Reference Librarians and the Success of Institutional Repositories

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The transformation underway in scholarly communication touches everyone in the academy, including librarians. The burgeoning open access movement is opening alternative channels for the dissemination of scholarly work and feeding the growth of institutional repositories (IRs). While academics still prefer to publish their research in books and journals, they are disseminating their unpublished work more frequently through open-access, digital outlets. This work, often called “grey literature,” includes conference presentations, technical reports, and preprints as well as datasets, supplements to published work, and electronic theses and dissertations. In this article, we examine how librarians are taking on different and expanded roles to bring new services and new forms of support to faculty members in this era of open access, making academic libraries more important and useful than ever before.

Librarians and the Open Access Movement

Individual faculty members disseminate grey literature more or less successfully through departmental websites, emails, and web services run by scholarly societies, to name a few. IRs offer faculty members a simpler way to make their own work secure and easily available to the public without having to maintain a server, back up their work, or respond individually to every request for information. Recently, more and more librarians have been supporting the establishment of IRs by doing what they do best: providing secure storage, preservation, cataloging, retrieval, and delivery. Consequently, academic libraries are becoming a major distributor – in addition to the preeminent collector – of academic scholarship.

With the emergence of IRs, and in light of the library’s increased importance in preserving and disseminating the work of faculty members, librarians are becoming the midwives to new modes of digital scholarly publishing that will put unique scholarly

output of enduring value into the hands of faculty, students, and the public at low cost. In addition to helping faculty members and students find IR content, librarians will also play a major role in getting that content into IRs in the first place. Consequently, as illustrated in Diagram 1, the scope of materials that falls within the guardianship of academic librarians is widening significantly to include institutional content (lower right quadrant).

[seeking use permission from OCLC]

IRs: The Awkward First Steps

Many institutions have set up IRs to meet a variety of institutional needs, including

- A showcase for the scholarly output of faculty
- A relatively inexpensive means for disseminating faculty research results
- A possible tool to leverage journal prices downward

An example of the intensity of their interest can be seen in the massive and immediate response to the release of the DSpace software, an IR software developed by MIT Libraries and Hewlett-Packard, in November, 2002: it was downloaded 941 times in the first month alone, and has been downloaded over 19,000 times since.¹

IRs provide many benefits to individual scholars, but faculty members have yet to recognize these benefits and jump on the IR bandwagon. This is where librarians come in. In addition to providing the IR infrastructure and cataloging services, it falls to

¹ Sourceforge.net Statistics: DSpace

librarians to develop IR collections, both by recruiting content and by making IRs as attractive as possible to faculty members.

In order to make this new librarian role possible at our own institution, the University of Rochester, we conducted a study of faculty members to understand what web-based research services faculty members need and what librarians can do to make IRs work for academic institutions and for scholars themselves.

Studying Faculty Members

Our study, funded by an IMLS National Leadership grant, was concerned with two main sets of questions. One had to do with the actual practices of faculty members engaged in research, including how they framed their research questions, collected and used resources, wrote alone or with co-authors, and published, archived, or self-published their work.

The other questions had to do more strictly with grey literature. In this area we asked what grey literature our faculty members consulted and how they acquired it; what sorts of grey literature they might generate and wish to archive or self-publish; and what kinds of grey literature were most common in the different disciplines represented at our institution.

In our study of faculty, we used a methodology based on traditional participant observation, an anthropological method in which the researcher is immersed in the milieu and activities of the people under study, participating in the local life while also observing and carefully documenting it.² We visited the offices and labs of faculty members in five different science, social science, and humanities disciplines, video-recording them as they gave us tours of their offices, showed us how they used their computers, and talked to us about their research.

In the part of the study more closely focused on grey literature, we conducted a series of interviews with subject librarians, asking about the grey literature used by faculty members in the various disciplines. This list also helped us identify the types of grey literature that faculty in the different disciplines would be most likely to archive or self-publish in an institutional repository.³

In addition to the formal studies, our IR Implementation Team has been meeting regularly to address a variety of issues, from completing the customization of our IR to prioritizing the many features that have been requested by our users. This article also includes information collected and discussed by this team.

² For more information about the work-practice study of faculty members see Foster and Lindahl n.d. and Foster and Gibbons 2005.

³ [an article with the results of this grey lit study has been submitted. We hope to have a citation for inclusion into this article by the time this goes to press]

Research Findings and New Strategies

In the remainder of this paper, we will share our major findings and outline the practical steps we are taking to respond to those findings and improve our IR, a highly customized installation of the DSpace software.⁴

Research Finding: Faculty members have been slow to put their content into the IR, mainly because they have not understood how they would benefit. They become willing contributors when librarians provide individualized information and even some direct support.

