

Publication Numbers are Increasing at American Research Universities

Budd, J. (2017). Faculty publications and citations: a longitudinal examination. *College & Research Libraries*, 78(1), 80–89. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.78.1.80>

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Evidence Summary

Publication Numbers are Increasing at American Research Universities

A Review of:

Budd, J. (2017). Faculty publications and citations: a longitudinal examination. *College & Research Libraries*, 78(1), 80–89. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.78.1.80>

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Abstract

Objective – To study the publishing output and citation activity of faculty at research universities.

Design – Bibliometric and citation analysis.

Setting – Academic citation databases.

Subjects – Institutions in the United States that are members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).

Methods – This study builds on three previous studies conducted by the author looking at faculty publication productivity, which were conducted for three different time periods

beginning in 1991. For the present study, the author searched Scopus by institution to collect the total number of publications and citations for the faculty of more than 100 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member universities, covering the years 2011 to 2013. The author acquired the total number of faculty at each institution from the ARL website. The faculty number from the ARL website and publication and citation data from Scopus were used to calculate the per capita publication and citation numbers for each institution. The author calculated the total mean number of publications and the mean number of per capita publications per university. Chi tests were used to compare the means for statistical significance.

Main Results – The number of both total and per capita publications for each institution went up over the course of all three studies. The mean number of total publications per university for 1991 to 1993, the first time period studied, was 4,595.8; for the time period of the current study, 2011 to 2013, the mean was 9,662.0. For per capita publications, the mean for 1991 to 1993 was 3.56 and the mean for the present study was 5.96. Based on chi-square tests, the results were found to be statistically significant.

Conclusions – The study found that the number of total publications increased significantly over time, exceeding the author's statistical expectations based on previous work.

Commentary

The adage “publish or perish” points to the well-known pressure academics face to publish in the scholarly literature to receive tenure or promotion. This environment can lead to the perception that scholars are emphasizing quantity over quality in their publication output (Fanelli & Larivière, 2012). Examining the total number of scholarly publications overtime can provide valuable insights into the validity of these perceptions. Many studies looking at scholarly productivity focus on an individual discipline (Walters, 2016; Griffin, Bolkan, & Dahlbach, 2017; Ford, Richman, Mayes, Pagel, & Bartels, 2019). By looking at total publication numbers across disciplines and institutions, this study provides a valuable, high-level look at the wider field of scholarly publications.

When assessed using Glynn's critical appraisal tool for library and information research, this study has an 86% validity rating (2006). A major strength of the study is that it builds on years of previous studies conducted by the author. The statistical analysis is well-described, and the tables provided present the results clearly. However, the author presents the publication numbers for only the top twenty institutions; future researchers would benefit from having access to all of the data for all the universities analyzed for the study.

A potential limitation of this study did emerge while examining the study methodology. The author presents this study as an examination of faculty publications and citations, but it is unclear how faculty and non-faculty publications and citations were differentiated in the data collection process. If Scopus has a functionality that allows for filtering between faculty and non-faculty publications, this should have been mentioned in the study text. If there was no differentiation, this is a serious limitation regarding how useful this data is in considering faculty productivity specifically. The data would still be useful as a look at the publication output and citation numbers for the institution as a whole but not when it comes to examining faculty output specifically.

This study is more informative than it is a basis for actionable practice for librarians. It would be of interest to analyze these results in the context of other studies on scholarly productivity that use different methods or are discipline specific to determine how strong the evidence is for a substantial increase in scholarly productivity over time. The results of the study also provide a foundation for potential future research as noted by the author, including further exploring the relationship between increasing publication numbers and institutional pressures, how publication quantity relates to quality, and the value of citation metrics as evaluation criteria, all of which are vital issues for academic librarians.

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