Starting the write way: Comparing two library scholarly development programs

By: Nina Exner and Amy Harris Houk

Abstract:

How many faculty librarians have uttered the plaint, "I don't know how to start getting published!" or similar laments about the publish-or-perish obligation? Because scholarship among academic librarians is a serious and often daunting issue, much time and energy are spent worrying about it. At institutions that require scholarly activity for tenure or for contract renewal, demands for scholarship can be problematic for junior faculty-librarians. Tenure demands are a major stressor for new academic librarians, but meeting tenure requirements is generally not addressed in library school.[1] Because of this gap in library school education, it becomes the responsibility of the tenure-granting institution to meet these needs. Additionally, librarians who move from institutions that do not focus on scholarship to ones that do may feel uncomfortable with this type of writing. The differences between papers written in graduate school and writing for tenure can be intimidating; although the differences should make it easier, they often make the process more, not less, daunting.[2]

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Comparing Two Library Scholarly Development Programs

Nina Exner and Amy Harris Houk

How many faculty librarians have uttered the plaint, "I don't know how to start getting published!" or similar laments about the publish-or-perish obligation? Because scholarship among academic librarians is a serious and often daunting issue, much time and energy are spent worrying about it. At institutions that require scholarly activity for tenure or for contract renewal, demands for scholarship can be problematic for junior faculty-librarians. Tenure demands are a major stressor for new academic librarians, but meeting tenure requirements is generally not addressed in library school.[1] Because of this gap in library school education, it becomes the responsibility of the tenure-granting institution to meet these needs. Additionally, librarians who move from institutions that do not focus on scholarship to ones that do may feel uncomfortable with this type of writing. The differences between papers written in graduate school and writing for tenure can be intimidating; although the differences should make it easier, they often make the process more, not less, daunting.[2]

Although tenure for academic librarians has a long history of debate and research, there is less overall discussion of the role of publication for tenure-seeking librarians.[3] Unsurprisingly, the tenure process is a proven motivator for publication among librarians.[4] But beyond that, finding ways to support and promote scholarship—especially among new librarians—is a more complicated question.

Literature Review

Only a modest body of research exists on promoting librarians' scholarly efforts in academic libraries. Some individual techniques that can help with publication have been studied or discussed in editorials and books. For example, studies of journal acceptance have found that choosing a journal that matches the topic is a critical step. In addition, good writing and interest in the topic is vital as well.[5] And

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finally, perhaps most important of all, the writer should understand the peer review process before submitting an article. In many ways, this process is easier and more collaborative than classroom work.[6] But as helpful as it is, this sort of advice is targeted toward the individual librarian and does not address what can be done by colleagues, mentors, or administrators to help support the development of scholar-librarians.

At the institutional level, several factors have been shown to encourage scholarship. Institutional commitment is a major factor, as long as that commitment includes concrete support mechanisms like release time or on-the-job writing time.[7] It is worth noting that in and out of librarianship, time pressures are one of the most commonly mentioned concerns that need to be addressed administratively.[8] Without serious administrative support, librarians will never have the ability to make the leap to become scholar-librarians. High levels of success have been found by intensive, multi-pronged approaches addressing scholarly training, research equipment, information, and release time.[9] But unfortunately such an exhaustive approach may be a more serious commitment to developing scholar-librarians than many libraries have the ability to engage in. More modest approaches are needed for libraries with more modest resources at hand.

Mentoring programs are also important contributors to scholarly success in libraries.[10] But there are times when mentoring may not be enough, or the mentoring program may need some added support. Mentoring by senior librarians is a widely subscribed to method of supporting junior librarians, but when new programs fall outside of mentors' realms of experience, alternatives may be needed. At those times collegial review[11] and informal or formal Academic Writing Groups[12] have been used with success to help encourage librarians in scholarly writing. This is not only true among librarians. Because many institutions and fields emphasize scholarship as the most important criterion for evaluation of merit for tenure, productivity is an issue for many scholars.[13] Other disciplines have found success with peer writing support groups, whether in individual disciplines or cross-disciplinarily.[14] Collegial writing support can help encourage scholarly productivity.

It seems potentially interesting, therefore, to look at the comparative traits of different types of collegial writing

groups. Different cultures and institutions have different needs, and it is certain that there can be no "one size fits all" solution for creating support for academic writing and scholarly productivity. This article looks at two different approaches to supporting librarians at two different institutions.