New Strategy: We have established a group of Library Liaisons, librarians who are specially trained in the features, benefits, and mechanics of our repository, to reach out and work directly with faculty who may have appropriate content for the IR. Our Library Liaisons are all subject librarians who share disciplinary knowledge and have longstanding and cordial professional relationships with faculty members and are well positioned to engage in the active recruitment of content from them.

As Christiansen et al. note, “Faculty believe that the function of the library and librarian within educational institutions is the organization and facilitation of access to resources and collections.”⁵ Since the IR is a collection to be organized and accessed, faculty members are not surprised when a librarian approaches them for this reason. But for the librarian, this role expansion may take some getting used to.

The key to success is to provide adequate training to Library Liaisons so that they speak to faculty in understandable terms and are prepared to answer any questions that might arise. We cover three main topics in our training:

1. A solid understanding of the institutional repository and why it was established, so that Library Liaisons understand who benefits from the IR and how. At the University of Rochester the impetus for the project came from the Provost and the initial benefits were mainly institutional. We also explain the user research we conducted and how we are working to make the IR a true benefit for faculty members.
2. Critical information to answer questions the faculty are likely to ask, as well as information they are not likely to ask, but should know. For example, faculty members may wonder why they should participate in the IR instead of simply posting their work on their departmental websites, or they may want to know whether items in the IR can be “Googled.” Using a “crib sheet” described in the next section, we discuss questions and answers until everyone feels thoroughly grounded.
3. Mastery of the mechanics of the deposit process. There is no substitute for hands-on experience with the IR interface, and Library Liaisons who have had a chance

⁴ <https://dspace.lib.rochester.edu/index.jsp>

⁵ Christiansen, Stomblor, and Thaxton, 118.

to play with the IR convey the confidence and competence that are essential to successful promotion of the IR. We provide hands-on experience in individual and group sessions, and we work with real materials whenever possible, to simulate the immediacy and, yes, mild anxiety of the true user experience. In the group setting, the librarians learn from watching each other and hearing the questions that are raised. One-on-one sessions are useful as refreshers or for dealing with special situations.

Our first three Library Liaisons are now actively working with faculty in a pilot project to evaluate and improve this strategy.

Research Finding: Faculty members across the disciplines share basic questions and concerns about IRs and have similar needs for clear, understandable information about IR features and benefits. But faculty members do not speak the same language as librarians. Moreover, the features of an IR that are most exciting to librarians, such as persistent URLs and metadata schemas, rarely register the same enthusiasm for faculty. The resulting “Tower of Babel” is a significant hindrance to the increased use of IRs by faculty. Consequently, Library Liaisons must strive to find a “lingua franca” to ensure that their message about IRs is clear and well understood.

New Strategy: We do best when we deliver our message about IRs in faculty language and can answer their questions confidently. Accordingly, we have created an internal document for Library Liaisons to use to respond to common faculty questions and concerns. For example, how the IR provides benefits that are not available with other modes of dissemination, what versions of their papers and presentations may be put into the IR without violating copyrights, how access is controlled, and so on.⁶ This “crib sheet” enables even less experienced Library Liaisons to promote the IR in ways that capture the attention and interest of our faculty. It also facilitates a quick response to concerns and objections with accurate, field-tested information.

Perhaps most importantly, this material helps librarians avoid words like “metadata” that hinder communication and to use such expressions as “make it easy for other scholars to find, use, and cite your work,” which speak directly to our faculty members’ highest hopes.

Research Finding: Grey literature in digital formats is important in *every* discipline; the most important or prevalent types of grey literature *vary* from one discipline to another.

Every discipline represented on our campus has a high degree of interest in electronic theses and dissertations and at least two or three other forms of digital grey literature. A table summarizing the different forms of grey literature that are most important or prevalent in the different disciplines is available at <http://docushare.lib.rochester.edu/docushare/dsweb/GetRendition/Document-16896/html>.

⁶ A sample “crib sheet” is available at <http://docushare.lib.rochester.edu/docushare/dsweb/View/Collection-331>

New Strategy: Our librarians have developed a greater awareness of grey literature and its role in disciplines and have targeted the disciplines and formats that seem to be the best fit for the IR at the present time. The table of grey literature in the different disciplines has become a useful tool for deciding where to focus our IR collection development efforts, especially when combined with librarian knowledge about the culture of the various departments, the degree to which the disciplines are already served by other archives and repositories, and how likely faculty are to be receptive to requests for IR content.

Combining our research results with this knowledge of the different departments, we have assigned departments first, second, or third priority status, focusing limited resources where we think they will be most effective.⁷ While this prioritization is unique to the culture of the University of Rochester, the methodology that led to its creation, described above, can be duplicated at other institutions with similarly successful results.

Research Finding: Sometimes serendipity is as successful for content recruitment as planned marketing.

