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Peer Reviewed Article

A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Community Service Trends in Academic Librarianship

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Abstract

As members of a service profession, librarians frequently engage in community outreach activities. This study sought to ascertain the role and definition of community service in academic librarianship, and consider expectations for librarians in staff positions, those with faculty status, and faculty librarians on the tenure track. Using a survey distributed to academic library listservs, participants report service activities are highly encouraged. Librarians receive strong institutional support for undertaking such initiatives, but the definition of community is fluid. Furthermore, responses indicated participation in community service and the librarian's academic status are not related. Survey data revealed broad commitments to diverse service opportunities, underscoring the significance of academic librarianship in a variety of community settings.

Introduction

Community service is an important aspect of academic libraries, often used as means of enhancing tenure and promotion portfolios¹. Some academic librarians participate in service through university-organized outreach activities, while others independently pursue community service that has personal significance.² Anthony Listing Antonio, Helen S. Astin, and Christine M. Cress identify, "Nearly 80 percent of all faculty say that they engage in some sort of service or volunteer activity."³ Furthermore, they find "lower-ranking faculty members generally demonstrate the highest levels of commitment to community

service activities."⁴ This report on faculty, including librarians, supports the notion that active engagement with the community in academic settings is valued as a movement to not only academically excel but to go beyond the academic service model to improve society as a whole. To date, no targeted research has been conducted exclusively on an academic librarian's, faculty or non-faculty status, choice to engage in community outreach. Other issues to consider are an institution's promotion and tenure requirements as they relate to community service, as well as the institution's support for such endeavors.



Review of Literature

There is limited research on the academic librarian's participation in community service activities. As librarianship is service-oriented, many argue that the profession includes the necessity of being civic-minded and taking responsibility for the "common good."⁵ Being a civic-minded professional has been defined as "...the philosophy that the educated have a responsibility ... for the public good."⁶ As illustrated in a civic-mindedness study among academic librarians, "47% percent of respondents were current volunteers, and 97% gave money to charitable causes."⁷

The value of an academic librarian's participation in community service outreach is defended in the literature.⁸ Pamela Louderback urges, "we must engage in community relationship building and define community outreach as one of the library's priorities in its services and overall mission."⁹ Iona R. Malanchuk and Marilyn N. Ochoa argue for the academic librarian as a promoter of outreach in literacy education: "...because of their obvious public service orientation, academic librarians are especially well qualified to participate in community outreach programs such as literacy programs for children and youth."¹⁰ Emphasizing the value of community service to librarians who already have faculty status, they assert that "participation in engagement and outreach programs helps address community needs but also provides career development incentives."

In a case study of community service initiatives of librarians at Mississippi State University (MSU) Robert E. Wolverton, Jr. and April K. Heiselt emphasize that librarianship is "a vocation based on service to the community."¹¹ At MSU, community outreach serves a dual purpose, satisfying the service element as well as the research component of librarian job expectations. MSU's promotion and tenure documents

outline four types of service: professional, library, university, and library-related community service.¹² However, the authors acknowledge the diverse definitions of service among post-secondary institutions stating: "community service activities can be defined differently depending on the institution, and the level of impact they have on a library faculty member's evaluation for promotion and tenure can also vary."¹³

Lisa Romano's 2015 review of promotion and tenure documents examines 18 promotion and tenure documents and identified that there is a lack of "...definition of service even though service is listed as a requirement for promotion and/or tenure"¹⁴ and that "the concept of 'service' is broad and subject to interpretation."¹⁵ Further research is necessary to provide a clearer representation of community service in the profession and a librarian's motivations for undertaking service initiatives.

Methodology

Data were collected through a 15-question survey using a combination of limited response and short answer questions. The survey was developed by the investigators for the study, incorporating ideas from past investigations of community service amongst higher education faculty.¹⁶ The survey was pilot tested by six librarians and then after modifications was distributed to a number of listservs aimed at professional academic librarians. Data were collected during a two-week period and received 99 responses. Returned responses excluded 14 for being blank or partially completed, leaving 85 responses used in analysis.

