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An Uphill Battle

Academic Librarians and the Barriers to Scholarship

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Some academic librarians within Pennsylvania and across the United States have been granted faculty status by their institutions. With this status comes the expectation that librarians will contribute scholarship to their discipline. However, with many librarians holding only a master's degree, there is the likelihood that they lack the requisite skills to engage in research. On top of this, multiple studies have shown that librarians feel they lack the time to pursue scholarship on top of their typical job duties. This commentary discusses how these barriers create stress for librarians, hurts their scholarly pursuits, and how the current culture in academia may play a role in it.

An Uphill Battle: Academic Librarians and the Barriers to Scholarship

Elizabeth Blakesley, in her article "The Constraints of Practice, or We Work in Libraries, That's Why We Can't Do Research" (2016), summarized the fundamental problem of the research component of academic library jobs: "None of us have time or are particularly rewarded for concentrating on research" (Blakesley, 2016). The crux of it is that librarians are expected to conduct research on top of their existing job duties, but our education never prepared us for this; instead, we have been trained for the job. This presents the two main barriers that researchers have established exist for librarians: no time and no skillset for conducting research. Blakesley wrote her article after reading Wayne Wiegand's "Falling Short of Their Profession's Needs" (Wiegand, 2016) in *Inside Higher Ed*. Where Wiegand (2016) asks "Where is the LIS research community?" and Blakesley (2016) responds "I'm afraid that we don't really exist." I would add my own experience as a new faculty librarian. It is not that we don't exist, but rather that we are up against barriers that make our research difficult to conduct in between the requirements of our jobs. It strikes me that these barriers are creating a body of scholarship that is not as robust as the profession and also hinder research that could be done by librarians who are required to publish for the sake of their promotion and tenure.

Most librarians are likely familiar with academia from their time as a student in an undergraduate and then graduate program. But institutional research culture is not always made clear to undergraduates, and with most master's programs lasting one to two years, there simply may not be enough time to fully communicate the

requirements and processes for research on top of all of the other skills that need to be taught. It was not until my second position within academic libraries that I became more acutely aware of the expectations of scholarship that would be placed on me as a librarian with faculty status. Even then, myself and other junior faculty often face ambiguous criteria for what is considered "contributions to the discipline" (Tysick & Babb, 2006). This not only increases stress but also further brings into question the quality of research being produced by librarians.

By the count of the State Library of Pennsylvania, there are around 107 academic libraries in the state (*Academic Libraries*, n.d.). The work done by Chris Lewis for the Academic Librarian Status website outlines a few categories for librarians in academic libraries. For the purposes of this commentary, I'll be focusing on three of those categories: librarians with full faculty status and tenure, librarians with faculty status but no tenure, and institutions with mixed positions. As of 2018, 15 of 107 academic libraries have librarians at faculty status with tenure, two have faculty status but no tenure, and one has a mix of positions.

The reasons for why a librarian might hold faculty status is almost entirely dependent on the institution. But very often one of the goals stated for granting faculty status is that librarians will continue to be engaged with scholarship and research methods, and therefore use these skills when they aid other members of university faculty. This engagement is typically thought of as reading and producing their own scholarly publications. For many faculty status librarians, their publication output is tied to whether they will get to keep their job, since scholarship is almost always considered during the review process. This process is very similar to our non-library faculty counterparts: we are expected to prove that we are scholars and worthy of being attached to the school's name.

Library faculty have a disadvantage compared to the rest of the faculty: our counterparts in the wider university faculty often have PhDs and therefore 4-6 years of research work behind them. Along with this, they have likely been taught the nature of academic faculty culture by their advisors. Most librarians have, at a minimum, a single master's degree in the library and information sciences. These programs do not always have a thesis requirement, in fact, only 10% do according to one study (Tysick & Babb, 2006). The intent of these programs is typically to prepare future librarians for the practice of librarianship. In the United Kingdom, librarians consider themselves practitioners and do not have the same scholarship expectations, and their drive for research comes about with the intention of improving practice (Clapton, 2010). A similar phenomenon occurs in the United States: librarians typically write about the problems that they face in their day-to-day practice. Ackerman and colleagues found in their 2018 survey that more than half (52%) of librarians wrote about practice-based issues, offering this explanation for the results: "Tying potential research topics to everyday work tasks enables busy librarians to maximize the use of limited time, especially given (sometimes competing) requirements to excel in both scholarship and librarianship" (Ackerman et al., 2018). This survey also asked what barriers or challenges librarians felt existed between them and their scholarship. The result was that 75% felt they lacked the time and 46% felt that they lacked the necessary skills (Ackerman et al., 2018). This is something that comes up across studies that have been done on the subject. The U.K.-centered study by Clapton found that 80% of respondents lacked time followed by 30% responding with "more skill needed" (Clapton, 2010). In Australia, where publication is voluntary, a writing group was established to help to overcome a lack of confidence by its members due to their prior inexperience with publishing (Sullivan et al., 2013).

