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## The Availability and Effectiveness of Research Supports for Early Career Academic Librarians

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### ABSTRACT

For many academic librarians, scholarly research is required in order to attain tenure or promotion and it is widely acknowledged that many early career librarians find this process challenging. Using a survey of > 200 untenured or recently tenured academic librarians, this study investigates early career academic librarians' access to and experiences with research support activities designed to develop research skills and confidence. Specific attention is paid to informal mentoring, formal mentoring programs, and writing groups. Responses indicate that early career librarians need supports that target three dimensions of the research experience: research design and methods; work practices and accountability; and emotional elements. Despite this, survey respondents had limited access to formal research supports that offer instruction and guidance in the research process, leaving them to rely heavily on informal mentoring. This study highlights the need for libraries and library organizations to invest their resources in research supports for early career academic librarians, helping them to become more effective and confident researchers.

### Introduction

In tenure and promotion systems that require scholarship, the stakes around research and publishing are high. Many academic librarians find meeting scholarly research expectations challenging because of their lack of training in research design and methods and the nature of their work duties and schedules (Blakesley, 2016; Hill, 1994; Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012; Mitchell & Reichel, 1999; Powell, Baker, & Mika, 2002). Indeed, some suggest that librarians change jobs or careers in anticipation of negative tenure reviews related to research expectations (Miller & Benefiel, 1998; Mitchell & Reichel, 1999). The literature on librarians who conduct research has recognized the challenges librarians face in conducting scholarly research and suggested ways to remedy these challenges. The literature often recommends or describes the initiation of research supports including methodology courses while in graduate school (Best & Kneip, 2010; Luo, 2011), formal and informal mentoring (Cirasella & Smale, 2011; Goodsett & Walsh, 2015), peer support and writing groups (Campbell, Ellis, & Adebajo, 2011; Exner & Houk, 2010; Miller & Benefiel, 1998; Tysick & Babb, 2006), and targeted professional development programs such as the Institute for Research Design in Librarianship (IRDL) (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012). Largely missing from this body of work, however, is an

assessment of early career academic librarians' access to and experiences with these research supports. Articles have surveyed academic librarians about their confidence and preparation to undertake research, or recommended potential strategies, or described the implementation of a particular support, but few have examined the experiences of early career librarians “with research activities, barriers, and strategies,” and their assessments of what “early career research activities were the most concretely linked with success in the academic library environment” (Wilkinson, 2013, p. 64).

This article asks what research supports and strategies have helped early career librarians succeed in scholarly research. Using a survey of > 200 untenured and recently tenured academic librarians who are expected to conduct scholarly research in order to achieve tenure or promotion, this article finds that most early career academic librarians have limited access to formal or institution-sponsored research supports and rely heavily on informal mentoring. Librarians' responses about their research support experiences and the strategies that helped them succeed indicate that early career academic librarians need supports and strategies that target three dimensions of the research experience: research design and methods; work practices and accountability; and emotional elements. Libraries and library organizations need to invest their resources in research supports for early career librarians

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beginning their research, helping them become more effective and confident researchers in the process.

### Literature review

Many authors recognize the importance of librarians conducting and disseminating scholarly research (Freedman, 2014; Gregory, 2005; Hollister, 2016; Perkins & Slowik, 2013). For academic librarians, research and publishing play a central role in tenure and promotion processes (Freedman, 2014; Walters, 2016; Wilkinson, 2013) because of their importance to advancing professional knowledge. Literature about academic librarians conducting scholarly research often focuses on the challenges librarians face (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012, 2018; Miller & Benefiel, 1998; Powell et al., 2002; Sassen & Wahl, 2014; Tysick & Babb, 2006; Vilz & Poremski, 2015) with the most frequently cited barriers being lack of time, funding, administrative support, and training.

LIS research has particularly focused on the obstacle that lack of research methods and design training presents for librarian-researchers (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012, 2018; Luo, 2011; Vilz & Poremski, 2015). These studies have found that librarians in the United States receive inconsistent preparation for conducting research. Although one analysis of the degree requirements available online for American Library Association-accredited LIS graduate programs suggests that a majority of LIS programs require a research methods course, a large number of librarians likely finish their MLIS program without taking one (Luo, 2011). Librarians, including those who have taken research methods courses as part of their MLIS programs, generally feel that their graduate programs have not adequately prepared them to conduct scholarly research (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012, 2018; Vilz & Poremski, 2015). Research methods courses in LIS programs may be more focused on the needs of doctoral students than on those of practicing librarians (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012).

