

A PILOT STUDY EXAMINING THE PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS AS RESEARCHERS ACCORDING TO ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS

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Introduction

This pilot study explored the perception of academic librarians as researchers and academics according to academic librarians themselves. Previous research (Kotter, 1999) acknowledges the tendency of relations between librarians and non-librarian faculty to be strained, with faculty frequently unaware of the research activities of librarians. Perceptions of academic librarians do not often reflect their true capabilities (Fagan, 2003, Kotter, 1999). Despite these flawed perceptions, librarians conduct research regularly, both within and outside of the Library and Information Studies (LIS) field (Henry & Neville, 2004, Tomaszewski et al., 2013). This study explored the nature of collaborative research between librarians and faculty, the perceived function(s) of research for librarians and the ability of librarians to conduct research.

Methods

This study was informed by a previously conducted survey of academic librarians and non-librarian faculty at six Canadian universities, through which recruitment for this study occurred. The sample for this pilot study included two academic librarians who self-identified as engaging in research activities. Semi-structured interviews with questions informed by the results of the aforementioned survey were conducted with the participants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data was anonymised and participants were given the pseudonyms “Cameron” and “Jane,” respectively. Interviews were free-coded. A coding framework was not employed due to the small sample size. The codes were then grouped into themes in order to identify trends within the data. Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board.

Results

A total of seven themes were identified from the interview data. The themes identified address the nature of library research, the role of research within librarianship, and the general perception of librarians as researchers. In general, the themes speak to the reality and the perceptions of academic librarians as researchers.

Service First

The importance of service was identified as a major theme within the data. Service was seen as the primary role of librarians. Service to students and faculty was considered to be the most important aspect of academic librarianship. Service included all aspects of librarianship, from collection development to teaching, to research support for faculty. Service and research activities could be considered at odds with each other, but the participants did not think this must always be the case.

“I think that as long as you can not take away that [librarianship] is a service profession that deals with the public, [then librarians should engage in research].”
- Cameron

Research is Essential to Good Service

Quality research was considered essential to inform good service. Evidence-based research was lauded.

“I think user experience research is essential. ... We’re constantly making changes to improve services for our users without having any quality evidence for that. ... Pushing more of an evidence-based practice is essential.”
- Jane

Conducting research was also viewed as a mechanism by which librarians could improve their ability to engage with the faculty and enhance their capability of providing useful research support.

Librarians as Researchers, Not Academics

While the librarians interviewed identified as researchers, they did not identify as academics.

“We’re not faculty in the sense of Faculty. I don’t think we ever will be, just because of that [service] aspect.”
- Cameron

The more applied nature of library research was also cited as a reason for this distinction.

“[Research] is required. ... It doesn’t [have] to be published in a peer-reviewed journal. ... Quality improvement would qualify as research in our setting.”
- Jane

Librarians Bringing a Skill Set to Collaborative Research

Librarians were identified as possessing skills that could assist non-librarian faculty with their research, especially related to bibliographic support and literature reviews. When unacknowledged, this was a source of frustration.

“I would like [faculty] to definitely take advantage of what we can do. ... I don’t know if they see us as being able to help THEM.”
- Cameron

When faculty were aware of the skill set of librarians, however, it was seen as a reason to involve them in collaborative research.

Librarians as Bridges

Librarians were seen as able to serve as a bridging force between disciplines in collaborative research settings or situations where a non-librarian faculty member was working with resources outside their own area of expertise. This was perceived to be true regardless of the area of expertise of the librarians themselves.

The reason for this perception is unclear, but may relate to the ability required of all librarians to work with resources in a wide variety of disciplines. This bridging was viewed as allowing for increased interdisciplinary research, which was identified as becoming more necessary.

Conducting Research Raises the Faculty’s Opinion of Librarians

Though never presented as a primary reason for conducting research, participants believed non-librarian faculty thought better of them when faculty were aware librarians conducted research. Such awareness does not always exist.

“I’d say [faculty] don’t know we do research.”
- Cameron

When awareness does exist, the situation beneficial.

“I ... offer insight based on my own [research] experiences, which I think raises [faculty] esteem of my position.”
- Jane

Lack of Research Support at a System Level

Both participants expressed frustration with the fact that they were contractually obligated to conduct research, yet were offered little in the way of support in terms of time or funding to do so. This was viewed as a barrier that prevented librarians from engaging in regular research and hindered the quality of the research that was conducted in the library setting.

This concern related not only to the participants’ individual research interests, but also to the service-improving research that both participants deemed necessary to librarianship.

Conclusions

Librarians’ perceptions of themselves as researchers are closely tied to the service aspect of librarianship. Research is seen as critical to library duties due to its direct or indirect influence on improving service. Librarians engage in regular research and would like to expand the research role, particularly in order to improve services and collaborative practice. Yet library research suffers from a lack of support, and a general lack of acknowledgement, despite the benefits to both librarians and non-librarian faculty when their research activities are known of. These barriers to research affect the quantity and quality of library and collaborative research, as well as the perceptions of librarians by non-librarian faculty.

References

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