

Ashley L. Downs and Kelee Pacion

# Employing field research to shape the library's direction

## The changing needs of the liaison

In the last several years, technologies have become ubiquitous in most academic disciplines. Collaborations between the engineers and computer scientists that create these technologies and the humanists, social scientists, scientists, and other practitioners that use and add meaning to them have grown.

Despite growing collaboration, the need for an information scientist at the intersection of construction and practice is very clear. Patrons routinely visit the library for assistance navigating databases, evaluating online resources, using citation management software, and creating multimedia projects. And as these technologies evolve at a clipping rate, the mode and frequency in which librarians learn and teach the skills sought by patrons is changing.

Whereas we were once able to derive skills from static workshops or webinars to provide patron assistance in standard unilateral formats, many of us now partner with peers across campus units, even external to our institutions, to remain adept with the array of tools supportive of scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

As librarians become increasingly interdependent on the technical knowledge and skills of one another, we are capable of playing more customizable roles for our patrons. Many of us transfer the style used when learning from peers into the classroom environment, thereby facilitating active

learning with new technologies among students.<sup>2</sup> Formal channels should be routinely strengthened to encourage these deep sharing networks among colleagues.

### Encouraging field research

Field research is a common component of the undergraduate and graduate experience in the sciences. The use of exploratory, hands-on study is driven by understanding the process of experiential learning as a means of developing new skills and insights. Time spent in the field has long been incorporated into many professional training programs, most notably in medical professions where applied skills are essential to an effective career.<sup>3</sup> Increasingly in many library schools as well, internships and applied projects are incorporated into curricula for students as a core component to a well-rounded education.<sup>4</sup> Arguably, obtaining applied experience in a library—especially one that values new technologies and takes a nuanced approach to instruction strategies—is a fundamental component of obtaining a job in a competitive market.

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Interestingly, despite recognizing the importance of field research for students preparing to enter the field, a review of the library literature yields little mention of the importance of experiential observations for librarians once fully within the profession.<sup>5</sup> Further, with research competency and proficiency often prized skills in the academic promotion process for librarians, the dearth of literature on exploratory interinstitutional field research is surprising.

Staff members at the Cornell University Albert R. Mann Library have long benefitted from a staff development fund that facilitates the very kind of internetwork knowledge seeking and sharing that is crucial for the modern librarian. Endowed by a former Cornell professor for nearly 30 years, the fund has enabled many Mann staff to explore and develop desired skills and projects from a variety of functional areas that also benefit our colleagues and patrons. Unlike professional development funds that reserve monies for conference travel, this fund encourages the form of field research that yields highly specific, structured, and topical knowledge about the issues that we're currently grappling with in our library.

In addition to asking what the travel award would be used for, the application asks why we aim to explore the issue, and how we intend to use the knowledge garnered for the maximum benefit of our patrons. By asking such questions, the grant primes us to seek the very members of the profession that are grappling with the same issues. The contact is therefore all the more meaningful by encouraging idea sharing in both formal and informal settings and encouraging the development of networks that extend beyond individual institutional boundaries.

Throughout the three decades in which the fund has been active, project proposals have ranged from the exploration of library learning spaces to the investigation of linked data web applications, with each representing the pressure points in the library environment at the time of submission. With each academic library across the country inevitably boasting

different strengths, our library has benefitted from sending librarians to visit the leaders who are addressing the particular pressure points commonly experienced at our own institution.

For example, at times when it was infeasible to conduct our own institutional research to identify the correct solution to a problem, the grant has encouraged a scholarly network in which initial decisions are built upon by others, then built upon again for maximum benefit, fortuitously mirroring the evolving nature of scholarship that librarians are so eager to support.

In one recent example, a previous award recipient traveled to Penn State to visit the Media Commons, a joint library and IT initiative that works to enhance teaching and learning through multimedia technology, instruction, and one-on-one support for faculty and students. After this trip, our colleague returned to our library with a clearer understanding of the work involved in the development of a collaborative, university-wide, pedagogically sound multimedia support service, as well as the specifications for building a simplified video creation studio. The development of multimedia services have led to collaborations with faculty and teaching staff to provide customized workshops related to video production.

In a second example, two librarians from our institution visited a variety of academic libraries that had recently undergone space renovations. After engaging in formal and informal discussions with other librarians regarding usage and space design, our colleagues returned with strong assessment strategies as well as best practices to consider when embarking on an internal space redesign, all of which has effectively increased library usage on our campus.

