Reshaping the Library Literature: Scholarship Challenges and Opportunities for Technical Services Librarians at Smaller Academic Libraries

Heather Getsay and Aiping Chen-Gaffey*

How actively are technical services librarians conducting research and publishing articles? Are there challenges specifically for librarians at smaller institutions to participate in scholarly activities? In seeking answers to these questions, this paper analyzes a sample of recent library literature (2013-2018) and fifteen technical services job descriptions from various sizes of academic institutions. The current library literature reveals a gap in the number of publications between those from large and small/medium-sized institutions, while the recent technical services job postings suggest that job settings can have a major impact on the scholarly output of technical services professionals. In light of the findings, the authors stress the importance of reshaping the library literature to represent all sizes of institutions.

Introduction

This study of the library technical services literature was prompted by another research project the authors undertook in fall of 2017. In searching for published literature on new trends and best practices in library technical services, the authors found an abundance of articles relevant for large research libraries, but significantly fewer whose scope applied to smaller institutions. A further review of the library technical services literature suggests that large academic institutions significantly outweigh smaller institutions both in number of publications and authors. The authors wondered why. Is it simply because large institutions may require publication as part of professional responsibilities? Are there challenges specifically for librarians at smaller institutions to participate in scholarly activities?

This paper presents a study of current technical services literature, in particular the extent represented by technical services professionals at smaller academic institutions, and an investigation of what drives publication by technical services librarians, with a focus on three specific questions:

1. How active are technical services librarians, particularly those at smaller institutions, in publishing?
2. What factors discourage technical services librarians from scholarly activities?
3. What are particular challenges for librarians at smaller institutions to participate in scholarly activities?

In seeking answers to these questions, the authors first examined a sample of the current library literature to find out the extent of technical services publications contributed by librarians at small to medium-sized

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academic institutions. Furthermore, the authors explored relationships between job descriptions and scholarly involvement of technical services librarians to identify factors that influence the likelihood of and possible challenges for professionals at small to medium sized academic libraries to publish.

Methodology

Sample of Publication Data

Library technical services literature encompasses a wide range of topics, mirroring the reality that the definition and configuration of technical services functions vary widely among individual libraries. Therefore, rather than conduct an exhaustive review of technical services literature, the authors decided to focus on a sample of literature that will reflect:

1. The most core functions of technical services, such as acquisitions and cataloging
2. Technical services as a whole operation
3. Topics representing emerging trends and technologies in technical services

The authors selected Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text (LISTA)—one of the most comprehensive library literature databases—and conducted multiple searches in LISTA via EBSCOhost. For broad technical services literature, the search terms included “acquisitions,” “cataloging,” and “technical services.” For current topics in library technical services, the search terms included “demand-driven acquisitions,” “patron-driven acquisitions,” “Bibframe,” and “linked data.” For all searches, the source type was set to “academic journals” and the date range to “2013-2018.” Because the search was conducted in October 2018, citations of later publications are not included in this sample of data.

The initial searches yielded over 3,000 results. After removing duplicate results and entries that were irrelevant or not appropriate for the subject, the authors collected 586 citations. Types of citations excluded are:

- Publications unrelated to library technical services
- Publications such as editorials, reviews, conference reports, recordings of presentations and interviews, biographies, and book chapters
- Publications shorter than three pages
- Publications authored by foreign institutions
- Publications stemmed from non-academic libraries, non-library agencies (including schools of library and information science)

Because one main objective of this research was to determine the extent of library literature contributed by small to medium-sized academic libraries as compared to large academic libraries, it is essential to obtain author information as part of the retrieved citations. In EBSCOHost, this was possible by including author affiliation under customized field format for the citation option. The other piece of crucial information is the size of the author’s affiliated institution. Based on Carnegie Classifications, the sizes for small, medium, and large libraries are defined by the number of student enrollment, such as the following:

- Four-year, very small—FTE fewer than 1,000 students
- Four-year, small—FTE 1,000-2,999 students
- Four-year, medium—FTE 3,000-9,999 students
- Four-year, large—FTE at least 10,000 students

Therefore, the number of student enrollment at the author’s affiliated college/university must be part of the research data. The authors used Wikipedia and college/university websites as sources for student enrollment information.
Publication Data Analysis

The data was entered in a spreadsheet under the following categories:

- Author
- Author affiliation
- Title of publication
- Publication year
- Topic
- Number of pages
- Size of author institution

The purpose of this data organization is to find out in the gathered citations the proportion of the technical services literature that stemmed from small to medium-sized academic libraries, and more specifically, the percentage of: 1) publications, 2) authors, and 3) co-authors representing small to medium sized institutions. Also, it is interesting to study other patterns and trends in the technical services literature over the last five years, as reflected in the data.

