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A Proposed Framework for the Evaluation of Academic Librarian Scholarship

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A Proposed Framework for the Evaluation of Academic Librarian Scholarship

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Abstract

The ACRL Impactful Scholarship and Metrics Task Force has created a framework draft that is designed to help librarians and libraries contextualize their impact within academic librarianship. To create this framework, the task force studied existing disciplinary models and institutional guidelines, and surveyed academic librarians. The task force discovered few standard practices regarding impact measurement from disciplinary societies or in institutional documentation, but did find some larger models outlining distinct impact areas. The proposed framework outlines evaluation in two primary impact areas for academic librarians, scholarly and practitioner impact, with suggested metrics for a range of research outputs in each category. It is envisioned that this framework will help initiate conversations at institutions with the aim of reviewing and revising existing documentation, alongside complementary ACRL initiatives that will similarly affect scholarly production and evaluation. The first framework draft was revised based on academic librarian feedback and could be finalized as an ACRL document in 2020.

Introduction

The field of academic librarianship is unique in many ways as compared to other disciplines. First and foremost, it is a practitioner-driven field, with librarians focusing primarily on their librarian responsibilities within their academic settings. As such, often less time is devoted to scholarly pursuits, with the bulk of library and information science scholarship informing professional practices more than contributing significant research findings to the literature.

This unique characteristic is reflected in the wide variety of appointment structures for librarians across academia, which include faculty and professional staff appointments, tenure, and alternatives to tenure, promotion, and/or reappointment. This results in a range of scholarly expectations for librarians and can create situations in which librarians' scholarly expectations for tenure, promotion, and reappointment fail to account for the unique scholarly field of academic librarianship.

Why a Framework?

In 2018, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Impactful Scholarship and Metrics Task Force set out to create a framework in order to better align scholarly communication and impact in the field with external evaluation of its scholarly and research output. In doing so, the task force aspired to both give

individual librarians a tool with which to contextualize their research impact and provide a document to guide conversations about rethinking and revising existing documentation regarding rank, tenure, promotion, and documents governing the evaluation of academic librarian scholarship and research.

Who Is Creating This Framework?

We represent the larger ACRL Impactful Scholarship and Metrics Task Force, which was tasked with the creation of a framework with a goal of adopting it as an official ACRL document as early as 2020.

The Information-Gathering Process

Before beginning to draft a framework, the task force set out to answer the following questions:

- What have other professional societies or entities created that would help inform our framework and its creation process?
- What kind of scholarly expectations are currently in place for academic librarians?
- What perceptions and opinions do academic librarians have related to impactful academic librarian scholarly practice?
- How does our work relate to other existing or ongoing initiatives, particularly within ACRL?

We engaged in three separate research-gathering projects in order to address these questions:

Metrics, Disciplinary, and Literature Review

The Metrics, Disciplinary, and Literature Review subteam reviewed the scholarly literature to identify current metrics, including bibliometrics and altmetrics, in library science and other disciplines, to discover best practices and trends regarding evaluation criteria for academic librarian scholarship.

College and University Scholarly Expectations

The College and University Scholarly Expectations subteam collected and examined manuals and policies from 30 universities that described scholarly expectations for academic librarians from individual colleges and universities in the United States and Canada and reviewed literature for articles on the topic.

Librarian Survey

The Librarian Survey subteam created and administered a survey for academic librarians to aid in understanding current practices and needs for measuring impactful scholarship in academic librarianship.

From the onset, we knew that our work could overlap with two existing ACRL committees—Research and Scholarly Environment (ReSEC) and Value of Academic Libraries (VAL). Our task force includes representatives from both committees to better align our work. As we engaged in the process of creating our framework and soliciting feedback, ReSEC published two independent initiatives that are both relevant to the larger questions of the future of scholarly communication publication and evaluation for academic librarians: the ACRL Policy Statement on Open Access to Scholarship by Academic Librarians (2019), and the ACRL Open and Equitable Scholarly Communications report (Maron et al., 2019).

Information-Gathering Results and Application

The Metrics, Disciplinary, and Literature Review subteam discovered a total of 26 documents related to tenure and promotion, mostly but not exclusively produced by professional societies. These came from a variety of disciplines in the arts and humanities, social sciences, and formal, applied, and natural sciences.

Many of these documents discussed impact in broad terms, but did not contain framework-level specificity, and often recommended institutional translation.

Other documents discussed the importance or role of specific types of scholarship, such as community service or digital scholarship. Several documents outlined different models for disparate impact areas. The document that came closest to the framework we had envisioned was the Becker Model, which outlines five separate impact areas in biomedicine and contains specific metrics and measures for research outputs within the five impact areas (Bernard Becker Medical Library, 2018). We found this model to be helpful in terms of organizing our own framework conceptually.

