Who Succeeds In Higher Education? Questioning the Connection Between Academic Libraries and Student Success

Zoe Fisher

Instructional Designer

Pierce College (Washington State)

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## Abstract

Many academic libraries are feeling pressured to join “student success” initiatives to collect and analyze data about students’ academic behaviors. In the library, this may result in tracking who uses group study rooms, who checks out books, who asks questions at the reference desk, and who participates in information literacy instruction. These data points are being used to prove that students who use the library are more likely to succeed in college; therefore, academic libraries are valuable. Such surveillance methods have been used in several high-profile studies, including those in the Association of College & Research Libraries’ Assessment in Action initiative. In this talk, I will question the role of academic libraries in student success and the methods being used to prove academic library value. What is at stake when academic libraries connect student library use with their academic performance? What are the implications for students’ privacy? Could tracking students in the library lead to self-censorship and intellectual freedom concerns? Most importantly, what do students really need from an academic library in order to be successful in college*?*

**Introduction**

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to be here to speak with you today. I am very grateful to the conference organizers, and I especially want to thank Miguel Figueroa and Charlotte Roh for their wonderful talks. I couldn’t have asked for a better keynote and plenary session to precede this one, and their presentations set the bar very, very high.

I am truly humbled by the amount of knowledge and experience in this room. I won’t pretend for a second to know more than any other person here. But I don’t think that I’m here to tell you about what I know. I believe I was invited to speak to you because of *how* I think about libraries, and how I see the role of academic libraries in student success.

**Learning to be a Librarian in Longview, Washington**

My perspective on academic libraries is shaped by how I started my career. After receiving my Master’s degree in 2010, my first professional position was an adjunct faculty librarian role at Lower Columbia College in Longview, Washington. Longview is a small mill town an hour north of Portland on Interstate 5. It sits on the Columbia River which made it a bustling place for timber industry and port shipping in the early twentieth century. Now it’s well-known for its distinct and lingering timber mill smell, its annual Squirrel Festival, and the song “Longview” from the 1994 album *Dookie* by Green Day.

I tell you this because Lower Columbia College was the first college I ever worked for as a librarian, and those students shaped my empathy. They were the highlight of my day, every day I was there. Since then, I have worked for several other community colleges, and community college students continue to be the most interesting, driven, capable, and hardworking people I’ve ever met. According to the student demographics when I worked there in 2012, 60% of LCC students were part-time. 58% of them were age 25 or older. Half of them had children. And 72% of students were there for certificate programs and basic skills education. Only 28% of students were seeking transfer degrees (“LCC Facts and Figures 2012-13”).

When I talk about college students with you, I don’t picture an 18-year-old person living in a dorm room at a sprawling university. In my head, when you say “college student”, I picture someone who works to make ends meet, who goes to school part-time, and who is raising a family.

Of all students who completed a four-year college degree in 2015-2016, half of them had been enrolled at a two-year college at some point in the ten years prior to earning their degree (“Community College FAQs”). Here in California, 29% of University of California graduates started at a California community college. The number goes up to 51% for California State University graduates (“Key Facts”).

Community college students are the people I care most about. When we talk about who succeeds in higher education, and how the library impacts student success, we have to remember that 40% of undergraduates attend community colleges (“Community College FAQs”). What are we saying about these students when we talk about library value?

What are we saying about students when we correlate their library use with their academic performance? For example, at the University of Wollongong Library, where students’ library use is tracked and correlated with their grades (Cox & Jantti, 2012)? Or the University of Minnesota, where students who used the library were found to have a higher GPA and a higher retention rate than those who did not (Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2013)? I think we’re trying to say, “The library is valuable.” I think we’re also saying, “Student success is determined by the actions of the individual student.”

**Neoliberalism and Student Success**

As I see it, the prevailing message about the academic library’s impact on student success is presented as an issue of individual choices made by students, a framework that aligns with a neoliberal philosophy of higher education.

