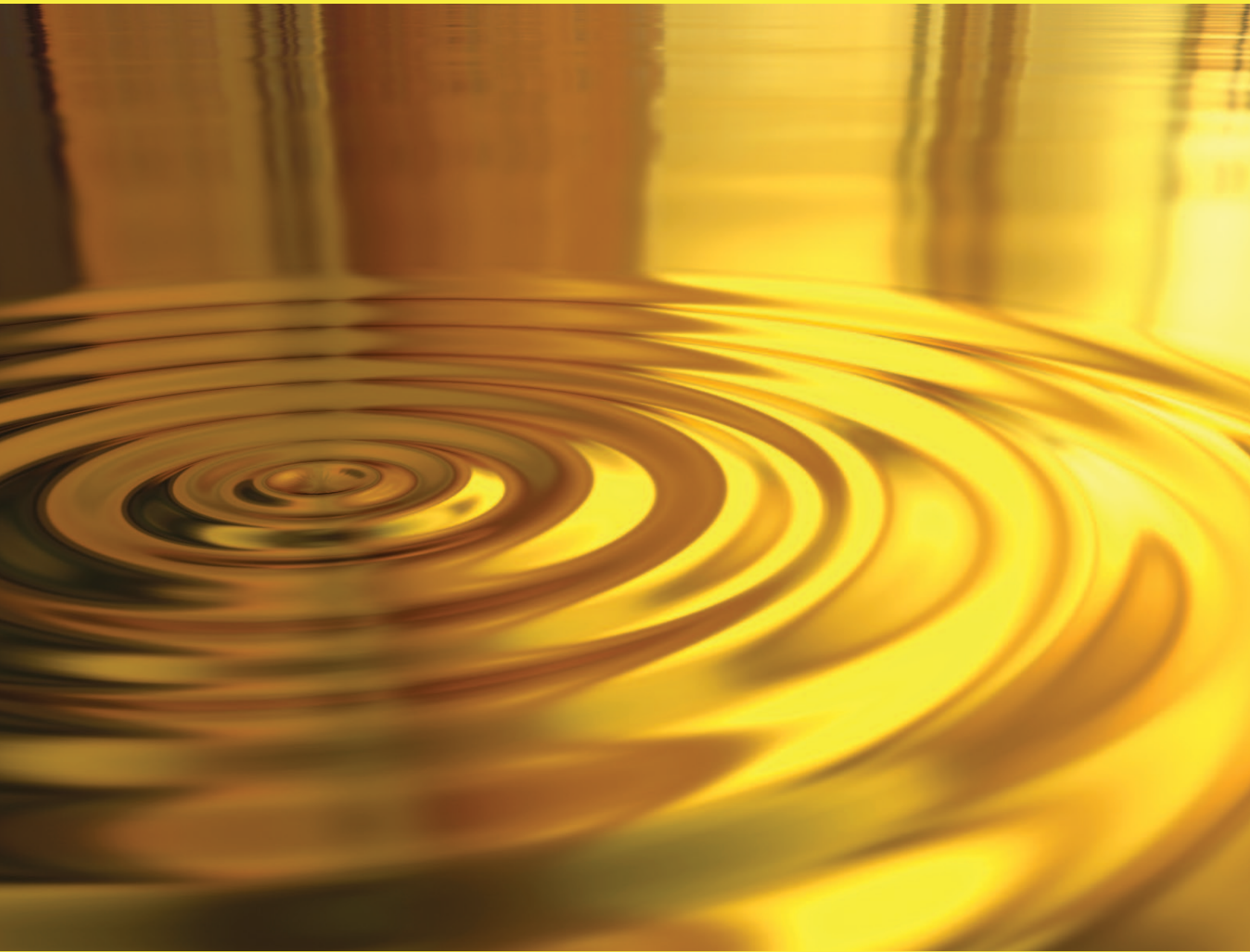# THE VALUE OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

A Comprehensive Research Review and Report

Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report

Megan Oakleaf for the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)

Value of Academic Libraries:
A Comprehensive Research Review and Report

Executive Summary

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Academic libraries have long enjoyed their status as the "heart of the university." However, in recent decades, higher education environments have changed. Government officials see higher education as a national resource. Employers view higher education institutions as producers of a commodity—student learning. Top academic faculty expect higher education institutions to support and promote cutting-edge research. Parents and students expect higher education to enhance students' collegiate experience, as well as propel their career placement and earning potential. Not only do stakeholders count on higher education institutions to achieve these goals, they also require them to *demonstrate evidence* that they have achieved them. The same is true for academic libraries; they too can provide evidence of their value. Community college, college, and university librarians no longer can rely on their stakeholders' belief in their importance. Rather, they must demonstrate their value.

