



Library Impact Practice Brief

Library Outreach Assessment

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Issue

The University of Washington (UW) Libraries have long prioritized identifying user needs and assessing our efforts at meeting them. Increasingly, the UW Libraries are using design thinking, qualitative research methods, participatory design, and mixed-methods approaches to assess everything from library spaces to teaching and learning practices to user behavior.¹ It is within this context of strong institutional support for assessment that Odegaard Library's Undergraduate Student Success (USS) Team sought to design a robust assessment framework for outreach to undergraduate students.

As the USS Team developed new student outreach events each academic year, we needed to develop an outreach assessment program to measure the effectiveness of our student programming, to demonstrate to stakeholders how the library provides value through outreach, to learn how best to support UW student success, and to promote self-reflection amongst the team. The mixed-methods outreach assessment framework we created is flexible enough to be adapted to any size, format (in person or online only), or level of outreach. This practice brief describes the USS Team's outreach and assessment planning processes, the qualitative and quantitative assessment methods employed, the results of our assessment program, the lessons learned, and the best practices that emerged over several years and several iterations of conducting library outreach assessment. The brief presents both long-term reflections and most recent applications between 2016–2021.

Why It Matters to Research Libraries

Student success is a growing concern in undergraduate education. The term student success has multiple definitions and has many in higher education assessing how their institutions contribute to student success, ideally using multiple metrics for “success”² and acknowledging how students themselves measure their success.³ Academic libraries are increasingly participating in student success strategies, often working with partners in higher education to support learning communities, peer tutoring, and other methods for first-year, first-generation, transfer, and other undergraduate student populations.⁴ Libraries are also designing approaches to assess and document the value of academic libraries and how they advance student success at their institutions.⁵

Critical assessment practice further demonstrates why libraries and higher education need to align our assessment practices with a commitment to equity, inclusion, and social justice, especially when concerned with student success.⁶ Critical assessment in the context of the Undergraduate Student Success team's work means critically examining, and being committed to changing, our

undergraduate student outreach practices, including how library student outreach is designed, who the library outreach is for, and its impact on that student community.⁷

Objectives and Key Performance Indicators

Objective 1: Demonstrate the value of library outreach to partners and stakeholders using an evidence-based approach

Performance Indicators:

1. Center mixed-methods assessment as an accepted means of demonstrating value
2. Develop deeper, more aligned relationships with partners
3. Receive regular funding that supports new and continuing outreach programs

Objective 2: Set goals and evaluate all new programs and outreach through the lens of making strategic, sustainable, and scalable decisions

Performance Indicator:

1. Create a flexible toolkit to guide the assessment process

Objective 3: Incorporate reflective practice into the outreach planning and assessment cycle

Performance Indicators:

1. Utilize reflective practice as a means to identify gaps in outreach and impact
2. Critically examine goals and decision-making in relation to student success; student voice; and diversity, equity, and inclusion

Process and Evidence

Objective 1 Process and Evidence

Demonstrate the value of library outreach to partners and stakeholders using an evidence-based approach

- Assessment methods include: ethnographic observations, capturing comments (in person, online chat, etc.), head count, social media analysis, photograph documentation, staff reflection, and surveys. Assessment methods were added, revised, and adapted over time.
- Through the planning and assessment processes, we developed common goals and language to highlight the value of each partner's work on the events. Planning the next cycle of events with our partners was simplified, and our conversations were more fruitful due to the communication of assessment results facilitated by the outreach reports. Our conversations started at a deeper place and went beyond surface event details; they focused on goals, outcomes, and enhancing student engagement.
- After a pilot period, the USS Team received an annual outreach budget signaling administration buy-in for our outreach and assessment efforts. This support fueled our assessment efforts and grew our capacity and reach, leading to additional funding from UW campus grants (UW Campus Internship Development Fund and UW Resilience and Compassion Seed Grant).

Objective 2 Process and Evidence

Set goals and evaluate all new programs and outreach through the lens of making strategic, sustainable, and scalable decisions

- We designed and launched the online [Outreach Assessment Toolkit](#),⁸ which is stored in Google Drive. The template toolkit documents are designed for flexibility, adaptability, and collaboration.
- Intentionally built into the toolkit are sharing, remixing, and revising. The toolkit is a living document that grows and transforms as we and other teams adapt it to meet the needs of our users, whether they be undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, or community members.
- Regularly review the template documents to ensure they still meet the needs of the overall assessment program.

