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ALLSTAR Benchmarking: How Collaborating On Collecting And Sharing Data Is A Win-Win

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ALLStA
BENCHMAR

HOW COLLABORATING ON COLLECTING AND SHARING DATA IS A WIN-WIN

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Using the ALLStAR Benchmarking Project to collect, share, analyze, and deploy data to measure success.

We all know it's hard to tell a library's story to its stakeholders. Academic law libraries are expensive enterprises, and it's challenging to capture the complete picture of the value that their resources, activities, and services provide. Consider as well the ever-increasing demands to augment services, while at the same time having to justify the need for new services and prove their cost-effectiveness. In this environment, decision-makers need a clear understanding of what the library wants to accomplish, how it intends to meet its goals, and how it will measure success. What are the most important operations and services? Why are certain resources required? How is success determined?

Enter ALLStAR Benchmarking. ALLStAR—Academic Law Libraries: Statistics, Analytics, and Reports—was developed to collect, share, analyze, and utilize data among academic law libraries. A web-based tool, ALLStAR is a platform for law libraries to collect data that can be used to identify and quantify the demands on the library, how those demands are changing over time, and how a library is allocating resources to meet those demands. Armed with this data, libraries can better align limited resources to meet current demand and anticipate emerging trends, and internally assess strengths and weaknesses while examining how peer institutions are effectively implementing services. ALLStAR is a collaborative tool, not a competitive one. Libraries share best practices and learn from each other, and we all win!

Each academic library is unique but functionally comparable. Demands on the library come from throughout the institution and can mean many things, from time spent on reference and research support, to teaching requirements for librarians, to assisting with faculty scholarship, acquiring library resources, and designing websites. ALLStAR helps measure these demands by capturing raw numbers of services and activities as well as time spent on those activities. For questions concerning facilities and staff, full-time equivalents, clinic and classroom support, and outreach and extracurricular activities, ALLStAR not only captures what we do, but also how we allocate our human and financial resources in accomplishing all that we do. A future ALLStAR feature, which was part of the original project, could also include measuring patron satisfaction.

ALLStAR has the potential to be our central clearinghouse for data. While some libraries have knowledge bases for their statistics, many do not.

ALLStAR fills this role. It houses the data from surveys completed annually by law schools and law school libraries as well as data entered manually.

Easier Reporting

Reports can easily be created from any of the performance indicators (data points) across collections within ALLStAR as determined by the user. For example, a request for the ratio of librarians to students

Evaluation is essential for measuring and taking action on a strategic plan, service, or project. ALLStAR makes it easier for academic law libraries to measure demands, allocate resources, and ultimately fulfill their missions. It also assists in answering questions from administrators and advocating for appropriate resources.

and faculty against peer institutions takes data from the American Bar Association (ABA) and Association of Research Libraries (ARL) or Employee Questionnaire (EQ) collections. The report can be sent to colleagues, downloaded into an Excel file, saved as a template in ALLStAR, and updated with future data. Libraries can also enter internal notes to help guide future data collection. The best part is that *librarians* own the data as well as the questions. We can change, add, delete, and define the questions to ensure that we are all entering the same data.

As Robert Dugan, dean of libraries at the University of West Florida and past chair of the Association of College & Research Libraries Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey, recently stated, "Evaluation is essential for measuring and taking action on a strategic plan, service, or project." ALLStAR makes it easier for academic law libraries to measure demands, allocate resources, and ultimately fulfill their missions. It also assists in answering questions from administrators and advocating for appropriate resources.

(See ALLStAR to the Rescue sidebar for a real-world example of how ALLStAR has already aided libraries.)

The ALLStAR Evolution

In 2014, Teresa M. Miguel-Stearns, director of Yale Law School's Lillian Goldman Law Library, and Steven Stearns, an experienced benchmarker and analyst, created the initial ALLStAR design on a spreadsheet. The primary motivations were to understand what drives demand on services in Yale's law library, and how to get a better grasp of internal resource allocation. An immediate insight—the direct result of Yale colleagues completing the EQ (Employee Questionnaire)—came from a supervisor: "I had no idea we were spending so much time on committee work." This prompted immediate changes to the law library's committee framework. ALLStAR has been used numerous times at Yale to examine demands and resource allocation, most recently to justify converting a support position to a professional position.