And what does this lack of training mean for the quality of articles published? Librarians admit that they are most comfortable using surveys as a testing instrument (Ackerman et al., 2018) but is that always the best tool for the research question? Or is it simply what is most familiar to practitioners who are used to surveying patrons about their experiences? Training is proven to help librarians in both their research output and confidence with their research (Luo, 2011), but not every institution is able to offer this; furthermore, the timeline to review is so short (and the pressure to publish so high) that these librarians cannot get more training on top of their daily work and writing. Common sense says that the training ought to come before you're even a position to need it. And according to one 2018 study, 65% of librarians say they did take a course in research methods (Ackerman et al., 2018) which does show improvement over

a 2006 study that found the number to be only 54% (Tysick & Babb, 2006). But in a 2015 survey of academic librarians' attitudes, involvement and perceived capabilities of research, only 17% responded "Yes" to the question asking if they believed their Library Science degree adequately prepared them for research (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2018). This is the situation that librarians seem to find themselves in: they need to publish to keep their job, but they cannot find the time to do it, and on top of that, they are struggling to muster the confidence in their skills to even begin to engage in research.

The result of this scenario is usually an article written about a problem that the librarian faces in their daily work. This certainly seems ideal: the librarian gets a chance to write about the problems they face and walk away from the experience with both an article and a solution. But then that could become a problem, as outlined in a discussion among librarian-researchers: "Too often, a librarian collects data to solve a problem or to answer a question, and then decides to write and publish an article. This leads to a plethora of 'this is how we do it in our library' articles, which may or may not be helpful to others in the profession" (Horowitz & Martin, 2013). It has been asked countless times if the idea of 'publish or perish' hurts scholarship. One article in the medical sciences writes of an issue that mirrors the 'this is how we do it in our library' issue: "The emphasis on publishing has decreased the value of the resulting scholarship as scholar must spend time scrambling to publish whatever they can manage, rather than spend time developing significant research agenda" (Rawat & Meena, 2014). Across academic areas, this emphasis on the need to publish can lead to less-than-ideal work. I think that the question of 'publish or perish' ought to be applied in librarianship as well. By putting emphasis on creating scholarship for the purposes of tenure and promotion in libraries, the quality of library research is potentially also less-than-ideal.

To further quote from the discussion moderated by Horowitz and Martin: "To improve research, librarians must start with research in mind." And to that end, efforts have been made to present librarians with the chance to not only conduct research but learn how to research. One example is involvement in ITHAKA S+R studies, where librarians can join other researchers at their institution as well as experts with ITHAKA. For my colleagues, this has presented the opportunity to not only learn but contribute to research projects. Institutions ought to present involvement these projects as an opportunity to gain further education in research methods. The Library Publishing Research Agenda offers librarians a list of topics and resources to aid in researching big research questions. In 2010, Kennedy and Brancolini surveyed librarians regarding their confidence and current research practices and followed this with an updated survey in 2015. One result of their first survey was the establishment of the Institute for Research Design in Librarianship (IRDL). This is an annual opportunity for a cohort of academic librarians to get assistance in developing their research skills. "Librarians involved in the scholarship process should spend their time performing research and writing, not trying to figure out the process" (Black & Leysen, 1994). The Librarian Parlor has also announced the LibParlor Online Learning (LPOL) which offers freely available online modules intended to help library professionals improve their research skills. If libraries expect scholarship from their librarians, then they also need to encourage and create opportunities for them to learn the skills that they need, especially as opportunities such as IRDL and LPOL proliferate.

Does library scholarship suffer due to these barriers? I'm not sure there is a definitive answer to this. On the one hand, faculty status and the impetus to publish offers a challenge and drives librarians to research the issues that they face. But librarians, often with a single master's degree, can be ill-equipped and lack the confidence to pursue research. And it seems that librarians are not alone, as university administrators favor long curriculum vitae over other experience then the quality of research goes down (Rawat & Meena, 2014). Arguably, this is an issue with the culture created by universities as a whole: one focused on individual achievements and doing as much as is possible with scarce resources. At the core of academia is still a sense of curiosity, and for librarians, there exists a desire to look deeper and, importantly, *work together* to find answers to difficult questions and problems. But I think there needs to be some reflection: without time, skills, or support to sufficiently pursue scholarship, are we pressured to create scholarship that simply satisfices rather than creating a world of scholarship that reflects the profession?

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