As there was only one period of data collection, a concurrent nested design was used for this study. At the conclusion of the data collection period, data were then concurrently analyzed

using quantitative approaches for limited response questions with short answer responses analyzed through thematic coding.¹⁷

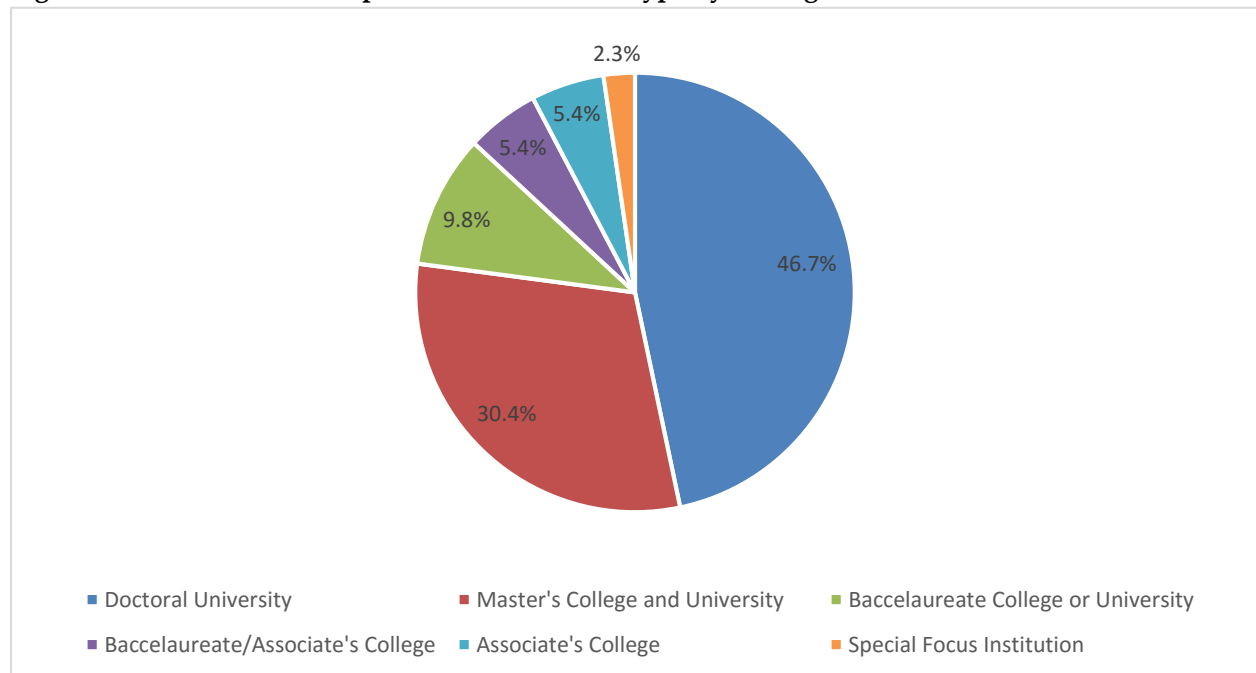
Findings and Discussion

The survey was comprised of two parts. The first part included demographic questions about the libraries in which the respondents worked, whether or not the librarians held an MLS or equivalent degree, how long the librarians had worked in the profession, the faculty status of librarians at their institution, and both the rank and tenure status of librarians at their institution. The second part of the survey included questions related directly to expectations of librarians related to community service and their self-reported involvement in community service activities. Thematic analysis resulted in four overarching themes: Librarian's Perceptions of Community Service; Role of Institutions; Librarian Motivations; The Impact of Faculty Status.

Of the respondents, all but one held an MLS or equivalent degree, with the respondent holding a tenure-track librarian position in their institution. Respondents' length of service averaged 5.6 years with a median career length of nine years. The respondents worked at a variety of institutions and were representative of the field at large.¹⁸

Respondents were asked about faculty status, rank, and tenure to compare to their responses about community service involvement. Of these results, 23.5% (n=20) of respondents did not have faculty status with 76.5% (n=65) reported having faculty status, 24.7% (n=21) of the respondents did not have rank or promotion in their positions while 75.3% (n=64) did. In regard to tenure, 90.5% (n=77) respondents to this survey indicated that librarians were not eligible for tenure at their institution.

