

From the Ground Up: Building a Culture of Research in an Academic Library

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Background: This article discusses the motivations, benefits, and actions taken to create and support a culture of research among library employees at a Carnegie Research 1 University Library system. Despite substantial pressures to publish and engage in library science research, many academic librarians lack the training or support to build their own research agendas. This is particularly worrisome as tenure requirements and professional trends require librarians to be knowledgeable and productive in their research dissemination.

Experience: At Clemson University Libraries, librarians responded to this problem by adapting evidence-based solutions from scientific and medical disciplines to fit their own research empowerment needs. The process of building a productive culture of research at Clemson Libraries was a multi-year endeavor that took considerable initiative, planning, and flexibility.

Discussion: Each of the initiatives required adaptation to the knowledge levels and existing culture in the Libraries. Organizers had to be willing to make changes and attempt new approaches as the organization evolved and comfort with the research process grew. Some initiatives, like Writing Circle, were disbanded, while others, like Journal Club and Research Roundtable, continue to develop with high levels of engagement.

Takeaways: The success of this progressive approach to fostering a thriving culture of research at Clemson Libraries is evident through the rates of participation, dissemination, and satisfaction of library employees in addition to the expansion of the Libraries' engagement with research in outside departments and disciplines. Librarians who seek to enhance their own institution's research culture should consider implementing some or all of these initiatives to jumpstart their efforts, including writing circles, journal clubs, and research roundtables.

Background:

Librarians have been conducting and disseminating research throughout the history of the profession, yet many struggle with research undertakings without ample support and a robust knowledge base from which to grow. At many colleges and universities, librarians are eligible for tenure; for example, an academic librarian position that is hired as “tenure track” implies that the position will be annually renewed and is expected to undergo a rigorous peer review process of their achievements after several years of work. Achieving tenure typically comes with a promotion and a more permanent contract. Though specific criteria vary among institutions, a common metaphor for tenure is a three-legged stool in which the legs are librarianship, research (expressed in terms of grants, scholarly articles, book chapters, professional conference presentations, and similar venues), and service (expressed via committee work, peer review services, or other activities in service to the profession). This often differentiates tenure-track librarians from their non-tenure-track counterparts, who may have no research or service components to their positions. Academic librarians may feel greater pressure to publish their own original research to maintain their employment and achieve tenure, a pressure many other academic disciplines colloquially call “publish or perish.” This stress may be compounded by a lack of research methods training in their professional graduate programs. This article seeks to explore how one academic research library set out to enhance their culture of research to advance the comfort of librarian researchers and advocate to the institution the strengths of the library faculty.

As the library system at a large public, land-grant institution, Clemson Libraries faced the challenge of re-envisioning themselves as a major research library when Clemson University became a Carnegie Research 1 (R1) institution in 2016¹. To support this development, the University’s ClemsonForward strategic plan, implemented in Fall 2016, set forth a goal to “increase annual production of nationally recognized forms of scholarship by 50 percent”². For the Libraries, this meant increased support for all research conducted by University affiliates while increasing the research productivity of Libraries’ faculty. In accordance with this goal in 2017, the Libraries guidelines for reappointment, tenure, and promotion were changed to include scholarship and creative activities, otherwise known as research output, as a required element for consideration for any of these faculty movements. With all of these developments, Libraries employees, both faculty and staff, found themselves in the unique position of needing to increase their engagement with research in order to both support the institution’s needs and to ensure their own professional success.

As with any change, implementation took time. Faculty librarians could not become expert researchers publishing in top journals overnight, and knowledge and experience gaps had to be identified and addressed to increase the entire department’s research output. One such gap was the lack of internal support for new and experienced faculty members conducting research. In other colleges and departments, already-tenured faculty can be relied upon for mentoring and knowledge-sharing for inexperienced faculty members expected to conduct research. In this situation, however, tenured Libraries faculty were largely inexperienced with conducting most forms of scientific research and had little experience with the methodologies, software, and publishing requirements that untenured faculty needed the most guidance with. Most Libraries

faculty, tenured and untenured, had never taken a research methods course that pertains to library and information studies, and those that had taken such a course had experience pertaining to their other degrees in other fields.

