A Study on the Art of Information: Publishing and Presenting by Medical Librarians

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A Study on the Art of Information: Publishing and Presenting by Medical Librarians

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this study was to discover what factors influence medical librarians to publish or present their work. It aims to determine what type of publications and presentations are most prevalent, what factors impact the decision to publish or present, and why one chooses to do one rather than the other or both.

Methods: Data were collected using an electronic questionnaire, consisting of both quantitative and qualitative items, sent to various listservs, including the Medical Library Association, Special Libraries Association, Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries, and regional MLA chapters. Responses were analyzed using multiple regression. A combination of descriptive statistics and axial coding were used to determine factors influencing and inhibiting publication and presentation of research.

Results: Participants were 209 medical librarians from across the United States. Respondents have no strong preference for publishing versus presenting, but preferred both equally. They have a preference for quantitative research over qualitative or mixed methodology and tend to present their research at all conference levels, but prefer the poster format. The most common influencing factors are an interest in conducting research, encouragement, resume enhancement, and interest in learning new information. Inhibiting factors include limited time, lack of encouragement, no mentor, and a shortage of travel funds.

Conclusion: Library schools, managers, and experienced librarians should introduce new librarians to research through encouragement and mentorship. Those who want to conduct research, but feel they do not have time, could speak with their manager about adding an original research project to their workflow.

Keywords: Librarians; Research; Publishing; United States
Introduction

Throughout their careers, librarians encourage, teach, and assist many researchers, students, and clinicians with research projects. However, the number of librarians who are working on their own projects is quite small. The Medical Library Association believes research is the “foundation for excellence in health information practice, for new and expanding roles for health sciences librarians, and for attracting top people to the field” [1]. The authors of this research study sought to learn why librarians are not “practicing what they preach” so to speak, and discover what factors influence librarians to publish or present their work. The study aims to determine what type of publications and presentations are most prevalent, what external and/or internal factors impact the decision to publish or present, and why one chooses to do one rather than the other or both. The authors will also share their insights and experience of doing research as it parallels this study.

The primary questions asked of questionnaire respondents included:

1. What types of research are medical librarians publishing?
2. What factors influence the number of journal articles medical librarians have published in the last three years?
3. In what format and where are medical librarians presenting their research?
4. What factors influence medical librarians to conduct and publish research?
5. What factors influence medical librarians to present their research at professional conferences?
6. What factors inhibit medical librarians in publishing their research?
7. What factors inhibit medical librarians in presenting their research at professional conferences?

Literature Review

Research on writing and publishing in the library profession has been conducted by several authors in recent years. In 2004 Henry and Neville surveyed Florida academic librarians and found that “[p]ublishing requirements do affect productivity, with practicing librarians contributing more to the literature overall but faculty teaching in library and information science programs publishing more
articles per person” [2]. This research also found that there is a separation between poster sessions and publications. “Poster sessions are ‘seen as signs of professional growth and competence, not as publication.’ As one would expect, national presentations are strongly recommended or required by more of the participants than presentations given at state held conferences and meetings. However, substantial numbers of participants reported that both types of presentations are considered” [2].

The results of a survey of new librarians at the Australian Library and Information Association’s New Librarians’ Symposium 2006 in Sydney, Australia by Bradley in 2008 “included a desire to network with peers, professional development, furthering an interest in public speaking, and interest in the suggested topics” [3]. Many of the reasons given regarding an interest in writing and presenting are similar to the finding of this study including: encouragement by supervisors/managers, “developing a professional portfolio and gaining recognition for their efforts in the workplace” [3]. The same results held true for the inhibiting factors of writing and/or presenting, including time pressures and financial support. “Time to write at work, especially if writing about work projects, may assist some of these pressures…. Time is likely to always be a barrier, and this means that motivation and skills have to be strong to [prioritize] writing over other work, or pressures and activities outside of work” [3].

