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Developing and Supporting Legal Information Specialists
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CALL/ACBD Research Grant

Tips for Planning, Conducting and Sharing Research:

These tips are practical, down-to-earth bits of advice culled primarily from experience. They are really nothing more than common sense, but they are offered here in the hope that they may serve as a reminder of some pitfalls to avoid and provide some positive suggestions for making a research project go smoothly. A useful entry point into a broad range of web resources for researchers is The Researching Librarian (http://www2.msstate.edu/~bea11/trl/).

What is research? Research in the context of these tips can be defined as any 'careful search or inquiry after or for or into; [it is an] endeavour to discover new or collate old facts etc. by scientific study of a subject …' (The Concise Oxford Dictionary. 7th ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

Arthur W. Hafner, Professor and Dean of University Libraries at Seton Hall University, has an up-to-date web page (http://library.shu.edu/HafnerAW/awh-th-researchtopics.htm) where he lists 9 types of inquiry that may involve research. These range from annotated bibliographies, to case studies, to original research. The point here is that research need not be highly theoretical to be of value. There is a place, too, for research that serves practical, even seemingly mundane, purposes.
Another type of research that is useful in our field is the replication study. For example, a study might investigate how much online coverage there is of a library's periodical collection at a given point in time, then replicate that study several years later to see what change there has been.

Finding a topic - Professor Hafner suggests looking at the research agendas of relevant organizations to get ideas for research and writing. And, of course, CALL/ACBD has its own agenda of research topics (http://www.callacbd.ca). Professor Hafner also publishes a list of his own ideas for possible topics which, while not specific for law libraries, may act as a catalyst for developing your own thoughts.

Looking at the literature in your field of interest may spark ideas or watching the listservs for questions or concerns that could be explored in more depth or from a particular angle may plant the seeds for a research topic. A colleague mentioned recently that he developed an idea for a sabbatical project from a book review he had written so, obviously, there are many paths to defining a topic. Discussions with colleagues who do research, however, suggest that research is most satisfying when it is an outgrowth of one's own interests or questions or concerns. Others can outline topics that need to be looked into but, ultimately, the topic needs to be one that truly engages the researcher. Whether it is a small project undertaken in the course of your regular work to address a particular need or a project that is the focus of a sabbatical or leave, your research is likely to require considerable amounts of time and energy. It had better be of genuine interest.

1. **Size your research project for the time and resources available**
   Many of us underestimate how long it is going to take to do something, whether it's cutting the grass or writing the annual report! Give serious thought to what is involved in the various components of the research you want to do and try to be realistic about the amount of time each will take. Be aware that projects have a way of expanding as one gets into them; build in some leeway. Estimate how long the work will take and double it or add a percentage depending on your own track record as an estimator of time. If you know you are a person who does things the night before they are due, make sure you have the type of project that can be pulled off in this way.

   Resources are also a factor. If, for example, you don't have or cannot afford the high tech resources you might need for a particular project, consider what lower tech options might work just as well. But take account of the impact your methodology will have on the amount of time the project will take.

2. **Networking**
   Talk to as many people as possible about the work you want to do and continue talking as you conduct the research. Getting the word out may have a number of unexpected results. Serendipitous things can and do happen; a senior colleague told me recently that one of her best insights came as a result of conversation with her seat mate on a plane--a person completely unconnected with libraries and librarianship!

   A colleague may be able to put you in touch with the perfect person to help with a particular inquiry or know of a recent study that is relevant. Others may challenge your assumptions and lead you to consider issues you had not thought about. Critical comment is at least as useful as approbation.

3. **Plan ahead**
   Sounds pretty obvious, but how many of us neglect to do this in a rigorous way? Plan the entire project at the beginning; develop a work plan and a timeline; revise them as the work progresses or if new strands of inquiry are added as the project proceeds. You may also want to factor in some downtime or time for emergencies.

   If different aspects of the research need to converge later on, plan those components up front so the data will be available when it's needed. For example, if you are conducting a survey, the results of which are going to be needed for a report, make sure your plans account for follow-up and late returns as well as time to compile the results.

4. **Searching for resources**
   Research almost invariably begins with a literature search. It is important to gain a basic understanding of your topic and the research that has already been done. The University of Sheffield Library has a handy reference page designed to remind researchers of the steps required for efficient literature searching (http://www.shef.ac.uk/library/libdocs/ml-rs17.html). Good practice is relevant for anyone doing a literature search.
   You may also want to search for materials about 'doing research', if for no other reason than to give yourself the benefit of others'

experience.

5. **Research methods and tools**

Clearly it is important to match appropriate research tools or methods with the type of inquiry you are conducting. If you are going to do a type of research that you have not done before, you will have to prepare by learning how to do it. Or you may need to use a particular methodology that is unfamiliar. You may need to take a course, for example, in designing a survey or questionnaire, if you want to be able to employ this kind of seemingly simple research tool.

If you find you need to employ research methods or tools that are unfamiliar to you, it will be helpful to identify someone--an expert--you can consult for advice.

6. **Work habits**

Figure out what work habits work well for you and try to stick to them, particularly if your research takes you out of your normal routines. If, for example, you have some evidence that you lack the discipline to work from home, don't imagine that you will miraculously turnover a new leaf when you are granted a research leave and don't have to be in the office every day.

If a bibliography of sources will be part of the end product of your research, decide on a format up front and keep your bibliographic notes in that form from the start; don't just toss them into a file to be dealt with later.

7. **Resources**

If you have a good project, don't hesitate to try to obtain some funding to help you complete it. Many organizations, including CALL/ACBD, AALL and SLA, offer research grants to members or you may be able to secure support from your own institution.

Be open to the idea of hiring a research assistant, depending on how much work needs to be done and what the nature of it is. After all, academics have been employing students to help with their research for years: why shouldn't you? Hiring a graduate student from the social sciences--psychology for instance--may be particularly helpful for certain types of research where the compilation of statistics in an essential component.

If you work in the academic or public sector, there may be opportunities for obtaining student assistance through a work-study programme. Depending on the size and nature of your research, it's worth checking out.

8. **Collaboration**

If you have a colleague who is interested in the same issues as you, think about collaborating to do research. Two heads are better than one. A partner can help brainstorm about the project and contribute to testing out hypotheses, etc. It is also useful to have someone to help keep up the momentum of getting the work done.

On the down side, collaborating removes some control of the project from your hands so you may need to be clear about who is

going to do what and how the research is to be conducted.

9. **Sharing your findings**

Many of us likely do research all the time in the course of our work but we don't think of it as such and we don't think to share our findings. Every time members of the Committee to Promote Research talk to colleagues about doing research, someone invariably says, "oh yes, we did a little study of … a while back; I suppose it might be useful for others." Even if a study or inquiry is not sufficient to make it worthwhile to publish in a peer-reviewed journal, it can be shared with colleagues via CALL-L or another appropriate listserv.