

# Assessment in Action Program: Four Perspectives in its Value to Librarians, Institutions and Students

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## Abstract

This paper provides a brief history and background of the Association of College Research Library's Assessment in Action Program. The authors reflect on program benefits and lessons learned while discussing three assessment projects planned and executed with the support of the Assessment in Action program from all three years of the program's existence, including the third and final year which is ongoing.

## Introduction/Background

The Association of Academic Research Libraries (ACRL) initiated the Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries and Student Success (AiA) program in 2012 as part of a National Leadership and Education Grant of \$249,330. The grant: "supports the design, implementation and evaluation of a program to strengthen the competencies of librarians in campus leadership and data-informed advocacy." (<http://www.ala.org/acrl/AiA>)

AiA came out of two leadership summits created as part of the (Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Collaborative Grant which concluded:

- "Accountability drives higher education discussions.
- A unified approach to institutional assessment is essential.
- Student learning and success are the primary focus of higher education assessment.
- Academic administrators and accreditors seek evidence-based reports of measurable impact"

To learn more about the summits read:

[Connect, Collaborate, and Communicate: A Report from the Value of Academic Libraries Summits](#)

A major goal was to select 300 libraries to participate in creating assessment projects using a team approach: Librarian team leader, faculty, Institutional Research, and others. In summary the goals included:

- "Develop the professional competencies of librarians to document and communicate the value of their academic libraries primarily in relation to their institution's goals for student learning and success."

- “Build and strengthen collaborative relationships with higher education stakeholders around the issue of library value.”
- “Contribute to higher education assessment work by creating approaches, strategies, and practices that document the contribution of academic libraries to the overall goals and missions of their institutions.”

The Assessment in Action program met these goals in part, but did not find that the required demand was there to continue the program past the third cohort. There are plans to use some of the curriculum in other training sessions to continue this important educational and training opportunity for librarians and others.

During the years the AiA program was in place, the structure was based on a 14-month program for each cohort centered around an online learning community, with some in person workshops, leading up to a poster session at the American Libraries Association Conference. Each team leader was charged with developing a research/assessment plan, executing it and analyzing the data (if possible) within the 14 months and reporting on in at ALA as a poster session.

This process was supported by a learning community using a “Guide on the side” approach (instead of “sage on the stage”) in which communities of practice emphasized that:

“Learners work collaboratively in face-to-face sessions, webcasts, and asynchronous online environments to create, share, and build content and products.”

To read up on the results of the projects from first and second year cohorts, click on the link below: (A Recent Special Edition of College & Research Libraries includes papers from AiA projects): <http://www.acrl.ala.org/value/?cat=25> Also, here is a bibliography of other articles: [http://www.acrl.ala.org/value/?page\\_id=980](http://www.acrl.ala.org/value/?page_id=980)

Some positive impacts for team leaders were opportunities to participate in:

- online learning community on assessment
- many webinars on various aspects of action research and assessment
- peer response on research questions
- planning assessment project
- literature review
- instrument development
- work collaboratively with inter-department campus team

After the cohort ended new opportunities continue to present themselves to participants including:

- opportunities to co-present with AiA participants
- publishing AiA study in peer reviewed journal
- continued collaboration with other AiA researchers
- continued interest in and development of empirical research projects
- foundation in research skills
- mentoring of other librarians doing research

This paper describes projects from all three years of the Assessment in Action program of which the third year is ongoing.

## **Assessment in Action, Year 1: Saint Mary's College of California Library**

### *Context*

Saint Mary's College Library was accepted into the first cohort of Assessment in Action just a year after the College adopted a new Core Curriculum: the perfect time to reassess our approach to first-year library instruction. The Composition Program had now begun mandating a library session for every section of *English 4: Composition* and *English 5: Argument and Research*, to help address the Information Evaluation and Research Practices (IERP) learning goals required from these courses in the new Core. So we decided to investigate a new kind of lesson plan for English 5, to build on the skills learned in English 4 without repeating the same content.

### *The Project*

Previously, the bulk of the session was dedicated to defining keywords, using them in various databases, and evaluating their credibility. However, after conducting research into the effectiveness of teaching students argument schema based on the Toulmin model, we instead focused the library instruction on reading their sources with an eye for the different parts of the argument and avoiding confirmation bias in their research. In addition, to avoid cramming too much information into a 65-minute one-shot, we experimented with flipping the classroom, assigning pre-library session homework for each of the sessions; in the experimental session, this homework focused on the kinds of argument analysis they would practice in the library session.