Thus it is not surprising that many librarians are anxious about conducting research, especially as the prevalence of faculty status and publication requirements for librarians are increasing (Sassen & Wahl, 2014). The LIS literature suggests a variety of research support activities (hereinafter “research supports”) to fill gaps in librarians’ research training, address anxiety, and promote successful research, writing, and publishing. Potential research supports include accommodating research time in librarians’ schedules, sabbaticals, research funding or grants, mentoring, writing and support groups, research training, and access to specialists for data or statistics (Bosch, Ramachandran, Luévano, & Wakiji, 2010; Cirasella & Smale, 2011; James, Rayner, & Bruno, 2015; Kennedy & Brancolini, 2018; Lorenzetti & Powelson, 2015; Miller & Benefiel, 1998; Sassen & Wahl, 2014; Sugimoto et al., 2014). While these activities may support librarians’ quest for attainment of tenure more broadly (Vilz & Poremski, 2015), there is an increasing trend to specifically design support activities around the development of research, writing, and publishing skills (Lorenzetti & Powelson, 2015). Research support and a supportive institutional culture matter for publication and tenure success (Fennewald, 2008; Vilz & Poremski, 2015; Walters, 2016).

Two of the most emphasized research supports in the LIS literature are mentoring and writing groups. Mentoring in particular is an often-studied subject and many single-institution case studies are devoted to the topic (Bosch et al., 2010; Farmer, Stockham, & Trussell, 2009; Kenefick & DeVito, 2015; Level & Mach, 2005; Stephens, Sare, Kimball, Foster, & Kitchens, 2011). Mentoring often addresses aspects of promotion and tenure requirements other than research, but is important for and helpful to research success because it can expose novice librarians to experienced researchers who can provide advice, support, and opportunities for collaboration (Bosch et al., 2010; Goodsett & Walsh, 2015; Lorenzetti & Powelson, 2015; Sassen & Wahl, 2014; Vilz & Poremski, 2015). Studies have shown, however that access to formal mentoring is limited, with only 52% of ARL libraries offering formal

mentoring (Sassen & Wahl, 2014) and only 40% of tenure-track academic librarians having access to such programs at their libraries (Vilz & Poremski, 2015). Informal mentoring, which a greater majority of librarians has access to, often fills this gap (Sassen & Wahl, 2014). The only study of informal mentoring focuses on academic librarians and paraprofessional staff in Illinois (James et al., 2015). This study finds that informal mentorship is accessible and may be preferred to formal mentorship, but does not specifically examine how informal mentoring supports conducting scholarly research.

Writing groups, which can be characterized as a form of peer mentoring (Lorenzetti & Powelson, 2015), are another often-discussed research support. Articles on writing groups for academic librarians are often single-institution case studies that emphasize benefits such as support through the promotion and tenure process and the opportunity for collaboration among group members (Campbell et al., 2011; Tysick & Babb, 2006). Despite their many purported benefits, however, academic writing groups and their participants have yet to be the subject of a study that goes beyond a single group or institution.

Several studies have sought to assess the availability and experience of tenure and research supports across multiple institutions (Goodsett & Walsh, 2015; James et al., 2015; Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012, 2018; Sassen & Wahl, 2014; Vilz & Poremski, 2015) and to examine academic librarians’ assessments of their capacity for and confidence with scholarly research (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012, 2018). These studies suggest academic librarians should, but do not always, have access to one or more of a broad range of tenure and research supports (Sassen & Wahl, 2014; Vilz & Poremski, 2015). Sassen and Wahl (2014) find that these research supports have increased over time. None of these studies has focused in depth on tenure-track and recently tenured librarians from a variety of institutions and their experiences with research supports. While Vilz and Poremski (2015) survey tenure-track librarians from a variety of institution types, their focus is not concentrated on research solely, but on tenure expectations more broadly defined to include instructional responsibilities and professional service, among other tenure requirements. Sassen and Wahl (2014) look at the availability of research supports in ARL libraries, surveying library deans and directors. As they note, this focus may not represent the concerns and experiences of junior librarians, nor allow for comparing ARL institutions with other academic libraries. Some of these studies have examined a particular support activity, such as mentoring (Goodsett & Walsh, 2015; James et al., 2015). Others have included in their respondent population librarians with and without faculty status, and/or librarians at different stages in their careers (Goodsett & Walsh, 2015; Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012, 2018; James et al., 2015). The present study focuses in-depth on the research experiences of early career academic librarians from a variety of institutions that require research for tenure and promotion.

### Methods

The survey (see Appendix A) was conducted using the online survey software Qualtrics and was distributed via direct email and emails to professional email lists of academic librarians<sup>1</sup> during October and November 2016. Study subjects were early career academic librarians from the United States who were employed at academic libraries with a tenure or promotion system in which research is required for tenure or promotion. To be considered “early career” academic librarians, respondents were required to have not yet earned tenure or promotion or

<sup>1</sup> The call for participation was distributed by the authors to the following listservs: ALA New Members Round Table; LLAMA New Professionals Section; ACRL University Libraries Section; ACRL Instruction Section; PA Library Association College & Research Division; ACRL College Libraries Section; ACRL Politics, Policy, and International Relations Section; Virtual Academic Library Environment (VALE) of NJ; ACRL NJ; ACRL Community and Junior College Libraries Section; ALCTS; Library Research Round Table; ACRL Science & Technology Section; web4lib; LITA; RUSA History Section.

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