The lack of internal research support became readily apparent after a new wave of Libraries faculty members came on board. Between 2017 and 2020, the Libraries welcomed 12 tenure-track faculty members who all would be evaluated using the new research requirements. In the absence of tenured faculty support, newer Libraries faculty members sought guidance from each other and developed informal networks of research support. While a faculty Mentoring Committee was formed in 2019, most new Libraries faculty members had already started in their roles by that time, and the program of mentoring to provide untenured faculty with structured career support, including with research, has yet to be fully implemented in 2021.

In addition to the lack of internal experience with scientific research and large numbers of new Libraries faculty, there was also an obstacle of pervasive imposter syndrome throughout the Libraries³. Though many had assisted, supported, and collaborated with other faculty at the University, Libraries faculty did not see themselves as researchers, or even at times faculty members, at the same level as their institutional peers. This manifested in widespread self-doubt in trying new methods, planning large projects, and even talking about or promoting research projects internally. All of this together highlights the stark need behind the initiatives explored in this case study—to increase the comfort with and willingness to engage in scientific research among Libraries employees by increasing the internal culture of research.

Librarians as researchers

Academic librarians are not unique in that they are a community of practitioners who have crossed the bridge into academia. As can be seen in a study conducted with nurses in the UK, this transition from professional practitioner to educator requires a blending of the two cultures and a supportive community of practice to foster the skills required by the academy⁴. Unfortunately, academic librarians often find their preparedness and support for research to be lacking, creating a culture where research is often met with trepidation.

Many librarians have taken some sort of course or workshop on research methodology, with a good proportion completing this training as part of their MLIS coursework⁵. However, participating in a research methods course or workshop is not a predictor of whether a professionally employed librarian will conduct research⁶. For most tenure-track librarians, research and scholarship are one of several required components for tenure, thus motivating them to engage in research of some sort. Requirements about the number and type of research outputs produced varies. Some institutions provide specific numbers, while others only measure by vague categorizations such as “consistency” or “progress.” Requirements for type of authorship (single, first author, co-authored, etc.) also vary between institutions⁵. These unclear tenure expectations are commonly faced by new faculty members, and they are a significant source of stress⁷.

While types of publications valued when working towards tenure varies, in most institutions, the peer-reviewed article is valued the highest as librarians and administrators place a significant level of value on the peer review process⁵. Since many early-career academic librarians lack practice or formal training in writing and publishing for peer review, this process can be a barrier for those seeking tenure. As found by Sassen and Wahl, “with little grounding in research methodology, statistical analysis, and scholarly writing, many academic librarians are not prepared to fulfill the research and publication requirements for promotion and tenure criteria”⁸. Librarians, as practitioner–researchers, need a thorough understanding of the research life cycle in order to support user needs, engage with developing trends in scholarly communications, and support the library’s tie to institutional strategic visions⁹.

Confidence plays a role in a librarian’s perceived ability to engage in research; though librarian confidence in ability to conduct a literature review is high, confidence in other discrete stages of the research project is much lower¹⁰. Many librarians feel like they have the training to read and understand library research articles. Similarly, many feel they received enough training in their LIS degree coursework to conduct original research. However, many felt their capabilities and confidence relating to research writing would be bolstered with additional training¹¹. Despite this need, the availability of formal research support, such as additional training, is lower for librarians than for those in other fields⁵. Early career librarians in particular “have limited access to formal or institution-sponsored research support and rely heavily on informal mentoring”⁵. This lack of support can be detrimental to a librarian’s willingness and ability to conduct research while working in a professional capacity¹².

While formal support is a significant factor in an academic librarian’s research approach, one of the biggest challenges librarians face in making progress toward their research agenda is finding the time to conduct research^{5, 10, 13}. Time and time again, academic librarians cite the lack of room in their schedule as a reason why research does not happen. Even for those who seek to engage more in the research process, either by reading disseminated products or conducting their own studies, the lack of work time to do so serves as a substantial barrier to doing so and is reflective of other trends in the profession such as salary compression (when there is little difference in pay between employees of different status, experience, and rank) and under compensation (when employees are not provided with pay and benefits commensurate with their rank, workload, and experience).

Despite these barriers, the amount of research being produced by LIS practitioners is steadily growing¹⁴. Academic librarians seeking tenure and those with a passion for research are contributing to the growing body of LIS research being published in a number of journals in the field. With proper support and dedication to reduce barriers, LIS research and scholarship can continue to grow, and a culture of research productivity can blossom among librarians.

