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What to Do When Everyone Wants to Be Your Partner: Transforming the Faculty/Librarian Relationship

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ABSTRACT

Historically, academic librarians have worked very hard at being involved in the day to day work of the faculty and have sometimes considered themselves lucky to be invited to teach in a class or to sit on a faculty council. However with the advance of evidence based practice and growth of systematic review searching as a form of research, and the requirement by some funding agencies that librarians co-author on systematic reviews, academic health sciences librarians are facing exponential increases in the demand for their time. At the University of Alberta’s John W. Scott Health Sciences Library, a plan has been developed to manage this significant increase in the demand for librarians' time. The plan includes: ensuring that tasks are assigned at the correct level, building searcher capacity in the community, lobbying Faculty and Library Administrations to increase the number of librarian/expert searcher positions, defining policies on the extent and nature of services provided to specific user groups, better organizing search support resources and educating users. Early observational results show moderate success in community capacity building and very high interest in instructional programs for client groups.

BACKGROUND

The literature of academic librarianship contains many articles that address the problems that academic librarians encounter in building collaborative relationships with faculty. McGinnis(McGuinness, 2006) reviewed the literature of the "Faculty Problem" thoroughly, noting that faculty have been described as having "limited conception of the role played by librarians in the academic community". McCreadie (McCreadie, 2013) in her recent study Library Value in the Developing World, reports that "the majority (three-quarters) of developing country faculty measure the value of their library via the quality and accessibility of the resource collection" and that "faculty are not always aware of the services offered by their library beyond access to resources". Much of the literature around this subject describes strategies and methods for developing good faculty/librarian relationships in order for library services to be valued and librarians to be viewed as equal colleagues in the academy.

There is, however, little in the literature about how to manage when the faculty thoroughly recognize the value of the library's services and the demand becomes overwhelming. That is the
situation that the John W. Scott Health Sciences Library (Scott Library) at the University of Alberta is currently managing.

**CHALLENGE**

With the advance of evidence based practice, and growth in the popularity of systematic reviews as a research method and the requirement by some funding agencies, such as the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (Grimshaw, 2010) that librarians co-author on systematic reviews, academic health sciences librarians are facing exponential increases in demand for their time.

At the Scott Library one-on-one research consultations are the norm for systematic review searches. These consultations may take one of two forms. Often the consultation is a one-on-one instructional session in which the researcher, usually a student, is taught the basics of systematic review searching and their search is reviewed for accuracy. These sessions usually require up to an hour of the librarians’ time. More often, when the researcher is a faculty member, or the search is in support of a grant proposal which will lead to a formal publication, the librarian is asked to be co-author of a systematic review. In this case, the librarian meets with research team members to define the parameters of the review subject and executes a series of detailed searches in multiple databases to identify all of the relevant evidence related to a research question. The librarian also documents all searches in detail for inclusion as an appendix to an article or for storage in an archive for later use. Finally the librarian writes the methods section of the article that describes the search process and reads the final draft of the article for accuracy. This process can take many hours. In the Scott Library the number of all librarian consultations rose from 210 in 2010 to 598 in the first eight months of 2013.

As part of a broader strategic planning process, the Scott Library developed a six part plan to manage the increased demand for librarian consultations. The plan has both long-term and short-term initiatives including: ensuring that all work in the library is done by the correct level of worker, building searcher capacity in the community, lobbying Faculty and Library Administrations to increase the number of librarian searcher positions, defining policies on the extent and nature of services provided by the Scott Library to specific user groups, better organizing search support resources, and educating users.

**Strategic Action 1: Freeing librarians’ time by ensuring that all work is assigned at the correct level**

Making sure that work is done by the correct level of worker is an efficiency goal of most organizations. While tasks were generally well distributed, librarians were still assigned reference desk hours during the week and on weekends with non-academic staff and also taught basic instruction sessions. Librarians now only work assigned shifts at the "on-site" locations in departments and take most of their reference work as consultations. Senior non-academic staff provide reference desk service and much of the basic instruction, which can be scripted.
Strategic Action 2: Building searcher capacity in the community

Systematic reviews, which began as a form of clinical research, have spread to other areas of research, including nutrition, education, psychology and physical education. The Campbell Collaboration was developed to disseminate systematic reviews in the areas of education, crime and justice, social welfare and international development. While most health librarians have some knowledge of systematic review searching, the skill set is only now making its way into other disciplines. Our first strategic action in this area has been to train our colleagues, both inside and outside the University.

Six librarians from other library units have taken part in one of the regularly scheduled classes on systematic review searching, including in several cases, assisting in the class. The eleven librarians of the Scott Library jointly taught a Health Sciences Librarianship course in our graduate School of Library and Information Studies, including a module on systematic review searching (Campbell et al., 2012). Finally an overview of systematic review searching is being prepared for publication in a general library journal to introduce non-health sciences librarians to the concepts involved in systematic review searching.

Strategic Action 3: Lobbying for additional librarian positions

The Library has had success in the past in developing shared librarian positions with research organizations. Currently four positions exist in which the librarian is employed 80% of her time with a health research group and 20% with the Scott Library. These arrangements are designed to be sufficiently flexible that the librarians can vary their schedules to meet demand for search consultations. The Library encourages applicants for large research grants to incorporate research librarian positions into their budgets.

