The Librarian Parlor:
Demystifying the Research Process through Community

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Introduction

Academic librarians, their institutions, and the field have much to gain from librarian-conducted research on the theory and practice of Library and Information Sciences (LIS).[†] In combining their day-to-day work with their research agenda, librarians are able to inform services and decision making. Librarian-led and published research also expands the literature, furthers LIS knowledge, fosters relationships with faculty and peers, creates a reflexive practice to better serve users, and contributes to career advancement.[1] Additionally, academic libraries that support and celebrate the scholarship of their librarians stand to gain national recognition.

However, academic librarians have inconsistent research responsibilities and support depending on their institution and position. The profession has historically used institution-specific initiatives to support tenure-track librarians. A survey of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Library Directors found that there are usually two types of support in these libraries: formal structures established by library administrators and informal librarian-led communities. Formal structures include things such as "protected time (e.g., sabbaticals, workload adjustments), financial support for professional development, research or research-related travel, and mentoring programs" while informal efforts are community oriented and include "research support groups, writing support groups, and journal clubs."[2] While these initiatives are helpful, they are noticeably limited, as they do not allow individuals outside particular institutions to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to conduct research.

Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) programs are inconsistent in their offerings for learning about research, and after graduation, the majority of resources are allocated to librarians at major research universities in tenure-track roles. Many LIS researchers not in those positions would like to get started but do not know where to begin. Current research acknowledges that despite institutional efforts, existing systems for training LIS researchers are insufficient.

The academic librarian community has developed some more wide-reaching initiatives to help librarians gain insight into the research process. For example, The Institute for Research Design in Librarianship (IRDL) is a great introduction for new researchers, but only instructs a small group of people each year and is dependent on grant funding. Some professional associations offer lists of resources; however, many of them are out of date.[3] In a book authored by the IRDL founders, *Enhancing Library & Information Research Skills*, they state that in

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† The Librarian Parlor is completely open to everyone, especially including those earning an MLIS or working in a library without an MLIS. However, for the purposes of scope we focused on academic librarians with an MLIS in this paper. We use librarians, library workers, and LIS researchers to collectively mean folks interested in, tasked with, or evaluated by library research.

order to create a more significant change in our profession, support needs to occur locally within institutions.[4] The authors of this paper agree, but also believe that the profession must create more open resources in order to make publishing more accessible for all voices.

The Librarian Parlor (LibParlor), created by the authors of this paper, is one option for more widely available information on conducting LIS research. Launched in August 2017, LibParlor grew from conversations between new academic librarians who, at the time, were not receiving support to conduct research. LibParlor is an online space (https://libparlor.com and @LibParlor on Twitter) for conversing, sharing expertise, and asking questions about the process of pursuing, developing, and publishing library research.

The lack of well-developed resources to learn about conducting research, insufficient communities of practice, and unequal access to financial resources have significant implications for who is heard and represented in LIS literature. Not only do these obstacles prevent early career librarians, people of color, librarians who experience disabilities, and more from getting started as researchers, they also have long-lasting implications for how the field moves forward and fits within academia. By outlining the issues and their implications, the authors of this paper hope to encourage a multimodal effort including both open and institutional options to help LIS researchers who are inspired to contribute to the field but may not know how to begin. They hope that the resources and reflections available through The Librarian Parlor can help liberate information that is traditionally privileged.

Knowledge

While the MLIS is a terminal, professional degree, and many academic librarians conduct research, a research methods class is not always a requirement for graduation. Graduate students in other masters and PhD programs often take multiple classes that cover research design, ethics, and methodologies before they receive their degree.[5] These courses give students the framework and skills needed to contribute to the disciplinary conversation as a graduate student or new professional. However, the MLIS lacks in-depth exploration or application of research methods for the academic library. This might be particularly true for students completing the degree online who face additional barriers to conducting a research project. Additionally, students may not know the importance of taking this class in relation to their future career. LIS graduate students who do not receive that education could enter a tenure-track position without the knowledge or skills necessary to address the research responsibilities of their position. While some MLIS students do receive instruction on research methods and design, it is unclear what the standards for those courses look like. A recent survey of early career or newly tenured academic librarians stated that 65% of respondents had taken a methods workshop or course, but the authors of that survey did not determine length of course or rigor of the instruction. Ackerman et al. determined that institutions need to further their support to early career professionals around research design and methods, signaling there is much room to grow in educating new professionals.[6]

