Spinning a Scholarly Story: Using Faculty Interviews to Develop a Scholarly Communications Agenda for Liaison Librarians

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In recent years, new forms and methods of scholarship and new processes for disseminating scholarly information are changing the ways that faculty engage in the publishing process. New developments such as open access (OA) publishing, digital forms of data, digital methods of scholarship, data sharing requirements, and the online dissemination of information are having an impact on the way scholarship is produced and shared, creating greater needs for support. Academic libraries have increasingly responded to the scholarly communications needs of their faculty by hiring library staff in roles that are specifically designed to support various aspects of scholarly communications. However, many small to mid-sized academic libraries do not have the resources to hire dedicated staff to support these processes.

Liaison librarians can help to solve this problem by providing some support in this area. With their understanding of disciplinary scholarship and their existing relationships with faculty, liaisons are well positioned to assist their users in understanding and navigating what can often be a complex and confusing scholarly communications landscape. For liaisons who are willing to learn new processes and embrace new roles, expertise in scholarly communications offers new opportunities for supporting the research agenda of faculty members and for better integrating the library into the scholarly processes of their campuses. Indeed, many academic libraries now require liaisons to have at least some basic proficiency in this area and are integrating scholarly communications as a core competency for liaisons.

In 2016, the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) Libraries sought to create an agenda for ways that liaison librarians could support scholarly communications processes. UNR is a land-grant institution of approximately 22,000 students. Prior to this time, the campus had established a task force regarding data management processes—largely focused on information technology—and had introduced an institutional repository run by the Office of the Vice President for Research Innovation. Otherwise, little attention had been paid to developing institutional support for faculty in response to changes in scholarly communications processes. In its five-year strategic plan, also created in 2016, the UNR Libraries designated scholarly communication as one of its goals, specifying that the Libraries wanted to “become a valued partner with the campus in furthering the scholarly enterprise” and that the Libraries would “grow our expertise in and provide assistance with topics related to scholarly communication,” particularly through liaison support. To meet this goal, the Libraries hired a scholarly communications librarian on a two-year appointment who was charged with jumpstarting liaisons’ work in this area. But the Libraries still needed a more definitive plan of action.

In order to develop a scholarly communications agenda, the scholarly communications librarian and the head of the liaison librarian program (the authors) decided that we first needed to understand the needs of our faculty. To do this, we initiated an interview project, based on work done at the University of British Columbia Libraries, in which liaisons conducted semi-structured interviews with faculty in their respective

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departments about topics related to their experiences with and perceptions regarding publishing, metrics, copyright, OA, grants, data sharing requirements, and open educational resources. Information from the interviews was then used to create a strategy for developing and marketing scholarly communications services and for articulating a plan for professional development for liaisons. Our purpose in embarking on this project was two-fold. First, we wanted to learn about faculty needs so that we had specific information about our users upon which to build our agenda, and second, we wanted to encourage liaisons to begin having conversations with their faculty regarding these issues. Interviewing techniques provided an excellent way for liaisons to begin to do this.5

Method
We used Van Orsdel’s “Faculty Activism in Scholarly Communications Opportunity Assessment Instrument”6 for inspiration in developing open-ended questions that touched on the topics we were most interested in: publishing activity, OA, copyright, data sharing, and open educational resources. Recognizing that faculty have busy schedules, we wanted to keep the interviews to approximately 30 minutes, so some areas were covered by just one or two questions. The assessment was tested on two faculty members and adapted based on the results. The assessment was also submitted to UNR's Office of Research Integrity, which determined that the assessment did not require institutional review board oversight. (See the Appendix for the full list of interview questions.)

Liaison librarians were asked to take part and went through a training session to review the interview questions and procedures. They were then asked to submit the name of at least one faculty member who they thought would be willing to be interviewed and who would provide us with rich information in this area. Only tenure and tenure-track faculty members with a substantial research component to their positions were selected. We then created a final list of faculty to invite to ensure that we had a diversity of professional levels and disciplines. Fourteen liaison librarians interviewed at least one faculty member. Overall, we interviewed 18 faculty members. Despite efforts to achieve balance, STEM faculty were in the minority with just four interviewed, whereas six came from the arts and humanities (A&H) and eight from the social sciences (SS). By rank, seven each were assistant and associate professors, and four were full professors. Each of the broad disciplines had a mix of all three ranks.