The College and University Scholarly Expectations subteam analyzed promotion guidelines from 30 institutions, freely available online, in order to better understand the expectations regarding the production and evaluation of scholarship for academic librarians. As shown in Figure 1, the guidelines came from a variety of institutions, with the largest group at 46.7% of documents analyzed coming from research-intensive (“R1”) institutions.

Of those guidelines analyzed, 40% had some sort of ranking system for research outputs. Of those 40%, peer-reviewed journal articles were mentioned the most as the highest ranked or preferred type of research output, but no other ranking trends were observed among specific types of research output. Seventeen percent of guidelines stated some sort of preference among journals, with most of those documents preferring peer-review generally. However, one document listed specific preferred journals.

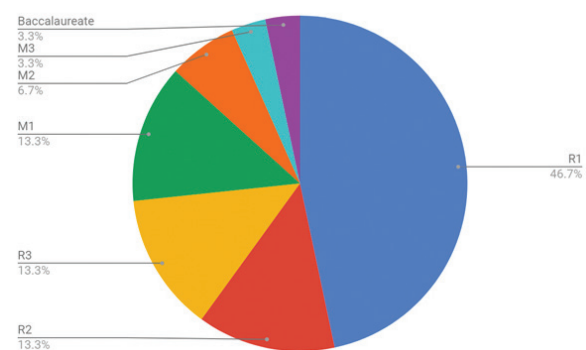


Figure 1. The Carnegie classification of institutions included in our document analysis. Please note: the classification system was updated subsequent to our analysis.

Very few documents specifically discussed expectations for demonstration of scholarly impact.

Ten percent mentioned external evaluations as a main factor for impact determination, but no other trends for determining scholarly impact were observed. Overall, the primary observed focus of evaluation regarded establishment of acceptable or preferred outputs, as mentioned above, rather than the evaluation or measurement of individual scholarly contributions.

From this evaluation, we concluded that the majority of documentation analyzed were more for guidance than to establish specific expectations regarding scholarly production and evaluation. As such, we were unable to establish trends in how impact is currently demonstrated by academic librarians. However, we recognize that we may not have been analyzing the most specific documentation available to academic librarians at these institutions, as there may be other internal or private documents that were unavailable for review by the subteam.

Finally, we noted two things that helped inform the framework. First, one institution’s documentation explicitly discusses how the role of academic librarians as practitioner affects research impact. Second, we noted that two institutions specifically refer to Ernst Boyer’s categories of scholarship (1990).

After ACRL ReSEC published information regarding its open access and equitable scholarship initiatives, we revised the introductory language accompanying the framework accordingly. This language acknowledges the need for librarians to consider open access and equitable scholarship along with our framework, and acknowledges the potential both concepts have for disruption of traditional scholarship and evaluation practices.

Framework Overview and Limitations

In line with the Becker Model and Boyer’s categories of scholarship, our framework outlines two distinct categories of impact (Figure 2). The first category, “Scholarly Impact,” roughly mirrors traditional impact measurements and is informed by citation-based metrics, as well as other commonly employed metrics, such as acceptance rate. The second category, “Practitioner Impact,” describes measurements that reflect the practitioner community of academic librarians and other related professionals/users. These metrics are more qualitative, less traditional, and best deployed in complement with other evidence of impact in order to give a more complete story of librarian scholarship.

Along with impact categories, different types of research outputs are listed in the framework. We aimed to describe a wide range of potential avenues for output—that is, ways in which librarians can share

Scholarly/Research Output	Scholarly Impact Metrics/Measures	Practitioner Impact Metrics/Measures
Journal article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citation count • Journal acceptance rate • Peer-review process • Refereed awards or nominations • Authorship order • Invited contribution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Views/downloads • Shares/mentions /comments • Direct evidence of use (e.g., e-mail follow-up) • Inclusion in practitioner materials, including syllabi, subject guide, training, or other materials
Conference/poster presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conference scope and/or size • Refereed proposal process • Conference proposal acceptance rate • Attendance • Invited to present • Refereed awards or nominations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation evaluations • Views/downloads of video, webinar, or slides • Shares/mentions/ comments • Direct evidence of use (e.g., e-mail follow-up) • Inclusion in practitioner materials, including syllabi, subject guide, or other materials
Dataset, digital scholarship, digital collections, or other online research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citations • Published critical reviews • Refereed awards or nominations • Invited content or curation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Views/downloads • Shares/mentions/ comments • Adaptations or revisions of original work • Attribution in other work • Other reviews • Direct evidence of use (e.g., e-mail follow-up) • Inclusion in practitioner materials, including syllabi, subject guide, or other materials

Figure 2. The second draft of the ACRL Impactful Scholarship and Metrics Task Force framework.