Klobas and Clyde [4] published an article in 2010 regarding the why and how of publishing choices. Their findings were similar to the results of this research study as well. “Practitioners were relatively more concerned about the lack of support for research in general and poor recognition of the value of research among administrators in particular; effectively, both groups perceived a lack of support for research among their referent institutions. Practitioners were also relatively more concerned than researchers about their lack of skills and expertise while full professors were more concerned than other groups about the lack of research background among practitioners and administrators” [4]. Lack of time and funding were also mentioned by respondents as was encouragement. “The encouragement of peers and senior colleagues is an important motivating factor for practitioner-authors who are rarely in positions where they are expected to research and publish, and who indeed report a lack of institutional support for these activities. Lack of time, funds and support for research were confirmed as perceived barriers to
research, felt by researchers as well as by practitioners. Practitioners differ from researchers in having less confidence in their skills and expertise to do research, and this might well be because they have had less research preparation than researchers” [4].

More recently, Lamothe [5], in 2012, stated that confidence was a barrier when librarians approach publishing, but had career advancement as a reason to publish. Emphasized more than career accomplishments was the fact that sharing ideas is important. “Scholarly activity may not be a necessary component of a public or special librarian’s workload or even a component at all. However, there are several reason to publish and advantages for doing so, regardless of employer expectations. Public and special librarians have made great creative strides and innovations in the marketing and promotion of library services as well as in the use and application of technology to deliver information effectively and preserve it in this ‘digital age.’ Creative ideas can be of value to all librarians, whether they come from corporate, business, health, legal, public, or academic libraries. What has been accomplished in one library can sometimes be of great benefit to another. All librarians have valuable contributions to make to the field of information science and to the advancement of libraries and librarianship” [5].

One publication by Harvey and Wandersee that the authors found relevant to their personal experiences and with the findings of their questionnaire was that “[l]ack of time was the greatest barrier” [6]. One of the similarities noted in the author’s results that coincides with Harvey’s results is that “some academic librarians may have more institutional support for research and writing than hospital librarians, who are often solo librarians” [6]. A hindrance that was noted in the results of Harvey’s survey, and was relatable to the authors, was that “[h]ospital librarians constantly reappraise how to spend time as they give priority to meeting requests for information and research related to patient care, as well as library administrative duties, technology updates, collection development, and management” [6].

One of the barriers that Harvey presents is that “[l]ibrary science posters and papers presented at meetings are often designed to share successful projects and may not always follow strict research design. As professionals accustomed to seeking the best possible evidence in the area of medicine, perhaps some medical librarians are so aware of any methodological limitations that they minimize the value that their
Another practical point that contributes to the publication rates of work by librarians could perhaps be that “a sense of completion follows presentation at a meeting, and librarians may be intrigued about pursuing something new. Also, unlike a meeting, which has a strict timeline to follow, writers may be tempted to keep postponing manuscript submission until the next issue deadline…[r]esearch may be neglected unless it is a workplace or personal priority” [6].

According to the Harvey [6] survey the “overall publication rate is 27.6%” for authors who present a poster to writing a paper. One noticeable finding is that “[l]ength of time from presentation to publication was also examined, showing that the rate of publication for all articles was highest in the first three year after the meetings” [6]. These studies and the results produced in this research study proved to be quite similar.

**Methodology**

The authors respective Institutional Review Boards approved this research survey. Data were collected using an electronic questionnaire (Supplemental Material, online only) sent to listservs, including the Medical Library Association, Special Libraries Association, Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries, and regional MLA chapters in November 2012. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers and it consisted of both quantitative and qualitative items. Participants were 209 health sciences librarians from across the United States. However, three sets of questions regarding presentations of research caused confusion among many of the participants and the number of poster vs. paper presentations did not match their total number of presentations. Only the 102 participants whose responses were correctly matched were included in that part of the analysis. Factors affecting publication of journal articles were analyzed using multiple regression. A combination of descriptive statistics and axial coding were used to determine factors influencing and inhibiting publication and presentation of research. This study was designed as a Descriptive Survey with a Cross-sectional design. This design method allowed the respondents to add comments that could be analyzed while at the same time presented
the authors with data to compare allowing for an opportunity to publish and/or present within the health science library profession.