The Two Institutions

The University Libraries at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) and the F. D. Bluford Library at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University are both part of the University of North Carolina system and are located in Greensboro, North Carolina. While not all UNC-system libraries grant tenure to librarians, both the University Libraries and Bluford Library have faculty-status librarians on the tenure track. Schools in the UNC system have a large amount of autonomy in their governance. Eight of the seventeen institutions in the system have tenure-track librarians.

The University Libraries at the UNCG is made up of Jackson Library, the main library, and the Music Library, a branch located in the School of Music. All librarians at the University Libraries are tenure-track, except one resident librarian, who has a two-year fixed-term appointment. There are currently fourteen tenured and fourteen tenure-track librarians. Librarians at UNCG have had faculty status and been tenure-track since 1976 and participate fully in faculty governance. UNCG has an FTE of just over fifteen thousand with more than one hundred undergraduate, sixty-three masters, and twenty-five doctoral programs. UNCG has a Department of Library and Information Studies, housed in the School of Education. The Carnegie Foundation has designated UNCG a Doctoral/Research-Intensive University.[15] Jackson Library features a reference desk, which is staffed approximately fifty-six hours per week by librarians from reference and other departments, fourteen hours by library staff and seventy-two hours by graduate student interns (some of which overlap with librarians and staff). Reference librarians also teach between three hundred fifty and four hundred library instruction sessions each academic year.

Librarians at the University Libraries are appointed to an initial four-year term. After two years, the tenure-track librarian goes up for reappointment. If reappointment is granted, the librarian is granted an additional three-year term and seeks tenure after five years of employment. Reappointment and tenure are based on four criteria: professional responsibility/teaching effectiveness, research and creative activities, service activities, and directed professional activities. In the past, professional responsibility was the main focus of reappointment and tenure decisions, but in recent years, research and creative activities has become more important.

The F. D. Bluford Library is a medium-sized academic library with nine currently tenured and five tenure-track librarians. Bluford Library serves North Carolina A&T State University (NC A&T), a PhD-granting HBCU institution with an FTE just under ten thousand. NC A&T has a Carnegie Classification of "High Research Activity" and offers 116 undergraduate, 54 master's, and 5 doctoral programs. Like the University Libraries at UNCG, the service model at Bluford is highly patron-centered; there are three service desks, including a reference desk staffed approximately ninety-five hours per week during the academic year by librarians only. Desk and classroom time take up the vast majority of public service librarians' days. Technical, systems, and administrative services are likewise stretched thin, which leaves little time for scholarly pursuits.

In the past, librarians have been granted tenure without extensive scholarly publications by demonstrating intense classroom and student-centered professional work. Tenure applications have always included service, professional activity, and/or scholarly presentations, but campus standards are increasingly strict. Because new campus standards for tenure demand more rigorous scholarly requirements, library tenure standards have become more rigorous as well. The just-revised tenure requirements demand authorship of a scholarly work (broadly defined), as well as scholarly presentation or high-level service in professional organizations. Therefore, scholarly publishing is becoming an increasingly serious concern for faculty-librarians at the Bluford Library.

Mentoring programs at both institutions provide support to tenure-track librarians. At the University Libraries, each new librarian is matched with a tenured librarian from another department within the library. This mentor is charged with helping the tenure-track librarian find opportunities for presenting and publishing, as well as assisting with the preparation of reappointment and tenure documents. The mentoring program also features a monthly Lunch 'n Learn component, where participants meet over lunch and listen to a presentation on a professional development topic. In the past, these topics have included copyright issues and funding opportunities for travel. Mentees find this program, which has been in existence since 2005, beneficial, but, because of the increased attention paid to publication, many of the mentors who have been tenured for many years know little about scholarly publishing.

At Bluford, the mentoring program is likewise focused on helping junior faculty-librarians achieve tenure. As already mentioned, senior (tenured) librarians at Bluford usually have considerable experience in professional service. But many of the senior librarians lack experience in scholarly writing because it has not been mandated until recently. Many tenured librarians have experience in parts of the publishing process. A few have written individual articles, both refereed and non-refereed, and others have

served as referees or editors. However, participation in this process is not consistent among tenured librarians. So in both libraries, mentoring exists but many mentors lack the experience in scholarly writing that would help them encourage and support their mentees.

Tenure-track librarians at both institutions have found that they need support beyond what is provided by the mentoring programs to achieve the level of scholarly publishing necessary for tenure, which has lead to the creation of writing groups for tenure-track faculty. The tenure-track librarians themselves formed these groups because they felt they needed the support. But the groups took two different routes, each with advantages and disadvantages.

