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A "Partnership" for the Professional Development of Librarian Researchers

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Abstract

In this article the authors introduce the Librarians' Research Partnership (LRP), founded in 2013, at McGill and Concordia University Libraries. The Partnership was inspired by the Canadian Association of Research Libraries' Librarians' Research Institute (CARL LRI) which was attended by three of the authors in 2012 and is described here from the point of view of the participants. The authors touch upon the research culture at McGill and Concordia Libraries and discuss barriers and supports for research as prominent themes in the literature on the research role of Canadian academic librarians. The formation of the LRP and the eight subsequent meetings are explained in detail, as well as the factors that made the LRP a successful initiative between the two universities: physical proximity, similarity of working environments, and common organizational culture. The article also includes a discussion of how the LRP's philosophy might diverge from that of the LRI.

Keywords

Librarians' Research Partnership; Librarians' Research Institute; research supports; professional development; academic librarians

Introduction

Much has been written about the role of librarians as researchers, and increasing attention is being paid to academic librarian research. However, librarians are encountering barriers preventing them from fully engaging with research. Support is available from Canadian academic libraries and professional organizations as well as from the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) in the form of the Librarians' Research Institute (LRI).[1] This Institute provides a framework within which academic librarians can adopt strategies that will enable them to meet research expectations. An important goal of the LRI is to foster a research culture among academic librarians in Canada by extending its reach beyond the yearly one-week LRI events. The authors embraced this goal by creating an offshoot of the LRI: the Librarians' Research Partnership (LRP). This group was formed by LRI alumnae Carson, Colosimo and Lake, who were later joined by McMillan. The group invited librarians from McGill and Concordia Universities to take part in eight meetings during 2013 that generally followed the curriculum of the LRI. The LRP's partnership model proved to have several advantages for librarians such as providing a sense of community and fostering collaboration as well as facilitating peer learning and providing continuity of professional development. The LRP was found to be quite successful due to several contributing factors including the proximity of the two universities in Montreal, an overlap in research interests, and similar working environments. The future of the LRP is yet to be decided, but it may end up departing from the philosophy of the LRI by offering workshops to build research skills and inviting researchers from outside of library and information science to the meetings.

Librarians as Researchers

Although the place of research among the professional responsibilities of academic librarians has long been debated, often as part of a larger discussion of librarians' academic status,[2] discussion of the topic has grown significantly in Canadian institutions over the past decade. A recent increase in literature focused on research culture in Canadian academic libraries exemplifies this trend and establishes the context from which the McGill-Concordia LRP developed.

Schrader credits the recent interest in this topic to a growing desire among librarians to contribute to the pool of professional knowledge and to engage in the scholarly communication process. Schrader observes that this desire is at least in part inspired by "an increasing expectation in research libraries across Canada that librarians pursue

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[1] See http://www.carl-abrc.ca/en/research-libraries/librarians-research-institute.html.
[2] Schrader, Shiri, and Williamson point to sources tracing the debate back in print to 1878.

active research and scholarship for purposes of tenure, promotion, and annual performance" (297). Others attribute "the evidence-based librarianship movement as well as emphasis on service assessment and meaningful measures of library impact" for the increasing attention paid to academic librarian research (8Rs Research Team 4). Whatever the reason for its current prominence, the issue is unlikely to fade any time soon: in a 2010 survey of library directors of CARL member institutions, most respondents acknowledged research as an issue of growing importance in their institutions and indicated that this trend would likely continue into the foreseeable future (Berg, Jacobs, and Cornwall 564).

Barriers to Research

It appears, however, that librarians encounter obstacles in meeting their personal or institutional expectations of research involvement. Not unexpectedly, lack of time is the most commonly cited barrier in the literature on the research culture in Canadian academic libraries.[3] Fox finds Canadian academic librarians struggling to fit scholarly activities into their work routine. Although the respondents to his survey report working 45 to 55 hours per week, few find adequate time at work to dedicate to research. In a comparison of actual and ideal time allocation, Fox writes, "… [L]ibrarians would like to be spending almost twice as much time on scholarly activities" (457). Schrader and Schrader, Shiri, and Williamson also received reports of time management issues in their surveys of librarians at the Universities of Alberta and Saskatchewan. The latter article acknowledges other possible obstacles to an active research culture as well: (1) a lack of research training among librarians, many of whom graduated from an ALA-accredited master's program with only one survey course in research methods and (2) the legacy of a "practitioner service model" in Canadian academic libraries. These last two obstacles resonate more with CARL library directors than an apparent lack of time. The respondents to Berg, Jacobs, and Cornwall's survey of this cohort identified lack of skills, lack of experience, and lack of a research culture as the top three barriers impeding librarians from pursuing research (566).

