

Not Counting What Counts: The Perplexing Inattention to Research Consultations in Library Assessment Activities

Devin Savage

Research consultations have strangely been overlooked in many aspects of the library and information science profession, and I believe the inattention to this service is a missed opportunity on multiple levels. I think we have an opportunity to represent not only our efforts, but to leverage this service for relationship-building with students, faculty, and campus partners, as well as link library contributions and librarian expertise to assessment activities in higher education. The title of this paper is almost beside the point when it comes to the lack of engagement and awareness of our research consultation activity. We are missing an opportunity to articulate the value of what we do.

When I was speaking to a group of local reference & instruction librarians about research consultations last winter, one of the first questions that I was asked was “how is this really different than a reference question?” The context of that question was that everyone there understood that a walk-up, unprompted question at a reference desk might be every bit as complicated and involve just as much information literacy instruction as a question that results in (or is referred to) a research consultation service. My answer was that in a research consultation, the librarian had time to prepare. And in hindsight, I feel this simplistic answer was probably insufficient. However, this is a question of significance, as some large academic li-

braries have started to label the in-depth questions at the desk as “research consultations” to elevate them over the sort of “ready reference” questions. In our field, this practice may be referred to by other names, such as research appointment, research assistance, and notably “one-to-one instruction session.” Anecdotally, I have been told on occasion that individual academic libraries offer research consultations but haven’t really called them anything, or promoted them as a separate service. I would suggest this inability to even articulate or define this activity by name, let alone to coordinate, promote, or assess it, is our first piece of evidence of inattention. Why does this matter? Well, I agree with Megan Oakleaf when she posits that, in order to reveal the value and the impact of the academic library, “...librarians need to map all the intersections between campus needs, goals, and outcomes and library contributions in the form of resources and services—in short, all ways in which the library helps address campus issues.” (Oakleaf, 68) At the very heart of this, I would argue that we need to be looking for ways to tell the story of the value of librarian expertise. We need to tell this story, and have multiple tools for doing so. Our collections and services will prove valuable to demonstrating our involvement (and hopefully with a positive impact) in the teaching and learning mission of higher education. And I

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would argue that research consultations are a distinct and valuable service, as well as an opportunity to embed ourselves more visibly.

So, it might seem sensible to try to define the concept first, before turning our attention to our own inattentiveness to that concept. I would suggest that the key pieces of defining research consultations are that these are interactions that are 1) triggered by the user(s) of the service, 2) fulfilled by appointment, usually with some sort of matching the user with a librarian with the most relevant expertise, and 3) that the librarian has time to prepare in advance. I would argue that this last factor is actually the most important factor of the three to distinguish it from other reference interactions. I almost proposed that it is an interaction that is solely one-to-one, but upon reflection, I've seen enough one-to-two or even one-to-three research consultations to consider it a different sort of interaction from the more well-known library instruction session.

Historically, the service seems to have begun at a number of institutions in the late 1970's and early 1980's, although arguably the "term paper clinic" was a forerunner and something a little different. The first mention of I was able to find of "research consultation" or the like occurred in 1981 at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. An article from December 16th, 1981, in Northwestern University Library's internal publication, *The Lantern's Core*, talks about the basic aspects of this service: 2+ days of lead time for the appointment request, the librarian could prepare a short working bibliography, teach basic research skills, and even give further subject-specific referrals. The last two aspects differentiate this concept from the stated goals of "term paper clinics," which appeared to be source-focused, ensuring that there was sufficient sources for any particular term-paper topic (Gale and Evans, 87). This also differentiates this service from an instruction session, as I think it analogous to the difference between interacting with an instructor in a class setting versus interacting with that same instructor during office hours. The issue of varying names for this service is still unsettled, but

