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CHAPTER 18

Connecting Research to Policy and Practice:

A Case Study of a White Paper Collection in an Institutional Repository

Angela Hackstadt

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2020, researchers across the University at Albany convened to study the differential impacts of Covid-19 on Black and Latinx New Yorkers and to deliver policy recommendations. This group, known as the Covid-19 and Minority Health Disparities in New York State Engaged Researchers Working Group (hereafter Working Group), has worked with community partners to “develop data-driven prevention strategies to help inform New York’s response to this and future public health threats.”¹ The project leaders and engaged researchers contributed their work to a white paper collection entitled Understanding and Eliminating Minority Health Disparities in a 21st Century Pandemic²

(hereafter White Paper Collection) in Scholars Archive, University at Albany's institutional repository.

The Working Group was charged with the task of directing research efforts toward policy solutions and their initial audience was New York State government. For policy workers, academic research is the most trusted information source, but policymakers tend to gravitate toward grey literature, which academic researchers tend not to create.³ The researchers involved with the Working Group have created a great deal of scholarship in various disciplines, including peer-reviewed articles, conference papers and presentations, panels, and issue briefs. The subject of this chapter is the White Paper Collection, comprised of eleven white papers authored by Working Group members and their co-authors as well as the final report, which synthesizes these white papers and other works that fall under the purview of the study.⁴

White papers belong to a nebulous category of publications known as grey literature. Grey literature is published outside of traditional publishing channels and includes reports, working papers, policy documents, briefings, data, and other publications produced by organizations whose main purpose is not publishing.⁵ Policy work relies heavily on grey literature, and the government is considered the most important target audience for grey literature producers of all types.⁶

While IRs do collect grey literature, there is room for growth and an opportunity to rethink the IR as the starting point for the active distribution of research beyond academia. This has been an exploration of the work where a subject librarian's liaison and scholarly communications duties meet. Although a member of the Working Group since it was formed in 2020 and a part of the University Libraries' scholarly communications team, this position's primary responsibility is as a subject liaison to the political science, public policy, public administration, and international affairs programs in Rockefeller College. Thanks to this influence, interests in research impact are specifically related to connecting academic scholarship with those outside of academia who would potentially benefit, like government and nonprofit workers, policymakers, advocates, and community members who are themselves often the subject of academic research.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the literature that deals with grey literature creation and its collection in IRs. Next, it will explore the reach of the White Paper Collection beyond New York and share the results of a survey sent to the Working Group about their experiences with creating and sharing grey literature. Finally, it will include a discussion of the survey results in the context of the literature and make recommendations for encouraging scholars to deposit their work in an IR and for connecting grey literature produced by academics to community and government stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purposes of this chapter, Schöpfel's definition of grey literature as "that which is produced on all levels of government, academics, business, and industry in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishers" will be utilized.⁷ Some examples of grey literature include technical reports, government documents or publications that translate research, like information sheets, reviews, or guidelines.⁸ White papers, documents that address a specific problem for a specific audience, fit into this category.⁹

Grey literature can find an audience in many disciplines.¹⁰ Government entities, policymakers, and practitioners are heavy users of many kinds of grey literature.¹¹ Information users among public policy workers report that 60 to 80 percent of the sources they consult are grey literature.¹² These audiences use and value grey literature because it is usually available for free online, it is often the most current information on a topic or problem, and it covers topics that do not appear in peer-reviewed publications.¹³ It is also valuable because it incorporates the experiences of practitioners and service users.¹⁴

IRs can aid in the collection and dissemination of grey literature, especially when it is created by academic researchers.¹⁵ Ninety-five percent of IRs contain grey literature and 63 percent of IRs actively collect it.¹⁶ For academic institutions, the most commonly collected grey literature are theses and dissertations, followed by conference materials, technical reports, and working papers.¹⁷ Other institutions that collect grey literature most commonly collect reports, conference papers, audio-visual material, and discussion papers.¹⁸ Improved search functionality and metadata are needed to further develop and expand grey literature collection by IRs.¹⁹ Where grey literature collection is possible, the IR provides persistent URLs, permanent storage, backup, and migration, all desperately needed for these kinds of publications that may be otherwise lost over time.²⁰

THE WHITE PAPER COLLECTION

Members of the scholarly communication team worked with the project leaders to publish the White Paper Collection in Scholars Archive, the IR. Download statistics were collected from the bepress Digital Commons dashboard for the period between April 2021, when authors could begin depositing their white papers, and April 2022.²¹ By the end of April 2022, there was a total of 1,653 downloads of individual white papers.

Seventy-two percent of downloads have been by readers in the United States: 42 percent of these are from New York, followed by California, Virginia, Texas, and New Jersey. There is at least one downloader in forty-four states; twenty states have ten or more downloads.

