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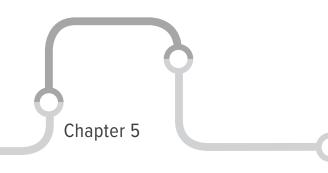https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2nc9555t

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Navigating Institutional Dynamics and Politics

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INTRODUCTION

Conducting research on topics that others consider "controversial" comes with many challenges. A key tenet of critical librarianship is to disrupt the status quo, whether that involves dismantling white supremacy culture, questioning patriarchal systems, or rejecting heteronormative practices.[1] This chapter provides a guide for librarians interested in conducting research that challenges systems of oppression within and outside of librarianship but are unsure how to get started or are afraid that their libraries may not support this work. First-hand lessons learned for conducting research on controversial topics are provided by examining the development of two research projects about sexual harassment experiences of University of California library employees.

MY LIBRARY CONTEXT

The University of California comprises ten public university campuses across California and employs more than 1,600 library workers. Within this system, the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) is the only UC campus that focuses exclusively on

graduate education and the health sciences field. UCSF enrolls 3,300 students within five professional and graduate programs, and UCSF Library employs sixty-two staff members across three campus libraries. San Francisco is known internationally for its progressive politics, including its status as a sanctuary city that regularly champions legislation around environmental issues and support of marginalized communities. Situated within San Francisco, UCSF is a leader in clinical care and research around vulnerable populations, HIV/ AIDS, and reproductive healthcare access; since the 2016 election, university leaders have been vocal in their support for the rights of undocumented students, health equity for immigrant families, and addressing gun violence as a public health issue. In contrast to other library environments I've worked in, I have received tremendous support from my library colleagues and administrators for my involvement in research on potentially controversial issues, including equitable access to abortion. Although UCSF Library is situated in a politically progressive space, our library is not immune to issues that affect the broader library community, including lack of diversity among library staff and sexual harassment.

MY RESEARCH PROJECT IDEA

The #MeToo movement in fall 2017 started a national conversation around sexual violence, including sexual assault and sexual harassment, in the workplace.[2–4] Recent studies have found that 50 percent of women faculty[5] and 77.4 percent of academic librarians have experienced or encountered sexual harassment in their work,[6] indicating the importance of this issue within our field. Because of my background and interest in feminist studies and women's health, I was asked to lead a UCSF Library discussion group around sexual harassment in libraries. In preparing for this discussion, a colleague disclosed that she had been experiencing sexual harassment at our library on a daily basis. Sexual harassment was clearly a problem for one person at the library; was anyone else experiencing it? Inspired by my colleague's story, I decided to explore UCSF Library employees' experiences with sexual harassment in order to inform the library discussion group with actual data about local experiences. It was my hope that sharing information about real-world experiences would facilitate conversations about this issue in our library in order to create lasting organizational and policy change. After successfully completing a pilot study at UCSF, I decided to expand this study to all ten campuses in the University of California system.

OBTAINING BUY-IN

After hearing anecdotal evidence from several library workers, I approached my library director with the beginnings of a study idea. The importance of involving library administrators when developing research topics of a potentially controversial nature cannot be stressed enough. Support must be obtained from library administrators for several reasons: (1) librarians must be supported with staff time to conduct research, (2) library administrators must support the dissemination of study results, both internally and outside the library through conference presentations and publications, and (3) library

administrators must be open to addressing study results, especially those that require change or improvement. In other words, if my study showed that sexual harassment was happening frequently at UCSF Library and our administration was not willing to share this information outside the library or make any significant changes to address these results, conducting the study would be pointless. If your topic is not supported by library leadership and you are afraid they may be unhappy if you share or publish the results, any change you are trying to effect will be very unlikely to happen. Research is a long and difficult process; without support from your institution, projects will be ignored and abandoned and library researchers may experience burnout. Those at institutions where librarians do not have tenure or academic freedom should consider the additional professional risks of conducting research on topics that are not supported by library administrators. If you are not able to obtain support from your institution, you may be able to find librarians at other institutions who are interested in your topic; multi-institutional projects may be more likely to be supported as your administration will see that there is wider interest in the topic. You can identify other library researchers who may be interested in working with you on social media, at conferences, through professional organizations or interest groups, or by searching the published literature for authors conducting research on similar topics.