Purpose—The following review and report is intended to provide Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) leaders and the academic community with 1) a clear view of the current state of the literature on value of libraries within an institutional context, 2) suggestions for immediate "Next Steps" in the demonstration of academic library value, and 3) a "Research Agenda" for articulating academic library value. It strives to help librarians understand, based on professional literature, the current answer to the question, "How does the library advance the missions of the institution?" The report is also of interest to higher educational professionals external to libraries, including senior leaders, administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals.

Scope—This report is intended to describe the current state of the research on community college, college, and university library value and suggest focus areas for future research. The report emphasizes library value *within the context of overarching institutions*. It has been said, "few libraries exist in a vacuum, accountable only to themselves. There is always a larger context for assessing library quality, that is, what and how well does the library contribute to achieving the overall goals of the parent constituencies?" (Pritchard, Determining Quality in Academic Libraries 1996). In recognition of this fact, this report includes significant research from other library types: school, public, and special (e.g., corporate, medical, law) libraries. The literature of school, public, and special libraries offers examples of numerous library value approaches and lessons learned from each. Academic libraries in universities, colleges, and community colleges would do well to learn from those experiences. Furthermore, because this report is focused on the articulation of library value to external audiences, this report does not emphasize measures of internal library processes such as input and output measures, external perceptions of quality, and satisfaction with library services. Internal, service quality, and satisfaction measures are of great utility to librarians who seek to manage library services and resources, but they may not resonate with institutional leaders as well as outcomes-based approaches.

Next Steps—A selection of recommendations for university, college, and community college librarians who wish to demonstrate value is included below. Additional details are available in the "Next Steps" section of this report.

⇒ **Define outcomes.** Libraries cannot demonstrate institutional value to maximum effect until they define outcomes of institutional relevance and then measure the degree to which they attain them (Kaufman and Watstein 2008, 227). Librarians in universities, colleges, and community colleges can establish, assess, and link academic library outcomes to institutional outcomes related to the following areas: student enrollment, student retention and graduation rates, student success, student achievement, student learning, student engagement, faculty research productivity, faculty teaching, service, and overarching institutional quality.

⇒ **Create or adopt systems for assessment management.** Assessment management systems help higher education educators, including librarians, manage their outcomes, record and maintain data on each outcome, facilitate connections to similar outcomes throughout an institution, and generate reports. Assessment management systems are helpful for documenting progress toward strategic/organizational goals, but their real strength lies in managing learning outcomes assessments. Individual librarians have assessed student learning for decades. However, such assessment efforts are typically "one-shot" and tend to capture limited amounts of information, e.g., only one librarian's class, one group of students, or one assessment method. In contrast, assessment management systems allow multiple librarians to enter assessment data, focus on different student groups (or the same groups over time), and use different assessment methods. Because they aggregate data by outcomes, they generate reports that demonstrate how well the library is achieving its outcomes as well as contributing to the mission of its overarching institution (Oakleaf, Are They Learning? 2011). Ideally, assessment management systems are used by an entire institution, but libraries can take the lead and pioneer their use at individual institutions. These systems can be developed by individual libraries or institutions; several assessment management systems are available for purchase, as well.

⇒ **Determine what libraries enable students, faculty, student affairs professionals, administrators, and staff to do.** Librarians may wish to conduct "help" studies that collect information about the impact libraries have on their target audiences. Librarians can also explore existing products, like MINES for Libraries, that enable libraries to collect information from users (e.g., how they use library resources). Results from these investigations will demonstrate library value and provide essential information for continuing improvements to library services and resources.

