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Academic Librarian Perceptions of Academic Librarians: Building a Foundation of Shared Understanding

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Academic Librarian Perceptions of Academic Librarians: Building a Foundation of Shared Understanding

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Abstract

A survey concerning perceptions of academic librarians was conducted at a large, 4-year university with three populations: librarians, faculty, and undergraduate students. The high response rate and the use of an instrument based on previous studies offers the possibility of longitudinal comparison and the identification of relationships between groups within one environment. This article focuses specifically on academic librarian perceptions about what librarians know (expertise and skills), what librarians do (role and duties), and what librarians are like (motivations and affective behaviours). Twenty librarians employed in James Madison University Libraries responded to an online survey (62.5% response rate); four follow-up interviews and card sorts were conducted later to provide context to the data. Results have implications for libraries specifically in the areas of outreach, instruction, management, and collaboration. Differences in the responses of liaison and non-liaison groups are not generalizable to the population, but patterns were found that suggest future research in this area should include examination of differences related to the type of librarianship or focus on specific

aspects of librarianship. Subsequent articles will situate these findings with those from surveys of faculty and undergraduate students and discuss implications for practice.

Keywords: academic librarians, perceptions, stereotypes, higher education, image, role, behaviour

Introduction

This article is the second in a series about the perceptions of academic librarians held by librarians, non-librarian faculty (hereafter "faculty"), and students. The first article presented a comprehensive literature review (Fagan, Ostermiller, Price, & Sapp, 2020), and this article and the next two will present survey results and analysis. For the purposes of this paper, "librarians" will be used to mean "academic librarians" since they were the subject of this survey.

Methodology

This study used an online survey and individual interviews to collect data from librarians at James Madison University (JMU), a large, master's comprehensive university. The survey was created using Qualtrics and remained open for four weeks in fall 2017. The IRB-approved instrument was adapted from earlier surveys by Pastine and Hernon (1977) and Fagan (2003) (see Appendix LPL-1 for full survey).

The population of this study was full-time librarian faculty working in JMU Libraries in fall 2017 (N=32). The survey link was shared via the libraries' faculty listserv. SPSS version 23 was used for statistical analysis of survey results. Qualitative survey data were coded using NVivo software (version 11) and sorted into categories for each question. Two coders worked independently, then met to discuss and agree on final labels and definitions for categories, as

shown in Tables 1, 8, and 9, then reviewed and updating all coding (thus, inter-rater reliability was close to 100%). After initial analysis, the authors desired additional context and solicited volunteers for follow-up interviews and card-sorting exercises. Subsequently, four librarians were interviewed individually in summer 2018 (see Appendix LPL-2 for interview protocol). All interviews were conducted by at least two researchers and audio recorded.

Limitations

One limitation of the survey is that we re-purposed an instrument designed for students for use with librarians and faculty, so it was limited to questions we anticipated students could provide informed opinions about. As one example, this survey did not directly ask librarians about their perceptions of interactions with teaching faculty. Also, the study's broad focus means information about specialized functions was not gathered. Another limitation is the nine-month interval between the original survey and the interviews, which made it difficult for the interviewees to recall their survey experiences. Finally, the lack of a clear definition of the term "teaching" might introduce ambiguity when interpreting results, especially open-ended responses where the terms "instruction," "teaching," and "information literacy" might be used differently by different librarians.

Survey Results

Demographics

Out of 32 librarians employed in JMU Libraries, 20 responded to the survey for a response rate of 62.5%. Sixteen respondents (80%) identified as female, three as male, and one preferred not to say. Ten of the 20 respondents (50%) reported being liaison librarians, with an additional five respondents from the same major division of the library where liaisons work (Academic Engagement). There were four respondents from the other major division of the

library. (Scholarly Resources & Technology), and one respondent chose "Other." Compared to the population of JMU librarians, the sample is skewed toward female librarians, liaison librarians, and public services librarians. A series of Fisher's exact tests showed that any differences observed in the sample between genders, liaison versus non-liaison, and public services librarians versus non-public services librarians in the sample should not be interpreted as evidence of differences in the population of JMU librarians.

What Librarians Know: Librarian expertise and skills / Value for librarians' skills

Seventeen of the 20 librarians responded to the open-ended question "What did you learn in your library school classes? Please write at least three topics that were covered in your classes" (Q9). Responses were coded, and reasons given across responses were coded into the broad categories of Expertise (19 mentions), Organisation (15 mentions), Resources (13 mentions), Not Coded Elsewhere (13 mentions), Reference Skills and Reference Interviews (11 mentions), Teaching (5 mentions), and Library Facilities (1 mention) as shown in Figure 1. Table 1 provides coding definitions. Librarians reported that coursework developed their expertise in the areas of technology/IT, research support, information ethics (including copyright), and finding and accessing information. Some technology skills mentioned were: "information architecture and technologies in libraries," "Web programming and design," and "database design." Another common answer related to organising information. Librarians learned how to catalogue and obtained information about knowledge management, data structure and curation, and archiving.

Librarians also stated they learned about collection development/management in library school. Courses addressed finding and using information (including specialized subject-specific resources and advanced reference materials), working with rare books and manuscripts, and data

curation. Half of the librarians said they learned how to conduct reference interviews and acquired reference skills in their coursework. One librarian discovered "how people don't always know how to ask for what they need." Coursework in teaching was mentioned by only five librarians (four were liaisons). Librarians said they learned about library/information literacy and "how to teach others how to find and use information."

A significant number of responses (*n*=13) did not fit in defined categories and were grouped in a Not Coded Elsewhere node. This indicates the diversity of courses in library school and information science curriculum. Some examples included assessment, preservation, management, diversity and inclusion, and library marketing.

Fourteen of the 20 librarians responded to the question "What skills do you think librarians have that are valuable to students?" (Q5). Responses were coded into these broad categories: Expertise (33 mentions), Interpersonal Skills (6 mentions), Higher-Order Thinking (4 mentions), Resources (4 mentions), Teaching (2 mentions), and Organization (2 mentions), as shown in Figure 2. Professional expertise, particularly in the areas of critical evaluation, locating and accessing information, research support and subject knowledge, were listed by most. A strong understanding of the information environment/cycle, information and digital literacy, and information ethics also were mentioned as valuable skills.

Five participants felt interpersonal skills were beneficial. Responses included words like "openness," "empathy," and "service-oriented mindset." Only two librarians mentioned teaching in some way, although one might be seen as a stretch ("research counselors"). Higher-order thinking skills, such as critical reasoning and problem solving, also were mentioned by four librarians. An equal number felt a strong grasp of library resources was helpful, including selection of useful resources and their utilization, data management, and "being able to explain

resources without much jargon." One participant mentioned the value of helping students organise their research. Another individual mentioned "curiosity (not exactly a skill, but…)." Finally, one librarian mentioned learning and applying new pedagogical skills.

Thirteen of the 20 librarians responded to the question "What skills do you think librarians have that are valuable to the university?" (Q6). Responses were coded into these broad categories: Expertise (28 mentions), Interpersonal Skills (7 mentions), Teaching (7 mentions), Higher-Order Thinking (3 mentions), Resources (3 mentions), and Not Coded Elsewhere (2 mentions), as shown in Figure 3. Professional expertise, especially in the area of research support, was listed by more than half of respondents. One commented, "Librarians support student learning and faculty research and that is central to the mission of the university." Librarians also recognized scholarly communication, information literacy, and identifying and providing high quality services to the university and broader community as valuable expertise.

Five librarians felt they possessed interpersonal skills of value to the university. Responses included words and phrases like "communication," "leadership," "collaboration," "networking ability," and diplomacy (e.g., "able to provide feedback to a faculty member when an assignment isn't working"). A third of the librarians thought their instructional skills and support of faculty teaching were important, as evidenced by this quote: "A desire to improve student success and the research and teaching skills to do so." These librarians specifically mentioned *teaching* as a skill of value to the university.

Within "Resources," three librarians posited collection development as a valued set of skills, including building collections that support the curriculum and accreditation standards. Curriculum also was mentioned as "program review work," "curriculum development work," and "broad understanding of curricular sequence across undergrad through graduate programs."

Finally, one participant mentioned "interest in contributing knowledge to our profession (scholarship)" and another listed "advocacy" as of value to the university.

What Librarians Do: Duties and role of librarians

On the set of questions asking, "How often do you think academic librarians perform the following duties?" (Q4), one respondent skipped one item and another skipped two items. Additionally, one respondent rated seven of the first eight items "Not Sure." Subsequently, we treated Not Sure as missing data. For the final analysis, there were either 19 or 20 informed responses for each item in this set.

