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Faculty Research Practices at Luther Seminary

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In 2016 librarians from Luther Seminary participated in a project for Ithaka S+R to investigate the research needs of religious & theological studies scholars. In this local report we share findings from 19 semi-structured interviews with Luther faculty.

Faculty Research Practices at Luther Seminary

Trisha Burr & Andrew Keck 2016
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Introduction

In January of 2016 Luther Seminary librarians, Trisha Burr and Andrew Keck, traveled to Emory University to participate in an ethnographic training session conducted by Ithaka S+R. The training was to prepare librarians to interview seminary faculty for a project called, “Looking at the Research Needs of Religious Studies Scholars”. Ithaka S+R has led a number of these investigations with the goal “to study the research practices of scholars by discipline” which in turn would, “provide valuable insight for libraries and other service providers of research support services.” At the time Luther undertook this project, previous studies had been completed by Ithaka in Art History, Chemistry and History.¹

An advisory committee was formed by Ithaka to review project methodology, help ensure that the project would reach across a broadly defined field of Religious Studies and work through some of the major issues facing the field today. The committee also walked through the script that was developed for the interviews. The committee included; Brenda Bailey-Hainer, Executive Director, American Theological Library Association, Jack Fitzmier, Executive Director, American Academy of Religion, John Kutsko, Executive Director, Society of Biblical Literature and Sabahat F. Adil, Assistant Professor of Pre-Modern Arabic Literature & Culture, University of Colorado at Boulder.

Sixteen distinct academic institutions participated in the project. These include: Asbury Seminary, Baylor University, Brigham Young University, Columbia University, Concordia Theological Seminary, Emory University, Luther Seminary, Naropa University, Princeton Theological Seminary, Rice University, Temple University, Tufts University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Notre Dame, Vanderbilt University, and Yale University.

At Luther, all current faculty were recruited by email and personal invitation to participate with 19 agreeing to be interviewed. Each librarian randomly selected and interviewed half of the faculty over a 3-month period. With IRB approval, all signed the Informed Consent Agreement that allowed for the recording of interviews and most allowed for their work-spaces to be further documented photographically. Recordings were commercially transcribed and coded by the investigating librarians.

Luther Seminary Background

Luther Seminary is in St. Paul, MN and is the largest of 8 seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Luther Seminary is a stand-alone seminary which was founded in early 1869 and through a number of mergers has become the institution it is today. Luther Seminary’s mission is to, “educate leaders for Christian communities called and sent by the Holy Spirit to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ and to serve in God’s world.” Luther awards degrees in Master of Divinity (M.Div.), Master of Arts (M.A.), Master of Theology (M.Th.), Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.), and offers various graduate certificates. The majority of students, 56%, are in the M.Div. program. Enrollment for the 2015-16 school year was 591 students. 71% of students identify as ELCA and there are 44 students from 20 different countries. Luther Seminary also provides robust distributed learning degree programs and a suite of lifelong learning opportunities.²

The 30 full-time faculty at Luther Seminary are majority Lutheran but represent other Christian traditions as well. Many of the faculty are ordained clergy who have served in congregational leadership and continue to be engaged in church life. Scholarship and teaching at Luther is set within a Christian framework organized around Bible, history, theology, and leadership. Many of Luther’s faculty engage with practitioners and scholars from other faiths. Although we did not specifically ask each faculty member whether they considered themselves to be theological or religious studies scholars, it’s interesting to note that, of those that we did, all strongly stated that they were theologians.

Findings

Qualitative research methods were used for careful coding and analysis. From this work a number of broad themes emerged among faculty approaches to scholarship. While there were many similarities among faculty in their scholarship practices, important differences also emerged depending on discipline (and sub-disciplines), level of seniority, and degree of engagement within their own scholarly communities.

The broadly defined categories of findings in this document are summarized in the six following sections; Access, Data, Discover, Dissemination, Research Practices, Research Support and General Conclusions.