Figure 1. A Breakdown of Represented Institution Type by Carnegie Classification

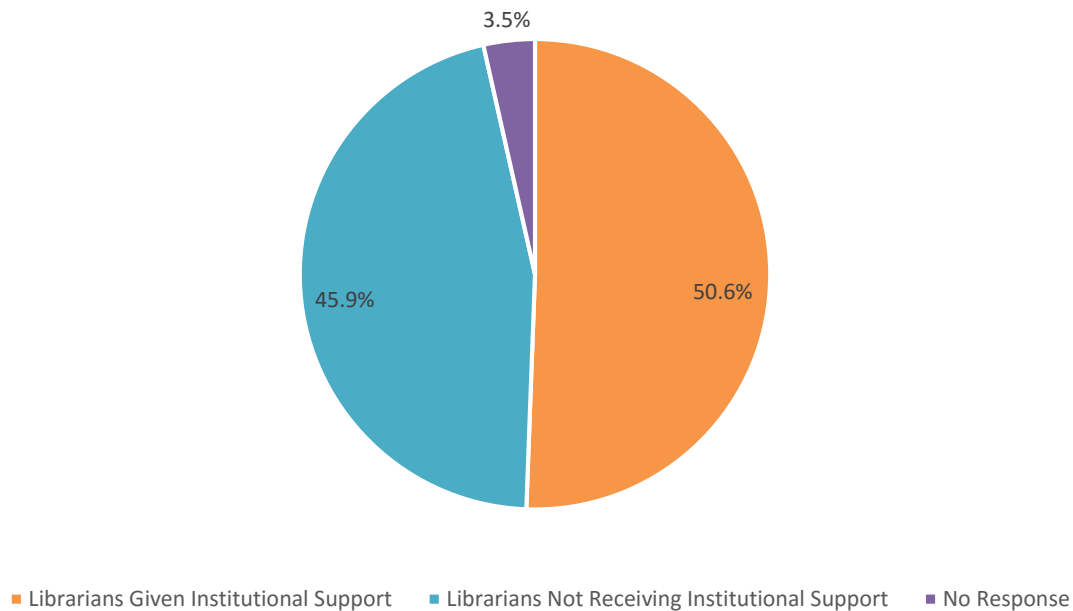


Respondents providing self-reported involvement in community service 75.2% (n= 64) were not required to engage in community service activities as part of their regular job expectations. However, 22.4% (n=19) of respondents indicated they were required to engage in community service activities as part of their regular job expectations and 2.3% (n=2) of respondents opted not to respond to the question. The survey next asked if community service activities were encouraged as a part of regular job expectations. A total of 63.5% (n=54) of librarians reported being encouraged to participate in community service as part of their job expectations with the remaining 36.5% (n=31) of respondents reporting community service activities are not encouraged.

Independent of job expectations, librarians reported engagement with their communities with

77.6% (n=66) of respondents indicating they participate in community service activities, and 22.4% (n=19) of respondents reporting they do not engage in community service. Individuals who engaged in community service spent an average of 22.1 hours per semester on community service activities of which 50.5% (n=43) identified receiving support from their institutions to engage in community service activities, 45.9% (n=39) not receiving any direct institutional support, with the final (3.5%) (n=3) non-responses. For individuals who did receive support from their institutions to engage in community service activities, the most common form of that support was some standard, institutionalized work release time for members of the university community.

Figure 2. Institutional Support for Librarian Community Service Work



Librarian Perceptions of Community Service

The survey defined community service as service to individuals or organizations outside of your primary workplace. Despite the inclusion of this definition, respondents emphasized the complexities of modern academic institutions and identified that librarians serve many communities within their institutions. They identified that the initial definition of community service was not expansive enough to encapsulate how individual academic librarians and the institutions perceive community service in different ways depending on institutional contexts.

