



An Exploratory Study on Post-tenure Research Productivity Among Academic Librarians



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ABSTRACT

The author conducted a survey of librarians at different types of academic institutions who had earned tenure or an equivalent form of permanent appointment. The purpose was to illuminate the forms of research that are valued at different types of institutions, the extent to which tenured or permanently appointed librarians produce research, and in particular, their perceptions and motivations concerning research productivity. Key findings showed high levels of post-tenure productivity among survey participants, and the emergence of grant activity as a valued form of research. Furthermore, respondents provided comparative perceptions of pre- and post-tenure scholarship, and they described a suite of overlapping extrinsic and intrinsic motivators affecting their research production.

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INTRODUCTION

The literature concerning scholarship among practitioners in the library field is highly focused on support structures for junior or tenure-track librarians and to the related controversy over faculty status. There is also a body of relevant research devoted to the publication patterns in select disciplinary journals or among individual institutions, university systems, or geographic regions. However, this area of the discourse characteristically lacks targeted attention to the research productivity of a significant population of seasoned librarians: namely, those who have already earned tenure or an equivalent form of permanent appointment. Furthermore, there is a lack of attention to the research productivity of non-faculty librarians, or to those who operate in so-called lower tier, non-Association of Research Libraries member institutions.

Notwithstanding that this line of investigation may be of interest to library practitioners on its own merits, it is also warranted by virtue of the amplified climate of institutional accountability. With decreased governmental funding for the academy and intensified competition for those funds, college and university administrators are giving greater attention to the financial benefits that come from increased research productivity among their faculty. Concurrently, libraries are struggling to demonstrate their institutional value in a climate of inflationary

source materials, static or decreasing budgets, and advancements in discovery technologies that lead institutional administrators to the impression that elements of the library professional's work have become obsolete. The author of the present study contends that a fuller understanding of librarian scholarship that goes beyond the proven motivations of earning promotion and tenure can potentially inform library administrators who wish to bolster the research productivity of their staffs. It stands to reason that those who have already earned tenure or permanent appointment have the experience to provide affecting, if not actionable insights on the matter of research productivity. Logic also holds that greater engagement with active channels of scholarly communication translates into better-informed professional practice. Furthermore, it is reasonable to argue that increased practitioner scholarship has the potential to enhance library visibility among post-secondary administrators, and thus to effectively demonstrate institutional value in areas other than collections and information literacy services.

This paper is an exploratory investigation. The author seeks to illuminate the extent to which tenured and permanently appointed librarians produce research, and more importantly, their perceptions and motivations regarding such productivity. Given the scarcity of pertinent discussion in the professional literature, the author enters into this investigation without prior assumptions or hypotheses. The specific research questions driving this study are as follows:

- What constitutes research productivity at different types of postsecondary institutions?

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- What is the nature of post-tenure research productivity among academic librarians in different types of postsecondary institutions, and how does that compare to pre-tenure productivity?
- What are the perceptions and motivations of tenured librarians relative to producing research?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Establishing a path for the present investigation begins with a paper by [Finlay, Ni, Tsou, and Sugimoto \(2013\)](#), in which the authors showed a decreasing proportion of librarian-produced research in the literature. This followed another study conducted by [Wiberley, Hurd, and Weller \(2006\)](#) with similar findings, and another by [Mitchell and Reichel \(1999\)](#) in which the authors maintained that “most librarians tend not to publish frequently, as a group” (p. 240). If the results of these papers represent a trend, the implications for the professional literature are potentially stark; as argued by [Gillum \(2010\)](#), “Having a body of theoretical knowledge is vital to librarianship as a profession” (p. 327). More specifically, [Finlay et al. \(2013\)](#) emphasized that “The apparent disengagement of librarians from the traditional channels of scholarly communication will necessarily decrease librarians’ familiarity with scholarly communication, and this in turn may affect how librarians, especially those employed at academic institutions, interact with students and academics who are conducting research” (p. 417).

Arguments concerning the apparent dearth of scholarship among practitioners persist; although they are characteristically framed by issues of academic status, the common themes remain librarians’ lack of time and training to produce research ([Walter, 2013](#)). However, [Finlay et al. \(2013\)](#) reasoned that the advent of blogging as an alternative conduit for professional communication serves as a possible reason for the recent decline in research productivity. [Aharony \(2009\)](#) confirmed the growing popularity of blogs as “informal channels” (p. 179) among practitioners; however, [Hendricks \(2010\)](#) cautioned that “most academic library promotion and tenure committees do not weigh publishing a blog the same as publishing a peer-reviewed article” (p. 477). This commentary by [Hendricks](#) is a useful illustration of the literature’s focus on practitioner scholarship mainly as it pertains to issues of professional status or advancement; furthermore, it prompts the question of what constitutes scholarship that is valued at different academic institutions.