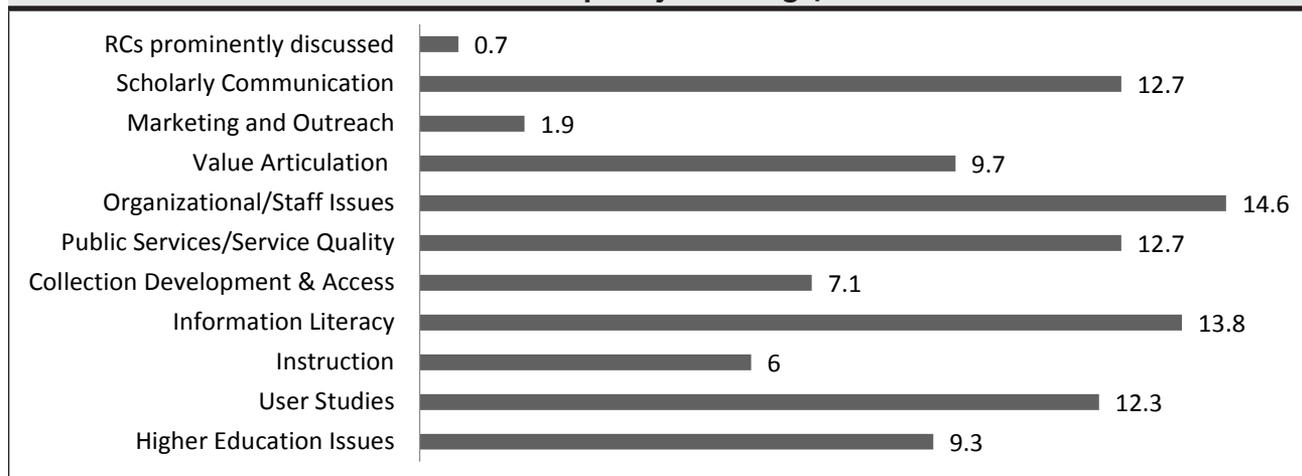
I will refer to them henceforth as research consultations for several reasons. First, it seems to have been the first name, and second, I have already disqualified the one-to-one concept. Last of all, I just like the term "consultation" as opposed to "appointment" as consultation connotes something more scholarly and less like something for which you might receive a bill afterwards.

What Do I Mean When I Say "Inattention?"

I could probably just sweepingly state that as a profession, we don't speak about, publish articles about, conduct assessment on, or otherwise articulate the value of this service. Or I could just cite Magi and Mardeusz's reporting of a dearth of literature on the subject, and I doubt many academic librarians would disagree with me (Magi and Mardeusz, 2013, 607-608). Still, as soon as I formulated this thesis, it seemed everywhere I looked I saw new studies and discussions on the topic. So, let us review the landscape. Indeed, one of my own former Library and Information Science (LIS) instructors, responsible for training future librarians for their reference duties, has publicly written about the lack of training and sources on research consultations (Bivens-Tatum, 2011). Association of Research Libraries statistics, ACRL statistics, and the Academic Library Survey (transitioning now to IPEDS) do not gather statistics of research consultations. The former Academic Library Survey suggested that any statistics on this service were to be rolled into the general reference question total, although whether everyone did that in all of the above survey is certainly an open question. RUSA's guidelines for reference work do not currently mention research consultations or synonyms. Since a greater focus on assessment and articulation of value has gained a hold in our professional activities, I'd like to look at the data available on research consultations, especially where it is comparable to our evaluation of other services and topics.

The latest summarization of the Assessment in Action first year projects shows that they were focused overwhelming on instruction alone, with over

