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From Subjects to Partners

Centering Participants in Library Assessment

Making Assessment Matter is a four-part *C&RL News* series focused on maximizing the impact of academic library assessment. This second article focuses on enabling librarians to use the results of their assessment projects. Upcoming topics will explore how to anticipate potential pathways for decision making and action to better stimulate follow-through and design communications that present compelling results to key decision makers—providing evidence that drives meaningful change and encourages ongoing investment and engagement in assessment for continuous improvement. Together, the series equips librarians to use assessment to drive meaningful change.

Introduction

Academic library assessment involves expertise, time, effort, and a commitment to reflection and change. However, despite librarians' best intentions, many library assessment projects fail to lead to informed decisions or drive meaningful improvements that benefit library stakeholders. At its most impactful, assessment is not something done *to* students, faculty, or other library constituents but rather *with* them. When we center the individuals representing the focus of a library assessment as participants in the process, we shift assessment from a detached evaluative exercise to a collaborative endeavor. Assessments conducted in partnership are more likely to yield transformative insights and foster positive change than assessments carried out in isolation.

Three key strategies are essential to centering assessment “subjects” as participants and increasing the likelihood of library assessments yielding beneficial results.

1. Determine Who to Include

When undertaking an assessment project, begin with an inventory of individuals and/or representatives of groups to include in their project planning. Casting a wide net to **include the voices of all those affected** (both external and internal to the library) is essential from the initial stages of a project (see Figure 1). Indeed, waiting to include these viewpoints can result in poorly framed user stories, research questions, hypotheses, or problem statements; methodological choices that may not “fit” the needs of project participants; or assumptions that undermine the validity of the approach or eventual results.¹ Avoiding these negative outcomes forms part of the rationale for “engag[ing] diverse stakeholders ... in all phases of assessment.”² In addition, involving assessment participants as **partners**, not only as **subjects**, can result in

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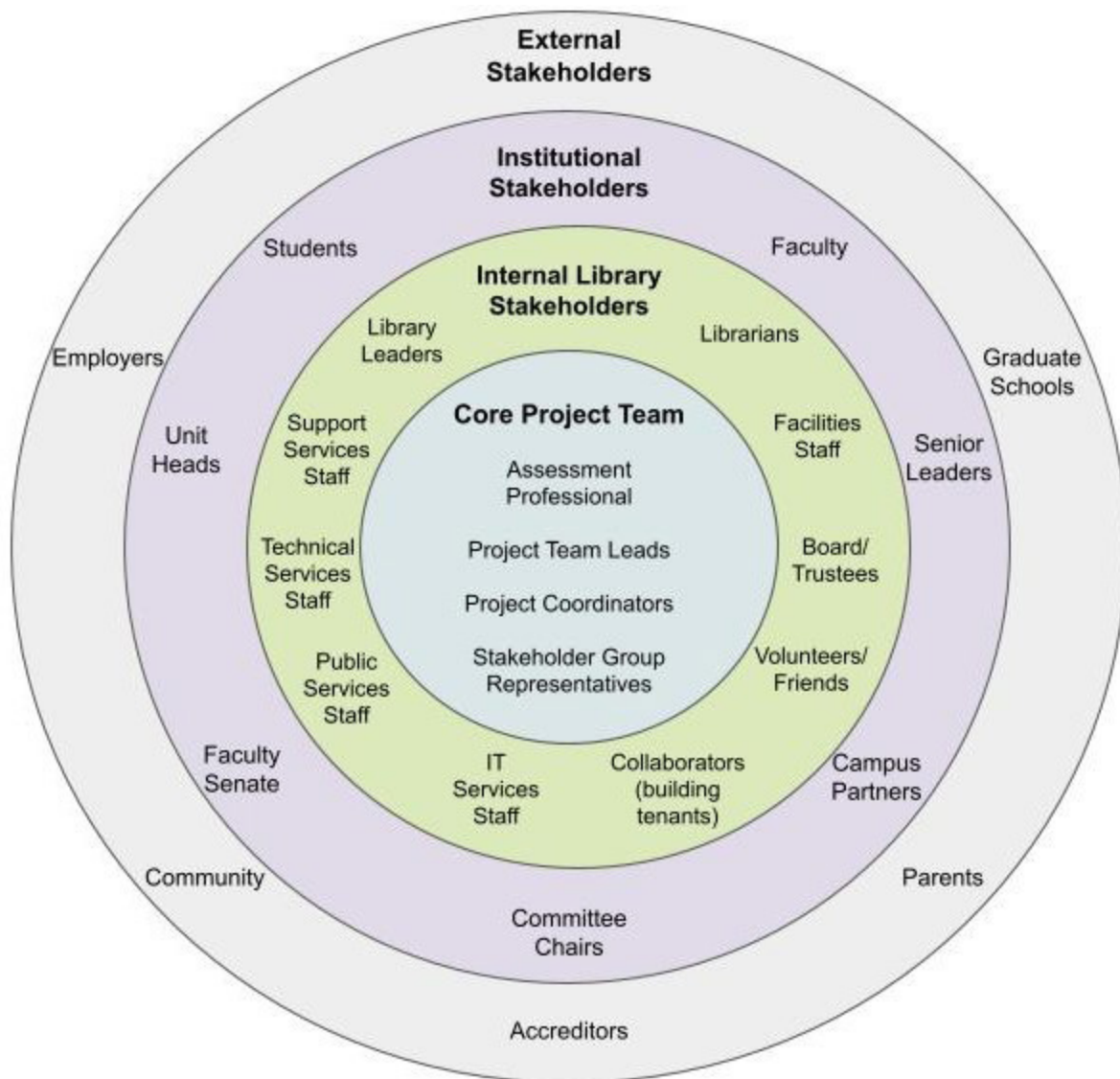


