

Taking Charge of your LIS Career: Personal Strategies, Institutional Programs, Strong Libraries
12 -14 August 2015
Cape Town, South Africa

Building Success in Research and Scholarship Through Peer Mentoring

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Abstract:

Research and scholarship contribute to personal career advancement, and to evidence-based librarianship which seeks to improve library services by encouraging librarians to incorporate the results of qualitative and quantitative research into their daily practice. Peer mentoring is an effective means of building success in research and scholarship for librarians by providing opportunities for support and mutual learning. This paper describes current peer mentoring initiatives relating to research and scholarship for Canadian academic librarians at the institutional and national level, with a focus on the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) Librarians' Research Institute. The CARL Librarians' Research Institute was founded in 2012 to "provide practicing academic librarians in Canada an opportunity to immerse themselves in sustained conversations and activities related to scholarly research, inquiry, and publishing" (Canadian Association of Research Libraries 2015).

Keywords: Library research, academic libraries, peer mentoring

Introduction

There is an expectation that librarians working in Canadian research libraries contribute to the knowledge base of their professional discipline as well as "align themselves more centrally with the broader academic process of scholarly communication" (Schrader 2010). As Schrader writes, "engagement with the scholarly communication process is increasingly recognized as a core value" (Schrader 2010). Underpinning the importance of research and scholarship for librarians is the growing emphasis on evidence-based librarianship which seeks to improve library services by encouraging librarians to incorporate the results of qualitative and quantitative research into their daily practice. Evidence-based librarianship (EBL) has its origins in the health sciences library field which was influenced by the evidence-based medicine and health care movement (Eldridge 2000). EBL is defined by Booth as "an approach to information practice that promotes the collection, interpretation, and integration of valid, important and applicable user-reported, librarian-observed and

research-derived evidence. The best available evidence moderated by user needs and preferences, is applied to improve the quality of professional judgements” (Booth 2002, 53).

In Canada the majority of academic librarians are members of associations -- in most cases certified unions -- that include teaching faculty. There is an expectation that they engage in research and scholarship for the purposes of evaluation for promotion and tenure. They are eligible for sabbaticals, research leaves and funding to support activities relating to research and scholarship. Being perceived as scholars in their own right aligns academic librarians more closely with teaching faculty. What is important is that librarians derive personal satisfaction from engaging in research and scholarship. In a 2007 study relating to the scholarship of librarians employed at Canadian research universities Fox reported that “the top ranking motivators were related to professional development and improvement of library services rather than increased income or job security. Despite the fact that scholarship activity is often a requirement for tenure and promotion in universities, it appears that the primary purpose for librarians’ engaging in scholarship is to learn and grow as professionals” (Fox 2007, 6).

The literature identifies a number of barriers to research for librarians. These include lack of time to undertake research within the regular work week, limited access to extended leaves, inadequate financial support for research, insufficient training with respect to the research process and research methods, and a lack of personal self-confidence (Fox 2007; Kennedy and Brancolini 2012). For librarians achieving success in research and scholarship requires both a theoretical and practical understanding of the scholarly communication process, the “system through which research and other scholarly writings are created, evaluated for quality, disseminated to the scholarly community, and preserved for future use” (Association for Research Libraries 2015). It also requires support at the individual and institutional level.

This paper examines the role of peer mentoring as an effective means of building success in research and scholarship for librarians by providing opportunities for support and mutual learning. It discusses current peer mentoring initiatives relating to research and scholarship for librarians employed in Canadian academic libraries at the institutional and national level, with a focus on the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) Librarians’ Research Institute for which the author served as a Peer Mentor in 2013. The paper shares insights from peer mentor-based programs developed for early career librarians that are designed to promote success in research and scholarship, contributing to personal career advancement and to strong libraries through the application of research results into daily practice.

