Supporting a Culture of Scholarship for Academic Librarians

Richard Sapon-White, Valery King, and Anne Christie

Abstract

Academic library faculty require a supportive atmosphere in order to successfully engage in research and publication. At Oregon State University, the Library Faculty Association (LFA) provides avenues for peer criticism of manuscripts and presentations and for the discussion of professional issues. A survey of LFA members on their level of participation in the association and their attitudes toward its various programs revealed that most were frequent participants in LFA activities and had a high regard for them. Differences in response were found between tenured and untenured faculty. Strategies for increasing the association's impact are suggested.

Introduction

Academic librarianship is a composite of the practice of librarianship, scholarly work, and institutional and professional service.¹ For academic librarians to be successful, they need to integrate scholarship into their other activities. However, while many academic librarians in the United States are required to conduct research and publish in order to earn tenure, there is a common sentiment that many librarians lack the research training,
grant-writing skills, and release time to pursue scholarly activities. Library faculty may enter academia with little or no experience participating in a scholarly community.

The challenge for academic libraries is to support their faculty in the culture of scholarship. Library faculty are expected to engage in developing and evaluating new services by integrating and applying their knowledge of library science to new situations. They are also expected to communicate to their professional peers what they have learned so that their research can be added to the corpus of library science knowledge. Support can be provided via subscription and routing of professional journals, funding research proposals, providing release time for research, and subsidizing travel to conferences and workshops, among other practices.

Beyond these measures, there is also a social context for supporting scholarly activities. Academic librarians need to have the time and occasion to interact with each other so that they can test ideas, learn from one another, and critique each other's efforts. When a formal structure is in place for these activities, an atmosphere is created that facilitates librarians collaborating on projects. Some academic libraries accomplish this by sponsoring research committees and library faculty associations.

Oregon State University Libraries has long provided professional development support for its academic library faculty in the form of release time for scholarly activities and funding for travel to conferences and workshops. In the early 1990s, the libraries sponsored a library faculty association for librarians to report on campus committees and conferences recently attended, as well as to discuss professional issues. The libraries also supported a seminar series in which library faculty spoke about recent projects or overseas professional travel. Both the association and the seminar series functioned
independently of one another, but they ceased by the mid-1990s as a result of changes in organizational structure within the university.

**About this time a requirement for library faculty to have a second master's degree in addition to the MLS was dropped.** Changes in how scholarship was viewed on campus resulted in increasing pressures on library faculty to publish. In this environment, librarians missed the collegial support provided by the aforementioned association and seminar series.

The OSU Libraries' faculty re-established the Library Faculty Association (LFA) in 1998. Two authors of this article were involved in drafting the organization's charter and later served as officers. The association provides a framework to support a culture of scholarship in the libraries by creating a variety of venues in which library faculty discuss research-in-progress and present completed projects to colleagues.

Five years after the inception of the association, we evaluated whether this structure and set of professional development activities fulfilled the perceived need for support of scholarship. We asked current library faculty about their level of participation in association activities and their attitudes toward the association. Our case study provides some baseline information to build on or test in the future. This paper describes the LFA model and a survey assessing its activities.

**Literature Review**

Academic libraries support scholarly activities in a number of different ways. Reviewing articles from various library publications, Bonnie Gratch lists several examples, including
organized groups, mentoring programs, the provision of release time, funding for research, and opportunities for collegial interaction—such as colloquia, guest lectures, and informal "brown bag" discussions.³ In Gratch's opinion, an organized group for supporting research activity is essential in whatever form it might take—whether it is called a committee on library research, a library professional development committee, or a research and publication committee. These groups promote research and publication or solicit and evaluate proposals for release time and funding. While her article provides descriptions of how these groups function, it provides little information about the degree of participation in or attitudes toward these activities. In fact, few of the papers mentioned here evaluate in any detail the activities they describe.