Supports for Research

To overcome actual and perceived obstacles, many Canadian academic libraries provide support. Berg, Jacobs, and Cornwall asked CARL University Librarians to indicate which of eight forms of support their institutions offered to its librarians. Research leaves and sabbaticals were the most common, reported by 16 of 19 respondents (84.2%). The other "more voluntary and less formalized" measures, such as mentoring programs and peer support groups, were in place at less than 60% of the respondents' institutions (567). Schrader, Fox, and Schrader, Shiri, and Williamson identify specific support offered at the University of Alberta and the University of Saskatchewan libraries. Both university libraries articulated a commitment to research in their strategic plans, which justified all other supports put in place. These include the following (in addition to the measures mentioned above): (1) librarian tenure and

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[3] This reflects a larger trend identified by Berg, Jacobs, and Cornwall: "Time is perhaps the most cited issue noted in the professional literature in relation to librarians and scholarship" (566 and note 21, 572).

performance standards that reflect faculty standards, (2) expectations for research made explicit in position announcements, (3) the creation of positions to support the development of research competencies (a Director of Research in Alberta and a Scholarly Communications Initiatives librarian in Saskatchewan), (4) research days and release time to pursue education, (5) reimbursement for research expenses, (6) the adjustment of workflows and position responsibilities to permit the dedication of 15% to 20% of work time to research activities, (7) lecture series and workshops to develop librarian research skills, and finally, (8) measures to disseminate the research of librarians (librarian profile web pages, presentation opportunities within the library, and the deposit of librarian research in institutional repositories).

Schrader also lists a number of professional organizations that support librarian research. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), which represents faculty and librarians, advocates on issues relevant to its members. In 2002, questions of librarians' academic status were added to the Association's biennial "Librarian Salary and Academic Status Survey" and, one year later, CAUT issued a "model clause on the scholarly activities of academic librarians."[4] Other Canadian library organizations offer various forms of support including research funds (CLA, CLA-CACUL) and professional development courses (The Partnership's Education Institute).[5]

The most comprehensive support comes from CARL. The Association set the development of librarian research skills as one of its strategic priorities for 2010-2012 and identified a knowledge of and engagement in "ongoing research and professional development" as one of seven core competencies of the 21st-century CARL librarian.[6] CARL's commitment has led to the development of several initiatives to promote a research culture among academic librarians, in particular the Librarians' Research Institute, founded 2012, which inspired the McGill-Concordia Librarians' Research Partnership.

Research Culture Chez Nous

Concordia University and McGill University are English language institutions located in Montreal, Quebec, each with a campus in the downtown area. Both university libraries are members of CARL. Concordia librarians are members of the Concordia University Faculty Association and receive an academic appointment under a collective agreement.

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[4] See http://archive.caut.ca/pages.asp?page=412&lang=1.

[5] One addition could be made to Schrader's list: Canada's newest librarian association, the Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians (CAPAL). Formed after the publication of his article, it includes "the pursuit of scholarship and professional creative endeavours in academic librarianship" in its statement of principles. See http://capalibrarians.org/membership/

[6] The CARL 2010-2012 strategic plan is no longer available online, but see Schrader, Shiri, and Williamson 149: "the 2010–2012 strategic plan of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL), the leadership organization for the Canadian research library community, calls on the Association to 'work to develop research skills in research libraries and to promote evidence-based librarianship'." The *Core Competencies for 21st Century CARL Librarians* may be found at http://www.carl-abrc.ca/uploads/pdfs/core_comp_profile-e.pdf.

McGill librarians also receive an academic appointment, but membership in the faculty association, the McGill Association of University Teachers, is voluntary.[7]

At both institutions, librarians are hired into tenure-track positions with formal regulations and procedures for reappointment and tenure. As Schrader concluded from the Canadian landscape, librarians at both institutions have experienced increasing expectations for research involvement and output (297). There is open dialogue about the role that research plays in the professional responsibilities of academic librarians at Concordia and McGill and the need for clarification of what constitutes reasonable or superior performance of research and scholarly activities. The evidence-based librarianship movement has also reached the universities with librarians being asked to show the impact of their research contributions.

