A Comprehensive Survey of Research Library Organizational Structure

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Abstract

Research library structures have grown in size and complexity over the past several decades. There is no single template for how to organize a library in the 21st century, but it is unclear how much variance in structure truly exists between libraries. This study sought to identify the essential features and characteristics of these structures through the collection and analysis of organization charts. Specifically, this study analyzes the roles and position of senior leaders (e.g. Associate University Librarians, Associate Deans, etc.) as well as how scholarly communications activities are positioned within research libraries. Findings indicate wide variance in the structure of senior leadership roles as well as how a relatively recent library function fits with other units.

Introduction

This research project began - as many ideas do – with a conversation at a conference. Two librarians introduced themselves by including the name of their unit – as many of us do – and explaining what that name actually meant in their organization. It occurred to us that we often create new names for traditional activities in response to trends in the nature of our work, and in our language about the work. Despite all the different names of units and job titles, we wondered how much variance there really is among different research libraries.

There are studies that identify trends in library leadership, and in the structures that define how libraries operate. Certain studies focus on specific cases of library re-structuring, some identify a specific librarian role and discuss its evolution and current state, while others interview library directors to describe how their library's structure works and the impact of library leadership roles.

This study examines the raw, publicly-facing illustration of a library's organizational structure, its organizational chart. There is a tradition of collecting organizational charts in library literature. In fact, ARL SPEC Kit #1 published in 1973 is titled *Organization Charts* and is simply a collection of charts submitted by ARL members.[1] The last comprehensive collection of charts was in 1991,[2] however, and in the intervening 30 years, things have changed. One of those

things, obviously, is the widespread use of the internet, which makes chart collection much simpler. Anyone can pick a research library, and the chart will likely be openly available on their website. The current study undertook a collection of these charts on a comprehensive scale among libraries of institutions in the American Association of Universities (AAU) and answered some key questions about organizational structure. Using the titles and areas of responsibilities of senior leaders, how are large library units organized and described? Considering the case of scholarly communications, when relatively newer functional roles are introduced, how do they fit within the larger structure?

Literature Review

Organizational structure and its measurement

While the idea of organizational structure is familiar, it has been defined by a number of authors. This article will use the following definition provided by John Child, "Organizational structure is defined as the formal allocation of work roles and the administrative mechanisms to control and integrate work activities including those which cross formal organizational boundaries."[3] When analyzing the structure of a given organization, certain characteristics are typically considered.

One among these is the span of control, which refers to the number of people reporting directly to a supervisor. Smaller organizations tend to have a larger span of control as all employees report directly to the director, but as libraries grow in size and complexity, and additional managers and levels of hierarchy are introduced, the span of control of the director is reduced.[4] Wilson and Tauber note examples of this trend at large research libraries in the 1930s and 1940s.[5] In an ARL SPEC Kit from 1986, responding libraries indicate a wide range of people reporting to the director (from one to 16), with the most common number between five and seven reports.[6] Almost 30 years later, these numbers remained consistent in a 2012 ARL SPEC Kit that showed the mean number of directors' direct reports was 6.48 and had changed little since a previous study in 2007.[7]

There are several studies that have surveyed the landscape of organizational structures, but most have taken a different approach than the current study. One approach is to interview library directors, as in the example of a 2016 Ithaka S+R report.[8] In a different 2016 study, researchers interviewed 44 directors of libraries at institutions belonging to the Association of American Universities. The study focused on the directors themselves, how they make decisions, and the process of their own development.[9] In addition to the organizational models identified

above, the Ithaka S+R reports also identified a trend of libraries using the AUL role as an organizational leader and less as leaders of a division.[10]

Another approach to demonstrating library organizational structures is through case studies of re-organization projects. In the early 1970s, Columbia University commissioned a consultant's review of its organization to consolidate divisions and reduce the director's span of control.[11] In more recent publications, there are cases of libraries changing their organizational structure in response to the greater role of computing,[12] physical renovations,[13] studies of organizational culture,[14] and new articulations of principles and strategy.[15] These case studies are instructive as a detailed illustration of one library's changes, the motivations that inspired them, and the process they used.