A majority of JMU respondents indicated that librarians Frequently engaged in eight of the 26 listed duties, four of which were indicated by more than 75% of respondents: Teaching research skills (in classes or one-on-one), Giving subject-specific help to students for research, Buying books, journals and electronic material, and Creating Subject Guides. A majority of respondents indicated librarians Never engaged in six of the 26 listed duties (see Figure 4).

For this question and a few others, we analyzed liaison versus non-liaison responses for the sample since so much literature focused on liaison librarians (Fagan, Ostermiller, Price, & Sapp, 2020). Again, these differences should not be inferred to exist in the population of JMU librarians.For this group of respondents, liaisons reported librarians performed some duties more frequently than non-liaisons did (see Table 2). Both groups found "Lending books, films, and equipment to users," "Buying books, journals and electronic material," "Creating online tutorials," and "Helping users to find books" to be a Frequently or Sometimes performed duty, but on average, liaisons were more likely to say Frequently than non-liaisons. The other three items in Table 2 were rated in the Rarely to Never range by both liaisons and non-liaisons:

"Issuing library cards," "Picking up trash/cleaning the library," and "Working in Starbucks." Non-liaisons were more emphatic about librarians not performing these duties than were liaisons.

Table 3 shows the two duties where non-liaisons rated the duty as performed more frequently than liaisons. Both groups reported these duties being performed Frequently, but non-liaisons rated them as more frequent: "Giving general help to students for research" and "Teaching research skills (in classes or one-on-one)."

As the sample size was too small to perform a factor analysis, we visually examined correlations among the rankings to explore possible relationships among duties. We classified relationships as moderate if the correlation was greater than 0.3, and high if greater than 0.6. We observed four clusters (see Table 4).

Four items were not placed in a group because they correlated moderately with multiple clusters or were not correlated strongly at all:

- 12.2 Helping users to find books
- 12.6 Buying books, journals and electronic material
- 12.8 Creating subject guides
- 14.4 Teaching research skills (in classes or one-on-one).

For example, item 12.8, Creating subject guides, had a moderate correlation with 13.2, Giving subject-specific help to students for research (.46), but did not have notable correlations with the other items in Cluster B.

What Librarians Are Like: Motivations and affective behaviours

Respondents were asked to rank from 1 to 10 a list of reasons librarians chose to become librarians (Q3). There were no missing responses to this item. Two respondents wrote in reasons

for the response "Other": "believe in equitable access to information" and "keeps me close to my chosen discipline." Figure 5 shows the aggregate responses sorted by mean, where 1 is the top reason. The standard deviations suggest some variability among respondents; 1.40 was the average *sd*, not including "other." Therefore, we propose JMU librarians agree "they want to help people" and "they like working with information" as top reasons, and "the prestige accompanying the job" and "it's an easy job" as some of the last reasons.

The greatest difference between liaison and non-liaison groups in this sample was on the item "they like working with technology," but liaisons' average rank (M=5.1) was not quite one rank lower than the average for non-liaisons (M=4.2).

In response to the prompt "Please read the following statements carefully and indicate your level of agreement" (Q10), two respondents chose not to answer any items and one respondent skipped one item. Otherwise, respondents answered every item. The item "Students would rather ask a female librarian for help" had nine Not Sure responses and the item "Students would be more willing to approach a librarian of their own race or ethnicity" had four Not Sure responses. While we will return to these latter items in the discussion, Not Sure responses were treated as missing data for subsequent statistical analysis.

Figure 6 shows librarians' level of agreement with various motivational and affective statements about librarians. For four items, a majority chose Strongly Agree:

- It is important to employ librarians of diverse ages, races, and gender
- Librarians like helping students
- Librarians have knowledge that is practical to students
- There are more female librarians than male librarians.

For an additional 13 items, the majority chose either Strongly Agree or Somewhat Agree. Six items elicited either Somewhat Disagree or Strongly Disagree responses from a majority of librarians. The items most likely to be rated Strongly Disagree (by more than 40% of respondents) were "Librarians like helping students with projects that are due tomorrow" and "It is faster for students to figure out a tough question themselves than ask a librarian." Setting aside "Students would rather ask a female librarian for help," which had only 11 informed responses, the items with the highest proportion of Neither Agree nor Disagree responses were "Librarians are experts with technology" and "Librarians are slow."

Average responses of liaisons and non-liaisons in this sample were meaningfully different on some items; Table 5 lists the items where liaisons in this sample agreed with the statement more than non-liaisons did, and Table 6 shows the three items where non-liaisons agreed with the statement more than liaisons did.

Similar to Question 4, we used correlations to explore relationships among the Q10 items using the same criteria, this time including negative correlations because the relationships define motivational and affective categories. Two Clusters emerged (Table 7).

There were eight items that were not correlated consistently with the Clusters, or that correlated with both:

- 27.3 Librarians like helping students with projects that are due tomorrow
- 27.8 It is faster for students to figure out a tough question themselves rather than ask a librarian
- 27.10 Librarians are easy to talk to
- 27.12 Librarians use words that students don't understand
- 27.13 Librarians know what they're doing
- 28.3 Librarians are experts with technology
- 28.6 Knowing more about a librarian's education, skills, job, and personality help students decide whether or not to ask them for help

- 28.7 There are more female librarians than male librarians.

Three additional items related to gender, race, and ethnicity also failed to correlate with the clusters, and were only moderately correlated with one another:

- 28.4 Students would rather ask a female librarian for help (Note: there were only 9 valid responses to this item).
- 28.8 Students would be more willing to approach a librarian of their own race or ethnicity.
- 28.9 There is enough diversity (race, ethnicity, age, gender, etc.) among librarians.

Fourteen of the 20 librarians responded to the question "Why might students ask librarians questions?" (Q7). Responses were coded, and reasons given across responses were coded into the broad categories of Expertise (8 mentions), Need Help (6 mentions), Good Experience (4 mentions), and five other categories, as shown in Figure 7; coding definitions are provided in Table 8. (Some individuals' responses contained multiple reasons). The category of Expertise included general comments such as, "If they need help and they have some kind of understanding/awareness that librarians are experts to help them," as well as specifics like expertise in evaluating information, citing/plagiarism, and locating information.. Areas of expertise were mentioned more often than any personal qualities that might encourage students to ask questions, although a couple of respondents did mention that librarians are "helpful" and "not as intimidating as the student's professor."

Some librarians speculated that students who have had good experiences with librarians in the past likely would return for help ("a librarian has been helpful to them in the past"). Librarian responses also suggested that others were encouraging students to ask librarian questions, either "written into the assignment" or as a "peer recommendation." Another theme was akin to students needing help, but to a stronger degree—participants stated students are

likely to consult librarians when they are stumped ("unable to find anything on their topic"). Other reasons (mentioned only once) included curiosity and a general liking of libraries.

The same number of librarians (*n*=14) responded to the converse question—"Why might students NOT ask librarians questions?" (Q8). The responses for this question had less variation, as seen in Figure 8 (coding definitions are provided in Table 9, with most librarians mentioning a lack of awareness about librarians and/or student shyness or anxiety (each category with 10 mentions). In coding the responses, a distinction was made between the categories of "Non-Awareness" and "Unsure What to Ask" (3 mentions). In the case of "Unsure What to Ask," librarians assumed students know librarians exist but do not know how best to ask for help from them. Librarians specifically used words like "fear," "embarrassed," and "anxiety" to describe student emotions that could keep them from asking questions.

Beyond these two reasons, some librarians noted students might believe they do not need help (5 mentions). A few librarians believed students who are aware of librarians still might not seek help if librarians were not available at the right time ("we can't be available at all hours"). The idea that a previous experience with a librarian could influence future student behaviour continued in the responses to this question, although fewer librarians named a bad experience as a possible influence than those who named a good experience as one (2 mentions versus 4 mentions). Other reasons provided were personal preference or a lack of time.

Any Additional Comments?

The three responses to the prompt, "Any Additional Comments?" (Q11) primarily concerned items on the survey; this feedback will be reviewed in the Discussion section.

Interview Results

As described in the methodology section, four JMU librarians were interviewed concerning their survey experience and responses. Interviewees were asked to reflect on what their perspective had been when they answered certain survey questions (see full protocol in Appendix LPL-2). For the question "How often do you think academic librarians perform the following duties?" (Q4), interviewees were asked to explain whether they had been thinking about themselves personally, about their colleagues at JMU, or about national colleagues. Three of the four interviewees indicated they were thinking of JMU colleagues. The fourth interviewee pictured a combination of personal experiences and a hypothetical librarian.

