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An extensible and successful method of identifying collaborators for National Library of Medicine informationist projects

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Question/Purpose: The New York University (NYU) Health Sciences Library used a new method to arrange in-depth discussions with basic science researchers. The objective was to identify collaborators for a new National Library of Medicine administrative supplement.

Setting: The research took place at the NYU Health Sciences Library.

Methods: Using the National Institutes of Health (NIH) RePORTER, forty-four researchers were identified and later contacted through individualized emails.

Results: Nine researchers responded to the email followed by six in-person or phone discussions. At the conclusion of this process, two researchers submitted applications for supplemental funding, and both of these applications were successful.

Conclusions: This method confirmed these users could benefit from the skills and knowledge of health sciences librarians, but they are largely unaware of this.

Keywords: Basic Science Researchers, Grant Funding, Informationist, Collaboration, Information-Seeking Behavior, Outreach, Data Management, Knowledge Management.

INTRODUCTION

The New York University (NYU) Health Sciences Library had a history of challenges in providing meaningful and effective support to basic sciences researchers. In 2012, the National Library of Medicine (NLM) provided a new opportunity for engaging with researchers through the NLM Administrative Supplements for Informationist Services in National Institutes of Health (NIH)-Funded Research Projects [1]. This new initiative provided funding for dedicated support to address data or knowledge management challenges. After careful

review of this new initiative, the library's leadership decided this possibility of additional research funding offered a fresh motivation and rationale for engaging with their researchers.

In deciding to pursue this opportunity, the library leadership's first question to address was how to identify and approach eligible researchers regarding a possible collaboration. A particular challenge was that most of the library leadership, as well as many of the overall organization's librarians, were relatively new to the institution, with limited contacts in the research community. Library leadership thought that approaching known "friends" or champions in the research community was too limited an approach and unlikely to be successful. Having this limitation and few other options, library leadership decided to follow the recommendations provided in the NLM announcement: use NIH RePORTER to identify researchers with eligible grants and discuss the opportunity with them. This approach proved successful in both identifying eligible and interested researchers, and learning about the daily data and knowledge management challenges that researchers experience. Researchers also learned about expertise and services that the libraries offered of which they were unaware.

Beyond the NYU Health Sciences Library, other academic health sciences libraries have reported challenges in providing meaningful and effective support to basic science researchers. Research has shown that these users perceive themselves to be largely self-sufficient in information discovery, independent of age or job classification. There is conflicting research about where researchers go to find information: research conducted on the information-seeking behavior of NIH scientists discovered that the library's website was a primary information source for many of their researchers [2]. In contrast, basic science researchers at the University of Vermont did not consult the library's website regularly when seeking information, instead relying on a known network of internal and external colleagues. These same researchers reported an overall positive impression of the library, describing limited use of interlibrary loan and document delivery services, and assistance with using End-Note. Although not universal, most of these researchers expressed little awareness of or interest in library subject guides and literature-searching assistance, and believed their graduate students received the required information discovery and management training that they needed from peers and mentors. The research also described the communication challenges these users sometimes pose. When asked to recommend services that the library could develop that they would find useful, some recommended a program that was nearly identical to the library's established liaison program [3].

METHODS

The NYU Health Sciences Library supports the NYU Langone Medical Center, an academic medical center with four hospitals, a medical school, and an active biomedical research community. The library has seventeen librarians and fifteen support staff providing services and initiatives across the medical center's research, education, and clinical mission areas. An emerging area of interest and work for the library is research data management, so there is particular interest in identifying collaborative projects with researchers to learn more about needs and test new services.

The NLM Administrative Supplements for Informationist Services in NIH-Funded Research Projects mechanism provides up to \$50,000 over 2 years to support adding an informationist to an NIH-grant-funded research team. The primary purpose of the supplement is to enhance the storage, organization, management, and use of electronic research data. Secondary objectives for the supplements include enhancing collaborative, multidisciplinary basic, and clinical research, as well as assessing and documenting the value and impact of the informationist's collaboration with researchers.

The first step in identifying potential collaborators was using NIH RePORTER to identify researchers with active grants who were eligible to apply for an administrative supplement. NIH RePORTER is an online tool that allows users to search across a repository of intramural and extramural NIH-funded research projects from the past twenty-five years. Special attention was required as not all NIH institutes participated in this program, so researchers had to be funded through a participating institute. Targeted grants also needed to be active for at least the upcoming two years to be a match. Based on these parameters and with some trial and error, the library representatives identified forty-four NYU researchers with fifty-three eligible grants.

