

Using Faculty Focus Groups to Launch a Scholarly Communication Program

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the benefits of using faculty focus groups as an early component of a scholarly communications program with suggestions for planning and conducting sessions, recruiting participants and analyzing outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on the experiences and findings of the authors where the use of focus groups was used in the initial stages of organizing a scholarly communications program at Kansas State University

Findings – Focus groups are an effective method to begin identifying scholarly communication issues that resonate with faculty on a particular campus. Focus groups can be helpful in targeting efforts to begin a scholarly communications program.

Practical implications – Focus groups are effective in generating insights, opinions and attitudes and are low cost in terms of time and resource commitments.

Originality/value – There is very little in the literature about using faculty focus groups to start a campus scholarly communication program. This article provides practical and useful information that other libraries can use to incorporate this method into their planning.

Keywords Focus groups, Scholarly communications, faculty

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Scholarly communication is an umbrella term for a complex array of related issues, including authors' rights, copyright, access to information, peer review, and publishing, all of which have a direct impact on libraries, universities, and particularly, faculty. Driven by years of journal price increases, dwindling serials budgets, and the potential for new distribution channels, organizations such as ACRL, ARL, and others have intensified focus on scholarly communication. Academic libraries are responding by creating scholarly communication programs, and, as with many areas of library service, involving faculty in discussions of these issues.

Developing a dialog with campus groups, especially faculty, to increase their awareness of scholarly communication issues is important. (Duncan, 2006). Libraries and universities employ a number of methods to involve faculty in this discussion, including, surveys, blogs, individual interviews, seminars/speakers, departmental visits, and campus committees. Because of the broad nature of scholarly communication and the impact it has on many aspects of academic life, focus groups are a particularly apt method to use, especially in the early stages of program development. This article will explore the benefits of focus groups as a component of a scholarly communication program and offer suggestions for planning focus groups, recruiting participants, conducting the session, and analyzing outcomes.

About Focus Groups

Focus groups have been used as a social science research method since the 1920's and have been referred to as "focused interviews," group interviews," "group depth interviews," and "focus group interviews." (Walden, 2006). The basic framework of a focus group is an open, in-depth discussion with a small group of individuals purposely selected to explore a predetermined topic of shared interest. This discussion is typically led by a moderator, but the setting is usually informal and encourages interaction among group members.

Focus groups are effective in generating insights and providing qualitative data on participants' feelings, values, opinions, and attitudes. The group setting allows for probing answers, clarifying responses, asking follow-up questions, and testing assumptions. The process of interaction within the group will often stimulate new ideas and provide more detail than can be obtained with other survey techniques. Although planning and preparation are required to hold focus groups, overall costs in terms of time and resources are low.

There are some drawbacks. Focus groups will not provide quantitative data, and though it may be tempting, it is not valid to generalize or draw sweeping conclusions based on opinions expressed by only a few individuals. Even with an aggressive approach, focus groups will reach only a small percentage of a group. The open nature of focus groups make them vulnerable to domination by the moderator or a participant, and all members of the group may not be equally represented in the discussion. Despite the best efforts of the moderator to elicit discussion, some participants may be unwilling to share their true views and feelings in a group setting.

Focus Groups and Scholarly Communication

As libraries begin to focus on scholarly communication, focus groups are an excellent way to introduce faculty to the issues and learn their perspectives. Publications from the University of California's Office of Scholarly Communication refer to the use "structured interviews" (focus groups) to promote and encourage university-wide planning and action to develop scholarly communication systems. (The University of California, 2007). Participating in a focus group may be one of

the few opportunities faculty have to interact with peers outside their department and to hear perspectives from fields whose traditions for peer review and scholarly publishing may be quite different from their own. For librarians, focus groups will generate ideas for educating faculty and promoting scholarly communication. The process of selecting participants for a focus group is a valuable exercise in identifying key faculty, and interaction within the group may set the stage for further work and projects with interested faculty.

Much of the attention on scholarly communication is focused on the need to educate faculty on issues such as retaining copyright, publishing in open access journals, and depositing articles in an institutional or subject repository. While it is important for faculty to be aware of these issues, it is equally important for librarians to become aware of faculty concerns related to scholarly communication. Are faculty under pressure to publish in certain journals? Do they see potential problems with depositing pre-prints of their research in an institutional repository? The open nature of focus groups encourages faculty to articulate their concerns and gives librarians the opportunity to hear faculty perspectives. Focus groups are an effective medium for raising new issues with faculty, but librarians also need to be ready to listen and learn from faculty.