Figure 1. Library Stakeholders

immediate and direct benefits to the participants and the populations they represent; ensure that the assessment serves the participant community by increasing awareness of problems and commitment to solutions; establish long-term relationships with participant communities; and forge a continuous communication loop that can lead to beneficial changes over time.³

A number of questions⁴ can help you identify participants to include, such as:

- What **perspectives, experiences, or mindsets** should be represented?
- What **skills** or **abilities** are needed?
- What **roles** should be included?
- Who will be **affected** by the project?
- Who might serve as **leaders** representing the interests of a group or community?
- Who could be included that is **not among the “usual”** people called upon for input?

Other questions you might ask in considering library coworkers to involve include:

- What **positions** at what **levels** can contribute to the project?
- What job responsibilities might **align** with or inform the project?
- What job responsibilities might **conflict** with the project?

Finally, consider institutional coworkers to engage by asking:

- Who else at the institution has **shared interests** about, **influence** with, or **responsibility** for the proposed assessment topics or participants?
- Who else at the institution might be able to **partner** in the framing, design, analysis, dissemination, or resulting actions of the assessment project?

In responding to these thought prompts, think broadly. Partnership lists will likely include the beneficiaries of the assessment (for example, students if you are assessing a student-centered service); faculty or staff who may help implement recommendations or be affected by changes in services; administrators who guide organizational decision making and control resources; and external partners who may have a stake in the outcomes.

2. Center Stakeholder Values

Once a diverse group of voices is convened to inform an assessment project, an essential next step is to **surface the core drivers** for each partner constituency. In some cases, the values motivating an assessment project participant might be easy to assume: Students value learning, development, professional/personal/social advancement, affordability, and so on; senior leaders might be moved by student retention, institutional rankings, disruption avoidance, or fiscal responsibility; librarians might be inspired by the opportunity to educate and advocate for students, stay abreast of technological advancements, or avoid additional duties that are not demonstrated to be effective. Although partners are often eager to share logistical needs, past experiences, or concerns related to an assessment project, intentionally and thoughtfully surfacing the deeper values that shape their engagement is essential for guiding an effective and actionable assessment project.

Organizing information about project partners in a “stakeholder register” is an efficient and effective way to ensure your partner needs and interests are centered throughout the project. Stakeholder registers list the individuals and groups identified by the question-asking process outlined above and typically include the **contact information, roles and responsibilities, levels of influence and interest, sentiment and expectations, values, and potential impact** on the project. A stakeholder register also serves as a tool to help you orient stakeholders toward the collective goals of the assessment, reinforcing that the values guiding the project should represent the full team, not just the dominant voices or institutional priorities. Taking this approach ensures the project is grounded in shared values, builds alignment and trust, and positions the project to generate meaningful and actionable insights. Table 1 illustrates a sample stakeholder register, showing how different groups contribute to and are affected by the project. When shared with all partners, the register can help you promote transparency, accountability, and a values-driven approach that is responsive to the communities the assessment aims to serve.

3. Plan for Ongoing Engagement

Planning for stakeholder engagement is an often overlooked aspect of assessment work—not identifying just *whom* to involve but also *how* and *when*. Too often, engagement happens reactively, triggered by a decision point or a roadblock. But meaningful engagement doesn’t happen by chance; it happens because we plan for it.

Table 1. Sample Stakeholder Register

Stakeholder	Contact Information	Roles and Responsibilities	Influence and Interest	Sentiment and Expectations	Values	Potential Impact
Assessment Project Team	Email/phone	Conduct the assessment project.	High	Successful project with actionable results	Useful results to improve library and student engagement	Medium
Library Leaders	Email/phone	Champion the project, communicate with senior institutional leadership	High	Increased ability to advocate for library services and resources	Useful results enabling demonstration of library contributions to institution	High
Public Services Staff	Email/phone	Communicate and encourage student participation in the project	Medium	Low effort, useful recommendations upon completion	Productive and positive engagement with user	Low
Institutional Research Staff	Email/phone	Collaborative data analysis, consulting on statistical tests	Medium	Efficient partnership, mutually useful results	Partnership in developing new insights about student success	Medium
Students	Email/phone	Participate in framing, responding to, and reacting to project recommendations	High	Being heard, positive change in status, circumstances, opportunities	Increased access, sense of belonging, ability to complete academic work successfully	High
Faculty	Email/phone	Encourage student participation in the project	Medium	Low effort, useful improvements upon completion	Improved student work	Low
Senior Leaders (president, provost)	Email/phone	Advocate for update of project recommendations across institution	High	Demonstration of value to institutional priorities	Utility for improving institutional benchmarks	High

At the onset of your assessment project, take time to map out a communication strategy that outlines how stakeholders will be engaged throughout the project.⁵ This plan is distinct from how you'll communicate results at the end of the project (which will be covered in the fourth article of the series). Here the focus is on *ongoing engagement*, the kind that builds trust, fosters collaboration, and ensures your project stays aligned with stakeholder needs.