Publications & Contributing Institutions

Among 586 publications on various topics within the technical services sphere, 507 (86.5%) were authored or co-authored by librarians at large universities. By contrast, a much smaller number—102 publications (17.4%) were from medium-sized academic libraries. Only five publications (0.9%) involved authors from small college libraries.

Large institutions were by far the predominant contributors both in the total number of publications and publications per institution. The publications in this sample affiliate with 293 academic libraries in the United States, which include 210 large university libraries, 79 medium-sized university or college libraries, and four small college libraries. This averages a publication-per-institution rate at 2.4 for the large academic institutions and 1.3 for the small to medium-sized institutions.

| FIGURE 1 | Publications and contributing institutions by size category. |
A significant number of the institutions were repeating contributors of the publications. It is fascinating to see how institutions in all size categories fare in terms of: 1) the number of repeating institutional contributors and 2) the publication frequency of these institutions over the last five years. The data shows that over 55% of the large academic libraries contributed more than one publication between 2013 and 2018. The publishing frequency of the large academic libraries ranged from once to 20 times. By comparison, only 19% of medium-sized libraries contributed more than once to the technical services literature during the same period. The publishing frequency of the small and medium-sized academic libraries ranged from once to six times.

**FIGURE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributing Institutions</th>
<th>Repeating Contributors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LARGE</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMALL</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
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</table>

### Author- and Co-Authorship

The technical services librarians at large academic libraries were not only the predominant contributors of technical services literature, but also more prolific in publishing. The data reveals an equally wide gap in the number of the published authors between large and small/medium-sized academic institutions. Among a total of 836 authors, 694 (83%) were affiliated with technical services departments at large universities. The rest of the 142 authors (17%) were technical services librarians from colleges and universities with an enrollment size smaller than 10,000 students.

It is important to note that over 50% of the publications involved co-authorship. Among the co-authored publications, more than 30% were collaborations across institutions. These include co-authorship among all sizes of academic libraries. However, the data also indicate that while technical services departments at large universities produced more co-authored publications, the technical services librarians from smaller institutions were more likely co-authors with other institutions, in particular with librarians from large academic institutions. Approximately 54% of the co-authored publications by medium-sized academic libraries involved co-authorship with other libraries. Moreover, about 32% (nearly one out of three!) of these publications involved co-authorship of small or medium-sized academic libraries with large academic libraries. In comparison, less than one third of the co-authored publications from large academic libraries were co-publications with other institutions.
Topics, Themes, and Content Types
Although the publications cover all aspects of technical services, the vast majority of the publications fall under cataloging and acquisitions. The topics include emerging standards and technologies, system and process innovations, administrative strategies, consortia collaborations and partnerships, and professional development. A significant number of publications concern issues across cataloging and acquisitions, such as library management systems, workflow reorganization and implementation of new discovery tools, with much increased focus on the end user. The remaining relatively small number of publications were about other technical services functions or technical services as a whole. Assessment and transformation of technical services were central themes among this group of publications.

Despite the sharp gap in the number of publications by technical services professionals between large and smaller institutions, there is much less difference in types and subject content of the publications among sizes of academic libraries. Like the large academic institutions, the publications contributed by librarians at small and medium-sized libraries convey a diversity of topics. Overall, their writings focused more on practical matters in technical services operation.

The content types of the publications in this sample include original research, surveys, case studies, reports on projects and best practices, short articles for a regular journal column, and opinion pieces. The length of publications ranges from 3 to 52 pages. In both aspects, there is no significant difference among publications between larger and smaller institutions. The average length of the articles was 13.8 pages for large academic libraries and 12.4 pages for small to medium-sized libraries.