New Strategy: We are working hard to educate our entire staff about our IR so that any librarian can recognize and pursue a new collection for the repository. Librarians who are not Library Liaisons may happen upon excellent content for the IR. We want everyone to know what the IR is, how it works, and what it is for so that we take full advantage of those serendipitous occasions on which a wonderful set of materials becomes available to us. In other words, we are trying to plan for serendipity as best we can.

As an example, after a staff meeting in which the IR was mentioned, the subject librarian for engineering suggested a series of reports from a significant project from the late 1970s-early '80s. The collection has historical significance, and some of the papers are still requested by current scholars. On another occasion, our multimedia librarian was interviewing a member of the history department for a completely different project. She happened to mention the IR, and after hearing a brief description, the faculty member was immediately interested and eager to use it. This gave us a great opening into a humanities department that we had hitherto relegated to the back burner, as their use of grey literature and their perceived culture had not led us to believe they'd be very interested in the IR.

Research Finding: Many faculty members are reluctant to use the IR because they worry about accidentally violating copyright. As a result, few faculty members are exercising their self-archiving rights when available to them.

New Strategy: Following the example of successful projects at Cranfield University, University of Glasgow and University of Kansas, we have begun a new content recruitment project using the SHERPA/ RoMEO Publisher Copyright Policies & Self-Archiving database.⁸ This online database uses a color system to identify the self-

⁷ At our institution, we are targeting Art and Art History, Computer Science, Dance, Economics, Education, Linguistics, Music, Political Science, Religion and Classics.

⁸ <http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo.php>

archiving policies of publishers with regards to pre- and post-prints, with “green” publishers being the most open in their self-archiving policies. Once we have identified the journals of “green” publishers, we contact faculty members who have published in them and invite them to self-archive the allowable version of their work, be it preprint, postprint, or published version. Once a faculty member submits a single document through this method, we then “drill down” through the rest of that faculty member’s publications to identify further material for deposit, before going on to the next journal and a new round of names.

Research Finding: Faculty members will want to use the IR once they know that others are finding, using, and citing the work that they place there. But that day is at least one or two years away. Until then, we will follow an approach to developing our IR collections that comprises many complementary strategies to capture different segments of our academic community.

New Strategy: The more faculty members experience the benefits of the IR, the more they will take the initiative to make deposits, supply metadata, and arrange for their own work to be digitized into preferred formats. In the meantime, we will provide a full range of support services. Even after faculty members are hooked on the IR, we will still play an active role in enhancing metadata and guiding format selection, and we will continue to improve the IR so that it complements faculty work practices and meets their evolving needs.

For at least the next year or two, we expect to follow a number of coordinated strategies for recruiting content:

- Identifying collections that are already hosted on University’s website and recruiting them to the IR
- Viral marketing: working with a small group of faculty and branching out through their networks to recruit additional users
- Asking recently retired or retiring faculty to archive their digital work to the IR, or allow us to digitize their work for inclusion in the IR, as a legacy to the institution
- Talking with departmental administrators about the kinds of content they obtain and distribute on behalf of the faculty, and then recruiting faculty to deposit this content to the IR
- Engaging targeted faculty in discussions about their research and weaving the features and benefits of the IR into that discussion
- Taking full advantage of our professional relationships, and even our personal relationships, to seed the IR. We are not shy about exploiting friends and spouses in academic departments. As others have noted, “established relationships provide a good foundation for ongoing collaboration.”⁹

⁹ Ducas and Michaud-Oystryk, 334.

- Publicizing usage statistics to convince faculty members that the IR is an excellent means of disseminating ones work to other scholars.
- Explore the possibility of connecting self-archiving to the faculty annual academic evaluation process on campus.

New Roles for Librarians in the Age of IRs

Recruitment of content for the institutional repository offers a wonderful new opportunity for reference librarians to go beyond day-to-day requests of “answer this question, buy this book, do a library session for this class.” Indeed, IR content recruitment puts the librarian into the role of publishing associate to the faculty member. Engaging faculty members in discussions of their research and writing – as opposed to their teaching – may well be a new experience for many librarians, but one that is likely to be very rewarding. For one, it opens up the possibility of having a conversation that the faculty member enjoys and sustains, for what do faculty members enjoy more than discussing their research? For another, it provides the opportunity for the librarian to offer to store, protect, and make the faculty member’s research widely available and to assist in the process of getting the material into the repository. Indeed, this conversation advances the library’s new publishing role.

As the institution builds its IR, it builds a very special repository of unique items, a catalog that will have completely different content at each installation. Reference librarians have the opportunity to attract the material to go into this repository, and to publish, catalog, and index it. In addition to helping users connect to existing resources, librarians have an opportunity to create a completely new, institutionally unique resource.

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