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Scholarly Communication Work: On the Ground Perspectives

Allegra K. Swift and Annie K. Johnson

This survey investigates the experiences of scholarly communication workers in North America, with a total of 282 responses. Previous studies on scholarly communication work in academic libraries have tended to focus on organizational structure and necessary competencies. This study aims to put the focus back on workers' own experiences on the job, to better understand the contributing factors to burnout and attrition that can arise for those in these positions. Five main areas are investigated: newness of the position, scope of the work, support and resources, feelings of one's expertise being unvalued or dismissed, and the impact of administration. The study concludes with recommendations for library administrators on how to fortify a more sustainable environment for scholarly communication workers.

Introduction

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defines scholarly communication as "the system through which research and other scholarly writings are created, evaluated for quality, disseminated to the scholarly community, and preserved for future use" (2003). Scholarly communication workers, then, are those in libraries who help make sure this system functions properly. They have various job titles, including librarian, manager, specialist, or something else entirely. Library staff with scholarly communication responsibilities hold unique "boundary spanning" roles. These staff are often in non-administrator positions without tangible support, resources, or authority, and yet are expected to lead and develop major programs and initiatives (Hackstadt, 2020). This study was conducted by librarians with experience in scholarly communication, in both non-administrator and administrative positions, who noticed several scholarly communication workers leaving their positions. It examines the range of experiences of people who work in these roles, with or without the designation "scholarly communication" or "librarian" in their title, to better understand the contributing factors to burnout and attrition that can arise. Five areas are explored: newness of the position, scope of the work, support and resources, feelings of one's expertise being unvalued or dismissed, and the impact of administration. After discussing these areas, recommendations are offered to upper administrators as to how they can help prevent burnout and attrition among their staff.

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Literature Review

Much has been written about scholarly communication in libraries. This research largely focuses on how scholarly communication work is structured, differences and commonalities in position descriptions, and skills and training needed for *librarians* specifically. There are far fewer studies that look at the individual experiences of scholarly communication workers or that question the overall sustainability of the work, as this study does. In addition, while there has been significant research on burnout and low morale among academic librarians more generally, this study is the only one that specifically focuses on scholarly communication workers and burnout.

Who is responsible for scholarly communication work and where does it belong in the library? Thomas (2013) drew on 2012 ARL Spec Kit *The Organization of Scholarly Communication Services* to discuss the prevalence of scholarly communication services across libraries. He found that there was no single or predominant model for how scholarly communication work was integrated into academic libraries. Almost 10 years later, Peper (2022) still found that the ways scholarly communication was organized and staffed varied widely across institutions. Case studies have shed further light on some of the ways scholarly communication work is distributed. Shea et al. (2017); and Wu (2019) discussed how they created working groups of volunteers from across their libraries to support scholarly communication initiatives. Whiting and Wright (2020) detailed how they established a formal scholarly communication unit to manage the work. Most recently, Lippincott (2023) found that digital scholarship centers were offering scholarly communication services, particularly related to data services and publishing. This study confirms what others had previously found: that academic libraries continue to staff scholarly communication services in varied ways.

In terms of position descriptions, Finlay et al. (2015) looked at the growth of job advertisements related to scholarly communication, arguing that more training was needed to support this area. Xia and Li (2015) also analyzed job ads and found that responsibilities and even qualifications changed over time often in response to milestones in the scholarly communications ecosystem. Although focused specifically on OER librarianship, Larson (2020), examined position descriptions and argued that a standard scope of work had not yet emerged. This study, on the other hand, examines the actual on-the-ground experiences of scholarly communication workers, and how they view their job responsibilities.

The question of what one needs to know to be a scholarly communication librarian and how they should acquire this knowledge has also been a hotly debated topic. The NASIG Core Competencies for Scholarly Communication Librarians, which was developed in 2017, set the standard for what scholarly communication work should look like for librarians. As a result, many studies, including Lange and Hanson (2020) and Brantley et al. (2017), have focused on how to help existing liaison librarians gain knowledge of what are considered core scholarly communication topics. Bonn et al. (2020), on the other hand, have argued that training needs to begin much earlier, and that library and information science graduate programs should be integrating scholarly communication topics into existing courses and curricula, to better prepare students for these positions. Kingsley et al. (2022) also focused on gaps in education and advocated for more training for scholarly communication work. Owens (2021) argued that the large number of responsibilities of a scholarly communication librarian led many to experience "impostor syndrome." Finally, Hollister and Jensen (2023) looked at the research productivity of scholarly communication librarians and argued similarly that lack of training

was a major issue. This study, in contrast, did not find lack of training to be a primary concern for scholarly communication workers.

Scholarship that discusses the actual on-the-job experiences of scholarly communication workers is less common and tends to be focused on individual case studies. In her well-known satirical article, Salo (2013) noted the many challenges facing scholarly communication librarians without institutional support. In the years that followed the publication of this piece, case studies confirmed that the sustainability of this work continues to be an issue. Champieux et al. (2020) described the need to encourage sustainable planning for outreach events like Open Access Week. Meetz and Boczar (2022) discussed changes made to the publishing program at Pacific University to make it more sustainable for staff. Most recently, the textbook, *Scholarly Communication Librarianship and Open Knowledge* (2023), includes personal essays from 10 scholarly communication librarians about their experiences with this work. This study therefore fills a gap in the literature, as it focuses on the experiences of a broad swath of scholarly communication workers from many different institutions.

Finally, there have been numerous studies that look at low morale and burnout among academic librarians. Kendrick (2017) examined low morale as a phenomenon different from, although related to, bullying and burnout. Nardine (2019) and Wood (2020) both found that burnout was a significant issue for librarians. Most recently, Holm et al. (2023) focused on the many causes of burnout among librarians, including workload, employment status, dysfunctional organizational culture, and leadership. This study complements such previous work on burnout and low morale while looking specifically at the unique experiences of scholarly communication workers.