LIS Research Methods Training

A research methods course is part of the standard curriculum in many LIS degree programs. A study published by Luo in 2011 reports that “among the 49 American Library Association (ALA)-accredited LIS degree programs with online information about degree requirements as of February 2010, 61% list research methods as a required course in the curriculum, 4% list it among a cluster of courses that students are required to choose from, and another 4% list it as a strongly recommended course” (Luo 2011, 191). The following is a typical description for a research methods course offering:

[The course] focuses on developing an understanding of appropriate quantitative and qualitative research methodologies and relevant descriptive and inferential statistics for the investigation of both practical and theoretical problems in the information professions. By considering the nature, concepts,

and logic of the research enterprise, permits a critically informed assessment of published research, including data gathering and data analysis procedures.

The course offers an overview of the different approaches, considerations and challenges involved in social research. The objectives of the course are to provide students with the tools and skills required to understand research terminology and assess published research, identify the types of methods best suited for investigating different types of problems and questions, develop research questions that are based on and build upon a critical appraisal of existing research, design a research proposal, and begin initial preparations for embarking on a new research project. (University of Toronto 2015)

Yet there is evidence that while graduates of LIS programs perceive research methods courses as useful, librarians, once employed, feel ill-prepared to conduct research and to meet the expectations required for promotion and tenure in academic libraries. Luo found that librarians' research participation focused more on reviewing and applying existing research to improve workplace practices and services, and less on conducting original research to solve problems (Luo 2011,199). A 2002 study of LIS practitioners conducted by Powell, Baker and Mika revealed that a little more than half the respondents believed that their LIS master's program prepared them to read and understand research-based publications, but only 30% felt that their master's degree program adequately prepared them to conduct original research (Powell, Baker and Mika 2002, 70-71). Similarly, in 2012 Kennedy and Brancolini reported that only 26 % of academic librarians believed that their LIS master's degrees adequately prepared them to conduct original research (Kennedy and Brancolini 2012, 437). Their study found that "even if their training was sound, by the time librarians are ready to apply a research strategy to a problem in their professional environment, that skill set may be diminished due to the time lag" (Kennedy and Brancolini 2012, 433). Strategies, suggested by survey respondents to make research methods courses more meaningful, include more hands-on practice through completion of a real research project and using practical examples (Luo 2011, 197). Also proposed is having practitioners serve as adjunct faculty or being invited into LIS research methods courses as guest lecturers (Luo 2011,199).

Peer mentoring

Mentoring of librarians is an established and wide-spread practice in libraries. What is the value of peer mentoring as opposed to traditional mentoring? Holbeche describes the difference between mentoring, be it formal or informal, and peer-mentoring as follows:

Peer mentoring can distinguish itself from conventional mentoring in one simple respect; in conventional mentoring, the person being mentored has a development relationship with someone who is more senior in an organization or is more experienced in a particular area of interest to them. Often there is an expectation that career development, usually within the same organization, is part of the mentor's role. In peer mentoring the relationship, as the title implies, is one of equality between members of the peer group. (Holbeche 1996, 24)

Mavrinac describes peer-mentoring as "a peer-to-peer developmental relationship that is premised on a multiple mentor approach in which benefit can be gained from a variety of experiences and people throughout an employee's career" (Mavrinac 2005, 398). According

to Holbeche the value of peer-mentoring lies in its non-hierarchical approach to mentoring, which removes feelings of insecurity, allowing individuals to acknowledge the need for support (Holbeche 1996, 24). Among the characteristics described by Mavrinac that make peer-mentoring ideally suited for building success in research and scholarship are that it is inclusive, learner driven, motivating, mutual, and facilitates a learning culture (Mavrinac 2005, 399).

Various models for peer mentoring to support librarian research, ranging from formal to informal, are used at the institutional level in academic libraries in Canada and beyond. York University Libraries holds an annual research retreat similar to that of Stony Brook University Libraries in the US, where librarians present results of their research or research in progress, followed by questions and discussion (Lieberthal 2009). Concordia University Libraries has extended its annual Research Forum to librarians outside of the institution, providing an opportunity to present completed or in-progress research, practical case studies or projects (Concordia University Libraries 2015).