When prompted to consider if they had the same approach to a different question, "Please read the following statements carefully and indicate your level of agreement (Q10)," two interviewees said they were thinking of a broader population of librarians, while the other two spoke more specifically about their own reactions. All four interviewees said when considering the prompt "how often librarians perform the following duties" (Q4), they answered based on reality rather than a hypothetical ideal librarian.

Interviewees felt there was no clear consistency about whether faculty are familiar with current research tools available to students. The three non-liaison librarians offered the caveat that they had no direct evidence, but their responses were similar to those of the one liaison interviewee. There was consensus that subject-matter faculty members have minimal awareness of the library science/information technology field.

When asked to what degree the interviewees think of themselves as teachers, the responses ranged widely, from "just in special circumstances" to "to a high degree." The role of "teacher" was not defined, so interviewees could also vary in their interpretation of the question.

One common sentiment was librarians who work as liaisons are more likely to feel like teachers than those who do not. All four interviewees stated that it is helpful for academic librarians to emphasise their instructional identity. One mentioned this effort could provide additional context for how the libraries fit into the university community. Another interviewee observed that librarians often have had more training and spent more time on pedagogy than some subject-area faculty.

The interviewees also shared additional insights about academic librarians and teaching. Most of them emphasized that they believe subject-area faculty members do not see librarians as instructors, while one interviewee pointed to a need for more pedagogy training in library and information science (LIS) graduate programs.

In addition to answering open-ended questions, interviewees were asked to participate in two card sorting activities. Card sorting provided a meaningful structure for the researchers to improve understanding of librarian perceptions from the initial survey. In the first activity, interviewees were given a stack of cards with duties librarians might perform (Q4) and asked to organise these into categories that made sense to them. Interviewees generally grouped their categories around responsibility for the duties or organisational alignment (Figure 9).

In the second card sorting activity, interviewees were given the same task, but proposed groupings of items from Q10 (Figure 10). Overall, the correlational data from the survey grouped items somewhat topically and allowed for negative and positive relationships, while the interviewees tended to group items in terms of positive / true or negative / false. The largest difference between liaison and non-liaison groups' responses for this question set was on the item "Librarians understand students' time pressures." The interviewees all predicted liaison

librarians would be more likely to believe they understand students' time pressures (this matches the actual survey results).

Overall, the interviewees expressed varied observations about how their personal relationships with faculty and students might influence their perceptions of librarians. One interviewee saw the most impact with a few students and faculty who directly contacted them and finds those people tend to have strong relationships with librarians. Another interviewee noted the value of faculty and students being able to transfer their experience with one librarian to have a similar experience with another. Librarians also expressed a concern that many faculty members and students might have outdated or inaccurate ideas about academic librarianship and that building personal relationships can correct misperceptions.

Discussion

This study summarizes librarian perceptions at a large, comprehensive, residential institution. Comparing the results to the literature illuminates how academic librarianship writ large might manifest in a specific way at one institution and situates the institutional context for future comparison with students and faculty at the same institution.

What Librarians Know: Librarian expertise and skills / Value for librarians' skills

Our literature review (Fagan, Ostermiller, Price, & Sapp, 2020) found copious information about "what librarians know" in research studies of job advertisements. Mentions of technology skills increased over time. A few studies focused on LIS curricula. Bailey (2010) found the most frequently listed subjects were Collection Management, Budgeting/Finance, Information Literacy/Instruction, Organisation, and Personnel/Staffing/Human Resources, followed by a second tier: Scholarly Communication, Management, and faculty status/tenure.

Saunders (2019) listed skills in a survey of alumni and LIS faculty and asked them to be rated as "core, very important, important, specialised, or not important." Studies by Walter (2008), Davis (2007), Hall (2009), and Hall (2013) suggested that librarians in the workplace see a greater need for educational opportunities on teaching.

This survey gathered information about librarians' perceptions of their expertise and skills by asking what they learned in library school, which librarian skills are valuable to students, and which librarian skills are valuable to the university. The responses covered both the topical nature of Bailey's findings as well as the skill set focus of job advertisements. The strong presence of interpersonal skills, technology skills, information ethics, and finding and accessing information in the respondents' answers corresponds with results of Saunders's (2019) study as "core" skills. JMU librarians did not specifically call out some of the other skills rated as core, such as cultural competence, interacting with diverse communities, and reflective practice, but this might be the result of the question being open-ended, whereas Saunders offered a list. JMU librarians commonly mentioned skills related to organising information and collection management as those learned in library school, which were found frequently in syllabi by Bailey (2010). The large number of responses that did not fit into defined categories aligns with the literature review's findings of diverse specialties for librarians, most notably investigated by Cox and Corrall (2013).

Coursework in teaching was mentioned by only four liaisons. This aligns with Hall's 2009 study, which found that only one ALA-accredited school required an instruction course (p. 61). In a later study, Hall (2013) reported significant growth in the importance of instruction as a skill, with 87% of supervisors saying it was very important for academic librarians and 96%

saying instruction should be taught in library school. One interviewee explicitly mentioned the need for more pedagogy training in LIS graduate programs.

Faculty status/tenure was included as a common topic for LIS syllabi (Bailey, 2010), and since JMU librarians are tenure-track, it was odd that there was no mention of this aspect of librarianship among survey responses. The closest response was a mention of learning about "the kinds of career paths available in libraries" in the question about library school (Q9). Future research could investigate the extent to which librarians might think of faculty promotion and tenure duties as separate from their definition of librarianship, perhaps even if only implicitly.

What Librarians Do: Duties and role of librarians

Our literature review (Fagan, Ostermiller, Price, & Sapp, 2020) found several approaches by academic librarians describing the primary roles of their profession (Arendt & Lotts, 2012; Cox & Corral, 2013; *Library Journal* & Gale, 2015; Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2015). Despite this study's focus on the spectrum of duties students might perceive librarians to do, responses to the question "How often do you think academic librarians perform the following duties?" (Q4) seemed to align with the services and roles identified in the literature. For example, teaching was rated the most frequently performed duty on this survey, reflecting the strong association with teaching found in the literature (Fagan, Ostermiller, Price, & Sapp, 2020). JMU organisational priorities also seem to be reflected in the responses. The strong agreement on evaluating student learning and creating online tutorials relates to JMU's instructional and assessment focus. It could be interesting to see if other libraries with a strong teaching emphasis would rank these highly, too.

When it comes to questions about librarians teaching on campus, the authors acknowledge that the words "teaching" and "instruction" might have different definitions in the

library literature and even among our respondents. The "teaching" that respondents to our survey said was "Frequently" performed may be a different activity in their minds than the activities brought to mind for non-librarian faculty or students. Some people might envision classroom teaching of credit-bearing courses, others might include any form of group instruction, and still others might include the creation of online course materials. On future surveys, we would recommend a clear definition be provided of the word.

When four interviewees were asked to cluster the list of librarian duties in a card sort, they took three different approaches. Two used functional groups, one sorted by the type of staff who perform the duties, and one sorted by special versus general versus non-librarian duties (Figure 9). Attempting to align the librarian-created clusters with those determined by correlations (Table 4) revealed overlapping structures of the professional nature of duties with functional areas of the library. Interviewees' responses to the card sort suggest that Clusters A and B might represent professional librarians' work because of their relationship to student and faculty support, research and instruction, and outreach, with varying opinions about the extent to which staff also perform the duties in Cluster B. Clusters C and D include duties more often performed by staff, including general and operational duties, with some duties deemed not library work at all.

We see agreement among respondents about the duties of librarians, but some differences in how to summarise and explain these duties to others. Librarians agreed that "Creating Subject Guides" was a duty, but it did not correlate strongly with any cluster. Furthermore, two interviewees thought of it in terms of whether it was a professional duty, while two thought of it in terms of where it belonged functionally (aligned with research support). Sometimes an idea like "Research support" overlaps neatly with the professionalism of duties, but other times it

might not. If librarian duties are hard to cluster, that doesn't make them less central, but it might illuminate one reason they are difficult to describe to external audiences succinctly and effectively.

These results might be useful for informing outreach efforts, including the creation of library brochures and web content providing overviews of librarian expertise. They also could increase internal understanding of other roles and duties. In future articles, we will examine how students and faculty rank and group librarian duties and evaluate the nature of any gaps in perceptions about librarian roles and duties.

What Librarians Are Like: Motivations and affective behaviours

Our literature review found that academic librarians are bothered by stereotypes about themselves but love their jobs despite this (Davis, 2007; Davis-Kendrick, 2009) and are proud of their work (Arendt & Lotts, 2012). JMU librarians suggested the top-rated motivation for librarians to enter the profession was "they want to help people" and the second-ranked reason was "they like working with information" (Q3). Differences in responses between liaisons and non-liaisons did not seem meaningful in size, suggesting underlying motivations might be shared even when duties are quite different.