Methods

The authors created an online survey designed to better understand the experiences of scholarly communication workers working in academic libraries in North America. The survey contained 33 questions that covered position background, current and future work, experiences on the job, and demographics. To be sensitive to respondents and as inclusive as possible, the authors deliberately asked only one open-ended demographic question related to respondents' identities. All questions in the survey were optional. Prior to submission to the IRB, the survey was sent to several individuals outside of the author team who had expertise in survey design and/or scholarly communication. Feedback from these reviewers led to edits to the survey questions. This study was reviewed and judged to be exempt by both the University of California San Diego Institutional Review Board and the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board. Recruitment emails were sent to numerous library listservs including SPARC, NASIG-l, Scholcomm (ALA), Digital Commons, ALPA, Lib-OER, CC-OpenEDU, OCLC-RLP, LPC, IR Managers Forum, and CLIR Postdoctoral Fellows, and survey links were shared over Twitter (now X) and LinkedIn. The survey ran for three weeks, closing on March 20, 2023.

Analysis

The survey received 282 responses which were analyzed using Qualtrics (for quantitative responses) and Taguette and manual thematic coding (for the qualitative questions). Because all the questions were optional, not all the respondents answered every question. Each author led the analysis for different quantitative questions and coding of the qualitative questions, after which the authors came together and compared work.

Limitations

While the survey specified that it was open to anyone in North America, it was written in English and was only distributed to English-language listservs. In addition, one question erroneously asked for Carnegie classification of the respondent's current or previous employer, when such a classification does not apply to universities outside the United States.

Regarding demographic questions, the authors were concerned about anonymity and the risks of re-identification; therefore, they decided before launching the survey to only report on data for subgroups when there were at least 20 respondents in the subgroup. There were fewer than 20 respondents who identified themselves as having any one marginalized identity and, as a result, the authors are unable to report on this data. This was unfortunate, as the authors hoped to find potential correlations between the experiences of scholarly communication workers and their identities.

Results and Analysis

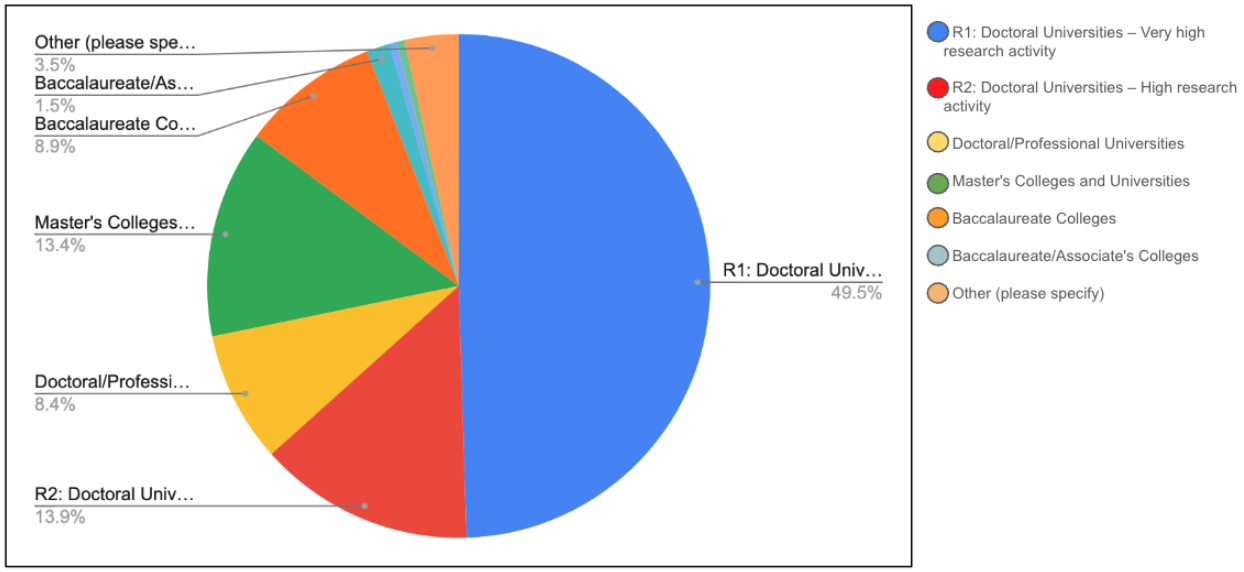
The Position

Of respondents, 87.69% worked in scholarly communication in a North American academic library and 7.46% responded that they used to. Of respondents, 49.5% worked in R1 universities with high research and publication outputs (see Figure 1).

Of respondents, 75.21% indicated that their position required a library and information science (LIS) degree, 13.68% said an LIS degree was not required and 11.11% of respondents indicated that an LIS degree was preferred. Only a small group of respondents indicated that a juris doctor or PhD was preferred or required for their position.

Of respondents, 96.15% were in a permanent position. In terms of how their positions are classified, 47.86% of respondents reported being faculty while 48.29% reported being classified as staff. Only 23.93% of respondents indicated that they are a member of a union.