Fostering a research culture

Supporting and sustaining a culture of research requires understanding the peer and library management support needs, meeting the visions of library administration, and

developing library-wide engagement among employees⁹. Librarians are unique in higher education due to the difference in their educational background, which is at odds with the level of scholarship they are expected to produce once on the tenure track¹⁵. While previous research studies have found that there is no correlation between whether librarians conduct research and whether they believe their educational backgrounds have prepared them as researchers, anecdotal evidence suggests there is much more that graduate programs in Library and Information Science can do to equip degreed academic librarians to conduct research with their academic peers in other disciplines¹².

Many librarians find a benefit to informal mentoring surrounding research because the emotional support and nonjudgmental relationship fosters a sense of safety and comfort that carries over into their feelings about performing research. Formal mentoring has also been shown to be beneficial as the more experienced mentors are able to work with mentees to specifically tailor their programs of research to their institution's tenure and promotion processes⁵. As demonstrated in nursing, mentoring relationships between experienced researchers and junior faculty can be mutually beneficial, including increasing productivity, providing clarity in establishing hierarchical relationships within the research team, incorporating developing trends in research focus to existing projects, helping to fulfill requirements for both tenure and promotion, and enhancing the stability and reputation of the institution¹⁶. Having multiple support systems in place for librarian researchers may prove to be the most beneficial option. Both peer and mentor support can positively influence early-career librarians in their journey to conduct research⁵.

In addition to formal mentoring, research indicates two other types of collaboration that can be beneficial to new researcher librarians: collaboration while managing the research process and collaboration while writing research manuscripts¹⁵. According to Wilkinson, these two types of peer interaction "alleviates the burden on each individual librarian while also providing an opportunity for a more experienced librarian to model successful research and writing strategies for a newer colleague"¹⁵. Beyond producing outputs, these efforts contribute to the emotional needs of new librarians through "provid[ing] reassurance that other new library faculty members are having the same experiences and anxieties"¹⁵. These supportive collaboration models help "bolster confidence and foster a sense of belonging" for new librarians and novice researchers¹⁵. As demonstrated throughout the research, as librarians progress in their research process, particularly with enhanced support networks, their confidence in their own ability to conduct research grows^{5, 10}.

Benefits to institutions and the profession

Fostering a supportive and productive culture of research in academic libraries has direct benefits to the institution and the profession. As reported in Perkins and Slowik's study of the value of librarian research as perceived by library administrators, librarians who conduct research add value to the library, university, and profession through research outputs that enhance library procedures and services, grant funding, recognition and awards, relationship building on and off campus, fulfillment of tenure requirements, and engagement with other research in the field¹⁷. Establishing a culture of research in an academic library can lead to outcomes such as increased librarian

understanding of the research process and greater appreciation of disseminating LIS research results for the benefit of the profession in addition to increased research output by institutional librarian authors⁹.

For academic libraries, the impact of librarians as research practitioners has a positive correlation to the success of core library functions. Researcher librarians improve their librarianship by having a more informed practice, which can also lead to improved services for library users¹¹. Research trends such as evidence-based librarianship has a large impact on the success of the academic library as evidence-based library research can directly lead to necessary changes to library practice¹⁸. The practice of conducting research improves librarians' problem-solving and decision-making skills, which can lead to better in-the-moment responses to unexpected library issues¹³. Training librarians in research methodologies allows librarians to teach graduate level methodology courses, mentor students, and engage with researchers as peers at their university, particularly in qualitative methods, expanding the scope and possibilities for partnership in the institution¹⁹.

As it impacts universities, librarians as practicing researchers help to form connections between departments and colleges. There is ample opportunity for collaboration between practitioners and other academic peers, in particular as library science research is highly collaborative with co-authorship reported in a majority of published articles^{5, 14}. These collaborations help improve the standing of the library and library–researcher in many ways, including by demonstrating a contribution to the mission of the institution¹³. As it impacts librarian–faculty relations, Borrego and Pinfield demonstrate that “carrying out research in partnership with faculty offers librarians the opportunity to gain valuable experience in how research operates¹³. This knowledge may help them provide better library research support services. While research demonstrates the many personal, institutional, and profession-wide benefits of nurturing librarians as researchers, the process of creating and sustaining a research culture in an academic library requires forethought, planning, and flexibility, as demonstrated through the experience at Clemson University Libraries.

Experience:

Writing Circle

One of the first attempts at introducing a research culture to Clemson Libraries was a Writing Circle. Librarians were invited to participate in the circle where each would author their own article. Other members of the circle were to provide extensive editing and assistance with writing to the degree that they would be listed as co-authors on each article. The goal was to complete the articles in eight weeks, and a schedule was created to provide a concrete timeline.

