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Liaison Librarians in the Know: Methods for Discovering Faculty Research and Teaching Needs

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Abstract

Libraries constantly seek information from their faculty partners on what, precisely, is needed from the library to support their teaching and research needs. This paper uses a case study from the University of South Florida (USF) as a framework to explore methods for determining the curriculum and research needs of faculty across disciplinary boundaries and ways for promoting library resources and services to departments across campus. Using syllabus analysis, website analysis, focus groups, and interviews, this project sought to evaluate faculty needs without relying on surveys. The data gathered from this case study will allow the liaisons at the University of South Florida to better serve and support the evolving needs of faculty and will also provide a framework and methodology for liaisons at other institutions to determine the specific needs of faculty at their universities.

Introduction

At the 2014 Charleston Conference, a panel of faculty members spoke on “What Faculty Want Librarians to Know” (Fair, Johnson, Richerme, & O’Donnell, 2014). In this plenary session, each faculty member discussed the challenges faced when trying to conduct research at university libraries, with the hopes that the audience (composed primarily of librarians) would take heart and action. The takeaways from this session align with what libraries know about faculty needs from standardized assessment metrics such as LibQUAL[™] and Ithaka (e.g., Jones & Kayongo, 2008): Faculty need access to information sources across an increasingly broad range of disciplines and topics, and barriers to access, be they paywalls or restricted access via reading rooms, are problematic.

Large-scale surveys of university faculty, however, are perennially unpopular, particularly for the faculty who are asked to respond to them; low response rates are common, and representative response rates are difficult to come by, leading to potentially skewed results (Thompson, 2000). Further, marketing research suggests that both faculty and students in American higher education institutions are constantly surveyed on every aspect of their lives, leading to survey fatigue and thereby compounding problems with representative response rates (Groves et al., 2009; Porter et al., 2004).

In order to avoid the common pitfalls associated with surveying vast numbers of faculty members, the University of South Florida began a year-long project to investigate the diverse needs of faculty members across disciplines, encompassing both curricular and research support. This year-long project sought to pull from existing datasets as well as develop new methodologies for gathering data from a variety of sources in order to better inform the USF liaison model. Among these, two teams were formed in order to address both the curricular and research needs of faculty. Each team was tasked with identifying key questions or concepts to address and to develop a methodology for gathering both quantitative and qualitative data to answer questions and offer insight into departmental needs across the USF campus.

Measuring Faculty Needs From the Library at the University of South Florida

The University of South Florida (USF) is a large, publicly funded state institution, with its main campus located in Tampa and separately accredited campuses located in St. Petersburg and Sarasota. In 2016, over 40,000 students enrolled at the Tampa campus of USF at the undergraduate or graduate level, and instructional faculty members numbered 1,790 (USF, 2016). One main library on the Tampa campus serves all of the university, with the exception of USF Health, which has a separate library facility. The Tampa campus library employs a lean

liaison model, with 13 liaison librarians (where “liaison” is defined broadly to include librarians with other primary duties, such as copyright and resource sharing or special collections) for these 40,000 students and 1,790 faculty members.

Given its lean liaison model, it is imperative for the USF Tampa Library to know what the faculty at the institution need to support their teaching and research. Like libraries at many academic institutions, USF has participated in campus-wide surveys, including LibQUAL+™ and, most recently, the Ithaka S+R faculty survey in 2015. While large-scale assessment surveys such as these are crucial for institutional decision making, they are impractical for gathering continuous data to inform day-to-day activities and support. Therefore, we sought methods for gauging how the library could help meet the research and teaching needs of faculty across a wide range of disciplinary boundaries without relying on survey responses.

The case study offered in this paper derives in part from a year-long process to re-envision liaison service models at USF. As part of this process, two committees were tasked with creating methodologies for assessing faculty needs of the library; the curriculum committee was charged with assessing needs to support teaching and learning activities, while the academic needs committee was charged with assessing library support required for research.