Individuals participated in a variety of community service activities outside academic contexts, but related to professional librarian interests such as: selecting and cataloging materials outside their home library, working with local public schools and historical societies on educational initiatives, serving on literacy councils at the county and state levels, including children's literature, language arts, or science festivals, holding public book discussions, or working as a trustee or within Friends of the Library organizations for local public libraries. The respondents who regularly engaged in community service activities other than those related to the librarian fields discussed volunteering in food kitchens, community gardening, environmental clean-up participation, blood drives. These responses taken collectively identify that academic librarian community service activities are wide-ranging inside and outside of the profession.

While a number of respondents did participate in community service that intertwined with librarian professional interests, several engaged in service that combined institutional and community service needs. In particular, leadership in community service was identified by respondents as an aspect of this type of service work that was recognized by their employing institutions. One respondent discussing such a leadership position stated, "We have recently

started a community outreach interest group at our institution, and I am leading that effort."

Another respondent reported that they, "serve as the college representative on a board of all the local school librarians (K-12)." A third respondent indicated they were serving on a statewide, "Humanities Council grant project with faculty member and local libraries." These responses indicate that leadership in community service is a core consideration for academic librarianship as their institutions place particular value on the stewardship responsibilities of a more prominent role.

The Role of Institutions

Institutions varied in how they required, encouraged, or supported engagement in community service activities. Librarians reported community service was required or encouraged as part of their larger service requirement for annual evaluation. Some institutions sent regular newsletters highlighting community service opportunities, and others provided small amounts of grant funding to support innovative community service ideas. Finally, many institutions informally supported community service work through allowing use of library resources. A respondent highlighting this manner of institutional aid stated, "...there is no financial support, but we can use work time, computer resources, library information resources for engagement in community service activities." The most important identified institutional support for community service engagement was the availability of work time to participate in community service. In many cases these arrangements were formalized as highlighted in a respondent stating: "As state employees we are given 32 hours a year for community service, although as a faculty member I do not need to log my time as such and am not limited in how much I can do." Another respondent noted, "The state allows all state employees 24 hours each year for volunteer work with non-religious groups during the regular work schedule hours

-- the time cannot be used evenings or weekends." Respondents also noted the absence of specific time allocated to community service, but the willingness of libraries to provide flexible time in which to engage in such pursuits.

Librarian Motivations

University missions were cited as a motivating factor for community service work. One respondent noted "...we are also encouraged to participate in service outside of the university community as part of the university's mission." Another respondent identified: "participation in such activities are not done for additional compensation, but is an expectation of the faculty member's role as a professional." Summarizing several related findings, a third participant stated, "my institution and fellow faculty have been supportive of this [community service] work. I have been allowed time and library space to host some activities related to this work. Fellow faculty and staff have also been helpful in promoting engagement within new communities."

The Impact of Faculty Status

The survey responses indicate no statistically measurable difference in the level of service performed by those who have faculty status in comparison to librarians with staff status. Additionally, among the survey respondents with faculty status, there was not a statistically measurable difference in the level of service performed by pre- and post-tenure librarians. This indicates librarian involvement in community service is influenced by factors outside of the traditional academic reward system.

Limitations and Further Research

Several elements of this study encourage further examination. This study defined community service as service outside the institution, however a number of respondents considered their service within the campus community a part of their

"community service". The literature supports this being a common occurrence across institutions.¹⁹

Most of the respondents did not have tenure for librarians at their institution, and future research can further examine the impact of tenure as a change agent around an individual's participation in community service. In addition, a purposeful sampling from universities that do not include community service as part of their mission would build a fuller picture of the scope of community.

Conclusions

Community service is considered an important aspect of academic librarianship both personally and professionally.²⁰ Many librarians feel supported by institutional missions that encourage community service, which is then facilitated by policies and procedures that incentivize librarians the most impactful being work-release time. Further to this, having faculty status does not influence how and when librarians are engaging with community service suggesting there is something external to the academic model motivating the behavior of actively engaging with community service. While not a significant part of the findings, emerging data does suggest academic librarianship may attract individuals who gravitate towards roles that encourage and facilitate community service, which should be more fully explored. Looking more closely at community service participation of academic librarians demonstrates how academic libraries are redefining their definitions of the communities they serve and proving their relevance in the modern information age. Ultimately to be able to effectively research this area further, a more consistent way of defining community, and community service within higher education contexts, much be reached.