To describe neoliberalism can feel like trying to describe the taste of the air. Put simply, neoliberalism is the political and economic theory that all human relationships are based on competition and, thus, society functions most efficiently when we work according to market principles (Monbiot, 2016; Spence, 2015). Neoliberal philosophy was put into practice by policies enacted by Reagan and Thatcher, policies which eroded public goods and dismantled social welfare programs.

Neoliberalism also emphasizes the notion of scarcity: there is not enough for all of us. If you don’t get enough resources, it’s because you didn’t work hard enough for them, or you didn’t provide the right commodities demanded by the market. We see this every day in academic institutions where departments that do not produce enough deliverables or meet institutional outcomes are thusly cut, and their erasure is treated as part of doing business.

I like the way Karen Nicholson describes neoliberalism as “an invisible part of the fabric of our daily lives” (Nicholson, 2017). In addition to Nicholson, there are several other researchers in LIS/archives who are actively questioning the impact of neoliberalism and corporatization in libraries. I recommend reading Ian Beilin (2016), Marika Cifor (2017), Maura Seale (2013), and David McMenemy (2012), all of whom have written words more eloquent than my own.

**Who Succeeds in Higher Education?**

So when we measure the value of academic libraries by the individual success of students who use them, we are saying: the more students engage with the library, the more successful they are. This fits with the neoliberal ethos of meritocracy: we all have equal opportunity, everyone can succeed if they try hard enough, and success is determined by the choices you make.

We seem unwilling to admit that the architecture of privilege permeates all things, including student success. In higher education, we regularly discuss success as an issue of what students do with their time rather than just bluntly admit: success is systemic and structural, still more often defined by your zip code, income, race, and inheritance than almost anything else you do (Reeves, 2015).

Success in higher education comes largely from identities that are ascribed to us, rather than what we have achieved. You are more likely to graduate from college if you are white, female, and have money (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; “Pell Institute”). You are more likely to finish your degree if you go to school full-time and if you attend a selective institution with limited admissions (“Higher Education Attainment”). There are clear connections between wealth, privilege, status, and college completion (Brownstein, 2014).

If this is the case, why are libraries investing time and money to ask how library use impacts student success? If we already know who succeeds, why are we tracking students who use the library to prove they are more successful than students who do not?

No moment exists in a vacuum and nothing is inevitable. I am married to a historian of science and technology, so we have a lot of dinner table conversations about the importance of history. I believe that we librarians find ourselves in this difficult moment for two reasons.

One, the Association of College and Research Libraries is actively pushing a research agenda that promotes connecting the individual use of academic libraries to traditional measures of student success. Two, it is much easier to believe that students are responsible for their success than to acknowledge the more complicated intersections of privilege and oppression that determine who succeeds in our society.

What I’d like to do with my time this morning is attempt to convince you that

* correlating student use of academic libraries with their individual success is a harmful framework;
* the ACRL research agenda is driven by a neoliberal concept of higher education that pins student success on their choices as individuals;
* if we are truly dedicated to the cause of student success, library money and library labor would be better spent focusing on what students actually need: financial support, food, and housing.

**The Value of Academic Libraries Report**

There’s a good chance that what you’re working on in your library right now aligns with the Value of Academic Libraries report, more commonly known as the VAL report, which was published by ACRL in 2010.

If your library has defined outcomes, created or adopted systems for assessment management, collected data about users beyond what is necessary to provide services, and/or connected library use to student engagement, retention, graduation, and academic performance, then you are practicing some of the 22 recommendations for demonstrating library value, as defined by Megan Oakleaf in her seminal report (Oakleaf, 2010).

The overarching recommendation that libraries must “demonstrate value” by integrating with their institution’s outcomes assessment reporting might sound normal to us now, but at the time of its publication, the VAL report suggested practices and procedures that did not exist in many libraries.

**Assessment in Action**

After the publication of the VAL report, ACRL received an IMLS grant to fund Assessment in Action, a three-year project to support data-driven assessment projects in academic libraries. AiA spawned three cycles of annual assessment projects at nearly 200 different colleges and universities, all of which defined research questions, created teams that included external partners outside the library, and collected data to study the impact of academic libraries on student success.