Access

Most, if not all, faculty maintained a personal physical library in their workspace for sustained access to texts. While a few might come to the library to consult or retrieve items, none really did their research in the physical library. Because of this, their own collections, library books, interlibrary-loan items, and electronic resources had to be accessible in their workspaces. One scholar said “I can pretty much access a lot of what I need here in my own library” and another stated “I must have the text before me.”

Many preferred digital versions of primary resources for access, searching, and ease of annotation/manipulation. One scholar stated “online access anywhere, anytime is just really huge.” Many scholars noted that digitization of materials that they would have previously had to travel domestically or overseas to research has been incredibly useful for their scholarship.

Secondary resources tended to depend more on format. With monographs, a few preferred digital - particularly for reading “on the go” - but physical books surrounded many scholars for their ease of consulting multiple volumes simultaneously. One respondent described their home work environment, “I will do projects at home, and sit on a big kitchen table when I need to access eight books or something at the same time, and they are all just out like that.” A few faculty noted the limitations of certain digital versions that are not as easy to navigate as the print. One faculty said “For me there’s no substitute for extensive reading having a hard copy.”
Journal articles, unless being browsed for current awareness or used to identify historical trends, were largely preferred in digital format. One senior scholar confessed “In fact, I have a very bad scholarly or a very bad research habit of going through the ATLA database when I'm looking for something, and only looking at articles that I can actually download.” While a few were willing to dive into the deep in the stacks for bound periodicals, most found the availability of article PDFs to be irresistible. As for microforms, one faculty simply noted, “Oh my gosh. Microfilm. That’s what you can do. Make nothing be microfilm anymore.”

The ability to interlibrary loan books and articles was universally praised, and not just for materials in their own fields, but for entering the scholarship of other cognate fields. One noted, “Most of the books now that I take out of this library are interlibrary loan books.”

Data

The “data” typically produced by faculty is detailed textual notes or bibliography and designed for their own personal research: “my own research notes, they’re for me.” Many protested the idea of creating data: “I’m more interested in analysis and interpretation than I am generating data, if that makes sense.” When pressed they would admit to having notes saved on hard-drives or notes taken in margins of journals that they owned. Almost none of them thought of preserving this information in a digital repository and were generally not convinced of the importance of preserving this part of their scholarly process or “data”. While resisting the idea
of “data,” most affirmed their own role in contributing to knowledge or scholarship. One faculty bluntly said, “I mean, it’s knowledge of God. If you don’t produce knowledge what the hell are you doing?”

Figure 3: Faculty Office

Discovery

Whether Facebook, Twitter, conferences, journals or book bibliographies, scholars cultivated and used a variety of disparate networks to “keep up” in their own disciplines and within other disciplines. The idea of individual scholars working in, or at the intersection of, multiple fields came up frequently “I live in the midst of at least three or four different guilds” and “I’m always digging into other fields.”

Conferences were considered important by a large number of faculty for keeping up with what was happening in their fields. One faculty noted the importance of “having a network of people who know what you’re working on.” The network worked both ways as another said “Facebook has been a really helpful way for me to keep up with articles … on topics that I’m not necessarily actively working on myself.” The networks need not always involve personal relationships: “I pick one person whose writing I can understand and then I read really deeply in that person.”
Many also combined this with forms of planned serendipity where they would browse the stacks, new book shelf, books/journals outside of their field and public intellectual conversations in search of insights that would catalyze ideas for their own work. “I’ll look at the best publishers and a publisher’s catalogue and see what they’re doing, yeah. And then I usually recycle it.”

Even with some filtering, it was often overwhelming: “the market of ideas, theological ideas, is over saturated. It’s too much” and “Ninety percent of it is crap.” A standard interview question asked faculty to consider a “magic wand” that could help with the research process. One responded: “I suppose the magic wand is - how could I tell Google - if I just put that question in there and have them screen out all the junk. And just give me the good stuff. Just give me good stuff.”