Sample of Job Descriptions and Analysis
In addition to publication data, this study includes analysis of fifteen recent technical services job descriptions, five each from small, medium, and large institutions, randomly collected from the ALA website, library-related listservs, and employment websites. By examining a collection of job descriptions, the authors hope to: 1) identify differences in expectations for technical services librarians based on sizes of institutions and 2) determine whether scholarly growth is a requirement for the positions at these libraries.
Job Responsibilities in Each Category

The job descriptions include five positions from each size category of academic libraries. The job titles are:

Small
- Cataloging Librarian
- Head of Cataloging/Metadata
- Meta-Data & Digital Scholarship Librarian
- Technical Services Librarian
- Technical Services Librarian

Medium
- Access & Discovery Librarian
- Bibliographic Services Librarian
- Cataloging Librarian
- Collection Development Coordinator
- Technical Services Librarian

Large
- Monographic Cataloger
- Coordinator of Monograph & Automated Acquisitions
- Metadata Librarian
- Metadata Librarian
- Metadata Technologies Librarian

In small libraries, technical services librarians typically oversee all aspects of technical services, including acquisitions, cataloging, and processing, as well as supervising staff. Responsibilities can include metadata management, original cataloging, acquisitions, serials, and planning and leading activities of the unit. The scope of job duties also goes beyond traditional technical services librarian functions to include responsibilities such as liaison work, reference, instruction, and possibly oversight of other library units, such as interlibrary loan and integrated library system.

Similar to small institutions, technical services librarians at medium-sized universities have multiple roles in terms of job functions. The roles include oversight and supervision of the acquisitions or cataloging unit, or related areas such as electronic access, discovery, or serials. The librarians are also required to perform complex and challenging work within the unit. In addition, they take on non-technical services duties in areas such as reference, instruction, subject specialization, and collection development. Based on the job descriptions, the technical services librarians in medium-sized institutions are expected to serve as experts in the field and to keep up with technology and new developments.

Unlike small and medium-sized libraries, large libraries generally have more focused and specialized positions. Expertise in specific aspects of technical services is required in order to perform complex work. Instead of handling multiple roles within the unit, larger institutions require librarians to maintain a deep focus in particular areas of technical services. Along with the emphasis on specialization seems to be the expectation that professionals at large libraries will be forward thinking in developing and incorporating new standards, uses of technology, and practices. Job descriptions include language that suggests librarians will not only implement change, but also take on new challenges and lead innovation.

Publication Requirement

Scholarly expectations increase with the size of the institution. While none of the job descriptions for positions
at small institutions include a requirement that technical services librarians engage in research, professional development and scholarly activities are common requirements for some medium-sized and many large university library positions. Of the sample institutions, the highest requirement for professional and scholarly growth is among the large universities. This suggests an expectation for librarians at large universities to make significant contributions to their field, such as scholarly publishing, presenting, and developing innovations.

A comparison of the 15 job descriptions with the publication data in the previous section reveals some interesting statistics. None of the five small institutions was represented in the collected citations, while four of the five medium-sized institutions contributed a total of 11 publications with nine different authors. The institutions from the large size category appear most frequently, with a total of 21 publications and 44 different authors. Of the 21 publications, 12 were from the same institution. The remaining universities had totals of 4, 2, and 3 publications. It is interesting to note the comparison to medium universities, which had totals of 2, 3, 4, and 2 publications from the four represented institutions.

**FIGURE 4**
Publications and authors appearing in both samples by institution size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Publications</th>
<th>Number of Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SMALL</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LARGE</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Faculty Status or Tenure**

Whether faculty status and/or tenure are awarded to academic librarians varies widely among institutions and may be impacted by the public or private nature of the college or university. Some universities also offer a mixture of tenure and non-tenure track professional positions. The analysis of faculty status and tenure in this study is not intended to provide statistics but rather to present a larger perspective of general differences among the sizes of institutions.

Based on the job descriptions, small institutions are the least likely to offer faculty status or tenure track positions. This is consistent with the lack of specific requirements for scholarly activities by librarians at small institutions. Faculty status and tenure track are more evident among the positions at the medium-sized institutions, although inconsistently. Large institutions have the highest occurrence of faculty status for technical services librarians, although tenure-track positions are less consistent and not as prevalent.
Other Job Description Requirements

There are other factors that potentially affect whether librarians pursue scholarly growth. One common expectation in many of the job postings is that the prospective technical services professionals will be innovative. While most prevalent in job descriptions from large libraries, the requirement for innovation also appears in job postings at medium-sized institutions. For the small libraries, all of the job descriptions include specific technical services responsibilities, but none of them use language that suggests innovativeness as a requirement.

