

Research Sprints: A New Model of Support

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“If only I had the time...”

For faculty and librarians, the thought, “If only I had the time...” enters their inner monologues all too often.¹ Tasked with a seemingly ever-expanding set of responsibilities, both populations are plagued with a lack of focused time to dedicate to new projects or complete lingering ones. A shared feeling of being short on time is perhaps one of the most significant impediments to librarian-faculty collaboration. Indeed, in the time-starved academic environment, it’s rather difficult for faculty to even have the time to gain a full understanding of the skill set within the contemporary academic library or to imaginatively consider how they may work together with librarians.

Over the last three years, however, the University of Kansas Libraries and the University of Minnesota Libraries have worked to overcome these challenges with “Research Sprints,” an event in which faculty partner with librarians to complete small projects or component parts of larger research and instruction agendas in a week or less.

Borrowing from time-bounded, fast-paced collaborative work formats in fields like design and software development, Kansas developed their own faculty-librarian sprints model and piloted three sprints in the summer of 2016. Seeing that their model may be portable to other academic libraries, the Kansas team helped Minnesota pilot their own version. Now, three years in, teams of librarians from Kansas and Minnesota have supported 26 faculty teams to quickly create an array of projects: from a scoping review on the intersection between health and probation, to an open educational resource for a journalism course, to the background research for a play on the history of denim.

With high ratings of satisfaction from faculty and active, engaged participation from librarians, our data on and experience with Research Sprints to-date suggests they hold potential to become a new model of research support outreach at academic libraries across the country.²

The Starting Blocks of Research Sprints

Academic librarians are increasingly involved in supporting and directly collaborating with faculty in all aspects of the research life cycle.³ However, this involvement has often proceeded in fits and starts. Moreover, such collaborations commonly lack any physical proximity or, at the very least, coworking in physical proximity is rare and infrequent. With lengthy durations, irregular progress, and physical distance as the norm in collaborations between librarians and

faculty, projects often progress slowly and the labor of both librarians and faculty remain largely invisible to one another.

The challenges facing librarian-faculty collaboration in contemporary academia are not unlike the challenges faced by computer programmers and their internal and external clients in the software development field of the 1980s and 1990s. In this era, software development was struggling with its productivity and processes to such a degree that software engineer Grady Booch quipped, “we often call this condition the software crisis, but frankly, a malady that has carried on this long must be called normal.”⁴ This “crisis” was born out of a highly complicated environment in which stakeholders (e.g., executives or users) and important variables (e.g., competition and customer requirements) were only engaged or considered before and after, but not during the product development process. Recognizing parallels in the working relationships between librarians and faculty, Kansas found inspiration in the software development industry’s solution to its crisis: the team-dynamics theory and project management practice of Scrum.⁵ By bringing together all relevant sectors of an organization to work in close proximity for an uninterrupted period of work time, teams using Scrum are thought to be able to collaboratively carry—as in a rugby scrum—a project to a more refined and efficient completion.^{6[6]}

Key concepts from Scrum had been imported into academic work processes as early as 2010 with the National Endowment for the Humanities-funded One Week | One Tool program at George Mason University’s Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, though the focus there was still on software development as most of its activities worked toward producing small web applications.⁷ But by importing Scrum principles into librarian-faculty collaborations, Kansas sought to restructure the process of librarian-faculty engagement and move it from intermittent involvement at the beginning (e.g., literature review) and end (e.g., collecting) of the research process and toward direct support throughout all phases of the research lifecycle—if only in the microcosm of a sprint. The hope of this shift, write members of the founding Research Sprints team Pamela Lach and Brian Rosenblum, was not only “a new type of user engagement based on meaningful, mutually beneficial, and equitable scholarly partnerships,” but also to “demonstrate the value of [Kansas] Libraries.”⁸

Running a Sprint

At Kansas and Minnesota, Research Sprints planning began months before their first implementation and started with proposals to secure buy-in from the dean and the associate university librarians of each institution. Libraries leadership at both institutions were relatively eager to pilot this new method of faculty engagement; however, each warned to be mindful of the time commitments of potential participants. Research Sprints need only a very modest budget—at Kansas and Minnesota this totaled about \$1,000 and \$2,500 for the week, most of which went to food and necessary software licenses—but the investment in terms of labor time is steep. Research Sprints require the dedication of dozens of highly trained librarians to a handful of faculty projects for up to an entire week, which takes librarians away from their other work, engendering opportunity cost. Despite those concerns, with strategic scheduling of the sprints during relative lulls in the academic calendar and with the understanding that the activities involved in the sprints are simply a concentrated form of typical academic librarian activities, the opportunity and labor costs can be justified.