Many of the projects in Assessment in Action are interesting, well-researched case studies with deeply provocative questions about how students and faculty find value in academic libraries. Looking over the project summaries, you’ll see that many libraries undertook collaborative projects that engaged multiple campus units and took hundreds of hours to complete. Reflections from participants indicate that the most valuable part of their involvement in AiA was forming connections with partners outside the library, including institutional research offices and faculty in targeted areas like Composition and STEM.

**Correlating Library Use with Student Success**

AiA projects were and continue to be widely publicized by ACRL, and many institutions are attempting to replicate the data collection and analysis performed by AiA participants. From my perspective, AiA popularized and normalized the idea that it is not just acceptable but imperative for libraries to track how students use the library to prove the value of the academic library.

A few examples of AiA studies connecting library use with student success:

* At Eastern Kentucky University Libraries, they found that students who accessed online resources through the library had a higher GPA than students who did not. They also found that students with a low (0-1 point GPA) had not accessed any online library resources (“Eastern Kentucky University: Project Description”).
* At Nevada State College, they found a positive correlation between library use and GPA, between using online resources and retention, and between using the library and achieving good academic standing (“Nevada State College: Project Description”).
* The Northwest Arkansas Community College Library found that students who attended information literacy sessions had better course-end grades and retained at a higher rate than those who did not attend the sessions (“Northwest Arkansas Community College: Project Description”).
* At Colorado Mesa University, 92% of students who used the library’s research assistance were retained, compared with 83% of students who did not use the service (“Colorado Mesa University: Project Description”).

**From Case Studies to Generalizations**

Each year, AiA published an executive summary of its findings. Both Year 2 and Year 3 reports highlight findings from studies like those just mentioned, emphasizing that students who use the library show better outcomes than those who do not (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016; Association of College & Research Libraries, 2017).

But can we really make such broad generalizations from these small, localized case studies? And what does it really tell us that students who use the library are more successful? Doesn’t this just mean that students who use the library are probably more academically engaged generally? It is my hypothesis that students who use the library have the time to do so. Students who attend library instruction sessions? Well, they probably have pretty good class attendance overall, and there’s certainly a strong correlation between attending class and getting good grades in college.

I am not convinced that correlational studies do anything more than tell us what we already know: students who have the time and resources to do well in college do well. As I’ve said before, the library is not the thing that makes students successful: privilege is.

In their AiA project summary, Michigan State University acknowledged the complexity of isolating the library’s impact on student success (“Michigan State University: Project Description”). Their team wrote:

*…we do not have sufficient data to make generalizations. This project reiterates the difficulty in demonstrating even correlative relationships between library use and student success; while we can compare the numbers, there are many external and environmental factors for which we cannot account.* (Executive Summary, para. 2)

**Learning Analytics**

The transition from Assessment in Action projects and correlational studies to involvement in campus learning analytics initiatives is a short one. Learning analytics is described by Erik Duval as “collecting traces that learners leave behind and using those traces to improve learning” (2012). In order to optimize education, learning analytics gathers data about student behavior and performance and makes such data instantly available to campus stakeholders through sleek online dashboards. Often times, students are not fully aware of the kinds of data being collected about them as they move through their days: they may be tracked when using Learning Management Systems (like Canvas and Blackboard), as well as when they swipe their ID cards at places like tutoring centers, the gym, and campus events, and now, in libraries, where circulation records and database logins can be transferred to institutional analytics repositories.

Collecting and analyzing information about students in higher education is not new; however, in the past, most administrators were stuck analyzing performance results like grades and course completion *after* the end of the term. Learning analytics offers educators the unique opportunity to act on real-time data during the term and intervene when students are flunking assignments or not attending classes, to offer “nudges” based on low performance, and to even predict what students’ outcomes might be (Smith, 2016).

How students feel about learning analytics is still largely unknown. Researchers in Australia conducted focus groups with students at a large metropolitan university and found that students were hopeful about how learning analytics could potentially help them connect with campus resources, but they were also concerned about being patronized and having their privacy invaded (Roberts, Howell, Seaman, and Gibson, 2016). One student commented that they felt "nudges" from professors through a learning analytics system could feel like a parent nagging them to do their chores. Overall, students expressed that they felt "uninformed and uncertain" about learning analytics and, after being given more information, they had concerns about how instructors’ access to analytics could result in preconceived judgements and bias that would impact their learning opportunities (Roberts, Howell, Seaman, and Gibson, 2016).

