

Reflections and Directions on Scholarly Communications: A Library Leadership Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly communications is far from being a new discipline, yet its rise as a defined specialization for librarians has taken off dramatically over the course of just the past decade. This rapid and fairly recent expansion of scholarly communications as a strategic area of focus has introduced both fresh opportunities and new challenges for academic library leaders. The purpose of this paper is to provide a broad overview of the past, current, and future scholarly communications landscape from the distinctive perspective of an academic research library director.

Topics covered include (1) a broad review of the development of scholarly communications as a library specialization in recent years and the associated efforts that library leaders have undertaken during this period to initially educate themselves, (2) how to foster enhanced understanding across library faculty, library staff, and the broader institution as to its purpose, strategic role, and place alongside more traditional and readily recognized library services, and (3) to effectively integrate scholarly communications within an existing library organizational structure. As an adherent of the New Librarianship Framework, this library leader also briefly considers how scholarly communications directly contributes to the user's understanding of libraries as community platforms for improving society by facilitating knowledge creation.

The paper then addresses (1) the challenges of justifying dedicated scholarly communications roles in modestly sized academic libraries, (2) attracting, managing, and retaining new scholarly communications talent, (3) scaling scholarly communications services over time, (4) establishing and managing campus expectations, and (5) successfully advocating for a gradual expansion of scholarly communications teams to ensure that services remain successful and not strained beyond a team's capacity to effectively deliver them.

New and ongoing opportunities for academic library leaders include a broad reinvigoration of library strategic goals; a fresh institutional understanding of the library mission; cultivation of the growing recognition of librarians as fully integrated academic partners in the teaching and learning enterprise and across the entire research lifecycle; and powerful opportunities to contribute to the accessibility of higher education for all students. Looking ahead, this library leader then anticipates emerging trends with implications for library leadership, such as the growing need to interweave aspects of scholarly communications across all library operations.

Introduction

Scholarly communications is of course not a new term or discipline. Depending upon how far back one wishes to reach, its origins can be traced to the rise of the first scholarly journals in the 17th century (Regazzi, 2015, p. 2). Modern conceptions and common use of the phrase “scholarly communications” came about in the 1970s with a growing discussion of the challenges of the traditional scholarly publishing model. The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) first formally defined scholarly communications in 2003, spurred by developments of the digital age (<https://acrl.libguides.com/scholcomm/toolkit>). As a defined specialization in librarianship, though—as a job *title*—scholarly communications has really come into its own over just the past decade.

For all but the most recently trained librarians, each of us possesses our own individual origin story as to when and where we first became professionally aware of scholarly communications. Each of us can probably still recall our personal pathway as we developed an initial working knowledge followed by a gradual, deeper proficiency of the many aspects of scholarly communications as a disciplinary specialization. For academic library deans and directors, who typically bring many years of library experience to their leadership roles, there are likely particular points in their career when they first actively engaged with scholarly communications at the leadership level, first intentionally integrated scholarly communications into their strategic “toolkit”, and first addressed the fresh leadership opportunities and new challenges that accompanied this growing field.

I first became a librarian in 2006 and assumed my first academic library leadership role in 2012, exactly ten years ago. My first position as a library director was at Adams State University, a small, rural public college with a limited library staff. While I recall learning about scholarly communications via conference presentations during that time, I didn’t encounter it directly until I changed positions in 2016 to become University Librarian at the Colorado School of Mines (“Mines”), a world-class STEM research institution. The Arthur Lakes Library at Mines had just hired its very first Scholarly Communications Librarian earlier in 2016. As a newly created position, that librarian had much to learn herself, much to share with me, much to communicate to the rest of the library faculty and staff, and much to impart to the greater campus community. In the busy six years since then, scholarly communications has expanded to arguably become our library’s most important strategic initiative, with deep and lasting impact on the library’s strategic goals, resource needs, and future directions.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a conversational overview of the past, current, and future scholarly communications landscape from the distinctive, firsthand perspective of an academic research library director. Doing so can provide scholarly communications librarians with a better understanding of how their daily work influences and informs the efforts of their academic library deans and directors. This can also encourage library deans and directors to pause and take reflective stock of how scholarly communications has shaped and continues to guide the broader direction of academic libraries. As a library director myself, considering how scholarly communications has impacted and continues to influence my library leadership is a

valuable and timely personal exercise, and one that I highly recommend for others who serve in administrative roles.