Measuring Curriculum Needs

The curriculum committee was charged with gathering and analyzing data regarding the presence of information literacy skills within colleges and departments at USF. As USF completed the Ithaka S+R faculty survey less than a year ago, the committee was particularly interested in accomplishing this work without requesting input from faculty. To accomplish this, the committee decided to analyze course syllabi to gauge the types of library resources that students would need to access in order to successfully complete a course. While the level of information provided in individual syllabi varies greatly, they nevertheless provide an excellent snapshot of the types of assignments and information-seeking behavior that faculty are requiring of their students.

While many institutions maintain a central, publicly accessible repository of syllabi to facilitate the assessment of transfer credits, USF does not; syllabi instead typically reside in departmental archives. In order to access syllabi, the curriculum committee worked with USF IT to obtain read-only access to syllabus files in Canvas, the university’s course management software. We used a three-pronged approach to gather syllabi. First, we targeted high-enrollment degree programs to pilot whether this approach would work. After the pilot’s success, we turned to courses that satisfy general education requirements, since information literacy is a key dimension of USF’s general education program, and all undergraduate students take a subset of these courses. Finally, after completing these smaller studies, we embarked on a large-scale review of the curriculum requirements of all degree programs at the undergraduate and graduate level at USF.

The workflow the committee created is not foolproof: The list of degree programs and course requirements were harvested from department websites, many of which are out of date. As noted above, not all syllabi are created equal. Some contain much more information than others, and some courses do not even have a syllabus loaded in Canvas, despite a university policy. It does, however, provide a workable solution to the problem of needing access to current information about the institution’s curricular requirements, and it helps ensure that our data sample is representative of the full range of departments and disciplines represented in the curriculum.

Measuring Research Needs

In addition to gathering data on faculty’s instruction needs, this project sought to establish methodologies and processes for determining how the library might meet faculty research needs across disciplines. The academic needs committee was tasked with gathering qualitative data that speaks to the research needs of departments and colleges as well as other units on campus such as institutes, labs, centers, and interdisciplinary units. The primary challenge for this activity was that no unified or strategic method for gathering qualitative data about faculty’s research needs across disciplines existed at USF before this project began. Naturally, reviewing faculty curriculum vitae (CVs) allowed for individual liaisons to gather data on the research

needs of particular faculty members; however, the larger project sought to gather a broader sample from which to make decisions about collection development and the library's role in faculty research support.

Short of interviewing the roughly 1,800 individual instruction faculty members who work at USF, this subcommittee worked to create a plan and set of methodologies that provide the greatest impact without overtaxing the workload of its five members. Specifically, the academic needs committee began its project by gathering data first from existing web sources (e.g., departmental websites) before moving on to a more time-intensive approach.

To normalize the data gathered from departmental websites, the academic needs committee developed an online form for assessing various aspects of each website using the same criteria (see Appendix A), choosing a randomized sample of five departments from the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), USF's largest college, in order to test a proof of concept before moving on to the entirety of the university. In addition to being the largest college at USF, CAS houses the School of Humanities, the School of Social Sciences, and the School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. The academic needs committee chose this college to test its proof of concept given the diversity of departments and broad representation of faculty across disciplines within CAS.

Unfortunately, given the array of departmental websites that had been developed without a uniform set of standards, this method proved less effective than anticipated. Specifically, many departmental websites led with outdated information or left large gaps of information, including missing faculty lists, no references to grants or awards, and no specification of particular research interests within the department. Therefore, the committee decided to remove this aspect of the methodological approach for determining faculty research needs from the overall plan.

After the departmental website scrape proved unfruitful, the academic needs committee considered what additional information was needed to flesh out the picture of research needs at USF. To this end, the committee developed a list of questions both for the committee to investigate as

well as those which could be directed toward various colleges within the university, the answers to which would determine where gaps in support existed.