## **Our project**

As highly specific instruction requests at Mann have increased in the last several years, the need to structure an effective yet sustainable information literacy program that is grounded in the latest technologies and software has

become clear. In looking at the existing program at Mann Library, a team formed to consider sustainability and scalability of our program. In addition, the buzz surrounding ACRL's new threshold concepts in early 2014, coupled with internal staff changes at Mann that same year, created an environment conducive of revisiting liaison instruction. With this backdrop, we proposed, and were granted, funds to visit three libraries that were recognized in the ACRL Information Literacy Best Practices report.<sup>6</sup> We sought to learn from the successes of these programs, hear about the latest technologies used by their instructors, and return home with tangible ideas for implementation.

### **Moving into the field**

The University of Rhode Island Library, Neilson Library at Smith College, and Lied Library at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas were recognized by the ACRL Information Literacy Best Practices report for successfully articulating the library's role within a curriculum, collaborating across institutional departments, and using modern pedagogical principles within instruction sessions. Visiting each provided a more intimate interaction than often possible at national conferences and enabled in-depth conversations with members of the instruction and research services units. With a full day spent at each institution, it was possible to participate in classes, participate in "show and tell" with new technologies and software, enjoy lunch with colleagues, and discuss the common challenges of building a highly relevant instruction program during a time of rapid technological change. Visiting campuses that prize quality instruction was invaluable, particularly coming from a research intensive university, where our information literacy instruction efforts remain in infancy. Even after leaving each campus, developed connections with colleagues led to sustained pathways for communication.

### **Contributing to our library**

The research made possible by the award has resulted in three immediate actions at

our library. First, we are devoting more effort to create sustained, meaningful interactions with students that persist beyond a single session. As we toured each campus and reflected on our experiences at home, it was clear that students are more likely to benefit from information literacy instruction if content and assessment varies across time. To foster such meaningful exchanges, we are looking to develop or strengthen relationships with instructors in credit-bearing courses and strategically plan the time(s) at which we meet with students.

Second, we have integrated ourselves more deeply with our university's Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) workshops to both take advantage of new pedagogical strategies but also position ourselves collaboratively with faculty in the early stages of course design. We saw the success of similar programs at several of the campuses that we visited and have received enthusiasm from the center's staff. Recently, a reoccurring once-per-semester instruction event for faculty opened to librarians and the CTE planning team devoted the lunch hour to pairing faculty members with liaison librarians to stimulate initial instruction planning discussions.

Finally, we intend to "flip" the creation of teaching tools traditionally used by librarians (like LibGuides) by asking students to develop them to aid their personal learning. In the process, we hope to learn more about how students use software for scholarship while cultivating highly relevant tools that will later benefit peers in subsequent semesters.

### **Review of other professional development programs**

Many academic libraries encourage professional development with various means. In other disciplines, field research is considered an essential form of professional development when quality information is gathered, observations are considered, and conclusions based on the experience are synthesized and shared for the benefit of others in the field.

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work as librarians and their advocacy as community members. And, though it feels a little self-satisfying to say it, the current scholars unanimously remarked on the value of being mentored by three IRDW alumni. As one 2015 scholar put it,

They understand where we are and what might be on our minds. I think I can safely speak on behalf of my entire IRDW cohort and say that we're HUGE fans of [the 2012-14 scholars] and are very grateful for their involvement in our site visit. I truly believe they were key to the success of our overall experience.

When I visited Purdue, there were no ARL diversity program alumni at the institution. There were, however, allies and mentors who created a safe space in which I could ask questions without fear of judgment and learn about the reality of working in research libraries. And hearing from one of MSU's visitors that the "open, welcoming, and relaxed

atmosphere made [them] feel comfortable to ask questions and participate," I'm both relieved and confident that the MSU libraries lived up to the impressive standards set by Purdue over the last decade.

