

Making Research-Driven Change: Developing a Research Agenda to Guide Your Professional Practice

Presented at the California Academic & Research Libraries 2018 Conference

April 13-15, 2018

San Francisco, California

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Abstract

In times of change, original research is a useful tool for navigating decision-making in libraries. Unfortunately, librarians may encounter deficits in time and preparation when considering their plans for academic publishing. Additionally, determining what research projects will be impactful within a specific institutional/professional context takes careful consideration and a deep understanding of the goals of these institutions. In this preconference session, attendees will be guided through activities and conversations that address issues related to academic publishing. Attendees will consider gaps in services, programs, or even perspectives, that can be addressed with focused research at their own institution. They will also have the opportunity to identify and reflect on their own institutional missions/strategic plans and brainstorm how their research can be framed within these broader goals. Finally, strategies and resources that can be used to fill perceived knowledge gaps in research design and publishing will also be discussed.

Introduction

Participating in scholarly activities, including publishing and presenting, is an important way for academic librarians to communicate new ideas and knowledge with others in the profession. Making decisions in practice based on one's own research and the research of others can improve and strengthen library services, while also building the reputation of the librarian (Clapton, 2010) and the institution to which they belong. Some academic librarians are not required to publish as part of their position and choose to do research on their own. However, many academic librarians (in public institutions especially) are required to demonstrate some form of scholarly activity as part of the promotion and tenure process on their campus.

Engaging in scholarship within the profession can be a very rewarding experience when the proper skills and support networks are available for librarians. Without those skills and support networks, the idea of doing research and/or publishing can be a stressful and daunting task. Most academic librarians hold the terminal masters degree for library/information studies, and may or may not have been required to take a research course in their LIS program. This preparation pales in comparison with the extended doctoral research training other disciplinary faculty receive before starting in their academic positions at universities (Tysick & Babb, 2006). It's not surprising that many librarians report a lack of personal confidence and formal research education when asked about barriers to doing research (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012). Even with a good research foundation, an academic librarian's day can be easily and quickly filled with non-research related responsibilities, making it hard to find the time to devote to writing and research (Bradley, 2008). Some librarians may feel frustrated that they are not given the resources and support needed from their institution to meet the research requirements of their position.

One way to address the issue of lack of organizational support is by developing a research agenda that aligns with the goals of one's institutions (the library, the university, and/or the LIS profession). If a librarian is able to articulate how their research supports the missions/values/goals of these institutions, they are better able to demonstrate the value of their research. This has several positive consequences: it improves the likelihood of receiving support (whether that be funding, time, etc.), it increases the visibility of librarian research beyond the library, and it can promote collaborations beyond the library.

Potential collaborations beyond (or even within) the library can also address certain skills or knowledge gaps in the research process. For example, partnering with a disciplinary faculty member with knowledge on how to do statistical analyses or a more senior librarian who has published in the past can bring an important skill set to the collaboration. Librarians may also seek out targeted professional development opportunities like online courses, books, or other resources. To address issues of motivation, accountability, and/or protecting one's time for writing, writing or research support groups can be a useful tool (Campbell et al., 2011; Sullivan et. al., 2013; Tysick & Babb, 2006). Writing groups are a great way to get early and ongoing feedback on a manuscript in progress. They can also provide a sounding board for developing (and sticking to) a timeline and internal deadlines.

Goals of the Session

In preparation for this preconference workshop, the facilitators circulated a survey among registered attendees to gauge the level of both professional and research experience participants would bring to the session in order to ensure the activities planned for the afternoon matched the

expectations of attendees. All of this information contributed to the formulation of goals guiding the presentation:

- Understand the purpose of research in our profession;
- Identify gaps in services, programs, or perspectives that can be addressed with focused research;
- Align research agendas with the broader goals of our libraries, institutions, or profession;
- Strategize to address gaps in knowledge, resources, or expertise;
- Produce the first draft of a research proposal.

Preconference Activities

To begin the session, the facilitators introduced themselves and briefly discussed their individual motivations for doing research, in order to model the centering of an overarching sense of purpose in taking on a research agenda. Participants, who were seated at round tables in groups of 4 to 6, did a “think-write-share” activity to produce their own personal mission statement. Participants did all of their written activities in a workbook (see “Additional Resources” below), in order to have a coherent collection of reflective writing to take away with them. The sharing portion of this activity gave participants the opportunity to introduce themselves to their table-mates. Responses from the pre-assessment survey about what participants hoped to learn from the session were shared with the group, and included goals like “get a clearer picture of where and how to start,” “develop research questions and agendas that align with your functional responsibilities,” and “use the outcomes of research to initiate or implement change.”

Attendees brainstormed responses to the question, “What’s the purpose of research in our profession?” and the facilitators gave examples of research projects that some of the librarians at their home institution (CSUSM) have undertaken to address specific problems or opportunities encountered in a librarian’s day-to-day responsibilities, as well as those seen on a larger, historical scale. With those examples fresh in their mind, participants were asked to individually reflect on the gaps in services, programs, or perspectives at their own institutions that could potentially be addressed with focused research. After writing a response in their workbooks, they were encouraged to share examples with their tables and the larger group.

Once everyone had a chance to think of some ideas, the facilitators guided participants through a multi-step activity that involved pairing up and taking turns describing their ideas with no interruptions, after which their partner had the opportunity to ask questions. A time limit of five minutes was imposed to encourage speakers to be as concise as possible. Once their time was up, roles were switched so that the other partner was able to talk and answer questions about their research ideas. Participants were encouraged to either record the speaker or take notes while in the “listener” role. Each person individually transcribed their recordings or read through the written notes and worked to refine the transcription/notes into the first draft of a rough abstract.

After a well-deserved break, the participants did more intellectual work individually, by responding to questions from the workbook about their proposed research. The group then spent some time talking about the process of aligning research with the broader goals of the libraries and universities in which they work, and of the profession as a whole. The facilitators gave examples of how they define their own research as important work that advances the goals of their home institution. Participants were then given the opportunity to locate the mission, vision, and values statements of their own institutions and link their proposed research to the goals described, taking care to note the source of the information.

Strategies to overcome knowledge gaps were discussed, with examples of the facilitators' own difficulties in beginning and extending their research agendas as new tenure-track faculty, as well as some of the solutions learned along the way. Participants then reflected on the knowledge and skills they may need to pursue their chosen research agenda, and whether they perceived knowledge gaps or other barriers that they would need to overcome. Individuals shared this information with the others at their table, received advice, and brainstormed solutions together.

The facilitators then briefly discussed approaches to creating a realistic timeline, taking into consideration the publication cycle, tenure clock, and the fluctuating availability of research time imposed by the academic calendar. To end the session, participants did one last reflective writing activity in which they considered their next steps toward making progress on their proposed research and outlined a rough timeline to make the work ahead of them visible and actionable.

Additional Resources

The preconference presentation and workbook materials can be found at the following links:

Presentation: tinyurl.com/researchCARL18

Workbook: tinyurl.com/researchworkbookCARL18

Works Cited

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