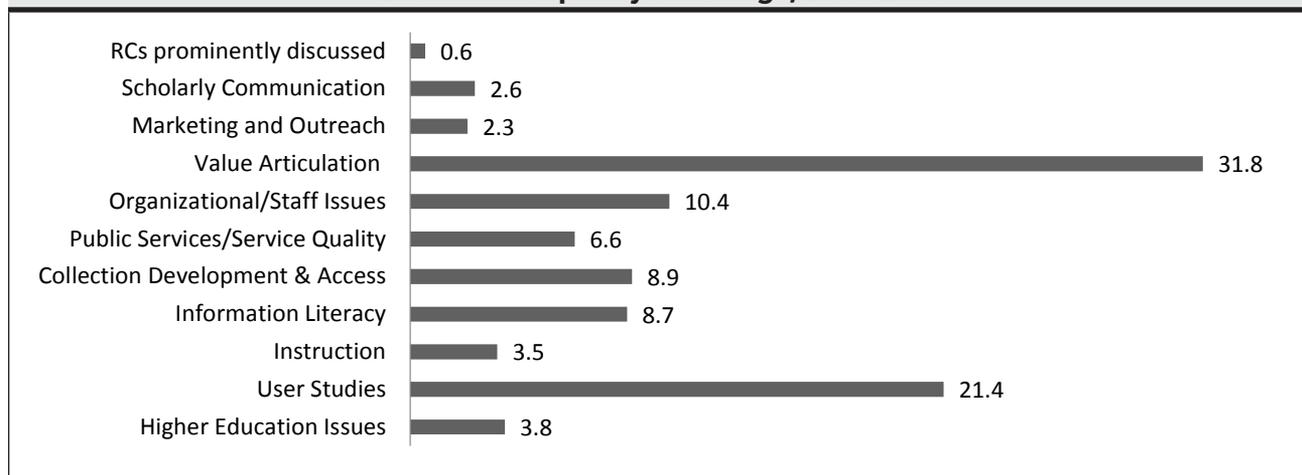
FIGURE 1
ACRL Session Topics by Percentage, 2005-13



109 outcomes explicitly tied to instruction services, and less than 45 focused on any other kind of topic or service format. Only 5 projects appeared to have any reference service assessed at all. While I was heartened to see a robust discussion this year on the ARL-ASSESS listserv on the topic of research consultations, it was only one thread out of 160 this year, and the conversation mainly revolved around statistical recording of interactions or customer demographics and satisfaction. Other mentions of research consultations are few and far between on this otherwise robust and utile listserv, and usually are found as a passing mention in conversations about reference or service statistics.

However, I did investigate LIS literature and LIS conferences for mentions, let alone prominent usage of, research consultations. What I found, was that in the last 10 years, research consultations were mentioned in less than 1% of LIS articles, and this was very similar to the level of incidence in all sessions or presentations at the Association of College and Research Libraries conference (ACRL) or the Library Assessment Conference (henceforth LAC). It was fairly enlightening to go through the full range of topics and try to categorize them, based on the descriptions, papers, or slides available. Here are the percentages of the type of topics addressed in the sessions at each conference (Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding).

FIGURE 2
LAC Session Topics by Percentage, 2006-2014



I would love to delve into the trends of certain topics that have risen or fallen at each conference, but that is unfortunately outside of the scope of this paper. Marketing and Outreach doesn't always get a lot of attention in academic libraries, but in this frame, it is considerably ahead of research consultations. The presentations were easy enough to go through manually, but for the articles I was fairly broad in my searching, looking for any hits at all of "research consultations," "research appointments," and anything that had "one to one." I searched these keywords and "assessment" to try to weed out false hits in LISTA, Library Literature Full-Text, JSTOR, Project Muse, and a handful of other journals, such as and College & Research Library News. I endeavored to err on the side of inclusiveness, but again restricted the search to just the last 10 years. I thought it appropriate to use "assessment AND" as a limiting keyword for hits, 1) since my interest is in our value articulation of research consultations, but 2) especially because I also searched for "assessment AND" a number of other keywords in these databases for comparison. Here is a table of the results.