Finding librarians who were eager to participate in the Writing Circle proved to be a challenge. Some librarians were uncertain about the relatively short turnaround for writing. Others did not have projects prepared to write about. Still more were concerned about their work being of high enough quality for publication. After much targeted outreach and many one-on-one conversations, four librarians committed to

participating in the Writing Circle

The circle itself did not meet its original goals. During the writing process, one member realized their data was incomplete and not ready to be written about. Another encountered continuity problems with surveys conducted at different dates that made statistical analysis unrealistic for the skills of the group; however, a conference presentation about the data proved successful with all members of the Writing Circle listed as co-authors. A different member completed an article but was not confident enough in the manuscript to ever submit it to a journal. The final member had their article accepted and published in a refereed journal. The group as a whole completed a conference presentation about their process. The ultimate goal of four published articles by the circle was not realized, but the circle did complete two conference presentations and one published article, which was still progress by a group so new to the requirement of research.

Many of the shortcomings of the Writing Circle can be distilled down to moving too quickly into trying to produce research outcomes. More groundwork was needed to get the librarians to a place where they saw themselves as researchers. If librarians identified as researchers, they would likely have been more interested in participating in a Writing Circle. Though the writing circle was designed to help build confidence and provide group support for the writing process, many librarians were not yet in a place where they had the confidence to jump directly into publishing. Had more time been spent building up librarians' skills as researchers and writers prior to the implementation of a writing circle, the Writing Circle may have seen greater success.

Journal Club

As casual discussions with coworkers and the experiences from the writing circle revealed, the librarians needed more familiarity with the current library research being done in the field. To address this in a low-stakes way that would facilitate discussion, Journal Club was framed as a casual meeting over lunch where participants (who could be any faculty or staff member) just showed up to discuss the reading as they ate. The goal was to eliminate as many participation barriers as possible; for example, staff frequently might not get time away from their service points other than lunch but might still be interested in attending Journal Club. The Journal Club was not organized by the library administration or leadership, so it was seen as a social gathering of equals rather than just another presentation or committee meeting.

The club was described in an email invitation as functioning similarly to a book club, in which everyone reads the book ahead of time, but with scholarly journal articles related to librarianship. There was no singular "chair" of the group; instead, members took turns "hosting" by selecting the article and preparing a couple of open-ended discussion questions in advance of the biweekly meetings. Everything was organized on an openly available Google Doc whose link was distributed library wide. Hosts also frequently brought treats for the group such as donuts or pizza, which was a big draw when meetings were held at lunchtime. One person did serve as coordinator by owning the Google Doc and scheduling meeting rooms, but these administrative tasks were often also handled by other Journal Club attendees.

Soon, a core group of dedicated Journal Club attendees emerged. These attendees regularly read the articles and talked critically about the methods, data analysis, and writing of the selections. By doing so, these librarians became more confident in their abilities to judge research in their own field. Many signed up to be peer reviewers for journals that matched their research interests. Although initial Journal Club article selections focused on specific areas of librarianship, the group eventually began to shift to broader topics that transcended service areas such as work–life balance and social justice in librarianship. The group has even spawned a research group that is investigating publishing practices in LIS journals.

Overall, the Journal Club has been successful in achieving its goals of getting people in Clemson Libraries to talk more openly about the process of doing and publishing research. However, the Journal Club saw dramatically decreased attendance when it was moved to a virtual format in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to this change, the Journal Club is currently on hiatus until the majority of library personnel have returned to working in the library building again.

Research Roundtable

Following the success of Journal Club, the need emerged to bridge the gap between discussing research and supporting the research projects of attendees. Recognizing this need, the Research Roundtable was formed as a monthly informal meeting to gather and discuss research. Much like Journal Club, Research Roundtable sought to be accessible to all practitioners of research in the Libraries with open meeting invitations, snacks, and loosely structured conversations. Unlike the more frequent Journal Club meetings, Research Roundtable is a monthly meeting that gives participants time to reach their goals and report progress between meetings.

In the earliest Research Roundtable gatherings, the meetings had a central theme, such as setting a research agenda, and the rotating host would provide information on the theme before leading a discussion on the topic. Meeting norms were established early as a way to provide a safe space for attendees to speak honestly about their experiences, frustrations, and successes in their projects and were reviewed at the start of each meeting. Attendees were welcome to participate in meetings as they desired, but a core group of participants were present monthly.