Such organized groups supporting scholarly research have been reported from several different institutions. One of the first reported was an academic library research committee at Ohio State University, described by Miller et al. in 1976.⁴ The purpose of this group was to encourage and support faculty and staff research activities. The committee was responsible for setting guidelines for research time and funding, as well as identifying research projects and article topics. In their evaluation of the group, the authors observed that the committee lacked integration with the library faculty and administration. Librarians had not contacted the committee about proposed research projects or informed it of research activity. At the time the article was written, the committee could not find similar entities at other universities and so spent much time trying to define its purpose and direction.

A similar committee at the University of New Mexico, described in 1982, created a formal process for requesting release time.⁵ The purpose was to encourage library
faculty to engage in creative work, research and publication, with priority given to untenured faculty. After three years, increased research activity among faculty was noted, but no quantification of this was published.

Ronald Fingerson and Aileen Helmick reported on a scholarly writer's support group at Central Missouri State University in 1987. The group supported research and writing by promoting writing collaborations, editing manuscripts, and providing specialist input for statistical methodology. Combining members with specific complementary skills facilitated the production of significant contributions to the professional literature. After a few months of collaboration, the group goal was to produce five articles in the spring term, but there was no indication as to whether the goal was met.

A tenure support group at Texas A&M University was formed in 1991 to meet informally, discussing topics pertinent to tenure and promotion. Open to all librarians whether tenured or not, the brown bag meetings sometimes included invited speakers. The group provided emotional support, a forum for practical ideas, discussions of the institution's resources, speakers on the tenure process, and the sharing of research projects. Members of the group were surveyed for the impact that the group had on them. They reported that information from the group resulted in such things as having a poster session accepted, obtaining research design help, receiving an ALA appointment, and organizing a tenure dossier. Less tangible results of the survey included the sharing of common experiences and anxieties, networking with colleagues, finding out about others' projects, and generating ideas for research, as well as providing an open forum for discussion in an informal atmosphere.
Gloriana St. Clair reported on a group of women from different disciplines (not just librarians) at Oregon State University who met weekly to critique each other's manuscripts and discuss research methods. She mentioned the importance of informal peer review of articles for polishing one's writing before submission and briefly described the idea of a "manuscript reading group." No formal evaluation of the role of the group was presented in this article.  

Mentoring is also described as a way to support librarians in their scholarly activities. At SUNY Albany, a mentoring program for untenured librarians was begun in 1989. Feeling Due to pressure for librarians to meet non-library faculty expectations for research and publication, the program was initiated to assimilate new hires, promote their professional development, and help them advance in their careers. Five librarians were matched with mentors, and group activities were held in an informal setting. After six months, mentored faculty were satisfied with their mentors and voiced positive feelings for the program overall, but many of the goals of the program were not met.

Donna Keyse and colleagues described an interesting mentoring program begun in 2001 at Oakland University and offer advice on what made their program successful. Their associate dean met monthly with four untenured librarians in informal meetings. Goals, concerns, and frustrations were discussed, with the associate dean-mentor offering encouragement and advice. The authors, who were the mentored faculty in this program, thought that their program was a very good one. They offer their view on what makes a good mentor: keeping the environment for the meetings casual and neutral, encouraging active participation in committee meetings, critiquing and editing papers, suggesting
topics for research, sharing research findings, and encouraging research and publication after achieving tenure.

These articles describe efforts to support library research and publication. In most cases there is little evaluation of the impact of these efforts. They tend to be pilot projects, in which a small number of people participate, and lack integration with other parts of the library hierarchy—such as the administration, a faculty association, or a promotion and tenure committee.

The Library Faculty Association at Oregon State University

Oregon State University is a land, sea, and space grant institution with Carnegie Doctoral/Research–Extensive status. It has approximately 15,400 undergraduates, 3,400 graduate students, and 2,200 teaching and research faculty. The OSU Libraries consist of a central facility on the main campus and two branch libraries in remote locations. The collection contains approximately 1.7 million volumes and nearly 10,000 periodicals. In February 2003, the OSU Libraries employed 80 staff, 24 of whom were librarians on tenure track with academic faculty status.

