Reflections on Moving on and Scaling Up: Adapting Past Experience to Emerging Scholarly Communication Programs

Emily Kilcer  
*University at Albany, State University of New York*, ekilcer@albany.edu

Julia Lovett  
*University of Rhode Island*

Mark Clemente  
*Case Western Reserve University*

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SECTION 3.1.7

REFLECTIONS ON MOVING ON AND SCALING UP

ADAPTING PAST EXPERIENCE TO EMERGING SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS

Emily Kilcer, Julia Lovett, and Mark Clemente

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly communication librarianship is always evolving. It is inherently malleable and context-dependent. Relevant skills can be challenging to learn in most LIS programs.

As a result, the experiences that shaped our early careers in scholarly communication were essential. Time at institutions with well-resourced, well-established, and highly visible scholarly communication programs, at MIT, Harvard, and the University of Michigan, showed us what was possible with a team working toward shared goals: where to look for opportunities, how to engage in strategic decision-making, when to keep nudging, and when to back-burner an effort.

An interesting shift we have each navigated is what happens when you move from where this sort of work is woven into an institution’s structure and culture to somewhere that is just beginning to build a scholarly communication program.

Gaining experience in a well-established program and then having the opportunity to build a new program elsewhere seems to be a common juncture in many careers. Interestingly, the challenges we have faced and continue to navigate have striking parallels, despite the differences in our institutions and roles. Our discussion here offers what we hope are some practical takeaways distilled from our collective experiences.

OUR STORIES

Before we share some of our impressions from these shifts in our professional environment, what follows are brief snapshots of our experiences with scholarly communication work.

EMILY KILCER, FROM HARVARD TO THE UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY

Coming to librarianship as a second career, I was helped by internships and part-time positions to navigate my understanding of the profession. An internship at MIT with
Ellen Finnie soon after its open access (OA) policy passed crystallized my interest in OA and introduced me to scholarly communication work. When a position at Harvard’s Office for Scholarly Communication opened, I found myself in the right place at the right time. My role there evolved over time, and I learned an incredible amount from the amazing team of people with whom I worked, which is a wildly insufficient characterization of that experience. One of the greatest lessons I learned is that high-functioning teams of people with different strengths build successful, impactful projects. After several years and life changes, I left to see if I could help build a new scholcomm program at UAlbany (part of the SUNY system). As I still work to adjust to this role, I remind myself regularly that while each organization has different resources and cultures, by the very nature of this work and with patience and persistence, there are always opportunities for progress.

JULIA LOVETT, FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN TO THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

In 2012, I was hired by the University of Rhode Island Libraries as the first digital initiatives librarian. Previously, I had worked for John Wilkin at the University of Michigan, managing parts of the university’s Google Books project and the HathiTrust Digital Library. I learned so much in a short time while working with a large, experienced team, surrounded by seemingly unlimited knowledge and resources. The opportunity to start a new initiative at URI and transition into a leadership role was both exciting and intimidating. URI offered increased autonomy, flexibility, and the freedom to set priorities, but there were significant resource challenges, and I especially struggled with a lack of IT infrastructure at the time. Gradually, I made progress by setting realistic incremental goals, finding like-minded colleagues within the institution and through professional organizations, crafting projects to fit the setting, and benefiting from copious support from my colleagues and the administration.

MARK CLEMENTE, FROM MIT TO CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

I began working in scholarly communication in 2012 as the library fellow for scholarly publishing and licensing in the MIT Libraries, part of a program for early career librarians. Within a highly structured and supportive environment, and with abundant networks of mentors to learn from—like Emily, I also benefited from Ellen Finnie’s generous mentorship—I could not have anticipated a more immersive experience for learning the core areas of this field. In 2016, seeing an opportunity to return to my home city of Cleveland, I accepted a new role to build a scholarly communication program at CWRU. The transition was difficult. Moving from a supporting role within a well-established program to a new one, where the priorities and scope of the position were primarily up to me to identify and communicate, forced me to make the mental and emotional shift from early career to midcareer much sooner than I felt ready. Once I accepted this shift, however, I found ways to thrive that enabled me to take more ownership of my own role as an expert. Building peer-mentoring networks at multiple levels—within my immediate team, as well as in local, regional, and national communities—was crucial, as was identifying collaborative programs that I could build with my colleagues.
CHALLENGE, ACCEPTED

FIND YOUR COMMUNITY

One of the biggest shifts when arriving at a new institution is the loss of an established community.