Any linkage of a research consultation and assessment is clearly less than a percent of the total (four-tenths of a percent, to be exact). College and Research Library News should get a shout-out for essentially doubling the total number of articles that mention research consultations. Despite widely accepted national trends that overall reference numbers are declining, we still see evidence of a continuing need for assessment and evaluation discussions. This is partly

due to changing staffing and service models, but also is surely due to changes in user behaviors. Collections will always have a robust share of the assessment conversation, and interest in scholarly communication-related concepts like altmetrics and the like have surely helped reinvigorate that field of study. The fact that instruction reigns supreme here is no surprise. We have linked library instruction assessment activity to Information Literacy Instruction and student learning outcome assessments, and this has seemed to be a wise strategy, as academic librarians begin to develop relationships in more areas around campus.

Why Might We Not Be Talking About It? Why Would We Make this Service Invisible?

A colleague suggested that assessment feedback in research consultations, even moreso than in instruction sessions, could get quite personal—which is scary! However, I think if we approach our professional identity in a mature manner, we should recognize that we have a lot to offer. And the more we engagement in assessment, the more that we will recognize the negative outliers in our data for what they truly are—outliers. More importantly, I think there is a self-reinforcing nature when it comes to professional topics for statistical analysis, discussion, and publication.

Importantly, in addition to there being no numbers gathered nationally, there are no clear or standard definitions: you could consider research consultations as folded in the RUSA, ARL, and NCES definitions

TABLE 1
Appearances of "Assessment and [Keyword]" by Source

	"Research consultations" OR "research appointments" OR "one to one"	Reference	Instruction	Public Service	Website	Collections	Space
LISTA	9	426	536	178	306	662	81
JSTOR	5	184	150	60	113	174	121
Library Literature	2	316	482	57	131	407	47
C&RL News	15	66	773	293	35	1251	430
Total	31	992	1941	588	585	2494	679

of reference transactions [“...an information contact that involves the knowledge, use, recommendations, interpretation, or instruction in the use of one or more information sources by a member of the library staff. The term includes information and referral service”], but I would argue the level of preparation and assistance is of a different kind, much closer to that of a one-to-many instruction session. Furthermore, a research consultation is likely to be the most direct single intervention and interaction with student learning and research that a librarian can experience. I do think the lack of a systematic gathering or tracking of the mere output of this service has helped to keep it under the radar even as service assessment has taken off. And after all, the importance of student learning outcomes to campus-wide assessment accreditation is only just starting to be linked to library instruction. I might optimistically suggest that we’re just starting to get the tools and the perspective necessary to understand the bigger picture, and perhaps we just haven’t gotten around to research consultations yet.

Still, the most concerning thing to me is the lingering pushback I still occasionally see to this service, and it is a pushback that rejects the service’s chances of success. There have long been fears (generally shown to be unfounded or overstated) of being overburdened, or being the librarian putting in the work for preparation of a research consultation, only to have the rug pulled out from under you when the student ‘no-shows.’ I can actually understand that we will still find examples of this service being not defined and/or promoted, as there are always some historical reasons for various antipathies. To wit, understaffed institutions likely didn’t want to promise services they couldn’t deliver on, and I’ve heard there was also resistance due to the perceived “inefficiency” of research consultations as such needs were thought to be able to be met with larger instruction sessions. Perhaps this residual resistance due to a fear of creating librarian burnout and failing to meet inflated expectations has led to this service to not be conceived of as an outreach or liaison opportunity, and therefore not even mentioned in order to have a “soft launch” that was

neither really promoted, or supported. However, I do hope that we are starting to wake up to the possible impact of this service. And the more we set about articulating the value of librarian expertise using all of our resources, the more momentum we will build for all services, including research consultations.

Why Do I Think this is an Opportunity?

I think this is an opportunity because we already have a base from which to start. Many of us are already counting output of research consultations, let alone offering and promoting the service. Also, this is simply a great opportunity for embedding assessment—and not just the formative assessment activities that we have found so useful in information literacy instruction. Indeed, I believe we can articulate the value of librarian expertise by leveraging this opportunity to help capture our possible impact on student learning outcomes, with faculty or even programmatically with campus partners.

