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The Data-Driven Library: Communicating the value of your school library program to administrators, parents, students, and colleagues

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About the Author

Shala Howell spent two decades as a writer helping companies like Bell Labs and Juniper Networks translate some of the world's most complicated concepts into actionable, understandable English. Her blog on fostering curiosity, Caterpickles (www.caterpickles.com), has reached half a million people since her first post. Her book, *[What's That, Mom?](#)*, encourages parents and caregivers to use public art to nurture children's curiosity in the world around them. During the pandemic, Howell began volunteering at her local public middle school library, ultimately transitioning into a permanent role as a library assistant to a credentialed teacher librarian in 2021. Shala Howell holds a B.A. in English from Rice University and expects to graduate from SJSU's MLIS program in Fall 2025. After graduation, she plans to use her MLIS to serve people interested in obtaining a free or low-cost education for themselves or their children.

The Data-Driven Library: Communicating the value of your school library program to administrators, parents, students, and colleagues

Teacher librarians can do amazing work boosting student outcomes through collaborative teaching, innovative educational technology, and engaging information literacy programs, but if their administration or school board never hear about it, the school library's budget will still be cut. Effective advocacy means collecting data about library programs and services and using it to create a user-friendly, audience-specific, and eye-catching data dashboard that connects school library services directly to district priorities -- all year long.

What is a library data dashboard?

Library data dashboards are an at-a-glance scorecard that teacher librarians can use to weave individual data points about programs and services into a coherent narrative that demonstrates the value of their school library or media center. Librarians can use their dashboards in a presentation to administrators, the school board, or their peers; display it on a monitor in the library for patrons; or embed it in a library website to give administrators, colleagues, parents, and students a continually updated look at the impact of library programs and services.

To help readers visualize how a data dashboard might be implemented at their school, [I have created a mock website that includes sample library data dashboards aimed at three distinct audiences: administrators, faculty, and students](#). The dashboards are based on the approach used in *We Boost Teaching and Learning: Micro Documentation Measures for Teacher Librarians* by Dr. David Loertscher and Ross Todd (2018). Each dashboard appears on its own page, accompanied by a brief explanation of the logic behind its construction. The dashboards are populated with sample data to give librarians an idea of how they function.

When reviewing the dashboards, notice how the headings for the individual charts work together to weave a coherent narrative targeted to that dashboard's audience. Readers who skim

the headlines on the [organization-level scorecard](#) will learn that “At The Best Library, students have better access to technology, more resources, and diverse books; and that means better student outcomes, better support for all types of learners, and students who feel better prepared for college.” All messages designed to appeal to that dashboard’s primary audience: administrators and school board members.

Similarly, the headings and supporting data points on the [student-centric dashboard](#) read: "At The Best Library, we show up, we help each other, we use technology, we read diverse books, we plan for our future, and we engage with our community." This overarching narrative serves the dual purpose of demonstrating to students how their peers are already using the library, while reinforcing the norms of the school library community.

How can teacher librarians build their own data dashboard?

Building a data dashboard requires librarians to:

- Gather data over time
- Store data as it is collected
- Turn that data into charts, tables, and graphs
- Publish those charts and graphs in a user-friendly, easily updatable, and widely accessible format

The precise combination of tools librarians use to complete those tasks is not important. I created my dashboards using Google Forms, Google Sheets, Google Looker Studio, and Google Sites, following the process described by [James Allen at KY Library Resources](#) (Allen, n.d.). In an interview with Dr. David Loertscher of San José State University, Dr. Rosalyn Washington [demonstrates a simple way to build a compelling data dashboard using a spreadsheet and Google Slides or Microsoft Powerpoint](#) (Loertscher, 2022).

In the explanation below, I have spoken in terms of tasks, not technology, to make it easier for teacher librarians to use whatever tools are available to them.

Step 1: Determine how the dashboard will be used.

