic officers.

Methods – The authors distributed the survey to a pool of 935 provosts and chief academic officers in academic institutions. Questions were organized toward understanding participants' perceptions of their libraries' involvement with issues of institutional importance inspired by the Association of College & Research Libraries' *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*, and high impact educational practices (HIPs) based on the work of George Kuh

(2008). The survey also asked participants to select their data preferences when making library funding allocation decisions and their library communication preferences when making funding decisions. The authors received 209 responses and analyzed the content using Qualtrics to determine the highest and lowest ranked responses to each question. In addition, responses for specific survey questions were cross tabulated with demographic information about the institution to identify any potential trends that conformed to or deviated from the overall set of responses. Chi squares were then calculated to determine potential significance.

Main Results – In terms of involvement with university initiatives, almost all of the 209 provosts and chief academic officers who responded to the survey had the perception that their respective libraries are either very involved or somewhat involved. The highest areas of involvement included: faculty research productivity (85.02%), accreditation (82.15%), student academic success (75%), and undergraduate retention (67.26%). Of note, only 9% of provosts indicated their libraries were very involved with enrollment. The authors found a trend that suggests that higher-enrollment institutions with a Carnegie ranking of doctoral/research, research, or research very high, increased provosts' perceptions of their institutions' libraries involvement in retention initiatives, student academic success, and faculty research productivity. A significant point of note: when asked why provosts did not view their institutions' academic libraries as being involved in undergraduate retention initiatives, a significant number (76.12%) of respondents indicated that it was because the campuses overall did not recognize the role the libraries could play in retention initiatives. This position co-exists in an environment where the demographic, economic, and cultural transitions taking place in the United States are continuing to have a disruptive impact on higher education. Library directors need to make these connections much more tangible.

Utilizing Kuh's (2008) 10 high-impact educational practices, the authors gauged the participants' perception of their libraries' involvement in educationally purposeful activities. They found that 84.43% of provosts perceived their libraries as highly involved with undergraduate research, 78.39% with first-year seminars/experiences, 77.38% with collaborative assignments and projects, 75.76% with writing-intensive courses, 71.34% with common intellectual experiences, and 69.64% with capstone courses/projects. Fewer provosts indicated that their libraries were involved in diversity and global learning, learning communities, service learning/community-based learning, or internships. A significant point of note: when asked if their institution's library had an impact on students' decisions to continue enrollment, opinion was divided. Of the total respondents, a combined total of 91 indicated yes, based on demonstrated evidence or anecdotal or suspected evidence, while 81 respondents indicated unclear or no. This suggests further work is required for libraries in terms of investigating the potential role they might play in enrollment and how to demonstrate such.

The authors also asked participants to indicate their opinion on the level of influence 11 different data types would have on a moderate (non-capital) funding request for the library. In terms of highest influence, 72.02% indicated they would like to see correlations linking the use of library services/resources with student success, 66.07% with undergraduate retention, and 56.55% with enrollment. Of moderate influence, 57.14% indicated they would like to see library usage data, 55.36% user satisfaction data, and 50% focus groups or other qualitative data. A total of 60% of the provosts also indicated that anecdotal evidence had a low influence on their funding allocations. Most provosts preferred the information to be communicated in a formal annual report, and indicated that the report should include information literacy student learning outcomes (SLOs) (50.9%), user satisfaction data (46.11%), correlations with faculty productivity (45.45%), correlations with student success (44.91%), correlations with undergraduate retention (43.11%), correlations with enrollment

(42.51%), basic use data (40.12%), and faculty feedback (39.1%).

Conclusion – Most provosts have an understanding that their libraries play an important role on campus, but demonstrating a strong connection to university goals and outcomes is essential. When seeking funding, academic library administrators should focus on projects or initiatives that support the priorities of the institution as a whole, and work to communicate evidence of the value of library services and resources within this context. This is achieved through communication channels that are both timely and relevant, and include a formal annual report or a dedicated budget meeting.

Commentary

Positioning libraries as an asset to academic administration is an increasingly essential mandate for library administrators. Recent research has explored this area, including a recent article in the *New Review of Academic Librarianship* by John Cox (2018) and the previous work of the authors of the topic article, Adam Murray and Ashley Ireland, which examined the strategies of library directors in communicating value to university leadership (2017). The authors make clear the importance of communicating library impact in ways and areas that university leaders understand and value.

This study focused on the outcomes provosts and chief academic officers expect from libraries and the data they are looking for to demonstrate this impact. The survey addressed a significant number of provosts and chief academic officers and provided a representative sample when analyzed according to criteria in the Glynn critical appraisal tool (2006). The population of provosts and chief academic officers was selected from institutions with relevant Carnegie classifications. Population collection relied on publicly available email data, but for this population of academic administrators at graduate-level Carnegie-classified institutions, this method of selection does not exclude a significant number of participants and can be

considered representative. There were 935 provosts contacted, and the authors received 209 responses, representing a 22% response rate.

The authors used Likert-type scales to gauge provosts' impressions of library involvement in the activities of institutional importance and high-impact educational activities they had defined, but did not provide the participants with the option to indicate other areas of importance that they might consider. This represents a potential weakness in the study, as provosts may have identified different areas of importance if they had been given more freedom in the survey. In-depth interviews with this population could augment this research: since the issues of institutional importance were partially defined by a library organization, there is a possibility that provosts' perceptions of these goals might differ from the options that they were allowed to choose in the survey. This information will be relevant to academic librarians and administrators, because these activities are likely already included in the institutional goals of their libraries. This is also true of the data definitions in the funding section of the survey. Because most libraries gather and use the defined data categories, it is important to understand the value of each of these data to academic administrators.

This article is particularly effective for librarians and library administrators in the target group of institutions because the data is cross tabulated to reveal provost responses for particular Carnegie classifications, enrollments, and types of institutions (public/private). This organization will help readers analyze the data in the context of their own institution, though the authors also analyze and explain the general trends in responses. Understanding how current provosts and chief academic officers understand the work of libraries and how we can approach these administrators with data that is capable of changing and improving their understanding of our work is an important goal. This article provides an important context for an evolving work in libraries and a foundation for developing

funding and promoting the work of libraries to stakeholders in academic administration.

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