For the prompt about librarian characteristics (Q10), respondents all indicated they Strongly Agree or Somewhat Agree with four items (Figure 6): "It is important to employ librarians of diverse ages, races, and gender," "Librarians like helping students," "Librarians have knowledge that is practical to students," and "Knowing more about a librarian's education, skills, job, and personality help students decide whether or not to ask them for help," with all but the last dominated by Strongly Agree responses. It is encouraging to see robust support for these perceptions, although one respondent noted that helping students "*should* be [librarians']

priority, but I'm not sure if it is." It also was encouraging to see consensus of strong disagreement among librarians for statements such as "Librarians think people who don't know the basics about the library are stupid." While we attempted to generate clusters of these items based on statistical correlation, we didn't discern any explanations for their commonality, and the interviewees' categorizations of these items did not match the statistically-generated clusters.

The ambiguity on some survey items shown in Figure 6 (e.g., "Librarians are experts with technology") might be due to items only being true sometimes, or for some people. The prompt "Students would rather ask a female librarian for help" had nine Not Sure responses and "Students would be more willing to approach a librarian of their own race or ethnicity" had four Not Sure responses. One respondent commented that white students might see this item as less relevant than non-white students because white students and librarians are in the majority at JMU.

While we did not find many studies dedicated to academic librarian perceptions of themselves in our literature review, the results generally line up with Goetsch's (2008) and Weng & Ackerman's (2017) finding that librarians value adaptability. They also suggest JMU librarians' self-assurance in their identity and abilities is strong, aligning with Norelli's (2010) and Posner's (2003) assertions. Comparing the librarians' perceptions with students' perceptions might illuminate the apparent contrast with previous findings of "provider pessimism" (Butler & Byrd, 2016; Hansen et al., 2009).

The differences between liaison and non-liaison perceptions on Q10 were not statistically significant; however, liaisons in this sample seemed to have stronger opinions about several items that directly relate to their engagement with students, such as those related to time pressures, helping students, changing services, and being easy to talk to. Non-liaison survey

respondents in this sample seemed to have a bit more confidence that librarians do not think people are stupid for not knowing about the library, and that students' decisions about whether to ask for help would be supported by knowing more about librarians.

JMU librarians perceive that students ask librarians questions primarily for their expertise. Personal qualities, previous good experiences with librarians, and related assignments were mentioned occasionally. Conversely, JMU librarians strongly perceive students' lack of awareness and/or anxiety to be the major barriers to not asking for help. Some respondents also thought students might not think they need help, or might not feel like they have the time, and a few cited previous experiences as a potential barrier. If we discover mismatches between student and faculty responses on these questions, we are eager to explore how those might be bridged.

Additional Findings

Given that information literacy instruction is a primary responsibility of all liaisons and often part of other librarians' jobs at JMU, we were surprised teaching did not emerge more frequently in open-ended questions as a valued skill among our respondents. Across all three questions, teaching was mentioned by only nine respondents: seven of the 10 liaisons, and two non-liaisons. The four interviewees gave very different answers about whether they think of themselves as teachers, although all stated that it is helpful for academic librarians to highlight their instructional identity. Contrasting with these results and the literature, JMU librarians were nearly unanimous that teaching research skills, whether in classes or one-on-one, was performed Frequently. This again points to the need for a clearer definition of "teaching." Perhaps when responding extemporaneously, librarians have a narrower definition of the term than if asked whether their duties fall into a fixed-choice category of teaching. JMU librarians do not universally view the development of asynchronous instructional materials such as tutorials or

research guides as instructional activities (indeed, Hall did not break out this task in his 2013 article). The mixed responses about where to cluster the creation of Subject Guides in our survey illuminates this problem.

The dominance (> 90%) of one-shot sessions as the primary instructional activity expected of academic librarians (Hall, 2013) also might limit librarians' ability to embrace the teacher identity more fully. As more institutions expect librarians to teach credit-bearing IL courses (nearly 25%, according to Hall's 2013 article) self-perceptions might shift. Currently, most liaison librarians at JMU do not teach credit-bearing IL courses. A more comprehensive view of what constitutes teaching could contribute to further change of self-perceptions.

Given that JMU Libraries' leadership group includes 18 librarians, and the Libraries has 11 librarians with direct reports, it is perplexing that management and leadership duties did not emerge on this survey. This might be because the instrument focused on areas where students could discern the work of librarians, but it also might be that librarians do not perceive management duties to be inherently part of librarianship. Mackenzie and Smith found that coursework in management is required by fewer than half of LIS programs, and of those, only about half cover topics in human resources, planning, and strategy (2009, p. 137). Like teaching, management skills might be learned most often "on the job."

While differences between the responses of liaison and non-liaison groups in this sample cannot be generalized to the population, we found enough descriptive differences to suggest that future research should investigate potential differences related to the type of librarianship or focus on specific aspects of librarianship. Given that liaison and public service librarianship as well as general perceptions of librarians in popular culture seem well covered by the literature, the most interesting topics might concern perceptions of not-explicitly-public-services and

emerging forms of librarianship. For example, digital humanities and digital collections librarians engage with faculty and students, and the perceptions of their customers is important for supporting that work (Cox, 2016). As the profession grows increasingly collaborative, the internal perceptions of librarians about one another also seem important for study (Weng & Ackerman, 2017). Böckler, et al. (2017) found that understanding one's own thoughts, beliefs, and emotional patterns supports a better understanding of those processes in others. This survey showed that even among librarians, there is not a shared understanding of public-facing work.

Methodology Development

The results of this survey suggest several areas for survey improvement. As mentioned earlier, we would include a definition of the term "teaching" on future surveys to reduce ambiguity, especially among populations of librarians, faculty, and students.

For the question asking why librarians chose to become librarians (Q3), in the future we would use a simple 1-9 Likert scale rather than a ranking system, which forces respondents to subordinate one item to another when their true response might be that two items are of equal value. We also would remove the parenthetical "(scholarly, quiet, etc.)" from the response "they want to work in the university library environment" and split the "Librarians like helping students with projects that are due tomorrow" into its two concepts: "Librarians like helping students," and "Librarians like helping with projects that are due tomorrow" to clarify these items.

For "How often do you think academic librarians perform the following duties?" (Q4), there was interesting variance to the item "Giving general directional help," where five respondents answered Frequently and five answered Rarely. Similarly, while three respondents said academic librarians Frequently taught software skills only 11 said they did Sometimes, and

six answered Rarely. It is unclear whether respondents think only some academic librarians do these things, or whether academic librarians just don't do them frequently. This type of ambiguity prompted several of the questions in the follow-up interviews.

Because responses to questions involving different ethnicities and races are challenging to interpret without information about the respondents' own race/ethnicity, we would add a demographic question to future surveys.

Conclusion

The next papers in this series will present results from student and faculty versions of the same survey. How do student and faculty perceptions of and value for librarians' skills line up with librarians' perceptions of themselves, especially with respect to teaching, leadership, and technical skills? Compared to librarians, do students and faculty perceive similar clusters of library work? How might students and faculty thoughts on why students ask or don't ask for help in the library compare with the views of librarians? The broader goal of this series of studies is to understand how students and faculty perceive academic librarians. Without first critically examining what JMU librarians believe about themselves, it would not be possible to act on that information from others to improve provided services.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflicts of interest reported by the authors

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Appendix LPL-1: Librarian Perceptions of Academic Librarians Survey Instrument

IRB, protocol No. 17-0549

Note: for the purposes of this survey, the phrase "academic librarians" will refer to librarians who work in libraries at universities like JMU.

