

Research Challenges Report

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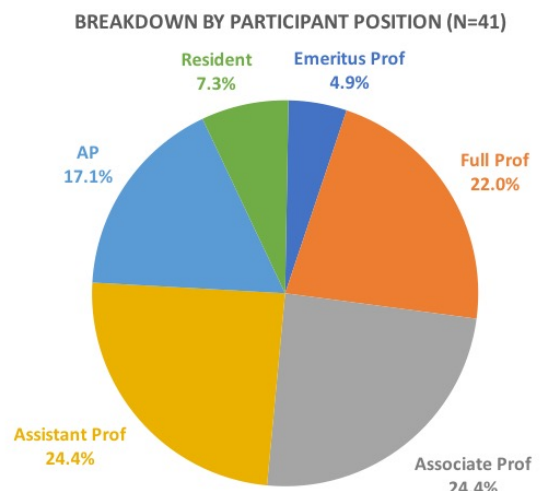
Background

As incoming AUL of Research, I proposed a few low-key, low-cost activities to strengthen the research community within the Library. These suggestions centered on developing a more robust culture of scholarship through developing habits for reading the LIS literature (e.g. through journal clubs) and being informed of colleagues' research (e.g. seminar series). However, these were suggestions based on my impressions of gaps and not on wide-spread consultation. In an effort to understand what activities would be of the most benefit to focus on, I scheduled a series of sessions to gather input on "research challenges." While these sessions focused on challenges that tenure-track faculty face, APs were also engaged, albeit with a careful caveat to reiterate that research is not a requirement for AP promotion. Four questions were used to prompt discussions:

- Q1. What do you see as the biggest research challenges for pre-tenure faculty? (sub question – how different for post-tenure faculty?)
- Q2. What things have been tried in the past to address these (or similar) challenges but didn't work well?
- Q3. Have there been things in the past that did work well, but we are no longer doing (for whatever reason, but sub question – why did we stop)?
- Q4. If we could improve or do 1 thing that would benefit faculty across all divisions, what would it be?

For junior (pre-tenure) faculty and APs, the first and last questions were the focus of the conversation, but I noted that if they had observations of their senior (tenured) colleagues to share, they were welcome to do so. These conversations and this report are for internal purposes only; no IRB was obtained and nothing of this effort, in whole or in part, will be published. Requests to attribute comments to specific individuals will not be accommodated.

Sessions were held between Dec 2018 and May 2019, and participants included the groups PTAC, FRC, RPC, LCAP, and the visiting residents. Additionally, I sought out a number of individuals with direct roles, either past or current, in providing research support, mentorship, and/or leadership. Finally, to catch anyone who wanted to participate but had not already, open calls to the senior faculty and the junior faculty were made. In total, 39 people were engaged directly in conversation, and 2 additional people provided written comments. The demographics break down as shown at right.



Results

Q1. Biggest Research Challenges

Across all positions, by far, the most frequently cited research challenge was directly associated with **Time**. Notably, this is consistent with library literature.¹⁻³ Three other themes emerged around **Getting Started**, **Maintaining Momentum**, and **Variability**. Specific issues related to these challenge themes were distilled as follows below:

Time

- Balancing job responsibilities
- Carving out time to devote to research
- Using time effectively
- Lack of time to mentor others

Getting Started (in particular for junior faculty)

- Overcoming a lack research experience/preparedness
- Understanding expectations for research quality and quantity
- Overcoming a lack of confidence/feelings of uncertainty
- Finding research mentors
- Understanding the “big picture”

Maintaining Momentum (in particular for senior faculty)

- Finding funding
- Maintaining interest/motivation

Variability

- Variable investment in and interpretation of the current tenure guidelines around research
- Variability in unit environment (e.g. inconsistent direction on balancing priorities)
- Inconsistent information shared about the sufficient quality, quantity, and importance of research
- Various support efforts (e.g. workshops, writing/research groups, etc.) often lose momentum
- Inconsistent results from various support efforts

Q2. and Q3. What Has Worked/Not Worked Well in the Past

In terms of what has worked well in the past and what has not worked well, there were often considerable differences of opinion. Specifically, separate individuals would reference the same activity but would offer opposing evaluations of the usefulness of that activity. Despite this, some activities were differentiated.

Not Worked Well	Worked Well
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Writing groups- Mentoring- Workshops- Classes- Semi-structured events (e.g. round tables/discussion groups)- Untenured lunches- PRCs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Writing groups- Mentoring- Workshops- Classes- Semi-structured events (e.g. round tables/discussion groups)- Untenured lunches- PRCs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Research days- Release time- Registry of research interests- Purchase of methods book	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Guidance within division- Junior faculty initiative (e.g. ad hoc advisory committee)- Research collaborations with senior colleagues- Dedicated research support personnel (i.e. Dan Tracy’s previous position), including consultations, on-boarding meetings and check-ins

In follow-up questioning, why certain things have not worked well fell back on two themes: **Time** and **Variability**. For example, workshops and semi-structured events tended to be considered positive overall but occurrence and participation were considered too variable to *consistently* work well. To consistently work well, more commitment to take the **Time** to prepare for such activities (both on the part of the leader and the attendees) is required. Likewise, interest in more mentorship opportunities came up frequently, in particular to address issues relayed in **Getting Started** and **Maintaining Momentum**. However, expressions of interest from both junior and senior faculty were quickly chased with concerns about additional demands on **Time** as well as the **Variability** of skills, expectations, and personalities of research mentors and mentees. Library literature suggests different mentorship models, i.e. informal vs. formal, tend to serve different purposes.^{1,4} Thus, to explore mentorship more fully, the reciprocal goals, expectations, and motivations would be essential to carefully and fully assess.