⇒ **Develop systems to collect data on individual library user behavior, while maintaining privacy.** In order to determine the impact of library interactions on users, libraries can collect data on how individual users engage with library resources and services. Currently, most libraries do not maintain records on

individual users' behavior; consequently, they cannot easily correlate behaviors with the outcomes of those behaviors. For example, they do not track data that would provide evidence that students who engage in more library instruction are more likely to graduate on time, that faculty who use library services are more likely to be tenured, or that student affairs professionals that integrate library services into their work activities are more likely to be promoted. Of course, any such data systems need to protect the privacy of individuals by following appropriate and ethical practices in the maintenance of such records.

⇒ **Record and increase library impact on student enrollment.** Institutions of higher education want to admit the strongest possible students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Entering student class characteristics are major predictors of institutional rank, prestige, graduation, alumni donations, and other positive markers. According to the Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers (2006), libraries are an important consideration when students select a university or college, and, as a result, academic libraries can help institutional admissions boost enrollment (Simmel 2007, 88). Specifically, the library ranked second in terms of facilities important in the selection decision process; only facilities for students' majors ranked higher. Libraries were ranked ahead of technology facilities, the student union center, and even recreational facilities (Michigan Academic Library Council 2007, 2). It is clear that libraries can help their institutions attract the best possible prospective students, as well as matriculate the best possible admitted students, in a variety of ways depending on the institution type, size, profile, etc. Typically, librarians take part in campus-wide recruiting and orientation efforts. In the future, libraries can play a more prominent role in reaching key prospective student groups and communicating the ways in which librarians can help students attain academic success. One can imagine assigning incoming students to librarians as "research advisors" and envision librarians innovating ways to provide just-in-time and just-for-you assistance based on students' enrollment records or individual characteristics. Ideally, librarians will send individual students instructional content relevant to their newly assigned projects proactively, rather than waiting passively to be asked to help (Eisenberg 2010; Shupe 2007, 53). Such service could target both students of great need and of great potential.

⇒ **Link libraries to improved student retention and graduation rates.** Most retention and graduation rate studies have focused on explanations for student persistence or departure, either due to personal characteristics or institutional practices (Bailey 2006, 10). Because most librarians are not in positions that enable them to influence students' personal traits, they should focus on creating institutional environments that foster retention and eventual graduation. To this end, librarians can integrate library services and resources into high-impact educational practices (Kuh, High-Impact Educational Practices 2008) and embrace "proactive early warning and intervention strategies for students with academic deficiencies" (Ewell and Wellman 2007, 9). High-impact practices include: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research,

diversity/global learning, service learning/community-based learning, internships, capstone courses and projects (Kuh, High-Impact Educational Practices 2008, 9-11). Note: In many cases, data exists that can link libraries to retention and graduation rates, but these correlations are not easily investigated. For example, National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) institutional data and academic library data are currently maintained in different databases with separate searching capabilities. However, combining the Academic Libraries Survey with Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) information can facilitate meaningful exploration of connections between community college, college, and university libraries and institutional outcomes. When examining IPEDS data, librarians can begin by investigating retention, graduation, completion, and transfer rates. Librarians can also investigate the utility of similar data in the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). Integrating library data with institutional data is critical; without joined data, joint analysis is difficult.

⇒ **Enhance library contribution to student job success.** Libraries support students' ability to do well in internships, secure job placements, earn salaries, gain acceptance to graduate/professional schools, and obtain marketable skills. Although it may be difficult to make direct and clear connections between academic libraries and students' educational and professional futures, these outcomes are of critical importance to institutions and their stakeholders. Consequently, librarians can investigate the linkages between academic libraries and student job success, and—if no linkages currently exist—librarians can form them. For example, many institutions place emphasis on students' job placements immediately after college and most invite employers to campus to interview students. Librarians can help students prepare for these interviews by sharing resources, such as company profiles, market analyses, etc., with career resources units on campus and with students directly.

⇒ **Track library influences on increased student achievement.** Libraries support student achievement in the form of GPA and professional/educational test scores. In order to demonstrate this impact, librarians can investigate correlations between student library interactions and their GPA well as conduct test item audits of major professional/educational tests to determine correlations between library services or resources and specific test items.

⇒ **Demonstrate and develop library impact on student learning.** Although librarians have long taught and assessed information literacy, most of the published evidence of the impact of libraries on student learning is sporadic, disconnected, and focused on limited case studies. To effectively establish the role of libraries in student learning, systematic, coherent, and connected evidence is required. The best learning assessments are authentic, integrated, performance assessments focused on campus learning outcomes including information literacy. Capturing such assessments in assessment management systems provides the structure critical to establishing a clear picture of academic library contributions to student learning.