From the beginning, Miguel-Stearns hoped she would be able to get peer institutions to participate in this benchmarking project so that she could better evaluate her library's strengths and weaknesses, and learn best practices from her peers. She found the data collected and submitted from the ABA, ARL, and *U.S. News & World Report* (USNWR) surveys to be insufficient for these purposes.

In early 2015, the law libraries of Yale, Harvard, Cornell, the University of Chicago, and the University of California (Berkeley) agreed to participate. The libraries took the original spreadsheets out for a real-world spin in what Miguel-Stearns nicknamed the "shakedown cruise." The experiment was a success. Miguel-Stearns and her team learned valuable information about themselves and other institutions, and in 2015, the NELLCO Law Library Consortium and Counting Opinions joined the project.

During the 2015–2016 academic year, NELLCO Interest Groups evaluated the spreadsheet and codebook,

BENCHMARKING
RESOURCES

- The ALLStAR Database
  bit.ly/ND17ALLStARdata
- NELLCO ALLStAR
  bit.ly/ND17ALLStAR

- *Viewing Library Metrics from Different Perspectives: Inputs, Outputs, and Outcomes* by Robert E. Dugan, Danuta A. Nitecki, and Peter Hernon (Libraries Unlimited; 1 edition, August 27, 2009) bit.ly/ND17Metrics

and assisted in refining and defining many data points. During the same time period, Counting Opinions converted the spreadsheet and codebook to the web-based tool we now know. ALLStAR is hosted on Counting Opinions' LibPAS, a performance management platform for libraries. LibPAS is also used by ACRLMetrics, American Library Association-Allied Professional Association Salary Survey, and Public Library Association Survey. In June 2016, Yale librarians beta tested ALLStAR, and in July 2016, the database went live. All academic law library directors were invited to take ALLStAR for a spin, kick the tires, and provide feedback. An advisory board of 20 law librarians from around the country continues to evaluate and refine the tool. The American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section Statistics Committee is considering how it might get involved as well.

To help get the word out, Dugan has lead training workshops on ALLStAR at the 2017 NELLCO Symposium and 2017 AALL Annual Meeting. Dugan, an expert on library assessment and benchmarking, says, "The [ALLStAR] portal is the best I've seen of all the portals around."