Interviews took place during the Fall 2016 semester. In-person meetings were scheduled at each faculty member’s office and were attended by both the liaison librarian and the scholarly communications librarian. The liaison librarian asked the predetermined questions, although both librarians asked follow-up questions as needed. The interviews were recorded, and the scholarly communications librarian took notes. If faculty members asked any questions during the interviews, the librarians answered them after each interview had been completed. The average length of each interview was 40 minutes. Despite our attempts to be conscientious about faculty’s time, we found that many were willing and eager to talk for longer than the requested 30 minutes.

Handwritten notes from the interviews were transcribed and entered into an Excel sheet. Audio files were reviewed to ensure that notes were accurate, and selective portions of the interviews were transcribed to capture quotations that seemed especially relevant. The scholarly communications librarian and the liaison program head separately coded all of the interviews, based on issues that appeared from the answers. For cases where we disagreed, we reviewed the notes and came to an agreement on how to code them. After examining the coded data, we found that four overarching themes emerged. We explain each of these below.
Results

Mistrust in Newer Forms of Publication

Faculty valued traditional, well-established journals and expressed some lack of knowledge and mistrust in newer forms of publication, mostly represented by OA. When asked to explain their understanding of it, faculty also demonstrated a limited knowledge of OA. Although most of the 18 faculty had at least heard of OA (although a few, all in A&H, had not), 15 simply defined it as being free to read. Several explicitly mentioned OA journals, and only one mentioned the involvement of copyright. Meanwhile, several equated it with pay to publish, and one said it cannot be trusted. Eight faculty had actually published in an OA journal (three each in A&H and SS, and two in STEM), and three were unsure whether they had. Of those who said they had not published in an OA journal, lack of prestige was the most common reason for not doing so.

Faculty expressed a balance of both negative and positive perceptions of OA. Ten discussed generally positive opinions of open access (such as by referring to it as “great” or “a good idea”), while some expressed specific positive perceptions (such as three saying tax payer-funded research should be open). Concerns about paying to publish and quality issues were the most commonly expressed negative opinions. In terms of paying to publish, one A&H faculty member said, “What the hell is that? It’s ridiculous. That’s lunacy. Why is that OK?” One SS professor stated, “I think there’s still a fairly substantial stigma against them, particularly if they are charging for publication.” A STEM professor noted that paying is a barrier because the university does not have a fund to help pay this fee. A few faculty members mentioned concerns about predatory publishing.

Half of the faculty said their departments did not know about or did not care about OA, while several said their departments would accept OA articles as long as they met other parameters (i.e., they were peer reviewed or had high metrics). Two said their departments do not see it as acceptable.

Concerns with Prestige and Promotion

Faculty’s most important concerns regarding publishing were the prestige of publications and their ability to promote their work to a wide audience. However, faculty differed in how they defined prestige. Out of the 18 faculty members, several stated that they used the Journal Impact Factor to determine the prestige of a journal, while a few also considered other metrics such as the Scimago Journal Rank, article level metrics, article downloads, and the H index. Several other faculty seemed to define prestige not with the use of metrics but through more nebulous beliefs about a journal’s reputation that was somewhat difficult to define. One faculty member stated, “I just really want to get [my manuscript] placed where it’s going to be in the highest ranked, most visible, most read outlet.” The prestige of a journal was much more important than other considerations such as the timeliness of publication. Three faculty members explicitly stated that they had chosen not to publish in OA journals because they feared they were not prestigious enough.