CARL Librarians' Research Institute (LRI)

In June 2012, the first CARL LRI was held at the University of Windsor. The LRI was repeated at the University of Regina in 2013 and will take place at Carleton University in 2014. The Institute was created to serve as a systematic nationwide initiative "to help support librarians in meeting research expectations" (Jacobs and Berg 227). The LRI was the result of the combined efforts of a program committee and planning committee, including seven peer mentors who are talented and experienced librarian researchers. The four-day event was attended by 29 librarians from 24 CARL member institutions. Three principles guided how the LRI would support librarian researchers: first, a strengths-based approach to focus on the qualities and skills participants already possessed; second, rather than simply teaching research skills, the focus was on developing research-enabling habits of mind; and third, a peer-to-peer format building on the expertise already held by Canadian academic librarians (Jacobs and Berg 229).

LRI Content and Learning Objectives

There were four main themes for the Institute's content: (1) balancing research and practice, (2) research processes and planning, (3) research approaches and methodology, and (4) dissemination and professional contributions (Jacobs and Berg 229). Learning objectives were achieved through presentations by peer mentors, group discussions on provided questions, group and individual activities, individual guided reflections, suggested and required readings, and opportunities for networking. A binder of materials for the Institute was provided for each participant. Of particular use were the frameworks for planning provided in the group and individual activities. Four days of rigorously thinking about and planning how to pursue research was a helpful exercise.

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[7] The McGill Association of University Teachers (MAUT) is not a union, but it is a member of both the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) and La Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d'université (FQPPU). The purpose of MAUT is to promote collegial governance and academic freedom. Librarian members form the Librarians' Section of MAUT. Membership is dependent on the payment of annual dues.

Each peer mentor at the LRI had four to five participants with whom he or she worked closely. The peer mentors followed up with participants over the following year. A Facebook group was also created for the 2012 cohort as a place to share news about publications by or about LRI organizers and participants, share articles and items of interest, and announce conference and event information including opportunities for submitting proposals.

A "Partnership" is Born

The Preparation

When CARL held its inaugural Librarians' Research Institute, McGill and Concordia Universities were permitted to send two librarians each. April Colosimo and Megan Fitzgibbons from McGill University attended, along with Pamela Carson and Michelle Lake from Concordia University. The universities are geographically well placed for collaboration; however, there was not a lot of opportunity (outside of association- or institution-related conferences) for the librarians from both universities to come together and discuss their research.

As part of the Institute's mandate, participants were encouraged to do work at their home universities to foster a research culture (Jacobs and Berg 228). At the conclusion of the LRI, there was a discussion with both the mentors and participants to come up with ways of continuing the work of the Institute, and one of the suggestions was to set up a group to support research in our own libraries. Colosimo, Fitzgibbons, Carson and Lake started initial discussions at the Institute about setting up a McGill-Concordia research network among librarian colleagues.

Fitzgibbons kept the momentum going by keeping everyone in contact and pushing ahead with the idea for a McGill-Concordia research partnership after the group returned to Montreal from Windsor. The group met several times to set up the initial infrastructure.

Fitzgibbons was integral in founding the group but was unable to participate as a facilitator as she had moved on to another position outside Montreal. Brian McMillan, a colleague from McGill Library with a keen interest in library and information science research and support, then joined the group.

The focus was on librarians at McGill and Concordia Universities because they are geographically close and had both sent representatives to the LRI in Windsor. The goal was to keep the scale of the research partnership manageable since there were only four facilitators to help organize the meetings, and the venues would need to be at either Concordia or McGill.

The initiative was supported by library administrators at both university libraries.

The Librarians' Research Partnership

The name *Librarians' Research Partnership* (LRP) was chosen for the group. The vision for the LRP was to create a semi-informal learning opportunity, like a workshop. The goal was to focus on stimulating research rather than showcasing it as there are many well-established venues for that purpose nationally, provincially, and locally. The LRP was to be practical and supportive to those in the early years of their research career, focusing on giving new tenure-track librarians opportunities to connect with each other and with those librarians having more established research portfolios.

The mandate or purpose of the LRP was to build a research community among librarians at Concordia and McGill Universities and to implement one of the goals of the CARL LRI, namely to take knowledge and energy from the LRI back to home institutions.