FIGURE 1
Carnegie Classification of Your Current Library or Where You Were Most Recently Employed

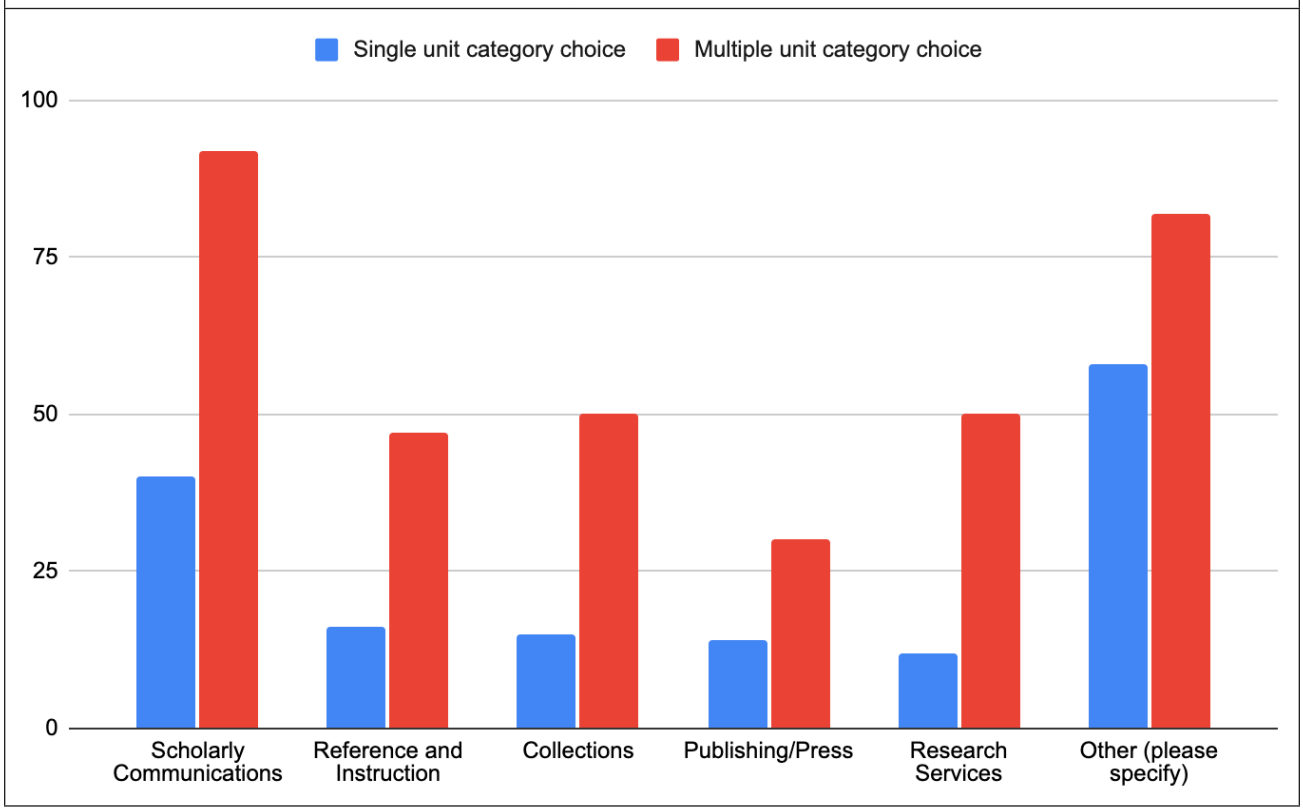


Note: Numbers are rounded so the percentages may not add up to 100%.

The question, "What unit within the library is your position considered a part of?" was intended to surface the wide range of possible organizational structures workers in these roles found themselves in. The respondents (282) to this question were allowed to make multiple choices but 97 respondents chose a single general category for type of unit. Forty were solely in a scholarly communication unit, 16 reported under reference and instruction, 15 to collections, 14 to a publishing/press unit, and 12 to research services (see Figure 2).

Most respondents' choices conveyed that their position was situated in multiple reporting areas within the organizational chart, sometimes under as many as four categories with the most common denominator again being scholarly communication (92). Many respondents felt the need to elaborate and chose the "other (please specify)" free text field in addition to the categories presented. Respondents reporting under collections or research services combined were evenly split with reference and instruction at 50 and 47, respectively. Thirty respondents were also aligned with publishing/press units (see Figure 2).

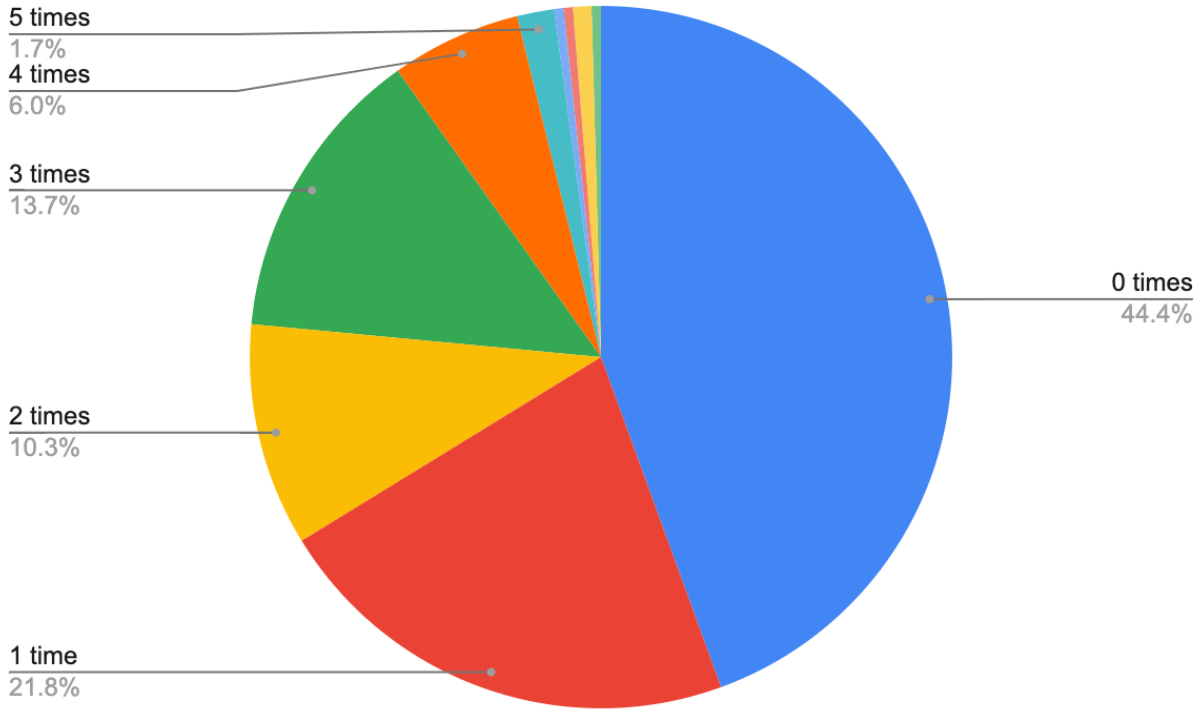
FIGURE 2
What Unit Within the Library is Your Position Considered a Part of?



