



## Promoting Academic Library Research Through the “Faculty-Member-In-Residence” Program



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### ABSTRACT

As a means of fostering academic library research, this paper provides an overview of an inaugural “Faculty-Member-In-Residence” program implemented at McMaster University Library, where a non-librarian faculty member from McMaster spent his sabbatical year conducting library research and helping librarians think about research. In addition to providing background on the context of academic library research and the research productivity of academic librarians, the paper describes the objectives, outcomes, and benefits of the program, as well as personal reflections and recommendations on how to move the program forward. Academic libraries are encouraged to launch similar “Faculty-Member-In-Residence” programs at their own institutions.

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### INTRODUCTION

Libraries provide fertile ground for research. They have a steep history, dating back to around 2400 BC when papyrus scrolls were first introduced to record events and maintain a list of happenings and events. They are complex organizations that offer a wide variety of information services and resources to meet the burgeoning and ever growing needs of a diverse user population. They offer services and resources ranging from the physical to the electronic, and that span the full spectrum of the information life cycle from creation, collation, storage, retrieval, organization, and access to information. They undergo and respond to continual and profound changes in both the internal and external environment, including technological, fiscal, legal, political and societal challenges, such as an ever-changing technological landscape, shrinking fiscal budgets, and copyright, privacy, and information ethics issues (Evans & Layzell Ward, 2007; Moran, Stueart, & Morner, 2013; Rubin, 2010).

In this light, research on libraries is important. Libraries need, and can benefit from, empirical evidence gathered on the services and resources that they provide. According to Powell, Baker, and Mika (2002, p. 49), research on libraries “improves problem solving and decision making in the workplace, to make professional practitioners critical consumers of the research literature, and to better equip librarians to provide optimal information services to researchers in other fields.” In this sense, research on libraries can offer empirically-based insights and ideas on improvements to the way library information services and resources are provided.

The problem, however, is how to facilitate research in libraries in general, and in academic libraries specifically. Moreover, how can research led by academic librarians be promoted? Though many academic librarians are successful researchers, academic librarians are confronted with several challenges that can inhibit or restrict their ability to conduct research, such as lack of time, unfamiliarity with the research process, lack of support, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation (Kennedy & Brancolini, 2012). These barriers limit academic librarians’ engagement in understanding and exploring the delivery of information services and resources in their own organizations and across the profession. Solutions are needed to help mitigate the factors negatively affecting librarian research productivity and to overcome barriers that prevent librarians from conducting their own library research investigations (Hoffman, Berg, & Koufogiannakis, 2014).

One potential solution is to provide academic librarians with convenient access to an in-house research expert with interests in library and information science. This is exactly what occurred at the authors’ university library. A faculty member from the same university agreed to spend his one-year sabbatical as a “Faculty-Member-In-Residence” as a means of not only conducting his own research, but also of helping librarians think about and conduct research themselves. The idea was that providing librarians with access to a faculty researcher with interests in “all things library” would reduce the mystery surrounding the research process, facilitate convenient research support, and provide an in-house mentor who could encourage, motivate and rally librarians to not only embark on their own research projects with confidence and ease, but also to delve into research questions and problems that mattered to librarians and library paraprofessionals. Further, the program would provide an opportunity for the faculty member to engage in library research himself and foster new potential library research projects and collaborations.

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The next section of the paper provides background information on academic librarian research in general. More details are given on the factors affecting the extent to which research is conducted by academic librarians, and recent mentorship approaches to help foster and promote research conducted by academic librarians. The “Faculty-Member-In-Residence” program is presented as a potential solution to overcome the barriers affecting the research productivity of librarians and as a mechanism to enhance recent academic librarian mentorship approaches. Next, a description is provided of how the “Faculty-Member-In-Residence” program at McMaster University Library originated and was carried out, as well as a summary of the major outcomes achieved. From there, discussion occurs on the various factors the authors believe led to the success of the residence program. Importantly, recommendations are provided for other academic libraries interested in replicating the program at their own institutions. Last, summary remarks are made.

## BACKGROUND

Though a considerable amount of research on libraries is conducted by faculty members from Library & Information Science (LIS) schools and colleges, a large portion of research on libraries is conducted by librarians themselves. For instance, Hildreth and Aytac (2007) analyzed a sample of 206 articles out of 401 published articles in LIS journals between 2003 and 2005, and discovered that 47.1% of articles were written by librarians and that 9.7% of articles comprised mixed academic and library practitioner research teams. Hildreth & Aytac also report that research among academic librarians is significantly higher than that of public librarians.