Three faculty (adjuncts and lecturers, like most of the faculty teaching English 5) each agreed to have their two sections of English 5 participate, so as a control we assigned one of each instructor's classes to the traditional lesson plan, and one of each to the experimental lesson plan. To compare the impact of the two library sessions, we collected students' worksheets from the library session, their final research essays, and a reflection worksheet about their research process that they turned in with their final essay (all with their consent). Using a rubric, we evaluated the quality of sources used; noted what types of sources were used; judged the accuracy of parenthetical and bibliographic citations; and evaluated how well students integrated evidence, including alternative viewpoints, related to their claims.

### *Results and Conclusions*

Unfortunately, once our research was underway, we found out that one of the sections assigned to the traditional library session condition was made up of Honors students. That class outperformed all the others on all our measures, and skewed our results. Furthermore, few students reported carefully completing the pre-session homework, rendering our attempts at flipping the classroom somewhat unsuccessful.

However, we were able to draw some broad conclusions from the study to inform our instruction. First, the type of source most represented in students' bibliographies were "popular" articles from the Web; most tended to use only as many scholarly articles from library databases as their professor required. Second, while most students included one opposing piece of

evidence, as required by their prompt, most did not really engage with this viewpoint and how it related to their claim, simply tacking it on to meet the requirement. Clearly, there was a great deal of confirmation bias in the research they chose to include.

Therefore, our library sessions now focus more heavily on a constructivist approach to evaluation, so that if students are using sources from the Web, as we now acknowledge they overwhelmingly will, they have the skills to evaluate those sources' credibility in the context of their essay assignment. We also focus our language around researching to learn, rather than researching to support one's argument, and developing research questions, rather than theses, so that students are not encouraged to come up with a viewpoint and then find evidence that backs it up, without giving real consideration to counterevidence and alternative points of view. Lastly, we continue to keep the Toulmin method in our toolbox of instruction content, and do share it with faculty and build it into library sessions when time allows.

*For more information, see:*

Radcliff, S., & Wong, E. Y. (2015). Evaluation of sources: A new sustainable approach. *Reference Services Review* 43(2), 231-250. doi:10.1108/RSR-09-2014-0041

## **Assessment in Action, Year 2: University of California Merced Library**

### *Context*

The University of California Merced Library successfully applied for Assessment in Action (AiA) year two with the goal of assessing the impact of an embedded information literacy curriculum on student learning and achievement. Writing faculty and librarians collaborated to integrate information literacy into introductory composition courses, with Writing faculty incorporating lessons, activities, tutorials, and readings related to information literacy topics into curriculum *before* those students came to the library for in-person instruction. The participating class sections were known as TRAIL -- Teaching Research and Information Literacy.

Through the development and implementation of the assessment project, the lead of the local Assessment in Action (AiA) team gained insight into the successes and challenges freshman students experienced in the research process and increased her own knowledge of assessment work. These reflections form recommendations for colleagues who may be designing and implementing an assessment project to demonstrate library value.

### *Recommendation #1 - Be ruthless about your assessment scope.*

The local AiA team asked three questions. Do TRAIL students demonstrate 1) more developed information literacy in research writing than their peers 2) the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of developing student researchers 3) higher levels of academic achievement than their peers? Asking multiple questions resulted in collecting multiple lines of evidence, some of which was not as useful as anticipated. It was challenging both to hone in on a manageable number of questions and to accurately identify the best sources of evidence to avoid scope creep.

### *Recommendation #2 - Temper your idealism with realism.*

The team lead anticipated that 80% of TRAIL students would score at the upper two performance levels, *developing* (3) and *advanced* (4) in their research writing for two criteria: selecting suitable sources and supporting arguments & counter-arguments with evidence. While

TRAIL students did outperform their peer groups, they did not reach the identified targets; 72.5% of TRAIL students performed at the upper levels for source suitability and 35.0% for arguments and evidence. Recognizing the differences in difficulty level between the criteria and reflecting more about expected performance levels of first-time freshman would have been beneficial in creating both realistic and optimistic targets.

*Recommendation #3 - Play out your analysis.*

Consider the type of data generated from the analysis strategy chosen. The team initially decided to apply a rubric to assess TRAIL student reflections. Yet, rubric scores felt limiting and left the team unable to communicate some of the rich information found in students' comments. As a result, librarians returned to the reflections and through coding made additional discoveries. For example, they found that 72.0% of the TRAIL students made source changes between their annotated bibliography and final paper suggesting that students were seeing research as a process rather than a one-time event. Coding rather than rubric scoring gave the team more interesting and useful results to communicate.

