

“You Can Help Me with *That?*”

Creating a Program of Faculty Research Support at a Regional Comprehensive University

About 80% of faculty members in the United States are currently conducting academic research.¹ As teaching methods evolve and service and administrative duties grow, it is an ongoing challenge for faculty to maintain their research productivity.² Publications are essential for tenure track progression, but the expectation to publish and disseminate research leads to added stress, and faculty often find themselves overwhelmed by the competing demands on their time.³ At the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Oshkosh, one of 11 regional comprehensive universities in the University of Wisconsin System, 93% of our faculty reported working more than 40 hours a week.⁴

Academic libraries at R1 institutions frequently provide advanced research support to faculty, offering services in areas like research data management, data reference requests, research design, researcher profile management, and research impact.⁵ But these types of services are less common at academic libraries serving universities with lower Carnegie classifications. UW-Oshkosh is an R3 university, and until recently, our libraries did not offer any formal research support services to our faculty. I began working at UW-Oshkosh in 2012 as the distance education librarian, one of eight reference and instruction librarians in a small (but mighty!) team of 22 people working across our three campuses. This article describes the genesis of our library’s Faculty Services program, launched in fall 2019, and my experiences providing research support services to faculty on our campus.

Creating the Program

The idea for a program of research support services for faculty arose organically. As the distance education librarian (since renamed to online learning librarian), I frequently worked with faculty in our College of Nursing (CON) to provide information literacy instruction to students in their online and hybrid programs. As I developed closer relationships with several nursing professors, we co-wrote articles about our information literacy collaborations, and I was invited to join them in their own research projects. More nursing faculty members began expressing interest in working with me, seeking help with finding articles for literature reviews or identifying potential journals where they could publish. I was invited to hold office hours in the CON’s research center, and I gave a presentation on predatory journals at the CON summer faculty retreat.

As requests for support within the CON were increasing, my responsibilities as online learning librarian were shifting. When I was hired to support online programs in 2012, those programs had unique support needs—there was a stark difference between the pedagogy and

Erin McArthur is online learning and faculty services librarian at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh Libraries, email: mcarthue@uwosh.edu.

technology used in fully online programs and what was used in our traditional on-campus courses, and the work I did in supporting those programs was very different from what my colleagues were doing. But by 2018 that had shifted, and the lines between online and traditional programs were blurring. (In 2020, of course, the pandemic changed everything, and suddenly all of us librarians were creating tutorial videos, hosting instruction webinars, responding to students on discussion boards, and meeting with students over video chat.) The responsibilities of my job and my colleagues' jobs were becoming more similar than different, freeing up my time for in-depth faculty projects.

I felt increasingly confident that faculty in other disciplines would also have unmet research support needs. The next step was to determine the extent of those needs across campus. My colleagues and I interviewed 25 faculty members to gauge initial interest outside of the CON. These interviews were overwhelmingly positive, and faculty were interested in a wide variety of potential services. Next, I created a sample menu of faculty services, including general research support (literature reviews and article retrieval); scholarship support (identifying and evaluating journals); grant support; curriculum development (recommending course readings or Open Education Resources, and developing research assignments); citation support (formatting in various styles to meet publisher requirements); data management; symposia/author series; and a designated faculty lounge in the library.

To further clarify the needs and to home in on the services that were most likely to be used, my colleagues and I created a survey in spring 2019 that was sent to faculty and instructional academic staff at our three campuses. We received more than 100 responses, representing faculty from all four colleges. I reported the survey data to library administration and recommended that our formal services begin in fall 2019, with a program assessment to be completed at the end of that academic year. We decided to offer services that required little or no staff training (general research support, scholarship support, curriculum development, and citation support), with myself as the primary contact and service provider and other librarians pitching in as needed.

Program Delivery

When we launched the program in fall 2019, I promoted our services at the new faculty orientation, in a presentation to Faculty Senate, and with a new page on the library website. Our library liaisons also began sharing information about the program when they attended department meetings, and we continue to promote these services through our liaisons. I also sent a promotional email to the faculty and academic staff mailing lists and continue to send these emails two to three times per year. I send the emails at quieter teaching times, when faculty may be thinking about their research projects; the emails typically go out near the end of fall semester or during winter interim, late in spring semester, and during summer term. Faculty can use a form on our website to request support, but most requests come directly to me via email, often as a reply to the promotional messages. I use a shared Google Sheets document to track requests and capture data for assessments.

Most requests I receive are for literature searches. Some recent topics I've worked on include medication self-management (nursing), preparation of teacher educators for anti-racist work (education), discussions of homosexuality in the early 1960s popular press (radio/TV/film), and local taxation in the 1850s (history). When I receive a literature search request, I work with the faculty member to identify their needs—some people want a link to a set

of database results that they can peruse themselves, while others prefer that I search and retrieve any books or articles that look relevant, which I add to a shared folder along with my search strategy. I am sometimes asked to write the literature review section of an article as a co-author. I have also been invited to collaborate on specialized nursing literature reviews (i.e., scoping reviews, integrative reviews, concept analyses, and systematic reviews); for these reviews, I design the methodology, conduct the search, and, with the rest of the research team, review the literature and write the manuscript.

