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Creating a Research Interest Group for Librarians in an Academic Institution

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Background

The idea to form a Research Interest Group (RIG) to strengthen the culture of research among an academic institution's library came about shortly after one librarian from the institution attended the CARL Librarian Research Institute (LRI) in 2013. Taking the structure of the LRI as inspiration, she formulated a proposal for the RIG, which was well-received by the institution's library community. A welcoming space for reflection and dialogue on research addressed a need that had arisen from the intrinsic motivations of many of the librarians within the institution.

The presence of such groups within academic libraries is not previously unheard of (Fox, 2007; Hall & McBain, 2014; Jenkins, Cook, & Fox, 1981; McBain, Culshaw, & Walkley, 2013); nor, however, is it particularly prevalently covered in the literature. The experience of forming and running a RIG at this institution provides an additional unique case study to add to the growing body of work.

The First Year

The creation and implementation of the group occurred in an organic manner, initially all coordinated by a single member. The first meeting focused on defining objectives for the RIG (i.e. what topics to cover, what format to follow, how frequently to hold meetings). Participants shared past and current research projects as well as future ideas that were starting to germinate. It was the first time librarians from the institution had a venue to share research interests among colleagues, and a baseline was set for what the group collectively knew about research.

Several ideas were enacted from this first meeting. A Journal Club with monthly meetings was established as a separate but complementary entity from the RIG. Since many participants were new to research, there was a need for more information on research processes and services available within the institution. The RIG's first year was a mix of formal meetings with guest speakers (e.g. professors from the institution's School of Information Studies, members of the Research Facilitators' office and the Research Ethics Board office) and informal meetings of the RIG's participants (e.g. lightning talks on past and present research projects, ad hoc meetings for conference presentation practice) to increase familiarity with research generally and with one another's work specifically.

At the end of the first academic year in which the RIG was introduced, members met to reflect on the activities to date, and agreed that they had a greater understanding of the services and resources available at the institution and that the culture of research within the library was developing; therefore, participants preferred to have a more active role in the second year.

The Second Year

The coordinator of the RIG was preparing to go on academic leave and solicited the aid of a second coordinator to share in the work of running the group through its second year. An email distribution list was created to instill ongoing debate and discussion among participants. A member survey was distributed which helped to chart the group's next steps, and also allowed the creation of a "knowledge base" where the institution's librarians provided a list of their research experiences with the objective of creating an atmosphere of mutual support among RIG's members.

RIG's Vision and Mission

To maintain focus, and to ensure that the RIG served the needs of the institution's librarians, a RIG meeting was held to jointly formulate a vision and mission. During the meeting, we discussed the purpose of a vision and mission, analyzed examples from comparable groups, and discussed possible contents of our own vision and mission statement. With the notes generated from the meeting, the organizers drafted a statement, which was sent back to the group via the distribution list for feedback and approval (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Vision and Mission Statement

Vision:

The [RIG] strives to foster a research culture, to increase and disseminate research knowledge, and to raise the research profiles of its members.

Mission:

- *To create an open environment where creativity and curiosity are fostered, and ideas are shared and developed.*
- *To support and develop members' research skills.*
- *To promote rigor in research, and align with research best practices.*
- *To support bilingualism in research.*

Scholarly Reading Sessions

To enhance the collegial spirit of the RIG, group reading sessions have been organized, where members convene for dedicated time to make way through the scholarly literature that has been piling up over the past month while tending to other duties. These meetings are typically held every other month, in between bimonthly RIG sessions. The challenge of the reading sessions is to find a single stretch of two to three hours that suits the greatest number of RIG members. Attendance at these sessions has been modest; however, those who do attend express appreciation for the sessions.

Creating a Wiki

Additionally, a Wiki (Figure 2) was created as a clearinghouse for the RIG's increasing information and activities. Upon its launch, the Wiki contained the group's vision and mission statement, notes and slides from past presentations and training sessions, notes on and resources for research ethics, lists of conferences with submission deadlines, lists of research grants with submission deadlines, information on distribution lists of associations of Canadian libraries, and a table charting contributing RIG members' research experience. All members of the RIG have been given authoring privileges on the wiki.

Figure 2 – RIG's Wiki



Proposed Mentorship with ÉSIS

Inspired by the faculty-member-in-residence model at McMaster University (Detlor & Lewis, 2015), the RIG is currently looking into the feasibility of collaborating with faculty members of the School of Information Studies in some form of research mentorship. While the precise collaborative model is still being worked out, RIG members are keen to draw upon a larger, more established pool of research knowledge, while possibly being able to lend their own expertise to assist the research of School of Information Studies' faculty members.

Outlook

Nearing the end of its second year of activity, the group continues to provide supporting activities to its members, such as analysis software training sessions as well as opportunities to meet and discuss developing projects. The librarians participating in the RIG have gained critical thinking skills from participating in the group, have a forum for peer support in conducting scholarly activity, and have raised their research profile. Challenges the group faced were to maintain momentum so that interest and attendance do not flag, and meetings' timing. We've learned that September is not the best period to host an interactive research brainstorm session, being the busiest month for most academic librarians. A key element to make a research group successful is to keep participants involved in the decisional process, whether with content, or with the group's future direction. The coordinators of the RIG address this by frequently reassessing the group's needs and shaping subsequent meetings around those needs.

Soon, the RIG will be entering its third academic year of activity. This year, the institution's library will be introducing an internal grant for library research, which should provide encouragement to RIG members to put their next research project ideas into action.

Bibliography

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