Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Research Supports are Effective in Increasing Confidence with Research Skills in Early Career Academic Librarians

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

Découvrir la revue

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:
Ackerman, E., Hunter, J. & Wilkinson, Z. T. (2018). The availability and effectiveness of research supports for early career academic librarians. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 44*(5), 553-568. https://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-09-2016-0068

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Abstract

Objective – To identify the type and efficacy of research supports currently available to early career academic librarians.

Design – Survey.

Setting – The United States.

Subjects – 213 academic librarians who were not yet promoted or have received tenure, or those up to three years post-tenure or promotion.

Methods – The researchers created a survey containing 39 closed and open-ended questions using the software Qualtrics. The question types included multiple choice, Likert scale, and free text. The survey was distributed through direct emails and various professional electronic mailing lists.

Main Results – The majority of respondents listed finding time as the most significant barrier to conducting research. Respondents listed informal mentoring as the most commonly used and most widely available form of research support. Statistical analyses revealed that for every type of research

support a librarian engaged in, on average confidence increased by 0.10.

Conclusion – Engagement in formal and informal research supports may influence early career academic librarians' confidence levels in regards to conducting research projects. Academic institutions as well as professional organizations should ensure that ample opportunities are available.

Commentary

The quality of this study was appraised using "The CAT: a generic critical appraisal tool" created by Perryman and Rathbun-Grubb (2014). Overall, the study was found to be of relatively high quality based on this assessment. The first author, Ackerman, is a social sciences librarian, and the two co-authors are librarians as well. The research questions and methods were, for the most part, clearly explained. There was significant attention given to previous relevant literature throughout the article.

However, the authors did not discuss the limitations of the study. Some of the limitations included sample size and the methods by which the survey was distributed, yet these were not acknowledged in the article. There was also no mention of how many surveys were distributed, which prevents the calculation of the response rate, which is used to determine the generalizability of the findings. There was the potential for a self-selection bias, as the participants who chose to take the survey may have had a greater interest in research than those that did not take the survey. Additionally, the sample consisted of librarians that "have not yet earned tenure or promotion or to have been tenured or promoted within the last three years." This definition seems to be fairly broad and does not necessarily match with the concept of "early career." Most of the respondents reported having "six to nine years of professional experience," which means these librarians had been in the field for some time. An explanation of why this range of experience levels was included would have been helpful.

Regardless of these limitations, the article provides some very important insights into this area. It is unique to the literature in that it explores which types of research supports are most effective for early career academic librarians. One of the major implications of this research is that it is important for organizations that support these librarians to provide some mechanisms to help foster their development as researchers.

This research also provides evidence that time is the largest obstacle to librarians in accomplishing their research goals. Interestingly, "designated research time" or "requestable research time" were the most popular formal supports provided by institutions, although they were found in less than half. Employers should take the time factor into serious consideration when evaluating the workloads of their employees and also consider the inclusion of similar mechanisms to increase time available for research, especially when it is critical to promotion or tenure.

Informal mentoring seems to be the most highly used form of research support, and the respondents indicated that it was significantly more helpful than formal mentoring. While there are a few brief explanations from the respondents as to some of the reasons as to why informal mentoring is preferred, this is an area that warrants additional study; a more complete understanding can help to inform institutional practices.

Additionally, participation in collaborative research projects was the most prevalent theme when respondents were asked to provide written answers as to what factors contribute to scholarly success. Increasing opportunities for networking with colleagues and facilitating collaborative research are important considerations.

Finally, this study yields statistical evidence that early career librarians gain confidence incrementally with each research support that they access. Thus, increasing the number and type of supports available can have a positive impact on research output. Librarians,

institutions, professional organizations, and even library science educators should take this under consideration when determining how to improve research confidence and skills.

References

Perryman, C. & Rathbun-Grubb, S. (2014). The CAT: a generic critical appraisal tool. In *Jotform – Formbuilder*. Retrieved from http://www.jotform.us/cp1757/TheCat