How does Megan Oakleaf see the future of learning analytics in libraries? In the 2010 VAL report, Oakleaf lamented the lack of individualized, user-level data about academic library use. She wrote:

*For instance, until libraries know that student #5 with major A has downloaded B number of articles from database C, checked out D number of books, participated in E workshops and online tutorials, and completed courses F, G, and H, libraries cannot correlate any of those student information behaviors with attainment of other outcomes.*

*Until librarians do that, they will be blocked in many of their efforts to demonstrate value...demonstrating the full value of academic libraries is only possible when libraries possess evidence that allows them to examine the impact of library user interactions.* (p. 96)

In November 2017, Oakleaf presented at EDUCAUSE about the importance of integrating individual library user data into learning analytics dashboards (Abel, Nackerud, Brown, Oakleaf, & Jantti, 2017). She included a screenshot from a campus analytics dashboard to show what it might look like to see a students’ interactions with the library. For example, what if faculty could see if students had attended information literacy instruction? I imagine that we could also include whether or not that student has logged in to our resources or borrowed materials. To be clear, this is not about research studies that look at student behavior in the aggregate -- this is identifying student behaviors and interactions with the library down to the individual student, for other stakeholders on campus to see, analyze, and interpret.

Earlier this year, Oakleaf published her most recent article about libraries and learning analytics, in which she discusses the “problem” of privacy in learning analytics as requiring “a significant shift in professional library practice and a reconciliation between long held ethical positions and new imperatives to support student learning and success” (Oakleaf, 2018, p. 20).

To me, it is not a “significant shift” to collect and analyze individual, identifiable use of the library and its resources; it is a *seismic pivot* in library values and intellectual freedom principles. I do not believe it is possible to foster unhindered academic inquiry while, at the same time, tracking when a student logs in to online resources, how many books they check out, or how often they attend information literacy instruction sessions. Putting this data into dashboards accessible by faculty, administrators, student advisors, counselors, and other campus stakeholders is an enormous violation of trust.

Oakleaf is unwavering in her certainty that learning analytics is the future of library assessment data and, while she acknowledges concerns about ethics and privacy, her true concern seems not to be with students’ autonomy and agency, but with librarians’ hesitance to hand over library use data for input in campus-wide advising and retention systems.

As the author of the VAL report, a prolific scholar, and an iSchool professor, Oakleaf has enormous influence over the direction of the conversation around library assessment. This influence is evident in the latest ACRL research agenda, titled “Academic Library Impact” which was published in September 2017.

**ACRL Research Agenda for Student Learning & Success**

The ACRL Research Agenda for Student Learning & Success presents six priorities areas, one of which is including library data in institutional data collection. In that section, the authors propose the following suggested actions.

* *Know how other academic stakeholders are using learning analytics.*
* *Research the safeguards needed to ensure student privacy or confidentiality.*
* *Strategically collect data that can be integrated into learning analytics software.*
* *Advocate for the inclusion of library data in the volumes of information collected from multiple systems within the academic institution.*
* *Integrate library data into campus analytics components.*
* *Work with stakeholders to statistically analyze and predict student learning and success based on shared analytics.* (Connaway, Harvey, Kitzie, & Mikitish, 2017, p. 5)

**Why Resist Learning Analytics?**

I am deeply troubled by the endorsement of pursuing learning analytics as part of an academic library research agenda for several reasons: one, it erodes student privacy and intellectual freedom, two, it takes away control and power from learners, and three, it conflates data tracking and surveillance with library assessment.

As Kyle M.L. Jones and Dorothea Salo explore in this month’s issue of *College and Research Libraries*, there are serious ethical considerations to incorporating library data in institutional learning analytics. They note that students’ intellectual freedom may be hindered if they believe the library is tracking what they search for and where they look for it. Additionally, there may be adverse psychological effects to knowing that library engagement is reported to faculty (Jones & Salo, 2018, p. 319). How will students feel when faculty, after reviewing students’ low engagement with library resources, “nudge” them to use the library more?