Of the respondents, 82 chose "other" to indicate lack of a unit structure, or to enter the title of a unit that was not included in the survey drop-down choices. Units listed by respondents included: "Digital" initiatives/library/scholarship/strategies, technical services, special collections/archives, systems and information technology, library administration, and access services/public services.

The survey asked how many times individuals had experienced changes in reporting structure. While 44.44% of respondents had not experienced any reporting structure changes, 21.79% of respondents had experienced organizational change once and 31.62% reported

FIGURE 3
Number of Times the Reporting Structure has Changed for Your Current Position



Note: Numbers are rounded so the percentages may not add up to 100%.

experiencing changes between two to five times. A few individuals went through six to nine changes in their organization (see Figure 3).

The Person

The authors chose to combine the personal identity question in a free-form text field to be inclusive of how respondents express complex and multiform identities, lessen potentially triggering or offensive survey fields/drop downs, and avoid deanonymization (see Figure 4).

Hulbert and Kendrick (2023) examined several sources of data on ratios of race or family origin in libraries, all reporting the profession has been consistently over 80% White. While the numbers for BIPOC librarians have fluctuated over the years they remain well below 5 or 10% depending on the demographic (2023). The profession has also been reported as over 80% women for decades (Iglesias & Gard, 2023) with no gender-diverse data collection for comparison. This survey focuses on the scholarly communication worker who is usually the sole dedicated person in this position in their place of work thereby increasing the possibility of identification if the respondent was not a white cisgender woman. By asking the personal identity question, the authors could ask a follow-up question to understand if the respondent experienced barriers in their work related to their self-described identities.

The survey asked respondents in what year they were born. This data was then generalized by compressing individual years into decades. Most of the respondents were born in the 1970s or 1980s. Under 20% of respondents were born in the 1950-1960s, and a small number are still working past the retirement age of 65.

Of respondents, 200 indicated how many years they had logged as a scholarly communication worker with the average being seven years. There was an overall range of six months

FIGURE 4
Word Cloud of Responses to Tell Us About Your Identities (e.g., Dis/Abilities, Ethnicities, Gender Identity, Race, Sexual Orientation, etc.)

to 27 years. Of respondents, 45.50% reported five years or fewer, 34.50% reported between six to 10 years, and 20.00% of respondents have been working in scholarly communication positions somewhere between 11 to 20 years (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Numbers of Years as a Scholarly Communication Worker

Respondents	Years in a scholarly communication role
91	5 years or fewer
69	6-10 years
40	11-20 years

Newness

Of respondents, 56.84% indicated that they are or were the first person to hold their position in their library. The "newness" of scholarly communication work was also evident when respondents were asked what unit they are/were a part of. As previously mentioned in the discussion of demographics, respondents detailed belonging to almost every single unit of the library, or, in some cases, no unit at all. Academic libraries have clearly not come to a consensus over where scholarly communication should "sit" within an organization.

Some respondents indicated that they applied specifically for their scholarly communication position, while others noted that scholarly communication work was "added" on to their original position within the organization. In some instances, scholarly communication work was added on in part because of the advocacy of the individual; however, in other instances respondents noted that staffing changes—such as reorganizations and staff departures—were responsible for the change. The establishment of an institutional repository was also noted as another reason why scholarly communication responsibilities were added to a person's existing role.

Being the first person in a new position brings opportunity. One respondent explained that "the job description is generic and it will be up to me to shape my new role" while another noted, "when I began I was tasked with essentially building a SC program from scratch." But it can also lead to overly high expectations from other staff as well as scope creep. As one respondent explained, "my area is a start-up with many projects, few policies and consideration for managing expectations." Another new scholarly communication worker explained, "I have been in my position [for] 18 months. I started to be overwhelmed by the demand for my services when I hit my first year anniversary." Yet another agreed: "I have been in two scholarly communication focused positions that were new to the institution and both had heavy job creep…"

