



Evidence Summary

Without Library Resources and Services, the Scholarly Activity of Medical Faculty and Residents Would Register a Code Blue

A Review of:

Quesenberry, A. C., Oelschlegel, S., Earl, M., Leonard, K., & Vaughn, C. J. (2016). The impact of library resources and services on the scholarly activity of medical faculty and residents. *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, 35(3), 259-265. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02763869.2016.1189778>

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Abstract

Objective – This study aimed to determine the use of three library services – literature search service, article delivery service, and library resources – among medical faculty and residents with regard to scholarly activity.

Design – Survey.

Setting – Medical Library and Health Information Centre at a large university in the United States of America.

Subjects – 65 medical faculty and residents.

Methods – The authors sent out 433 invitations to participate in a 23-question survey via an email distribution list. A total of 65 individuals

participated, for a response rate of 15%.

Questions related to the use of library services for scholarly activity, patterns of information-seeking behaviour, and instructional needs. Comments were allowed on several questions, and a final open-ended question was included.

Main Results – All respondents used PubMed at least a few times a year, with 71% selecting it as their first choice to search for articles. Only 20% prioritized Google or Google Scholar above PubMed as the first place to begin a search. The most popular reasons for using library resources were “lectures, papers, research, and patient care” (p.262). The first three of these activities are types of scholarly activity.

Of the 65 respondents, 46% published article(s) or book chapter(s). Within this group of authors, 67% of residents undertaking scholarly activity requested a literature review, 100% accessed online material themselves, and 67% requested articles. Faculty placed similar importance on these services, with 71% having requested a literature review, 87% having accessed materials themselves, and 75% having requested articles. Among those respondents who presented posters or papers, there was high use of library services, ranging from 59% of faculty requesting a literature review to 98% of faculty accessing online material themselves.

Conclusion – The library is a key resource for faculty and residents undertaking scholarly activity. However, faculty members use the library’s services and resources for publishing articles and book chapters more than residents do. This may be because of “publish or perish” pressure, or because faculty have less time to locate research by themselves. Surveys are useful to ensure the library’s resources and services align with the needs of the user community. Inclusion of free-text comment boxes in the survey allowed users to put a “personal face” (p. 264) to their comments that would have otherwise not been captured.

Commentary

As academic institutions place more value on quantifying the effect of dollars spent, it becomes increasingly important for libraries to demonstrate that the resources and services they offer are needed and used by the communities they serve. This is particularly important when personnel comprise a large portion of a library budget, as it may mean the difference between keeping or losing an individual’s job. In the case of this library, in which personnel comprise 50% of the library budget, this type of value survey research is vital.

An additional benefit of the study is that it works to test librarian assumptions. In this case, it would be unsurprising to learn that many librarians would likely assume that PubMed, being a key medical database, would

be highly used in a medical library. Another assumption that our profession may hold is that access to medical information will assist in patient care. The Rochester Study (Dunn, Brewer, Marshall, and Sollenberger, 2009) confirmed that 75% of medical professionals definitely or probably handled some aspect of patient care differently as a result of access to information via a library. As demonstrated in this article, testing assumptions that librarians hold is critical, so that we are able to make decisions from evidence and not guesses.

In order to enhance these findings overall, the authors might consider bolstering their survey results with database usage numbers and trends. While database numbers cannot indicate the intended use of the articles accessed, they can show trends in access and cost-per-use data which over time may contribute to the case for keeping or cancelling particular products.

Another way in which the authors could strengthen this article is a more fulsome discussion of their assertion of the importance of including several opportunities for survey participants to write in free-text comments. The authors make this claim, but do not give readers any examples or analysis. The answers received via these comment boxes could bolster the evidence that library services and resources are important, or give the library feedback on how services and resources could be improved.

While the authors acknowledge that the small sample size (n=65) and low response rate (15%) limit the transferability of results to other academic medical libraries, this article is a fine example of how a simple survey can provide valuable information to librarians and administrators. As the authors mention, the results of this survey show that the library is making a positive difference to the research activity of faculty and residents, thus aligning the library with the university’s strategic plan. It also provided librarians with comments from users related to their issues and priorities, which is a helpful feedback tool to inform future service and resource decisions.

References

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