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Book Review

Dynamic Research Support for Academic Libraries

Lucinda May

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BOOK REVIEW

Dynamic Research Support for Academic Libraries

Edited by Starr Hoffman

2016 | Facet Publishing | 176 pages, softcover | ISBN-13: 978-1-78330-049-5 | £54.95 print

In *Dynamic Research Support for Academic Libraries*, editor Starr Hoffman demonstrates how academic librarians are well positioned to provide much-needed guidance and practical support to researchers working in different disciplines and at various career stages. Lively chapters offer accessible snapshots of creative approaches to research support from higher education institutions, with the needs, motivations, and competing priorities of the researcher at the heart of the library initiatives described. From the outset, Hoffman emphasizes the importance of context when developing research support. The academic library should reflect the culture and methodologies that we seek to nurture: “In order for our constituents to see research libraries as dynamic spaces where research happens, we must cultivate our own interests and explore new things” (introduction, p. xv). Hoffman also encourages us to bear in mind the specific context of our individual institutions, each with distinct areas of research focus which necessarily influence and drive collections and skill sets: “We shouldn’t try to recreate what every other library is doing . . . instead, we should look for what our specific institution needs, and what we already do best, and tailor our approach accordingly” (p. xix). The book is accordingly nonprescriptive, with no claims to be a definitive manual for research support; it presents ideas and experiences for consideration and adaptation to different research settings.

Authors share their experiences of innovation through brief but engaging case studies on varied aspects of research support, including research data management (chapters 4–6), open access (chapter 7), digitization and metadata enhancement (chapters 2 and 9), information literacy (chapter 8), and formative considerations including the design of library spaces (chapter 1). The book is intentionally comprised of many different perspectives, an approach that results in both a high-energy tone and a somewhat incoherent structure. Highlights include chapters on research data support, which emphasize the importance of grounding data management guidance and training in real-world concerns. Ashley Jester states in chapter 5 that “embedding data services in the larger research context . . . not only



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enhances our overall research support but also strengthens the data services we offer” (p. 71). Heather Coates explores different methods of data literacy instruction, concluding that the library’s priority should be to provide “authentic, engaging examples and activities” (p. 65), and Jackie Carter describes U.K. universities’ efforts to develop “new and innovative ways of teaching data analysis by translating data skills to use in the workplace, through work placements and internships” (p. 47). Another strong chapter was Dominic Tate’s, sharing the benefits of providing decentralized open access support through the provision of dedicated staff “visible in Schools . . . closer to academic practice, rather than working remotely from a central library” (p. 111). Richard Freeman’s chapter extends discussion of training needs to include librarians themselves. Although each case study presents a unique perspective, the importance of delivering engaging, transformational training and advocacy emerges as an overarching theme across many different areas of research support.

Throughout the book, the commitment to transparency and candor on the part of the authors was impressive, with writers eager to share both best practices and lessons sometimes painfully learned. Many readers will relate to challenges such as high attrition rates for non-credit-bearing modules, no matter how well designed, as experienced by Coates in chapter 4; the “persistence of a traditional view of what a library is and does” by key university stakeholders encountered by Alberto Santiago Martinez in chapter 1 (p. 17); and the debilitating effect of technical and time constraints experienced by members of Freeman’s “Developing Librarian” digital scholarship pilot training project in chapter 3.

The omission of discussion of research library staff competencies was perhaps a missed opportunity for this book. Richard Freeman and Karen Munro both discussed upskilling in relation to confidence using new digital tools in chapters 3 and 6, but competencies—“the demonstrated ability to apply knowledge, skills and attitudes to achieve observable results” (Schmidt, Calarco, Kuchma, & Shearer, 2016)—were not discussed, with the exception of references to effective open access advocacy by Tate in chapter 7 (p. 114). Unlike other areas of library education, training and development opportunities for research support staff tend to be less clearly established, and there is evidence to suggest traditional library school courses are failing to adequately prepare students for research-related library roles (Goodsett and Koziura, 2016; Bayjoo, Cornish, and Jones, 2018). Since this book was published, other resources on this topic have become available, such as those created by the Confederation of Open Access Resources ([COAR; Gottschling 2018](#)), [NASIG](#) (2017) and the Association of College Research Libraries ([ACRL; ACRL 2017](#)), so it could be that discussion of research support competencies has gained momentum in the last couple of years. Martinez describes a shift in library recruitment practices, with managers seeking candidates from nonlibrary backgrounds to deliver the services now considered essential to the modern academic library in chapter 1. Although it may be necessary to look beyond

the library for some specialist roles, the book would have benefitted from more discussion of ways that libraries can cultivate requisite competencies in existing research support staff. This would be a valuable focus for future books on this topic.

The flow of the work did not always feel coherent. The promise of the rich, often philosophical section introductions was not always fulfilled in the chapters that followed, perhaps due to their contextual specificity. It was sometimes necessary to look back to the contents page to understand the connection between the case study being shared and its place in the broader theme. The most effective chapters looked beyond the experiences of individual institutions to include transferrable, practical tips and pointers, frequently developed through overcoming considerable challenges of limited resources and competing priorities. Particularly effective were Coates's suggestions of teaching methods to incorporate into researcher data management training in chapter 4, and the recommendations for planning, funding, staffing, managing, and evaluating a MOOC provided by Mariann Løkse, Helene N. Andreassen, Torstein Låg, and Mark Stenersen of the Arctic University of Norway (UiT) in chapter 8. The book also suffers from some limitations of perspective and geography. Most of the authors are librarians, and are affiliated with U.S. or Western European institutions, with no representation of the Global South apart from in Martinez's chapter on the twenty-first-century Mexican library.

The book remains useful and relevant to its diverse intended audience: academic librarians and other library professionals. It's also of interest to higher education administrators and library and information science (LIS) course participants through its comprehensive consideration of key areas of research support, and mostly clear, engaging presentation of real-life case studies. The relative newcomer to a role, or a LIS student seeking an overview of research support activities, will benefit from reading the book cover to cover, whereas the more established professional may prefer to dip into a section of particular interest. I'd recommend this book to the library practitioner seeking to prioritize or refine their organization's existing research support offerings.

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BIOGRAPHY

Lucinda May is a Research Services Librarian at The University of Manchester Library, UK. She specialises in Open Access, overseeing operations supporting compliance with funder, national and institutional policies, as well as developing support on publishing strategies for early career researchers.