Conducting a Focus Group

At Kansas State University, there was interest in launching a scholarly communication program, but uncertainly as to where to begin. Focus groups seemed like a good way to generate ideas on how to proceed and did not require a large investment of time and resources. Two librarians volunteered to serve as moderators, and the first faculty focus groups were held during Spring semester 2007. This next section describes methods used for planning the sessions, recruiting participants, and conducting the sessions.

Planning

Since the library was in the earliest stages of addressing scholarly communication, the goal for the focus groups was to hear views and opinions of faculty on a number of issues. During initial planning, the moderators identified the following issues to address with the focus group:

- Faculty awareness of scholarly communication issues
- Alternatives to traditional scholarly publication
- Barriers to implementing solutions to scholarly communication problems
- How tenure/promotion criteria affect these issues
- Open access journals
- Self-archiving
- Author's rights and copyright
- Strategies for promoting scholarly communication at K-State

To address these topics, the moderators prepared a short list of questions (see Appendix) to pose to the group. It was decided, however, to be flexible and not set a time limit for discussion of any one topic. If interest in a particular topic was high, the moderators would allow discussion to run its course before introducing the next question. The moderators also discussed the need to monitor the discussion and to make sure the session was not dominated by one individual.

Focus group sessions were planned for 90 minutes. Moderators prepared brief presentations to give an overview of the “crisis” in scholarly communication and some of the possible solutions, including retaining copyright, self-archiving, and new publishing models. These presentations took about 15 minutes, with the rest of the session devoted to open discussion. A date toward the middle of the semester was selected and a small conference room in the library was reserved for the meeting.

Recruiting Participants

The moderators decided it would be best to start with faculty who were likely aware of issues in scholarly communication and who could offer ideas on how the library and university could address these concerns. Subject librarians were asked to suggest faculty who might be interested in attending a focus group, including those who were frequent library users, editors of journals, and prolific authors. Other key faculty were identified, which gave the moderators a list of 25 names. During this process, attention was paid to selecting faculty at various points in their careers and from a variety of disciplines.

The moderators prepared an invitation which included a description of the focus group and a list of topics to address in the session. This was sent by e-mail to target faculty about 10 days before the session. Faculty were asked to RSVP, and 12 responses were received. Seven faculty stated they were interested but could not attend at the scheduled time. These faculty were contacted and another session scheduled for a time when most of them could attend.

As the moderators worked on recruiting participants, several key guidelines emerged. One is that repeated contact and follow up is necessary with faculty in order to elicit their participation. They may be interested in the topic, but their schedules and workloads present formidable hurdles to attending a session. Ask faculty when they have free time, send reminders, and make phone calls. These are small efforts to make when compared to the valuable insight gained through the focus groups. Secondly, it's beneficial to ask for help in identifying potential participants, and to think broadly in terms of who may be interested. Many excellent participants were identified by polling other librarians, many of whom work closely with faculty in academic departments. In addition, department chairs, members of the library committee, and faculty senators are all potential candidates.

Conducting the Session

Of the 8 faculty who indicated they would attend the first focus group, only 5 attended. As it turned out, this proved to be an ideal size for the group. Everyone in the group was able to participate freely, whereas a larger group would have likely prevented free discussion. For the second group, 4 faculty attended, and again this size group allowed for a free and open discussion. Although these groups seem small, at no point in either session did discussion drag.

Place cards with the name and department of each participant were prepared beforehand, and proved helpful since faculty were from several different departments and had not met previously. The session began with introductions, followed by a brief overview by the moderators, and then open discussion. The moderators posed questions to the group to move from one topic to the next.

The moderators knew they would need to pay attention to the discussion and did not want to be burdened with having to take extensive written notes. Video recording was thought to be too intrusive, so a small digital audio recorder was used to record each session. Most modern voice recorders can record for several hours, and the device required no attention during the session.

Analysis and Outcome

After the sessions, the moderators reviewed the audio recordings. No attempt was made to extract quantitative data, e.g., 80% of participants thought journal prices are too high. Rather, the sessions were effective in identifying the range of faculty views on specific issues. For example, none of the faculty had made efforts to retain copyright for their works. Several faculty noted the need to publish in high profile journals for promotion and tenure considerations. Reaction to open access was mixed; some faculty viewed it as very important, while others said that dissemination and access to their work was not a concern. Faculty were not aware of the potential citation advantage of self archiving, but all indicated they and their colleagues would be interested in participating in a self-archiving program as long as the process was simple and required little or no effort on their part.