*Recommendation #4 - Consider your tolerance level for risk.*

This project not only assessed the impact of TRAIL on student learning but also explored whether or not TRAIL may have influenced students' academic achievement as represented by GPA or grades in Writing 10. Though findings in the literature were mixed around this topic, we pursued this piece of the assessment. In retrospect, this was a bit risky and the results gave us pause since the TRAIL group performed the lowest of the three peer groups compared. Upon reflection the team lead should have considered whether or not it was worth spending the effort on pursuing this piece of the assessment.

*Recommendation #5 - Give up control for more collaboration.*

Collaboration was key to participation in the Assessment in Action (AiA) program starting with the formation of a five member campus team. In addition, Merritt Writing Program (MWP) Assessment sub-committee members gave feedback on the rubric used to evaluate research writing and over 30 MWP faculty double-read all 120 papers from the three student cohorts. Incorporating campus colleagues not only contributed greater expertise to the project but also expanded the conversations about the TRAIL curriculum and student learning.

*Conclusion*

The Assessment in Action program provided an avenue to bring campus constituents together to assess student learning and achievement. Referring to a competitive opportunity provided by a professional organization (ACRL) allowed librarians to speak in a language familiar to faculty who are well acquainted with grant opportunities. The team lead, in particular, benefited from the professional development opportunities provided by the program and has learned lessons that will be valuable for future assessment endeavors.

**Assessment in Action (AiA), Year 3: California State University East Bay University Libraries**

*Overview and Local Context*

At California State University East Bay (CSUEB), our year three Assessment in Action team was interested in exploring how well we support information literacy skill development for

our transfer student population. CSUEB has a required, two-unit information literacy course for new freshmen students, but there is no equivalent course for transfer students. At the upper division level, about 60% of CSUEB's student population are transfer students. This study was designed to investigate the impact of course-integrated information literacy instruction in upper division courses on CSUEB's transfer student population.

### *Project Questions*

The CSUEB AiA team had two questions we wanted to explore. The first question was designed to help us assess how well our existing practices were meeting student needs: "How well are we currently supporting the information literacy skill development of transfer students?" The second question was focused on what additional steps we might take to improve our support of IL development in transfer students: "What (else) can we do to help our transfer students develop the information literacy skills they need to succeed in their upper division coursework?"

### *Developing the Project Outcome*

With our research questions in hand, the team worked on developing a clear outcome for the project. This portion of the AiA program was invaluable in helping guide us to a study design that was focused, useful and achievable. Our project outcome is made up of four parts:

Outcome: Transfer students will effectively utilize library tools to access appropriate scholarly sources in order to succeed in upper division coursework at CSU East Bay (this is the change we want to see in our population)

Criteria: % of transfer students who utilize library e-resources from off-campus; % of transfer students who check out materials from the library (What we will use to know we are successful)

Action: Course-integrated instruction to upper division (3000+ level) courses (What we will do to make the outcome happen)

Evidence: EZProxy use, Library checkouts, GPA (What will we observe, measure and judge)

### *Project Process*

With our outcome development complete, the research team planned out a three-step process for this project:

#### Step 1: Identify the study population

The team chose to study transfer students who began coursework at CSU East Bay in fall quarter 2014 (n=2217). We created two sub-populations within this group: the treatment group (those who received course-integrated instruction during the 2014-2015 academic year, n=227) and the control group (those who did not receive course-integrated instruction during the 2014-2015 academic year, n=1990).

#### Step 2: Collect data

We gathered library usage data from the EZProxy service (off-campus authentication for e-resources), as well as checkout data for the project time period (the 2014-2015 academic year). Through our campus Institutional Research office, we gathered demographic information about our study population, as well as their GPA upon transfer to CSUEB and their non-cumulative GPA at the end of their first year at CSUEB.

#### Step 3: Analyze data

This step is still in-progress as we near the end of Year 3 of the AiA program. The plan is to examine the library use data and GPA to look for significant differences between our treatment and control groups.

*Lessons Learned (So far...)*

While our project is still ongoing, we have learned a few lessons along the way. Our first lesson was to be conscious of *scope creep*. There were a lot of different directions this project could have gone, and it was difficult to stay focused on something that was “doable” during the time frame of this program. Spending a good amount of time developing the project outcome (with the supporting Criteria, Action and Evidence) helped our team to stay on track. The second lesson we learned was to *anticipate snags*. Our team ran into some significant issues with the collection of the data required for this project. Those snags led to our third lesson, which is to *watch the timeline*. We had hoped to tackle both research questions (analyzing past interventions and exploring future interventions for transfer students), but due to data delays we were unable to analyze the data in time to implement phase two of the project before the conclusion of year three of the AiA program. Looking on the bright side, this means that we already have plans for additional assessment we would like to take on during the next year.