A brief history of library models and the roles of senior leaders and scholarly communications

Over the past 100 years or so, academic libraries have employed a variety of different models of organization. In a 1976 article reflecting on "organizational patterns" of the previous 100 years, Dunlap reports that little attention was paid to organization until the time of World War II as libraries grew in size and more sophisticated structures were required. "As recently as 1940, the average college or university library was organized along departmental lines. Work was divided among a number of departments depending on the size of the library, and the heads of these departments all reported to the chief librarian and were responsible to him or her alone."[16] In 1945 Wilson and Tauber proposed the functional arrangement and the subject arrangement (separate libraries in each academic department or reading rooms in a main building).[17] In the following decade, Wight identifies six "bases of departmentation": function, activity ("order, repair, extension, etc."), clientele ("children, adults, undergraduates, etc."), geography (e.g. branch libraries), subject, and form of material ("serials, audiovisual, documents, etc."). [18] Dunlap concludes that by 1952 (and continuing until the time of her writing in 1976) there was one plan that was the most common, which was a functional organization "in which all library activities are considering either reader services or technical services."[19] All of this development is in the mode of increased centralization, a trend which continued at least into the 1990s as an ARL SPEC kit on library reorganization published in 1996 identified "combining of specific units within the library" as the most common outcome of such reorganizations.[20]

An Ithaka S+R report from 2016 provides a good summary of the organizational models identified at that time through interviews with library directors at larger institutions, mostly including members of the ARL. This study identified five "essential types of structures." The "Unit Heads"

model is most often used in smaller libraries in which all heads of units report directly to the director who has a greater span of control. The "place-based" model has largely been retired and is the most decentralized with each branch library operating a separate unit of technical and public services. The "AUL" model has all library staff reporting to a group (typically three or four) of AULs. When a library has a deputy director, this role "takes responsibility for the day to day work of the library" while the director "focuses on 'outward' or 'future' issues." In the final model, workers operate within teams that are less hierarchical and more self-organizing.[21] The author concludes by stating that few libraries will exclusively use one of these models, but instead will incorporate some of multiple models to fit their own local needs.

Within the context of the "AUL" model, the 2012 ARL SPEC Kit on the "Changing Role of Senior Administrators", provides additional detail. The study indicates that senior leaders in research libraries had titles "moving away from head and assistant titles to associate and director titles" and that titles begin to include "descriptive language such as digital content, collections, learning, instruction, and user services, rather than the more generic 'public services' or 'technical services' that were used more frequently as recently as five years ago."[22] Because the defining feature of organizational models in research libraries is often the role of the senior leadership level directly supporting the director, this group is the focus of the first half of the current study.

In the 21st century, the subject liaison model, adapted from the mid-20th century practice of widespread use of departmental branch libraries, became more prominent. In the past 10 years, much has been written to define the current state of the liaison model, particularly as it shifted its focus from an orientation to librarians and collections toward researchers and engagement.[23] This research has identified the myriad roles that liaison librarians play and the evolving variety of methods to engage faculty and students in their research and teaching. Part of the evolution of the liaison model is to integrate functional expertise and activities more formally into how library work, specifically in externally facing roles, is structured. An ARL report from 2013 discusses the introduction of a hybrid model that combines elements of a liaison model and a functional model. This model contains functional specialists without a specific liaison responsibility or one in which liaisons have additional responsibility in a functional area. At that time, some of the functional areas receiving support were in scholarly communications, digital humanities, and GIS.[24] Academic libraries continue to shift between a liaison structure and a functional model, with many finding a balance of both. The second part of this study focuses on one of these functional areas, scholarly communications.

A survey of ARL libraries in a 2012 ARL SPEC Kit proposed a definition of scholarly communications that the current study adopts: "the creation, transformation, dissemination, and

preservation of knowledge related to teaching, research, and scholarly endeavors."[25] At that point, almost all responding libraries indicated that they were involved in scholarly communications services and most had increased the number of positions dedicated to this purpose.[26] For those libraries with a single individual leading these efforts, "all but two" report to a senior leader within the library and the people in those positions had additional responsibilities in other areas of library work.[27] A follow-up study of non-ARL libraries reached similar conclusions, although it was less common for an individual position to focus exclusively on scholarly communications services.[28] Both of these studies were primarily interested in whether an individual, unit, or team/committee led scholarly communications efforts. The current study focuses on where this function is placed within an organization and how research libraries see this role fitting with other library activities.

Methods

The case study and director interview methods lack a comprehensive scope and a perspective beyond one individual, respectively. The current study aims to provide a more complete picture of the state of academic library organizations at a single moment in time. It uses the organizational charts of these libraries as an objective method to view libraries as they are, and less as they aspire to be. The organizational chart does not show informal relationships, but "does represent an accurate picture of the division of labor, showing at a glance 1) what positions exist in the organization, 2) how these are grouped into units, and 3) how formal authority flows among them."[29] In answering questions about how libraries view their various parts working together and as a way of taking a high-level view of a large number of organizations, using their charts can be instructive.