1. I identify as ... - Selected Choice: 1=Female, 2=Genderqueer or gender fluid, 3=Male, 4=Other [with optional text entry], 5=Prefer not to say.
2. I work in the following JMU Libraries unit ... 1=as a liaison librarian, 2=in Academic Engagement (but not as a liaison), 3=in Innovation Services, 5=Other, 9=in Scholarly Resources & Technology
3. Please drag and drop the following reasons librarians chose to become librarians 1-9, where 1 is the top reason that librarians want to be librarians. You may write in another reason and rank it, too.
    - they want to work in the university library environment (scholarly, quiet, etc.)
    - they like books
    - attractive wages and benefits
    - they want to do library research
    - the prestige accompanying the job
    - they want to help people
    - they like working with information
    - they like working with technology
    - it's an easy job
    - other [with text entry]

4. How often do you think academic librarians perform the following duties?
   1= Frequently, 2=Sometimes, 3=Rarely, 4=Never, 5=Not Sure

    - Issuing library cards
    - Helping users to find books
    - Lending books, films and equipment to users
    - Processing fines
    - Giving general directional help
    - Buying books, journals and electronic material
    - Removing outdated books
    - Creating Subject Guides
    - Giving general help to students for research
    - Giving subject-specific help to students for research
    - Giving general help to faculty for research
    - Sorting and putting books back on the shelves
    - Evaluating student learning
    - Creating online tutorials

- Repairing damaged materials
- Planning special events at the library
- Publishing research about the library profession
- Working in Starbucks
- Supporting library computers/printers/photocopiers
- Providing IT support for campus wi-fi
- Teaching research skills (in classes or one-on-one)
- Teaching software skills (in classes or one-on-one)
- Teaching copyright principles (in classes or one-on-one)
- Marketing library services and programs
- Analyzing the effectiveness of library services and programs
- Picking up trash/cleaning the library

5. What skills do you think librarians have that are valuable to students? [multiline text entry box]

6. What skills do you think librarians have that are valuable to the university? [multiline text entry box]

7. Why might students ask librarians questions? [multiline text entry box]

8. Why might students NOT ask librarians questions? [multiline text entry box]

9. What did you learn in your library school classes? Please write at least **three** topics that were covered in your classes: [multiline text entry box]

10. Please read the following statements carefully and indicate your level of agreement. Remember, "Librarians" means academic librarians at a university like [INSTITUION]
1=Strongly agree, 2=Somewhat agree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Somewhat disagree, 5=Strongly disagree, 6=Not Sure

- Librarians like helping students
- Librarians are slow
- Librarians like helping students with projects that are due tomorrow
- Librarians respect students' intelligence
- Librarians help students learn to do things themselves
- Librarians think people who don't know the basics about the library are stupid
- Librarians are too busy to help students
- It is faster for students to figure out a tough question themselves than ask a librarian
- Librarians understand students' time pressures
- Librarians are easy to talk to
- Librarians are willing to change their services to meet patrons' needs
- Librarians use words that students don't understand
- Librarians know what they're doing
- Librarians have difficult jobs

- Helping students is a librarian's #1 priority
- Librarians have knowledge that is practical to students
- Librarians are friendly and pleasant
- Librarians are experts with technology
- Students would rather ask a female librarian for help
- Librarians help students search the internet more effectively
- Knowing more about a librarian's education, skills, job, and personality help students decide whether or not to ask them for help
- There are more female librarians than male librarians
- Students would be more willing to approach a librarian of their own race or ethnicity
- There is enough diversity (race, ethnicity, age, gender, etc.) among librarians
- It is important to employ librarians of diverse ages, races, and gender

11. Any additional comments?

Appendix LPL-2: Interview Protocol

Introduction: Thank you once again for participating in this interview so we can further explore perceptions of librarians. Previous research has shown that improving librarians' understanding of perceptions helps us improve our services. We expect our interview today to last approximately 60 minutes, but no more than 90, during which I will ask you for your perspective about initial findings from the survey portion of our research, about the survey instrument, and about future directions in perceptions research. You'll also have an opportunity to share ideas extemporaneously at the end.

[Review aspects of consent form]

Note the check box indicating that I have your permission (or not) to audio record our conversation.

If checked yes: Thank you! Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said off the record.

If not checked: Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions?

[Discuss questions]

If any questions (or other questions) arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.

Questions

1 – [show the person a printed screenshot of how each question appeared on the survey] For the question "How often do you think academic librarians perform the following duties?" (Q4), were you thinking about whether YOU did the item frequently or your JMU colleagues? Or your national colleagues?

1.5 – [show the person a printed screenshot of how each question appeared on the survey] Do you think that's the same approach you'd take toward the prompt, "Please read the following statements carefully and indicate your level of agreement"? (Q10)

2 – Regarding "how often librarians perform the following duties" (Question 4), were you thinking more of how often an **ideal** librarian performs these duties, or how often we perform them in reality?

3 – These cards have duties that librarians might perform. Please sort them into categories that make sense to you: Any idea of what you'd label these categories? (Q4)

4 – These cards have items related to perceptions of librarians. Please sort them into categories that make sense to you: Any idea of what you'd label these categories? (Q10)

5 – To what degree do you think of yourself as a teacher?

6 - To what extent do you think it's helpful for academic librarians to highlight their instructional identity and why?

6.5 – Anything else you'd like to share about academic librarians and teaching?

7 – To what extent do your personal relationships with faculty and students influence their perceptions of librarians? Elaborate if you wish.

8 - To what extent do you think that teaching faculty who assign research papers are familiar with the use of current research tools available to their students in the library?

9 - To what extent do you think teaching faculty are aware of the nature of the field of library science/information technology?

10 - There was a statistically significant difference between liaison and non-liaison groups on one item: "Librarians understand students' time pressures" (Q10). Why do you think liaisons might differ from non-liaisons about whether librarians understand students' time pressures? Which mean do you think was higher? [non-liaisons was closer to disagree, liaisons was closer to agree]

Before we conclude this interview, is there anything about your experience with this survey or with perceptions of librarians that we have not yet had a chance to discuss?

Thank you again for participating in this interview. Do you have any questions or concerns before we end today? If you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results, you can tell us now or email us later. Questions or concerns that may arise after today are welcome also.

Table 1. Definitions for coding "What skills do you think librarians have…" and "What did you learn…" (Q5, Q6, Q9)

Category / Subcategory	**Description**	**Example responses in LPL**
Expertise / Evaluating Information	An ability to determine the quality of information or sources.	"Discerning quality information."
		"The ability to evaluate and absorb information."
Expertise / General Library-Related Knowledge	Librarians "knowing stuff."	"An understanding of how information flows through society."
		"Foundations of Library & Information Science"
Expertise / Locating & Accessing Information	Furnishing or finding needed information. Usually also coded with a particular type of resource (databases, books, articles, data, etc.)	"deciphering where to find information"
		"knowledge about how to navigate an overwhelming ocean of information"
Expertise / Research	Research as either a noun, adjective or a verb. Usually focused on processes.	"ability to help students see research as a process"
		"thinking about different ways to approach a research problem"
Expertise / Subject Areas	References either knowledge across many topics (General Education expertise) or subject specialties depending on position.	"Subject expertise"
		"awareness of curriculum and subject area"
Expertise / Technology	Computers, software, or technology management skills.	"Creating accessible documents, spreadsheets, and web materials"
		"human-computer interaction"
Higher-Order Thinking	Analytical or problem-solving skills.	"Critical thinking"
		"abstract thinking"
Interpersonal Skills	"Communication" or "customer service" or to personal qualities such as "patient" or "intelligent."	"collaboration skills"
		"empathy"
		"curiosity"
Organization	Arranging items logically (e.g., classification systems) or the skills and knowledge required to carry out these tasks.	"organizational skills"

Reference Skills and Reference Interview	Specific mentions of "reference" in the context of helping users identify what they need.	"the 'reference interview' and how people don't always know how to ask for what they need."
		"reference skills"
Resources	Materials generically (holdings, resources, stuff, etc.) or specifically (data, articles, books, films, etc.); collection management. Often also coded as expertise in locating/accessing information.	"collection management skills"
		"Ability to effectively search databases and utilize database features to locate relevant results"
Teaching & Pedagogy	Teaching and instruction for individuals and groups, as well as mentions of student learning or pedagogical practices. Also includes assistance provided to improve others' teaching.	"ability to teach students about searching for and evaluating information critically"
		"instruction"

Table 2. Liaisons rated some duties as more frequent than non-liaisons (Q4)

	Mean (Liaisons)	Mean (Non-liaisons)	Mean Difference
Issuing library cards	3.2	3.8	0.6
Picking up trash/cleaning the library	3.2	3.8	0.6
Lending books, films and equipment to users	2.8	3.3	0.5
Creating online tutorials	1.6	2.0	0.4
Helping users to find books	1.7	2.1	0.4
Working in Starbucks	3.7	4.0	0.3
Buying books, journals and electronic material	1.0	1.2	0.2

Note: 1= Frequently, 2=Sometimes, 3=Rarely, 4=Never. Not Sure was a response option but was treated as missing data.

Table 3. Non-liaisons rated some duties as more frequent than liaisons (Q4)

	Mean (Liaisons)	Mean (Non-liaisons)	Mean Difference
Giving general help to students for research	1.5	1.2	0.3
Teaching research skills (in classes or one-on-one)	1.1	1.0	0.1

Note: 1= Frequently, 2=Sometimes, 3=Rarely, 4=Never. Not Sure was a response option but was treated as missing data.