Scope of the Work

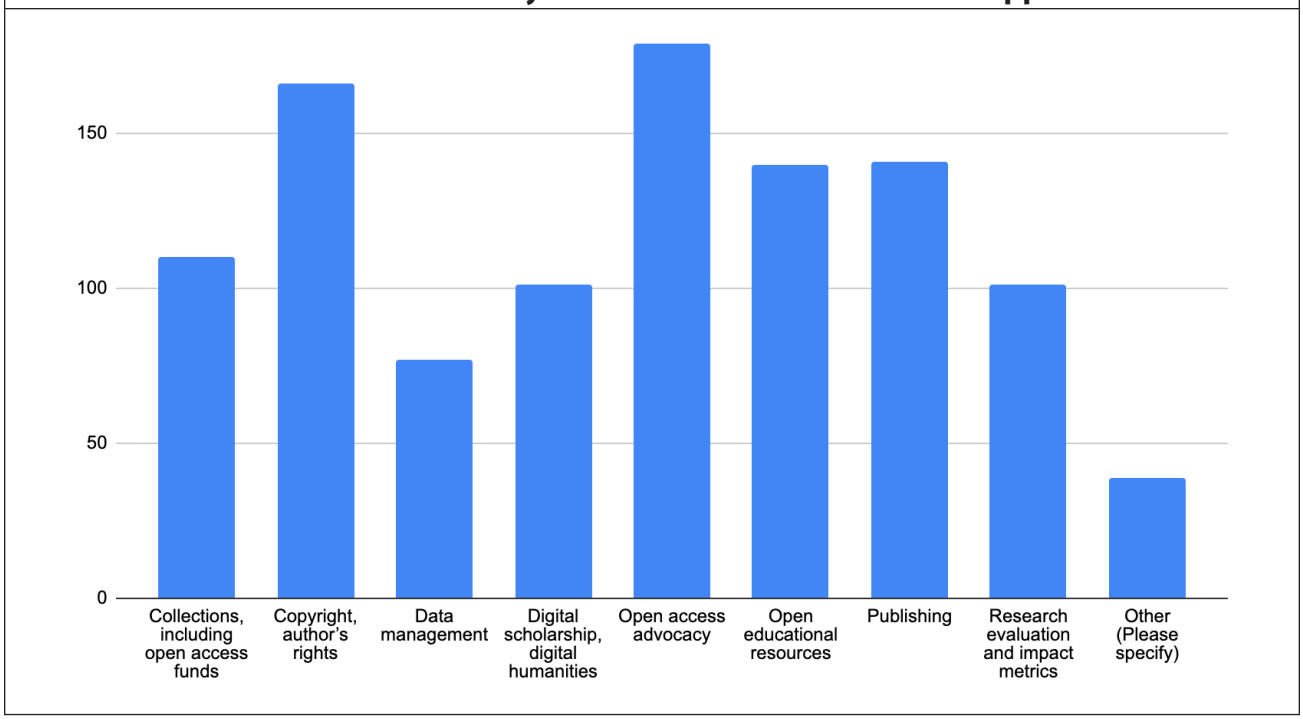
When asked to identify what areas of scholarly communication work the individual supported, responses indicated the breadth of scholarly communication work, with open access advocacy and copyright being two of the most frequently noted areas of work. Other areas noted included: collections, data management, digital scholarship/digital humanities, open educational resources, publishing, and research evaluation and impact metrics (see Figure 5).

When asked about whether their job description accurately reflects their work, 64.53% of respondents said it did. However, several respondents also indicated that their job descriptions were vague and could therefore encompass lots of different types of work.

Other responses shed more light on this question of scope. One respondent who was hired as a liaison librarian but whose work has expanded into scholarly communication noted, "I am basically trying to do two jobs and am completely overwhelmed and frustrated." Another explained, "The exact boundaries of my job were never clear, and asking for clarification got me nowhere." Yet another respondent noted that scholarly communication work is "like pushing a large and ever-growing rock uphill in sand."

Despite these sentiments, 58.53% of respondents said they were currently focused on growing their scholarly communication services. Indeed, only 2.30% of respondents indicated that they were cutting back their services. Several respondents noted that doing this work was a balancing act: "The role encompasses enough work for at least 3 people. I am focused

FIGURE 5
What Areas of Scholarly Communication Work Do You Support?



on better defining what I can reasonably support, which means deciding what to maintain, what to grow, and what to pare back." Another noted, "In some ways, my services just keep growing. I see a greater need now than I did 10 years ago for OA conversations with faculty and students. In particular, I've ended up leading OER work on campus; OER has become a substantial part of my work (even though it's not specifically referenced in my job description). On the other hand, I'm aware that I'm only one person and can't possibly do 'all the things' without putting some things in maintenance mode or paring back in (hopefully) strategic (less urgent) areas."

Importantly, survey results also indicated that scholarly communication workers are adaptive and dedicated to this work despite its challenges. As one respondent noted, "Even when it feels like a struggle, I absolutely love this work and wouldn't want to give it up." Another explained, "I think it's an exciting place to be, and I'm grateful to be doing this work, despite the disappointments." Yet another noted, "I love the work I do—I find it fulfilling and I believe in it on a fundamental level."

Support and Resources

Several survey questions focused on support for scholarly communication in terms of staff time. Of respondents, 63.25% indicated that they do not supervise other staff members (excluding student employees) and 50.92% said they do not have an established team or unit for scholarly communication work. When asked how other library staff collaborate with them when it comes to scholarly communication work, responses varied. Several respondents mentioned referrals to their services by liaison librarians as the primary form of "collaboration." Others mentioned specific areas such as the institutional repository, transformative agreements, copyright, data management, and publishing. Still others noted they received no help from other library staff members. Of respondents, 78.90% indicated that there are other positions,

departments, and/or offices on campus with whom they collaborate, though the nature of the collaboration was unspecified in terms of workload sharing.