Description of the Participants

Participants were 209 health sciences librarians from the United States. Over 90% of the participants worked in either an academic or a hospital library, and most had worked in the health sciences library field for either 1-5 years or more than 20 years (Table 1). Only 56 (26.8%) of the participants were in a tenure track position, while 86 (41.1%) were required to publish as part of their jobs. Twenty-seven had mentors who helped them with their research. Of these 27, 14 (51.9%) chose their own mentor, while 13 (48.1%) had their mentor appointed by their employer.

Table 1 Description of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Type of Library Where Currently Employed</th>
<th>Number of Years in the Profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Academic 144 (68.9%)</td>
<td>1-5     57 (27.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hospital 52 (24.9%)</td>
<td>6-10    37 (17.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pharmacy 2 (1.00%)</td>
<td>11-15   24 (11.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other 11 (5.30%)</td>
<td>16-20   20 (9.60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>+20     70 (33.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were asked if they preferred publishing articles, conference presentations, or both equally. Forty-three preferred publishing their research, 49 presenting at conferences, and 95 preferred both equally (Figure 1). Twenty-two participants did not answer the question.

Figure 1
Publishing vs. Presenting
Results

Responding librarians had no strong preference for publishing versus presenting but preferred both equally. They have a preference for quantitative research over qualitative or mixed methodology. There was an almost equal mix of peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed publishing. Medical librarians tend to present their research at all conference levels – local, regional, and national, but prefer the poster format. The most common factors that influence publication or presentation of research were an interest in conducting research, encouragement from a colleague or supervisor, resume enhancement, and interest in learning new information. Factors that inhibit medical librarians from publishing or presenting are limited time, lack of encouragement, no mentor to assist with the process, and a shortage of travel funds.

What Types of Research are Medical Librarians Publishing?

The most common type of research conducted by medical librarians was survey research, with 42 participants working on at least one study. Other types of research included bibliometrics (17), historical (17), mixed methodology (18), and qualitative research (non-historical; 12) (Figure 2).

In addition, 17 indicated that they conducted research based on their library introduction or class sessions, but did not indicated the type of research. Finally, 65 of the participants indicated that they conducted “other” types of research, but did not indicate what type. Thus, those who did indicate a type of research seemed to prefer quantitative research (survey or bibliometric) over qualitative (historical, individual interviews, or focus groups) or mixed methodology.
One hundred and five of the participants had published at least one peer-reviewed journal article in the last three years, while 107 had published non-peer reviewed journal or newsletter articles, book reviews, or book chapters. Thirty-six had published “other” items, but did not indicate a specific type of publication.

**What factors influence the number of journal articles medical librarians have published in the last three years?**

A multiple regression revealed that being in a tenure track position, having publications as a job requirement, and the number of years in the profession combined had a significant effect on the number of articles (peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed) ($F(3, 192) = 4.779; p = .003$). Individually, having publications as a job requirement was significant ($t = -3.155; p = .002$), while being in a tenure track position and the number of years in the profession were not significant. Further analysis revealed that 22.8% of the participants who were required to publish had not published any journal articles, while 44.9% of those who were not required to publish had not published any articles.

**In what format and where are medical librarians presenting their research?**

The results revealed that most of the conference presentations were posters presentations rather than papers. This result was consistent for local, regional, and national presentations. At local conferences, 10 of the participants presented papers and 14 gave poster presentations. At regional conferences, six presented papers and 21 presented posters, while at national conferences, eight presented papers and 19 presented posters in the last three years. There was an approximately equal number of presentations given at local, regional, and national conferences with 24 presenting at local, 27 at regional, and 27 at national conferences (Figure 3). The results indicate, then, that health sciences librarians present at all conference levels equally.
What factors influence medical librarians to conduct and publish research?

The most common reasons for publishing their research were an interest in conducting research (74 responses), being encouraged to publish by their supervisor or colleagues (46 responses), enhancing their resumes (42 responses) and being interested in learning new information (41 responses) (Table 2).

Table 2 Reasons for Publishing and Presenting Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interested in Conducting Research</th>
<th>Interested in Learning New Information</th>
<th>Encouraged to do so by Colleagues/Supervisor</th>
<th>Tenure Requirement</th>
<th>Worked with Mentor</th>
<th>Resume Enhancement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publishing Research</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference Presentations</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses that participants added, in addition to the options given on the questionnaire, included mentoring their colleagues and interns (three responses), working collaboratively with other departments (three responses), and sharing information with others (5 responses: “saw the need for information to be
What factors influence health sciences librarians to present their research at professional conferences?