Since my library director and university librarian were supportive of the study, my first step in obtaining buy-in from campus stakeholders was to create a research protocol, a necessary tool when designing any study.[7] A research protocol is a formalized research plan that includes your research questions, a literature review, your research methodology, participant recruitment, ethical protocols that address working with human subjects, and your approach to how you will analyze the data. Creating a research protocol is the single most important tool for any research project, especially when dealing with potentially controversial research. Looking to our colleagues in the social and health sciences, most research studies require detailed protocols to obtain funding and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The IRB reviews research protocols to ensure that human and animal rights are protected. Just as you wouldn't create a class or outreach program on the fly, you should not create a research study without giving extensive thought to the entire plan and its outcomes at the beginning of your project. This is even more important for controversial research topics as these projects often experience a higher level of scrutiny, and you should be prepared to answer all types of questions about your study. Templates and examples of research study protocols[8] can be found on most universities' IRB websites or through basic Google searches. Using a template to create your protocol will save time; you may need this extra time to solicit feedback from colleagues and other stakeholders about your protocol, including comments about the usefulness of your study, soundness of your methods, and feasibility of your timeline.

For the UCSF pilot study, I received feedback on my study plans by sharing the protocol with my library director, university librarian, library leadership team, any interested library employees, and UCSF Campus Advocacy Resources & Education (CARE), the sexual violence support organization on our campus. Our CARE advocate proved to be an essential partner, helping to modify the protocol and shape the study going forward.

For the expanded UC-wide study, the pilot study protocol was modified slightly: changes were made to the study team, the study population, and the rationale for the study, which included results from the pilot to justify the larger project. Although expanding the protocol document did not take much time, sharing the protocol with various groups and incorporating their feedback for this multi-institution study was a time-intensive process. In order to inform our stakeholders about the study, we shared the protocol with several multi-campus organizational groups, including UC system-wide groups of university librarians, library human resources staff members, librarians, and our study advisory team. In all, this document was shared with more than seventy people and several rounds of feedback were incorporated. When researching potentially controversial topics, transparency is especially important as these topics are often held to a higher standard and an increased level of scrutiny. In the case of sexual harassment research, several important concerns arose about protecting anonymity, sharing data, and language sensitivity; being able to address these questions at the outset of the study ensured that stakeholders had confidence in the project, and asking for feedback from multiple groups within the UC Library community enabled these groups to feel more invested in the process.

Developing your study team is another crucial step for obtaining buy-in from library stakeholders. Most research projects should have a team, and when researching controversial topics, it is especially important that your team is made up of people who have a strong interest and/or expertise in the topic. Members of a research team do not each need to be experts in all facets of research. As librarians, we are often asked to join systematic review teams as information-finding or data management experts but are not expected to do data analysis; in the same way, your research team can leverage the individual strengths of its members. When expanding this study across the larger University of California system, I created a core research team and a larger advisory team made up of representatives from each campus. Creating an advisory team helped us obtain buy-in at each campus since we had at least one local representative that knew each library's culture and could speak to relevant issues therein.

I encourage librarian practitioner-researchers to follow the public health model of community participation that prioritizes community involvement in research design and process.[9] Incorporating the input of those stakeholders who are directly involved in the issues you are studying is ideal to ensure that their voices are represented throughout each stage of the research process.

NAVIGATING LEGAL ISSUES

Ensuring that the study adhered to the University of California's mandated reporting policy around sexual harassment was essential.[10] In accordance with this policy, if any supervisor becomes aware of a sexual harassment incident involving any library staff member (not just someone they supervise), they are mandated to report it, regardless of the reporting intention of the staff member. Because we wanted to respect the personal agency of library staff members around reporting and did not want to take

on the responsibility of reporting incidents that were disclosed as part of the study, we utilized anonymous data collection methods. It is important to consider how the use of anonymous data collection may shape your study methods in terms of IRB approval processes and choice of data collection tools and data sharing options, among other issues. For our study, the aforementioned policy-related and legal issues affected our ability to ask for certain potentially identifying information in our survey and limited our opportunities for in-person, non-anonymous data collection methods like focus groups. In order to obtain IRB approval, we had to ensure that our survey instrument prohibited any identifying information from being collected, specify that our data would be protected via password-protected devices and encryption, and limit how any identifiable data could be shared to others.

In both studies, protecting participants' anonymity prevented us from collecting information on race or sexual orientation. We know that intersectional identities can affect experiences of sexual violence, with some women of color and transgender folks at higher risk.[11] Unfortunately, because of the lack of diversity in UC Libraries, we were unable to collect this demographic data as it could have potentially been used to identify individuals; therefore, we were unable to speak to the important issues around disparities by race or sexual orientation. This decision was not made lightly and involved extensive discussions with members of our advisory team, CARE advocates, library administrators, and representatives from diversity and inclusion organizations on several UC campuses. Those conducting research on controversial topics should be open to seeking the advice of experts outside the library when faced with difficult questions like this. Because some people may want your project to fail, it is important to make informed decisions about issues that, if completed without considerable thought and care, may provide an opportunity for your study methods to be criticized. Those conducting library research on potentially controversial topics where factors like race, gender identity, or sexual orientation play an important role must consider how the lack of diversity in libraries may affect your data collection. Library researchers should evaluate the importance of collecting such data against the potential harm that may occur if data becomes identifiable or if participants feel "othered" by being asked to choose an identity category that does not correspond with how they self-identify (i.e., asking participants to choose from binary options like "White" or "People of color").