⇒ **Review course content, readings, reserves, and assignments.** Librarians can use course information to identify students who have had substantial library exposure and compare them to those who have not; track the integration of library resources into the teaching and learning processes of their institution; and answer questions such as: What percent of readings used in courses or co-curricular activities are available and accessed through the library? How much do these materials save students? What contributions do they make to student learning? How many assignments do students complete that require use of information skills? What do library services and resources enable students to do or do better? Are faculty assessing these skills in their own ways, and if so, what have they learned about student skill levels?

⇒ **Document and augment library advancement of student experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of quality.** National student experience studies tend to focus on the entire student experience and often do not include questions directly related to libraries. However, there are questions that are at least tangentially related to information behaviors, and these questions may reveal information about the impact of the community college, college, or university library on student experiences. In addition, librarians can continue to work to develop library-related questions for these national surveys as well as local institutional surveys, especially those aimed at seniors and alumni.

⇒ **Track and increase library contributions to faculty research productivity.** Librarians contribute to faculty research productivity in a number of ways. To some degree, librarians have investigated the impact of library resources on faculty productivity, but librarians can explore the linkages between library services and faculty research productivity. How do librarians serve faculty who are preparing publications, presentations, or patent applications? How do librarians help faculty prepare their tenure and promotion packages? Fortunately, surrogates for faculty research productivity are well established; the challenge for librarians is to collect data on those surrogates for individual faculty and correlate them to faculty behavior and library characteristics.

⇒ **Continue to investigate library impact on faculty grant proposals and funding, a means of generating institutional income.** Librarians contribute to faculty grant proposals in a number of ways. Recent studies have documented the contribution of library resources to citations in grant applications (P. T. Kaufman, Library as Strategic Investment 2008). In addition, academic librarians can investigate other ways in which libraries contribute to the preparation of grant proposals, both funded and unfunded.

⇒ **Demonstrate and improve library support of faculty teaching.** Librarians contribute to faculty teaching in a variety of ways. Librarians provide guest lectures, online tutorials, and LibGuides. They integrate library resources into course materials on a massive scale. They collaborate with faculty on curriculum, assignment, and assessment design. They also provide resources that cover the

scholarship of teaching and learning; some libraries also partner in campus-wide teaching and learning support centers. Librarians clearly support teaching; now librarians can also collect the data and communicate the value of that support.

⇒ **Record library contributions to overall institutional reputation and prestige.** Academic libraries can augment their institution's reputation and prestige in four ways. First, they can help department chairs to recruit faculty (Simmel 2007, 88) or retain them (Tenopir, Investment in the Library: What's the Return? 2010). Traditionally, libraries contribute to faculty recruitment by building collections that support faculty activities. In the future, librarians have opportunities to be more proactive in this area, by actively engaging in dialogue with "star" faculty recruits prior to their hiring. Second, strong libraries, especially those that win awards or other distinctions, may also impact their institutional rank by bringing attention to the institution and therefore potentially influencing the peer assessments that make up a large portion of well-known ranking entities. Third, library special collections can bring significant prestige to their institutions (Webster and Flowers 2009, 306). Finally, library services and resources support institutional engagement in service to their communities locally, nationally, and globally, thus contributing to their institution's reputation and prestige through service.

⇒ **Participate in higher education assessment initiatives.** Librarians can familiarize themselves with national movements such as the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA), the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN), and the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), as well as international efforts such as Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO). They can participate in these activities whenever possible; for example, they might participate in the Rubric Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (RAILS) project, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), which seeks to integrate the new Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) information literacy rubric into their institutional assessment processes. Librarians can also be involved in Tuning USA's effort to develop common postsecondary learning standards in disciplinary areas; they can be aware of the new national "College and Career Readiness" standards, as well.

⇒ **Engage in higher education accreditation processes.** Librarians can prepare for and participate in institutional accreditation efforts in their own institutions. They may also engage in accreditation processes at a higher level, perhaps working to increase the integration of information literacy concepts into regional accreditation guidelines (Gratch-Lindauer, Comparing the Regional Accreditation Standards 2001; Rader 2004).