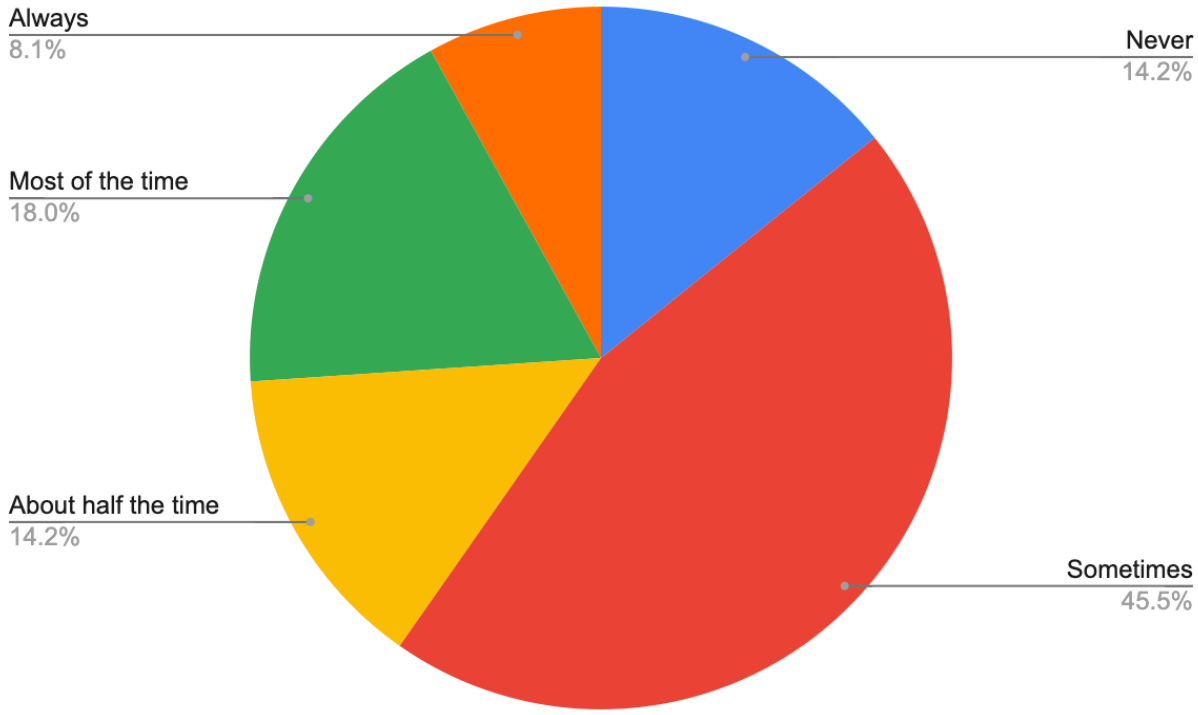
Of respondents, 73.71% indicated that they "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" that their supervisor understands their work. In addition, 81.22% of respondents "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" that their supervisor advocates for their work. Responses to the questions about direct supervisor advocacy were one of the strongest in the survey, with only 8.92% of respondents choosing the ambivalent "neither agree or disagree."

Of respondents, 51.17% of respondents "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" that their colleagues understand the work they do. In addition, 65.26% of respondents "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" that they feel valued as a colleague/employee. When asked if colleagues appropriately refer patrons to the respondents as an expert in scholarly communication topics, most responses were positive with 35.68% responding that they "strongly agree" and 35.21% responding that they "somewhat agree."

When asked about support for scholarly communication in terms of financial resources, about 74.79% said they did not manage a budget. In addition, 52.11% "strongly disagreed" or "somewhat disagreed" that scholarly communication work is appropriately resourced at their workplace. On the other hand, 54.93% of respondents either somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement, "I am compensated fairly for my work."

To acquire additional resources or support, individuals often must advocate for themselves. When asked how often they were required to advocate, only 14.15% of respondents said "never," while 45.28% said "sometimes." 14.15% said "about half of the time," 17.92% said "most of the time," and 8.02% said "always."

FIGURE 6
Answering From Your Perspective and Experience, How Often Are You: Required to Advocate for Your Position and Work?



Adding to the individual's workload is the emotional labor of advocating for the work and position itself. Only 14.15% felt they did not have to explain the work or why it should matter both internally to the library and externally to campus (see Figure 6).

Expertise Unvalued or Dismissed

While more respondents felt they were valued as colleagues—and that their supervisors understood and advocated for their work—their experiences with faculty and administration outside the library reflected a much different experience. As a respondent recounted, "I think I am valued in many ways, but I don't think I or my work really is understood or valued broadly in the university. I mainly only feel the most valued by my immediate team." In addition, respondents described feeling that their expertise was not valued and dismissed or disregarded for reasons that often intersected with identities and experiences of discriminatory behaviors. Expressions of demoralization and frustration surfaced in the qualitative data, often reflecting sexist stereotypes related to the value of women's expertise and contributions: "I also frequently talk to upper administrators, who tend to see me (either due to my gender or librarian status, unclear) as being of a lower social class. I am often treated like a secretary or substitute teacher rather than a highly knowledgeable professional who is a published expert in her field." Workers who self-identified as women and BIPOC reported that they experienced microaggressions and gaslighting directed at their identities further contributing to demoralization. Adding to the exhaustion, the work itself often requires advocating for culture change and examination of status quo unlike many other roles in the library. "I think library colleagues write me off as too passionate about open access and justice in scholarly communication and often devalue my input as a result," as one respondent related.

Indeed, some respondents noted that they had experienced barriers and/or discrimination as a scholarly communication worker related to their identities. Often these experiences were aligned with how the worker personally identified themselves. As a result of experiencing barriers and/or discriminatory behaviors due to identities 70.37% respondents felt less valued and 59.26% experienced low morale.

