Getting Started

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Librarian As Researcher Panel
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Just as some information on my background, I graduated in 2009 with my MLIS from UBC. I should also mention that I have a MA in Anthropology. Although a field that in no way helps me in my current position, the experience I gained by researching, writing and defending my MA was invaluable. Most MLIS programs don’t really do an adequate job in preparing librarians to be researchers, but I really do think that as an academic librarian it can be very helpful – especially when starting out.

I should also point out that my first academic position was at one of the most supportive environments for research in an academic library possibly in all of Canada at the University of Saskatchewan. At the U of S, I was given one day a week to complete research, a start-up grant, as well as great colleagues and a support group that met once a month to help new librarians with research.

That is kind of my “conflict of interest” statement to basically say that I recognize I had a leg up over a lot of other librarians. But at the same time I think that anyone can do it if they want – and this is evidenced by the huge number of librarians publishing great work without having had my advantages.

So – what are my tips, tricks, and other random advice for how to begin a program of research and to start doing and publishing research...
The very first one is simply...raise your hand. A lot of my research has come up as simply a chance of an opportunity I saw that I was willing to take. I’ve found it helpful that during meetings to always be thinking (way in the back of your mind of course!) of whether this is something that could potentially have a research angle?

• LSSE
  • For example, our library recently had an organizational review. As a result of it, five different task groups were formed to deal with the issues raised by the review, including document delivery, cross-campus communication, and our literature search service. The Library director was looking for volunteers for each group. I was one of the few who actually raised my hand instead of being volunrtold as I wanted to go on the literature search service evaluation.
  • I recognized that the evaluation of this service was a nice, neat research project with a data set ready to go.
  • This one hand-raising has now resulted in three accepted presentations at conferences in Winnipeg, Montreal, and Chicago, as well as an invited submission for a major peer-reviewed journal.

• iPad
  • Another similar example of this was that in a previous position all the health sciences librarians were given iPads to use in their professional practice. In order to get the iPads the head of the library smartly framed it as a research question (how are librarians using ipads in their professional practice?) and asked all the librarians who was interested in participating on the project. Of the 8 librarians 4 said yes. For more established librarians a small project like this that would be co-authored might not be that appealing but for me, as a newer librarian it was perfect. I got to work with a group which lessened the load, and it was a project directly informed by my daily practice. The end result was a paper presentation in Hamilton and a published article in a peer-reviewed journal.

Both of these are examples of where if I didn’t say yes to the projects, I wouldn’t have been penalized or reprimanded for not doing part of my job. However, raising my hand when I saw an opportunity led me to two very different projects that both taught me a lot (including how to do research in a group) and that have benefited my career.
- The twin of raising your hand when you see an opportunity is **Saying Yes** when you are asked to be part of something, even if you feel intimidated.

- For example, as I was wrapping up my first year at library school one of my profs asked if I wanted to present a class paper as part of an upcoming panel of student speakers at CLA. So my very first paper presentation was part of a huge national conference and incredibly intimidating. But again – it gave me practice public speaking and led to an publication.

- Further, a contact I made from that paper later asked me to be part of a CLA Battledecks competition. For those of you who don’t know – Battledecks is a potentially the most embarrassing thing a person can do and should only be done when everyone is nice and drunk – not at 8:30 in the morning on a Saturday when I did it.

- And finally, this presentation here. Sitting on a panel with two very established and qualified researcher-librarians can be a bit intimidating, but I have to remind myself that my opinion can be valid too – and potentially helpful to others.
As with most things, the best way to get started is just to dive into it. There are so many opportunities around you and you just have to start taking advantage of them. Your first foray into research doesn’t have to be sole-authored multi-side study published in a major peer-reviewed journal. What you really want to do at the beginning is figure out both your voice and what your research interests are. If you can tie your research interests to your professional practice – all the better! In addition to the usual reading of journal articles and blogs to really understand what is going on in the field and to identify potential gaps where more research is needed, these are some of the venues I would suggest that have worked for me.

Start with things like blog posts and book reviews, and develop your writing skills and understanding how to write for a particular audience. This can also help you in working with editors and the process of editing.

Move on to slightly bigger things like Brief Communications or Columns in journals. A good idea for this is start reading your favorite journals “cover to cover” to see the variety of pieces they have. A lot of journals have a wide variety of options for publishing.

Then, perhaps move onto creating posters – usually much easier to get accepted into conference and slightly less terrifying.

I personally really benefit from writing evidence reviews for EBLIP. These are peer-reviewed pieces that critically appraise already published work. In addition to really forcing you to think about things like methodology when reading an article, it was invaluable for helping me learn about navigating the peer-review process – especially when my two peer-reviewers would give me directly opposing advice.
Once you begin feeling a bit more comfortable you can start moving up to those slightly more intimidating projects.

For those of you unfamiliar with the format, lightning strikes are short (5 mins or so) presentations on a topic. They are obviously brief, to the point, and can be used to cover even very small projects.

From there move on to slightly longer conference presentations where you more fully delve into a topic. I have found it quite beneficial working in groups. While in some ways it can be more time intensive it is also rewarding as you have people to bounce ideas off of, to share in the workload, and to help you in better working as part of a team.

And I’d like to emphasize that I really do try to continually educate myself. I would have loved to have applied to the CARL Librarians’ Research Institute, which I am sure will be talked about shortly, this year but it is unfortunately during the major conference in health sciences librarianship
And finally I guess is the idea that all projects or research, no matter how big or small, always have the potential to lead elsewhere and to other directions and/or interests, so no research, even if it fails miserably, should be seen as valuable.

So, to kind of sum all of that up, here is a brief history of my program of research to demonstrate both starting small and getting bigger, and how everything is connected.
Thank You

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