⇒ **Appoint liaison librarians to support senior institutional leadership and/or offices of assessment or institutional research.** Providing top-notch information services to key decision makers can help overarching institutions achieve a culture of assessment and evidence.

⇒ **Create library assessment plans.** Librarians can develop detailed plans that organize assessment efforts, keep them on track, and record assessment results and lessons learned. These assessment plans can be integrated into library budget, strategic planning, and reward systems.

⇒ **Promote and participate in professional development.** Librarians learning to demonstrate their value require training and support to acquire new skills (Oakleaf, Are They Learning? 2011). Their attendance at existing assessment professional development opportunities, such as the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Library Assessment Conference, the ACRL Assessment Immersion program, the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Assessment Institute, or other higher education assessment venues, can be encouraged and supported. In some cases, inviting consultants, participating in webinars, and establishing assessment resource collections are required to update librarian skills.

⇒ **Mobilize library administrators.** Library administrators can help their libraries demonstrate value by taking a number of actions: communicating assessment needs and results to library stakeholders; using evidence-based decision making; creating confidence in library assessment efforts; dedicating assessment personnel and training (Blankenship 2008, 321-322); fostering environments that encourage creativity and risk taking (Stoffle, Guskin and Boisse 1984, 9); integrating library assessment within library planning, budget (Hoyt 2009, 10), and reward structures (Dow 1998, 279); and ensuring that assessment efforts have requisite resources.

⇒ **Leverage library professional associations.** Major library professional associations can play a crucial organizing role in the effort to demonstrate library value. First, they can create online support resources and communities to serve as a nexus of value demonstration activities. Second, they can serve a "pulse taking" role, learning how member libraries are showing value and communicating this information to the membership. Third, they can orchestrate an "all hands on deck" approach to assessment, helping librarians determine which part of the Research Agenda might be best suited to their institutions and ensuring that the agenda is covered. Fourth, they can encourage library-centric publications and conferences to index their work in library and education literature databases. Finally, they can identify expert researchers and grant-funding opportunities that can partner with librarians to take on the most challenging aspects of the Research Agenda.

Research Agenda—The Research Agenda lays out 10 specific areas of library value within the context of an institutional mission and/or outcomes: student enrollment, student retention and graduation, student success, student achievement, student learning, student experience, faculty research productivity, faculty grants, faculty teaching, and institutional reputation. For each area of library value, the Research Agenda also identifies potential surrogates (see Figure 1) as well as potential areas of correlation.

For example, student enrollment is one area of institutional value. Surrogates for library impact on student enrollment include the recruitment of prospective students, matriculation of admitted students, and willingness of current students to recommend the institution to others. In other words, libraries can demonstrate their value by providing evidence that they play a role in student recruitment, matriculation, and willingness to recommend. They can do that by participating in prospective student events or new student orientation, assigning librarians as student advisors, or offering services that positively impact student judgments of institutional quality. These surrogates may be correlated to library services and resources in other ways; potential correlations are listed in the Research Agenda section of this report.