For medium-sized libraries, specific qualifications that refer to innovation include such examples as “motivated by challenges in a changing library landscape” and “ability to apply new technologies to library services.” Examples from large libraries include: “Must be able to set and adjust priorities and workflows in a dynamic and changing environment and accept new challenges” and “ability to deal with change, ambiguity, and complex problems.” Similar language is particularly prevalent in the job descriptions for technical services librarians at large universities.

Librarians whose job descriptions require them to be on the leading edge of innovation are likely to participate in scholarship. In order to implement meaningful changes and important developments librarians may need to conduct research. Therefore, innovativeness can be a job requirement that affects whether technical services librarians engage in scholarly activities.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Technical Services Duties</th>
<th>Duties Outside Technical Services</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acquisitions</td>
<td>Cataloging / Metadata</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Serials / E-Resources</td>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>ILS</td>
<td>ILL</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collection Development</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College A</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College B</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College C</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>College D</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College E</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>University C</td>
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<tr>
<td>University D</td>
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<tr>
<td>University E</td>
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Discussion
In conducting this study, the authors seek to determine how actively technical services librarians from smaller institutions are publishing articles. The citations clearly reveal that an overwhelming majority of technical services publications were associated with large universities. Large institutions had the highest number of authors, co-authors, total number of publications, and number of publications per institution. Medium-sized institutions had much lower numbers of publications and authors, and small colleges contributed the least number of publications.

The gap in the number of publications by technical services professionals between small, medium, and large academic libraries widens further, when taking into account the total number of academic institutions in the United States by size category. Based on Fall 2016 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, there were 2,831 four-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions, including 1,153 small, 1,295 medium-sized, and 383 large institutions by enrollment size. The findings in this study imply that over 50% of large institutions were contributors of technical services publications over the last five years. In comparison, only about 6% of mid-size institutions and less than 1% of small institutions contributed to the technical services literature during the same period.

The findings raise the question of why small, medium, and large academic libraries are disproportionately represented in the library technical services literature. Analysis of the job descriptions provides a partial answer to the question. Technical services librarians at large institutions tend to have more specialized positions, while librarians at smaller institutions typically have multiple roles. Requirements for innovativeness and staying current in specialized fields are evident in job descriptions at large universities, where librarians with faculty and/or tenure status are more common. Expectations for librarians at smaller institutions lay emphasis on oversight of technical services operations while the job descriptions also include non-technical services responsibilities, thus leaving little time for exploring and initiating new developments.

Job Responsibilities vs. Scholarly Work
Comparison of the two data samples hints at a possible connection between job responsibilities of technical services librarians and their scholarly output. Large universities require librarians to have highly specialized expertise in particular areas of technical services. Their job descriptions focus on these specific areas, creating opportunities for experimentation and the emergence of new innovations. It is important to note also that job descriptions for large institutions typically require librarians to do research. The publications findings confirm that the librarians at large institutions are most active in publishing.

Medium-sized institutions are unique in that the job descriptions seem to combine common criteria of positions from both small and large libraries. Technical services librarians at medium-sized institutions typically oversee operations of a unit while also fulfilling non-technical services responsibilities, which is common at small institutions. Like their colleagues at large libraries, professionals at medium-sized institutions often perform complex work in specialized areas. Publication is not always required for librarians at medium-sized institutions, but the data shows that they do publish, albeit far less frequently than librarians at large schools.

The job descriptions for librarians at small colleges show evidence of responsibility for multiple areas, often including all of technical services and potentially other units as well. Unlike large institutions, which have very focused job descriptions, small schools typically have broader roles with a wide variety of responsibilities. Research and publishing are not required. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the data shows only a very small number of publications (0.9%) authored by librarians from small institutions.
Challenges and Opportunities

It is important to emphasize that challenges exist within every size of institution. This paper, however, examines the unique challenges of technical services librarians at smaller institutions. First, their job descriptions focus on their functional responsibilities. The job scope often extends beyond technical services functions. According to Gillum, “Librarians lack the time to conduct research and do scholarly writing because of 40-hour workweeks and full-year contracts.” With full-time responsibilities in other areas their time is overburdened and too limited to take on more.