Objective 3 Process and Evidence

Incorporate reflective practice into the outreach planning and assessment cycle

- Key elements of the assessment process include staff reflection and communicating through the outreach report. These processes include important questions and discussions about the overall impact and value of the event in relation to staff time and effort. Reflection data allowed us to change our outreach strategy to better impact the student experience, and in some cases resulted in discontinuing an outreach event due to low impact.
- Reflection and longitudinal data from annual outreach events influenced large scale changes to USS Team initiatives and structure. Our outreach assessment program has become a flexible practice that has helped us become more reflective, student-centered librarians; think about library outreach in innovative ways; and deepen our campus partnerships. Critical reflection also led to new decision-making modules centered on anti-racism and centering the student experience.

Resources Required

A successful outreach assessment program requires the following:

1. Staff time and capacity
 - a. Designed to meet the needs of a variety of institutions and teams, the Outreach Assessment Toolkit can be expanded or simplified. It is also designed so that any team, from 2 people to 20 people, is able to easily manage the assessment process.
 - b. Time and labor can be considerable, especially if those who are assessing the event are also planning it.
 - c. This assessment approach does not require deep knowledge of assessment methods and is intentionally designed to have volunteers help with the assessment process with little training.
 - d. Outreach assessment starts in the planning and ends in reflection. Staff must build in time before and after an outreach event to include planning and analyzing data.
2. Skills
 - a. Project management and organization skills
 - b. A leader with a clear vision and goals for an existing or new outreach assessment program
3. Technical resources
 - a. A collaborative working space (Google Drive, Microsoft Teams, Slack, Trello, etc.)
 - b. Outreach event technology (computers, tablets, Zoom, etc.)

Lessons Learned

The first year of creating and implementing new student outreach programs while simultaneously piloting the Outreach Assessment Toolkit was challenging, in terms of having to extensively document and assess every event and create evidence-based reports for each new student program. But over time, setting goals, assessing student engagement through non-intrusive, qualitative methods, and reflecting on the successes and challenges of our student outreach programs became a natural and necessary part of the USS Team process. After several years using the Outreach Assessment Toolkit for large in-person events (such as the Odegaard Library Dance Party) and smaller, online-only events (such as the New Student Orientation for First-Generation Students), this program of assessment has enabled us to demonstrate the value of library outreach to students to our administration (funding and buy-in) and our partners (deepening student-centered collaborations).

Partnerships are essential to creating engaging and relevant student success programming, and facilitating library outreach to specific student communities, such as international students, first-year and first-year transfer students, first-generation students, and students from minoritized communities. To best meet the needs of our UW student communities, collaboration and communication with UW partners is essential for the USS Team's program of student outreach. Over time, our assessment program has strengthened relationships with UW Libraries administration and UW partners and resulted in new, collaborative projects that support the overall undergraduate student experience.

An unexpected, but equally valuable, benefit of regular use of the Outreach Assessment Toolkit has been the deep reflective practice this assessment program has encouraged within the USS Team. We reflect not just on one-time student programs, but on the practice of library outreach and supporting undergraduate student learning. Reflective practice holds us accountable to the student communities and UW partners we serve and support, and encourages us to grow, to commit to equity, and to work with one another in new ways.

In 2020, with the library buildings closed due to Covid-19, staff working from home, and students learning from across the globe, USS Team planning for new student outreach necessitated a complete reimagining of how to reach out, connect, and engage with students, and what types of information they would need to succeed while studying remotely. The USS Team's student outreach in the 2020–2021 included a variety of all-online events and instructional sessions for undergraduate student communities, often done in partnership with UW student support units. We were thrilled to discover that our Outreach Assessment Toolkit did not need to be changed for online-only events, proving the assessment program to be adaptable and flexible, no matter the format or delivery method. Some of the best practices and constraints of the Outreach Assessment Toolkit are listed below.

Best practices for library outreach assessment

- Set clear goals for outreach events so they can be measured
- Invite others to help with assessment, including student employees, library staff, etc.
- Collaborate with students in the initial design of student outreach programming and compensate them for their labor
- Communicate assessment results regularly with partners and administration
- Incorporate reflection and encourage reflective practice for all student outreach

Constraints of library outreach assessment

- Buy-in is needed from library team, library administration, and partners
- Especially at the beginning, time and labor can be considerable
- When assessing regularly recurring events (such as first-year library orientation), consider labor of assessment and what you already know about the events
- Relatedly, when assessing the same type of event every year, you can hit saturation of assessment data, rendering new assessments useless and/or a waste of time and labor

Value

Over time, the USS Team discovered that the toolkit's focus on reflective practice has become one of our strongest assessment methods and data points, year after year. Reflective practice is now ongoing and continually informs the USS Team's program and process improvement, drives decision-making, and changes how we engage with students and UW partners. Self-reflection encourages us to be humble when engaging in student success programs and outreach. Reflective practice has also led us to make important changes to our student outreach program. Changes include intentionally integrating student voices in designing library outreach, programming, and instructional sessions through participatory design methods; hiring undergraduate student employees; and paying undergraduate student researchers for their feedback and time. The Outreach Assessment Toolkit process encourages regular evaluation and self-reflection, which lead the USS Team to transform our team processes in order to authentically improve our interactions with our user communities and partners. And by intentionally including students in the beginning stages of library outreach, programming, and instructional session development, we were able to apply critical assessment to our library outreach assessment framework.