Expectations for tenure and promotion include excellence in performance of assigned duties, scholarly work that is published and verified by peers (such as, but not limited to, peer-reviewed journal articles), and involvement in professional service, especially at the national level. In 1995 the university embarked on a comprehensive revision of its promotion and tenure guidelines, in part to recognize the variety of creative activities in which faculty engage. There are no specific quantitative measures required
for the attainment of tenure and promotion. However, the minimum involvement in scholarly activity for faculty on the tenure track accounts for 15 percent of a person's position description.11

The head of an individual's department reviews each faculty member annually. A review of progress toward tenure is made during the third year by the libraries' promotion and tenure committee. Application for promotion and tenure is made in the sixth year after a faculty member is hired. Both the libraries' and the university's promotion and tenure committees review the dossiers. Following the granting of tenure, faculty members undergo a thorough review every five years by the libraries' promotion and tenure committee, in accordance with university guidelines. Continued contributions in the areas of scholarship and service are regarded as essential for satisfactory performance.

All members of the library faculty belong to the LFA, including both those in tenure track appointments and professional faculty. According to its charter, the purpose of the association is to:

1. provide a forum for the discussion of issues in library and information science and higher education,
2. promote and support the research and scholarship activities of the library faculty, and
3. provide a forum for the discussion of library faculty concerns regarding library and campus issues and, when necessary, advocate and publish positions on these issues.
The LFA's goals are pursued through meetings, seminars, research presentations, and a research and writing group. With the support of the libraries' administration, a block of time on Friday mornings is set aside for LFA activities or personal research time.

Meetings

The LFA meets every other month from September to June. These meetings provide a venue to share information about individual professional activities, such as attendance at conferences and participation in committees, to discuss issues of professional concern in librarianship, and to debate university matters. The LFA does not deal with the day-to-day business of running the libraries.

Seminar Series

The seminar series is modeled on the common practice of academic departments on campus, many of which hold weekly seminars during the academic year. The LFA president appoints a coordinator each year. The seminar coordinator is responsible for the planning and logistical arrangements for the seminar series, including calls for speakers, publicity, room reservations, and equipment.

Seminars are held every other month during the academic year. The opportunity to speak is first offered to members of the libraries' faculty. Invitations are also extended to outside presenters whose work pertains to libraries, such as faculty who are working
on digital library projects. The seminars consist of formal presentations with time for questions from the audience. They are widely advertised both on and off campus.

*Research Presentations*

A recent addition to LFA activities in 2002–2003 was the establishment of a research presentation series. Research presentations are scheduled in alternate months from the seminar series but may also be arranged on an ad hoc basis. In contrast with the seminar series, the research presentations are an in-house opportunity for less formal presentations, allowing for feedback from colleagues when a project is in its beginning stages. Presentations also provide a means for faculty who are coming up for promotion and tenure to familiarize peers with their body of research. Research presentations are sometimes given as rehearsals for upcoming conferences, as well.

*Research and Writing Group*

The purpose of the Research and Writing Group is to serve as a support group for faculty engaged in research and creative projects. The group meets each month and is a forum for sharing ideas and asking for advice about potential research projects, reviewing manuscripts and poster presentations, and assisting with grant applications. The Research and Writing Group coordinator is appointed by the LFA president and is responsible for setting agendas for meetings. However, faculty who are working on projects, papers, and poster sessions are expected to contribute to the agenda. Manuscripts are circulated
before the group meets so that other librarians can review them beforehand. The Research and Writing Group also provides a forum for faculty to find opportunities for collaboration with colleagues and hear about the research and projects in which other librarians are engaged.

Untenured faculty are strongly encouraged to participate in Research and Writing Group meetings. Even though the LFA concerns itself with more than the attainment of promotion and tenure for individuals, it does have an important role in assisting new librarians through the process, both for their own as well as for the libraries' sake.