While the concern with prestige was intimately connected for some with metrics, 14 faculty did not believe that their departments had any formal documentation regarding Impact Factors or citation counts in their requirements for promotion and tenure. Rather, faculty believed that it fell upon them to make a case to their departments that they had published in prestigious outlets, using whatever data was available to them. One SS faculty member explained that “We don’t have explicit criteria, but we do have an expectation that you make an argument for the quality of the work that you’re taking credit for.” Using journal and article level metrics often seemed like one of the best ways to make this argument. This is perhaps why, when asked about what types of scholarly communications topics they were interested in learning more about, one of the most popular responses given was journal metrics and alternative forms of metrics.
Because faculty needed to establish a reputation for their work, publishing in outlets that had a wide reach and would get as much attention as possible was critical. Many faculty tended to think that traditional, subscription-based journals reached the largest audience base. However, promotion did not rest with the publication outlet alone. Thirteen of the faculty interviewed stated that they also published their work online, although A&H faculty were the least likely to do so. Of these that published their work online, the most common places they shared their work were personal webpages, ResearchGate, and Academia.edu.

**Misunderstanding of Rights and Terms Associated with the Sharing of Materials**

Faculty expressed confusion when it came to their rights over sharing their works. Ten of the 18 faculty reported at least skimming their publishing contracts, if not actually reading them carefully. Twelve expressed confidence in knowing their rights without showing that they understood what these rights actually were. Just six knew that their rights varied according to their contracts, but for many, they relied on assumptions as to how and when they can share their works and under what parameters. Despite the confidence of many, some expressed unease that they did not really know what their rights were. One STEM faculty member said, “I probably violate rights for using things in the classroom all the time because I never check” and another A&H faculty said, “I probably don’t have as much legal right as I exercise.”

Despite these misgivings, most faculty said they post their work online, and all but one of those said they post the published version. One faculty member specifically expressed displeasure of posting the submitted or accepted version of an article, saying “I don’t want people seeing my drafts.” Just one said she always made sure to check her contract before posting her work to ResearchGate. An SS faculty said, “I wonder, well, can I post the Word document of the paper? Which was written by me before it was accepted for publication. I don’t know the answer to that question.” Only three faculty were familiar with subject repositories.

In addition to understanding rights associated with sharing their own works, we wanted to know whether faculty were aware of how they could use open educational resources. We assumed that most faculty were not familiar with the term “open educational resources” and thus we provided a short definition during our interviews. However, while 14 faculty reported using at least some type of a free resource, several discussed material coming from the library as part of their answer to this question. It appeared that they did not seem to consider a distinction between free to them versus free to all.

**Unawareness of Data Practices**

Almost all of the 18 faculty members claimed to use some form of digital data in their work, with statistical/quantitative and audio/video being the most commonly used types. While most faculty used digital data, most also demonstrated only a simple understanding of how to store and share it. When describing where they stored their data, the most common response was on a single computer, with a few others each stating that they stored it in the cloud, an external hard drive, and/or multiple computers. Two were not sure how they stored their data.

Foundational grants had been received by half of the SS faculty and most of the A&H faculty. Half—all of the four STEM faculty and five of the SS faculty—had received federal grants. While most of the faculty interviewed had received grants of some kind, 13 had not encountered any challenges regarding compliance with requirements for storing and sharing data, possibly because data sharing requirements are often less rigid for foundational grants. A few stated that they had not encountered any challenges yet, indicating that they suspected that sharing data would be a future issue. In addition, most faculty were unaware that subject repositories could serve as potential places to deposit data and articles.
Application

The objective of this project was to help jumpstart a scholarly communications agenda for liaison librarians. Having liaisons interview faculty helped to engage them in identifying areas in which they could provide scholarly communications assistance. The assessment itself also helped to serve as a form of marketing for the library’s scholarly communication services. For instance, as a result of a faculty member’s question asked during an interview, one librarian later worked with that person to help them upload their works to the university’s institutional repository. In other cases, the interviews helped to further relationships that librarians could build on for future projects. Upon completion of the analysis of all of the interviews, the findings of the assessment were shared with all liaisons and then we worked on a follow-up plan.