Just as there are no "quick fixes" to the problem of demonstrating the value of higher education, there are no simple solutions to the challenge of articulating academic library value. A fact well known in higher education is that "the more valuable evaluative data is, the harder it is to arrive at them" (Gorman 2009, 3). However, there are a number of steps librarians can take to move forward in the effort. Academic librarians at universities, colleges, and community colleges all can take part in the quest to document the existing value of libraries and maximize their value in future years.
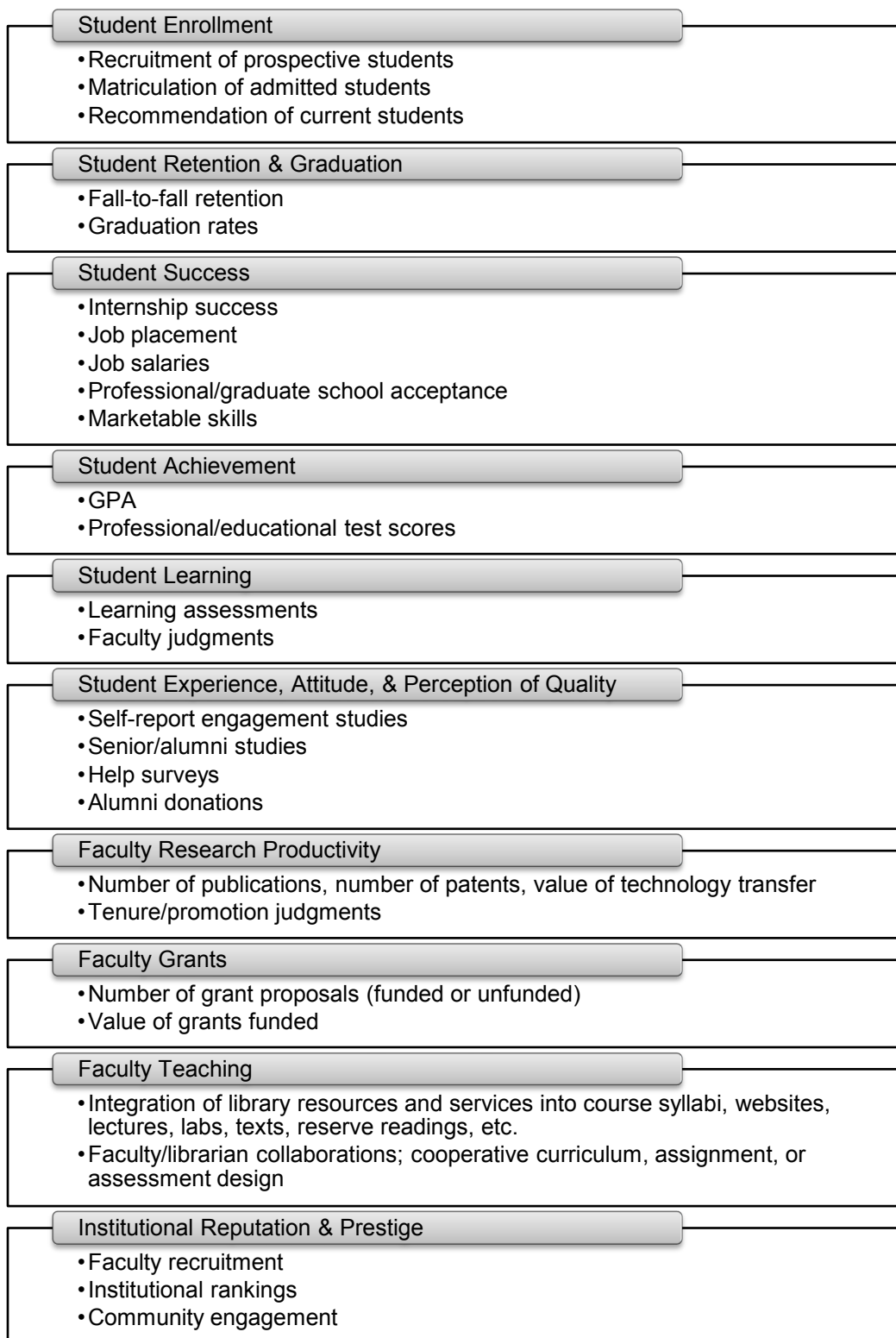
Student Enrollment
- Recruitment of prospective students
- Matriculation of admitted students
- Recommendation of current students

Student Retention & Graduation
- Fall-to-fall retention
- Graduation rates

Student Success
- Internship success
- Job placement
- Job salaries
- Professional/graduate school acceptance
- Marketable skills

Student Achievement
- GPA
- Professional/educational test scores

Student Learning
- Learning assessments
- Faculty judgments

Student Experience, Attitude, & Perception of Quality
- Self-report engagement studies
- Senior/alumni studies
- Help surveys
- Alumni donations

Faculty Research Productivity
- Number of publications, number of patents, value of technology transfer
- Tenure/promotion judgments

Faculty Grants
- Number of grant proposals (funded or unfunded)
- Value of grants funded

Faculty Teaching
- Integration of library resources and services into course syllabi, websites, lectures, labs, texts, reserve readings, etc.
- Faculty/librarian collaborations; cooperative curriculum, assignment, or assessment design

Institutional Reputation & Prestige
- Faculty recruitment
- Institutional rankings
- Community engagement

Figure 1. Areas of Library Value and Potential Surrogates

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APPENDIX A – "MUST READ" RESOURCES

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