Development of Scholarly Communications: The Early Days (2016-2019)

In August 2016, the Arthur Lakes Library hired its first Scholarly Communications Librarian. The position was created opportunistically when a librarian candidate who interviewed for an entirely different librarian position impressed the provost with her passion for and articulate knowledge of scholarly communications. With little to no advance notice, preparation, or extensive prior experience in the area, the library suddenly found itself with a new specialist creating and carving out a scholarly communications role from scratch.

Just three months later, in November 2016, I began as University Librarian. I spent my first few months in an intensive learning period with the Scholarly Communications Librarian. She had already developed several in-depth position papers to facilitate making introductions across campus and launching early initiatives. She shared those papers with me, and we discussed them enthusiastically and in depth over the course of several months. She had also already assembled an ad hoc committee of key administrators and faculty across campus to build broad support for a Research Information Management System (RIMS), one of her earliest strategic efforts. Joining this group also proved instrumental to my rapid professional development. This early period was crucial, quickly advancing my ability to effectively champion scholarly communications initiatives in my first meetings with university leaders across campus.

Soon after, I organized and scheduled several campus bring-your-own-lunch sessions to gather broad input for a library strategic planning process. We dedicated multiple sessions to communicating the fundamental concepts and goals of scholarly communications with faculty and staff across campus, gathering feedback on what services resonated most with them. These stakeholder interactions helped solidify scholarly communications as a central focus for the three-year strategic plan we developed over the course of Summer 2017. Scholarly communications became one of just six high-level goals in the library's 2017-2020 strategic plan:

GOAL 5: BECOME THE CAMPUS NEXUS FOR SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION:

STRATEGY 5-1. RESEARCH IMPACT – Enhance the visibility and impact of research and scholarship created at Mines or by members of the Mines community.

STRATEGY 5-2. OPEN SCHOLARSHIP – Provide leadership, resources, and services to foster open access publishing, research data management and sharing, reproducible research, open educational resources, and best practices in digital workflow across the research lifecycle.

STRATEGY 5-3. INSTITUTIONAL REPOSITORY – Expand the Mines institutional repository and connect it to the broader research information ecosystem with the goal of enabling new forms of academic inquiry and discovery through the creative and dynamic use and reuse of the digital assets of the university. The repository will preserve and disseminate

the intellectual output of the university's faculty, staff, and students as well as the digitized versions of the library's special collections, archives, and the collection of Mines Geology Museum.

While we made great headway with establishing basic scholarly communications services and goals during that first year, we recognized that our own library faculty and staff have not yet developed a full understanding of the breadth of the scholarly communications field. They expressed a desire and need to be able to integrate it more effectively into their regular library advocacy conversations across campus, and to better understand how scholarly communications intersected with their own roles within the library. Accordingly, the scholarly communications librarian led periodic in-service sessions to keep the team up to speed on her foundational efforts and to further their knowledge of the many ways scholarly communications supports curricular endeavors and the research lifecycle.

To accomplish the library's identified strategic scholarly communications goals, I recognized that the library needed to first undergo substantial organizational and physical restructuring. These changes were implemented between 2017-2019. To rapidly grow the library's fledgling institutional repository, for example, I transitioned a staff member who possessed the requisite background and interest into an entirely new position as a dedicated Digital Initiatives Specialist. A well-equipped digitization lab was built to facilitate the work of this new position. A series of carefully planned and sequenced office renovations and relocations were executed over several years to be able to create a new and highly visible space to centrally house scholarly communications and other public-facing library initiatives, and to fully leverage the power of service colocation (Smith, 2021). Funding to accomplish these many library space projects had to be raised from both campus and external donor sources.