First, liaison librarian program expectations were changed to include scholarly communication practices, with the notion that librarians would continue to solicit information about faculty needs, keep up with emerging scholarship trends, serve as a resource for faculty on scholarly communications issues, and support and partner with faculty on various aspects of digital scholarship. We also worked within three teams of liaisons—a STEM team, a SS team, and an A&H team—to help liaisons better meet this goal.

One of the first steps in realizing these new program expectations was to better educate liaisons. To do this, the UNR Libraries held several in-house workshops on scholarly communication-related issues for librarians. The answers from the assessment informed workshop topics. For instance, because the interviews indicated that faculty showed a lack of awareness of how copyright works, one workshop focused on the basics of copyright. The goal was to better prepare all liaison librarians to talk to their own faculty about these topics. Eight such workshops were held in Spring 2017. The scholarly communications librarian also created a monthly newsletter on relevant topics and trends, which were reviewed in liaison team meetings. Liaisons took it upon themselves within their teams to focus collectively on learning more about new trends in scholarship, such as open science and digital humanities.

Next, we had to decide what level of support we could provide in the specific areas, realizing that we could not do everything. Feedback from our assessment suggested that many faculty were largely unaware of good data management practices. After discussion in 2017, liaisons who worked with SS disciplines began reading more about research data management and how libraries were playing a role. They contacted librarians at other institutions to learn more about their programs. This eventually led to an effort to host the Association of College and Research Libraries’ Research Data Management (RDM) Roadshow in May 2018 for all liaisons at the UNR Libraries, as well as including RDM support in the roles of three existing liaison librarian positions. Although RDM services are in their infancy at UNR, we have made some successful steps, including the creation of online materials and the provision of workshops for faculty and students that address data-related topics. At the same time, we have been able to form a partnership with our Office of Research and Innovation to offer an online module created in Canvas for faculty about the basics of RDM, as well as where to receive help on campus. We have even used the module as a way to provide further RDM training for our liaisons.

We also developed a marketing plan for our outreach efforts related to scholarly communications. We created an email newsletter for faculty that is distributed at the beginning of each fall and spring semester that contains various library-related news items. We have three different versions of our newsletters that are targeted to STEM, SS, and A&H faculty. We have peppered these newsletters with scholarly communications tips and tricks, as well as information about our support services. Many of these newsletter items are based on much of the feedback we received from our interviews and have contained information about topics such as data, selecting journals for publication, OA, open educational resources, and assessing scholarly impact. We also created library brochures for new faculty in which we highlighted our scholarly communications services and provided
additional tips. We have found an increase in the number of consultations that liaisons are giving in these areas over past years, possibly as a result of some of these marketing events.

Creating targeted events has become a part of our scholarly communications strategy too. For example, knowing that misunderstandings about OA were prevalent, but also knowing that some faculty had very positive experiences with OA, we used our OA Week in 2018 to celebrate and promote this. We created a video display featuring UNR faculty who had published in OA journals, including quotes from them about the importance of OA to their work. Our events strategy has also been influenced by additional feedback. As a follow-up to the assessment described here, we conducted a survey with graduate students and learned that they also had many questions and anxieties about the publishing process. This led us to produce a one-day campus symposium called Manuscript Accepted!, which is targeted toward graduate students and early career faculty. This symposium included panels and workshops from UNR faculty and staff as well as publishing representatives to provide help on how to navigate the scholarly publishing process. The event also included workshops on OA publishing and sharing research data. In addition, feedback from graduate students and graduate program directors has led us to explore more ways that we can provide statistical support for data analysis through the hiring of graduate student “data wranglers” who teach and consult on the basics of statistical analysis programs such as R and Stata and through partnering with other groups on campus to provide training in data computation, analysis, and management. Our attempts to offer events targeted to faculty and student needs, as revealed through our assessments, has resulted in registrations that have been much higher than we have seats available.

Despite these early successes, we have encountered roadblocks too. One of our biggest impediments has concerned our institutional repository. The UNR Libraries were unable to receive funding for a new position to help oversee our institutional repository, which has reduced our ability to support it. However, we still have a library committee in place that advises our Office of Research and Innovation about how best to manage it.