The second most common service requested is citation support, typically formatting references to meet a publisher's specific requirements. I also receive many curriculum development requests, often to find and evaluate open education resources for courses. With these requests, I typically consult with the faculty members and then recommend options for open textbooks or library resources to replace or supplement their current text.

Assessment

I conducted a program assessment in the fall of 2020 measuring both program usage and faculty satisfaction. I developed the assessment tool after conducting a brief literature review.⁶ A colleague and I sent emails to faculty who had used our services, including a reminder of the projects with which we had assisted, inviting them to complete the survey. We completed 50 faculty service projects in the 2019–20 academic year, with 41 faculty members using our services. The response rate to our survey was 77%,⁷ and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Faculty indicated that librarians have the skills necessary to help with their projects, and our work exceeded their expectations, saving them time, relieving stress, and helping them make progress in their research.

I have not conducted further faculty satisfaction surveys since 2020, but I continue to track program usage. I have consistently completed 50–55 projects annually; when projects completed by other librarians are added, our total is closer to 75 projects per year.

Challenges and Opportunities

The biggest limitation on the growth of our program (and likely a challenge facing other libraries that wish to start a program) is staff time. When my responsibilities in supporting online programs began to change, I had more time available to work on projects for faculty. Eventually, with administration's support, my title changed to online learning and faculty services librarian to better reflect how my time was spent. Now approximately 15–20 hours of my week are spent on faculty projects. But with my other responsibilities, I don't have time to expand; my colleagues may work on a few projects per year, but they don't have room to do more on a regular basis. Thus far, I have not received more requests than we can fulfill, but I hesitate to step up promotion of the program because we are close to capacity. Since increasing staff time is not currently an option for us, we could revisit the scope of services we provide. In their book *New Roles for Research Librarians: Meeting the Expectations for Research Support*, Hilde Drivenes Daland and Kari-Mette Walmann Hidle argue that librarians should not function as “research assistants,” proofreading bibliographies and doing searches for researchers, because these tasks are not a good use of an educated library professional's skills.⁸ While a service like citation formatting is highly valued by our faculty, it could be eliminated to better leverage our professional librarians' limited time.

Another challenge facing our program is the budget shortfall UW-Oshkosh has experienced and accompanying changes to faculty teaching load. For the next few years, faculty will teach a higher course load and will no longer have access to the same amount of course release or funding they previously had for their research. The impact on our program is still to be determined—we may see a decrease in the number of requests if faculty are doing less research, or an increase in the number of requests if faculty need more help due to other constraints on their time.

If the university's financial situation improves, I can imagine a few ways the program might evolve. Obviously, additional staff positions in the library would give us more capacity to complete faculty projects, allowing us to expand the program. We could also offer additional services if we were trained to provide them and we had access to the necessary tools; for example, bibliography and citation analysis, data management, and author rights support are all services provided at our flagship, UW-Madison. We are also planning for a new or remodeled library building, which will hopefully include spaces suitable for hosting faculty speaker events or writing retreats.

Working with faculty is an incredibly rewarding part of my job, and I'm excited to see our program evolve in the future. ❧

Notes

1. Melissa Blankstein, "Ithaka S+R US Faculty Survey 2021," Ithaka S+R, research report, July 14, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.316896>.

2. Andrew S. Griffith and Zeynep Altinay, "A Framework to Assess Higher Education Faculty Workload in U.S. Universities," *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 57, no. 6 (2020): 697, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2020.1786432>.

3. Charanjit Singh, Wendy Cross, Ian Munro, and Debra Jackson, "Occupational Stress Facing Nurse Academics—A Mixed-Methods Systematic Review," *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 29, no. 5–6 (March 2020): 724, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15150>.

4. Michelle Highley, Sabrina Johnson, Michelle Kuhl, Barbara Rau, Susan Rensing, Laurie Stevens, and Greg Wypiszynski, *Report from the Chancellor's Study Group on Work-Life Balance* (UW Oshkosh, February 2017), <https://uwosh.edu/chancellor/wp-content/uploads/sites/69/2017/02/CSG-LifeBalanceReport-02-23-17.pdf>.

5. Jane Radecki and Rebecca Springer, "Research Data Services in U.S. Higher Education," Ithaka S+R, research report, November 18, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.314397>.

6. Jeanne M. Brown and J. Cory Tucker, "Expanding Library Support of Faculty Research: Exploring Readiness," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 13, no. 3 (2013): 287–99, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2013.0019>; Peter Hernon and Robert E. Dugan, *Action Plan for Outcomes Assessment in Your Library* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2001), chap. 3.

7. Thirty-five faculty/instructors received the survey; those who retired, left the university, or whose projects were on hold indefinitely due to COVID-19 were not included. We received 27 responses.

8. Hilde Drivenes Daland and Kari-Mette Walmann Hidle, *New Roles for Research Librarians: Meeting the Expectations for Research Support* (London: Elsevier, 2016), 17–18.