The Pub & Grub Model

Bluford Library's academic writing group is based on an informal exploration and mutual support model. The group, called the "Pub & Grub," meets during the lunch hour to discuss issues of mutual interest and to write. It is an opt-in group with little structure. Summer meetings are held weekly to help encourage more intense writing when hours (and therefore desk duties) are shorter and the instructional schedule is less demanding. Although there is considerable work to be accomplished in the summer, the time is more flexible.

The first attempt at such a group was in 2005 and formed to encourage scholar-librarians at the Bluford library. Growing concerns over publishing arose in a meeting of the library faculty, because of early discussion about more stringent requirements for scholarship on campus. A few individuals—a mix of new tenure-track librarians, near-tenure librarians, and senior librarians—wanted to do something to address the concerns. This led to the formation of a scholarly development task force, which engaged in a number of activities including the posting of "Call for Paper" announcements on the library Intranet, collecting paper topics and matching coauthors, and offering peer review to give feedback on papers or presentations. This task force gave feedback on some presentations, but no librarians were able to really harness the task force for publishing. The task force ultimately was unable to settle on a formula to encourage scholarship. By 2009 there had been no activity by this task force for well over a year. But new campus guidelines—now a reality, not simply a discussion—along with an influx of new tenure-track librarians increased the need for publishing support. This led to a great deal of discussion and concern among librarians, especially tenure-track librarians who were not certain where to begin. The result was that one tenured librarian with a little publishing experience decided that a support group might be worth starting. Junior faculty suggested that a casual, discussion-based forum would be better than a task force.

With the success of the library's lunchtime book discussion group, the formation of another lunchtime group for scholarly discussion seemed to have general appeal.

The group initially met to discuss its goals. They determined that librarians needed support in several areas. The most common issues facing these tenure-track librarians were: lack of time available to write, not knowing what to write about, a lack of practical experience with the peer-review process, and the inability to use citation-management software. Most of the participants faced more than one of these issues.

The Pub & Grub group decided to start with a facilitated problem-solving approach. The first few meetings started with general information about the experiences of the published librarians and those who knew the journal editorial process best, in order to familiarize everyone with the peer-review process. Then the writing process began. First, each member came up with at least one topic, which was discussed as a group. The next several sessions were spent tweaking and adjusting topics and outlining.

Soon it became clear that it was time to write. But a lack of time to write was still the biggest obstacle: the group tried to separate and say they would write during the week, but most did not get far. So when there are not many topics for discussion, the rest of the lunch time is spent writing. This way there is some quiet time for writing, but writers also have access to others when they need advice.

The Agraphia Group Model

Jackson Library's academic writing group is inspired by and based on the agraphia group described by Paul Silvia in his book *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing.* He aims to help people in academia become more productive writers. Silvia stresses the importance of making writing routine. He suggests scheduling time to write in the same way one schedules a meeting and sticking to it. Silvia spends an entire chapter debunking common excuses that keep people from being productive writers and provides specific advice on writing articles and books.[16]

The interest in this model began when a tenure-track librarian who is involved in a campus-wide New Faculty Mentoring Program received a copy of Silvia's book. She shared it with an administrator, who purchased copies of the book for each tenure-track librarian. Upon reading the book, some of the tenure-track librarians decided to form an Agraphia Group, which Silvia discusses in his book. Participation in this group is optional and open to all tenure-track librarians. The word "agraphia" means the loss of the ability to write, which Silvia felt an appropriate name for his group. Silvia's group meets weekly, and each member of the group sets measurable goals (such

as words written, articles read, and so on), which one member writes in a notebook. At the next meeting, each member tells whether or not they met their goal from the previous session and sets new goals for the next week.[17] Some examples of writers' goals are as follows: write five hundred words, create an outline, research places to submit an article, and write and submit a presentation proposal. The members of the University Libraries Agraphia Group decided to meet every other week because the librarians do not have enough time for writing every week to necessitate meeting more frequently. On average, seven librarians attend each thirty minute meeting. Once a librarian has shared his or her goals, there is often discussion about whether a goal can be accomplished in two weeks, or if a goal is truly measurable. It is helpful to receive this type of feedback from colleagues. Additionally, some of the group members would like additional time to discuss ideas for writing. This will likely occur after the Agraphia Group meeting for those who wish to participate. The participating librarians have also decided to peer edit each other's drafts. When someone finishes a draft, they will send an e-mail out to the group asking if someone can edit it. People who have time to do so will read the draft and make comments.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Each approach has positives and negatives. One advantage to both approaches is increased motivation and confidence. Being part of a shared experience and having a support group to turn to not only helps participants keep their writing in the forefront of their mind, but also helps them feel that they are not alone.

