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Using Metrics to Illustrate Impact

Campus librarians are running as fast as they can to keep up with a constant stream of students, teachers, classes, and management duties. Most of them love the work, and constantly want to do better, which leads us to ask: what does better mean? Among other things, librarians want to explain to campus and district administrators the effect the library program has on student achievement and how that impact might be increased, preferably using concrete terms that can illustrate specific points. But direct data is hard to find; even AASL is working to develop official research to support the causative impact that those of us in the field "know" school libraries have on student learning (AASL 2014). So let's look at what data most campus librarians have already and how it might be made to serve a bigger purpose.

In the not-too-distant "old days," we did annual reports that counted the books added and weeded, classes taught, books circulated, books lost, etc. These were statistics that every librarian had at the ready, but the practice of data-driven annual reports fell out of favor as the non-library assignments (lunch duty, testing supervisor, after school supervision, etc.) increased. Repeated articles reminded us that those annual reports could be much more useful: put photos in them; detail the classes and long-term projects you supported; mention the planning time spent with teachers. And truly all of that does matter, but it seems our administrators want a more direct connection between the program/collection we offer and student test scores in aggregate, in addition to their individual and collective academic progress and learning. How can we use data to show them this?

Students Need Libraries in HISD

Here in Houston, I work with a small group of advocates to convince Houston Independent School District (HISD) leadership that every student on every campus deserves a strong campus library staffed by a certified librarian. Students Need Libraries in HISD (http://www.studentsneedlibrariesinhisd.org/) built a website, hosted small meetings of interested librarians and others, and developed information tools to better inform district leaders and school board members about our work. We seek to reverse a trend that saw declining numbers of libraries and librarians in HISD as budget crunch after budget crunch hit campus principals while at the same time those principals remained unaware of changes in library best practices.

As an early step in the process, we collaborated with Debbie Hall, a retired career HISD librarian who also served in the office of the district's library manager; she has a strong understanding of the data the district and campus administrators need in order to change their attitudes. In collaboration with her, SNL developed maps to reflect the existence of campus libraries in the nine school board districts (Hall 2017). It was immediately clear that certain areas had many fewer campus libraries and even fewer librarians. We followed these staffing patterns for three years, each iteration allowing us to build deeper insights from the data at hand.

Next, we were able to get district-wide circulation statistics from the online catalog system. This data was imperfect since not every campus had a person trained to run circulation data for the students, but that in itself is an indicator of insufficient library support. We combined the circulation data with the initial maps to show where there was extremely low circulation, where there was some circulation, and

where there was very high circulation. We then correlated this data with the presence of a certified librarian, teacher, or other staff member assigned to the library. Yes, there were some campuses where a non-librarian was accomplishing high circulation, but those were few. And while circulation does not necessarily indicate reading, comprehension, or classroom collaboration, it is a start as it reflects access to books and personal book selection.

Beyond Circulation Data

As we looked at this new set of maps, we realized that our work was informative within its limitations for elementary campuses, but less useful for middle and high school levels, where students commonly begin to read fewer books and where they begin to read in other formats that may not show in a circulation system. Circulation data did not adequately reflect the work of secondary librarians we knew to be doing a good job on their campuses. So, how could we begin to better reflect the non-book reading that students do as a result of the efforts of campus library resources and staff? What do they read and how do they find it? While we realize that many students use the Internet independently, we also know anecdotally that where there are school librarians, students locate and use stronger digital resources. How could we draw that relationship more clearly?

An April SLC article "What Is the Most Important Data You Collect and Analyze?" by Maria Cahill presented results of a survey of school librarians who are also wrestling with what data to use to show the impact of their programs. The results indicate that "data usage stats" are the least used metric overall. Thinking about how to interpret these statistics may prompt more librarians to collect this type of data, especially if we can develop measures to show the application of non-book sources. For example, if we can say that students in grade 11 used Encyclopedia Britannica and Gale's Research in Context heavily during the month of October, which happens to be the month of their major research paper—we are demonstrating that these two databases directly impacted student learning in the context of a specific assignment. Further understanding will come from debriefing with teachers and students about how they used recommended digital resources, as well as what other resources they found or wanted but couldn't find.

Surveying Librarians

In attempt to understand more about school library metrics for digital resources in my state, I developed a Google survey that I sent to librarians across Texas via our Texas Association of School Librarians (TASL) blog. Eventually, I collected 83 responses from librarians and library directors. I asked about digital resources, including eBooks, databases, and Internet sources, as well as decision making hierarchies and funding patterns (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1UV0oXeQCIEvWiGqUVOZkbH1aEAgvM4-ggapjbhKnUZc/). Although the small numbers mean it is not a statistically valid survey, it does point us in some interesting directions.

Texas has many excellent librarians at all levels—librarians who actively use and teach the state-funded TexQuest resources, which include a variety of databases and digital resources. However, few librarians have any clue what their use statistics for digital resources are. The reasons for this are myriad.

First, there is the variety of database sources. TexQuest is available to all districts. If a district signs up with a single login for all students in the district, then campuses cannot easily separate their own use

data—hurdle one. If a campus has its own login, that hurdle is managed easily. But what about additional digital resources a district or campus may purchase beyond TexQuest? Not only do these require a separate login to be managed by each campus, but the statistics must be managed separately as well. All of this can be done, but when we remember all those extra duties that take librarians on during the school day, we are cutting into the time they might manage data needs. Well, assuming they don't need to plan lessons, meet with teachers, and support student questions and class needs, etc.

A Plan

As usual, there are no easy answers, but a plan is beginning to form. Using a district map that shows campuses with or without libraries/librarians and bookstores/public libraries access, accompanied by circulation data, indicates some direct effect of library staff getting books into student hands. If districts can know by campus what databases are available, then those access statistics would be available to show what the library does for students. Further, some trends could be extrapolated when a specific database was used many times in a short period, perhaps for a specific project. This kind of data would help a librarian demonstrate direct impact on student learning and perhaps defend additional budget for databases or a library clerk to free the librarian for more intense teaching and collaboration.

Action Plan:

- Add database use statistics to reports you provide your principal. District library services might collate those numbers to indicate how schools are using district resources for the school board and/or superintendent.
- Tie these to your report of classes taught, projects planned, teachers coached. Again, combined from across the district, here is a potentially powerful indication of the value of school librarians as well as a demonstration of the impact of district and state funds.
- Tie details of the data to specific projects to show your principal your direct impact on students.

Data is key to supporting the story you want your campus and district leadership to hear, a story of student success grounded in artful use of district resources and targeted teaching by you, the librarian. Always take full advantage of any data that you have, especially if it is already gathered. Illustrate your story well with judiciously selected numbers and use the data gaps to indicate where you would like to target your next level of understanding. Data is powerful; administrators love it. This is a win-win plan: make whatever metrics you have (or can get) work for school library support, whether at the campus level or more broadly.

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