In both studies, we chose not to share raw data because of the small risk of the presence of potentially identifying information; all data was shared in aggregate form to protect the anonymity of study respondents. Raw survey data includes the individual responses of each survey participant. Aggregate data is compiled from the raw data into a meaningful statistical summary. Librarians conducting research on controversial topics must balance the desire to share data and encourage research reproducibility with the legally and ethically mandated need to protect the identities of participants. Local IRB offices and IT departments can often provide advice to new researchers regarding the protection of personally identifiable information and protected health information (PHI), data analysis software options, and best practices for sharing data within and outside of research teams.

DESIGNING THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In both research projects, the study team worked with campus stakeholders to design our survey questions and informed consent materials to ensure respect for respondents' experiences. We used the UCSF IRB exempt research consent form template as a starting point to develop our informed consent materials;[12] many IRB offices will provide similar documents for researchers. Given the subject matter, it was extremely important to pilot our survey instrument.

In the UCSF pilot study, we solicited feedback on survey questions from my library director, the university librarian, ten library employees, and the UCSF CARE advocate, an MA, LMFT-qualified therapist that works with survivors of sexual violence on our campus. Piloting a questionnaire to an audience similar to the people who will eventually participate in the study helps identify issues with face validity (are the questions logical for the intended audience?), comprehension, syntax, and ambiguity of questions. No questionnaire should go forward without being piloted as your pilot testers will often observe mistakes that escaped your notice and identify areas that need clarification. Ensuring that your pilot audience is similar to those who will be participating in your study is crucial; several suggestions about the types of harassment behaviors in this study came from those with real-world experience of these behaviors, and potentially triggering language was identified and addressed as well.

In the UC-wide study, our questionnaire was piloted by a seventeen-member advisory team, representing all ten UC campuses. CARE advocates and library human resources representatives from each campus also reviewed the questionnaire. Piloting a survey instrument not only identifies problematic areas but it also encourages support from stakeholders by asking for their feedback on the survey. After piloting, you will be able to point to this process of gathering feedback from relevant stakeholders if questioned about your methods. For example, incorporating the feedback of our UCSF CARE representative was a way to legitimize the study and point to her support as an expert in this field when dealing with backlash against the study. When conducting research on controversial topics, you should plan to be questioned about your qualifications; having as many stakeholders as possible involved in the planning and testing of your survey instrument goes a long way toward dealing with such questions.

When piloting, you may receive contrasting feedback that leads you in new directions; it is important to go back to your research protocol frequently throughout the study design process to ensure that you are meeting your original research aims and objectives. If these aims need to be adjusted because of feedback you've received in the piloting stage, these should be changed and rationale for each change should be recorded. Throughout the research process, you should regularly consult your study's aims and evaluate how these aims are being achieved.

DATA COLLECTION AND SHARING RESULTS

The UCSF survey (n=40, 62 percent response rate) found that 48 percent of UCSF Library employees had experienced sexual harassment. Survey questions asked about types of

behaviors experienced, groups that had exhibited these behaviors, how important they believed library administration considered addressing sexual harassment, and how participants believed the library should address sexual harassment, among others. Already a controversial research topic, our study found some controversial results, including the fact that library staff members were the second most frequently reported group exhibiting harassment behavior and that library administration was viewed as considering sexual harassment as less important than respondents themselves did.

The UC-wide survey (n=579, 36 percent response rate) found similar results in this larger population, with over half of participants reporting that they had experienced or observed sexual harassment behaviors at work.[13] All types of behaviors were experienced, and most people did not report or disclose this harassment. Views of the importance that library administration placed on this issue varied across campuses, as did knowledge of reporting resources, indicating the need for increased education and the opportunity for culture change within individual campus libraries.

When conducting controversial research, there will always be detractors who do not approve of your study and results. No amount of transparency in your study design or open discussion about stated concerns can persuade such critics, whose reactions often result from white fragility or other fears around losing their privilege; understanding this can help you cope with such reactions. Backlash to controversial research topics can manifest in ways that other types of research studies would not be subjected to, such as library administrators or others in power attempting to stop your study from happening, study participants questioning your methodological rigor or leaving disparaging comments in your survey, or peer reviewers and editors denying publication of your results because of biased attitudes toward your topic. If you have obtained buy-in from stakeholders at your library for your controversial research project, including library administrators, they may be able to help you address local backlash to your study.