The inability to access information about the research process can lead to a lack of confidence. As noted by Berg, Jacobs, and Cornwall, a common barrier to conducting research for librarians is the feeling that they do not have the necessary research or writing skills.[7] If the hardest part of this process is getting started, it is no surprise that new librarians struggling to feel competent might put research at the bottom of their priority list. Furthermore, librarians who are anxious about conducting research might gravitate towards a method they are comfortable with, such as case studies or surveys. In a recent study on early career and recently tenured librarians, 76% reported using the survey method for their research.[8] The authors of that study propose that, "Heavy reliance on surveys may be a reflection of librarians' lack of training in or confidence with other research methods and/or a product of time and funding constraints."[9] This means that the profession may miss out on

more creative or robust research by not training librarians in research methods. There is not a wide existence of affordable "how-to" literature available for new professionals to learn how to conduct research or publish, and this can lead to a variety of issues.

The gap in library research education directly leads to new information and insights not being published. This missing research affects librarians attempting to do work informed by scholarship. Sometimes called evidence-based librarianship (EBL), this approach integrates research-derived evidence into practice.[10] For practitioners aiming to make decisions and implement solutions based on evidence, more work must be done to enhance the quality and proliferation of our literature. Whether a librarian takes a research methods class during their MLIS or not, it is common that they will have to train or retrain themselves on how to successfully conduct a research project. This includes a time commitment that few professionals can make; as a result, some of the research that is done in LIS is poorly designed or is completed but not reported in the published literature.[11] Academic librarianship should support librarians conducting research and making evidence-based decisions as a necessary practice. This should start in MLIS courses and continue through professional organizations, across institutions, and by library administration in order to provide the necessary support for library researchers to succeed.

Librarians must add their research to the growing body of scholarship to enhance the professional literature, but without an established system of research training and an equitable path toward publishing, not all librarians can add to this scholarly conversation. Along with accessing necessary information in order to gain knowledge, those learning to do LIS research struggling with confidence can benefit from a community of practice.

Community

Librarians tend to create space for writing groups, journal clubs, and mentoring programs in order to encourage a community of practice around developing, writing, and disseminating research. Journal clubs are created primarily to stay up-to-date on new research, discuss literature, and inform local library practices.[12] Meanwhile, writing groups serve to focus on the research of the individuals at the library and hold members accountable to scholarly productivity. A study of journal clubs found that in addition to their primary purposes, they also create a peer group and help members from across various departments understand different perspectives.[13] These groups offer feedback on writing, inform novice researchers of best practices, provide emotional support, and more.[14]

While journal clubs and writing groups offer benefits, they also have limitations. A study at Penn State reported that "librarians found their coworkers to be too kind when critiquing their writing; they were too supportive and failed to give the critical feedback needed."[15] In a similar study, Sapon-White et al. found that "the faculty writing group was a poor venue for criticism and had low participation and attendance."[16] These clubs also struggle with sustainability, as it is difficult to find people to volunteer. Journal and writing clubs may help library workers stay current in the field and become more familiar with publication norms, but may not help them gain the in-depth knowledge necessary to learn how to do research. Mentors also influence the productivity and capabilities of new researchers by helping them to navigate the complex publishing environment through sharing norms, expectations, and opportunities. In a survey of ARL directors, 93.1% said they believed that mentors had a positive impact on how many scholarly or research-oriented works librarians publish.[17] While there was an American Library Association (ALA) Library Research Round Table (LRRT) mentoring group, it appears to have been inactive since 2015 as indicated by the website.[18]

Professional organizations tend to create the majority of resources for continued education after graduation through hosting conferences and webinars. However, the groups that exist to offer research guidance can only do so

much and tend to offer lists of resources and information. Learning to do research is challenging and complex and requires robust community support. The teaching and learning necessary cannot be achieved through a webpage of resources alone. This method puts most of the responsibility on the user and is not a complete learning experience. The resources are presented out of context, and it is hard to understand how it might fit into the learning process.