Methodology

A short questionnaire was developed in consultation with the university's Survey Research Center to measure the participation of OSU librarians in LFA activities and to solicit their views on the effectiveness of the association. All 24 tenure-track and tenured librarians employed at Oregon State University as of February 28, 2003, were invited to participate.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section contained questions about whether the librarian was tenured, had ever written a thesis for a degree, or had received any training in research methods as part of the library degree. The second part listed the various activities of the association and asked about the frequency of the librarian's participation in those activities over the past year. The last section asked if the librarian agreed or disagreed with statements concerning the value of these activities. Respondents were also given the opportunity to append free-form comments.
An e-mail message was sent to the libraries' faculty announcing the upcoming distribution of the questionnaire. Three days after the e-mail announcement, the questionnaire was distributed to each potential participant. Participants returned it to the university Survey Research Center to be compiled, rather than directly to us, in order to ensure the anonymity of respondents. After a week, a reminder was sent to those who had not returned their forms to ask them to complete and return the questionnaire. Results were reported to us by the center.

Results

Out of a population of 24 possible respondents, 16 completed the survey thereby yielding a 67 percent response rate.

Profile of Surveyed Community

Thirteen respondents had taken a research methods course or written a thesis or both. This included nine who had taken a research methods course as part of their library science studies and seven who had written a thesis or dissertation for either their MLS or some other advanced degree. Experience as an academic librarian in a tenure-track or tenured position ranged from four to thirty years, at either OSU or another institution. Half had been academic librarians for eleven years or less; three had only worked in academic libraries for four years. Eleven were tenured faculty, and five were untenured.
As a way of checking to see if non-respondents were similar to respondents, the tenure status of all 24 possible respondents was compared to that of the 16 actual respondents. Of the 16 respondents, 11 had tenure (69 percent) as compared to 13 of the 24 library faculty members (54 percent).

*Attendance at LFA Activities*

Of the 16 faculty members who responded to the survey, 13 indicated that they attended most or all of the faculty meetings scheduled since September 2002 (fig. 1). Twelve had attended most of the presentations in the LFA seminar series. Participation in the Research and Writing Group meetings was less, with only five respondents stating that they had attended most or all of these sessions.

*Attitudes*

Attitudes toward LFA meetings are reflected in figure 2. Fourteen respondents agreed that LFA meetings were valuable forums for professional issues and that the meetings helped to make them feel connected with colleagues in the libraries. All of the tenured librarians agreed with these two statements. However, only three of the untenured librarians agreed with the statements.

Seven respondents agreed "somewhat" that the LFA meetings helped them to feel connected with the campus community. Four strongly disagreed with this statement. Only
four of those with tenure versus three of untenured librarians agreed that the meetings helped them to feel connected with the campus community.

While all respondents agreed that the seminar series and research presentations provided presenters with an opportunity for improving presentation skills (fig. 3), seven of those with tenure reported strongly agreeing with this statement. However, only two of untenured faculty strongly agreed. Fifteen respondents agreed that the seminar series and research presentations contributed to their professional development. Six respondents agreed with the statement, "When I have a presentation to give at a conference, I try to present first at an LFA-sponsored meeting."

Fourteen respondents agreed that the Research and Writing Group was an important way to inform colleagues about their research (fig. 4). Only nine agreed that the Research and Writing Group provides useful input for their papers and presentations. It is reasonable to assume, however, that non-respondents and those marking "no basis for opinion" for this item on the questionnaire represent those who do not attend the group. If only those responding on the agree/disagree scale are considered, then nine of these eleven respondents agreed that the Research and Writing Group provides useful input.

Overall, 14 respondents agreed that the LFA had contributed to creating a scholarly environment for OSU librarians. This includes five who agreed strongly with this statement.

Discussion
The data collected provide useful insights into the role of the LFA in creating a scholarly environment for the libraries' faculty. A number of patterns are readily apparent from the data, even though the small size of the study group and the lack of randomness in selection of subjects preclude statistical analysis. Although it is difficult to make broad generalizations from these results, they suggest a number of areas that could be tested in future studies.

An unexpectedly high proportion of respondents reported having had research training in the form of research methodology courses or thesis writing experience. This contradicts the perception cited above that academic librarians are unprepared for the rigors of academia. Such preparation, while undoubtedly useful, is not sufficient to transform students into seasoned scholars. Time and effort are needed to produce a publishable paper, an endeavor that may take as long as two years from start to finish. Institutional support is necessary for academic librarians to succeed as scholars, and this is certainly reflected in the generally positive attitudes of the respondents to the association's activities.