Q4. One Thing of Benefit Across All Divisions

This question was posed in order to attempt to focus the conversations towards actionable and ideally consensus-driven, or at least consensus-inspired, outcomes. Not surprisingly, and as was true for other questions, research needs intersected with other needs (e.g. dossier preparation and improvement, etc.). As such, suggested improvements distilled below are differentiated by their specificity to research challenges alone or improvements that would serve more broadly.

Research-specific improvements

- Greater consideration of research readiness at the point of hire
- Re-instate dedicated personnel to support research
- Encourage/require coursework on methodologies in LIS research
- Re-instate research methods workshop series and panels
- Establish research groups (with collaborators across skill/career levels)
- Broadly share short research tips (e.g. curated content in the form of a monthly email alert)

Research-inclusive, but not specific, improvements

- Greater accountability of career trajectory
- Develop an ethos of cohort (e.g. via tenure classes) to articulate and prioritize needs
- Greater mentorship (broadly, multi-faceted)
- More ready correction of PRC mismatches
- Training on persuasive/"big picture" writing
- Communication of resources available (tenure documentation, training opportunities, etc.)

While these were the suggestions that surfaced when participants were asked to identify only one area of benefit, many other ideas were sparked by this question. These suggestions included: use faculty meetings better, revisit (equitably-granted) release time, review P&T documentation from other institutions and elsewhere on campus, and more sharing of works in progress and experiences (including failures).

This question also spurred a particular thread around the dossier review process for OY-5Y librarians. Some participants questioned if the support, which is intended to improve the likelihood of a positive tenure decision, does more harm than good. These efforts received a number of comments, from both junior and senior librarians, that are best distilled as considering the process frequently *frustrating* and *counterproductive*. In some cases, these concerns lead to radical suggestions, including being more willing to let people fail [to get tenure] and removing the PRC/dossier review process altogether. Interestingly, doing so would address the most-oft quoted challenge, **Time**, since the Library structure in place exceeds what Provost Communications 9, 13, and 21 articulate as unit obligations for tenure, 3Y, and annual review, respectively.

However, as noted elsewhere, these suggestions have implications that go well beyond addressing research challenges. Instead of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, it may be that modifications to the Library's current PRC/dossier review processes could be beneficial to consider and implement.

Preliminary Conclusions and Next Steps

There are two main next steps:

- 1) distribution and feedback for this report
- 2) coming to a decision about which direction to go, of which there are several options

One direction is a formal decision to do nothing, while another direction would be to implement (some) actions that would address the issues raised in the four challenge themes. As directions are explored, it is essential that **Time** is kept at the forefront of our minds as our most scarce resource. That is to say, any direction must be *clearly worth the Time invested*. Some actions may be more subtle vs. dramatic, more strategic vs. reactive, or more demanding vs. light-weight, and they will not all be equally promising or equally effective.

As the current AUL for Research and the consistent ear in the room during these many discussions, my instinct is that the Library should bear down on the research-focused activities that were perceived as working well: guidance within the division, junior faculty initiative, research collaborations with senior colleagues, and dedicated research support personnel. This direction would see the Library bolstering and/or reinstating those activities, which would also address, at least in part, the suggestions offered as most broadly beneficial from Q4. There is one exception: efforts to better assess research readiness at the point of hire. This improvement should also be examined.

Along with other thoughts provoked as a result of this report, I ask that Library Administration, including EC, consider this direction to focus on activities cited as working well. After feedback from Administration and EC is received, my inclination is to distribute this report (or an updated version thereof) via LibNews and discuss the results at an upcoming Faculty Meeting. This would provide an opportunity to communicate a summary of these conversations as well as present an opportunity to discuss future directions and gauge broader buy-in. I see my role as AUL for Research as championing and driving directions forward, for example, by developing plans for implementation and working to ensure activities are embedded, as uniformly as possible, within the Library's fabric. However, this cannot be done in isolation or without the support of the Library Administration. Even more importantly, this cannot be done without the support of the Library faculty. In particular, given the challenges associated with **Variability**, I now believe it is important for these changes to be durable and outlast inevitable fluctuations in personnel across the Library's organizational structures.

Note on Methods

Forty-one opinions are not easily digestible or presented as ideas primed for decision and action. In order to present this report, I reviewed all session notes, aggregated and organized comments, and reviewed for themes. In some cases, I tried to take the "spirit" of a comment rather than the words verbatim. For example, rather than listing each permutation of "round table," "discussion group," etc., these were morphed into "semi-structured events." Additionally, some distillations may obscure complexity, e.g. there is *a lot* packed into "Variable investment in and interpretation of the current tenure guidelines around research," including a lack of investment in *and* an overabundance of investment in research activities by both junior and senior faculty as well as interpretations that are overly broad *and* overly narrow, again, by both junior and senior faculty. Any misrepresentations or oversimplifications were not intentional, and requests to clarify are welcomed. My goal in this distillation, however, is to move decision-making forward.

References

1. Ackerman, Erin, Jennifer Hunter, and Zara T. Wilkinson. "The Availability and Effectiveness of Research Supports for Early Career Academic Librarians." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 44, 553–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2018.06.001>
2. Kennedy, Marie R., and Kristine R. Brancolini. "Academic Librarian Research: A Survey of Attitudes, Involvement, and Perceived Capabilities." *College & Research Libraries* 73, 431-448. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl-276>
3. Kennedy, Marie R., and Kristine R. Brancolini. "Academic Librarian Research: An Update to a Survey of Attitudes, Involvement, and Perceived Capabilities." *College & Research Libraries* 79, 822-851. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.6.822>
4. James, Julie M., Ashley Rayner, and Jeannette Bruno. "Are You My Mentor? New Perspectives and Research on Informal Mentorship." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 41, 532–39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2015.07.009>