The following points were also raised during the sessions:

- Several faculty mentioned interlibrary loan is effective in providing access to journals they need. Most do not perceive a “crisis” in scholarly communication, although they do see that access may be an issue in developing countries. Some faculty mentioned they try to avoid publishing in very high priced journals.
- There was confusion over self-archiving and its relation to peer review. The initial reaction in most cases is that self-archiving would replace peer review.

- There was hesitation at the idea of archiving pre-prints. Faculty recognize there is an advantage to getting one's ideas out on the web quickly, but have concerns with having different versions available, especially as corrections or updates are published.
- There was some support for the idea of "civil disobedience" in self-archiving. Faculty told stories of colleagues who self archive their articles even if it goes against publisher policies.
- Getting access to materials in institutional repositories worldwide was a concern. How will we find relevant materials without having to be aware of or visit individual collections in individual repositories?
- There was little support for the concept of article charges to support open access journals. Faculty were concerned of the impact this will have on research funds, i.e., if faculty will need to pay these costs from their grant funds.
- Universities should be willing to host journals, but it is not clear how this would be funded.
- Early in the discussion, there was confusion over "open access" and "online" journals. It was not clear to everyone that even though an article is available in an electronic form, access may be restricted.
- Academic societies need journal subscription revenues in order to survive.
- There was strong interest in how scholarly communication could be different. How could we best utilize the possibilities offered by networked and digital media?

From the analysis of the ideas, feelings, and attitudes expressed in the focus groups, it became clear the first phase of the Library's scholarly communication program needed to focus on working with faculty and library staff to raise awareness and understanding of the issues. To address this, the following projects were outlined:

- Hold staff seminars to identify "talking points" subject librarians can use to engage their faculty in discussions on scholarly communication;
- Establish a library-based web site that identifies and defines key issues within scholarly communication;

- Create an automated, online presentation that will serve both as a tool for librarians in opening presentations to faculty and as a resource for interested faculty to view on their own;
- Plan a seminar with invited speakers to focus both faculty and administrator attention on scholarly communication.

The most tangible outcomes, however, were projects launched through faculty contacts made at the sessions. Two faculty members, energized by the potential of self-archiving and open access, agreed to initiate pilot projects for adding the scholarly work of faculty in their departments to K-State's budding institutional repository. Although these projects have a specific goal of creating subject-based collections within the repository, they also provide the opportunity to further engage faculty in discussion and exploration of the many facets of scholarly communication.

Conclusion

While the Library has a long way to go in establishing a scholarly communication program, focus groups proved to be an effective mechanism for identifying the first steps to take. For other libraries seeking to address scholarly communication issues, focus groups can help identify topics that resonate with faculty at a particular institution and help target the initial thrust of the program.

References

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Appendix: Discussion Questions

These are questions the moderators had prepared to pose to the focus group.

1. Why do you publish (communicate findings to peers, advance career, gain funding, financial reward, prestige, etc) and which of these reasons is most central to your work?
2. How do you choose which journals you publish in? What are the factors that determine an acceptable level of quality? What values (university, departmental, discipline) come into play?
3. What are some of the challenges and changes to publishing in your field?
4. Have you ever published or considered publishing in an open access journal? How would this be accepted by your department? What institutional capacity exists to support open access and/or author-pays models?
5. Of the professional associations you belong to, are you familiar with their standing on scholarly communication issues (reasonable journal prices, do they contract or sell their publications to a commercial publisher, have they launched an open access journal, do they have disciplinary repositories?)
6. How do you handle copyright for your publications? Have you ever retained, modified, or negotiated your copyright?
7. We're considering expanding the scope of K-Rex to include collections of faculty papers by creating a disciplinary or institutional repository. Is this something that would be of value to you? Would you voluntarily use it?
8. What kind of follow up to this meeting would you like to see? How should the university respond to these issues? What strategies should we use to educate and involve more faculty?

Additional questions to consider:

- Do you retain copyright when you publish an article?
- Do you make copies of your articles available on a web site?
- Do you ever have problems getting articles you need for your research or teaching?
- Have you ever used an article or other paper that was freely available on the web?

Author Biographies

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