Dissemination

Faculty scholarship has three major audiences: scholars, practitioners, and students. While some faculty focused on one of these audiences, many faculty struggled with the incentives, impact, and payoffs for each. One issue was institutional values and rewards: “the institution actually wants me in congregations and church conferences more than publishing in academic journals that nobody reads.” Yet at another level, promotion and tenure decisions often placed a higher value on scholarly contributions. Another issue considers impact: “I think the other challenge, too, in publishing, for me, is to figure out how much I want to continue writing for pastors and
other scholars and where I want to do more “popular” writing that would get into the hands of more people.” A third issue was with the financial model of publishing: “I don’t know if Biblical scholars can afford any longer to just write for 12 people. Maybe we never could.” A related issue was the potential market of the actual field of study they were focused on. For example, a professor in Children, Youth and Families had a larger “market” of interested practitioners than a faculty member who was doing work on a narrow slice of church history.

Those writing for other scholars were much more traditional in their approach to research and dissemination of it. They contributed to society journals that they are editors for or as a result of professional networks when asked to contribute essays to collections or articles for encyclopedia projects. Many faculty regularly contribute to local Luther Seminary publications such as *Word and World* and *Working Preacher*.

Many noted how articles or essays often grew from conference presentations, “I have a lot of output that needs to be funneled from the oral presentation to the printed.” While some noted the relative ease of writing articles (compared to books), others openly questioned whether writing more narrowly-focused articles and essays distracted them from doing larger monographic projects.

Relationships with book publishers often developed at conferences or as the result of professional networks. Faculty were aware of nuances among scholarly publishers in regards to potential audience. For one project, a faculty member solicited a publisher with an international presence in order to better reach the perceived international audience. Another faculty member noted a distinction between “world-class publishers that would publish anything in an academic world” and “Christian publishers like Eerdmans and IVP.” The market realities of publishing were sobering as both authors and readers, “you would not buy a $180 book even if you are passionately interested in the topic.”

Faculty were open to thinking about what they might contribute to an institutional repository. Some could imagine putting in sermons or perhaps conference sessions they had given. One hesitation was that they didn’t want to put in content that they were asked to do for monetary recompense. Another consideration that was noted is that this type of presentation often continued to grow and change from feedback received - it wasn’t ever seen as being in a completed state.

Most faculty were aware of how their research contributed directly to the classroom and how the classroom often had a symbiotic relationship with their own research. A seminar topic might shape a book or a research question. Similarly, the simple “joy” of sharing research might prove infectious: “my most obscure research has incredibly fun and interesting payoff, I think, in the classroom”. Or thought-provoking - “my desired outcome is I would be satisfied with 30 seconds of stunned silence.”
Research Practices

Research practice for most theologians is very text-based, while using a variety of critical lens: “So while reading the text, I make, for example, [an] analysis for a word that I begin to notice [how] it is being used and is shaping the vocabulary and the ideology of the writer.” While many practice a “close reading” of specific texts, others search a broader corpus for specific insights, “it’s kind of like you slip down there with boxes of materials or volumes of materials until you find, you know, two or three little nuggets.”

Most faculty make use of broader methodologies and various cognate disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, history, political science, law, rhetoric, anthropology, etc. and have well-established ways of going about their research. New Testament scholars, for example, will engage with race and ethnicity, sexuality or the apocalypse. A few of the more “practical” scholars studied living communities in a sustained way.

Faculty widely noted an uncertain nature to their research practices: “I feel like for a lot of projects there’s the writing of the abstract six to nine months before you actually have to produce the article. And you have an idea, and it never quite goes in the direction that you meant for it to.” Some of the “randomness” was due to external influences - they would have a particular idea but would have to shape it to meet the demands of the editors, audience of the publication, or the context of the publication. But some “randomness” was due to internal
discovery - where a source or idea emerged in the process of research that helped them to reframe their work in a new way.