Respondents were disproportionately comprised of tenured faculty members. The majority of the respondents' attitudes toward the association would therefore be expected to be those of veteran librarians well adjusted to academic life. Tenured librarians' support for scholarly activities and their expectations for the LFA might differ significantly from those of untenured librarians. However, it should be kept in mind that untenured faculty members at OSU are a heterogeneous group. They are not necessarily without experience as academic librarians, as some have worked many years in faculty positions at other academic institutions before coming to OSU. The analysis below
highlights the differences between the majority of survey participants and the small group who lacked tenure.

Attendance at LFA meetings is very high among both tenured and untenured librarians. This is especially noteworthy since attendance at these meetings (as at all LFA activities) is optional. The membership values these meetings as venues for discussing professional issues, as well as promoting connections among members. Talking about a **broader array of topics** than would arise in day-to-day interactions provides an opportunity for intellectual reflection on one's work and helps to cement the bonds that tie academic librarians together. One faculty member commented that the LFA meetings provided a "forum for communication with colleagues who are not part of my usual contact group."

Tenured librarians seem to value the LFA meetings more than untenured ones despite the fact that both attend meetings in similar percentages. Since untenured faculty members may be new to the profession, or at least new to the university, they may not yet feel integrated into the profession or the university. Possibly a lack of background knowledge concerning issues discussed at meetings or the ways in which those issues affect individuals or the libraries' faculty collectively are reasons for differing attitudes. For example, the LFA recently debated the relative merits of the OSU Libraries' placement in the university hierarchy. Since 1996, the libraries have reported to the vice provost for information services rather than the university provost. To participate in the debate, one needed to understand and perhaps have experienced the history of the change in reporting structure. An understanding of the ramifications for political power within the university and budgeting issues also would enable LFA members to better participate,
in what was acknowledged to be, an important conversation. A faculty member who lacked this knowledge or experience could sense the importance of the debate but might feel unable to participate in the discussion. In-depth interviews with the libraries' faculty concerning their participation in such discussions and any obstacles to that participation might better clarify the role that these issues play in faculty attitudes toward the LFA meetings.

Many respondents disagreed with the statement that the meetings promote a sense of connectedness to the campus community. This was surprising given the level of participation in campus activities exhibited by our libraries' faculty. For example, representatives of the libraries sit on the Faculty Senate and serve as members of university committees, reporting on their activities at LFA meetings. Tenured librarians felt the disconnection more than the untenured librarians, perhaps because of their longer experience on campus, reflecting frustration with campus politics. Alternatively, tenured librarians may lack a feeling of connection through the LFA meetings, because it is their primary contact with campus issues. Untenured librarians may feel a connection with campus that has nothing to do with LFA meetings but based, instead, on success in recent years receiving appointments to campus committees.

The seminar series and research presentations were also very well attended. These sessions were viewed as valuable for improving presentation skills, in addition to contributing to the professional development of the libraries' faculty. One comment, referring to both the research presentations and the Research and Writing Group, stated, "I've learned a great deal from this and really appreciate the growth potential!"
Curiously, although the seminar series and research presentations were well attended, the number of those who used the LFA research presentations as rehearsal opportunities for conference presentations was somewhat small. One would expect that those making presentations at upcoming conferences would take advantage of the opportunity to present first to their colleagues. However, as these sessions are scheduled in advance and occur only once a month, it may be difficult for faculty to time their presentation preparation to coincide with these pre-set dates. They may not be far enough along in their research. Toward the end of the past year, several research presentations were arranged on an "as needed" basis to accommodate the libraries’ faculty's schedules. LFA members need to be made more aware of the flexibility in scheduling these sessions. Not only would presenters benefit from the chance to rehearse, but their colleagues also learn about presentation skills by watching and offering constructive criticism.

Attendance at the Research and Writing Group sessions was the lowest of all LFA activities. One might reasonably suppose that only [by - delete] those who lack research and writing experience or are untenured attend the group. However, there is no indication in the survey data that those without tenure or research training attended any more frequently than those with tenure or research training.