Having students share their stories and reflections about library events and programs has been incredibly valuable in demonstrating the positive impact outreach can have on student experiences with libraries. We've intentionally centered the student experience in our outreach programs and this has resulted in deeper partnerships, new initiatives, and better alignment with student success programs across campus.

Recommendations for the Future

Due to the interactive nature of outreach assessment, improvement to the outreach process and shifts in priorities are always part of the conversation. Continuing to engage in reflection, realignment, and prioritization of student voice will be a part of the USS Team's work for years to come. Engaging in outreach assessment is valuable on multiple levels and we invite any individual or team engaged in outreach to any student population to undertake this work. Moving into the future, we hope to continue to share our process with other practitioners, share new methods, and remix one another's work. The [Outreach Assessment Toolkit](#) is freely available, and we value hearing from others about how they use the toolkit.⁹ We also see potential in continuing to investigate how outreach assessment may change or shift as we continue virtual teaching and student engagement.

Endnotes

¹ Maggie Faber and Emilie Vrbancic, "I Wish My Parents Knew: A New Message for Parents from First Gen Students," *UW Libraries Blog*, September 16, 2020, <https://sites.uw.edu/libstrat/2020/09/16/i-wish-my-parents-knew-a-new-message-for-parents-from-first-gen-students/>; Janice Fournier, Amanda Hornby, and Louise Richards, "Active Learning in Odegaard Library: Report on Year 1 of UW's First Active Learning Classrooms," University of Washington Libraries, 2015, <https://www.lib.washington.edu/ougl/learning-spaces/active-learning-classrooms/FinalALCReportYear1.pdf>; Linda Whang, Christine Tawatao, John Danneker, Jackie Belanger, Stephen Edward Weber, Linda Garcia, and Amelia Klaus, "Understanding the Transfer Student Experience Using Design Thinking," *Reference Services Review* 45, no. 2 (2017): 298–313, <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-10-2016-0073>.

² Karen Brown, *Academic Library Contributions to Student Success: Documented Practices from the Field*, with contributions by Kara J. Malenfant (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015), http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/issues/value/contributions_report.pdf; "Student Success," Association of American Colleges & Universities, accessed August 24, 2021, <https://www.aacu.org/resources/student-success>; Ian Beilin, "Student Success and the Neoliberal Academic Library," *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 1 (January 2016): 10–23, <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v1.24303>; Megan Oakleaf, "Connecting Libraries and Learning Analytics for Student Success," EDUCAUSE, December 11, 2020, <https://library.educause.edu/resources/2020/12/connecting-libraries-and-learning-analytics-for-student-success>.

³ Sarah O'Shea and Janine Delahunty, "Getting through the Day and Still Having a Smile on My Face! How Do Students Define Success in the University Learning Environment?," *Higher*

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⁴ ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, “2016 Top Trends in Academic Libraries: A Review of the Trends and Issues Affecting Academic Libraries in Higher Education,” *College & Research Libraries News* 77, no. 6 (June 2016): 274–81, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.77.6.9505>; Denelle Eads, Rebecca Freeman, and Valerie A. Freeman, “Cross Collaborations: Librarians Stepping Out of the Box to Serve Students,” *Collaborative Librarianship* 7, no. 3 (2015): 109–19, <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol7/iss3/5>.

⁵ Brown, *Academic Library Contributions to Student Success*.

⁶ Ebony Magnus, Jackie Belanger, and Maggie Faber, “Towards a Critical Assessment Practice,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, October 31, 2018, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/towards-critical-assessment-practice/>.

⁷ Jan McArthur, “Assessment for Social Justice: The Role of Assessment in Achieving Social Justice,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 41, no. 7 (2016): 967–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1053429>.

⁸ Amanda Hornby, Emilie Vrbancic, Linda Whang, “Outreach Assessment Toolkit Overview,” accessed August 24, 2021, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nbFBuUkRAurjcsIBFJqgrbjPszgXoCIvptgoqsD5i8Q/edit?usp=sharing>.

⁹ “Undergraduate Student Success Team,” University of Washington Libraries, accessed August 24, 2021, <https://www.lib.washington.edu/ougl/about/staff/undergraduate-student-success-team>.