There are several reasons why academic librarians conduct research. First, research on academic libraries is required for purposes of day-to-day decision making, quality assurance and/or performance evaluation (Dube, 2011; Osinulu & Amusa, 2010; Tang, 2013). In recent years, the profession has taken a strong interest in evidence-based decision making, the systematic collection and analysis of data as a foundation for effective planning and priority setting (Booth, 2011; Eldredge, 2013). The founding of Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP) is a case in point; EBLIP represents a social movement among library and information practitioners that serves principally to provide a process for informed decision making in libraries (Eldredge, 2012, 2014). In practice, the volume of published literature, especially on applied topics, is not always rich and academic librarians often find themselves needing to conduct the research themselves or to replicate the research conducted by others to determine the applicability in their local environment. For example, Koufogiannakis (2011, 2012) describes how local evidence collected in libraries and the professional knowledge of library practitioners are both needed and can complement research-based evidence. The dearth of high-quality applied research may arguably be caused by the LIS academic's greater focus on theoretical investigations: these scholars typically have limited access to research libraries and may not be aware of the need to conduct such research in the first place as they are not immersed in the day-to-day happenings and trends in the quickly changing, fast-paced library world.

Second, conducting research is often a requirement of an academic librarian's employment and/or status within the profession (Best & Kneip, 2010). There is an expectation for many academic librarians to participate in research as part of their overall contribution to their institution and their profession (Meadows, Berg, Hoffman, Torabi, & Martin Gardiner, 2013). For example, since 1974, the Association of College and University Librarians, a division of the American Library Association, in its *Joint Statement on Faculty Status for College and University Librarians*, has encouraged faculty librarians to be held to the same standards as other faculty members when being evaluated (ACRL, 2014).

Last, academic librarians conduct research for personal fulfillment or growth purposes. Many librarians derive personal and professional

satisfaction from conducting research, as it satisfies innate desires to discover new knowledge, provides opportunities to hone areas of expertise and develop skills, and improves librarians' professional contributions to the field of librarianship and the academic mission of the institutions in which they work (Clapton, 2010; Perkins & Slowik, 2013).

Though academic librarians are productive in conducting and disseminating research, most research activities conducted by librarians involve consuming research (e.g., reading and interpreting existing research) as opposed to conducting research (Luo, 2011; Powell et al., 2002). For those librarians who do conduct research, the most popular data collection method used by librarians is the self-administered survey questionnaire; the least popular is experimental design (Luo, 2011). The extent to which more research conducted by librarians will occur in the future is unclear. On one hand, some advocate that more librarian research will occur. For example, a recent survey by Canadian University Librarians and Deans of Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) note a significant shift in research and scholarly expectations for Canadian academic librarians in the past five years and that they expect this trend to continue (Berg, Jacobs, & Cornwall, 2013). On the other hand, some predict less research will be conducted by librarians as evidenced by some universities and colleges reclassifying the librarian position as a staff job as these institutions reassess the role of their research libraries more broadly (Dunn, 2013; McKinzie, 2010). Though forces exist which may reduce the research expectations of academic librarians, such forces are likely to be more acute at, or constrained to, institutions of higher learning where research is of less importance. It is the authors' opinion that universities and colleges that place importance and value on research activities as part of their mission and vision statements will continue to demand an emphasis on research outputs in the future, and place increasing pressure on academic librarians to conduct more research as a means of not only meeting institutional service needs, but also to satisfy employer and peer expectations of what librarians should be doing in their roles in research-intensive institutions.

The literature on the success factors affecting the research productivity of librarians is not vast. Fennewald (2008) identifies personal motivation, intellectual curiosity, and education as important factors contributing to the research productivity of librarians, and being in an environment where everyone is expected to participate in research as the most critical factor. A recent literature review by Hoffman et al. (2014) identifies few library-related research studies that explore the success factors affecting librarian research productivity. A content analysis of these studies identify the following grouping of success factors affecting academic librarian research productivity present in the library literature: a) individual factors such as personality traits, education and experience, professional commitment to research, and extrinsic motivation; b) peer and community factors such as guidance, mentoring, and peer support; and c) institutional factors such as time, positive organizational climate, and access to and use of resources (Hoffman et al., 2014).

Though there is no consensus as to which of these factors is the most influential in predicting librarian research productivity, several of these factors are discussed in the literature as being important influencing factors to consider. Time is certainly a prevalent factor (Schrader, 2010, 2011; Schrader, Shiri, & Williamson, 2012). For example, Kennedy and Brancolini (2012) report that the largest barrier for academic librarians to reading the research literature and conducting research was time; only 39% of academic librarian participants in their study reported that their institution provided release time for librarian research. Fox (2007a, 2007b) reports that most university librarians have year-round administrative work schedules that inhibit sustained, meaningful scholarship, and that full-time librarians, although spending an average of 47 h per week on all of their combined responsibilities, devote less than 5 h per week to scholarly pursuits. It appears that lack of institutional support to provide research time for librarians is a

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