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A New Partner in the Process: The Role of a Librarian on a Faculty Research Team

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Abstract

Academic librarians have tremendous opportunity to demonstrate their worth to the institutions they serve. One successful approach is for faculty and librarians to collaborate on a research project; however the frequency of such partnerships has not been readily documented in academic library literature. This paper shows how the addition of an academic librarian to a faculty research team led to a better understanding of how faculty projects operate, and how the process can lead the way for librarians to be seen as valuable research partners in the academic landscape.

Keywords: collaboration, partnerships, academic librarians, librarians as research partners, faculty research teams

Introduction

Academic libraries strive to be relevant professional partners and demonstrate legitimate value within their institutions. Faculty/librarian collaboration on research projects can garner success, since it allows librarians to be viewed as partners in research; however the variety and frequent nature of such partnerships have not always been fully chronicled in academic library literature.

In contrast, medical library literature has consistently documented the involvement of clinical librarians in the research process, and how they are viewed as stakeholders who assist not only with the dissemination of information, but as contributors of knowledge creation due to the specialized skills they bring to the project. At present, systematic reviews tend to be the leading form of research publication in the health sciences. Systematic reviews are studies of studies that include a rigorous methodology in order to identify studies in relation to a specific research question;¹ they import a demand for resources and services, which has called for greater collaboration between academic faculty members and librarians. This form of research

has begun to appear more frequently in academic libraries and in disciplines such as business and the social sciences.

The purpose of this paper is to show how one academic librarian's integration into a systematic review team led to a better understanding of how faculty research projects operate. The librarian benefitted by gaining valuable knowledge and experience in working collaboratively on a time sensitive project, as well as understanding the evolving research trends within a given university.

Project Background

In late 2014, the Peabody College Associate Dean of Professional Education, also a Human and Organizational Development (HOD) professor, asked me, as the librarian for that department to meet with her and an HOD Senior Research Associate to develop search strategies for a literature review. At the initial meeting, I learned that the two faculty members were conducting the review as participants of the Nutrition and Behavioral Health working group, part of the President's Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition Science Board. The working group, comprised of scholars from across the country,



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wanted to conduct a literature review in order to draft an initial position paper for the lay public that would detail the intersections between mental health and nutrition. Because of Vanderbilt University's research focus, a second team was formed to deliver a systematic literature review to supplement the lay paper for an academic audience. This newly formed internal research team, consisting of three working group/HOD faculty members, as well as an HOD Ph.D. student, invited me to join them to assist with the development of the introductory research question for a systematic literature review. I agreed willingly and began the process of researching my upcoming new role.

Role of the Librarian

In the past, academic librarians at Vanderbilt have had little involvement in the systematic review process; however they can be valuable contributors because of their specialized skills and knowledge about searching and proper utilization of databases. It was this approach that I took as I began to develop components for my part of the review. My first task was to develop a research protocol for the initial topic and to formulate search strategies based on that concept and supplemental feedback provided from other team members. I ran test searches and presented the results to the team to ensure that the search strategies had retrieved the appropriate literature. I advised the team on the identification of databases for the project based upon scope, date, and subject coverage. The final list of databases consulted included Cochrane Collaboration, ERIC, PsycINFO, and PubMed because their content linked the two focus areas in question.

After the execution of database searches, the team decided to export 243 citations into a Zotero (www.zotero.org) library for easy access to content and so duplicates could be removed. I had recommended using Zotero for the project

due to it being open-source software and capable of including policy papers and government documents, which are not always available on other platforms. I set up the Zotero library and taught team members how to use it effectively. Once the Zotero library was created and the duplicates removed, the next task was to retrieve the full text content of the 157 citations that had been identified as potentially eligible sources. I offered to take the lead on this part of the project since it would require consulting and utilizing Vanderbilt Library's extensive journal collection.

At this point, the team decided to expand beyond the initial research team of three faculty members, the librarian, and the Ph.D. student, and enlist the help of student assistants with other project tasks. The team invited students from HOD's graduate programs to join the team. HOD uses Kolb's theory of experiential learning within its curriculum so these students would be familiar with best practices on how to learn tasks and solve problems. I felt that the retrieval of eligible full-text articles would make a great student project so the team hired a library student assistant who also happened to be an incoming HOD graduate student.