The current study collected organizational charts in January 2020 from libraries whose institutions are members of the American Association of Universities (AAU). The AAU includes 65 institutions in the United States and two in Canada. Members include public (38) and private (27) institutions that have strong research portfolios. The author chose these institutions to provide some homogeneity within the sample from which to analyze their organizational structures. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) is a potential alternative sample, and there is much overlap with libraries of AAU institutions, but the ARL includes some non-university libraries (e.g. Library of Congress, Center for Research Libraries) that would have reduced the desired homogeneity within the sample. 46 of the libraries at AAU institutions publicly post their organizational charts on their website. The author contacted the remaining libraries (19) directly to obtain a current chart and received one from all but four libraries. The reasons for not being able to acquire a chart include non-response, a contemporary re-organization resulting in a lack

of current chart, and a stated practice of not posting nor sharing a chart. The analyzed sample includes 61 academic libraries from 37 U.S. public and 24 U.S. private institutions. There is variety in how recently each of these charts was updated with a range of a few days to 18 months. It is unclear if this represents the recency of any organizational changes, or if this is only a reflection of the frequency with which libraries update their publicly visible charts.

Collecting and analyzing 61 organizational charts, each with great detail and complexity, required thorough documentation. The author consulted each chart to identify the key data points needed for analysis and collected these in a number of spreadsheets. There is wide variance in how libraries are structured and the ways that positions and their relationships are described. To record the methods of this study, spreadsheets were annotated to document decisions made in the data collection process. In order to better analyze and explain trends, codes for various categories of job types and work units were created and the connections between categories and the original names from the charts themselves have been retained.

Limitations and Further Study

While the position is not widely employed, the "Deputy Director" role, its characteristics, and its impact on library structure and operation could be explored further. This study was limited to "research libraries" as defined by the university's membership in the AAU. Within that category, however, there is wide variance in size of the institution and size of the library (which could each be measured in different ways). There is potential in better understanding the effect of size on how libraries are structured. Finally, the most significant limitation is the data this study collected. Organizational charts are comprehensive and transparent in important ways, but are superficial and do not completely explain how an organization works or ways in which the structure impacts library workers. Much can be gleaned from the words used in job titles, but a senior leader with "Research" in their title could lead a unit that includes liaison librarians, data experts, research computing, or some combination of these. Talking directly to library workers about how they view the library's structure and how it aids or impedes their work would be a natural extension of the findings of this study.

Results

Senior Leadership

When the current study refers to "senior leaders", this refers to those with a title of "deputy", "associate university librarian" (AUL), "associate dean" (AD), "associate vice president", or

"associate director." Those with titles of "head" or "director" of specific units were not included as senior leaders as those titles typically reflect leadership of a smaller organizational unit.

The most common titles used for senior leaders, accounting for over 80% of the libraries in this sample, are "Associate University Librarian" (31) and "Associate Dean" (19). Other titles, with only a single case each include "Associate Librarian" (i.e. the director has the title "Librarian"), "Associate Chief Librarian," and "Assistant Vice President." Overall, the libraries in the sample have an average of 3.5 senior leaders, confirming the outline of the "AUL model" in the 2016 Ithaka S+R study, which characterized 3-4 senior leaders per library as typical.[30]

Previous research[31] indicates that senior leaders are becoming more of an organizational leader than the leader of their specific unit. In analyzing the span of control of senior leaders, their average number of reports is 5.2 (standard deviation of 1.5), which is 2.7 fewer reports than those of library directors. Senior leader titles, however, still reflect a responsibility to a particular area of the library, with only five libraries in the sample omitting any connection to a particular area of the library in the titles of their senior leaders (for example, the title being "Associate University Librarian" rather than "Associate University Librarian for Digital Strategies and Technology"). While senior leaders' responsibilities are becoming more holistic, there are still leaders with responsibilities to specific libraries or academic disciplines within a larger library system. The most common of these is a senior leader who is specifically tasked as the leader of a special collections library (12 libraries) with additional leaders responsible for health sciences (seven libraries), law (two libraries), or a specific subject or branch outside these areas (six libraries; e.g. "AUL for Departmental Libraries").