## Conclusion

Site visits remain a unique and important part of the IRDW program, and their success is predicated on the hosting institutions' significant investment of time, energy, and resources. As we reflect upon the contribution and impact of this component of the IRDW, we would like to thank the host institutions over the last decade who have made these site visits financially possible. We thank key administrators at the libraries of Harvard, MIT, Purdue, and Michigan State for their support of the program, as well as ARL and IMLS. We would also like to thank the decade of IRDW Scholars who enriched the institutions they visited for years to come, and who continue to lead our libraries to success as key administrators themselves. *~*

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In the library field, blogs, webinars, MOOCS, conferences, and even mentor-mentee partnerships seem readily supported by library administrations. Unfortunately, upon reviewing these programs, rarely did we see mention of the type of field research that we have benefitted from. Field research occurs outside the library, is often cross-disciplinary, and uses mixed methods (such as interviews, observations, participation, and discussion) to gather the most information possible. We hope that this article serves to demonstrate the merits of a professional development program that encourages a sharing community among institutions. While strengthening the greater librarian community, it also promises to deliver a highly relevant return on investment for your local library.

## Notes

1. Kari Hahn, "Introduction: Position-

ing Liaison Librarians for the 21st Century," *Research Library Issues: A Bimonthly Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC* 265: 1, 2009.

2. Anne Kenney, "From Engaging Liaison Librarians to Engaging Communities," *College & Research Libraries* 76, no. 3 (2015): 386-91, doi:10.5860/crl.76.3.387.

3. Elizabeth Rickert, Page L. McDonald, Marissa Birkmeier, Bryan Walker, Linda Cotton, Laurie B. Lyons, Howard O. Straker, and Margaret M. Plack, "Using Technology to Promote Active and Social Learning Experiences in Health Professions Education," *Online Learning* 18, no. 4 (2014): 23.

4. Selina A. Berg, Kristin Hoffman, and Diane Dawson, "Perspectives on Integrating Research into LIS Field Experiences in Academic Libraries," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 35 (2009): 591.

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variety of services, and knowledge of most library procedures can be instrumental in providing positive customer service at such service points. A well-executed cross-training program creates new teams among old colleagues working toward a common goal and opens new lines of communication between departments, sparking discussion of shared problems and potential resolutions.

## Notes

1. Shirley Duglin Kennedy, "Give the people what they want, but," *Information Today*, (2015): 8.

2. Stephanie L. Maata, "Renaissance librarians: traditional roles are increasingly

incorporated into broadly defined responsibilities that call for flexible skill sets," *Library Journal* 139, no. 17 (2014): 26-34.

3. Holly Flynn, "Creating Manuals for Job Duties," in *Library Management Tips That Work*, ed. Carol Smallwood (Chicago: American Library Association, 2011).

4. Sarah C. Michalak, "This Changes Everything: Transforming the Academic Library," *Journal of Library Administration* 52:5 (2012): 411-423.

5. Eleanor Gossen and Frances Reynolds, "Forging new communication links in an academic library: A.," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 16, no. 1 (1990): 18.

6. Michalak, 415. *z*

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("Employing field research...", continues from page 333)

5. Zara Wilkinson and Julie Skill, "The use of librarians as occupational study populations in social science research," *Library Review* 63 (2014): 2-14. Doi: 10.1108/LR-07-2013-0092.

6. ACRL Instruction Section ILBP Committee, "Information Literacy Best Practices: Exemplary Programs," [www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/sections/is/iswebsite/projpubs/bestpractices-exemplary](http://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/sections/is/iswebsite/projpubs/bestpractices-exemplary). *z*

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("Be Here," continues from page 340)

The goal was to truly create something that is useful for all library employees, and it impacts each team differently. Foundationally UVU library believes that every employee always represents the library, whether they regularly see patrons or not. That is why this process included many stakeholders in order to create something useful for all.

For example, the technical services librarian suggested the principle "Remember the Goal"—something his team was already using. For a group like Technical Services, which is often separated from the public, "Remember the Goal" reminds them that work, seen and unseen, impacts the experiences and opportunities of faculty and students. Each of the principles is adaptable and can be used differently, depending on the needs of a particular department or team.

## Conclusion

"Be Here" is UVU library's principle-based customer service solution that asks employees to be present, flexible, and innovative. It is UVU library's best attempt to put patrons first by focusing on what the library can do, rather than what it cannot.

## Notes

1. Ronald Block and Julie P. McNeil, "Get to yes: Branding public library customer service," *Public Libraries Online: A Publication of the Public Library Association*, retrieved from <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2015/02/get-to-yes-branding-public-library-customer-service/>.

2. To see the training videos please visit <https://sites.google.com/site/behereuvulibrary/home>. *z*