
Library as Research Site: The Local Value of Participating in a National Research Project

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New Methodologies Created New Opportunities

During the spring 2016 semester, Princeton Theological Seminary Library completed a study on the research practices and research support needs of advanced scholars at its institution. The study was conducted as part of [Ithaka S+R](#)'s new national study on the research needs of scholars in religion and theology: Research Support Services Project on Religious Studies.

Ithaka S+R, a not-for-profit research and consulting service that helps academic, cultural, and publishing communities, has in recent years developed a series of innovative studies of the research needs of historians, chemists, and art historians respectively, which have been powerful tools for libraries planning support services to scholars. As Ithaka expands its slate of discipline-based studies, it is also evolving its methodology. Beginning in early 2016, academic libraries can now partner with Ithaka as research sites for the discipline-based research studies. This project is the first discipline study in the Ithaka S+R series to include on-site library research teams at participating institutions, and the first to look closely at scholars in the fields of theology and religious studies. In addition to the 18 participating institutions,¹ support and guidance for the project was provided by the [American Academy of Religion](#), the [Society of Biblical Literature](#), and the [American Theological Library Association](#), working jointly with Ithaka S+R.

The purpose of this short paper is to illustrate the local value that Princeton Theological Seminary Library (PTSL) received from its participation as a research site in [Ithaka S+R's 2016 study](#) into the research practices and support needs of senior faculty in the fields of religious studies broadly defined.

The Local Process

The library formed a research team consisting of three librarians.² Along with librarians from other participating institutions, the research team completed Ithaka S+R ethnographic research training in February 2016.

Following training, the PTSL research team e-mailed invitations to 15 tenured faculty members (approximately 37.5% of 40 total faculty) randomly sampled from the institution's four academic departments to participate in the study; of the 15 invited, nine (approximately 22.5% of total faculty) ultimately participated in the study. In March and April 2016, the research team conducted the nine in-depth on-campus interviews with faculty members about their research practices and support needs, and gathered photographic documentation of faculty workspaces. The 13-question semi-structured interview protocol designed by Ithaka S+R was used at all 18 local research sites, and provided a consistent data set for analysis by Ithaka in the generation of its forthcoming national discipline report.

Digital audio files of the faculty interviews were transcribed and coded using standard qualitative data analysis methodologies, revealing key themes, from which local findings were derived. A local report was completed in August 2016 and will publicly debut alongside the Ithaka S+R national report in early 2017. Thus, the values discussed here should be considered "early stage" benefits that the institution has received so far in relation to the longer arch of the project's timeline. It is anticipated that in mid-2017 the library will produce a follow-up analysis of improvements that the library was able to enact, following the public debut of both the local and national reports in early 2017.

The Local Value of Discussions Near and Far

The Ithaka project design was specifically shaped to provide participating research sites with a detailed local portrait of faculty research practices and research support needs, allowing libraries to evaluate the effectiveness of current library services and resources. Certainly, the interviews conducted on-site have provided the library with a number of practical ideas for concretely improving library service to faculty that it is keen to pursue. The library also quickly recognized five additional important “early stage” local benefits that it received from its participation.

- **Communicative opportunities arise from localizing national research projects.** Being a small institution, the library already benefits from a close relationship with faculty members. There is in place an array of traditional library outreach and assessment mechanisms aimed at soliciting faculty engagement and feedback, including surveys, focus groups, use analysis, and research studies. However, the library discovered that the practice of localizing national research projects provides unique opportunities to engage with faculty somewhat differently. By using national research project topics and orientation as discussion points, the library has a new conversational “in” to faculty, contextualizing their needs in relation to discipline-wide norms and trends, providing an opportunity for reflection from broader perspectives—a luxury that the rush of the regular academic year does not often allow. The library felt this benefit right away in terms of the Ithaka project. Faculty were excited to participate, learn more about how libraries track faculty research needs, and eager to see how their responses to interview questions might or might not be echoed in aggregate responses from faculty in the national report.
- **National studies speak to stakeholders.** Thoughtfully researched and presented local studies that spin out from important or high profile national projects can also serve as compelling evidence to administrative stakeholders about resource requirements in a competitive academic marketplace. In some cases, national projects have achieved saturation beyond library and technology circles to regularly surface on the radars of administrations or governing bodies—for example, EDUCAUSE’s Horizon Report. The PTSL research team plans to take the

Ithaka national report and its local report as opportunities for executive analysis of resource allocation and planning at the institutional level.

- **National studies provide helpful objective distance in uncomfortable local discussions.** From the first faculty interview, it was clear that the research team was going to learn a great deal about faculty support needs broadly, including needs beyond the “boundaries” of library responsibility. For example, faculty discussed several important things that impact their research process such as information technology challenges and a desire for a fuller, more formal institutional relationship with the faculty at a nearby university. The “objectiveness” of the Ithaka-designed report protocol will allow the library to pass on sometimes pointed critiques or politically complex recommendations to other offices of the institution with some diplomatic cushion.
- **Externally designed studies ask questions local librarians might not.** The research protocol itself kept the interview focus on hearing the faculty perspective in a more direct, “pure” way—less tainted by librarians’ well-intentioned but potentially intrusive leading of the conversation towards a library-centric perspective. In the Ithaka project, the questions that drew faculty out most fulsomely were questions about how their research is impacted by eagle-eye issues about the challenges and opportunities facing the discipline, the state of the academy, and faculty members’ own perceptions about their position within the academy. In this way, the library learned things about faculty research approach and research support needs from questions it might not have asked.
- **Library staff training is enriched in a multi-institution setting.** While not all national projects will provide opportunities for local libraries to directly participate in data collection and training, the Ithaka project did. The library received considerable benefit from the project by having library staff formally trained in ethnographic research methods in a two-day, in-person project overview and training at Columbia University. Led by Ithaka S+R’s analyst for libraries and scholarly communication Danielle Cooper, the training was necessary to get the participating library research teams organized and equipped to consistently conduct the project’s research protocol. The library staff directly benefitted in terms of its research

planning and interview analysis skills, which they can now also extend to other library staff that were not part of the original research team. Finally, the multi-institutional setting of the Ithaka-led training was incredibly helpful, and allowed the research team to learn new methodologies in a lively environment enriched by other institutions' library teams asking questions that would not have occurred to us.

Practical Implications

Going forward, the library's experience in the Ithaka national research project suggests a few practical implications that it will be exploring and that other libraries might find appealing.

First, libraries can link to, customize, and repurpose large-scale national and discipline-wide research projects in the context of their own assessment work locally. Being able to meaningfully link local needs to national trends is a facility the library will be building into its work in a more regularized way.

Second, the potential for collaborative ongoing work in assessment at the discipline level, including with other libraries, scholarly societies, and related organizations that provide services and resources to a specific discipline, is rich. The library is going to continue to seek opportunities to originate new—or expand existing—collaborative assessment projects among its peers and partners.

Finally, the library will work to urge high profile national research projects to “build in” mechanisms for local engagement by providing the original (or modified) protocol, question sets, or tips for localized tailoring of their work at the institution level.

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Endnotes

1. The 18 participating institutions include: Asbury Theological Seminary, Baylor University, Brigham Young University, Columbia University, Concordia Theological Seminary, Emory University, Harvard University, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 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.
2. The research team consisted of discovery and web services librarian Virginia Dearborn; director of access, research and outreach Kate Skrebutenas; and director of collections, preservation, and assessment Jenifer Gundry.