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Demonstrating Library Impact Through Acknowledgment: An Examination of Acknowledgments in Theses and Dissertations

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ABSTRACT

Academic libraries are increasingly seeking ways to demonstrate their impact on student learning. Acknowledgments - formal statements of indebtedness - in graduate theses and dissertations provide a rather unexplored area for demonstrating impact of the academic library on student learning. This study uses quantitative and qualitative methods to characterize acknowledgments of the Texas A&M University Libraries (TAMU Libraries) in theses and dissertations, both overall and for three disciplines specifically: civil engineering, geography, and history. This study also searched for mentions of the TAMU Libraries throughout the entire body of theses and dissertations. Overall, acknowledgments to the TAMU Libraries in theses and dissertations were less than 1%, though acknowledgments were found in all three disciplines with over a quarter of the history theses and dissertations containing an acknowledgment to libraries. There was no statistically significant difference found between the numbers of acknowledgments in theses versus dissertations. Acknowledgments to the TAMU Libraries were found in the theses and dissertations of 28 different departments. Mentions to the TAMU Libraries - not necessarily a formal acknowledgment - were found throughout the text of theses and dissertations with most concentrated in the acknowledgment, method, and bibliography sections.

Introduction

The completion of a graduate degree is usually the cause of many diverse feelings and emotions, from a profound sense of relief, to elation, and perhaps sadness as the newly-minted graduate leaves friends and colleagues for the “real world.” As they are composing final drafts of their theses, dissertations, or records of study, some students take the opportunity to reflect on what it took to achieve their goals. Many of these students feel a strong enough sense of obligation or gratitude for assistance that they will have a special acknowledgment section in their final written product. Here they recognize a wide variety of assistance and an equally wide variety of people and organizations. The types of assistance may include financial (grants, fellowships, or family savings), mentoring, emotional, and other material resources (including libraries). The practice of this recognition will often vary based on the culture of the discipline.

Academic libraries are always searching for ways to demonstrate the impact they are having on the community of scholars. University scholars (faculty and graduate students) produce an immense amount of output in the forms of scholarly articles and books, theses and dissertations, computer models and programs, grants, patents, and fellowships. Academic librarians like to assume that at some point in the

research and writing process, the scholars consulted library materials, resources or made use of library services. But how do we prove this in a documentable fashion? This project explores the relationship among graduate students at TAMU and the TAMU Libraries.

Literature review

The Oxford English Dictionary defines an acknowledgment as “an author's statement of indebtedness to others” (Acknowledge, 2017); however, this definition lacks the manifold motivations for that indebtedness or a more nuanced description of its function. In *Patterns of Acknowledgment*, Cronin, McKenzie, and Stiffler (1992) identified seven functions served by acknowledgments based on a review of previous acknowledgment studies. These include: [1] trusted assessor (Chubin, 1975), [2] hidden influence (Cronin, 1992), [3] credit or reward (Mackintosh, 1972), [4] exchanges of gifts (McCain, 1991), [5] ordering devices (Ben-Ari, 1987), [6] ritualistic appendages (Cronin, 1991), and [7] expressions of solidarity to a particular school of thought (Ben-Ari, 1987).

While acknowledgments are ubiquitous in monographs and the journal literature today, that was not always the case and their emergence has not been extensively studied (Giannoni, 2002). Sometime

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during the 16th or 17th centuries, acknowledgments became a distinct section within monographs and mainly acknowledged financial support from benefactors (Roberts, 2003). For journals, it was not until the 1940s that acknowledgments emerged and then another 20 years before they became commonplace (Bazerman, 1988). There is much less written about the origins of acknowledgments in theses and dissertations, though Scrivener (2009) found thesis and dissertation style guides dating back to the 1930s describing how to write an acknowledgment.

The earliest acknowledgment studies can be traced back to the 1970s (e.g., Chubin, 1975; Mackintosh, 1972), though the study of acknowledgments was really launched by the pioneering work of Blaise Cronin in the 1990s (e.g., Cronin, 1991; Cronin, 1992; Cronin, 1995; Cronin et al., 1992; Cronin, McKenzie, & Rubio, 1993). Since then, studies of acknowledgments have been used to answer a variety of questions involving research funding (Costas & van Leeuwen, 2012; Cronin & Shaw, 1999; Rigby, 2011; Wang & Shapira, 2011), intellectual and social networks (Fahmy & Young, 2015; Khabsa, Koppman, & Giles, 2012) and more recently demonstrating the importance of libraries and librarians to the scholarly communication process (Finnell, 2014; Scrivener, 2009; Stigberg, Guittar, & Morse, 2015). Most of the aforementioned studies focus on acknowledgments in the journal literature; there are far fewer that examine theses and dissertations.

Various classification schemes for acknowledgments have been advanced (Cronin, 1991; Mackintosh, 1972; McCain, 1991). Cronin's six categories outlined in *The Scholar's Courtesy* (1995) are some of the most widely adopted in acknowledgment studies. The six categories are essentially a refined version of the seven mentioned in his *Patterns of Acknowledgment* (Cronin et al., 1992). The six categories are: moral support, financial support, access to facilities, clerical support, technical support, and peer interactive communication (Cronin, 1995).