The prevalent lack of research support in librarianship affects the way our library communities are represented and heard. The disparity in available resources might cause librarians to not share research at all or stop sharing their research after presenting. This prevents robust and diverse LIS scholarship. If a librarian does not work in an institution with a robust research community or a mentor to guide them, they must figure an alternative way to train themselves. They may even consider applying to another institution that offers financial resources and flexibility.

Mentoring programs require substantial labor on the part of librarians. As Smigielski, Laning, and Daniels point out, "They are contingent upon a contribution by those who have already completed the tenure process. While they may be institutionally supported, they cannot be set in motion and then left alone, as financial support for research and sabbaticals may be; they require constant activity on the part of librarians whose schedules may already be full".[19] Formalized mentor programs offer structure through expectations and timelines for mentors and mentees, but even if library workers have a formal mentor at their institution, there are still limitations. They might be paired with colleagues who have not published recently or are not interested in their area of research. To address this, early career librarians might seek out informal mentors because it offers them the power of selection, but the lack of formalized processes can create issues in a gendered profession where women might be more hesitant to ask for help.[20] Additionally, due to the overwhelming whiteness of librarianship, librarians of color might not be able to find mentors that can identify with the ways they experience librarianship in formal or informal mentor programs.

Academic librarians conducting research should have access to support through various communities and resources in order to fit different needs. This requires experienced researchers to step up, share stories, and support those who need it but may not know how to ask for it.

Financial

There are many financial barriers to participating in LIS research and publishing. There is the cost of attending conferences to get inspiration or share findings as well as the institutional cost of protected employee time. Allowing library workers to research during their regular work hours or to take a sabbatical requires institutional commitment and resources. Institutions should be invested in eliminating financial barriers and providing support for research, considering that an ARL study found that, "Institutional support is the most important indicator of productivity."[21]

Ability to access institutional financial support varies based on the person. Different positions in the library receive varying levels of financial support. For example, tenure-track librarians likely receive more financial support than their non-tenure track colleagues. Even with a professional development budget, travel policies often require the individual to pay for conference registration, airfare, and hotel months in advance and wait to be reimbursed. This is a barrier to researchers that do not have access to disposable income, a high limit credit card, or are not able to travel without additional accommodations. For example, attending conferences has additional costs for library workers with children, as free childcare is infrequently provided. This system is not set up to support people without a disposable income, especially those who are relatively new to the profession. Librarians from low-income backgrounds, with caretaking responsibilities, substantial student loan debt, and disabilities are all affected by this.

Requiring professional dues and conference fees acts as another financial barrier to education. For example, LRRT has a Forum on Theory, Method, and Practice in Library Research at the ALA Annual Conference in 2019.[22] This serves as a beneficial learning opportunity for those interested. However, conference registration rates range from $320 (early bird, member) to $460 (onsite, nonmember),[23] and there may be many researchers who cannot pay that. Local conferences are an available alternative and tend to be less expensive, but there are different levels of prestige associated with local and national presentations, and this may be important to researchers for various reasons.[24]

In addition to the lack of financial support, those who are not specifically allotted research time within their regular work schedules may not be able to participate in research at all, especially those without tenure who also have prior obligations outside a regular 40-hour work week. Conducting research requires space and time for thinking through ideas, reading literature, applying research methodologies, and writing up findings. Institutions can support LIS researchers by giving them time to work on research during their work week or offering research leave or sabbaticals. Librarians have varying responsibilities that they must prioritize in whatever way their institution dictates. Often, small and underfunded institutions demand more of librarians in service-centered positions who then lack the time to dedicate to research in their working hours. This can lead to regularly working outside of work. Because librarianship is service-oriented and often place-based, librarians at small libraries often cannot fit research in between reference, instruction, cataloging, and more. Zoe Fisher writes, "The disparity in library job roles and priorities leads to an inevitable result: much of the LIS research about academic libraries focuses on university libraries writing about their own job-related projects, and many community college librarians, expected to focus on teaching, are left out of the scholarly conversation about academic libraries."[25] If we depend solely on institutions to support librarian research the representation in the literature will be incomplete.