Strategic Action 4: Redefining service policies for external users

Historically, the Scott Library offered fee-based services to the general public, and in particular, to practicing physicians who did not have access to library services. As health library services have improved through the public libraries, local health authorities, and health-related associations, the Scott Library has limited extended reference service to members of the Faculty, Staff and Students of the University of Alberta.

Strategic Action 5: Better organizing search support resources
Organizing support resources has improved our efficiency. Because of the strengths of specialties in the Edmonton health research community, many studies are done in closely related areas. There are concentrations of research in pediatrics, cardiac care, diabetes, obesity and public health. Each of these subjects is being explored from many angles, so searches are often repetitious. To streamline these searches, librarians are posting filters or hedges, both to the Expert Searches section of the OVID platform and to a Health Sciences Search Filters page (http://guides.library.ualberta.ca/content.php?pid=448005&sid=3671216), hosted by the Scott Library. The Filters page is publically available for anyone to copy and paste.

A second area of improvement was the development of a systematic review protocol form (Appendix A), which is now sent to researchers who request search consultations. The protocol form allows the researcher to do some advance planning, flesh out some of the details of the research question and to identify inclusion and exclusion criteria and limitations on the search.

**Strategic Action 6: Educating users**

Our sixth area of action, educating our users, is the area in which we have had the most success.

Since January, 2012, the Scott Library has offered a three-hour, hands-on "Introduction to Systematic Review Searching" workshop on 13 occasions, with 161 researchers attending. Students attending this class are asked to read two articles in advance and set up a citation management account. In the class they receive instruction in structuring a search, identifying and selecting databases, introduction to the grey literature, searching one or two databases, exporting references, recording their searches and preparing the search part of the methods section of a research paper.

**RESULTS**

The multi-pronged approach to managing the demand for librarian services in systematic review searching will take time to show results. Some initiatives, such as developing new positions for librarians may take years in the best of economic conditions. Others, such as making our filters readily available to all searchers, have been fairly easy initiatives to implement. Even our most successful initiative, educating our users, is a two-edged sword. We know that offering the class has actually increased the demand for consultations, because people tell us that they have made an appointment after having taken the class. One of our librarian colleagues described the courses as effectively "painting targets on our backs". However, these researchers acquire a better understanding of what they need for their search, so they require less consultation time. Further, the Scott librarians value being able to spend more of their time performing high-level and challenging tasks.
The teaching program has definitely raised the profile of the Scott Library among the health faculty. We see the awareness of systematic reviews reaching into adjunct disciplines of Psychology, Education, Physical Education and Nutrition. Library Administration and the University's research administrative offices are also becoming more aware of systematic reviews.

More systematic review content is also being embedded into credit courses. While there has been a mini-systematic review assignment for many years in a Faculty of Nursing course, and a full term course on systematic reviews taught through the School of Public Health, there are now assignments or courses in Orthodontics, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Rehabilitation Medicine, Physical Education and Nutrition.

CONCLUSIONS

The strong demand for librarians as collaborators on systematic reviews and teachers of systematic review searching is evidence that this work is highly valued, there is a need for the Library to continue providing the service. It is not clear when, or if, we will reach a peak in the demand for these services. So far implementing the six strategic actions in the management plan have yielded varied results, but we recognize that some of the actions will yield results over the long term. In the short term, our efforts have allowed us to keep up with service demand, but in the future, we many need to move to more drastic measures such as rationing of services.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A: Search Protocol Form

Systematic Review Search Protocol

Title __________________________________________

Research Team members and contact information

Name  Phone:  E-mail
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________

Introduction (Describe the background to your study)

Objectives
The objective of this review is to conduct an up-to-date systematic review of

Methods
Criteria for considering studies for this review

Types of studies
To be included. studies will be.....

Types of participants (Population)
Studies including.....

Types of interventions

Types of outcome measures
Primary outcomes
The primary outcome will be ....

Secondary outcomes
1.
2.
3.

Search methods for identification of studies

Electronic searches
We will identify studies via systematic searches of bibliographic databases including (list database)

We will search electronic databases using the following terms (List likely keywords)

We will not limit by date (list date range)
We will not limit by language
We will not include unpublished materials

Appendix 5: Search Strategy – Grey Literature

Grey literature search will be conducted as follows:

We will include
___ Yes ___ No: Clinical trial registries (Cochrane Central Register of controlled trials, controlled trials.com and ClinicalTrials.gov) to identify recent and ongoing studies.

___ Yes ___ No: Web of Science/Scopus searches of the sentinel paper from each of the reviews will be completed at the end of the searches to identify any additional potentially relevant studies.

___ Yes ___ No: Google Scholar web search.

___ Yes ___ No: Dissertations and Theses

___ Yes ___ No: Hand searches of the most recent subject conference abstracts associated with Canadian and research meetings to identify recently completed but not yet published studies. Please list relevant meetings:
Yes  No - bibliographies from included studies, known reviews and text for additional citations.

Does not have to be completed for Search Session
Data collection and analysis

Selection of studies
How will you define inclusion/exclusion criteria?
Who/how many people will select from the complete title list?
Who/how many people will make the secondary selection?
How will you resolve disagreements?

Data extraction and management
How will you do your data extraction and management

Assessment of risk of bias in included studies

Quality Assessment (Risk of Bias):
How will you assess risk of bias?

Interpretation of the Results:

References
List relevant papers that you have already found

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