To determine the areas of responsibility associated with senior leaders, the current study considers the words in their titles. "Research" is the most common word found in these titles, appearing in a total of 40 titles with some version of "Research and Learning" (see Appendix 1 for words coding scheme) occurring in the titles of 16 senior leaders. "Collections" was another common title word, as 35 positions have this title word, not including those using "special collections" (13 titles) as those positions have a distinctly different focus. Libraries in this sample emphasize the importance of computing and technology with 25 using "technology" and 22 using "digital" in the titles of their senior leaders.

SENIOR LEADER TITLE WORDS	
research	40
"research and learning"	16
collections	35
technology	25
digital	22
strategy	20
resource(s)	17
access	14
administrative/administration	14
"special collections"	13
engagement	13
science(s)	11
"technical services"	9
"scholarly communications"	8

Figure 1. Count of the most common words in position titles of senior leaders (minimum eight titles)

Of the 61 in the sample, twelve libraries have a position in the deputy role. In these libraries the average number of senior leaders is slightly higher (3.6, compared to 3.5 in libraries without a deputy). The average number of reports for the director is 7.9 whether there is someone in the deputy role or not. The use of the deputy position is typically understood to reduce the number of direct reports for the director, but this is not the case in this sample of libraries. This could be related to the number of employees in the library, but library size was not a data point in this study.

Administrative Impact of Deputy position		
	Libraries without a Deputy	Libraries with a Deputy
Avg. # of senior leaders	3.5	3.6
Avg. # of director reports	7.9	7.9
	(49)	(12)

Figure 2. Average number of senior leaders and individuals reporting to the library director in libraries without and with someone in the deputy director role

The use of the historical divisions of "public services" and "technical services" are limited among research libraries. Only nine libraries use "technical services" and six libraries use "public

services" in the title of a senior leader and often in combination with another element of their responsibility (e.g. "AUL for Collections and Technical Services"). Outside of the leadership level, "public services" is more commonly used to describe access services specifically than as the overall "public face" of the library including subject/research librarians, reference, and circulation staff.

Position of Scholarly Communications within Organizations

In addition to analyzing the positions of senior leaders within research libraries, the current study also includes a case study of a specific role and how it is situated within the larger organizational structure. This section examines the functional area of scholarly communications. This role was chosen as one that is now well-established and common within academic libraries, but has a relatively limited history within libraries.

This study did not communicate with the sampled libraries and relied on organizational charts and web directories, so the "scholarly communications" position was identified by title. In studies from 2012 and 2013, "scholarly communications" was often present in the position title, and this has become more common in the intervening years.[32] In the 11 position descriptions included in the 2012 ARL SPEC Kit, nine had the word "scholarly communications" in the title, while the others included "copyright" and "scholarly publishing."[33] Following this precedent, the current study designates a position or unit as fulfilling the "scholarly communications" role if it includes "scholarly communications", "copyright," "open," or "publishing" in the job title if there was evidence that this role was involved with open access, open education, author rights, or copyright. Although there is some overlap, any position with a title including "digital scholarship" or "data" was not included as there are other significant responsibilities in these roles that diminished the importance of the one of primary interest to this study.

This study first identified the position most responsible for scholarly communication activities within each library. Of the 61 libraries in the sample, 48 have a position dedicated to this role, while 10 do not, and for three it was undetermined. The study next examined the department to which the person in this role belonged. Among libraries at AAU institutions, 37 have a department with "scholarly communications", "scholarly sharing", "scholarly impact", "copyright" or "open" in its name. Among these departments who are named for this function, 18 have multiple positions dedicated to scholarly communications activities, 11 have only one individual within the department, five have additional members of the department, but these other members are not focused on scholarly communications, and for three the composition of the department was not determined. As for the other positions in the department with the scholarly communications

