Strategic Library Assessment: Aligning with your University's Strategic Plan

By: Kathryn M. Crowe

Abstract:

At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a new Chancellor began a strategic planning process in fall 2016 with a focus on "big ideas" and "giant steps." The planning framework emphasizes student, knowledge and regional transformation in three areas: Health and Wellness, Vibrant Communities and Global Connections. Each year, units are required to submit their strategic planning report to the Office of Accreditation and Assessment with objectives, measures and targets. At the end of the year units submit a report to show if these objectives were accomplished. The report includes findings to show if targets were met or not along with an action plan for improvement. For both the planning and annual reports units are asked to link their goals and accomplishments to the University's strategic plan where appropriate.

Keywords: strategic planning | library assessment | academic libraries | higher education

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Strategic Library Assessment: Aligning with your University's Strategic Plan

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Introduction

Demonstrating academic libraries' value has been an important initiative in the profession since the publication of ACRL's ***The Value of Academic Libraries*** in 2010. This report encouraged libraries to become more closely aligned with their institutions' mission and goals as a mechanism to show their value and contributions to their campuses. Because academic libraries do not exist in a vacuum, but are part of their academic institutions, it is essential that they understand the institutional mission and align services and resources with them and communicate this alignment widely. As stated in the document, "Communicating that alignment is crucial for communicating library value in institutional terms."[1] Furthermore, academic libraries should let the institutional mission guide their assessment initiatives, an approach that provides libraries additional opportunities to show their value to their campus through good data.[2]

More recently, in its 2017 report, ***ACRL Academic Library Impact: Improving Practice and Essential Areas to Research***, ACRL further recommended that libraries:

- Match library assessment to institution's mission
- Include library data in institutional data collection[3]

The ***Impact*** report also recommended that libraries participate in the data environment used by their academic institution in order to report their accomplishments.[4]

And, in ACRL's new ***Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*** (2018), the Association included the following as performance indicators for the Institutional Effectiveness principle:

- The library defines and measures outcomes in the context of institutional mission.
- The library develops outcomes that are aligned with institutional, departmental, and student affairs outcomes.[5]

These guidelines confirm that academic library administrators and assessment librarians need to align strategic planning and assessment efforts with their university's planning operations as an important strategy to show the library's value and contributions to the campus.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) is a high research activity campus with an enrollment of 20,000 that is part of the 17-campus University of North Carolina system. In fall 2016, the new chancellor began a strategic planning process. The university libraries participate actively in this process each year by submitting goals and metrics and aligning them with the university's strategic plan in the campus data system. This article presents a case study to illustrate how an academic library can demonstrate its value by developing assessments and strategic plans that support the university's mission.

Literature Review

Even before ACRL's value study, librarians began calling for academic libraries to align with their campus mission. Dillon stated in ***No Brief Candle: Reconceiving Research Libraries for the 21st Century*** (2008), "Academic libraries will survive as long as there are universities. However, libraries cannot thrive without aligning their workings directly to the core mission of their host institutions."[6]

More recent studies indicate a disconnect between academic libraries and their institutions' goals and mission. The 2016 Ithaka S&R Library Survey included responses from 722 academic library directors from all types of institutions. The results suggested that directors and their provosts do not always share the same

vision of the library's mission. Those respondents that indicated they had a well-developed strategic plan, however, felt they were more integrated with the institution's senior leadership than those who did not have a solid plan.[7] For ACRL's **Impact** study mentioned above, the researchers interviewed 14 provosts from a variety of institutions. Outcomes of these interviews revealed that communication is essential and that library administrators need to make provosts aware of library efforts that align with institutional mission and goals. Library administrators also need to employ the terminology used by provosts and other university administrators.[8]