I would suggest that another reason this is a “shovel-ready” opportunity, (and perhaps this is a bit of a gamble on my part), but this really could be a growth field. Anecdotally, we have often heard that the reference questions may be getting fewer, but they are also getting harder and taking longer to address. LIS literature argues that the liaison and subject specialist model of outreach to academic departments has led to a more integrated, higher value body of work for academic librarians. And studies are starting to be shared that actually shows in-depth questions are on the rise (Murphy, Buehler, and Lewellen, 2014, slides 4–5). Although I’ve argued that the library assessment field has had only scattered and occasional attention to research consultation programs, particularly over the last ten years, the incidence of shared study is slowly starting to rise.

And finally, I believe that this is a unique opportunity to build relationships with undergraduates, graduate students, and develop a deeper conversation about student learning with faculty and/or programs. One librarian, Emily Keller, commented on a blog post that the primary value she saw in the research

March 25–28, 2015, Portland, Oregon

consultation was “information/research therapy”, wherein students got a chance to have someone really listen to their ideas, and supportively guide them to their best learning outcomes (Bivens-Tatum, 2011). This, I believe, is a great example of the sort of intimate conversation and engagement that research consultations uniquely offer (much like an instructor’s office hours), and an example of the relationship-building that should be celebrated and shared.

What is to Be Done?

There are three outcomes I hope to provoke with this piece: that I could provide a working definition of the practice of research consultations (and correspondingly, but to a far lesser extent, that this might be the agreed-upon nomenclature for this service), that examples of assessment activities for individual librarians’ continual improvement might be provided, and finally, examples of assessment activities for the articulation of the service’s value might be provided. If these outcomes assist anyone in the articulation of librarian expertise, and the utility and impact thereof, I would consider this endeavor very successful indeed. The first step, however, has to be a simple defining, supporting, and promotion of this service.

I would also suggest that this service, even if it is newly launched, offers great opportunities not just for assessment, but engagement and outreach across campus, especially to graduate students (for whom library instruction is nearly non-existent). Once you know what the service is and what you want to accomplish with it, then it is far easier to come up with questions that you might want to use to help you in value articulation. Embedding assessment will hopefully become as easy and natural as it is within instruction sessions now. We need to link the needs of higher education with our success. Another relevant point that Megan Oakleaf has made is that practicing formative assessment sharpens the ability of librarians to carry out and speak about programmatic assessment, and transforms academic libraries into “learning organizations” (Oakleaf, 2011, 77).

I would also echo Karen Sobel and Kenneth Wolf call to “update our toolbelt” yet again, but specifically for research consultations. We can appropriate some methods from previous assessment investigations in other areas of the academic library, but there may be new opportunities for novel assessment methods, given the unique nature of research consultation. And I would suggest that we seek to not just merely capture and compare outputs, but that we find ways to measure outcomes as well. Earlier, I suggested that assessment could be embedded in research consultations for two purposes, continual self-improvement and articulation of value.

Possible Assessment Activities for Continual Self-Improvement

- Feedback from faculty: The first and foremost assessment tool. Bahr & Harriss’s article earlier this year in *College and Research Library News* is a great example of this sort of collaboration and communication.
- Post-session short survey: I suppose it is possible to hand someone a paper sheet to fill out after the service is over, but in the past I have worked with colleagues to try sending the students a google forms survey link to rate the service and talk about their experiences. As the research consultation often requires a follow-up e-mail from the librarian (and oftentimes the student), this embedding of this link and the request for assistance in service improvement, this embedding of this link and the request for assistance in service improvement flows naturally and unobtrusively. Some library studies on students’ perceptions of the impact of library services and resources have included research consultations (Miller, 2013)
- Guest Driver: I mentioned earlier that there is perhaps a social or empathetic aspect to research consultations, and I think guest driving is a good example. This activity, like clicker polls, might be good for engagement within an instructional session. However, unlike clicker

polls, it's probably somewhat anxiety-inducing for students to be called up on the spot, whereas a clicker poll would be a weird and anxiety-inducing tool within a research consultation. I think guest driving could put this anxiety on its head in a research consultation, to let the student drive and gain confidence that the librarian cares to listen to them and will help them first and foremost (as opposed to their instructor or faculty member). Guest driving also offers opportunities for usability testing and other kinds of observational information-gathering on student searching and information-seeking skills.