Once a libraries' administration approves the endeavor, the Research Sprints process kicks off with an outreach campaign to inform faculty across campus about the opportunity. Given Research Sprints' novelty, informing faculty about the event and its unique style of working can be a challenge. But with an informational webpage, email campaigns, targeted messaging, and an information session, academic libraries should be able to court relevant and promising proposals from a diverse array of faculty candidates. After faculty submit their applications, a planning committee of librarians reviews the submissions using a rubric aimed to assess feasibility, local and broader impact, and fit with the library's skills and goals. The planning group (in consultation with associate university librarians) then assembles a team of librarians to work with the faculty member based on skill and expertise.

After the teams are assembled and the applicants notified, the entire team—faculty, librarians, a project manager (also a librarian), and (occasionally) research assistants—gather for a pre-Sprint meeting to clarify goals, set expectations, and assign roles for every member of the group. Concurrent with the general timeline of these meetings, the Research Sprints planning team hosts an orientation for their colleagues who sign on to participate in the sprints about what to expect during the week, how to pace their activity, and strategies for a productive experience and rewarding outreach. Then—typically the week after the semester ends or during spring break—the Research Sprints begin.

The sprints themselves are an intense experience. For four-to-five full days, Sprint teams huddle and work toward mutually agreed-upon goals. At Kansas, teams work in their own dedicated rooms, and at Minnesota, teams work side-by-side in a large coworking space. Each team's project manager makes a work plan for the week and documents the accomplishments and needed tasks on a daily basis. They also arrange for last-minute necessities and make adjustments to the group's schedule. Since faculty goals vary so widely, there is no activity that is "typical" across Research Sprints. Some sprints have focused on traditional libraries-related skills such as developing search strategies, identifying relevant literature, combing through archival documents, and focusing on integrating information literacy into courses. Others, however, have focused on more emergent forms of support from libraries such as developing sound data management practices, translating primary sources into interactive GIS maps, or building public-facing websites and web applications to present collections in a new format or to disseminate research as it progresses. In all cases, the proximity of librarians to faculty mean that each sees the working processes, skill sets, and struggles of the other.

Tiring but Rewarding

By the end of the sprints, faculty, librarians, and everyone else involved almost uniformly report being exhausted.⁹ Nevertheless, in evaluation surveys, both institutions have found similar positive responses to the Research Sprints. Faculty report great satisfaction with the process and end products and often share their experiences with others in their department, leading to greater interest in the Research Sprints and other libraries services. Librarians have found the experience to be an ideal networking opportunity but also challenging given their consistently-busy schedules.¹⁰ While setting aside a week in order to participate on a team can be daunting for busy librarians, the resulting relationships with faculty are educational and enduring. And the effects of the sprints have just begun to ripple.

At Kansas, only three applicants are selected for sprints each year as not all projects are scoped for a sprint. However, Kansas views each application as a potential new, enduring relationship. To avoid missing this opportunity, the committee at Kansas offers “Research Hurdles” to applicants not accepted for a sprint. A Research Hurdle, which is essentially an extended research consultation, allows librarians and faculty greater flexibility to schedule and build a working partnership. Much like the sprints, faculty members are matched with appropriate librarians; these teams self-schedule their meetings until the project is deemed successfully completed by the faculty member.

At Minnesota, the success of the first Research Sprints prompted an invitation from the Office of the Provost for the libraries to host sprints for each of the Grand Challenges Research Initiative teams. This administrative initiative is at the core of the university’s current strategic plan and has dedicated over 9 million dollars of internal funding to cross-disciplinary research that tackles problems of global significance.¹¹ Importantly, the libraries’ own current strategic plan was written to reflect the centrality of this initiative, stating that its premiere goal is “enabling Grand Challenges research and supporting field-shaping researchers.”¹² The opportunity to work so closely with the university’s Grand Challenges faculty gave the libraries a chance to showcase the diverse range of its research support to administrators and faculty. And these sprints, in particular, led to a number of long-term collaborations between librarians and the highest-profile interdisciplinary research teams on campus.

Kansas and Minnesota have continued to evolve their processes with each iteration of Research Sprints, and both institutions have tailored their events to their local environments. But they have also worked together to make a common guide and set of templates for other academic libraries to host a Research Sprint. This toolkit, along with example projects, is available for free at researchsprints.org.