Impact of Upper Administration

Survey responses made clear the impact of upper administration on scholarly communication work. This impact could be either positive or negative. Several respondents mentioned reorganizations that resulted in the creation of their position and/or a scholarly communication unit within their library. One respondent noted "I am fortunate to have a library director/supervisor that really sees the value to what I bring and the connections of this work across campus." Another explained, "For several years, I was the only SC professional in my institution, but I had 22 years of experience to underscore my knowledge and lend weight to my voice. Having advanced to the administrative level, I have been able to successfully grow our SC unit." However, others noted that for those without the support of upper administrators, within the library and the broader institution, it was difficult to find success. As one respondent explained, "Our initiatives would likely get considerably farther on our campus if we had more support from upper administration and the policies guiding faculty behaviors (course text adoption, transparency about course materials costs, timely communication with the library about required texts for course reserve, contributions to the IR, etc.)."

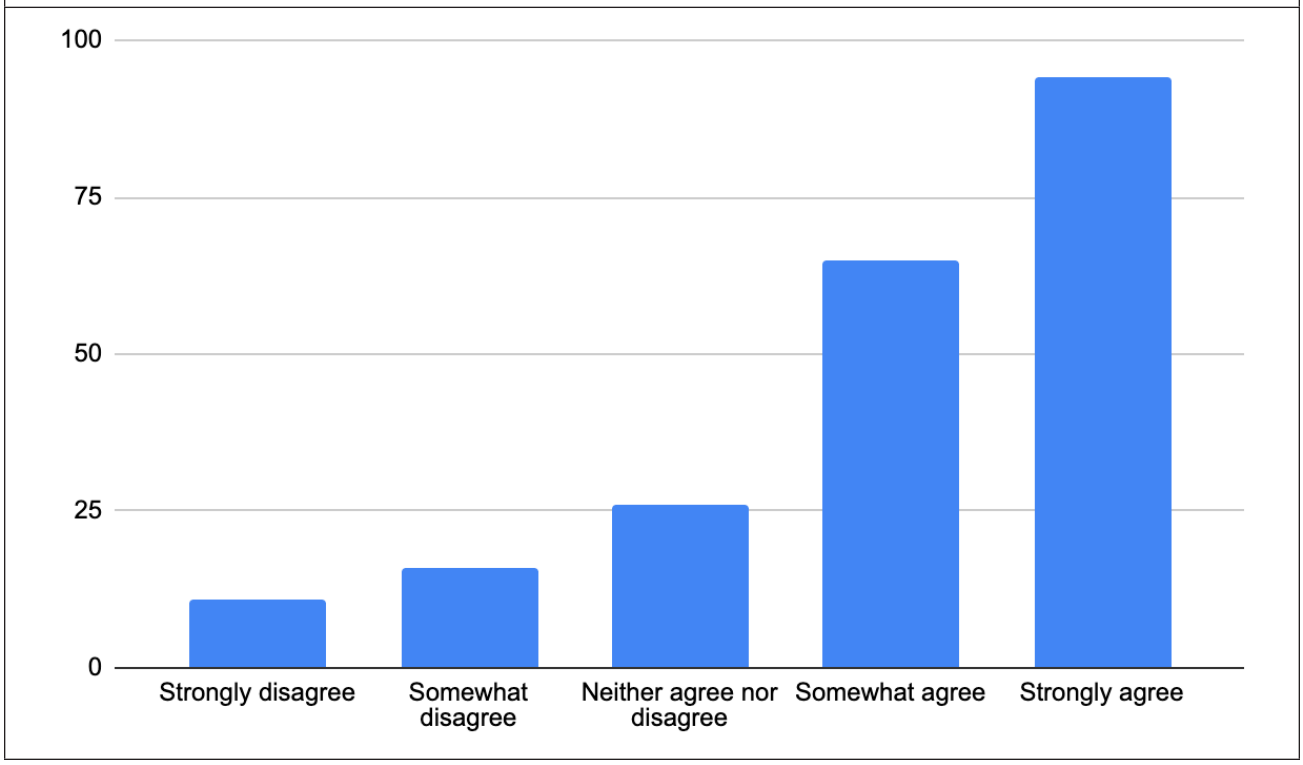
At a fundamental level, several respondents pointed toward understanding the work as key. Funding and advocacy were also brought up by respondents as part of the equation: "I believe schol comm needs significant administrative support and funding to be done adequately. If an institution does not have the willingness, time, or funding to support schol comm, I would advise them to reduce the scope of their ambitions rather than hiring someone to 'fix' these problems without resources." Another summed up the situation as: "You are typically not in a position of power, yet in order to make lasting change, you need to be able to influence policies and procedures at a very high level at the university, which is incredibly difficult when you can't even be in the room with the people making the decisions."

Burnout and Attrition

When asked about whether they had experienced feelings of "burnout" such as reduced initiative or low-morale, 44.34% of respondents strongly agreed and 30.66% somewhat agreed (see Figure 7). As one respondent explained, "I experienced severe burnout in fall 2021 lasting roughly a year that greatly impacted my work and personal life, a direct and measurable result of increasing workload over time with little to no support." Another explained, "The amount of work is impossible. One person CANNOT do OA, OER, copyright, digital everything, IR, ETDs, data management, etc, etc. I am BURNT out and do the bare minimum to keep my work going."