Conclusion

Many academic libraries are not large enough to be able to hire staff devoted solely to scholarly communications, but they want to find ways to provide support in this area. We determined that, with a reasonable plan of action, liaison librarians could shoulder this task if we were deliberate and focused about how we would pursue this. Through the assessment project described here, we learned much about our faculty’s attitudes toward traditional versus alternative forms of publishing, their concerns with prestige and promotion, their understandings of the rights and terms associated with the sharing of materials, and their awareness (or unawareness) of data practices. We found that the use of semi-structured interviews with faculty was an effective means of helping liaisons learn about and engage with our faculty’s scholarly communications needs. These interviews were also critical in helping us determine areas of faculty support and liaison professional development. While it can be challenging for liaison librarians to provide assistance related to scholarly communications processes, there are indeed many options for small to mid-sized institutions that want to grow in this area.
Appendix. Interview Guide

General Publishing Activity
1. Describe your best scholarly publishing experience in terms of the process of working with the journal or publisher during the peer review and editing process and what made it that. Do the same for your worst publishing experience. Do you provide journal peer review services? To which journals? (If yes: Ask them to name one or two).
Do you serve on any journal editorial boards? Which ones?

2. What criteria do you use when selecting a journal to publish in?

3. Does your department documentation for tenure and promotion mention citation/Impact Factors? (If no: Does your department place importance on Impact Factors, and how is that information shared?)

Open Access Knowledge and Perception
4. What’s your understanding of open access? (If needed: Open access is when something is made available for free online and is also licensed to allow people to reuse it in certain ways.) What’s your opinion of open access?

5. How does your department view open access journals, particularly when it comes to tenure and promotion? (If needed: An open access journal does not require readers to pay to read any of its articles and licenses the articles so that users may reuse them in certain ways.)

Open Access Activity
6. Are you aware of any open access journals within your discipline? (If they can, ask them to name one or two.)

7. Have you published in a journal that makes all of its articles open access? (If yes: Was there a fee to publish? Where did the money to pay the fee come from [for example, you and any other authors, your department, your grant or another source]?)
(If no: Why not?)

8. Do you read your contracts with publishers? Do you keep copies of them? What are your perceptions of your rights to use your work in terms of sharing it with others and using it in your classroom after signing a publishing contract?

9. Have you posted any of your articles online (i.e., posted them with free access)? (If yes: Was it your own version produced in a program like Microsoft Word that you submitted to the journal or was accepted by the journal, or was it the final, published version with the journal’s branding?)
(If yes: Where do you usually post them? [for example, a personal website, social site like ResearchGate, subject repository like arXiv or SSRN (Social Science Research Network), or some other])
10. Are you aware of any repository aimed toward your discipline and that your field significantly utilizes? (If needed: A repository is a database that collects the scholarly work in either a specific discipline or of an institution and makes those works open to everyone to read.) (If yes: Have you ever deposited articles there?)

Other Publishing Activity
11. What grants have you received, if any, in the past few years and from which funders? Have you encountered any challenges with compliance in terms of storing and sharing data?

12. What kind of digital data formats do you produce as part of your research? How do you store it, both during and after a research project?

13. What do you consider a credible form of publishing for your field? Is it only publishing in a peer-reviewed journal or are other formats, such as blogs, digital humanities projects, or a data project, accepted?

14. In your teaching, have you ever used an open educational resource, which is any instructional item that you’re allowed to use for free?

Department Interest
15. Do you or any other faculty members you know have an interest in learning more about open access, author rights, measuring impact, or other issues related to scholarly communications?

Notes
4. Kirchner, “Scholarly Communications: Planning for the Integration of Liaison Librarian Roles.”
5. Tsang, “Faculty Conversation Project Tips”; Vine, “Realigning Liaison with University Priorities Observations from ARL Liaison Institutes 2015–18.”
6. Van Orsdel, “Faculty Activism in Scholarly Communications Opportunity Assessment Instrument.”

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