What makes Research Sprints effective is that they allow faculty and librarians to condense hours of individual research time by working with a team in a tailored, immersive environment. Blocking off the time, committing to a project, and collaboratively working toward a shared goal make the Research Sprint a time apart from the mundane activities of research. We do not have the data and cannot imagine proper measures or controls that would conclusively point toward Research Sprints as producing more or better research. However, academic librarianship literature indicates that library-faculty collaborations encourage increased faculty use of library resources, and that the integration of library instruction into coursework improves retention and student learning.¹³ Such engagement is the fundamental impetus behind Research Sprints. Research Sprints are an outreach activity in the long game of rendering the invisible labor of librarians visible to faculty. They are also part of a continual effort to share the evolving nature of academic librarians’ roles and their increasing involvement in the entire process of research. Through the familiar-yet-exceptional activity of Research Sprints, libraries have a chance to leave a lasting impression about the sort of work they do every day and how that work speeds the pace of research.

Proposed “Call Out” Box Building Relationships

Working together closely for a week builds strong relationships between faculty and librarians. Not only do librarians gain a deep understanding of the faculty member's research interests, but faculty gain a better understanding of the range of interests and expertise of librarians. After a particularly joke-filled week, a recent faculty participant, Na'im Madyun, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs, Diversity, and Outreach at the College of Education and Human Development at Minnesota, ended the Research Sprints with a surprise for his library team -- he wrote a poem in their honor:

Green Eggs and NOT Ham

by Boo AND Lean Seuss (a.k.a. Na'im Madyun)

I am not Sam.

and Sam I am not.

I'm not NOT a Sam that is a Sam bot.

I am not NOT a Sam that eats green eggs and ham stew.

I de-duped the first NOT and tagged it to NOT two.

I de-duped the third NOT, and ANDed it to NOT 22.

I did not de-dupe before the search.

I did not de-dupe before the merge.

I did not de-dupe before the sync.

I did not de-dupe the Master links.

We do not NOT a lot of NOTs because they may trigger the auto NOT bots to block us out and our green eggs will rot.

Notes and References

¹ We contrast librarians and faculty for ease of understanding each categories' primary role and place of appointment, but recognize that many academic librarians including the authors of this article have faculty or faculty-like status.

² Jenny McBurney, et al., "Evaluation of Library Research Sprints as a Tool to Engage Faculty, Refine Project Management Skills, and Promote Collaboration" unpublished manuscript currently under review at *College & Research Libraries*.

³ Janice Jaguszewski and Karen Williams, *New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries* (Washington: Association of Research Libraries, 2013).

⁴ Grady Booch, *Object Oriented Analysis and Design with Applications* (San Francisco: The Benjamin Cummings Publishing Company, 1994), 8.

⁵ Pamela Lach and Brian Rosenblum, "Sprinting Toward Faculty Engagement" in *Project Management in the Library Workplace* eds. Alice Daugherty and Samantha Schmehl Hines (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, 2018).

⁶ Hirotaka Takeuchi and Ikujiro Nonaka, "The New New Product Development Game," *Harvard Business Review* 64, (1986): 137-146; Ken Schwarber and Mike Beedle, *Agile Software Development with Scrum* (London: Pearson, 2001).

⁷ Lach and Rosenblum, "Sprinting."

⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁹ To combat fatigue and burnout, Research Sprints organizers have imported "stress busting" activities usually reserved for undergraduates (e.g., therapy animals, games, guided walks), have encouraged breaks, and have held end-of-sprints celebrations.

¹⁰ McBurney, et al., "Evaluation."

¹¹ Office of the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost, *Report of the Provost's Grand Challenges Research Strategies Team* (Minneapolis: Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2016).

¹² University of Minnesota Libraries, *Strategic Plan 2016-2018* (Minneapolis: Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2015).

¹³ E. M. Waton, "Taking the Mountain to Mohammed: The Effect of Librarian Visits to Faculty Members on their Use of the Library," *New Review of Academic Librarianship* 16, (2010): 145–159; Michael Mounce, "Working Together: Academic Librarians and Faculty Collaborating to Improve Students' Information Literacy Skills: A Literature Review 2000–2009," *The Reference Librarian* 51, no 4, (2010): 300-320. DOI: 10.1080/02763877.2010.501420; Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic Library Impact on Student Learning and Success: Findings from Assessment in Action Team Projects* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017).