A Timely Launch

As it turns out, ALLStAR's development is well timed. In June 2017, the ABA Standards Review Committee eliminated Section III Libraries from the ABA Annual Questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire is to provide its Accreditation Committee with the information needed to determine if a law school is in compliance with the ABA Standards and Rules of Procedure for Approved Law Schools. With this in mind, each question was examined to determine whether the information gathered from the question was needed for the interim monitoring program, to create data needed for the various charts included in the sabbatical visit reports, or to provide the public information required by Standard 509. If it did not meet any of these requirements, the question was eliminated.
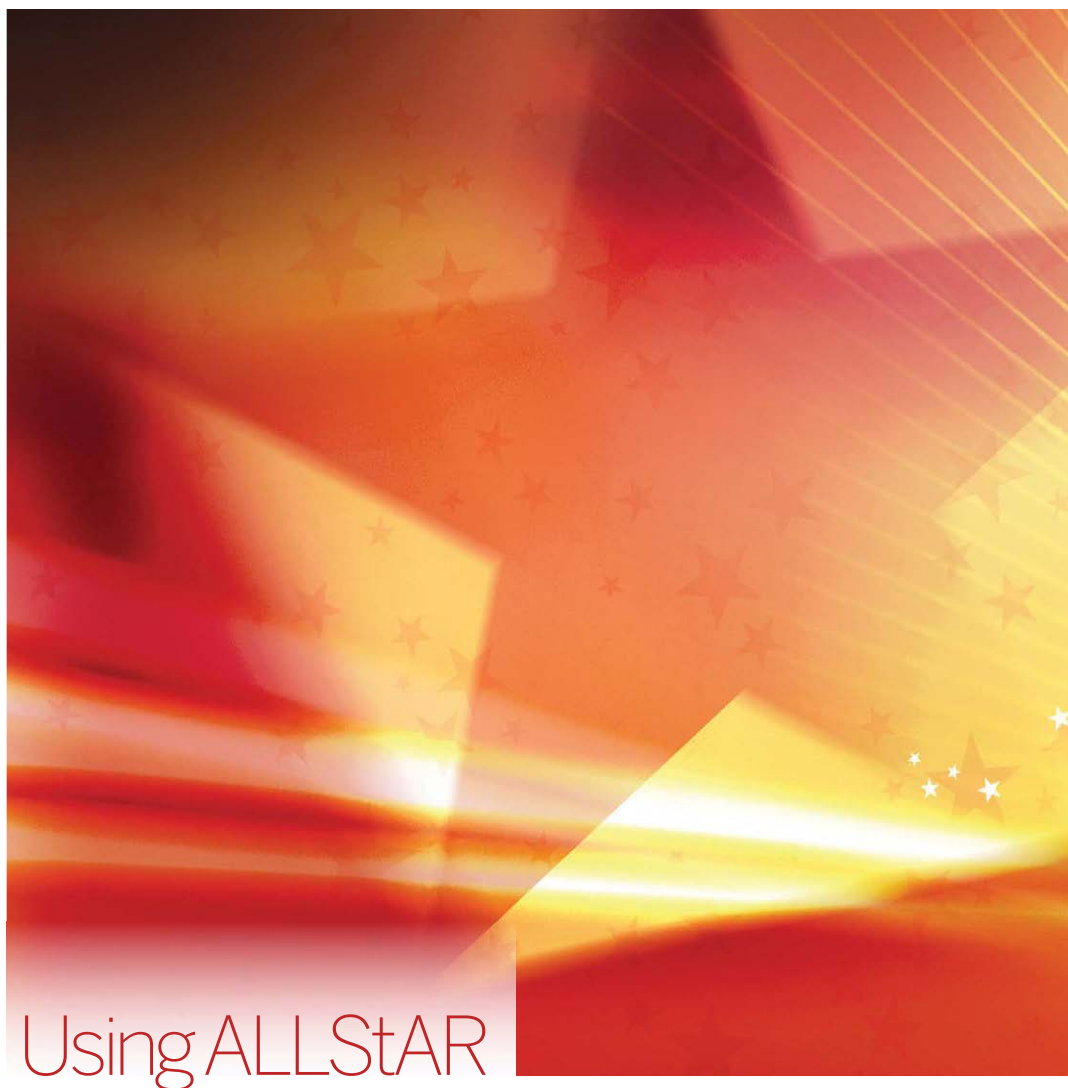
Using ALLStAR

In July 2016, all academic law libraries were invited to participate in ALLStAR. Institutional logins were sent to all library directors. In October 2017, NELLCO launched tiered pricing for ALLStAR, including free access to the ABA survey. The hope is that everyone will continue to complete, at the very least, the ABA survey in order to avoid a gap in our data collection.

For those who have not attended one of the online or in-person workshops, a great place to start learning how to use ALLStAR is at NELLCO's ALLStAR webpage, where visitors can watch two introductory webinars and find additional information about accessing ALLStAR. You do not need to be a NELLCO member to access this page or ALLStAR.

ALLStAR has been free to institutions since its launch. This year, however, there is a fee associated with using ALLStAR. NELLCO is determined to keep the price below $1,000 for participating libraries. There are four tiers of access, so libraries can choice the statistics most important to them. Tier one is free ABA data entry and access to ABA data. For Tiers two through four, there is a one-time setup fee and yearly subscription. A library does not have to be a NELLCO member to participate, they can contact allstar@nellco.org for additional subscription and setup information.

ALLStAR TO THE RESCUE

There have been requests for assistance from law library directors from around the country. ALLStAR has been able to assist with each of the queries submitted.

QUESTION: BUDGET ANALYSIS (JANUARY 2017)

Today, a claim was made that the budget cuts suffered by my library in the past year(s) is typical and "below average." I confess I was at a loss to counter this accusation.

I'm hoping to discover:

- Percentage change year/year for the past three years
- Per full-time equivalent
- By collection budget (TOTAL)
- By personnel budget (TOTAL)
- By law librarian budget (TOTAL)

RESULT:

ALLStAR contains budget data from the ABA Annual Questionnaire preloaded for 2013–2016. ARL budgetary information is preloaded for 2006–2016. ALLStAR can create a report that takes all of this data and shows the raw figures over time alongside the percentage change over time.

It was determined that the library operations questions did not fall into any of these categories and they were eliminated. The only library information collected in the 2017 ABA Annual Questionnaire concerns librarians who teach and total library expenditures.

