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The Advantages of Practice, or We Work in Libraries: That's Why Our Research is Most Likely to Be Relevant

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¹The Advantages of Practice, or We Work in Libraries: That's Why Our Research Is Most Likely to Be Relevant

I was offended by just about everything I read in Elizabeth Blakesley's recent editorial, "The Constraints of Practice, or We Work in Libraries, That's Why We Can't Do Research" (2016). As a librarian-researcher and academic library administrator, my immediate reaction was "What are you talking about? And why are *you* saying this?" Editor-in-chief Blakesley was responding to an article in *Inside Higher Ed* by Wayne A. Wiegand, public library historian and Professor Emeritus of Library and Information Studies (LIS) at Florida State University. In his article, Wiegand laments the shift from "library schools" to "schools of information," which he believes has "decentered the library as a subject for instruction and research." However, Wiegand praises academic librarians who have shown leadership in transforming academic libraries into collaborative learning and social spaces, in recognition of the importance of "library as place." Wiegand notes that the effects of this positive development have been studied by "researchers outside the profession and [by] already overworked practitioners." Then he asks the question "Where is the LIS research community?," which I interpret to mean LIS faculty researchers, in addressing the longitudinal impact of libraries on the lives of our users. In her editorial Blakesley picks up on "overworked practitioners" and launches into an attack on the quality of research by librarians. I find this baffling, because I believe that the appropriate response to Wiegand's concerns should have been instead: Don't worry about it. This research is being done and the librarians are doing it, as well they should be. In addition to some LIS faculty colleagues, many academic librarians have spent the past decade studying research questions of outcome, impact, and value, in our own libraries and across multiple institutions. These questions are difficult to answer, but over time and in the

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aggregate that is how knowledge is created; one study at a time, researchers building upon one another's work, LIS faculty researchers and librarian-researchers alike.

Librarians account for the majority of the authors in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* (Luo & McKinney, 2015).² What does it say about *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* for its editor-in-chief to call librarian research “‘how we did it good’ articles for publication so that we can get tenure and keep the jobs we like”? Blakesley contends that we are incapable of “doing real assessment” or “capturing data to trace the longitudinal impact of our work.” Why? Because we did not learn this in our library or i-school. Instead, “[w]e were taught rules and processes and sources.” Much of Blakesley’s editorial repeats the excuses that we have been hearing for years: We don’t know how. We don’t have the time. We don’t have the money. My response to these assertions? Not so. Many librarians produce outstanding research that we have used to improve services and document the value of our libraries to college and university administrators.

Librarians author the majority of articles in LIS journals (Chang, 2016), including our profession’s most highly-regarded journals (Galbraith et al., 2014). In addition to journals there are numerous conferences that focus on assessment practice and research, such as the ARL Library Assessment Conference, the Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Conference, and the International Conference on Performance Measurement in Library and Information Services (formerly known as the Northumbria Conference). Some within the LIS education community have sought to find a closer connection between their research and our practice, but while waiting for this to happen, most of us have just gotten down to the task of doing it ourselves. In fact, this is most appropriate. Assessment research is integral to our practice. Numerous studies have shown that many librarians work on their research at work, as part of their jobs. Research is not

² Among 541 peer-reviewed articles published in the journal from 2004 to 2013, 45.7% were single authored and 54.3% had multiple authors. Of the articles with single authors (N = 247), 74.5% were authored by a librarian; of the articles with multiple authors (N = 294), 52% were authored by all-librarian research teams.

an add-on. It is essential to the quality of our work and its effectiveness. Dissemination of the results of our research is part of our obligation to our profession and to our own professional development. While some LIS faculty conduct research in areas of interest to practitioners, it is not surprising that most LIS faculty do not have the same commitment to this research.

Blakesley's provocative title is not descriptive. She does not appear to believe that we really cannot do research, but rather because of our time commitments and lack of academic preparation, we cannot do very good research or very useful research. She uses her authority as the editor of a prestigious journal to back her claim, rather than citing research. Perhaps Ms. Blakesley sought to stimulate dialog about librarian research, but I am concerned about the impact of this article on aspiring and novice librarian-researchers who look to publications like *JAL* for inspiration and as an outlet for their work. We are academic librarians. We are also researchers and we seek to make a difference with our research. Practitioner-researchers need encouragement and support. Blakesley's editorial offers the opposite.

Our profession has moved far beyond "how we did it good" articles posing as research. One reason is that the bar has been raised for tenure and promotion of librarians; this old-style article will no longer be sufficient (if it ever was). Today's tenure-track librarians must hit the ground running with regard to their research and must plan to publish in the most reputable journals. A recent study of articles published in the top 23 high-impact LIS journals in 2007 and 2009 found that 42% of the articles were written by academic librarians and 19% by LIS professors (Galbraith et al., 2014). Of the librarian authors, 65% were at libraries with faculty status and tenure. The study's authors also found that faculty status - "publish or perish" - does not contribute to the publication of a large number of low-quality articles. Rather, "faculty status may actually encourage publication in the most respected journals" (Galbraith et al., 2014, 734).

The criteria for tenure and promotion have intensified over the past two decades and the research output of academic librarians reflects this raising of the bar.

Our research is usually grounded in our practice, but that does not lessen its value. Case studies are not “how we did it good.” The November issue of *JAL* also includes an article by librarians at Loyola Marymount University focused on their successful efforts to integrate mandatory information literacy instruction into the university’s new core curriculum (Johnson-Grau et al., 2016). This case study chronicles a lengthy process, which may be of interest to other librarians. It details what worked and why the authors believe that it worked. The article also acknowledges that there have been obstacles and that not all efforts have been successful. More importantly, the effects of these librarians’ multi-year efforts have been documented by numerous rigorous assessment studies, presented at peer-reviewed conferences and published in peer-reviewed journals. The library’s assessment research studies have been recognized as models by the university’s Office of Institutional Research. The instruction team has begun gathering and analyzing data comparing the information literacy proficiency of seniors before and after the implementation of the new core, using measures tied directly to the learning outcomes of the library’s program. None of this work deserves the demeaning label “how we did it good.”

There are many more academic librarians than LIS faculty and we are most acutely aware of the critical research questions that affect our work. Yes, librarians contribute the majority of articles to our profession’s research journals, including *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*; this is to be expected, given the many thousands of us who are expected to conduct as disseminate quality research for tenure, promotion, annual merit increases, and advancement in the profession. Despite constraints and barriers – time being only one of them – we conduct this research in order to answer the questions that arise through our practice.

Librarian research takes many forms and over the years librarian-researchers have had to work hard to get the education, continuing education, and institutional support that they need for research success and productivity. Instead of a litany of barriers and deficiencies, it would be beneficial for the editor-in-chief of one of our most reputable research journals to advocate for creating the conditions that foster research success, enabling academic librarians to document the value of their work and the impact of libraries in the lives of students and faculty. As a library administrator with decades of experience, I am impressed by the enthusiasm of academic librarians for their research and by their commitment to the impact and relevance of their research. LIS research, including that published by librarians, is vastly more rigorous and useful than what I read as a library school student and early-career professional. My job is to provide encouragement and support. I have improved my ability to provide that support through my own research and through the rigorous research of others. The hallmark of a professional is that we always strive to do better.

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