- Peer observation: As a new librarian, I was able to sit in on two separate librarians' research consultations. The sessions could not have been more different, as one was performed by a reference librarian, and the other a subject specialist. It was incredibly valuable for me to see the varied approaches to preparation and how each librarian approached the student interaction. This should be a great training tool for interns and new professionals, as well as a source of feedback for continual improvement.
- Post-test and/or worksheets: These can be used for individual assessment and/or articulation of value, but would probably be best used in unobtrusive but curriculum-integrated ways. This would probably be most productive with an engaged faculty member, willing to find a way to help capture skills gained or strengthened by a research consultation.

Possible Assessment Activities for the Articulation of Value

- User studies: This could be usability, observation, case studies, or essentially just finding a systematic way to capture qualitative data. Most well-known are the various anthropological methods employed by the University of Rochester and the ERIAL project, although

Watts and Mahfood created a more recent Single Case Design study of research consultations (Watts and Mahfood, 2014)

- Critical Incident Technique interviews: What I love about the Critical Incident Technique is that it sort of seeks the opposite of standard statistical investigations, which usually seek an "average" experience or the sum. Critical Incident Technique seeks to capture the outliers, the most outrageous or the very best experiences that a patron might have at a library, and then examine the factors of why this experience was able to occur.
- "Learning Analytics": generally a comparison of data of students who use service: GPA, retention, graduation rates vs general student body: Soria, Fransen, and Nackerud notably included "peer" research consultation comparison data in University of Minnesota's much-lauded data analysis study.
- Artifact review and analysis: This generally covers citation analysis as well as other documents, portfolios, etc. Thomas Reinsfelder (2012) has a good piece on examining student scholarly output for signs of evidence of impact of research consultations.
- Learning Outcomes Assessments: This can be considerably more difficult, but Hernon & Dugan some up the two basic questions rather simply: "What do students know that they did not know before? What can they do that they could not do before?" (Hernon and Dugan, 2002, 377) Also, the National Institute of Learning Outcome Assessments (NILOA) has a robust repository of examples, resources, and papers. Not all are appropriate for the sort of one-time limited engagement opportunity that research consultations offer us, but I recommend checking back on their website (<http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/>) for new developments, activities, and rubrics.

I think at a basic level, we have a service that is valuable and unique, and we need to define, promote,

March 25-28, 2015, Portland, Oregon

and support this service in order to remain relevant and articulate the almost ineffable nature of librarian expertise. We can attempt to demonstrate (and at least correlate) our impact on student learning outcomes, retention, and/or lifelong skills. At the same time, we also need to think at a level above outcomes and outputs, and leverage the affordances for campus and community engagement that this service provides. I would argue that this is a key piece of what “librarian expertise” can provide—both for information literacy skills for undergraduates and for the research and scholarly communication skills for graduate students and our future faculty. This is the final difference that requires us to take understand research consultations as a truly unique opportunity. Given that research consultations are likely to be just as useful for graduate students as well as undergraduate students in terms of actual disciplinary research, there may also be opportunities for developing or augmenting scholarly communication awareness and services. Graduate students going into their future professions will certainly have a much more vested interest in learning about issues of Data Management, the opportunities (and issues) of Open Access Publishing, and the importance of Institutional Repositories for not only their own portfolio management, but as a locus for future research mining as well.

I believe that while academic librarians do have valuable subject expertise to assist in the teaching and research mission of higher education institutions, it is more important that we have an ethical imperative to do so. This is why I’m proud to be a librarian, and why I am trying to call attention to an impactful activity that we have been inattentive to, despite our need to communicate library impact. Let us embrace and understand our value in all that we do, and when offered opportunities as rich as research consultations, let’s find ways to tell the story of our success.

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