First, these questions were developed on a general level in order to assess many facets of the overarching charge and, upon reflection, then broken into categories based on audience. Specifically, questions targeted audiences in administration, department chairs, faculty groups, and for the committee itself (see Appendix B). These questions evolved over the semester, breaking away from the library-centric approach and morphing into a more faculty-oriented question set. In order to test our proof of concept for informational interviews, the academic needs team focused on key individuals within CAS, including the vice provost for student success, the associate dean of the office of graduate and undergraduate studies, and the chair of the philosophy department before advancing on to other administrators, chairs, and faculty members. This is an ongoing process, and the academic needs committee is currently in the process of determining which departments to approach next as well as is working to develop faculty focus groups to gather data on a more granular level.

Results and Actionable Items

This project resulted in the accumulation of massive amounts of data, some of which is still under review and analysis. Both committees, however, have begun to identify trends and patterns that will affect liaison services at USF.

Trends Identified

Undergraduate courses appear to be moving away from the traditional research paper and requiring more project-based and service learning opportunities. Therefore, the traditional information literacy components that librarians have historically helped support are now evolving into projects that may not require extensive research or even utilize any library resources. The data has also suggested departments and programs that require library-intensive projects and papers of its students with which liaison librarians do not currently have strong relationships; this assessment, therefore, provides information to support targeted outreach. Furthermore, the informational interviews conducted reveal that various campus-wide

initiatives impact the research and instructional needs of faculty across departments. Specifically, the university's emphasis on student success, including a focus on freshmen retention rates, student persistence, and the six-year graduation rate, has heavily influenced a restructuring of courses across departments. Additionally, USF's Global Citizens Project has become an integral component of core classes. As a result, classes across departments are now required to contain at least one major project that ties into global citizenship, and the library needs to assess its collections and services in light of these changes.

Action Items Identified

Given the larger trends that are shaping the evolution of course development and faculty research at USF, the library has identified a series of steps it can take in order to better support faculty through this transition.

This project revealed that liaisons need to make a concerted effort to tap into campus-wide initiatives, such as textbook affordability and student persistence. This may come in the form of partnering with various nonacademic units to find new avenues for providing outreach to students struggling to afford textbooks or attempting to find proper and effective sources for conducting their research. Additionally, as the university transitions to offering more and more classes online, the library can develop an online toolkit for supporting faculty as they transfer content to the online sphere. This may include tapping into Canvas courses in order to develop research modules and online learning objects to replace the traditional face-to-face one-shot.

Further, additional perspectives are needed to inform the library's understanding of faculty research needs, and the library will continue working with faculty and chairs in order to assess department-wide research needs across disciplines. Indeed, although the initial round of interviews led to various vital pieces of information, it became clear that the view from the top was focused more on instruction and student success despite the specific questions designed to elicit information about research needs. The academic needs committee anticipates that faculty focus groups will provide more data regarding these specific research needs, however, which will allow the liaisons to respond on the departmental and individual level.

Next Steps

As librarians, we recognize that understanding faculty research and teaching needs is an ongoing endeavor that must be repeated throughout our time serving various departments. This project was large scale, but the librarians at the University of South Florida hope to adapt it to inform the smaller scale through the ongoing process of data collection going forward.

In the meantime, the members of the curriculum and academic needs committees are working to answer several primary questions to arise from this project: How do we share all this information with our administrators, chairs, and faculty, and students? How do we incorporate these insights into our daily work? And how do we ensure that we are meeting the current research and instruction needs of our faculty?

To begin, we are restructuring our existing liaison program in order to provide a more consistent level of service across departments, including evaluating our instruction program to see how we can better support faculty in research-intensive courses. We are also rolling out new marketing and outreach strategies that are informed by this data, including revamping our new graduate orientation program through partnership with other on-campus organizations. Specifically, we tapped into the departmental demographics of our new students and created tailored sessions and handouts for these audiences that provided information to support graduate students both as students and as instructors.

Rather than simply hoping that library resources and services effectively support the diverse needs of faculty and students, this methodology allows the librarians at the University of South Florida to systematically evaluate trends in teaching and research in order to adjust support and services in accordance with current faculty needs.