Table 4: Responses clustered based on examination of a correlation matrix (Q12 and Q13)

Cluster A	Cluster B	Cluster C	Cluster D
Analyzing the effectiveness of library services and programs Creating online tutorials Evaluating student learning Marketing library services and programs. Planning special events at the library Publishing research about the library profession Teaching copyright principles (in classes or one-on-one) Teaching software skills (in classes or one-on-one)	Giving general directional help Removing outdated books Giving general help to students for research Giving subject-specific help to students for research Giving general help to faculty for research Providing IT support for campus wi-fi	Lending books, films and equipment to users Processing fines Sorting and putting books back on the shelves Repairing damaged materials Supporting library computers/printers/ photocopiers	Issuing library cards Picking up trash/cleaning the library Supporting library computers/printers/ photocopiers

Table 5. Liaisons agreed with some statements more than non-liaisons (Q10)

	Mean (Liaisons)	Mean (Non-liaisons)	Mean Difference
Librarians understand students' time pressures	1.6	2.6	-1.0
Librarians like helping students with projects that are due tomorrow	3.3	4.1	-0.8
Librarians are willing to change their services to meet patrons' needs	1.5	2.1	-0.6
Librarians are easy to talk to	1.9	2.5	-0.6
There are more female librarians than male librarians	1.1	1.5	-0.4
Librarians like helping students	1.0	1.3	-0.3

Note: 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Somewhat Agree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Somewhat Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree. Not Sure responses treated as missing data.

Table 6. Non-liaisons agreed with the statement more than liaisons (Q10)

	Mean (Liaisons)	Mean (Non-liaisons)	Mean Difference
Librarians think people who don't know the basics about the library are stupid	4.8	4.0	0.8
Students would rather ask a female librarian for help[1]	2.8	2.3	0.5
Knowing more about a librarian's education, skills, job, and personality help students decide whether to ask them for help	1.9	1.6	0.3

[1]on this item, there were six liaisons and three non-liaisons expressing a Not Sure response.

1=Strongly Agree, 2=Somewhat Agree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Somewhat Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree. Not Sure responses treated as missing data.

Table 7: Clusters that emerged from correlational analysis of Q10

Cluster A	Cluster B
Helping students is a librarian's #1 priority Librarians are slow Librarians like helping students Librarians respect students' intelligence Librarians think people who don't know the basics about the library are stupid Librarians understand students' time pressures	It is important to employ librarians of diverse ages, races, and gender Librarians are friendly and pleasant Librarians are too busy to help students Librarians are willing to change their services to meet patrons' needs Librarians have difficult jobs Librarians have knowledge that is practical to students Librarians help students learn to do things themselves Librarians help students search the internet more effectively

Table 8. Definitions for coding responses to "Why might students ask librarians questions?" (Q7)

Category / Subcategory	**Description**	**Example responses in LPL**
Assigned or Expected To	Interaction with librarians as part of an assignment or expectation for a course.	"written into the assignment" "because their professors tell them to"
Expertise / Evaluating Information	An ability to determine the quality of information or sources.	"they want the best sources possible"
Expertise / Information Ethics	Copyright, intellectual property, author's rights, citing, plagiarism, etc.	"unsure how to cite something"
Expertise / Locating and Accessing Information	Accessing or finding needed information. Usually also coded with a particular type of resource (databases, books, articles, data, etc.).	"they need help finding information"
Expertise / Research	Research used as either a noun, adjective, or verb. Usually focused on processes.	"help formulating a research topic"
Good Experience	Past experiences that were helpful or useful.	"a librarian has been helpful to them in the past"
Interpersonal Skills	"Communication" or "customer service" or personal qualities such as "patient" or "intelligent."	"We are very helpful people and will go out of our way to connect students with what they need."
Need Help	A general need for information or assistance.	"help knowing what they don't know about a topic"
Recommendation	Receiving a recommendation from someone (e.g., a peer or professor). Does not include references to looking for a recommendation.	"if a professor or peer suggests asking a librarian"
Resources	Materials mentioned generically (holdings, resources, stuff, etc.) or specifically (data, articles, books, films, etc.). Includes the concept of collection management. Often also coded at expertise in locating/accessing information.	"They need help finding resources"
Stumped or Lost	Being stuck or having no idea how to start. More pointed than references to generally wanting or needing help.	"unable to find anything on their topic"

Table 9. Definitions for coding responses to "Why might students NOT ask librarians questions?" (Q8)

Category / Subcategory	**Description**	**Example responses in LPL**
Bad Experience	Past experiences that were not helpful or useful.	"Fear of librarians based on school or public library experiences"
Lack of Need	Students feeling like they don't need help.	"With so much information available, students might feel like they can find everything they need on their own"
Non-Awareness	Not realizing that librarians could help. Distinct from being unsure what to ask.	"not knowing they have a librarian" "They don't understand we aren't only about books."
Preference	Specific choices or inclinations for getting help or information.	"They feel independent and don't want to ask ANYBODY questions"
Shyness or Anxiety	Emotional responses to asking for help. Includes fear of looking stupid, intimidation, awkwardness, etc.	"because they are ashamed or embarrassed not to know" "anxiety"
Unavailability	Not being able to find librarians or having difficulty contacting them. Distinct from not being aware that librarians could help.	"We can't be available at all hours" "can't find a librarian"
Unsure What to Ask	Not knowing how to ask the right questions to get the information they are seeking. Distinct from not being aware that librarians could help.	"It may also be that the students don't know what they can ask a librarian." "leading a busy, complicated life and not aware of the range of ways to ask librarians questions"

Figure 1. What did you learn in your library school classes? (Q9)

Figure 2. What skills do you think librarians have that are valuable to students? (Q5)

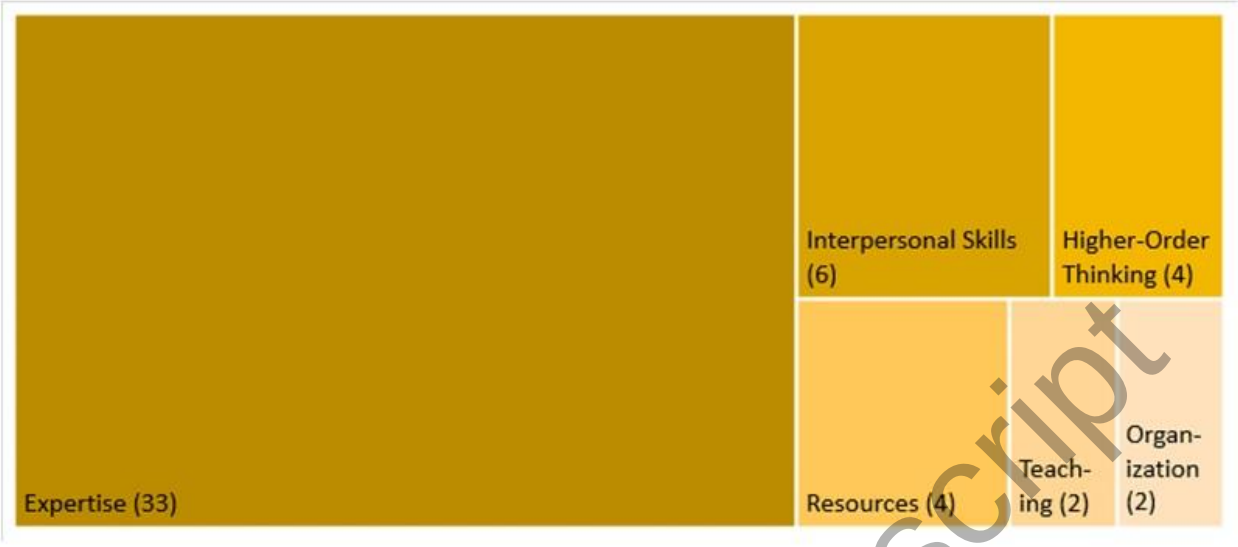

Figure 3. What skills do you think librarians have that are valuable to the university? (Q6)

