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Becoming Part of the Conversation through Assessment of Undergraduate Library Internships

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Abstract

Any recent attendee at an academic library conference would likely note the large number of panels, posters, presentations, and roundtables that focus on libraries partnering and collaborating with other campus stakeholders, such as admissions, international student services, the writing center, and so on. Our library is no different.

Gettysburg College is a four-year liberal arts institution located in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, with an enrollment of 2,600 students. Musselman Library serves its campus population with thirteen librarians and nineteen staff members. In a small college environment, collaborating with other campus stakeholders is not only desirable, it is essential if the library wants to move forward with any service or initiative.

After decades of carefully developing relationships, cross-department and cross-division collaboration is an expectation and the norm, and the library has a reputation of being a strong partner. Colleagues across campus are open and receptive to new ideas that mean better serving students. Indeed, forming partnerships with stakeholders is part of the library's current strategic plan.² It is only through strategic partnerships with faculty and other administrators on campus that the library will be able to gain traction on its own goals around information literacy, diversity and inclusion, and communicating the library's value with assessment data.

The library's participation in the third cohort (2015–16) of the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Assessment in Action (AiA) program enabled the library to partner with colleagues in our Office of Institutional Analysis and the Center for Career Development in order to assess the library's long-standing, but never formally assessed, undergraduate library internship program. Through this distinctive program, the library has provided internships since 1998 for over 100 participants who have gone on to careers in libraries, archives, museums, and related fields.

Keywords

academic libraries, liberal arts college, interdepartmental collaboration, Association of College and Research Libraries, ACRL, Assessment in Action

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Comments

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Introduction

Any recent attendee at an academic library conference would likely note the large number of panels, posters, presentations, and roundtables that focus on libraries partnering and collaborating with other campus stakeholders, such as admissions, international student services, the writing center, and so on. Our library is no different.

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After decades of carefully developing relationships, cross-department and cross-division collaboration is an expectation and the norm, and the library has a reputation of being a strong partner. Colleagues across campus are open and receptive to new ideas that mean better serving students. Indeed, forming partnerships with stakeholders is part of the library's current strategic plan.² It is only through strategic partnerships with faculty and other administrators on campus that the library will be able to gain traction on its own goals around information literacy, diversity and inclusion, and communicating the library's value with assessment data.

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Through this partnership, we not only obtained much-needed assessment data about the program's impact, but also learned what makes for a successful partnership, gained new insight into how the library's mission overlaps with the goals that drive our campus colleagues' work, and developed a model for cross-division assessment projects that could be implemented across our campus.

Institutional and Library Priorities

Gettysburg College has long placed a value on the high-impact educational practices (HIPs) outlined in George Kuh's 2008 report.³ The Gettysburg curriculum is centered around completing a senior capstone; conducting undergraduate research; studying abroad; having common intellectual experiences, such as taking a first-year seminar; service learning; and participating in other experiences, including internships.

Supported by our Center for Career Development, 80 percent of 2017 graduates completed an internship, a percentage that has steadily increased since 2013 when 67 percent participated.⁴ Hoping to further increase students' participation in this area, Gettysburg's 2017 strategic plan includes a goal of providing all of our graduating students with the foundational skills to launch into graduate or professional school or careers, as well as access to mentors and a professional network.⁵

Musselman Library actively contributes to this part of Gettysburg's strategic plan. Over the course of nineteen years, the library's internship program has grown from a single, year-long internship for a recent graduate to several endowed, semester- and summer-long internships within the library, ranging across reference, special collections and archives, and music librarianship.

At the time of our assessment, the library provided internship opportunities for three to four Gettysburg students and recent graduates each academic year. Our original internship opportunity, the Barbara Holley '54 Internship, is a one-year, paid internship with benefits allowing a recent college graduate from any institution who is interested in librarianship to gain experience working in all library departments. Providing a shorter experience, the Robert '44 and Esther Kenyon Fortenbaugh '46 Internship is a semester-long, paid internship for a current Gettysburg student with the opportunity to work in a specific library department, such as special collection and archives, research and instruction, or technical services. Supporting a student who may be unable to complete an internship during the academic year, the Diane Werley Smith '73 Internship is a summer-long, paid internship allowing a current Gettysburg student to work in special collections and archives.

Given the history, scale, and success of our program, we consider it to be a key part of how we serve our campus community. However, before the AiA program, we had never conducted a formal assessment of the program's impact on student learning, career and professional goals, and early professional employment and success. Similarly, we had not communicated to our campus community about how the library's internship program, as a high-impact practice, supports student learning and success.