In a study published in 2018, Murray and Ireland surveyed provosts at institutions from master's level or above to determine how they perceive academic libraries as playing a role with issues of institutional importance, what types of data they find useful, and what methods of communication are successful to increase library funding. Results showed that demonstrated correlations linking the use of library services and resources with academic success, retention and enrollment, and faculty research productivity were the most important for funding requests. Other types of useful information included use data, user satisfaction, qualitative data, and information literacy student learning outcome data.[9] Respondents indicated that the most helpful communication tool for budgeting was the formal annual report followed by budget presentations or meetings. Endorsements from other deans and administrators were also noted as influential.[10] The authors concluded, "Academic libraries are no longer the symbolic "heart of the university; instead, they must provide evidence to support funding requests that support the priorities of the institution as a whole."[11]

In other recent studies, researchers sought to determine how academic libraries use assessment to inform their strategic plans and align with their institution. In 2018, Miller conducted an exploratory study by surveying libraries in Australia, Canada, and the UK to determine how university libraries engage with their university community when developing strategic plans. Respondents expressed that libraries use a variety of methods with surveys being the most popular followed by focus groups, interviews, and consultations.[12] Also in 2018, Springmier, Edwards, and Bass explored how academic libraries use data and strategic planning documents to communicate with their stakeholders and others with the hypothesis that a strong commitment to assessment would correlate with the presence of data on the library's website. The authors conducted a content analysis of 97 North American websites and scored them with a rubric. Of these libraries, 57% made data available to the public with the most usual being "counting" statistics of volumes held, classes, gate counts, etc. Libraries that scored higher on their evaluation also provided benchmarks or comparisons. The most effective strategies used data to tell the story of the library and communicate its impact on the campus. These libraries devoted a section of their website to assessment and provided archived documents of initiatives.[13] Madsen and Hurst with Athenaeum21 Consulting conducted 96 interviews with library administrators from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany between 2015 and 2017 to examine the landscape of library assessment and the culture of assessment in academic libraries. Their inquiry included exploring the relationship between assessment and the library's strategic plan, how the library's assessment tied into the parent institution's plan, and the importance of integrating with the institution's assessment operation. They also conducted a survey in 2017 with 211 assessment librarians and other administrators completing it. The libraries in this study reported that assessment activities were closely tied to their strategic planning; fewer libraries, however, reported a strong link with their university's strategic planning.[14] The authors recommended that, with the current progression toward impact assessment as opposed to service quality improvement, libraries need to better align assessment to their institutions priorities; also, libraries need to pair their data with better reporting tools and link it directly to both the library's and institution's mission and goals.[15]

A few librarians have published articles specifically about tying assessment to library and campus strategic planning efforts. Franklin discussed such activity at the University of Connecticut. In 2009, the university launched a new strategic plan and each academic unit was charged with adapting its plan to support that of the university.[16] The library's planning team developed its strategy and used LibQUAL® data as supporting documentation. Goals, measures, and metrics were defined that directly followed the university's guidelines.[17] In a follow-up article in 2012, Franklin noted the impact of these efforts on the library. The new strategic plan influenced a reorganization of the library and assessment data tracked growth and changes for

each goal of the strategic plan, thus showing how the library supported the university's mission.[18] Also, the LibQUAL survey administered after changes were made showed improvement in service quality scores.[19] Walter provided a case study in 2018 that discussed aligning across university units to promote awareness of the library's value. The library at DePaul University adopted the university's strategy for its own 2012–18 plan and focused on initiatives relating to teaching and learning associated with academic quality and educational innovation. They used data from the Ithaka Local Faculty S&R Survey to demonstrate that DePaul faculty perceived the library as important to their teaching and developing undergraduate critical thinking and information literacy skills.[20] Walter also reported that the library is in the process of integrating with the campus learning analytics system.[21] In another 2018 study, Britto and Kinsley described using a logic model to develop the libraries' strategic plan at the University of Florida to submit to the university's institutional effectiveness plan.[22] Library units were asked to develop assessment measures to demonstrate to stakeholders how they contributed to the university's mission.[23]

Case Study

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) is a high research activity university with an enrollment of 20,000 students and part of the 17-campus University of North Carolina system. In fall 2016, the new chancellor began a strategic planning process with a focus on "big ideas" and "giant steps." The strategic plan employs a framework that emphasizes student, knowledge, and regional transformation in three areas of focus: Health and Wellness, Vibrant Communities, and Global Connections:

Table 1

Areas of Transformation	Areas of Focus
Student Transformation	Vibrant Communities
Knowledge Transformation	Health & Wellness
Global Connections	Regional Transformation

Each year, specific goals and key performance indicators with metrics are identified for each of the areas of transformation and foci.[24] The plan also follows the five areas identified in the strategic plan for the University of North Carolina system, which include access, affordability and efficiency, student success, economic impact and community engagement, and excellent and diverse institutions.[25]

University Libraries Strategic Planning Process

The UNCG Libraries, while they do have an established mission along with goals and values, do not have a long-term strategic plan; instead, an annual strategic plan is developed each year.[26] The process begins with a retreat of the leadership group that includes the dean, assistant deans, and all department heads. This group develops an initial plan that the dean and assistant deans then finalize at another retreat. Each goal includes action items with assigned responsibility, metrics, and targets, and indicates which aspect of the UNCG plan it supports. This plan forms the basis of what is then entered in the template required by the Office of Assessment and Accreditation. Figure 1 illustrates this process.

Figure 1 University Libraries Strategic Planning Process

UNCG Strategic Planning Process

UNCG's Office of Accreditation and Assessment (OAA) is charged with organizing and implementing the annual strategic planning process. All academic and administrative units are required to submit their strategic plan (formerly called the institutional effectiveness plan) for the upcoming year to this office with identified objectives, measures, and targets. The units' mission statements are also included. This plan emphasizes change and improvement. At the end of the year, units submit a strategic planning report with findings to show if these objectives were accomplished or not along with analysis and explanations. This report also requires an action plan to show how the unit will follow up on their findings. Activities may also be recorded. Figure 2 illustrates this process. The libraries have participated in this process since 2008 and a member of the libraries' faculty has served on the UNCG Institutional Effectiveness Committee since then as well.[27] The libraries' goals and metrics for the year that specifically show change and improvement form the measures and targets for the strategic plan submitted to OAA.

Figure 2 UNCG Strategic Planning Process
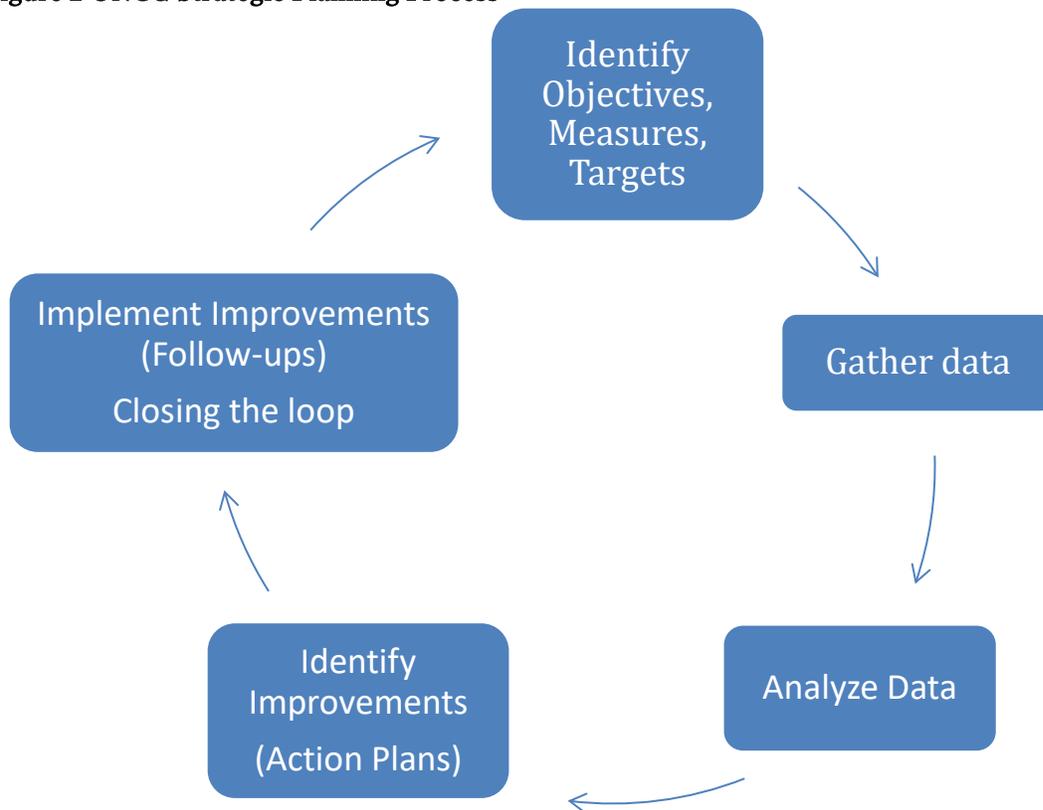
Beginning in 2016, all UNCG units were asked to link their goals to the new UNCG strategic planning framework. The libraries determined that most of our goals aligned with the student and knowledge areas of transformation and the vibrant communities focus area. The chancellor's office developed a report, ***Giant Steps: Initiatives Supporting Transformation of Students, Knowledge, and the Region.***[28] It was very gratifying that most of the libraries' initiatives were included in this campus-wide report thus showing how the libraries align with the UNCG strategic plan. This report is kept current so that unit goals continue to be showcased.