To facilitate and encourage research and publication among librarians several institutions in the US, such as the University at Buffalo Libraries, have created academic writing support groups (Tysick and Babb 2006) and others, such as East Tennessee State University Library, have formed collaborative writing groups (Campbell, Ellis, and Adebomojo 2012). A number of institutions have implemented programs which are an amalgam and offer a variety of support activities. For example, the City University of New York (CUNY) has a Junior Faculty Research Roundtable for junior library faculty, which hosts invited speakers, structured discussions, and informal conversations about scholarship (Cirasella and Smale 2011). The University of Oregon Libraries provides a seminar series, research presentations, and a research and support group for library faculty (Sapon-White, King and Christie 2004). In Europe, the program at the National University of Ireland Maynooth provides a “blended learning approach” combining three elements: a formal writing seminar; a structured series of online exercises and mentoring support; and two peer-feedback days to support librarians “to develop the motivation and skills to write for publication” (Fallon 2012, 7).

Returning to Canadian institutions, Western University Libraries has formed a Librarian and Archivist Research Support Network, driven and led by peers, which provides a range of programming, such as lectures, workshops, discussions and webinars, based on user research support needs which are periodically reassessed (Meadows et al. 2013). Concordia and McGill University Libraries have formed a Librarians Research Partnership (discussed in greater detail below) to support and foster librarian research at their institutions (Carson et al. 2014).

Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) Librarians’ Research Institute (LRI)

The Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) comprises the larger Canadian university libraries and several major Canadian research library organizations, and in 2010 released “Core Competencies for 21st Century CARL Librarians.” Included in the competencies identified as “required by academic librarians working in an intense 21st Century academic research environment” is the requirement that “all CARL librarians should be knowledgeable of, and commit to, ongoing research and development” through the following:

- Research and publication – contributions through writing, editing, refereeing or reviewing of books, articles or reports

- Conferences – contributions through presentations to professional or scholarly associations/meetings
- Formal study – taken to broaden subject or professional knowledge and may include study for advanced professional and/or related academic qualifications
- Teaching – teaching courses in areas of librarianship, archives or other academic disciplines
- Conference management – planning, organizing or conducting professional programs, workshops, seminars or conferences
- Professional Associations – active participation in professional associations which may include holding executive office, serving on committees, etc.
- Active engagement in community initiatives – especially those associated with their area of professional or subject expertise
- Staying informed – ability to stay abreast of research in a specific area to support a research agenda or to support other work as a librarian within the library
- Research models and methods – knowledge of the fundamentals of qualitative and quantitative research methods including the research process (e.g. question formulation, peer review, etc.)
- Grant writing – knowledge and pursuit of avenues available for grants to facilitate research work

(Canadian Association of Research Libraries 2010)

In 2011 a proposal was submitted by a group of librarians to the CARL Research Libraries Committee for a Librarians' Research Institute (LRI) that would be "developed and delivered by Canadian academic librarians for Canadian academic librarians". It was "founded on the belief that much could be gained by pooling the strengths, expertise, and visions of librarians across Canada and forging and fostering relationships between librarians and institutions". The LRI was designed to bring together peer mentors and participants from across Canada "to provide practicing academic librarians in Canada an opportunity to immerse themselves in sustained conversations and activities related to scholarly research, inquiry, and publishing" (Jacobs and Berg 2013, 227-228). The Institute was also intended to be "a step toward building an infrastructure for librarian researchers across Canada and for building a community of our own researchers in CARL libraries" (Canadian Association of Research Libraries 2015).

The three underlying foundation principles for the LRI were: "focus on strengths not deficits; development of habits of mind not skills; and content created and delivered by librarians for librarians" (Jacobs and Berg 2013, 229). The Institute would be held over four days at a sponsoring CARL library and would provide an intensive workshop experience. The call for five to six Peer Mentors with proven research records and active, sustained research agendas would be nationwide.