(continued)

Scholarly/Research Output	Scholarly Impact Metrics/Measures	Practitioner Impact Metrics/Measures
Book (including edited volumes, monographs, textbooks, reference works)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publisher's reputation • Published critical reviews • Citations • Refereed awards or nominations • Authorship order • Role in production (e.g., editor, author) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct evidence of use (e.g., e-mail follow-up) • Inclusion in practitioner materials, including syllabi, subject guide, or other materials • Views/downloads • Shares/mentions/ comments • Other reviews • Library holdings/circulation • Sales
Chapter in an edited volume (including conference proceedings)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publisher's reputation, including peer review/referee process • Citations to book chapter or book • Published critical reviews • Refereed awards or nominations • Authorship order • Invited contribution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct evidence of use (e.g., e-mail follow-up) • Inclusion in practitioner materials, including syllabi, subject guide, or other materials • Views/downloads • Shares/mentions/ comments • Other reviews • Library holdings/ circulation • Sales
Journal peer reviewer/ editorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journal acceptance rate • Peer-review • Role/responsibilities • Awards or nominations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities (e.g., number of manuscripts reviewed, specific duties) • Consultations or other evidence of direct support (e.g., correspondence prior to manuscript submission)
Advisory board member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role/responsibilities • Awards or nominations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities (e.g., specific duties) • Evidence of direct or indirect impact (e.g., changes as a result of advisory work)
Information technology (development of systems, applications, implementations, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviews • Citations or inclusion/reuse of technology in subsequent research • Refereed awards or nominations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of technology adoption or use • Views/downloads • Shares/mentions/ comments • Evidence of derivative or dependent projects (e.g., forks) • Invitations to conduct off-site workshops/trainings/ consultations
Original professional practice (original cataloging, published metadata, online lesson plans, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviews • Citations or inclusion/reuse in subsequent research • Refereed awards or nominations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of contributions • Evidence of use/adoption (e.g., transaction tracking/logfiles) • Views/downloads • Shares/mentions/ comments • Contribution to cataloging services (e.g., NACO, PCC) • Contribution of authority headings to cataloging records
Published reviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach of publication • Evidence of adoption or use • Views/downloads • Shares/mentions/ comments
Online contributions (blog editor/author, podcast creator, website maintenance, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citations • Published critical reviews • Refereed awards or nominations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Views/downloads • Shares/mentions/ comments • Other reviews • Other awards or nominations • Adaptations or revisions of original work • Inclusion in practitioner materials, including syllabi, subject guide, or other materials
Professional association publications (e.g., authoring/editing ACRL guidelines, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citations • Scope of association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Views/downloads • Shares/mentions/ comments • Adaptations or revisions of original work • Inclusion in practitioner materials, including syllabi, subject guide, or other materials
Professional association service (committee or task force work, leadership, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope of association • Role/responsibilities • Refereed awards or nominations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional publications or other available materials • Duties • Other direct evidence of impact, e.g., adoption of any service work (including guidelines, best practices, etc.) by others
Creative works, including exhibitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published critical reviews • Scope of venue/publisher • Invited to present work • Citations • Refereed awards or nominations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptations or revisions of original work • Inclusion in practitioner materials, including syllabi, subject guide, or other materials • Attribution in other work • Other reviews • Attendance • Views/downloads • Shares/mentions/ comments

their research/scholarship with others, as well as impact measurements. In cases where it was unclear whether an avenue could be considered scholarly in character, the framework aims for inclusion.

This framework is intended to outline possibilities for scholarly evaluation rather than prescribe or recommend practices. As mentioned previously, the framework will be best employed as an entryway for discussion at individual institutions within the context of existing guidelines and expectations set forth for academic librarians by those respective institutions. Institutions prioritizing different metrics or areas of scholarly output can adopt areas of the framework that align with institutional values and priorities.

The Second Draft of the Framework

The task force solicited feedback from the ACRL community via survey and an online commentable Google Doc of the draft. As a result of the feedback, several research outputs and metrics were tweaked and the introductory language was updated to contextualize the framework. References to the ACRL Policy Statement on Open Access and ACRL Open and Equitable Scholarly Communications policy were also added to the introduction section.

Future Timeline

The final framework is scheduled for submission to the ACRL Executive Board by summer 2020.

References

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When published, the framework's supporting documentation will include the full task force scope of work, comprehensive results, and task force recommendations.

Conclusion

Through the work of the task force it has become clear that there is wide variation in the selection and documentation of measurements used for the purposes of rank, tenure, and promotion. It is the task force's hope that the framework will help provide guidance to institutions wishing to update current guidelines regarding rank, tenure, and promotion documentation, and better align existing documentation with current practice and disciplinary standards. We also hope that the framework will provide greater opportunities for academic librarians to contextualize their research outputs, particularly when describing their impact to external audiences. We recognize that the concept of impact measurement will always be imprecise and imperfect, but it nonetheless remains a common expectation for academic researchers. Within this imperfect system, we hope that academic librarians and libraries will be able to better advocate for their unique scholarly contributions by giving them a framework and metrics to better describe their individual and collective impact within the field of academic librarianship.