While the themed meetings were successful, they did not provide the intended space for participants to dive deeper into their interests and projects. A new structure for Research Roundtable meetings was established in which every month featured a Research Captain (RC), who would partake in a series of interview questions regarding their current projects, frustrations, successes, and goals. To foster collegiality, an additional question was added in which the RC could share something that was currently bringing them joy, which could range from a television show, podcast, new snack, or other personal detail. This structure was successful in giving attendees the space to share their projects, learn from others, and provide accountability in moving forward in individual projects. While there are still special event-themed Research Roundtable events, often in collaboration with other committees or groups, the structured interview RC approach has been the most successful method to provide a

supportive and reflective space to foster research initiatives in the Libraries.

Discussion:

As experiences such as Journal Club and Research Roundtable have taken hold, the culture surrounding research in the Libraries has begun to shift. Most notably, librarians seem more comfortable talking about library research. Prior to the establishment of Journal Club and Research Roundtable, there was hesitancy to state out loud any apprehension, confusion, or discomfort surrounding research, particularly since it became one of the areas on which librarians are evaluated. By providing a safe space to explore what research looks like, share experiences, and grow as a group, barriers to having honest conversations about scholarship have been broken down. In turn, this has led to increased willingness to participate in research because librarians have become more comfortable trying new methods and projects without fear of performing a study in a vacuum.

Having the experience to critique what has already been published has illustrated that not every project has to be perfect to be complete. Taking time to dive deep into the literature published in journals that define the profession has reduced the intimidation felt by librarians seeking to publish as they realize they are capable of producing work of similar quality. Seeing colleagues experience similar struggles and setbacks in their research has made it easier to talk about concerns with one's own projects. Research and writing has become a more approachable endeavor within the library, and colleagues are more willing to share both the highs and the lows of what they are working on.

In addition to improved perception of research as a process within the Libraries, collaborative research projects have increased in number. Having a space to talk about research and share ideas has led to groups that have spun off from Journal Club or Research Roundtable to take on projects. People are able to connect with others who have similar research interests, where before it was more of a challenge to know what colleagues in other units were interested in researching. These collaborative groups have already produced several conference presentations, and manuscripts for articles are underway.

Takeaways:

While the shift in culture surrounding research at the library has come a long way, there is still plenty of room to grow. One of the most notable areas for growth is among tenured faculty, who view the training, group learning, and sharing sessions as systems in place for their pre-tenure colleagues only. A large contingent of these tenured faculty members received tenure under the old faculty guidelines, which did not require research. As such, their research agendas take a different shape than those who were hired under the new guidelines. A barrier to effectively reaching this group of librarians is their reluctance to admit they have something to learn about research. The growing pains associated with new guidelines and a large cohort of pre-tenure faculty can make it uncomfortable for tenured librarians to admit they may not have the same or more knowledge and experience their new colleagues have. In order for the

Libraries' research culture to reach its fullest potential, this discomfort needs to be assuaged, and tenured librarians will need to join the conversations surrounding library research. The efforts described in this article (forming a Writing Circle, Journal Club, and Research Roundtable) were open to all faculty regardless of tenure status, but tenured librarians rarely participated. Future efforts may target them more specifically; for example, the department chair has discussed requiring a "research agenda" as part of the regular annual activity review.

Future considerations

Given the opportunity, many changes could continue to advance the research culture at Clemson Libraries. First, the authors could get approval from their Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct a research project with human subjects; this would allow for a study to be done on the research agendas and research culture at Clemson Libraries directly. With some form of data to back up the findings, it would be easier to create a cohesive plan to continue to encourage Clemson librarians to conduct research.

Second, one change going forward could be formal recognition of these efforts within the library. To date, activities like Journal Club and Research Roundtable are grassroots efforts spearheaded by untenured faculty. If these activities were adopted more widely and supported by the Libraries' administration, not only would engaging tenured faculty be easier but also leaders of these activities could receive recognition for their overlooked labor.

Although not discussed at length here, one weakness that faculty librarians have faced in the past is the perception of how their research compares to that done by other university faculty. Along with formal recognition from library administration, promoting the research of library faculty at the same level as that of other university faculty helps demonstrate the legitimacy of librarian research and ideally situates library faculty alongside their institutional peers.

Author Contributions

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