Table 18.1 Downloads from the White Paper Collection by state.	
State	Downloads
New York	500
California	129
Virginia	54
Texas	52
New Jersey	42
Ohio	37
Maryland	35
Washington	31
Georgia	29
Pennsylvania	23
Michigan	22
Massachusetts	22
Connecticut	20
Illinois	19
Florida	17
North Carolina	15
Indiana	14
Arizona	12
Oregon	11
Tennessee	10

After the United States, Japan had the next highest number of downloads at seventy. By far, most downloads occurred in the US, but the White Paper Collection appears to have some relevance for readers around the world.

Table 18.2 Downloads from the White Paper Collection by country.	
Country	Downloads
United States	1191
Japan	70
Philippines	47
Canada	42
France	23
United Kingdom	23
China	22
Germany	21
Australia	19
India	17
Netherlands	12
South Africa	11
Ireland	10

While the Working Group’s original audience was New York State government, most of the institutions that accessed the collection are described as educational. Only 12 percent of downloading institutions are categorized as government.

Table 18.3 Downloads from the White Paper Collection by institution type, although there are discrepancies.	
Type of Institution	Downloads
Educational	190
Commercial	71
Government	38
Organization	13
Total	312

However, bepress was only able to identify the type of downloading institution for 312 downloads, or approximately 19 percent. From the dashboard, it is unclear how institution types are identified and there are some discrepancies. For instance, the City of Albany was coded as a commercial institution. Also, some hospitals are coded as organizations while others are coded as educational. The low number of identified download sources and misidentified institution types are not good indicators of who is downloading the work.

For 72 percent of downloads, bepress was able to identify a referring URL, giving us some insight into how readers are finding the White Paper Collection. Thirty-nine percent of these are Scholars Archive links directly to the collection, followed by Google (30 percent), and Google Scholar (24 percent). The remaining referrers (7 percent) come from other search engines and a mix of other links.

Table 18.4

Downloads from the White Paper Collection by referring source.

Referrer	Downloads
Scholars Archive	467
Google	351
Google Scholar	283
Other	49
Other Search Engine	36
Total	1186

THE WORKING GROUP

A survey was distributed via Qualtrics to fifty-two members of the Working Group's email list; ten members responded to the survey.²² Nine of the respondents indicated that they currently hold an academic position: three associate, four full, one distinguished, and one emeritus; one respondent did not clarify their rank or position. Seven of the respondents stated that they have been in their field for twenty or more years; three indicated fifteen or fewer years. The Working Group is interdisciplinary, and six colleges, schools, or units are represented by the respondents.

Seven Working Group members said they do create grey literature as part of their usual research or scholarship. Of the three who said they do not usually produce grey literature, two said they do not because it is not rewarded or recognized by their department. Other reasons are that creating grey literature is not relevant to their current position, there are concerns about the perceived quality of grey literature, a lack of stringent peer review of grey literature, and time constraints. For those who do create grey literature, the most common types

are conference papers or presentations and white papers, followed by technical reports, pre-prints, working papers, datasets, and government documents.

Table 18.5 Content of the White Paper Collection by type of grey literature.		
Type of Grey Literature	Percent	Count
Conference papers or presentations	23.08%	6
White papers	23.08%	6
Technical reports	19.23%	5
Pre-prints	11.54%	3
Working papers	11.54%	3
Datasets	7.69%	2
Government documents	3.85%	1
Total	100%	26

For most of the respondents, policymakers are the target audience for their grey literature, followed by academics or researchers, nonprofits, the public, educators, government, and lobbyists or advocacy groups.

Table 18.6 Target audiences for the White Paper Collection content.		
Audience	Percent	Count
Policymakers	71.43%	5
Academics or researchers	57.14%	4
Nonprofits or NGOs	57.14%	4
The public	42.86%	3
Educators	28.57%	2
Government officials	28.57%	2
Lobbyists or advocacy groups	14.29%	1
Total	100%	7

When asked how important it is that their grey literature reach a broad audience, four said it is somewhat important and three said it is very important. Seven of the ten respondents indicated that they contributed white papers to the collection; of these, four said their target audience for their white paper is policymakers and three said their target audience is government officials.

Respondents share grey literature by providing copies on request, depositing it in an IR, uploading it to an academic social network, publishing it on their

institution's website, conference proceedings or conference website, and depositing it in a disciplinary repository.

Table 18.7

How grey literature is shared by survey respondents.