The Librarian Parlor

In 2017, in an attempt to respond to these barriers, the authors of this paper created a community that supports library workers in conducting, writing, and disseminating research. The Librarian Parlor (LibParlor) is a blog that solicits guest writers from the LIS field to offer insight. Writers cover various topics covering research agendas,[26] submitting an IRB proposal,[27] collaborating with researchers at other institutions,[28] handling the peer review process,[29] and more.[30] As of February, 2019, after 18 months live, 55 guest writers[31] have contributed their knowledge and have reached over 13,500 visitors to the blog. While LibParlor does not solve all the problems related to supporting LIS researchers, the blog provides one avenue that, combined with others, can help to build the multimodal approach needed to further LIS knowledge and increase evidence-based practice.

When the authors were creating LibParlor, they felt it was important to present honest reflections from their writers while also covering both procedural[32] and privileged[33] knowledge around the systems and norms for publishing in LIS. The goal from the beginning was to build a community where the content would feel accessible, and anyone would feel comfortable asking questions[34] about the research process. In creating the blog, the authors spent time crafting Editorial Guidelines[35] that help steer guest writers to write informally, using inclusive language, addressing an audience new to research,[36] and acknowledging things the writers wish they could have done differently.[37] Reflection on mistakes is hugely important to the LibParlor mission, as recognizing that published, established professionals make mistakes as well can help new researchers deal with imposter syndrome. Guest writers will often include links in their post connecting readers to related sources, resources, and articles. In including these resources, the guest writers also encourage readers to reach out and contact them to further the conversation around a methodology, a publication, or a best practice. As the LibParlor tagline states, this blog is "Building a community of researchers."

Additionally, through ongoing columns written and curated by contributing editors, LibParlor publishes content that highlights LIS research and researchers from a variety of backgrounds. For example, LibParlor's "Listen In" column[38] exposes readers to new methodologies employed by their colleagues in recent publications while the "Featured Researcher" column[39] highlights researchers in all areas of librarianship who share insight into their research process.

In creating LibParlor, the authors recognized that as they are primarily teaching librarians, their networks were composed of others in similar positions. This led the authors to be more intentional about who they recruited and sought out to write for LibParlor, in order to ensure a diversity of voices, perspectives, experiences, and roles within librarianship. During the year and a half of LibParlor's existence, the authors of this page have realized that recruiting outside of their networks takes time, patience, and intentionality. In the coming months, LibParlor hopes to continue to expand its reach so that more LIS researchers can find and use the resources provided on the blog.

LibParlor has been a labor of love for the authors of this paper that has resulted in professional growth for them and their readers. Growing an online community, finding writers, recruiting contributing editors, and managing multiple posts in progress has required the Editorial Team to devote part of their service requirements to this project. However, it has allowed the authors of this paper to connect with professionals in the field they admire, and learn about research from those more experienced. Beyond the blog, LibParlor has facilitated several Twitter chats, presented a poster at ALA Annual in 2018, and maintains an active Twitter account. Looking to the future, LibParlor aspires to build more tools to assist library workers who want to get started,[40] connect peers with similar research interests, and create modules to assist in teaching library workers the beginning steps of conducting, writing, and disseminating research.

Conclusion

The LIS field needs to continue to create ways for library workers to learn about conducting research. There should be multiple points of entry and opportunities for LIS researchers to gather expertise from a variety of options; however the authors know that not every entry point will work for every LIS researcher. Perhaps library workers learn foundations in library school; stay current through journal clubs; remain accountable through writing clubs; get feedback from peers outside their institutions; learn the process through close mentors; get ideas for new methodologies through various open source methods; find partners at their home libraries at conferences or through online communities; attend institutes for intensive training; beat imposter syndrome through online communities; and obtain additional resources through professional associations. LibParlor hopes to offer some of these resources, but the authors need the field to do more to support robust research education in MLIS programs; provide financial support to researchers not at large, well-funded, research universities; and spend time sharing knowledge with others through places such as LibParlor. The authors hope The Librarian Parlor can be an accessible way for librarians to find their own sustainable path toward research.

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