position, the two most common words in position titles are "digital" (22) and "data" (20). The positions within these departments were coded for a more precise assessment of the kind of work being done (see Appendix 2 for sample of coding scheme). The most common area of work was related to branch libraries (21), liaison librarians (19) and access and delivery (i.e. circulation, interlibrary loan, etc.) (16).
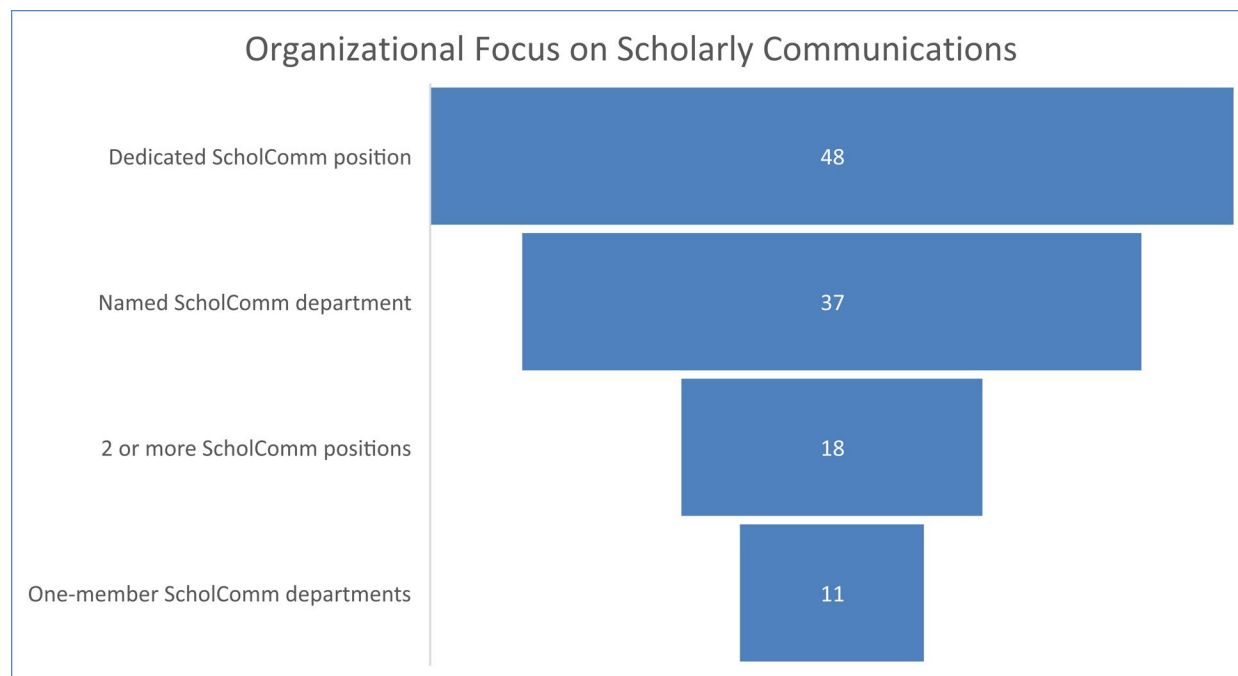

Figure 3. Number of libraries with varying degree of emphasis on scholarly communications in their organizational structure. From a total sample of 61 libraries.

Taking a wider view of the organization of this role, the study examines the "divisions" that contain this position. For the purposes of this study, a division is defined as a unit with a senior leader at its head containing multiple smaller units or departments. The most common words in the names of the division are "research" (17), "scholarly" (mostly "scholarly communications", but some with something like "scholarly resources", 11), "digital" (10), and "collections" (8). To get a better sense of what defined the division, the study identified the other departments within the division that contains the scholarly communications function. The most common words in the names of these departments include "collections" (24), "digital" (20), "research" (13), "access" (10), and "acquisitions" (10). The same coding scheme that was used to define positions within the department containing scholarly communications was used to identify other departments

within the same division (see Appendix 2). The most common were very similar to those within the department: branch libraries (21), groups of liaison librarians (19), access and delivery (16), web services (14), and collections (14).

SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATIONS DIVISIONS			
DIVISION NAMES		**DEPARTMENTS IN DIVISION WITH SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATIONS**	
research	17	collections	24
scholarly	11	digital	20
digital	10	research	13
collections	8	access	10
		acquisitions	10

Figure 4. Word count of the names of divisions containing scholarly communication function (minimum of 8 divisions) and the word count of the names of departments within the same division as the scholarly communications function (minimum 10 departments)

Discussion and Conclusion

The 2016 Ithaka S+R report on research library organizations identifies five "essential types of structures"[34] for research libraries and suggests that senior leader roles are becoming "more focused on organizational leadership and less on staff management."[35] Among the research libraries in the sample of the current study, the most common of those five models is certainly the "AUL" model. Directors generally maintain a large number of reports, which has increased since previous studies in the 1980s, 2000s, and 2010s.[36] Directors typically supervise senior leaders and the leaders of administrative units (e.g. HR, communications) and not functional units (e.g. acquisitions). Senior leaders representing "unit head" models are largely place-based (another of the five models) in the form of "professional school" libraries (e.g. law, health sciences). While the strategically-oriented senior leader is now more common, place still matters and there are many senior leaders that are connected to specific subject libraries. The deputy librarian role is rare, occurring in less than 20% of this sample of libraries, and based on the current study, the impact of the deputy librarian on the organizational structure is unclear. The number of direct reports for the library director and the number of senior leaders are largely unaffected by the presence of a deputy director. This would warrant further study, but the inclusion of this role could be cultural or historical, depend on director preference, or could be a function of the size of the library.