Working with a Campus Team

We assembled a four-member team to carry out our AiA assessment project. Given the focus on the library's internship program, the team included two librarians from different library departments who regularly work with interns. Drawing upon local campus expertise with student learning assessment and Gettysburg College students' career preparation, the team also included administrators from Career Development and Institutional Analysis.⁶

At the outset of the AiA project, the library worked under the direction of our 2013–16 strategic plan, which included an objective of cultivating relationships with other campus departments on the topic of assessment and effectively communicating the library's value using assessment data.⁷ The library's acceptance in the third cohort of the AiA program provided credibility to our assessment efforts, gave weight to our conversations with campus partners about shared areas of assessment interest, and enabled the library to assert itself as part of assessment efforts on campus. With

the full commitment of administrators from Career Development and Institutional Analysis to serve on the campus AiA team, we established cross-divisional support for our internship assessment.

This project also aligned closely with the mission of Career Development to help students develop a career plan and build their professional network and Institutional Analysis's mission to assess student learning. Additionally, participation in this assessment project was beneficial to the Center for Career Development since the department had previously collected more quantitative than qualitative data regarding student internships. The project was one way to develop skills for collecting qualitative data in that area. For Institutional Analysis, it provided a way for staff to learn about the assessment needs of the library and Career Development and to explore how other research methods, such as interviews, could be used to assess student learning. This assessment also provided a good model that Career Development and Institutional Analysis, as well as other departments on campus that provide internships, could use and build upon.

A number of factors helped establish the groundwork to make this fourteen-month project a success for all those involved. From the beginning, it was important to have open conversation and agreement as a team about our shared goals, how the AiA program's structure would inform our collective work, and a timeline that made sense within our campus context and individual schedules. Even though Gettysburg is a small campus and working collaboratively is a norm, it was important for the team leader to ensure that all team members were able to articulate what they felt they could contribute realistically and what they wanted to learn through the project in order to establish a commitment to a collective mission.

The team developed its own timeline based on the assessment cycle for the project to stay on track to meet project milestones. Meetings were scheduled every two weeks for continual check-ins on progress, and flexibility was incorporated to allow for other commitments, such as conference attendance and busy times of the academic year. Individual areas of interest were matched with assigned responsibilities and evenly distributed across all team members. The team agreed upon the best way to communicate throughout the process (email), and a network drive was set up to allow team members to share documents easily.

Being a small college presented both benefits and challenges as the project progressed. The shared commitment to the institutional goals of career preparation and assessment of student learning was an important factor contributing to the project's success. It allowed for a natural partnership with our colleagues in Career Development and Institutional Analysis, and the directors of both departments provided support for the project by allowing a significant time commitment by all members.

However, it is important to note that a time commitment, such as fourteen months, can be a burden to members of a small department staff with many other ongoing projects to attend to. Early in the planning process, we acknowledged as a team that there would be times in the semester when we would need to pause our work because of other commitments or would be unable to meet as a full group. We were able to easily accommodate updated project deadlines to adapt to busy schedules along the way since our project timeline had built-in flexibility, and the team leader facilitated regular communication across the team, such as check-in emails to individual members or collective update emails about our overall progress and next steps.

To sustain momentum, we needed to acknowledge the limitations of what we would be able to get done realistically at different points in the academic year and, just as important, to celebrate when we reached certain project milestones, like completing our survey design or receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval. We celebrated small successes through informal lunches

(paid for by the library) where we could be together but not doing project work. To celebrate the completion of the project, the team gathered for a lunch and received small thank-you gifts from the library. Additionally, the team leader wrote individual thank-you letters to the various team members and their division heads.

Establishing the Research Question and Method

After the team was established and the timeline was in place, we agreed that the assessment would focus on a three-part research question:

What impact (if any) does completing an undergraduate library internship have on preparation and success in graduate or other advanced training; career and professional goals; and early professional employment and success?

To explore our research question, the team relied upon two research methods—an online survey and a semi-structured interview, which we conducted by telephone. We identified the online survey as a method that would enable us to reach former interns who were spread geographically across the United States and internationally. After looking at a number of tools for administering an online survey, we decided upon SurveyMonkey, which was easy to learn, fit within our budget, and supported our data needs.