April Hathcock, scholarly communications librarian at NYU and lawyer, says learning analytics are “a colonialist, slave-owning, corporatizing, capitalist practice that enacts violence against the sanctity of a learner’s privacy, body and mind. It is not in keeping with our professional values as librarians or educators” (2018). She goes on to write that we owe learners the agency to be involved in decisions about learning analytics. “You can’t object to something," she writes, "if you don’t know it’s happening to you.” I would add that you can’t ethically opt-in to something that hasn’t been fully explained to you, either.

**Assessment ≠ Analytics**

Most importantly in my mind: analytics is not assessment. I think we have to take a step back and remind ourselves of this, because our current conversation reflects analytics as assessment. Some people think that I’m against assessment because I don’t support learning analytics, and that is not true. It is my belief that the best library assessment initiatives ask questions with an inquiry mindset. Are we providing the right services at the right times? Do we have the right materials? Is the coffee shop open late enough? Are there enough outlets? (The answer is always no, on the last one.)

At the heart of *true* assessment is the willingness to change and make adjustments, to move the library to better fit the user. We do this all the time. We adjust hours for finals week, extend borrowing privileges for long-term research projects, and put furniture on wheels so students can move it around to suit their needs. We make the library better based on assessment results, which includes direct feedback from users. In return for being studied and observed ethically, transparently, and with care, people who use the library are given a better library to use.

In contrast, harvesting our users’ data from their EZ Proxy logins, their ID card swipes, and their circulation records, and then comparing it to their GPA, retention rate, or graduation rate, does little to nothing to help *them*, and it only serves *us*—provided the results are in our favor. I think York University was brutally honest in their project summary for AiA (“York University: Project Description”). They wrote,

*[Our] project found that there is a positive correlation between library eResource usage and GPA. While the project did not result in data from which we would make changes to library or institutional practices, it does give the library a new way to communicate value.* (Executive Summary, para. 3)

The bottom line is this: ACRL tells us that we need to connect the dots in order to prove that libraries are valuable, and specifically encourages us to perpetuate the narrative that simply using the library has a positive impact on students.

**But what if using the library hurt student success? Would we do anything differently?**

Lise Doucette is a librarian and a researcher in Canada, and she has done some wonderful work studying library assessment. When I talked to her about my frustrations with correlative studies in library assessment, she smiled and said, “I always ask, ‘What would you do if the results were opposite of what you expected? What if library use was correlated with *negative* student outcomes? e.g., the more students used the library, the worse their grades were?’”

It really made me stop and think when she said that, because I don’t think that anyone doing these kinds of studies has considered that result. What would you do if students who spent more time in the library, or logged in to more databases, were more likely to fail their classes? Would you limit their library use? And if the answer is you wouldn’t close the doors and stop students from coming to and using the library, and you would just keep doing what you’re doing, then what does this say about your beliefs? Your motivations? Your ideology?

**The Stories We Tell**

If we ignore all other factors and put student success squarely on what students do, it takes the pressure off of us as educators. If we believe that everyone is created equal and has the opportunity to succeed, then we can sit back and track success as data blips on a dashboard. Neoliberalism in higher education says: If you don’t succeed, it’s because you didn’t engage enough. Not because you were the primary caretaker for your family, not because you couldn’t afford tuition, not because you work two or three jobs, not because you were living in your car. In the neoliberal academy, we don’t have to question the way market forces might be harming or hindering our students’ success. Students simply succeed or fail at their own hand.

In the conversation about library value, we have chosen to believe in neoliberalism because it is easier for us. In this mindset, we embrace meritocracy (those who succeed do so based on their hard work) and stories of those who start at the bottom and work their way to the top. This is the same philosophy that says that students who attend information literacy instruction sessions, borrow materials, and use online resources will be more successful.