Almost all research libraries in this sample have positions like an AUL who oversee large divisions. The current study finds some evidence to support the trend towards organizational, rather than functional, leadership, but the evidence is mixed and this change continues to be in transition. The number of reports for senior leaders seems relatively small, especially when compared to directors and could reflect a trend away from staff management and toward organizational and strategic work. Areas of focus for senior leaders are still largely functional, (e.g. "research", "collections"), however, but are much more broadly defined and incorporate a diverse set of foci. There are a small, but notable, number of senior leader position titles that are more holistic (i.e. less functional), commonly employing words such as "strategy", or "engagement." An even smaller number employ a completely generic title (i.e. "Associate University Librarian" without any unit or functional affiliation). The current study confirms the trend away from the use of "public services" and "technical services" as only a small number of libraries (10% in this sample) still employ these titles for their senior leaders. The use of simple, highly functional, and homogeneous units is less common and most senior leaders oversee units that incorporate the complexity of user needs and skills among library workers. This study confirms research from the past 10 years suggesting this trend.

While scholarly communications activities are now expected within research libraries, there is still great diversity in how positions are structured and how they fit within the larger organization. Especially given that a 2012 study indicated the rapid growth in scholarly communications positions,[37] the variance in how libraries staff this area is notable. While there are very few in the sample, more than one-sixth of research libraries still do not have a designated position responsible for scholarly communications work. Conversely, there are other libraries with entire units named for their scholarly communications activities. Similarly, there is no consistent pattern to how individuals or units are organized within the structure of the library. These positions and units are typically co-located with other public-facing units, including those focusing on technology (i.e. "digital"), research, access and delivery, or data. It is not clear if the "digital" and "data" positions are primarily public-facing or not. The simple word count analysis suggests a connection to technology and data services, while the coding analysis suggests that scholarly communications is tied most closely with user engagement activities. These are not mutually exclusive, but they are likely different in focus. This highlights the variance with how scholarly communications is organized between libraries.

Ultimately, there is organizational variety among research libraries. This is true for the areas of responsibilities of their senior leaders, how those leaders relate to the library's director, and the units that they lead. This is also true for how scholarly communications positions and

activities are organized within libraries. The traditional notion of libraries divided between public and technical services is certainly much diminished as most units and most positions have blended responsibilities that involve technical and public-facing activities. As research library organizations adapt to changes in research and teaching needs at their institutions as well as the information environment, the complexity and diversity of organizations will continue.

Acknowledgement

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[34] Schonfeld, "Organizing the Work of the Research Library," 6.

[35] Schonfeld, 10.

[36] Association of Research Libraries. Systems and Procedures Exchange Center, *Organization Charts*, 1986, 129; DeLong, Garrison, and Ryan, "Changing Role of Senior Administrators, SPEC Kit 331 (October 2012)," 18.

[37] Radom, Feltner-Reichert, and Stringer-Stanback, "Organization of Scholarly Communication Services, SPEC Kit 332 (November 2012)," 16.

Appendix 1

Coding Scheme for Senior Leader Title Words (Figure 1)

"Research and Learning" entry terms:

- research and learning
- research and instruction
- research and education
- research and academic services

Appendix 2

Coding Scheme for Names of Departments with the Scholarly Communications Position

Branch libraries entry terms:

- Branch library services
- Media center
- Gorgas Information Services
- Dewey Circulation
- Music Library
- Theology and Ministry Library
- Social Work Library
- Medical Library
- Remote library facility
- Scholars Commons
- Art
- Business
- Engineering
- Sciences
- GIS Data Center
- East Asian
- Law
- Architecture
- Undergraduate Library

Liaison librarians entry terms:

- Subject Librarians and Reference
- Humanities

- STEM
- Social Sciences
- Scholarly Outreach
- Arts and Humanities
- Health Sciences Area Studies
- Sciences
- International Studies
- Academic Engagement
- Business
- Government Information
- Visual Resources

Access and delivery entry terms:
- Public Services
- Patron Services
- Interlibrary Loan
- Document Delivery

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