The three main reasons participants gave for presenting their research at professional conferences were an interest in conducting research (79 responses), an interest in learning new information (51 responses), and being encouraged to do so by a colleague or supervisor (46 responses). Unlike with the factors influencing publication of research, resume enhancement was not a major reason for giving conference presentations (Table 2). Other reasons listed by the participants for giving conference presentations included sharing knowledge with others (three responses: “sharing knowledge and experiences with other libraries;” “sharing experiences;” and “interested in contributing to/furthering the field”) and mentoring junior faculty (two responses: “coach junior faculty” and “coaching my mentees who need to publish”). In addition, five of the participants stated that they published to satisfy a professional requirement (“required for post-tenure review;” “required for promotion;” “job involves/requires it, but not for any reward like tenure;” “professional development requirement;” and “required to submit an abstract for a poster for the Health CAS program at Univ. of Pittsburgh”). One additional participant stated that he/she presented research because “I feel like I have to.”

What factors inhibit medical librarians in the publication of research?

The three most common reasons the participants chose for not conducting and publishing research were not enough time (76 responses), not encouraged to publish by a colleague or supervisor (39 responses), and not having a mentor (31 responses) (Table 3).
**Table 3 Reasons for Not Publishing and Presenting Research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Interesting in Conducting Research</th>
<th>Not Encouraged by Colleagues/Supervisor</th>
<th>Not Enough Time</th>
<th>Not Required for Tenure</th>
<th>No Mentors</th>
<th>Not Sure of Research Process</th>
<th>Lack of Travel Funds</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publishing</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentations</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, six of the participants stated that they had plans to publish in the future (“3 articles in process of pub.;” “currently working on dissertation—want to publish from that;” “currently working on article with co-workers;” “planning on doing it in 2013;” “publications are in process;” and “new to the field. Working on an article to be published in 2013.’”) Other participants stated that they were working in other areas such as developing and presenting MLA CE courses and serving in two “demanding editorial positions over the past 4 years.” Finally, three participants mentioned issues with the research process: that they “don’t even know where to start with research,” had “difficulty getting data analyzed,” and “getting through all the hoops is a ridiculous hassle.”

**What factors inhibit medical librarians in the presentation of research?**

The three major reasons given for not presenting research in the last three years were not enough time (52 responses), not encouraged to do so by colleagues or a supervisor (33 responses), and a lack of travel funds (32 responses) (Table 3). Three participants cited personal reasons for not presenting research (“I’m not a good traveler;” “nervous to speak in front of others;” and “difficulty presenting before a group”). Two stated that they already have tenure (“I have presented five years ago. I am tenured and I will retire soon” and “I already have tenure and am extremely short-handed at work”). Finally, two said that they had “no projects that lend themselves to wider sharing” and had “not had any ideas that I thought were interesting enough to present.”
Discussion

The authors found that their experience was similar to the findings of previous studies and their own questionnaire. The questionnaire results indicated that 76 respondents did not have enough time to publish research and 52 respondents did not have enough time to present at a conference. The authors agree that processes for both publishing and presenting can be lengthy; less so with presentations because of the imposed deadlines whereas publishing, many times, needs a self-imposed deadline, which concurs with Harvey and Wandersee’s [6] findings. The process for this study began with a discussion amongst the authors in March 2012; IRB approval was sought that summer. The questionnaire was written then sent in November 2012 and a poster was presented at the Medical Library Association (MLA) conference in Boston, MA in May 2013. Then the study was presented as a contributed paper at the Southern Chapter/MLA meeting in Jackson, MS in October 2013. This was followed by a version of the topic given as an interactive presentation at the Georgia Health Sciences Library Association in Adairsville, GA in March 2014. The study is only now being submitted for publication in the Summer of 2015.

Without the commitment that the authors had to the project and the time support from their institutions the authors would not have been able to progress from conferences to publication. As stated by Harvey and Wandersee “[e]ncouraging the eventual publication of meeting abstracts in formal literature is a worthy goal for MLA members. Publication helps assure better access to the information, and a further vetting of the content and better hone the quality of reported results” [6].