In order to administer the survey and conduct interviews, the team needed to submit all relevant materials to Gettysburg's IRB before moving forward, which was a new process for the majority of the team. As part of the application process, all team members needed to complete an online training program that required a significant time commitment. Once that was completed, our team member from Institutional Analysis was extremely helpful with the IRB application process, assuring that the research and survey process was transparent, the results were kept anonymous, and plans were in place for storing our data.

We designed our online survey with twenty-nine items. Combining existing data collected by the library and our colleagues in the Development, Alumni, and Parent Relations division, we were able to identify ninety-six interns from 1998 to 2015. Of those ninety-six, we were able to gather an email address, a physical mailing address, or both for eighty-three. Of the eighty-three possible participants, we received forty-five complete responses, a response rate of 54.2 percent. To receive greater detail for some questions beyond what a survey would make possible, we used the survey to identify participants for a series of follow-up semi-structured phone interviews.

Overall, respondents were extremely pleased with their internship experience, and a majority indicated that it had positively impacted their careers. A majority of respondents also indicated that their internship positively influenced their acceptance to a graduate program. Additionally, survey results showed that the internship positively impacted students' decisions to pursue a career in libraries, archives, museums, or related fields and helped them to identify possible areas of specialization that matched their work-related interests.

At a programmatic level, we sought to learn what participants valued from their overall experience in order to inform the program's design. Figure 10.1 provides a listing of major themes that previous interns said they valued the most from their experience.

<p>Treated as a colleague/ member of staff</p>	<p>Mentorship</p>	<p>Acquisition of practical skills</p>	<p>Seeing the “big picture” of how an academic library functions</p>
<p>Confirmed or clarified career choice</p>	<p>Personalized experience</p>	<p>Breadth of experience</p>	<p>Good preparation for graduate school</p>

FIGURE 10.1
Themes for “most valued” part of library internship.

While we will not go into depth here, the final report containing the survey, interview questions asked, and the complete findings is available on Gettysburg College’s institutional repository.⁸

Becoming Part of the Conversation

Regular communication with stakeholders during a large project is one of the most valuable lessons from completing the AiA program. We felt a strong need for accountability to our upper administrators in the library, Career Development, and Institutional Analysis, who had given their support and staff time to work on this project. For the librarians on the team, we needed to acknowledge and value the great amount of personal investment our library colleagues have in the internship program. To make internships successful experiences, they require a significant amount of time to plan, organize, and implement. Given this sense of accountability, we made sure to communicate regularly to library staff throughout the AiA program and afterward.

For librarians and library staff, that meant meeting at various points with internship supervisors, our colleagues who most directly work with interns. These conversations were essential to identifying outcomes, interpreting results, and identifying next steps. At various points in the process, we also gave short updates on our progress at library-wide staff meetings, during monthly librarian meetings, and individually with the library dean. Our colleagues were supportive and eager to hear what we were doing and our findings. It was also important for our library dean to be up-to-date in order to report on our work during meetings with our associate provost and provost.

For the other members of our team, we relied upon them to share our progress in their respective meetings with their upper administrators. From our librarian perspective, we felt that our partners knew best how to frame our common talking points into a form that matched what their administrators wanted to know and how frequently they wanted to be updated.

As we reflect on the project, we see areas for improvement. If we had been able to get everything accomplished within the fourteen months of the AiA program, it would have been ideal. However, the ideal rarely matches with reality, especially in a project like this in which all team members juggle a number of other responsibilities. As a result, we had to be flexible. For example, by the end of the project, we had not fully completed the analysis of our results and did not have a formal report to share on campus. We needed to acknowledge how much we had been able to get done and accept that some unfinished work would extend into the next few months.

From the library side, we felt concern about asking our campus partners to do a lot of work after the agreed-upon fourteen months. We wanted to respect their time and work commitments. As a result, much of the final analysis and communication about the findings have happened through the two librarians on the team. However, we have made sure to keep our campus partners updated.

Keeping the Conversation Going—Immediate Impact

Even with these challenges, the project results have impacted library and institutional practice in a number of ways. For all of the team members, going through the assessment cycle itself has been enormously valuable. Our partners have been able to see how that cycle was applicable within a library and how it would work in their own organizations.

It was also the first time that the assessment cycle was part of an ongoing conversation across the entire library. It clarified the value and need for articulated formal outcomes, developed local expertise (particularly for the two library team members), and increased assessment capacity within the library. We are now seeing the same assessment cycle being applied across different library departments. We have been able to facilitate this process by sharing what we have learned with our colleagues, being open and available to answer questions and provide feedback about assessment projects, and applying what we now know in our regular work responsibilities.