The LRP was created to foster research partnerships and collaboration among librarians at Concordia and McGill and, in particular, to act as a support for those librarians new to the research process and culture. Concordia and McGill Libraries encourage and support engagement in research and professional development by allotting time and resources. The founders of the LRP knew, however, that much more could be gained by creating a forum where learning, planning, and collaboration between librarian researchers was supported on a regular basis.

The Mechanics of the LRP

The group set out to meet once a month, alternating between the university campuses. Colleagues were invited by email to participate, and meetings took place during work hours, beginning in February 2013.

A LinkedIn group was created in February 2013, and librarians from both universities were invited to join. The LinkedIn group became a place to provide updates on the activities and discussions that occurred during the LRP meetings and to encourage individual connections among librarian researcher colleagues. It was decided not to have a Microsoft SharePoint site or a Facebook group because of limitations with both platforms. LinkedIn was preferred over Facebook because of LinkedIn's status as a *professional* social networking site. A SharePoint site was less attractive because of the technical requirements involved with getting user profiles and permissions set up. Many of the librarians at both universities were already LinkedIn members. The LinkedIn group proved to be popular, with 40 members as of May 2014.

Content

Each meeting incorporated CARL LRI hands-on activities or a central research theme (such as barriers or research methods) into the discussion. Carson, Colosimo, Lake and McMillan, who have varying levels of research experience, intended to act as facilitators rather than leaders. The style was an informal peer-to-peer model which differed from the CARL LRI where the mentors were librarians with extensive research experience.

The LRP was based on the four broad themes covered in the CARL LRI. A variety of topics were covered in the workshops such as: how to develop an individual research trajectory, setting short- and long-term goals, evaluating appropriate methodologies, and selecting conferences and publication venues.

A total of eight meetings were held during 2013. The first meeting was well attended with over 30 participants, which signalled that there was a need for this kind of support and dialogue in the community.

The content and activities of each meeting were as follows:

Date	Content	Activities
February 2013	Introduction to the CARL LRI and the concept of the LRP bringing that material and research culture to a wider community of librarians	Small group discussions and individual reflective work about the role of research for librarians
March 2013	Research barriers and enablers	Identification of research barriers and brainstorming of strategies to overcome these obstacles (Materials used: post-it notes and markers)
April 2013	Research processes and planning; how to identify one's research goals or trajectory in the short, intermediate, and long term	Development of a draft "program of research" for sustainable research throughout one's career
June 2013	Planning a research program and building a research journey	Concept mapping (original content not included in LRI) introduced
July 2013	Approaches and methodologies in LIS research	Discussions about methodology (I): semi-structured interviews and focus groups, surveys, and citation analysis; the facilitators and group members bringing their experience and advice
August 2013	Approaches and methodologies in LIS research	Discussions about methodology (II): phenomenology, the Delphi Method communication technique, and conceptual frameworks for research; also, discussed: alternatives to traditional article publishing, such as book reviews and evidence summaries
October 2013	Dissemination, professional contributions, and research culture	Research dissemination (I): Methods of research dissemination, the distinction between dissemination and professional contributions, and their role in the development

		of a research culture; Thinking about common dissemination problems and suggesting solutions
November 2013	Dissemination, professional contributions, and research culture	Research dissemination (II): How to create a research dissemination plan

Participants

The meetings were generally well attended, and there were a number of colleagues who attended every meeting. There were both logistical and timing challenges mostly related to room locations and bookings. Monthly meetings did not take place in May (prime conference season in librarianship) or September (arguably the busiest time of year for academic libraries).

What became very central and valuable in these meetings were the discussions around research processes, issues, and challenges. The participants varied greatly in their experience levels: there were new tenure-track librarians, mid-career librarians and senior level librarians. A lively discussion about research ethics approval took place, with contributions from several librarians who had experience with this and could offer insight into how to navigate the process. There was also a good discussion during the research methodology meetings of what had worked and not worked well for our participants in the past, as well as suggestions for resources to help.

Many participants of the LRP both anecdotally and formally provided the facilitators with feedback on the benefits of the group. Overall, participants noted an increase in confidence and motivation about research, which was also an outcome of the CARL LRI. Having a supportive venue where colleagues could share ideas, successes, and even failures, significantly improved the overall research culture for individuals.

Partnerships for Professional Development

The partnership approach to professional development embraced by the LRP had several advantages. Joining together to contribute to the local research culture created a sense of community, opened the lines of communication on research practices, and led to peer teaching of the knowledge and skills required to embark on projects.