¹ Maureen Barry, Laura A. Lowe, and Sarah Twill, "Academic Librarians' Attitudes about Civic-Mindedness and Service Learning." *The Library Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (January 2017): 1-16.

² Pamela Louderback, "Turn your focus outward: academic libraries should create learning communities in their local areas as well as among the faculty and students at their institutions." *Information Outlook* 17, no. 4 (July-August 2013): 20-22.

³ Anthony Listing Antonio, Helen S. Astin and Christine M. Cress, "Community Service in Higher Education, a Look at the Nation's Faculty." *The Review of Higher Education* 23, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 373-397.

⁴ Antonio, Astin, and Cress, "Community Service," 382.

⁵ Maureen Barry, Laura A. Lowe, and Sarah Twill, "Academic Librarians' Attitudes about Civic-Mindedness and Service Learning." *The Library Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (January 2017): 1-16.

⁶ Barry, Lowe, and Twill, "Academic Librarian's Attitudes," 2.

⁷ Barry, Lowe, and Twill, "Academic Librarian's Attitudes," 11.

⁸ Henry, Deborah B., and Tina M. Neville. "Research, publication, and service patterns of Florida academic librarians." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 30, no. 6 (2004): 435-451.; Lisa Romano, "Service Requirements for Promotion and Tenure: What Is the Technical Services Librarian to Do?" *Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services* 39, no. 3/4 (July 2015): 82-93.; Sutton, Stuart A. "Future service models and the convergence of functions: the reference librarian as technician, author and consultant." *The reference librarian* 25, no. 54 (1996): 125-143.

⁹ Pamela Louderback, "Turn your focus outward," 21-22.

¹⁰ Iona R. Malanchuk and Marilyn N. Ochoa. "Academic Librarians and Outreach Beyond The College Campus." *Southeastern Librarian* 53, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 23-29.

¹¹ Robert E. Wolverson Jr. and A. K. Heiselt, "US academic librarians and community service: A case study." *New Library World* 111, no. 9 (2010): 381-390.

¹² Wolverson, Jr. and Heiselt, "US academic librarians," 387.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Lisa Romano, "Service Requirements for Promotion and Tenure: What Is the Technical Services Librarian to Do?" *Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services* 39, no. 3/4 (July 2015): 82-93.

¹⁵ Romano, "Service Requirements," 83.

¹⁶ Antonio, Astin, and Cress, "Community Service," 373-397.; Ada Demb and Amy Wade, "Reality Check: Faculty Involvement in Outreach & Engagement," *The Journal of Higher Education* 83, no. 3 (May/June 2012): 337-366.

¹⁷ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2018), 189-193.

¹⁸ Rachel Applegate, "Charting Academic Library Staffing: Data from National Surveys." *College & Research Libraries* 68, no. 1 (January 2007): 59-68.

¹⁹ Jack Hang Tat Leong, "Community Engagement - Building Bridges between University and Community by Academic Libraries in the 21st

Century." *Libri* 63, no.3 (2013): 220-231.; Erin E. Meyer, "Low-Hanging Fruit: Leveraging Short-Term Partnerships to Advance Academic Library Outreach Goals." *Collaborative Librarianship* 6, no. 3 (2014): 112-115.; Toni Tucker, "Partnerships Beyond the University Campus: Community Connections that Work," In *Academic Library Outreach: Beyond the Campus Walls*, ed. Nancy D. Courtney (Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2009), 181-182.

²⁰ Sare, Laura, and Stephen Edward Bales. "Professional identity: a grounded theory study of veteran academic librarians." *Library review* 63, no. 8/9 (2014): 574-589.; White, Gary W. "The professional development of reference librarians: Implications of research, publication, and service." *The Reference Librarian* 35, no. 73 (2001): 337-350.