Conclusion

As liaison librarians, it is our duty to recognize the diverse needs of our faculty and students and to respond to those needs with the proper support. In this ongoing process, it is necessary for liaison librarians to develop an action plan for assessing the

needs of their subjects during the tenure of their liaisons. Although developed to serve the population at a large, research university, the methodologies outlined here could be easily adapted for gauging faculty needs for research and instruction across different disciplines at other

institutions. We anticipate that these techniques will allow the library liaisons at the USF Tampa Library as well as librarians at other institutions to better support academic units even as they pursue new and emerging practices within their disciplines.

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Appendix A: Departmental Website Evaluation Form

What are the areas of specialization for the department (particularly for PhD students)?

What areas of research can you identify with regard to the department? The PhD program?

What are the specific curricular areas of concentration in the doctoral program?

What collaborations with other units on campus are highlighted?

What news items are featured on the front page?

What activities are unique to this department compared to others?

How many regular faculty are listed on the website? How many research faculty? How many visiting faculty? How many postdocs? Affiliated faculty? Courtesy faculty?

What information is available about research awards (national level) and grants?

Appendix B: Academic Needs Guiding Questions

For Administrators

1. What are the research needs of tenure earning faculty? Of instructors? Of adjuncts?
2. How are research needs changing? What are the challenges faced by faculty? Adjuncts? Students?
3. What do faculty perceive as the educational gaps in their students and the needs of their adjuncts and colleagues?
4. How could the library support pre-eminence?
5. How do you feel the faculty would like to receive information from the library?
6. What data points determine the success or failure of a department?

For Chairs

1. What are the research needs of tenure earning faculty? Of instructors? Of adjuncts?
2. How are research needs changing? What are the challenges faced by faculty? Adjuncts? Students?
3. What are the unique differences in research needs between yours and other disciplines?
4. What frustrations do you perceive your colleagues struggling with in relation to teaching and research?
5. What are the obstacles your students face in finding information and conducting research?
6. How do you feel the faculty would like to receive information from the library?

For Faculty

1. What do you perceive as the educational gaps in your students' research, writing, and information skills?
2. What are the obstacles your students face in finding information and conducting research?
3. What are the unique differences in research needs between yours and other disciplines?
4. What are the obstacles you face while preparing instruction and/or conducting research?
5. What frustrations do you perceive your colleagues struggling with in relation to teaching and research?
6. What are the most important resources you need for your research?
7. How do you select external partners for grants? Do you seek out other USF units/colleges?
8. Does your research inform your instruction or vice versa?
9. If you had more time, what resources and services would like for your instruction or research activities?
10. How can the library support your research and instruction?
11. How do you hear about library services and resources?
12. How would you like to receive information from the library?
13. Should your department have an academic librarian liaison?

For Committee

1. How do we find out what the faculty needs are?
 - a. Look at currently available qualitative information.
 - b. Meet with administrators for informal talk about their perceptions of departmental needs.
 - c. Ask faculty directly.
2. What is the makeup of the faculty at USF?
 - a. Ask data gathering and analysis committee's information.
 - b. Check USF Info Mart.
3. What current qualitative data about faculty trends/needs is available to us?
 - a. Ithaka.
 - b. LibQUAL.
 - c. Articles on similar research studies.
 - d. Department and faculty websites.

4. What level of input should we seek first (administrators, department chairs, faculty, etc.)?
 - a. Administrators first.
5. How do we find out recent trends in colleges and departments (the trajectory of the department)?
 - a. Ask administrators and faculty.
6. How do we identify differences in user behaviors among the disciplines?
7. How do we create relationships in order to have conversations about curriculum needs?
8. How do we identify gaps in what the library offers compared to what the faculty and students need?
9. How do we determine the needs of nonlibrary users?
10. Which colleges/departments/programs are heavy library users, and which are less dependent on library resources?
11. How do we identify departments that seemingly are afraid to ask for library assistance?
12. Are there inequities of library support because of lack of liaison coverage?
13. Are there inequities of library support because of lack of department interest/understanding of the library?
14. How are we best going to communicate information to our departments?