The authors noticed that many of the barriers that are discussed in the results of their study were situations they faced. Beginning with the IRB approval, each institution had a different method for addressing the survey research proposal. Institutions varied from a small hospital library, to a small academic medical library, and a large university medical center. There was uncertainty about this step in the research process so the authors chose to conform to the most inclusive IRB procedure. The questionnaire items, which the authors thought to be clear, turned out to have had a couple of questions that were unclear to the participants. This was a situation where the authors needed to assess how to address the misunderstanding in the results thus causing them to remove nearly half of the responses for
three sets of questions due to this mistake. The benefit to their collaboration was that the authors complimented one another with backgrounds in statistics, writing, editing, and presentation design, which were used when needed during the process. This allowed them to divide the workload so that the different strengths of the authors were utilized in the best way and during times when these strengths were most available.

Regarding the types of research that medical librarians conduct, qualitative research was preferred. This limitation raises the question of why this method is preferred: is it easier to conduct, a better method to answer questions in the field, or is it the most familiar for researchers? The experience of the authors of this study indicates a mixture of these three questions, but additional research into the specific reasons is needed. Another question the authors asked themselves regarding research methods relates to the education librarians gain over time about the research process. Though this research study indicates only 15 respondents are unsure of the research process when publishing and eight respondents when presenting at conferences, the authors question whether this is a problem with education about the different types of research or how to navigate through the process. An additional limitation of this study is that the authors did not question what types of research the participants were unsure of completing. Further study can be conducted to assess this need and how it can be overcome. Suggestions the authors believe may help with education and navigation of the research process include continuing education about the different types of research methods and how to begin and conduct each type.

When reviewing the combined results of those who feel inhibited to publish or present, the lack of encouragement and lack of mentors stood out as easily remedied problems by colleagues, supervisors, and professional organizations. The authors’ process began when two of them met during work on the regional chapter’s research committee. They connected to the third author during a local consortium meeting because of mutual interests in research studies. In the end, the authors were all from different types of institutions, located in two different states, and had a mix of backgrounds from statistics to art to journalism. The encouragement and interest in research and collaboration amongst them helped propel the project forward. This is evidence of a statement by Lamothe that “[c]ollaboration among information
specialists has been on the rise, especially among female authors. Other than sharing ideas and time, there may be unseen advantages to collaborating. Hernon, Smith, and Croxen found that some journals received more submissions from single authors, but more frequently accepted and published those by more than one author” [5]. The experience of the authors illustrates how encouragement does not need to begin with a supervisor but can come from peers.

If a librarian is a new researcher in the field, mentors can be found in a variety of ways - through conferences, contacting authors whose work is of interest, or joining a mentorship program offered through an association. The authors did not review the literature for a connection between mentorships and publication and presentation opportunities. If research is unavailable for this topic this is another opportunity for study in the field of librarianship.

Finally, there were a number of respondents who indicated that a lack of travel funds were a barrier to whether they would publish or present. The authors are curious to discover the connection between the ability to travel to a conference and the motivation for doing research. A historical analysis may need to be performed to determine when and why this trend has occurred in the profession. One suggestion may be that conference leaders consider holding virtual poster sessions or video conference paper contributions. During these sessions authors and attendees could use social media to discuss virtual presentations. Using technology to enhance and further research opportunities for librarianship is a natural progression.

**Conclusion**

In order to promote publishing and presenting, library schools, managers, and those who have been in the field for several years should introduce new librarians to research through encouragement and mentorship. Librarians who have published or presented should show how being interested in learning new information about the profession will enhance professional capabilities, possibly leading to speaking engagements or promotions. Conducting research and presenting or publishing the results also enhances one’s resume which can lead to similar opportunities. Those who want to conduct research, but feel they do not have time, could speak with their manager about adding an original research project to their
workflow. Lastly, if ideas or topics for research are needed, consider reading articles of interest for further research suggestions that may be suggested by authors. Incorporating one or more of these actions can encourage more librarians to become interested in conducting research and disseminating the knowledge they gain, thus increasing the knowledge-base of the library profession.
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