Once the student had met the other team members, agreed to attend the weekly team meetings, and give ten hours of service per week to the project, I began to train the student assistant to retrieve the full text of journal articles using Vanderbilt Library's journal collection and to import articles into Zotero. As the project continued, other HOD students joined the internal team and I continued to advise and train the team on the proper utilization of library resources and to offer guidance on current perspectives of scholarship.

One of the most important documents that is developed during a systematic review is the codebook, which contains information about the data being collected; however due to other library



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commitments and projects, I decided not to participate in the development of the codebook or in the writing phase of the project, though I did assist in the initial review of full-text articles for eligibility. This part of the project provided me with a distinct learning curve since I had never been trained in research methods or in the interpretation of research results. The faculty members on the team provided me with training on how to examine an article using protocol guidelines before I was given my article assignments. Another important aspect that I facilitated during this phase of the project was educating the team on the importance of copyright and preserving scholarly work and research for institutional purposes. I advised the team about the significance of copyright and encouraged them to place the codebook into Vanderbilt's digital repository, DiscoverArchive (discoverarchive.vanderbilt.edu). Upon completion of the opening article review, my fundamental role with the research team was completed; however I continued to attend the weekly team meetings. Jessie McGowan and Margaret Sampson, in their article about systematic reviews, state "The librarian is a key player on the team and needs to be an integral player at all meetings."² The expertise of the librarian can be utilized in other stages of the review such as retrieving items that have been difficult to locate or if the scope of the project changes and more sources will need to be identified.³

Reciprocal Benefits

The integration of an academic librarian into a faculty research team contains both individual and institutional benefits. The librarian gains valuable experience and knowledge about how a faculty research project operates, which could foster future collaborations. Librarians involved with systematic reviews can take satisfaction in knowing that their expertise has contributed to the development of a faculty driven product while learning about current university research

trends and research methodologies. Their faculty, in turn, will develop an appreciation for the searching and information management services that librarians provide.⁴

Genevieve C. Gore and Julie Jones state that any form of librarian involvement in a systematic review leads to an increase in the visibility of librarians' skills as expert searchers and research collaborators. Librarians tend to be the obvious choice when it comes to developing the search strategy and are seen as the natural candidates to write the method section of the paper since they are now accountable for the research that has been documented.⁵ These contributions provide librarians with evidence they can use to show the academic community that they should be actively engaged in knowledge creation and dissemination.

As academic libraries look toward the future, it is imperative that they show their value to universities beyond the traditional core library services of the past, such as building print collections or offering point of need reference services. Librarians who integrate themselves into a faculty research team extol collaboration in action. Even if a librarian is not directly involved with a research team, faculty may seek a librarian's assistance and expertise with developing search strategies, selecting appropriate sources, and assisting with the use of data collections in the project.

Conclusion

For the project contributions that I made to the Vanderbilt review team, I was listed as a co-author of the final paper as well as being made a member of the Nutrition and Behavioral Health working group (part of the President's Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition Science Board). These accolades have not gone unnoticed by other Vanderbilt faculty and administrators who commented that it seemed logical to have a librarian on a faculty research project since it



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would make the project research phase more efficient.

As mentioned in the 2013 ARL report *New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries*, the role of the librarian is evolving just as emerging research methods are transforming higher education. The report urges librarians to embrace models of engagement in order to position the mission of the library within the context of the institution, stating “An engaged librarian seeks to enhance scholar

productivity, to empower learners, and to participate in the entire lifecycle of the research, teaching, and learning process.”⁶ This type of targeted support has gained momentum and is being framed as research support services. It represents a new evolution of academic librarianship that has shifted and paved the way for librarians to become integrated partners in the academic landscape.

Endnotes

¹ Genevieve C. Gore and Julie Jones. “Systematic Reviews and Librarians: A Primer for Managers.” *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 10 (2015): 5. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v10i1.3343>

² Jessie McGowan and Margaret Sampson. “Systematic Reviews Need Systematic Searchers.” *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 93 (2005): 78

³ Ibid.

⁴ Martha R. Harris. “The Librarians’ Roles in the Systematic Review Process: A Case Study.” *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 93 (2005): 87

⁵ Genevieve C. Gore and Julie Jones. “Systematic Reviews and Librarians: A Primer for Managers.” *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 10 (2015): 6. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v10i1.3343>

⁶ Janice M. Jaguszweski and Karen Williams. “New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries.” Association of Research Libraries report (2013): 4. Accessed May 19, 2016. <http://www.arl.org/storage/documents/publications/nrnt-liaison-roles-revised.pdf>