To incentivize the strategic plan, the university offered faculty seed grants in 2016–17 for teaching innovations, research, and community-engaged research.[29] The libraries' digital projects unit received a research grant in collaboration with history and library and information studies (LIS) faculty. The libraries' digital project, North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisements, 1750–1865, was incorporated into a capstone history course and LIS students had the opportunity to learn how to digitize primary source materials.[30] This grant provided another opportunity for the libraries to integrate and align with the UNCG strategic plan.

Integrating the Libraries' Strategic Planning with the University's Plan

Moving forward, the libraries' 2017–18 strategic plan included several goals that supported the UNCG framework and demonstrated value. The following table provides an example of how the libraries' planning cycle aligned with the UNCG strategic plan:

Table 2

Selected Objectives	Measures	Targets	Findings	Link to UNCG Framework
Make UNCG an OER leader within the state in order to reduce the cost of a college education for our students	Number of adopted course textbooks freely provided online Amount of student savings if they don't purchase the text	Provide at least 200 texts Students savings of at least $200,000 if they don't purchase the text	532 course texts provided as e-books with a 55% increase from 16–17 Potential savings of $445,643	Vibrant Communities Student Transformation Knowledge Transformation Regional Transformation
Develop a master space plan for Jackson and Schiffman Libraries in order to maximize space for services, learning, and unique materials	Number of seats added	60 seats added on 5th floor by June 2018	72 new seats added	Vibrant Communities Student Transformation Knowledge Transformation
Undertake an information fluency initiative in order to expand information literacy/fluency on campus and in the community	Difference in GPA between students who receive library instruction and those that do not.	Difference in GPA between those that receive library instruction and those who do not of at least 0.25 Number of community workshops Number of faculty development stipends to restructure a course	The overall difference for all subjects was 0.27 (an average GPA of 2.87 for those who did not receive instruction and 3.14 for those who did)	Vibrant Communities Student Transformation Knowledge Transformation

Integrating Assessment with Strategic Planning

The university libraries' assessment program is coordinated by a team. This group establishes an annual plan based on current needs, goals, and initiatives from around the libraries. Team members as well as other librarians and staff engage in assessment projects. Support for the program is provided by a graduate student and staff from UNCG's Office of Assessment, Evaluation and Research Services (OAERS), a service of the School of Education's educational research methodology department. This plan is presented to libraries'

leadership for approval. Results, reports, presentations, and publications about all assessment projects are posted on a LibGuide along with a summary report at the end of each year.[31]