Once you've identified your core project team—the individuals who will do the heavy lifting—and your partners, consider who needs to be kept in the loop. Not everyone needs to be informed of every detail, but transparency in communication builds trust, buy-in, and engagement. Some partners may benefit from regular updates, others may need to weigh in at key moments, and some may simply appreciate being informed.

A project communication plan, sometimes called a **stakeholder communication matrix**, can clarify how, when, and what information is shared, as illustrated in Table 2. This plan

Table 2. Sample Stakeholder Communication Matrix

Stakeholder	Role/Interest	Information Needs	Communication Methods	Frequency	Owner
Library Leaders	Strategic decision-makers	Project goals, progress, key findings	Executive summary, email	Monthly	Assessment Lead
Public Services Staff	Service delivery	Survey results, feedback themes	Infographics, team meetings	Monthly	Communications Officer
Institutional Research Staff	Data alignment & support	Data definitions, integration points	Email, working sessions	As needed	Data Liaison
Students	End users of library services	Summary of findings, opportunities to engage	Email, posters, website	Once per semester	Outreach Coordinator
Faculty	Instruction & research support	Service impact, usage trends, opportunities	Department meetings, newsletters	Once per semester	Outreach Coordinator
Senior Leaders (president, provost)	Institutional oversight, ROI, institutional priorities	Strategic alignment, outcomes, resource needs	Briefings, executive summary	Quarterly	Library leader (e.g., Dean)
External Consultants	Methodological expertise	Scope, deliverables, timelines	Email, project portal	As needed	Project Manager

builds on the stakeholder register and typically outlines each stakeholder’s **role/interest**, **information needs**, preferred **communication methods**, **frequency of updates**, and **who is responsible** for the communication. For example, strategic decision makers like library leadership may need monthly executive summaries, while frontline employees may benefit from information shared during team meetings. Students and faculty may be engaged through periodic communications via email or the library website, while institutional research staff may be looped in as needed through working sessions or project portals.

To make engagement meaningful, consider building in engagement checkpoints or moments when you pause to reflect on stakeholder input and adjust course if needed. These checkpoints can help ensure that stakeholder voices are not only heard but also acted upon.

Remember: Communication isn’t just about broadcasting; it’s about **listening**. Make sure your communication plan includes the following:

- Clear channels for feedback, such as surveys, meetings, or informal conversations
- A designated person or team to receive and act on feedback
- A process to close the loop and let stakeholders know how their input informed decisions and shaped the project

In short, if you want stakeholder engagement to happen, you have to **plan** for it and then **work your plan**. It’s not just good project management; it’s good relationship building.

Conclusion

Effective library assessment is not just about collecting, analyzing, and reporting on data—it’s about building relationships, fostering collaboration, and centering the voices of those

most impacted. By engaging stakeholders as partners from the beginning, surfacing their values, and planning for ongoing communication and feedback, library assessment professionals can ensure their projects are meaningful and actionable. Early and inclusive planning helps avoid missteps and strengthens the commitment to solutions. Intentional communication keeps stakeholders informed, involved, and invested throughout the process.

As libraries continue to evolve, so too must our approaches to assessment. Partner engagement is not a checkbox; it's a mindset—one that positions assessment as a collaborative process. When approached this way, assessment fosters shared understanding, strengthens decision making, and supports continuous learning and improvement. Ultimately, an assessment that is done *with* participants rather than *to* them is far more likely to lead to transformative understanding and positive change. The next article in the series will highlight ways that anticipating potential pathways for decision making and action can better stimulate follow-through. *~*

Notes

1. Megan Oakleaf and Becky Croxton, “Start at the End: Strategies for Actionable Assessment Results,” *College and Research Libraries News* 86, no. 9 (2025): 382–85, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.86.9.%25p>.

2. Association of College & Research Libraries, “Proficiencies for Assessment in Academic Libraries,” revised June 2023, https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/assessment_proficiencies.

3. Budd L. Hall, “Breaking the Monopoly of Knowledge: Research Methods, Participation and Development,” in *Adult Learning: A Design for Action: A Comprehensive International Survey*, ed. Budd L. Hall and J.R. Kidd (Elsevier Ltd., 1978), 155–68, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-022245-5.50021-9>.

4. Barbara Allan, “The Project Life Cycle and Project Analysis,” in *Project Management: Tools and Techniques for Today's ILS Professional* (Facet, 2004), 17–36.

5. Barbara Allan, “Planning the Project,” in *Project Management: Tools and Techniques for Today's ILS Professional* (Facet, 2004), 37–60.