Distribution Method	Percent	Count
Provide copies to others on request	31.25%	5
Deposit in an institutional repository (e.g., Scholars Archive)	25.00%	4
Upload to an academic social networking site (e.g., ResearchGate, Academia.edu)	12.50%	2
Publish on my institution's or organization's web page	12.50%	2
Other	12.50%	2
Deposit in a disciplinary repository (e.g., ArXiv, SocArXiv, SSRN)	6.25%	1
Publish on my personal web page	0.00%	0
Total	100%	16

When distributing grey literature, five said they default to the venue's licensing terms and one said they actively apply an open license. Six said it is somewhat important that their grey literature be preserved in perpetuity, and one said it is very important.

DISCUSSION

For most of the Working Group, policymakers are the most important audience for the grey literature they create. Grey literature is a valuable resource for specific domains of public policy, such as climate change, and research can indirectly influence policy by raising awareness of issues among stakeholders.²³ The Working Group's top grey literature outputs are conference papers or presentations and white papers. While conferences are an important way to share research findings, conferences have limited audiences.²⁴ Grey literature users of all types say that reports, discussion papers, briefings, reviews or guides, and datasets are among the most important kinds of grey literature they rely on.²⁵

Some of the Working Group reported that they produce pre-prints. A pre-print is the version of an article manuscript before it goes through the peer-review process posted to a repository "to facilitate open and broad sharing of early work without any limitations to access."²⁶ Pre-prints are a way for scholars to get their work circulating prior to the lengthy peer review and publishing process, so they can be beneficial to advocacy or policy work on a current problem. However, these kinds of documents are not without problems. Because they have not been peer-reviewed, there is the potential for error and concerns about research quality.²⁷ There are also concerns about journalists reporting on findings in pre-prints

without explaining or understanding that these results are unvetted.²⁸ Researchers should also consider their intentions for the work. If they intend to submit an article for peer review, they should check with the editor of the potential journal to ensure that sharing the work on a pre-print server or depositing it in a repository does not make it ineligible for publication.

Timeliness is one of the most valued aspects of grey literature by users.²⁹ Grey literature producers put materials on their own websites, making them free to access.³⁰ Industry or organization websites are used to distribute grey literature, but this contributes to “link rot” when pages are reorganized; for this reason, academics choose to post their work on their own websites.³¹ This does give the researcher more control over the distribution of their work but simply moves the responsibility for website maintenance from an organization to an individual. The respondents to the survey said that preservation of their grey literature is very important or somewhat important. It is also important that their work has a broad audience. The White Paper Collection demonstrates that an IR can meet both needs for academics who create grey literature.

Librarians should actively seek out other forms of grey literature for IR deposit. IRs positively influence the reach of grey literature, as grey literature is downloaded from open access repositories more than articles, books, or book chapters.³² Scholars are already creating conference presentations, white papers, datasets, and other documents not intended for peer review. Exploring other potential document types and formats would be a worthwhile endeavor. It is necessary to communicate research findings in more than one format to reach a diverse audience.³³ Grey literature can be more accessible—as in more readable or understandable—in this way: “More accessible outputs like white papers and policy documents are increasingly likely to reach and impact policymakers, just as videos, recordings, fact sheets, websites, and blog posts may be more easily accessed and readily understood by the general public.”³⁴ Shorter pieces, like fact sheets or summaries of research, are also more easily accessible on mobile devices.³⁵

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 and Minority Health Disparities in New York State Engaged Researchers Working Group is, at its heart, a community-focused project. Its original target audience was the New York State government, but its purpose has expanded to include developing and fostering partnerships among researchers, community organizations, and government agencies. In addition to the White Paper Collection and an impressive body of research, this work has led to a campus-wide commitment to collaboration and research in health equity.³⁶ It has been a valuable experience and has provided opportunities for a subject librarian to expand professional networks, collaborate with researchers outside of

University Libraries and Rockefeller College, and to leverage scholarly communications and subject and research expertise. The project has also provided opportunities to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of Scholars Archive and other library support. The White Paper Collection is evidence that researchers are motivated to share their research broadly. From here, it is possible to rethink the institutional repository as a vital connection between research and policy.

NOTES

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14. Hughes et al., "Using Grey Literature in the Human Services."
15. Cooper et al., "Grey Literature"; Małgorzata Rychlik, "The Role of the Academic Library in Disseminating Grey Literature," *Grey Journal (TGJ)* 12 (January 2, 2016): 60–64; Cara Bradley, "Canadian Community-Based Research Unit Outputs, 2010–2020" (Scholars Portal Dataverse, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.5683/SP2/GYVKN6>; Simon Lambert, Brian M. Matthews, and Catherine Jones, "Grey Literature, Institutional Repositories, and the Organisational Context," *Grey Journal (TGJ)* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 85–90; Robyn Price and John Murtagh, "An Institutional Repository Publishing Model for Imperial College London Grey Literature," *Serials Librarian* 79, no. 3/4 (October 2020): 349–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0361526X.2020.1847737>.
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