I’m afraid that the students who will suffer the most from this narrative are the students higher education was not designed to serve: students of color, queer/trans/gender nonconforming students, students who work, older students, and students with families. I can easily imagine a scenario where we sit down those students and say, "Well, we’ve looked at the data, and other students in your situation did x, y, and z, and they were successful, so why haven’t you done the same?"

Ultimately I want the next ACRL research agenda to move beyond its current obsession with handing over data to stakeholders to instead study the impacts of poverty, housing insecurity, and hunger on student success. I want the ACRL research agenda to acknowledge that higher education replicates systems of oppression, including racism, heterosexism, transphobia, classism, and white supremacy.

To me, these are the issues that are at the core of student success, and we cannot expect our students to become wholly-realized citizens, to thrive, unless we begin to acknowledge the possibility that using the library is not *the* answer. “More library” will not feed them, house them, and pay their bills. “More library” does not equalize the terrible inequalities faced by our students. “More library” is not going to stop students from dropping out.

**Why do students leave higher education?**

In 2009, the non-profit organization Public Agenda interviewed over 600 young people with at least some college education to find out what kept them in college, or if they didn’t finish their degrees, why they dropped out. According to their results, the number one reason students leave school is because they can’t balance work and school at the same time (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009).

When asked to rank various options for what colleges could do to retain students, the number one thing students wanted was financial assistance for part-time attendance. Other popular responses included adding more evening and weekend classes, cutting the cost of college overall, and providing childcare (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). Not a single student in this study indicated they dropped out because they didn’t use the library enough.

**Homelessness, Food Insecurity, and Poverty among Today’s College Students**

Sara Goldrick-Rab at Temple University has been studying housing and food insecurity among college students for years. In her 2016 book, *Paying the Price*, she argues that the prohibitive cost of college not only leads to low student success rates but even harms students by leaving them with insurmountable debt that follows them for the rest of their lives.

Her most recent study, released just this month, finds that 36% of college students were food insecure at some point in the thirty days before responding to the survey. Nearly one in ten students is homeless. Almost half of community college students say they struggle to pay for housing and utilities (“Hunger and Homelessness are Widespread”).

The University of California system has long been aware of food-related challenges faced by students. UCLA has had a food pantry in its Student Activities Center since 2009, which provides staples like peanut butter and oatmeal. A 2016 survey of 9,000 students in the UC system found that 40% had experienced food insecurity (Watanabe & Newell, 2016). In 2015, each campus in the UC system was asked to form a food security working group to establish food pantries and develop programs to meet student food needs, including education around nutrition, cooking, and budgeting for meals (“Student Food Access”).

**What Libraries Can Do**

With this in mind, if libraries are truly devoted to student success, I would encourage us to look deeply at our communities and see how we can meet their needs. In all of our communities, there are students who need financial aid, food, and housing. Many libraries are already doing incredible things to better serve their campuses, and I think we need more of the following.

*Provide spaces for students with families, including areas where children can play.*

Portland Community College and Sacramento State are just two institutions of many that provide family study rooms equipped with amenities for children, including toys and games to keep children occupied while caregivers study (“Family Study Rooms and Kits”; “Family Study Room”).

*Provide scholarships directly to students.*

Penn State University Libraries administers six different scholarships, including one that gives preference to applicants who have been in the foster care system (“Scholarship Opportunities”).

*Eliminate late fines & review loan rules.*

Many academic libraries still charge fines. In a 2016 survey of 76 large academic libraries, a researcher found that 66% of libraries charged fines for books returned late (Eberhart, 2017). Harvard University recently eliminated fines for late returns and established semester-long borrowing privileges (“Changes in Library Fines”).

Reserve items can be particularly crucial for students who need to study or work at night while homes are quiet and families are asleep; libraries should consider extending reserve materials for overnight checkout. This is already the practice at many institutions, including UC Davis (“Course Reserves”).