Second, job descriptions for librarians at smaller institutions rarely require scholarship. Without the requirement for research in their job descriptions, librarians might not have the support of their institutions to participate in scholarly activities. According to Sassen and Wahl, “Administrative support is a key factor in fostering the scholarly productivity of librarians.” Without support and time needed for meaningful scholarship it is a challenge for librarians at smaller schools to conduct research and publish.

Third, faculty status and tenure may add pressures, or motivate librarians, to engage in scholarship. Galbraith et al. found that a significant majority (64%) of academic librarians who publish in top-tier library science journals have faculty status and tenure track appointments. A significantly smaller 19% are tenure track without faculty status, 12% have faculty status but not tenure, and only 5% have no faculty status or tenure track appointments. Gillum argued that faculty status and tenure track positions create an “important byproduct, an increase in library and information science (LIS) research and published literature.” Librarians who do not have faculty status or tenure might be less motivated to publish, especially when their functional duties leave little time for research.

Faculty librarians with tenure track appointments, more typical at large research libraries, are expected to demonstrate scholarly achievements. The findings by Blecic et al. for publication patterns of U.S. academic libraries show that the top 20 most productive libraries are large institutions such as University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Penn State, Texas A&M, and Ohio State. For perspective, the top most productive library (Illinois) had 149 articles published in a 10-year period. Small to medium-sized academic libraries cannot compete with this level of productivity.

While smaller colleges and universities might not prioritize scholarship for librarians as highly as larger institutions, it is vital for the profession that small and medium-sized institutions actively contribute to the library literature. As revealed in the content analysis section of this paper, there is a significant number of articles with important practical relevance, such as case studies, reports on new initiatives, project implementations, and applications of new technologies and operational models. The vast majority of the publications emerged from larger institutions, providing relevant research developments for other libraries of similar size. Significantly fewer articles were found whose scope applied to smaller institutions.

Despite the unique challenges faced by librarians at smaller colleges and universities, opportunities for publishing are possible. Maintaining awareness of trends and developing innovative ideas that specifically benefit smaller institutions will also fill a gap in the library literature. According to Laskowski, “though managing operational and production-based units is extremely time sensitive, producing quality scholarly research, presentations and publications help to highlight the intellectual nature of technical services work.” Developing the practical matters of technical services operations into research projects is an opportunity for scholarship that benefits smaller libraries. The challenge of having multiple roles commonly found in smaller libraries can also be a unique advantage, as these professionals may have a more holistic perspective of the unit’s mission and purpose.

Co-authorship is another opportunity, as revealed by the collected publications data. While librarians might not have the time or support to engage in individual research, partnering with colleagues from their own insti-
tution or from another library is an additional way to participate in scholarship. The data show that 54% of the co-authored publications by medium-sized libraries involved partnering with other libraries. Of significant note is that 32% of these publications involved co-authorship between small/medium-sized libraries and large libraries. For librarians at smaller institutions, collaboration with colleagues from larger universities presents a good opportunity to publish and may lead to future opportunities for research and publication. More importantly, such co-publications combine the perspectives of various sizes of academic libraries, thus enriching the library literature.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study reveal a gap in the library literature. Technical services librarians from large universities publish far more frequently than those from small to medium-sized academic institutions. Technical services librarians at large universities are required to be on the leading edge of new technologies and innovations, and these developments are likely to be the subject of their scholarship. For librarians at smaller schools, the scope and setting of articles authored by librarians from larger universities, though interesting, is not likely to be practical and applicable. The library literature should represent a diversity of library and information communities, including all sizes of institutions. This can only happen when librarians at small and medium-sized institutions actively contribute scholarly publications in their specialized fields.

Libraries of all sizes have challenges. Writing for publication takes passion, time commitment, and a willingness to overcome challenges. The obstacles faced by librarians at small/medium-sized libraries are evident. Despite the more or less disadvantaged job settings, librarians from smaller schools should consider opportunities to publish that will highlight their unique environments. Developing the practical work of technical services into research projects is an opportunity for scholarship that benefits smaller libraries. Partnering with librarians from larger universities to co-author articles is another option that helps librarians from smaller institutions contribute to and be represented in the library literature.

**Endnotes**

Bibliography