The goal was to draw on the pool of significant numbers of Canadian academic librarians already producing high-quality research. Participants (limited to 30) with some experience in research and a "foundational knowledge of research methodologies and skills" would be nominated by and recruited from CARL member libraries (Canadian Association of Research Libraries 2015). Unlike formal LIS research methods courses, the LRI would be an opportunity for practitioners to work with participants on real problems using practical examples. While the Peer Mentors were required to be more experienced researchers they would also benefit from the interaction with participants, reflecting what is described by

Mavrinac as the “mutual” advantage of peer mentoring and contributing to a “learning culture” (Mavrinac 2005, 399).

Leading up to the LRI

Once the Peer Mentors have been selected they participate in weekly intensive planning sessions which include developing and refining the LRI curriculum and preparing Institute materials. Peer Mentor terms of office are staggered to ensure that new Peer Mentors are regularly recruited and that Peer Mentors are provided fresh opportunities to learn from and mentor each other. For the first two years of the Institute the program was developed and delivered working with an Educator Consultant, Dr Gloria Leckie, Professor Emeritus, Faculty of Information & Media Studies, Western University, who provided guidance with respect to curriculum development and pedagogical approaches (Jacobs and Berg 2013, 230). Dr Leckie also worked with Peer Mentors and participants to bridge the divide between formal research methods as taught in LIS programs and the practical application of research methods to practitioner research.

Several months prior to the Institute individual participants are assigned to Peer Mentors, ensuring that each group has a range of backgrounds and abilities; individuals from the same institution are in different groups, providing an opportunity for cross-institutional mentoring. One of the challenges of the LRI is developing and delivering a program that meets the needs of participants with a broad range of research experience as well as varying research interests. Having Peer Mentors with a range of exposure to different research methodologies and methods of dissemination as well as varying disciplinary and/or professional expertise is critical. Opportunities are provided throughout the Institute for participants to meet and discuss their research projects with a Peer Mentor who has a background in a particular method and/or subject area. Participants are asked to complete work in advance in preparation for the Institute and Peer Mentors contact each member of their group asking them to:

- complete a short survey asking them to rate their research experience (on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing little in the way of background in research and professional writing, and 5 designated for those who had designed and implemented research projects and disseminated their findings)
- articulate two personal goals for the Institute
- complete a “Balancing Research and Scholarly Activities Chart” (outlining past activities and projects, work in progress, and future plans)
- complete required readings, and
- locate a research article on their research topic that uses the same or similar method.

LRI Program

The LRI will be offered for the fourth time in 2015. The curriculum of the LRI evolves from Institute to Institute in response to feedback received from Peer Mentors and participants. Initially the program included four themes: balancing research and practice; research approaches and methodology; research processes and planning; and professional contributions. (Jacobs and Berg 2013, 229). This was expanded to six themes the following year.

The program opens with balancing research and practice, which includes examination of the role research plays in work of academic librarians; how research can inform the practice of academic librarians; and how to balance research demands/responsibilities with the day to day responsibilities of academic librarians, including the identification of research enablers

and research barriers. The second theme looks at the formulation of research questions and how to incorporate a theoretical framework into research. The third theme, approaches and methods, is perhaps the most challenging aspect of the program to deliver in the time allotted. It provides an overview of different research methodologies and the evaluation of methodologies for individual research projects. The fourth theme examines the research process and planning, including the identification of research goals and a research plan. Dissemination, including the identification of a plan for dissemination and options and venues for dissemination, is the focus of the fifth theme. The program concludes with a discussion of the various ways individual participants can contribute to the development of a research culture at the local and national level in Canada after completion of the LRI (Canadian Association of Research Libraries, 2013).

The program comprises formal presentations, small group and open discussions, scenario-based exercises, one-on-one consultations between participants and Peer Mentors, and opportunities for individual guided reflection. The formal part of the program is divided up and delivered by individual Peer Mentors on the basis of interest and expertise. One of the benefits of this model is that Peer Mentors have themselves evolved from novice to experienced researcher. They provide a perspective of trial and error and an understanding of the many pitfalls of conducting research. They have undergone the rigours of peer review and have had articles rejected for publication, but have gone on to become successful researchers. This takes away some of the intimidation of conducting research, providing participants with a sense of reassurance and building their confidence.