Fortunately, ALLStAR can immediately fill the void left by the elimination of ABA-collected data. ALLStAR is also poised to take library statistics and analysis in a direction that is more beneficial to academic law libraries'

operational needs. As Dugan emphasizes, "You own the data, law librarians can own this sphere—and should!"

Where the Data Comes From

The Big Surveys. ALLStAR is loaded with four years of data (2013–2016) from the ABA questionnaire and 10 years of data (2006–2015) from the ARL survey. Each collection is available separately within ALLStAR, and each includes retired questions and data:

- The ABA data includes all of Section III Libraries, as well as faculty, student, and selective curricular data from ABA Mandatory Disclosures.

- ARL survey data is composed of 124 research libraries from the U.S. and Canada, and includes library collections, staffing, expenditures, and some service activities of member libraries.

Since the ARL survey is in ALLStAR, non-ARL libraries can participate and compare themselves with ARL libraries if they choose.

ALLStAR also contains a separate collection for the USNWR survey, which is pre-populated with the data points that are identical to ones in the ABA questionnaire. Thus, about half the USNWR survey is pre-populated. Counting Opinions, NELLCO, and the advisory board are currently working to load historical USNWR rankings data as well.

ALLStAR will continue to mass-upload ARL data and relevant ABA data annually.

Participating Libraries. The remaining data in ALLStAR Benchmarking relies on the affirmative input by participating libraries. ALLStAR includes almost 3,000 data points arranged

into distinct collections for easy input. Libraries can control, at the local level, who has access to which collections. When inputting data, remember that estimates are acceptable. The figures don't have to be exact in benchmarking, especially at this early stage of ALLStAR. Libraries can opt to enter historical data into the system. It is probably impossible for any library to answer all the questions in ALLStAR. Some of the performance indicators are aspirational. The hope is that over time, colleagues will develop tools to aid in various aspects of data collection.

The EQ is an optional tool that gathers data from library employees on activities to which multiple employees contribute, and then automatically rolls that data up to a single point. The intent is to more accurately collect this type of data, while also saving the library time. If a library chooses not to employ the EQ, all data points within the EQ are scattered among the various collections. In other words, no data points are lost in a library's decision not to use the EQ.

Scalable, Reliable Data
For a library manager, the data collected is much more useful than the minimal data collected in the national surveys. For example, knowing the forms of and time spent on reference assistance and faculty support are more useful to decision-makers than the ABA survey, which only asks for hours of reference desk staffing. Through the work of the NELLCO Interest Groups and the ALLStAR Advisory Board, many of these data points are accompanied by a clear set of definitions to ensure consistency in the data provided by each participating library. Creating and refining definitions is an ongoing process.

There is unlimited valuable information that can be mined from ALLStAR. As Dugan states, "the data is scalable, the data has validity and reliability." Since ALLStAR allows a library to create customized reports by combining performance indicators from any of the data collections, while also

incorporating many optional statistical formulas, data from historically different data silos can be measured longitudinally over time, allowing a library to view its story through a different lens. Libraries can create derived ratios within ALLStAR for particularly frequent calculations, such as the one recently created: collection dollars per student.

Services vary from institution to institution. There is no right or wrong service level, as each library has to set priorities. Yet peer comparison is valuable, and ALLStAR allows libraries to learn what peer institutions are doing—and how they are doing it with finite resources. A library can determine who its peers are based on historical measures or based on data they wish to compare. Each library can also decide which of the 3,000 data points it will capture and share with the greater community.

Moving Forward
As of August 1, 2017, 110 academic law libraries have logged into ALLStAR, and 34 have started to add additional data. As more academic law libraries participate in ALLStAR, the tool will become stronger and more valuable, and better able to assist each library in telling its story and advocating its worth.

Given the elimination of library data from the ABA Annual Questionnaire, NELLCO and Counting Opinions have worked toward a solution where the ABA, ARL, and USNWR collections will continue to be offered for free. The goal is to encourage all academic law libraries to complete, at minimum, the ABA survey so that we do not lose a year's worth of data. Going forward, the ALLStAR Advisory Board will recommend that libraries complete certain questions within ALLStAR with the remaining data points being optional. This approach will create an "official survey" each year to ensure all participating institutions are collecting and reporting the same data. The Advisory Board will also examine sets of questions that may not need completion annually, and will rotate them

through the survey every two, three, or four years.

ALLStAR is our survey. As librarians, we can control it, refine it, change it, and make it relevant to all academic law libraries. ∎

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