Research Support

It came as no surprise that “time” was the largest limiting factor noted by faculty. Most felt adequate support from the library as far as resources were concerned and the institution in terms of sabbaticals, etc. One area noted for additional support (either by technical or human means) was some sort of sifting of possible materials for their research projects. This was often articulated as an intelligent “research assistant” that might know who “wrote about what or who is working on what” or “these ten books have been published” in a particular field in a certain year or “these are the arguments with which I need to engage.” Such a research assistant could also be asked to do tedious tasks such as “go through the 1,200 examples of the words in the Weimar edition [Martin Luther] and categorize which ones are in a liturgical text.”

Most faculty were comfortable with their level of technical skills. They could ably navigate databases or the library catalog to find what they were looking for. The scholars who were working with newer media found their own ways of doing this and didn’t always turn to the library for support with technology. The library was largely praised for the resources provided, particularly the growing suite of digital resources. Library support was valued for expertise in navigating collections, digital tools, and copyright.
Conclusion

Faculty at Luther represent a continuum of research engagement from traditional scholarship to practitioner scholarship. Traditional scholarship tends to be primary source text-based research while practitioner scholarship often engages direct ethnographic research practices. In general, traditional scholarship follows established academic dissemination models that include publishing monographs and/or articles in peer reviewed journals. Practitioner scholarship is disseminated in similar ways but also makes use of more non-traditional publishing formats in order to reach a broader audience. These might include personal websites, blogs or a YouTube channel. While each end of the continuum is represented by a few faculty, most faculty fall somewhere in the middle. A common unifying factor at Luther Seminary is that nearly all faculty said that they attempt to make their scholarship relevant for the church, whether they are looking at 16th century catechesis or Christianity’s relationship with guns; in some way they will seek to contextualize this information for a contemporary church audience.

During our interviews, and later analysis, a pattern of faculty scholarship emerged - the degree of cycling and recycling that happens as part of the research and dissemination process. A faculty member will decide to teach a course, give a workshop or deliver a paper. Sometimes this is wholly determined by the faculty and other times it is developed within the constraints of the curriculum, paying customer, or symposium/conference theme: “[there are] always articles I write in response to an invitation.” This occasion will lead to further research and dissemination outlets. In this same manner, course lectures will get refined into articles or collected as chapters for a book or taught again in the same or a different course. Workshops get turned into essays or recycled into other workshops/presentations. Papers are refined into a collection of essays or become the seed of a book project. Within any of these, a particular thought or loose end can lead to other areas of research. The feedback from students or conference participants is a part of the refinement for the final work, whatever form it may take.

Along with these general insights, two main findings emerged from our interviews with Luther faculty that have implications for libraries and librarians. First, there is a need for information professionals who can consult with faculty to curate and manage their digital scholarship. As dissemination of scholarship continues to become more digital, a guide to the many ways in which research can be licensed and made available is necessary. Consultation on copyright issues was needed on a number of levels, especially for each individual’s own work. All but one faculty member at Luther praised the idea of open access and an institutional repository. However, the implications of contracts they had already signed with publishers wasn’t always clear and it was hard to fully imagine what, outside of already published material, would be appropriate to add to a repository. There is a clear need to develop a policy that states what is considered desirable and/or relevant to be made accessible in a digital repository. It also
became clear through these interviews that libraries need to define what “data” is, in relation to theological scholarship, where much of what is produced is not statistical analysis but notes or amorphous ideas.

Our second finding is that assistance in the research process is needed – especially in cognate fields where a sifting or orientation to the most relevant and reliable resources is helpful. As we discovered in many of our interviews, time spent teaching is increasingly given more importance than research for faculty with dwindling support for dedicated research assistants. The library can provide greater support through improved tools and research guides that address a wider set of disciplines. Also, professional and student staff could be deployed to provide greater specialized assistance.

While the project to investigate faculty research practices at Luther Seminary has provided considerable insights, it has also raised further questions in many areas that cannot be answered in this study. The following list includes some of the questions that directly impact libraries.