The next step was to consider how to approach these researchers and inform them they were eligible to apply for this funding. Various methods were discussed, but the choice came down to either crafting and sending a single generic "blast" email to all of the researchers and inviting them to respond or sending individualized emails to each researcher. The advantage of the blast email approach was ease and limited effort, but there was concern that this method would not motivate researchers to respond. Based on these considerations, the more personal approach of sending individualized emails was selected. The library leadership worked with administrative support to create a template for individual emails from the library director citing the identified researcher's grants, informing them that they were eligible to apply for this administrative supplement, and briefly describing ways that the library could potentially support their research. The email closed with an invitation to respond if they had interest in arranging a brief discussion of this opportunity.

RESULTS

Nine of the forty-four researchers responded to the email asking for more information or asking to discuss the administrative supplement further. Based on brief email exchanges or phone calls, it was determined that the best approach was to arrange informal discussions with six of the nine researchers who responded to the original email. The library director and an associate director met with each researcher over a period of a couple of weeks.

The library representatives had two primary objectives during these meetings: (1) identify the one or two best candidates for collaboration on an application, and (2) learn more about the data and knowledge management needs of all of these researchers. A key approach was asking the researchers to describe their day-to-day data and knowledge organization and management problems, rather than going into a lot of detail describing available services. Over the course of these thirty-minute discussions, a number of themes emerged regarding the researcher's challenges:

1. Many of their day-to-day data and knowledge management challenges were similar to what has been described in the literature and in anecdotal discussions.
2. Some of these challenges, such as organizing collections of portable document format (PDF) files and discovering and accessing information licensed by the library, were standard types of support regularly provided by librarians.
3. Other needs that went beyond typical library support—such as the need to automate literature discovery and mining, improve lab process organization, and develop a data model to support mapping of two databases—were approachable for the library as they were areas of expertise for the library.

Although not surprising based on past experience and review of the literature, another consistent theme was that these researchers rarely or never thought about the library, and if they did, their conception was limited and traditional. To them, the library represented books, journals, a facility, and little else. They had some awareness of basic services that the library and librarians provided—for example, literature searching support, assistance with bibliographic management software, and interlibrary loan—but no awareness of the library's broader expertise in knowledge management or interest in expanding support in related areas like data management. One motivation in responding to the library's email for some of these researchers was curiosity about what libraries and librarians did in the contemporary era of digital information.

At the conclusion of this process, the library representatives and two researchers agreed to collaborate on separate applications for the supplemental awards. The library representatives decided that the other four research projects did not offer as robust data management possibilities as the two selected. In each of those cases, however, standard library

services were made available to satisfy identified needs. The two applications that were developed were subsequently approved:

- "Role of Proteases and Peptides in Cancer Pain"
- "Clinical Management of Cochlear Implant Patients with Contralateral Hearing Aids"

In 2013, NLM again provided the opportunity to apply for this administrative supplement, and the library repeated this process. During this second round, forty researchers with forty-six eligible grants were again identified through NIH RePORTER and were sent individualized emails from the director. Eight researchers replied, and through the same process of in-person and phone conversations, two applications were submitted. Once again, both of these applications were funded:

- "Synaptic Basis of Perceptual Learning in Primary Auditory Cortex"
- "Multicultural Community Dementia Screening"

DISCUSSION

This process for identifying researchers for potential collaboration is an extensible and successful approach to identifying, contacting, and ultimately selecting basic science researchers for collaboration on NLM administrative supplements. Although limited in scope, it is a potent way to develop new and knowledgeable library champions in the research community who can attest to the value of librarians in research data management. This approach was presented at a professional conference as well as shared informally, based on multiple inquiries from colleagues at other academic health sciences libraries. Although this approach was introduced as a strategy based on lack of other options, colleagues have repeatedly described it as novel in contrast to approaching known contacts with whom there was a preexisting relationship. The authors contend that casting a broader net, as in the cases described, yielded opportunities and information that we would have been unaware of otherwise.

The library's discussions with researchers confirmed that they would benefit from the skills and knowledge of health sciences librarians. This has influenced subsequent initiatives and an overall emphasis in the library on pursuing many opportunities to communicate directly with researchers about their day-to-day data and knowledge discovery and management challenges. Everything that is being learned from these discussions is helping guide the library's strategic directions and future activities.

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