The resulting Scholars Hub center debuted in Fall 2019 and serves as a pivotal moment in the library's rapidly developing suite of scholarly communications services. These services now include copyright consultations, authors rights advising, scholarly identity support, research data management plan consultations, Open Access publishing initiatives, Open Educational Resource initiatives, research workflow and citation management tools, educational workshops, and more (<https://library.mines.edu/research/scholarly-publishing-research-data/>). In just a few short years, our scholarly communications services quickly expanded into a maturing collection of offerings. Faculty awareness, appreciation and use of these services were steadily growing as well, thanks to intentional branding, intensive marketing, and authentic faculty relationship building.

It is important to state that the credit for these many and substantive accomplishments should be wholly accorded to the Scholarly Communications Librarian and the library faculty and staff who contributed directly to these initiatives. A library leader is first and foremost a champion for the efforts of their team; the resulting accomplishments are fully theirs to claim. A substantial amount of my leadership time and effort from 2017-2019 was devoted to initiatives to help realize our scholarly communications ambitions. My contributions as University Librarian centered on formally articulating and communicating our strategic goals for scholarly

communications, identifying the resources needed to accomplish those goals, and then advocating for, acquiring, organizing, and successfully deploying those resources. It was also very much a collective effort across the entire library team. We all worked at every opportunity to spread the word and raise awareness of our new scholarly communication services.

Maturation of Scholarly Communications: Recent Years (2020-2022)

The COVID-19 pandemic, of course, introduced unexpected disruptions to all of higher education, including our library's scholarly communications initiatives. On the whole though, I believe the pandemic ultimately only accelerated our progress. Thanks to our many ongoing initiatives, our library was able to readily pivot to a digital learning environment. Many faculty encountered our scholarly communications services for the very first time as they had to rapidly adapt their courses to remote instruction and a distance education model. Scholarly communications efforts that expanded during the pandemic years include Open Educational Resources (OER), institutional repository adoption, electronic course reserves integrated within the campus learning management system ("Course Readings"), initiatives to share best practices for classroom accessibility, and more.

By 2022, just six short years after hiring our first ever dedicated Scholarly Communications Librarian, it is fair to state that the Arthur Lakes Library accomplished our initial high level strategic goals. We established a recognized campus center for scholarly communications services and are increasingly recognized as academic partners across most aspects of the research lifecycle. We fostered deep and impactful relationships with key faculty that we can now leverage to further widen the campus audience for scholarly communications services. We are recognized as campus leaders in promoting equitable access to information via our Open Educational Resources grants, Open Access publication incentives, and electronic reserves ("Course Readings") initiatives. Our institutional repository (<https://repository.mines.edu/>) now contains over 15,000 items and is growing by 50-100 items weekly. We offer a robust suite of both undergraduate instruction and graduate workshops to educate our students about scholarly identity, research workflow tools, and other key aspects of scholarly communications.

Challenges Along the Way

This recounting of our library team's many and significant accomplishments over the past six years is not to suggest that, as a leader, I did not encounter obstacles along the way. Shepherding our scholarly communications initiatives was not all easy and smooth sailing. A steady stream of challenges arose along the way, each of which I needed to address to ensure the library still moved steadily toward our strategic goals.

One major challenge involved our ability to retain a librarian in the scholarly communications role. As a newly emerging specialization in high demand, scholarly communications librarians are faced with many employment opportunities. For a variety of reasons, over the course of a few short years (2018-2021), a couple of librarians assumed the

position and subsequently left. We are currently on our third Scholarly Communications Librarian in as many years. Primary leadership challenges associated with rapid turnover in this position include ensuring continuity of core initiatives and addressing the need to rebuild essential faculty relationships with each new hire. Although frequent position turnover can be disruptive, we have also found it to be energizing and ultimately beneficial. Each of the three librarians in the role has brought particular strengths, inclinations, and perspectives to the role, and always at the perfect time for our state of service maturity.

As a library leader, I would of course prefer to retain the talent we've worked to recruit and cultivate for longer periods of time. This can only be accomplished if the library faculty serving in this role is appropriately compensated, given sufficient resources to accomplish their mission, and appropriately acknowledged for their high-profile achievements. Accordingly, much of my recent time as a library leader has shifted to raising awareness of their accomplishments, nominating individuals for campus recognition awards, advocating for competitive salaries, and making the case for growing the size of the scholarly communications team as our ability to sustain existing services reaches and increasingly exceeds our capacity to fully deliver. As I continue to work on these campus advocacy efforts, I also had to counsel the existing team to appropriately temper their expectations for additional resources at a medium-sized institution to avoid unnecessary frustration or burnout. It is no easy task for a library leader to effectively manage and scale growing scholarly communications services, led by highly talented and ambitious librarians, in the face of perennial competition for scarce campus resources.