In our former roles, we all worked with leaders in their domains who continue to shape the direction of this field. The conversations, connections, and projects we experienced attuned our ears to a strategic vision and organizational presence that continue to guide our work. Mentors and colleagues, both within our organizations and beyond, helped shape how we developed professionally.

When shifting from one institution to another, we have all found it important to maintain previous connections and establish new networks of peer support.

ESTABLISH AND NURTURE STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS

Nurturing a culture of openness first in the libraries is critical to building an effective scholarly communication presence, as well as a shared understanding of the value of this sort of work both within the libraries and outside. To this end, building cross-departmental allies can make the difference between a successful effort and one that fails to gain traction. Partnership can be built on deliberate conversations as well as serendipitous encounters. Being open and curious, asking questions, and finding the people who are the connectors on campus is a good start.

When you are still trying to build energy within the library, having support from another unit or a trusted voice can help make the case for the legitimacy of an effort.

SCALE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Setting a different pace, level of expectation, and measurement of success can be key to adjusting to a new institution and getting a new initiative off the ground. Even when progress on an effort seems frustratingly slow, look for quality over quantity. Scholcomm work is often touted as global in scope, especially OA initiatives that aim for global access to scholarship, but this work can also be transformative at a local level. Do not underestimate your program just because it is new or modest in size. There may be certain aspects of your program that are very successful—even more so than the known leaders in the field—that others would want to hear about.

TAKE TIME; BE DELIBERATE AND STRATEGIC

Another obvious benefit of building an emerging program is the flexibility and freedom to shape priorities. We have each experienced increased autonomy and agency in our new positions. It takes time to identify strategic priorities that cohere and make sense within an institution based on culture, staffing, and resources.

Relatedly, scholcomm roles are often responsible for work of high strategic importance to the library and institution and often do not come with the authority or level of influence to shape discussions. Navigating this tension is often part of a scholcomm role. Providing information and reasoning to help inform decision-making will often be an iterative process with fits and starts.
YOU CANNOT DO IT ALL. AND THAT’S OK.

Because this work is always changing, expanding your own expertise as a scholcomm librarian is part and parcel of the role. Deep expertise in all areas of scholarly communication is difficult and time-consuming at best, if not impossible. As a result, it is possible that your strengths may not match the requirements of your new institution. Understanding that you may need to tool up and explore new communities and practices should be a welcome challenge. Your expertise may help inform other efforts down the road. Again, there’s opportunity everywhere!

CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE

Another expectation of a scholarly communication librarian is the ability to contribute to the knowledge of the profession through publications, presentations, or other means. When your vantage point is from a library with a robust program, your scholarship will reflect that stature. Coming from an emerging program, there will be fewer opportunities to speak from a leadership role. Remember, however, there are many scholarly communication librarians in the same boat, working with limited resources, who need information pertaining to their own situations. Hearing how a similar library tackled a problem will be more valuable than hearing what an elite institution is doing with its latest large grant.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

From taking the time to understand your new organization and build new communities of support to setting reasonable priorities and finding time to continue to grow professionally, navigating this sort of professional shift has the potential to be remarkably challenging, rewarding, and impactful. As you make this leap, try to maintain relationships with your mentors, remember that local impact is powerful, and be patient with the process and kind to yourself.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After identifying the variables that you can control and those you can't, how might you be able to best direct the trajectory of the scholcomm efforts at your institution?
2. Since partnerships critical to this work take time to build, where can you best spend energy as those efforts develop?
3. As you map out and build upon your program, how will you advocate efforts to your leadership? What assessment measures will you need to have in place? How will you demonstrate impact? What language resonates with which communities on campus?
4. Each of these authors discusses how previous experience informed next jobs. How have your experiences, whatever they are, prepared you for your current or next role?