The respondents who indicated that they strongly agreed that they had experienced feelings of burnout were more likely than overall survey respondents to indicate that their reporting structure had changed one or more times (61.70% compared to 55.55% of overall respondents). They were also more likely to indicate that their job description does not accurately

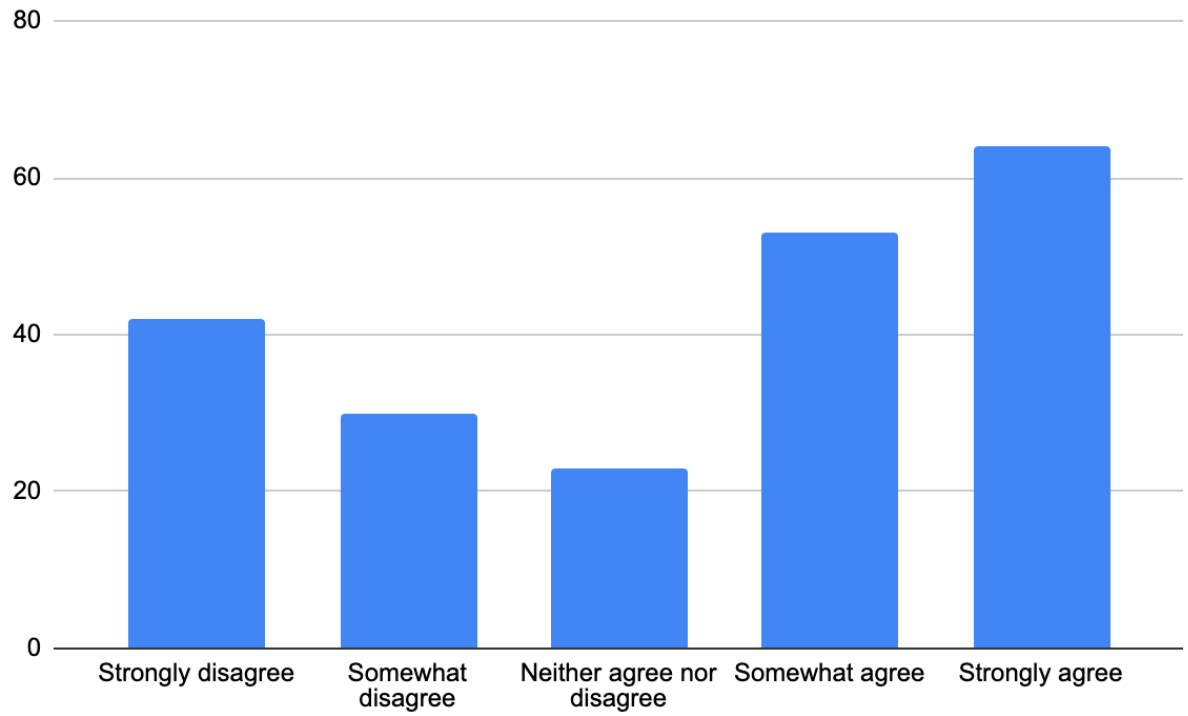
FIGURE 7
As a Scholarly Communication Worker: I Have Experienced Feelings of "Burnout," Such as Reduced Initiative or Low Morale



reflect their work (38.30% compared to 29.06% of overall respondents). They were less likely than the overall survey respondents to "strongly agree" that scholarly communication work is valued at their library (24.47% compared to 33.80% of overall respondents). Finally, only 2.13% of those who noted having experienced strong feelings of burnout "strongly agreed" that the scope of their work is sustainable (compared to 8.45% of overall survey respondents), and 15.96% "somewhat agreed" that the scope of their work is sustainable (compared to 28.64% of overall survey respondents).

When asked about whether they had often considered changing careers, either by applying for another position or leaving libraries altogether, 30.19% of respondents strongly agreed and 25.00% of respondents somewhat agreed. One respondent noted that they "are thinking of leaving the profession daily." Another explained that because they were so burnt out, they "left for another academic librarian position that had no scholcomm aspect to it" (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8
I Have Often Considered Changing Careers, Either by Applying for Another Position or Leaving Libraries Altogether



Discussion

The data from this survey presents a complicated picture of scholarly communication work. Most respondents expressed the desire to grow their services but also felt that the work, as it is, is not sustainable. Most respondents felt their work is valued and about half believed the work is understood in the library, but more so by supervisors. However, perceptions of value did not always extend to being well-resourced or being included in initiatives or decision-making related to the work. The organizational and reporting structure that should serve as a foundation and support for the work is fractured across the library and over half of workers experienced change in reporting, often multiple times. This could make it difficult to maintain any consistency as

the worker needs to adjust to different departmental or program focus and goal setting.

While positions across the library experience burnout, this study has shown that scholarly communication workers specifically experience burnout. People in these positions must consistently advocate for changes in the scholarly communication landscape, as well as for the importance of their work more generally. So, what would improve morale and retention? Would including scholarly communication workers in institution-wide scholarly communication initiatives and decision-making result in better scoped, defined, and sustainable work? Could an examination of both the job responsibilities and the reporting structure result in a more stable foundation and alignment with the organization's needs allowing for focus and growth of services? Future research could delve into the gap between workers' understanding of the value and needs of the work, library administrators' perceptions, and organizational strategic directions to bring about better alignment and progress.

Conclusion

Recent research on scholarly communication in academic libraries has focused on the lack of official skills and training in scholarly communication work and how it is up to the individual worker to fix this. However, this study shows that some of the main issues facing scholarly communication workers are structural and related to appropriately scoping and resourcing the work. As a result, our recommendations for change are largely directed at upper administrators. Library administrators have a huge role to play in terms of making scholarly communication work sustainable. First, administrators in collaboration with direct supervisors and the scholarly communication workers themselves should take the time to understand what the work involves and actively develop a plan as well as budget to support it. Before hiring for a new scholarly communication position, administrators should also think carefully about the focus of scholarly communication work in their specific library and institutional environment, how it will be resourced and supported, and the role's alignment in the organizational structure. Library administrators should work with scholarly communication workers to refine scope and services to align with capacity. If scholarly communication work is only "part" of a person's job, administrators must decide what the person can stop doing so that they can properly prioritize scholarly communication work accordingly. Ultimately, if scholarly communication work is truly core to academic libraries, properly scoping and supporting this area of librarianship is key.

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