In expanding collaborations beyond individual units, branch libraries and institutions, the LRP created a community of librarians with similar interests. This gave access to colleagues that individuals may not have had prior opportunity to interact with and learn from. Members provided support and feedback during the meetings as well as mentorship outside of the regularly scheduled times. They also assisted each other by pointing out relevant resources, literature, and potential collaborators.

Prior to the LRP there were topics of conversation that were not often discussed among librarians from these different institutions. As a result, the group opened up about the challenges that they were facing in the research process: for example, in identifying new areas of study, dealing with gaps in knowledge related to particular methods, and finding the time to dedicate to research. It was beneficial to hear a mixture of librarians at different stages in their careers share strategies on staying motivated throughout the planning, research, and writing process.

Working as a partnership encouraged engagement with discussion topics and facilitated peer learning. Rather than taking on a teaching role, facilitators allowed members to share their expertise and experiences. The LRP also benefited from positive group chemistry and a respectful atmosphere.

Another advantage of the partnership is that continuity worked well for professional development. Rather than meeting just once to share lessons learned, participants worked towards extending the conversation and building a community. It is easy to lose momentum if the conversation stops, if you stop meeting or stop posting in community spaces like LinkedIn.

A Recipe for Success

Factors that contributed to the success of the LRP for the professional development of librarians were the physical proximity of the universities and the similarities in workplace culture and values. The fact that the librarian researchers are working in the same city, on campuses within walking distance, allowed for face-to-face meetings between the facilitators and with the whole group. Beyond proximity, the libraries are also close culturally. They serve similar user groups and are faced with the same challenges, leading to an overlap in research interests among the librarians. Many of the librarians had met previously at events, and working in the same area meant that they had other professional activities in common. In addition to conferences and activities coordinated by local associations, Concordia Libraries organizes an annual Library Research Forum as a venue for librarians, archivists, graduate students, teaching faculty, and information professionals to discuss and promote their work.[8] McGill librarians are regular participants in this Forum.

Participants in the CARL LRI, who are encouraged to build on their work at the Institute, are natural candidates to establish programs similar to the McGill-Concordia LRP. Obtaining permission to share course materials can be a first step in the creation of a professional development partnership. Having the material from CARL was highly beneficial in structuring meetings and guiding discussions. It also made a difference that members from both universities had participated in the LRI and that enough time had passed for them to reflect on the content. Without the strict timetable that accompanies training workshops and institutes, partnership facilitators took their time and explored the content over several meetings or used it as a base to go beyond what was initially

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[8] See http://library.concordia.ca/about/staff/forum.php

covered. The future of this professional development endeavour will require that we keep the partnership alive. The involvement of more recent LRI attendees from both universities will help sustain this initiative.

The Future of the LRP

In 2013, the LRP facilitators exhausted all of the existing activities and materials from the CARL LRI curriculum. The next step is to evaluate the LRP and refocus its mandate. Input was solicited from LRP participants who offered some interesting ideas such as establishing forums where librarians can share research in progress and receive informal feedback from colleagues, training in specific research methodologies by experts, creating research agendas, or as a group brainstorming research ideas or identifying gaps in LIS literature that could invite further research. There were also several suggestions to find more time for a series of workshops and for the group to spend more time together learning from (potentially non-librarian) experts and actively participating in the learning process. The authors would like to see the future of the group be determined by its members' needs and wishes.

Conclusion

The future of the LRP is yet to be determined. The authors are considering adopting an approach for the LRP that is complementary to the philosophy of the LRI (a strengths-based approach focusing on participants' actual skills, a focus on honing habits of mind, and a peer-to-peer learning environment [Jacobs and Berg 229]). A growing number of librarians at both McGill and Concordia are LRI alumni, so the group of potential LRP facilitators is getting larger. Still, many of those who attend the LRI are early in their research programs and are quite interested in acquiring discrete research skills such as a more detailed familiarity with qualitative and quantitative methodologies. There is a place for fostering habits of mind, but librarians are also ready to engage in deeper conversations about research steps and find answers to the questions that arise during the research process. A community such as the LRP will be instrumental in supporting a peer-to-peer learning environment, and LRI alumni continue to benefit from networks established at the LRI. Given that librarians are multidisciplinary by nature, bringing in researchers from outside of the librarianship field may also further enrich the community and spur new and novel research projects. The role of librarians as researchers continues to evolve and change, but it is hoped that the LRP can provide a model to other institutions as a support for research communities.

Acknowledgements

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