In the Agraphia Group, goals are discussed as a group and recorded, which proves an element of accountability. There is no penalty for not meeting one's goals, but the members are motivated to meet goals so that they do not have to admit to the group that they were unsuccessful. Thus far, this has been sufficient motivation for the group. The Agraphia approach takes up little face-to-face time, so members are more likely to make it to meetings. It is goals focused, which is an advantage in making real progress. It is hoped that this fusion of flexible writing time and goals-oriented encouragement will be an ideal arrangement to enable and advance the academic writing objectives at UNCG. The Pub & Grub group also sets goals, but an unfortunate discovery has been that if almost no one in the group meets their goals for a few weeks in a row, the sense of accountability is gone. A particular advantage of the Pub & Grub approach has been its flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of its members. Writing with other people available for immediate feedback during a problem has helped librarians in the group avoid stumbling blocks. Several times when a project might have been set aside because of a problem, a writer has been encouraged instead to go ahead and face the problem.

Each approach also has disadvantages. The Pub & Grub does not provide a very large amount of time for writing. More time than just the two-hour lunch break is needed to make significant progress. Also, because it is a longer gathering, people often do not have time for it; a shorter meeting would be easier to attend. A disadvantage to the Agraphia model is the inability to workshop ideas or papers within the meeting. Because the meeting is deliberately brief, there is no time to workshop papers or discuss possible topics at length. A possible disadvantage to both approaches is that they tend to attract people who are already motivated to write. Because both groups are voluntary, people who feel that they are not good writers or that they do not have time to write may not participate. Something more would be needed if a particular institution needed to approach 100 percent participation levels in scholarly writing.

Progress and Hope for the Future

Though this article provides possible models for support for the scholarship of tenure-track librarians, no conclusions can be made yet. At both institutions, librarians have been able to devote more time and make more progress on writing than they had previously. As the time this was written, other librarians in each of these groups were also writing articles and preparing to submit them for review. Some of these librarians have never published an article and had previously not understood how to get seriously started on their writing. Others had lacked time or impetus, or had hit specific stumbling blocks. Having a support group, whatever the format, has been a definite benefit already.

Nonetheless, until we have concrete results in the form of published articles by previously unpublished librarians (which excludes the authors of this article) or tangible increase in the overall volume produced in either library we cannot be certain of the results.

At the time of writing, half of the tenure track librarians at UNCG and all of the tenure track librarians at NC A&T are participants in their respective academic writing groups. The Agraphia Group members are currently at various points in the article writing process. Most of the articles currently underway by members of that group were already in progress before the group began, though some librarians have begun new progress. After the group has been in existence for well over a year, it will be interesting to see if librarians feel it has increased their productivity.

The Bluford Pub & Grub has been in place for less than a year. Each Pub & Grub participant has at least one article currently underway, and the first-time writers have made it farther than previous attempts to write a

scholarly article. In that sense the Bluford Pub & Grub has accomplished its goal of helping librarians to get past the obstacles that were preventing them from writing. Whether it develops fully into a substantial number of librarians successfully publishing scholarly writings is yet to be determined. Confidence and motivation have increased, in a group with very little experience with scholarly composition. However, the hope had been that some articles could be completed by previously unpublished librarians over the course of the first summer. In that sense, it has proved to be overly optimistic.

From current estimations, both formats seem to have been of some help. Because the Pub & Grub group needed more assistance with starting–not having any articles underway–and the Agraphia Group needed more assistance with maintaining momentum, each approach has been helpful for its target group. This may be the time to reassess the needs and achievements of each group and make sure that stumbling blocks are addressed and impetus is maintained.

Conclusions

It is important to remember that there are several critical factors needed for success in adopting either model. In either instance, if no one writes then there is no penalty for failing to write. Other incentives or a serious obligation to participate is important. Time to write–whether at a set time, a flexible schedule, or through release time–is also crucial. As mentioned in the literature review, administrative support for librarian scholarship is critical to the perception of value and the sense of organizational support and therefore critical to success.

The ideal group would be a fusion between the two approaches–and others as well–with emphasis on the aspects that best meet the culture of each library. Some way of providing the sense of weekly accountability in an easy-to-attend, brief format could be combined with less frequent but longer support and discussion group meetings. Weekly Agraphia model short meetings combined with monthly BYOB Pub & Grubs might be the ideal format for success, if the time can be arranged.

The most important thing is that scholarship is encouraged in some form. The expectation of scholarship is a primary contributor to the production of scholarship. If steps are not made to encourage the development of scholar-librarians, scholarship will not flourish in the academic library.

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