- What items need to be licensed digitally versus bought in print?
- How far into cognate fields should a theological library collect?
- Among “data” formerly collected as a part of faculty “papers,” what “data” needs to be preserved and how?
- What tools and level of research assistance should be made available for faculty research?
- What is the role of the library in curating and disseminating faculty research?
- Should the library curate and collect non-traditional outlets such as personal websites, blogs, or a YouTube channel?
- Should the library curate and collect each iteration of a workshop or presentation?
- What should be in the collection development policy of a digital repository?
- How much should the library consult or insert itself within the contractual agreements between faculty and publishers?

These questions and more will continue to push at broader issues of faculty scholarship in a digital age and impact the ongoing work of librarianship. How libraries and librarians will engage with faculty scholarship in the future is not clearly defined at this point. However, the need for knowledgeable individuals who can assist and collaborate in the areas outlined in this paper - access, data, discovery, dissemination, and research support - is clearly needed.
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Informed Consent Form
This consent form asks you to take part in a research study. The study is being conducted by:
Andrew Keck Trisha Burr
Director of Library Services Acquisitions and Serials Librarian
akeck001@luthersem.edu tburr001@luthersem.edu

Title of the research study: Research Support Services Study for the Field of Religious and Theological Studies

Reasons for the study: This research study seeks to examine the research practices of academics in religious studies in order to understand the resources and services these faculty members need to be successful in their teaching and research.

What you will be asked to do: Your participation in the study involves a 60 minute audio-recorded interview about your research practices and support needs as a religious studies scholar. We also may take photographs to document your work space, however, you will not appear in the photographs. Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the interview at any time for any reason.

Benefits and Risks: There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. Subjects may experience benefits in the form of increased insight and awareness into their own research practices and needs.

How your confidentiality will be maintained: If you choose to participate, your name will not be linked to your interview responses or work space photographs at any time. We do not include your name on any of the interview data and there is no link between this consent form and your responses.

Questions? You may contact the researchers at any time if you have additional questions about the study, or, if you have any questions about your rights as an interviewee, you may contact Peter Susag at psusag001@luthersem.edu

I ______________________________ understand and consent to participate in the study as described above including:
___ being interviewed and being audio-recorded during the interview
___ having my work-space documented by photograph

Signature of Research Participant: ____________________________ Date: ___________
Signature of Interviewer: ____________________________ Date: ___________.

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INTERVIEW GUIDE

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Research focus
1. Describe your current research focus?
2. Describe how your research is situated within the academy. [Probe for how they position themselves in relation to religious studies or theological studies and if they see their work as connecting to any other disciplines]

Research methods
1. What theoretical approaches does your research utilize or rely on?
2. What research methods do you currently use to conduct your research (i.e. discourse analysis, historical analysis, etc.)?
   a. Does your research produce data? If so, what kinds of data does your research typically produce?
   b. How and where do you currently keep this data?
   c. Where do you plan to store this data in the long term? [Prompt: e.g. an archive, an online repository]
3. [Beyond data you produce yourself] What kinds of sources does your research depend on?
   a. How do you locate these materials?
4. Think back to a past or ongoing research project where you faced challenges in the process of conducting the research.
   a. Describe these challenges.
   b. What could have been done to mitigate these challenges?
5. How do you keep up with trends in your field more broadly?
6. If I gave you a magic wand that could help you with your research process - what would you ask it to do? [If they cite broader issues, e.g. lack of time or funding, probe further for coping strategies or workarounds they use to mitigate these challenges when conducting their research]

Dissemination Practices
7. Where do you typically publish your research in scholarly settings? [Probe for kinds of publications and the disciplines these publications are aligned with]
   a. Beyond scholarly publishing, are there any other venues that you disseminate your research? [Probe: e.g. blogs, popular press, classes]
8. How do your publishing practices relate to those typical to your discipline?
9. Have you ever deposited your data or final research products in a repository?
   a. If so, which repositories and what has been your motivations for depositing? (i.e. required, for sharing, investment in open access principles)
   b. If no, why not?
Future and State of the Field

9. From your perspective, what future challenges and opportunities currently facing religious and or theological studies?

10. Is there anything else about your research support needs that you think it important for me to know that was not covered in the previous questions?