As shown by [Perkins and Slowik \(2013\)](#), there is exhaustive research and opinion concerning practitioner scholarship as it relates to support structures for tenure-track librarians and the associated controversy over faculty status. This is understandable; it is disingenuous to overlook or disregard the fact that institutional requirements for job security and professional advancement are powerful motivators for librarians who produce research. Dozens of papers have included findings to this effect: [Gillum \(2010\)](#), [Perkins and Slowik \(2013\)](#), [Fennwald \(2008\)](#), [Henry and Neville \(2004\)](#), [Hoggan \(2003\)](#), [Mitchell and Reichel \(1999\)](#), and [Meyer \(1999\)](#) to name only a few. Some practitioners may also be motivated by post-tenure review policies that require ongoing scholarly activity ([Sapon-White, King, & Christie, 2004](#); [Hook, Lees, & Powers, 2000](#)). Still, this cited evidence is similarly focused on structural expectations, chiefly among librarians with faculty status, and study samples are limited to small numbers of large research institutions. To date, there has been an incomplete accounting of the holistic perceptions and motivations of tenured or permanently appointed practitioners—faculty and non-faculty, at various types of institutions—regarding their research productivity.

Previous studies also fail to address in a straight-forward manner the question of what forms of practitioner scholarship are valued at different types of institutions. Research by [Bradigan and Mularski \(1996\)](#) demonstrated how books and journal articles are ranked; [Lawson and Pelzer \(1999\)](#) conducted an early investigation into emerging

technology-based products; [Best and Kneip \(2010\)](#) examined the value attributed to peer-reviewed journal articles; and as noted, [Hendricks \(2010\)](#) researched the burgeoning production of blogs. However, all of these papers addressed practitioner scholarship within the framework of academic status and professional advancement. [Perkins and Slowik \(2013\)](#) showed that library administrators encourage scholarship among their staffs, but they did not rank or enumerate their preferred forms of research productivity. [Henry and Neville \(2004\)](#) provided a potentially useful list of research output in their investigation of publication patterns among academic librarians in Florida. However, this list appears to be generated based solely on the authors’ general experience of what constitutes research output; well recognized forms of productivity like grants, patents, and consultancy work are absent.

The most informative previous research, as it pertains to the present investigation, was conducted by [Fennwald \(2008\)](#); his study “explored the factors contributing to research productivity among a cross section of Penn State librarians” (p. 104). It is noteworthy that this cross section included both tenured and tenure track librarians, although their participation in the study was not parsed out. Notwithstanding that all ranks of library faculty at Pennsylvania State University were expected to produce research, [Fennwald](#) showed that other motivations also drove that activity: specifically, commitment to the field’s body of knowledge, desire to improve professional practice, intellectual curiosity, and personal satisfaction. Still, as the researcher concluded, “This is but one study. Further studies should be conducted at other institutions to provide comparative data” (p. 113).

To gain a more general perspective, the present investigation includes input from practitioners from different types of academic institutions, not only those that require research; it also includes input from practitioners who serve in a wide variety of functional areas within their libraries. Furthermore, this inquiry is focused on professionals who have already earned tenure or an equivalent form of permanent appointment. The intent is to establish a more holistic picture of practitioner scholarship by collecting input from those who are less likely to be driven primarily by issues of job security or professional advancement, and who are more likely to have experienced and mature perspectives on producing research in the library field.

METHOD

The author developed an online survey instrument—approved by his Institutional Review Board—to solicit the perceptions of tenured or permanently appointed academic librarians concerning their research productivity (see [Appendix A](#)). Elements of the survey were adapted from [Hollister and Schroeder’s \(2015\)](#) investigation of research productivity among faculty in the field of professional education; this was necessary to provide a fuller accounting of the various forms of academy-recognized research output than what is presently shown in the literature for academic librarians. The term “research productivity” was defined for survey respondents as the product of systematic investigation, including development, testing, and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge or understanding. Standard examples of research productivity were given, including books, book chapters, journal articles, grant funding, conference presentations, juried exhibits, patents, and consultancy work.

The initial questions of the survey established the basic-level classifications of respondents’ institutions, the primary functional areas they serve within their libraries, and whether they have earned tenure of an equivalent form of permanent appointment. The question concerning tenure or permanent appointment was the only one requiring an answer; study participants were able to leave other questions unanswered. Untenured or non-permanently appointed responders were

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