Some LFA members seek input for their writing from outside of the Research and Writing Group. "I don't see the group, per se, as providing valuable input into my writing, but individuals do. …The follow-up by specific individuals is often most productive.” This particular comment suggests that some librarians have developed relationships on their own with colleagues whom they respect and trust for advice on their scholarly activities. It is not known whether these contacts are "collegial" (i.e., interactions between
librarians in a similar career stage) or "mentoring" (i.e., interactions where a more experienced librarian is assisting a less experienced one).

The Research and Writing Group is lauded as a good place to find out what others are doing, but it is not as widely perceived as a good venue for critiques on one's writing. There is little in the written comments of the survey to indicate that authors are put off by harsh criticism, but ineffective criticism could discourage one from making the effort to participate actively in such a group. Providing quality feedback is an art that all the libraries' faculty should master. Perhaps by improving the quality of feedback, participation in the group could be increased.

Unlike the other LFA activities, participation in this group requires advance preparation by reading manuscripts. One possible explanation for non-participation in the group is that those who have not done the advance reading probably skip attending the session. With many faculty already swamped with a variety of responsibilities, it can be difficult to find the time to read others' drafts.

In spite of the relatively low attendance, the Research and Writing Group is viewed by many as a useful means of keeping informed of research activities in the OSU Libraries. Those who do attend value the input they receive. Comments from respondents reflect the generally positive attitude toward the group: "essential for those pursuing tenure, useful for those holding tenure if they haven't already honed their writing skills," "invaluable," "an important forum for mentoring librarians." The group is filling an important need of at least a small proportion of the total LFA membership.

Overall, participation in nearly all activities was very high, and attitudes toward the LFA were overwhelmingly positive. The LFA is satisfying a significant need for the
libraries' faculty. The organization has certainly succeeded in reaching many of its objectives, but there remain areas where improvements could be made.

Conclusion

Acceptance of the LFA by the libraries' faculty and active participation in its activities reflect an established group, which is perceived as a positive influence on members' work lives. One person commented, "The LFA as a whole has been very good for our faculty—it has helped us think of ourselves as a faculty." Another wrote, "The Library Faculty Association helps to provide recognition and support for the libraries' faculty engaged in scholarship."

Nevertheless, as with any relatively new organization, there is room for improvement. The LFA can take steps to develop the feeling of connection to the campus community. One way is to require consistent reporting at LFA meetings from librarians serving on the Faculty Senate or campus committees and task forces. To help librarians develop awareness of campus issues, Faculty Senate officers and university administrators could be invited as speakers at meetings.

Further research may be useful in identifying how the LFA could better acclimate junior faculty to the scholarly and creative demands of their new positions. With a relatively short timeframe until being reviewed for tenure, it is important for junior faculty to be integrated as quickly as possible. This might be best accomplished through mentoring or orientation programs. By building on other libraries' example, the
association could create and support mentoring relationships between senior, tenured faculty and new hires.

A workshop on providing constructive criticism of scholarly research, perhaps offered periodically, could improve the workings of the Research and Writing Group and perhaps, thereby, boost attendance. Ensuring practice opportunities for all presentations intended for outside audiences would also help to expand participation in the LFA's activities.

Since the LFA is still in its infancy, we anticipate that it will become stronger as new hires "grow up" with it. At the present time, none of the libraries' faculty have completed the tenure cycle with the LFA in place. To further determine the impact that the association has had on OSU librarians, we intend to follow up this study with one examining the impact of the LFA on scholarly productivity.

This assessment of OSU's Library Faculty Association identifies some of the strengths and weaknesses of this model for supporting scholarship in an academic library. We hope that other institutions will find this study useful and adapt the model to their own situations.

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Richard Sapon-White is **Monographs Cataloging Unit Head**, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR; he may be contacted via e-mail at: Richard.Sapon-White@oregonstate.edu.

Valery King is **Social Science and Government Information Librarian**, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR; she may be contacted via e-mail at: Valery.King@oregonstate.edu.

Anne Christie is **Biological Sciences Librarian**, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR; she may be contacted via e-mail at: Anne.Christie@oregonstate.edu.

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