*Provide access to textbooks and encourage Open Educational Resources (OER) adoption.*

Required textbooks on reserve on critical for students who can’t afford to buy them. Maintaining a robust and accurate reserves collection takes a lot of labor, but is well worth it. Alverno College took the radical step of creating a textbook collection on open reserve. They spent about $6,000 and bought 300 textbooks (Skowronek, 2017, p. 609). They found that their collection of 329 items circulated 1,126 times in the Spring 2017 semester (Skowronek, 2017, p. 610). We need to continue to be leaders in the conversation around low and no-cost learning materials, including open educational resources.

*Technology*

Libraries provide critical access to high-demand technology items, like laptops and iPads. The last library I worked out at loaned out USB charging cables for Androids/iPhones and headphones, and those were in constant use. One trend I’m particularly excited about is lending WiFi hotspots. Many public libraries already do this, but I think this is a great idea for academic libraries for students who do not have reliable Internet access off-campus (Vercelletto, 2017).

But perhaps most importantly, we must continuously ask our students what they need from us. Ask regularly, review their responses with care and empathy, and take action to meet the gaps in your community. You may not be *the* answer to student success, but you are definitely *an* answer.

**Assessment. Success. Value.**

If you are doing assessment, do assessment. This means asking open-ended questions without an agenda to prove your value, and being willing to make changes to improve. If you are interested in helping students succeed, find out what your students need and provide it. When you prove your value, as you always must, have answers and data at the ready that are meaningful to you and to your institution. You should position yourself as best you can to decide how you will tell the story of your value.

If you are regularly collecting statistics and evaluating your spaces, programs, and services in a variety of ways, then you get to choose how to tell your story of your library’s value. What is it that you provide on your campus that no one else can? How are you critical to student success? My guess it’s hundreds of small things that you do every day, and honestly, some of these things are the hardest to quantify. Sometimes it’s having a stapler available ten minutes before a paper is due. It’s having bathrooms and tables and good lighting. It’s having well-trained, helpful library workers who maintain the stacks, answer questions, and support students.

**Does Our Work Matter?**

When reading the Assessment in Action project summaries, I found that one of the project participants said they wanted to know if their work matters. If that is your question, my answer is yes. Yes. I promise that you matter to your students, your faculty, and your campus. It’s your job to ask *how* you matter, and if you are doing the right things and enough of them. It’s your job to meet the needs of your campus so well that you fill your campus with the wildest, loudest advocates. They should be there to sing your praises when you need them. I also think we have to accept that all of this might not be enough.

Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe connecting individual use of academic libraries to student success, and feeding that data into institutional learning analytics dashboards, is the way that we will prove academic library value. Maybe our collections will flourish, and lost faculty and staff support positions will return to us.

I’m sad to say I think it’s more likely that the money that has left library budgets is gone, and it’s not coming back. Surveillance tactics will not save us. Handing over our data to institutional dashboards will not save us.

In her blog, Emily Drabinski recently pondered how librarians can reframe the terms of the debate around learning analytics (2017). If student-level data determines resource allocation, and the library needs resources, how can we reject the system by which our funding is determined? She notes, correctly, that it is easier to say “resist!” but much more complicated to actually do so.

Drabinski asks:

*What does that rejection look like if we were to reject it an organized way, in a way that reflected a meaningful we, rather than as single individuals taking loud public stands and then getting fired for it?* (2017, n.p.)

**Conclusion**

I am not going to tell you that the work ahead is easy or simple. There are large and powerful forces in higher education that want us to quantify and measure our work to prove our worth. I had the opportunity to speak to you today, and I wanted to talk to you about this--about students, what they need, and how we can be there for them. And the next time you have the ability to organize, to speak together as a group, and to question how the way we prove our value might harm our students, I hope you do so.

I think Drabinski is right that this is not work we can do alone, and we need to organize ourselves and demand better from our institutions, including our employers and our professional associations. But I do think, at the very beginning of any resistance, there are individual voices looking for each other, hoping to find resonance and strength in community.

You are not silly, or stubborn, or impractical for valuing students and their privacy and agency. You are not unreasonable for thinking learning analytics is a load of nonsense, designed to serve a particular narrative about student success in higher education. The first time you use your voice to speak out against the status quo, your words may waver. Your voice is not shaking from fear. It is power. And when your voice shakes, that is the moment you have to use it.

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