Peer Mentors also are familiar with formal research processes in place at the institutional level and are able to speak to procedures such as the ethics review process required for research involving human participants. Not to be dismissed is the value of the mentoring that individual participants are able to provide for their own peers, whether it be assisting with refining a research question or suggesting strategies for methods of dissemination, supporting what Mavrinac calls a “multiple mentoring approach” (Mavrinac 2005, 398). As Tiller reports, on her experience at the 2013 LRI, “I received many valuable recommendations, suggestions, and insights from colleagues who have completed similar projects. These insights and suggestions have given me a place to start and a strategy going forward” (Tiller 2013).

Scenario-based exercises, such as creating a physical model of the research process, succeed in breaking up formal instruction, introducing a sense of camaraderie and team building. The small group discussion rotates between peer mentor contact groups and unstructured groups. Peer Mentors facilitate discussion with the use of prompting questions. Quiet unstructured time for guided reflection is provided at the end of the day, allowing participants to consider how what was learned earlier can be applied to their current research projects and what questions they might have. Opportunities are provided for in-depth exploration of research questions with Peer Mentors with relevant expertise. Inevitably certain Peer Mentors are more sought after because their own areas of research (for example, information literacy) are very popular with participants.

Institute participants are then asked to complete a survey evaluating the LRI’s success with respect to outcomes, themes, content, delivery, and format of program amongst other things. It is hoped and anticipated that LRI participants and Peer Mentors will continue to interact and collaborate, and that the mentoring relationship between Peer Mentors and the individuals in their Peer Mentor contact group will continue.

A listserv is created after each LRI to encourage and foster discussions around research. In addition a “Partnership” was formed between the LRI and the Canadian Association for Information Science (CAIS) in 2013. LRI Peer Mentors and participants are invited to present at and participate in the CAIS annual conference at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences (Canadian Association for Information Science 2015). This provides an opportunity for LRI participants to present the research they have conducted since the LRI and also allows them to reconnect in order to further develop partnerships with each other and the broader LIS community. Peer Mentors are invited to serve as peer reviewers for submissions.

Reflections on the LRI

Feedback on the LRI has been extremely positive, spawning a research partnership at the local institutional level modelled on the LRI as well as a number of articles. In 2013 McGill and Concordia University Libraries founded the Librarians’ Research Partnership, inspired by the CARL LRI which was attended by several librarians from those institutions. Taking place over eight meetings it adapted a peer-to-peer model focused on four broad themes: how to develop an individual research trajectory; setting short- and long-term goals; evaluating appropriate methodologies; and selecting conference and publication venues. Hands-on-activities or a central research theme were the focus of each meeting (Carson et al. 2014, 8).

In an article on her experience at the 2014 LRI, Webb from the University of Toronto Library describes the LRI as an “official welcome into a community of research librarians and an entry point into the culture of librarian research in Canada” (Webb 2014). She reports that other participants likened it to “a condensed doctoral research seminar,” providing the “mental space to focus on research,” and the “immediate benefits of having **the space and time to think about my own work and connect with other librarians doing research**” (Webb 2014). **Webb writes:** “My real ‘aha’ moment at the LRI was the realization that the stronger our research culture, the more leverage we have in leading the future direction of our libraries” (Webb 2014).

From the perspective of the author, the peer mentoring relationships that were initiated at the 2013 LRI have been lasting and rewarding, with the following personal feedback from one participant to this Peer Mentor:

“You cannot imagine how much the Librarian Research Institute changed my life! It gave me courage to pursue my research project, and to apply for an academic leave. You helped me through this process, at the Institute with all your advice and encouragement, and long after with my leave request... I cannot thank you enough!!” (personal communication 2014).

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