Are you defending your annual budget? Are you trying to increase patron usage of the library? Are you hoping to find more opportunities to collaborate with colleagues? In short, what do you want this dashboard to help you do?

Step 2: Determine the target audience.

Librarians planning to use their dashboards to justify their annual budget will likely target administrators, the school board, and if the school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA) contributes to library funding, PTA leadership. Faculty colleagues are the target audience for librarians planning a dashboard to increase collaborations—and by extension, the library's impact on student outcomes.

Step 3: Determine what the target audience needs to know to make the right decision.

To determine whether or not to renew an expensive database subscription, librarians need data that demonstrates the value of that database, such as usage stats from the database provider and feedback from patrons on whether those logged database visits were actually helpful. Similarly, in deciding whether to cut, keep, or augment a school library budget, administrators need to know what the return on their investment is. A data dashboard that contains statistics on circulation, student visits, collaborative lessons, and the resources and technologies patrons use most will give administrators some of the information they need. To fully justify an administrator's investment in the library media center, however, teacher librarians also need to provide data that link the library's work directly to the district's core priorities, like improved student outcomes and support for all types of learners.

Step 4: Begin collecting data.

To make these data dashboards sustainable, librarians should build data collection into their day-to-day processes as much as possible. After every collaboration, ask co-teachers to fill out a survey [that explores student outcomes, the collaboration process, and suggestions for future improvements](#). Librarians should also survey students to [gather data about their learning experiences](#), as well as the technology and library resources they found most helpful during the unit. Circulation statistics can generally be accessed on demand from an integrated library management system (ILS), but librarians [may also want a mechanism for tracking class visits, individual student visits, and patron feedback on a regular basis](#).

Step 6: Construct an overarching message.

After determining the dashboard's purpose, target audience, and the data that will be displayed on it, construct an overarching narrative to tie that data together. In her interview with Dr. Loertscher, Dr. Rosalyn Washington provides several examples of how to do this. Dr. Washington states that [a good rule of thumb is to construct a narrative using at most 8 or 9 pieces of information](#) (Loertscher, 2022).

Step 6: Build the dashboard.

To keep this process as simple as possible, librarians can use whatever combination of tools they already feel comfortable with and have access to, whether that is Google Workspace, Microsoft Office 365, Canva, or a data visualization tool like Tableau or Google Looker Studio.

Step 7: Publish the dashboard.

Each librarian's situation and purpose for creating the dashboard will determine how they publish it. Google Slides or Microsoft Powerpoint work well for sharing the dashboard in presentations to administration, the school board, or colleagues at conferences. If the library or

school already has a website, librarians can add their dashboards to it. For this article, I created a website using Google Sites.

During the year, librarians can display the dashboard targeted to patrons on a monitor in the library. At year's end, librarians might take a screen capture of the dashboard and use it as the basis of an infographic summarizing the library's achievements to post around campus, share with administrators at the central office, tuck in with the library's annual report, or include in the library newsletter for students and their families. Archiving the data from the dashboards at the end of every year will also enable librarians to track changes in resource usage and monitor the effectiveness of library services and programming over time.

Step 8: Keep collecting and updating the data.

Whether collecting surveys at the end of every collaborative lesson, filling out forms to log class and student visits, or pulling circulation statistics from the ILS, librarians need to have a plan to keep gathering data to update their dashboards all year long.

The Bottom Line

When making data dashboards, librarians should consider these four questions:

- What do you want to do?
- Who do you need to convince?
- What does your target audience need to know to make a decision?
- How can you present that information in a way that is accessible and compelling for your audience—and sustainable for you?

Thinking through these four questions will enable librarians to turn data collected during the course of normal library operations into a powerful communications tool that links school library programs directly to district priorities.

References

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Related Resources

Sample Google Form-based Surveys

- [Learner Survey](#)
- [Teacher Survey](#)
- [Library Usage Data](#)

[Sample data dashboard](#)

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