Hyland (2003) conducted a study of acknowledgments in 240 theses and dissertations that represented a broad cross section of disciplines that included: applied linguistics, biology, business studies, computer science, electronic engineering, and public administration. A majority of the theses (80%) and almost all of the dissertations (97.5%) contained an acknowledgment. Across both theses and dissertations, approximately 44% of all acknowledgments were to academics, 24% to friends, 14% to family members, 11% to organizations, and the remainder to "other." Hyland categorized the acknowledgments into six main categories: academic support, access to data, moral support, clerical services, financial resources, and technical help. Approximately 45% of the acknowledgments in the theses and dissertations examined were for academic assistance and 30% for moral assistance; the other four categories were significantly lower. While the advisor was acknowledged in all of the theses and dissertations with acknowledgments, Hyland (2003) noted other academics including those "... within students' professional communities who had mentored or believed in them, taught them, provided intellectual guidance, assisted with conference papers, or contributed in other ways." (p. 253). This would certainly include librarians and one excerpt provided in Hyland's (2003) article did in fact mention librarians.

Scrivener (2009) conducted a study of 219 history dissertation acknowledgments from 1930 to 2005 at the University of Oklahoma (OU). This is the only thesis or dissertation acknowledgment study found that focused exclusively on the contributions of libraries and librarians to the scholarly communication process. Overall, it was found that 93.6% of the dissertations examined contained acknowledgments. Of those, 81.5% of the OU acknowledgments in history dissertations mentioned libraries, with 97% of the authors mentioning libraries or archives by name and 71.9% mentioning librarians by name. This corroborates findings of other studies showing that historians are heavy library users (Dalton & Charnigo, 2004; Delgadillo & Lynch, 1999; Stieg, 1981). Like Hyland (2003), Scrivener (2009) found that the dissertation chair ("supervisor") was the most frequently acknowledged among individuals or institutions (98.1%). The second most acknowledged

institution or individual was libraries, librarians, or archivists. As with doctoral students in other disciplines, a familiar pattern was observed where gratitude was first expressed for academic assistance, followed by personal support.

Traditional databases, such as Scopus (Beatty, 2017) and Web of Science (Clarivate Analytics, 2017), have been extracting research funding information from acknowledgments and providing a searchable field. Beyond research funding being indexed in traditional databases, there are at least two other notable efforts to systematically collect acknowledgments on an ongoing basis; one is local and the other is global. Stigberg et al. (2015) reported on the development and implementation of the Northwestern University Library Acknowledgments Database tool. The custom-built MS Access database was developed as a means to achieve the assessment goals of Northwestern University (NU) Library Special Libraries Division. The assessment goals for the database tool included: the need for enhanced assessment of library impacts in a quantifiable way, the need to track and analyze acknowledgments of library work and impact beyond traditional scholarly citations or patron service collected data, to gather evidence of individual staff and departmental outputs and impacts, to allow librarians to track their acknowledgments and accomplishments, and to collect qualitative data on the value of librarians and associated special collections (Stigberg et al., 2015). The utilization of qualitative content of the acknowledgments allowed the Special Libraries Division to link "library performance with successful learning and research outcomes for students and faculty" (Stigberg et al., 2015, p. 572).

A more global solution to capturing acknowledgments is AckSeer (Giles & Council, 2004; Khabsa, Treeratpituk, & Giles, 2012), a search engine and repository that extracts acknowledgments found in books, conference papers, and journal articles. The architecture of the system consists of a text extractor, named entity recognizers, and searched through a Solr/Lucene database via a web interface. Unfortunately, AckSeer was only deployed for a short time before efforts were redirected to CiteSeer and related tools. These two efforts, Northwestern's Acknowledgments Database and AckSeer, illustrate the interest and value in the systematic collection of acknowledgments to demonstrate impact and study the scholarly communication process.

Background

Texas A&M University (TAMU) is a large land-, sea-, and space-grant university founded in 1876 (Texas A&M University, 2017). The university has been a member of the prestigious Association of American Universities since 2001 and holds a Carnegie classification of doctoral with highest research activity (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2015; Texas A&M University, 2017). Over 66,000 students were enrolled in 2016, and nearly 12,000 of that number are graduate students (Texas A&M University, 2017). TAMU has 268 graduate programs, including 85 departments approved to offer graduate degrees requiring a thesis or dissertation (Texas A&M University, 2017). The TAMU Libraries consists of five libraries: Sterling C. Evans Library and Annex, Cushing Memorial Library & Archives, Medical Sciences Library, Policy Sciences & Economics Library, and the West Campus Library. Together, the TAMU Libraries hold over 5.2 million print volumes, 1.5 million e-books, 114 thousand e-journals, and over two thousand databases (Texas A&M University Libraries, 2014). TAMU Libraries is a member of several prestigious organizations and consortia including Association of Research Libraries, Center for Research Libraries, and Greater Western Library Alliance.

Objectives

The individuals or organizations mentioned in acknowledgments of theses and dissertations can be viewed as having "impact" upon that student's education and research. Determining the extent to which libraries are mentioned in thesis and dissertation acknowledgments, and

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