Several assessment studies provided data for building and future renovation plans. The Harold Schiffman Music Library, a branch in the music building, has underutilized space in its lower level. A needs assessment conducted in the School of Music in 2016–17 provided evidence that students needed more recording space. The libraries are working with the school to develop renovation plans to provide such a space that will help students' success in making recordings to submit for graduate school and performance opportunities. For the past few years, the libraries have engaged in a "rightsizing" project to reduce the stack footprint and increase seating and learning spaces. Observational studies of both technology and furniture have informed placement and purchases of both. In addition, the libraries are in the process of developing a master plan for a major renovation and addition. Building results from a general student survey in 2017 provided evidence of student needs and desires for learning spaces and technology to enhance their success. An infographic and other handouts were developed to provide brief bullet points for the project architects and university administrators. More recent assessments in the libraries' Digital Media Commons will provide useful information about how space and services will inform the master space plan.

As frequently noted in assessment literature, other studies provided evidence of the need for marketing resources and services. A 2017 survey conducted among distance learning students indicated that many are not aware of the libraries' extensive online resources and services. Similarly, a survey of students who study abroad showed that they, too, did not use the libraries' online resources or chat service while in another country. As a result, a marketing campaign is part of the libraries' plan for 2018–19.

A frequent theme in library value literature is to measure the library's impact on student success by determining if library use affects student grades or other standard criteria. The UNCG Libraries conducted a grade study in 2017–18 that compared the aggregate GPA of students in 100-level classes who attended a library instruction class to those who did not. The results were positive overall as noted in the above table. In the discussions of the findings with the OAERS consultants, however, it was determined that there are too many variables with student grades and it is very difficult to make a direct correlation to the library's influence. With this end in mind, the libraries' assessment team decided to focus on authentic assessment of student work in the future following the libraries' student learning goals based on ACRL's Information Literacy Framework.

The table below illustrates how the libraries' assessment informs strategic planning and thus aligns with the university's mission and planning:

Table 3

Assessment project	Libraries' Strategic Plan Action Item	Link to UNCG Framework
Needs assessment of Schiffman Music Library. Surveyed School of Music students & held focus groups	Renovate space to provide a recording studio needed by students	Vibrant Communities Student Transformation
Digital Media Commons assessment. Surveyed faculty and customers and held student focus groups	Informed future planning of DMC Informed Master Space Plan	Vibrant Communities Student Transformation Knowledge Transformation

Assessment project	Libraries' Strategic Plan Action Item	Link to UNCG Framework
Distance Learning survey Study Abroad survey	Developed a marketing plan to publicize remote and electronic services and resources more effectively	Vibrant Communities Student Transformation Knowledge Transformation
Technology use data and observations	Determined future technology purchases and their placement	Vibrant Communities Student Transformation Knowledge Transformation
Student surveys—building responses	Informed Master Space Plan	Vibrant Communities Student Transformation Knowledge Transformation
Furniture use observations	Provided additional seating and effective learning spaces	Vibrant Communities Student Transformation Knowledge Transformation
Student grade study	Determined decision to focus on authentic assessment of student work and conduct more robust analysis of LibInsight data	Vibrant Communities Student Transformation Knowledge Transformation

Conclusion and Recommendations

In recent years, hundreds of useful and important studies have been published that provide research and protocols for academic libraries on how they can demonstrate their value to their campuses. ACRL has led this effort and provided excellent support and guidance through funding, documents, and infrastructure. Few publications, however, focus specifically on how libraries' assessment data can match with their institutions' mission and, in turn, align and support the university's mission and strategic plan as recommended by ACRL in its ***Impact*** report. It is important to participate in campus planning and assessment committees and integrate with the university data system. This case study provides an example of how an academic library can demonstrate its value to the university by integrating and aligning with the campus strategic planning and assessment process. Effective assessment shows that the libraries are providing good data for planning and follow-up and are thus furthering UNCG's goals and mission. The libraries are fortunate to be fully integrated with the campus-wide planning and assessment process. Recent developments where unit accomplishments are documented in the campus data system have enhanced the libraries' profile. Over the years, the libraries have learned to merge its planning and reporting more

effectively with the university's process and are thus able to show how they support and enhance UNCG's mission.

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