Additional leadership challenges have included the need to balance a strongly branded scholarly communications center and busy scholarly communications librarians with the need to also cultivate overall library team cohesiveness. To some extent, scholarly communications efforts have disconnected from other ongoing library efforts in recent years. The global pandemic and increasing demand for scholarly communications services without a corresponding increase in library faculty are factors that have understandably contributed to this trend. As a library leader, one of my current goals as we emerge from the pandemic years is to reinforce bridges between scholarly communications and related library initiatives. As with all things, it's about striking the right balance, and a library leader is responsible for maintaining that balance.

We have also had our share of unsuccessful initiatives. After several years of carefully building campus support for a Research Information Management System (RIMS) and issuing a formal request for vendor proposals, the initiative was retired without action due to prohibitive costs. We still believe a RIMS to be an essential component of the library's growing suite of scholarly identity and scholarly impact services, and we plan to revisit it at an appropriate time in the future. It is sometimes the case that a worthy proposal needs to be introduced more than once before it meets with success. Perseverance in reaching lofty goals is also the responsibility of a library leader, and many resource-intensive scholarly communications initiatives will require years of ongoing commitment to bring them to full realization.

Opportunities Abound

Our many scholarly communications initiatives have introduced powerful and sometimes unanticipated benefits and opportunities. From a leadership perspective, scholarly communications has generated a justifiable degree of library pride and a greater campus awareness of new and emerging roles of academic libraries. Overcoming traditional library stereotypes is a perennial challenge for all library leaders, and the future-forward orientation of scholarly communications has had a positive spillover effect, opening up campus perspectives on what a library is and can be. As we all know, it is no longer sufficient to position the library as the “heart of the campus”. Scholarly communications has rapidly repositioned librarians as full-fledged academic partners in the teaching and learning enterprise and across the entire research lifecycle.

While we still have much work to do, scholarly communications has contributed significantly to a fresh and renewed understanding of the eternal library mission. I am an adherent of the New Librarianship Framework, which holds that “The mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities” (Lankes, 2011, p. 31). Scholarly communications, by directly contributing to scholarly impact and identity across research endeavors, has been instrumental in shaping this campus understanding of the role of their library.

Our scholarly communications accomplishments to dramatically reduce the cost of curricular materials via our OER, OA, and Course Readings initiatives are particularly recognized by the campus as a significant contribution to the accessibility of higher education for our students. Recognition of these and other accomplishments is opening doors for the library to participate in other areas of curricular and co-curricular life of our faculty and students. Put succinctly, our success in scholarly communications has fostered greater success in more traditional areas of library work. Scholarly communications has proven instrumental for cultivating a virtuous cycle across all library operations.

Looking Ahead: 2023 and Beyond

Taking leadership stock of the state of scholarly communications, I can clearly identify several areas of focus that will occupy my time in the coming few years. As previously mentioned, I need to ensure that our existing scholarly communications initiatives integrate as effectively as possible with our broader library team efforts. I can see paths forward for this, as an emerging trend is for scholarly communications to become increasingly diffused and interwoven throughout most library services and operations. While many of our disciplinary faculty are now actively engaging with the library’s scholarly communications services, there are others we still need to reach. As a leader, I therefore need to continue to cultivate new partnerships and raise awareness across campus of the impactful work of the library team. Raising administrative support for an expanded scholarly communications team is also essential if we are to further scale our existing services as well as move into entirely new areas such as data services. Library leaders should continuously strive to increase campus awareness of and

support for scholarly communications. Fortunately for the state of Colorado, we have a governor who already champions scholarly communications via his Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) Challenge (<http://masterplan.highered.colorado.gov/governor-polis-ztc-challenge/>) and other efforts. I and other library leaders in the state can look to his good example as we strive to further advance scholarly communications in the years to come.

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