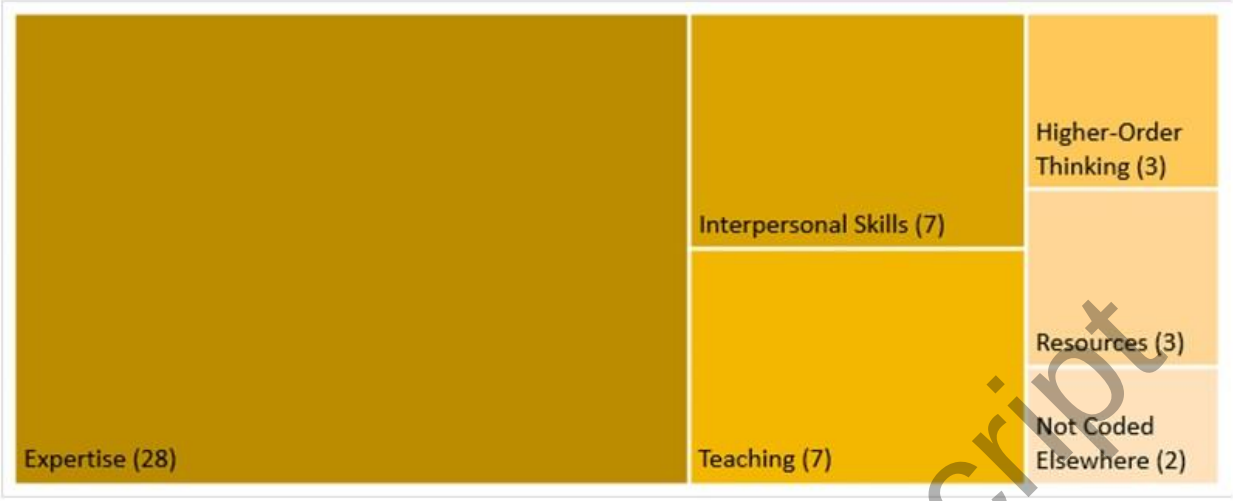

Figure 4. How often do you think academic librarians perform the following duties? (Q4). Note: Not Sure was also a response option; it was treated as missing data. Sorted by total positive responses (descending), then total negative responses (ascending).

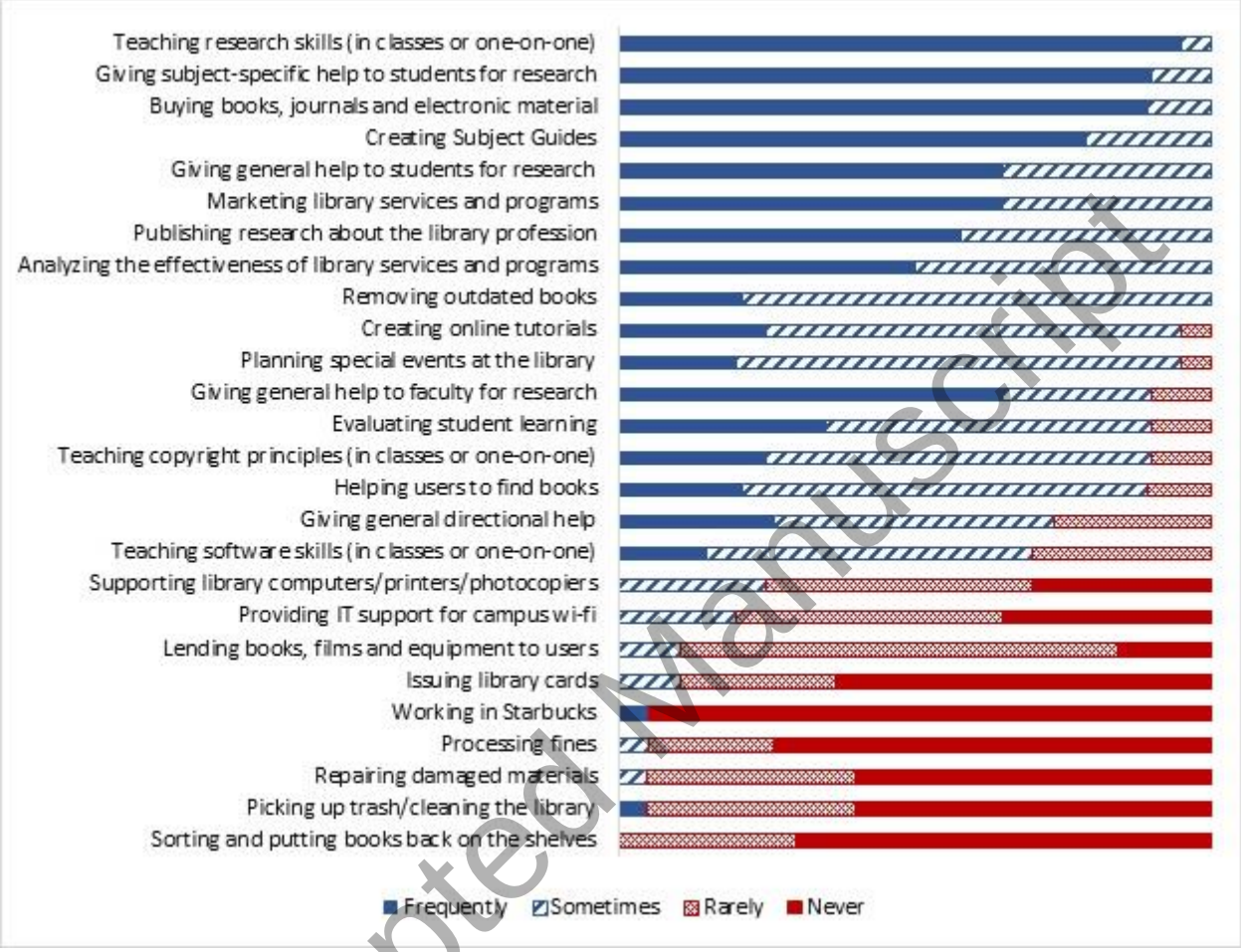

Figure 5. Reasons librarians chose to become librarians (Q3) (Average Rank on a scale of 1-10, with Standard Deviation Error Bars)

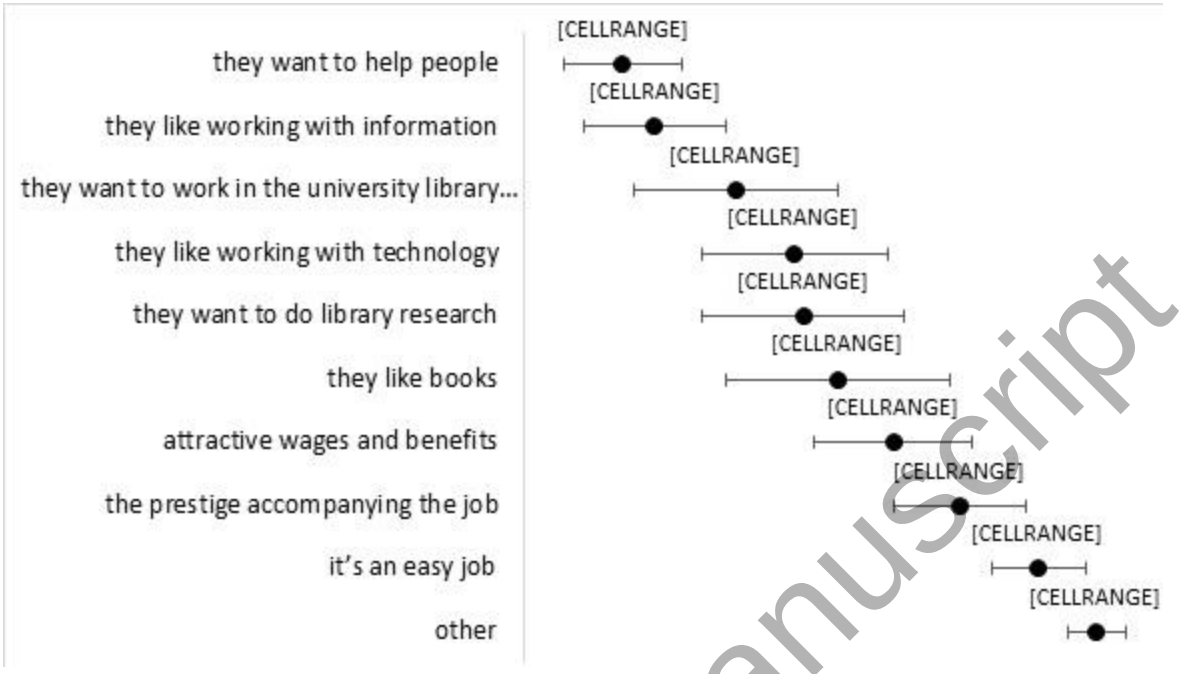

Figure 6. Librarians' levels of agreement with various statements (Q10). Note: See Appendix LPL-1 for full statement. Not Sure was a response option but was treated as missing data. Sorted by total positive responses (descending), then by total negative responses (ascending).

