Is it time to re-envision the role of academic librarians in faculty research?

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Why do we need to talk about academic librarians’ research roles?

Recent library literature is full of concern about how academic libraries can continue to be central to the research and scholarship missions of universities and colleges. In response, academic libraries are enhancing their roles in scholarly communication by developing expertise and services in the preservation of research data, measurement of research impact, and promotion of institutional repositories, among other initiatives. However, little has been written about the role that academic librarians could play in supporting individual faculty members’ research, and librarians often find it difficult to articulate the support they provide in this area.

Our research project examined possible roles for individual librarians and was driven by two questions:

- How do librarians perceive their role in relation to faculty members’ research and how do they put this into practice?
- How do faculty members perceive the role of librarians in regard to their own research, and how would they respond if offered the opportunity to have a librarian assist in their research?

Providing research support: A contentious issue for librarians

Librarian colleagues who reported that they had been involved in providing significant support for a faculty member’s research were interviewed about the nature of this support. The involvement they mentioned can be grouped into the following categories:

- providing informal alerting services
- purchasing requested resources/collections
- co-researching about scholarly publishing in a specific area of knowledge
- co-researching the scholarship of teaching (based on collaborative experience)
- answering in-depth reference questions
- creating visual representations of data
- consultations about searching by faculty or their graduate research assistants
- co-researching a systematic review (in health sciences)

Several people also mentioned that they occasionally did, or were asked to do, selective literature searching for faculty members. Most were wary of taking on this responsibility because they felt they were being asked to make inappropriate decisions about the relevance of search results, and because “librarians are not research assistants!”

Offering support to faculty members

An open-ended offer of research support was made to members of the Faculty of Education, resulting in support being provided to seven projects. Although

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the research topics were quite diverse, it is noteworthy that all requests were for some form of assistance with literature searching, which seems to indicate that faculty members perceive this as librarians’ primary area of expertise. The literature that they desired ranged from academic articles to digital primary sources to current news reports. In some cases they needed exhaustive, ongoing searches for all relevant literature; in others, they needed someone to identify the most relevant resources and to summarize why they were important or representative. The time commitment per project also varied, ranging from 12 hours over a two-week period to about 42 hours spread over a number of months.

Why faculty members accepted the offer

When subsequently interviewed by a colleague about what prompted them to accept the offer of research assistance, faculty members highlighted both personal and professional characteristics of the librarian, whom they know because she manages the branch library that serves the faculty. They talked about her reputation, her helpful nature, and her focus on detail, as well as her literature searching expertise and her knowledge of the subject and of databases. It was clear that they attributed certain skills and knowledge to librarians as a whole.

Librarians versus graduate research assistants

All but one of the faculty members said that they wouldn’t have asked a graduate research assistant (GRA) to do the literature searching because most GRAs don’t have the skills to perform comprehensive searching without a lot of oversight and mentoring. The implication was that the faculty members have neither the time nor the expertise to provide this. One faculty member had previously had a GRA do the necessary searching, but the librarian found substantially more relevant results, which seems to substantiate faculty members’ wariness about using GRAs.

Librarians as colleagues

Faculty members also valued that the librarian acted like a colleague — asking questions that pushed their thinking, helping them brainstorm and bringing a different perspective. One person commented that the librarian’s involvement “brought us into a sphere where we may not have gone.” Where selectivity, rather than comprehensiveness, was called for, faculty members seemed surprisingly comfortable leaving the selection and interpretation of what was important up to the librarian. They trusted the librarian’s professional abilities, based on her reputation, her inferred skills and the questions she asked at the beginning of their projects. The results of having a librarian involved exceeded their expectations; several faculty members commented that the materials the librarian found were much better than they would have been able to find on their own.

A new role for academic librarians?

Results of this study suggest that many faculty members are not receiving the research support that they want or need. GRAs are not necessarily capable of providing the necessary help, especially unsupervised, and librarians are hesitant to offer support that might see them pegged as “research assistants.”

One direction that academic libraries could go would be toward providing much better training for GRAs in literature searching. But will GRAs be able to develop strong enough search strategies and research skills in a limited number of training sessions to satisfactorily meet the research needs of their faculty member?

Another route is that librarians could re-evaluate their concern about being labeled as research assistants, and instead actively offer to collaborate in research. Health science librarians are already leading the way, in terms of their involvement with systematic reviews, which usually result in co-authorship opportunities. Librarians in other disciplines might think about offering different levels of support depending on the level of credit that faculty members are prepared to offer. In contemporary research universities, with their great emphasis on research productivity, this would be a significant contribution to universities’ strategic plans, and help to ensure that librarians are seen as essential to the research endeavor. LC