Even within what is considered to be a progressive university and library environment, there was some backlash to the UCSF study. A few respondents described the study as a "witch hunt" and expressed concern that they may be asked to change their behaviors at work. Researchers should respond to these reactions respectfully: ask for more detailed information about the concerns, reiterate the fact that your library administration supports the study, and take any concerns into consideration when disseminating the results of the study. Some backlash to the UC-wide study occurred during the planning and results dissemination stages, in which some administrators expressed their lack of support for the study by limiting distribution of the survey and presentation of results to their staff. We attempted to address all identified concerns through regular communication with administrative groups and our liaisons at the individual campus level. Despite these instances, the vast majority of feedback we received was positive, with many people expressing their support for the studies and the need for changes based on the results. It is important for library researchers addressing controversial topics to reflect on positive experiences and remember that attempting to change the status quo cannot happen without the inevitable side effect of upsetting those in power.

When sharing results of controversial research, consideration should be taken to understand how your library will react to these results. Will library administrators be upset if they do not see the results before the rest of the staff (or a journal editor or conference audience) does? Do your results show particular groups in a negative light? Speaking about your plan for sharing results with groups that you think may be affected will help with buy-in and may result in new suggestions for dissemination. Because we decided not to share raw data, reports were created for both studies that summarized results using aggregate responses to key questions. At the request of our university librarian, I presented the UCSF study's report at an all-library staff meeting. Sharing the UC-wide study report was managed on a campus-by-campus basis by each corresponding advisory team member, leading to presentations at eight of the ten campuses. Establishing a data sharing plan at the beginning of your project is essential for addressing any questions that might arise about who can access your results.

EVALUATION AND NEXT STEPS

From my perspective, the biggest accomplishment of both research projects was obtaining support from multiple stakeholders throughout the library system and incorporating their feedback into the studies. Involving people from across UC campus libraries that represented a wide variety of positions and personal and professional experiences helped every aspect of the project, especially the design and dissemination of the survey. Potential challenges involving obtaining IRB approval, ensuring anonymity of participants, designing a thoughtful survey, and obtaining the support of stakeholders across the UC Library system were addressed with the support of the studies' research and advisory teams.

Since the UCSF Library pilot study was completed, our library has decided to act on its results. We formed the Sexual Harassment Library Task Force and have organized educational training around definitions of sexual harassment and reporting options, two major suggestions that resulted from the survey. This group has worked closely with our university librarian and campus CARE advocate to share information about sexual harassment within the library, and we aim to create a safe, inclusive culture where this behavior is seen as unacceptable and does not happen. Future goals of the task force are to update library policies around sexual harassment and incorporate sexual harassment training into our new employee orientation materials.

The UCSF Library pilot study was expanded to all ten campuses within our university system in 2018. This project is ongoing; data collection finished in December 2018 and results were shared with each campus in 2019. We hope to share the work of the UCSF task force as a model: our approach has been informed by survey data and this group has grown organically with strong support from our library administration.

REFLECTIONS

There is a paucity of literature on sexual harassment in libraries. Although our study arose out of a local need, I believe our approach could be useful to those interested in examining

this issue at their libraries or to those interested in other "controversial" issues. Conducting research on controversial topics can be difficult, but those who do so in a conscientious way that prioritizes strong methodology will be rewarded with an opportunity to eliminate stigma and begin conversations around issues that were previously unaddressed.

- Find an area of research that you are passionate about: your project will go a long way toward addressing the stigma of a "controversial" issue if you can speak knowledgeably and passionately about the subject, informed by your own interest and research results.
- Find other people to be involved in your study, including a research team and stakeholders within and outside the library. Your research will be improved with others' involvement because of the diversity of experiences and expertise that everyone brings to the project.
- Involve library administration from the beginning; there is no use making headway on a project only to be told it is not a good fit for your library.
- Find campus advocates to help your cause. Having the support of the CARE organization legitimized my projects, and I believe their affiliation made some stakeholders more comfortable with supporting the study.
- Create a protocol, detailing all aspects of your project, your planning timeline, and what you need from others to accomplish your study. Make this protocol openly available and share it with anyone who is interested.
- Be prepared to defend your research topic. Think about the issues and counterpoints that might arise and have well-researched answers ready.
- Be prepared for the fact that some people will never support your study, no matter what you do. This is OK. Have advocates on your side and focus on your ultimate goal.
- Be open to making changes, especially those based on experiences from your participant community. Be prepared to make final decisions that will not please everyone; prioritize feedback from groups who will be most affected by your study and results.
- Be as transparent as possible with all aspects of your project: share your protocol, your meeting notes, your survey (for piloting), and your de-identified results. This will increase confidence in your project and deter those who may not like your topic.

NOTES

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