For the internship program, there have been several areas of immediate impact. A final report was written by the team and shared with the entire library staff, and a meeting was held to go over the findings and identify and discuss possible next steps—both immediate and into the future. Because everyone was included in this process, the project progressed to something in which the entire library staff had ownership. As a result of these conversations, we changed how we plan to recruit applicants in order to increase diversity, redesigned elements of the internships in different library departments, implemented a standard exit interview as an assessment for all interns to provide more standardization, and laid the groundwork for future assessments by identifying what data we will need and how it should be recorded.

Keeping the Conversation Going—Long-Term Goals for Impact

While we have been able to make immediate changes as a result of our assessment, many areas will continue to require attention. We have taken time to think strategically about our next steps with our project partners and others on campus. However, our current findings allow us to articulate a clear and compelling narrative, supported by data, about the impact our internship program has on students. Moreover, we can communicate how the library's internship program aligns with strategic institutional goals to support student learning and career preparation.

One of the most valuable aspects of this assessment has been the establishment of individual partnerships with Institutional Analysis and Career Development. Those offices are now aware of what the library internship program provides to students, and we have evidence of how these internships prepare students for graduate school and their professional careers, which can be communicated to students seeking internships on campus. We plan to develop our connection with Career Development going forward. For example, we are exploring ways to supplement our internship program by developing additional externship opportunities in other archives, libraries, and museums.

With Institutional Analysis, we are keen to explore other ways in which we may work together to assess the library's contribution to student learning, particularly with our library instruction program. As a result of our conversations on assessment, a librarian is now serving on our campus's committee on learning assessment, alongside colleagues from Institutional Analysis, which is an excellent start.

Outside of our team members, we are sharing our findings with colleagues in other divisions, such as Admissions and Development, Alumni, and Parent Relations. The library has not always effectively shared information about our program beyond the academic division. Because we have provided admissions with language about the program and its impact, that office will be able to share this opportunity with prospective students.

Our colleagues in development have a long-standing relationship with our library dean. As a result of the work they have done together, the library has secured endowments for our internship programs. We are keen to build upon those endowments, and the findings of our assessment project provide a compelling narrative for development officers to share with potential donors who are interested in supporting students' career exploration.

Elsewhere on campus, there are a number of programs that have a similar interest in demonstrating their impact, such as our campus centers for public service and leadership. We hope that by sharing the story of our partnership, the model for our assessment project, our findings, and how we have been able to use them, we will serve as a model for these and other programs on campus.

This assessment has also clarified the need to develop new partnerships on campus. For example, through library-wide conversations about our existing program, we identified a strong need to diversify the profile of our interns in order to feel that we were embodying our library's diversity statement.⁹ Historically, our applicants have been white, female, and from particular academic departments, such as history and English. We plan to share our assessment results with the Office of International Student Services as well as the Office of Multicultural Engagement and work with them to attract and recruit a more diverse applicant pool.

Conclusion

Through the partnership with our colleagues in Career Development and Institutional Analysis, we have started a conversation about how the library supports student learning and success, as well as career preparation. This is a conversation that could have taken place with enough drive and determination, but the AiA program itself has provided a way to spend time developing relationships with campus partners, exploring a central question together, and developing our own professional understanding of how library assessment can be used to demonstrate library value.

During the program itself and well beyond, we have gathered data that has informed our professional practice—both immediately and in the future—in ways that help not only the library, but our partners and campus colleagues as well. We experienced successes and challenges, but by starting the conversation itself, we gained momentum that will continue to inform how the library conducts assessment and partners with others. Indeed, with the library's embrace of the assessment cycle, we have much to do.

Biographies

Clinton K. Baugess is a Research & Instruction Librarian and instruction coordinator at Gettysburg College's Musselman Library. He served as Team Lead for Gettysburg's participation in Cohort 3 (2015–2016) of *Assessment in Action*. He has supervised and mentored numerous library interns as part of the library's undergraduate internship program and continues to explore ways to assess and demonstrate the library's contribution to student learning and success. Reach him at cbaugess@gettysburg.edu.

Kathryn S. Martin is the Cataloging & Collections Librarian at Gettysburg College's Musselman Library. She was a team member for Gettysburg's participation in Cohort 3 (2015–2016) of *Assessment in Action*. Her main duties include monograph and ebook cataloging as well as collection assessment. She has worked closely with library interns in Technical Services since 2012. Reach her at ksmartin@gettysburg.edu.

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