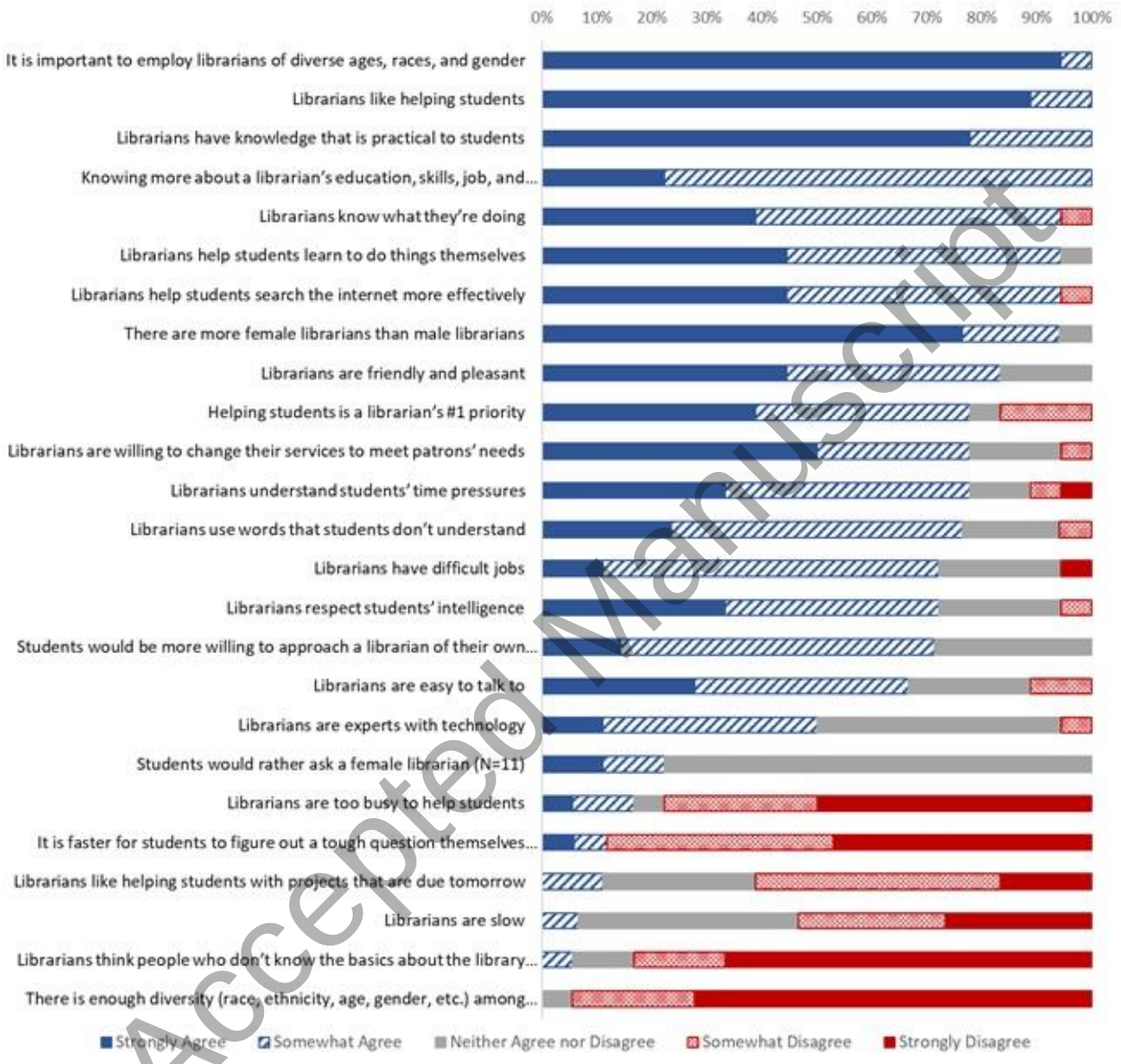

Figure 7. Why students might ask librarians questions (Q7)

Figure 8. Why students might NOT ask librarians questions (Q8)

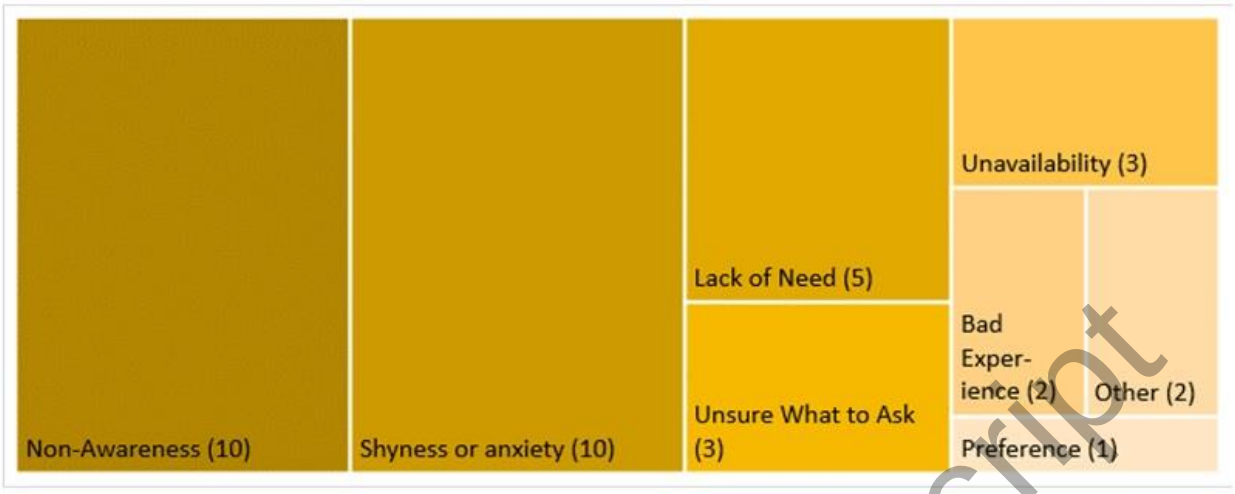

Figure 9. Categories of duties proposed by interviewed librarians (Q4)

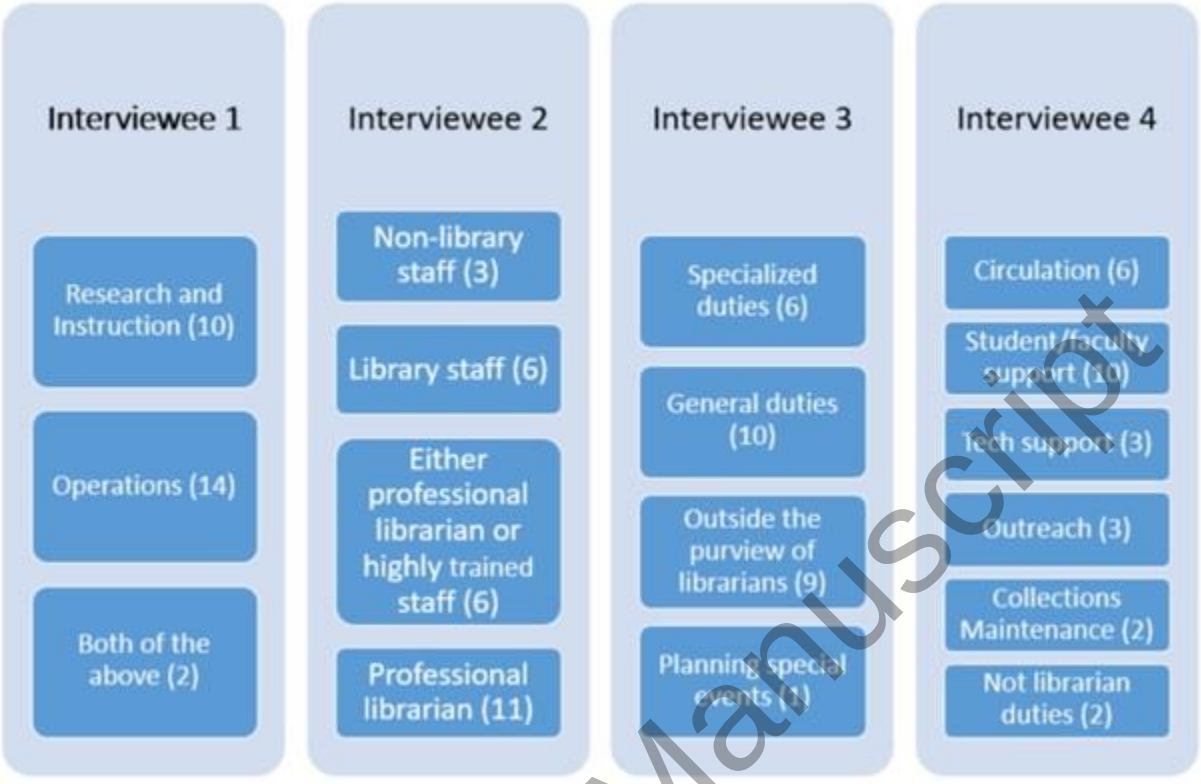

Figure 10. Categories of perceptions proposed by interviewees (Q10)