



Evidence Summary

Canadian Research Librarians have Little Time for Scholarship

A review of:

Fox, David. "Finding Time for Scholarship: A Survey of Canadian Research University Librarians." Portal: Libraries and the Academy 7.4 (2007): 451-62.

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Abstract

Objective – To provide comparative data from Canadian research universities regarding the time spent on scholarly activities by research librarians.

Design – Qualitative study employing a bilingual survey consisting of thirty-nine questions.

Setting – Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) located at the twenty-seven CARL universities during the spring and fall of 2006.

Subjects – CARL university librarians for whom e-mail addresses could be retrieved.

Methods – The survey was distributed to 1052 CARL librarians during the spring and

fall of 2006 via e-mail. Problems with the clarity of two questions became evident during the receipt of responses. The questions were revised and resubmitted to the same population.

Main Results – Five hundred and twenty responses (49.4%) were received, with 441 (84.8%) in English and 15.2% in French. A total of 53 surveys were unusable, leaving 467 (44.4%) cases as the basis for data analysis. Responses to the survey revealed that 51.4% of participants were required or encouraged to undertake scholarship. Of these, 35% were expected, in addition to sabbatical and study leaves, to make scholarship an integral and ongoing part of their professional responsibilities. Due to the individualized and subjective nature of the responses, no clear data emerged on the balance between scholarship and other

professional activities. The majority of research librarians, on average, spent less than five hours per week on scholarship activities. For the 290 full-time librarians surveyed, the average time spent per week on all activities (professional and scholarly) was 47.4 hours. Almost one third of the full time librarians worked fifty hours or more per week – the equivalent to the time commitment of the average university professor. Participants indicated that in an ideal world they would like to spend 10% less time on assigned duties. Francophone respondents spent 5% more of their time on professional responsibilities and 5% less time on scholarship. Participation rates in scholarship related leaves are low, with less than 25% of those surveyed engaging in these opportunities.

Conclusion – Based on the study’s findings, research librarians are not participating in scholarship to any great degree due to the perceived lack of time.

Commentary

This paper just touches the surface of what could be an interesting analysis between expectations and delivery. It is felt that the author’s superficial reporting and analysis detracts from the scholarly nature of the work.

The author states that “this paper will attempt to provide some comparative data from a Canadian research university library perspective,” (451) but discusses only a limited number of the survey findings. To be “comparative” implies that one set of the data is compared to another set of data. Given the introduction to the paper, one expects some comparison with Jeanne Brown’s work as well as to data about scholarship activities undertaken by university professors. Unfortunately, this level of analysis is missing from the article.

Evaluation of the survey instrument itself is difficult as very little information is provided. It would have been helpful had the full survey and attendant results been included. Since this was not done, one is not sure that the results have not been cherry-picked to support the thesis. Nor is it clear what method of analysis was used.

The author highlights the University of Saskatchewan as a model for encouraging scholarship. It would have been more interesting if the policies of the other CARL libraries had been presented and these then compared with the responses from the librarians at each university. Indeed, a breakdown of responses by university may well have revealed some interesting information.

Reference is made to the average number of hours a university professor works without any data/source to back this up. Insufficient data was proffered to support the claim that “the requirement for formal scholarship by Canadian research university librarians appears to be a growing trend” (452).

Terminology is not always clear, for instance, there is no mention as to what “8R” refers to. A footnote is certainly warranted. In Figure 5 an explanation of what “other” includes is also lacking.

The author implies that the uptake for scholarly leaves is low because of perceived lack of time. His focus on this perception results in a narrowness in the analysis of the results, leaving many questions unanswered. For instance, what degree of real support is given to librarians as opposed to token support? A survey of administrators’ perceptions would supplement the thesis of the article. Also, the differences within the CARL libraries are delineated for the reader. Yet, no analysis is made to compare responses to library “type.”

While this paper is weak in a number of areas, it is a valuable first attempt to investigate a level of scholarship amongst professional staff in university libraries. A more in-depth, analytical research paper would certainly be worthwhile.