What Is Scholarly Communication?

While not a new concept in academic libraries, scholarly communication is a relatively recent area of professional focus for academic librarians. In the past, the roles and responsibilities assumed by scholarly communication librarians (or “Schol-Com” librarians, as you’ll sometimes hear them called) might have fallen under the purview of reference or subject area librarians, repository librarians, digital scholarship librarians, or even administrators or professionals working outside of the library in a copyright office or research and innovation center, for example. In some libraries, these positions are still the ones most directly involved in scholarly communication, or it may be that various aspects of scholarly communication are distributed among a number of different positions. In recent years, however, the need for specialized librarians who can offer a broad range of knowledge and expertise in topics such as scholarly publishing, copyright and authors’ rights, digital scholarship, data management, repository services, information literacy, and open access resources has grown dramatically. While the term “scholarly communication librarian” hasn’t been universally adopted in all libraries, a recent study showed that an average of 4.3 percent of all ALA JobList advertisements between 2006 and 2014—or nearly 600 jobs—used “scholarly communication” in the title or text of the ad, and nearly 40 percent of those included scholarly communication as a core component or required competency for the job.¹ What’s more, the frequency of the term as a job title or core component has increased each year over that time period, from 2.9 percent (or twenty-three positions) in 2006 to 7.1 percent (or sixty-three positions) in 2014.² This suggests a growing consensus on both the definition of the term and the need for librarians with this particular set of competencies.

The Association of College & 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.”3 That is to say, it encompasses everything in the typical life-cycle of scholarly work—one of the central activities of any college or university. While most stakeholders are engaged in only one or two aspects of this scholarly “ecosystem” at a time—faculty who create new scholarship, peer reviewers or editors who help evaluate it, publishers who disseminate it, librarians who help provide access and preservation, or students and patrons who use it—a ScholCom librarian must be conversant in all of these different stages of the scholarly process and must be able to provide current information, resources, and guidance along the way. It’s also important for these librarians to stay abreast of current issues and new developments in the field, including publishing practices, technological innovations, law and policy changes, economic models, scholarly practices within individual disciplines, funding agency requirements, and patterns of use or re-use of scholarly materials. The goal for most ScholCom librarians is to help create a more effective, sustainable, and equitable scholarly ecosystem that benefits all of the various participants—although their approach may vary between individuals and institutions, depending upon the particular needs of the community they serve.

NASIG, an independent organization devoted to information management and communication, has identified five broad areas of emphasis or expertise for most scholarly communication librarians, each with a distinct set of core competencies: institutional repository management, scholarly publishing services, copyright services, data management, and scholarly assessment and impact.4 These areas of responsibility may be assumed by a single librarian or distributed among a team. But all scholarly communication librarians need to possess a basic knowledge of each area, and preferably specialized training in one or more. NASIG also suggests there are four broad “themes” or common sets of skills for all scholarly communication librarians, including background knowledge of the scholarly publishing landscape and the impact of the open-access movement, legislation, and institutional policies; technical skills that may include knowledge of publishing or repository platforms and faculty profile systems; outreach and instructional skills that may involve information literacy training or open access advocacy; and team building or project management skills that include creating cross-departmental teams or working with consortium partners.

Finally, there are several aspects of scholarly communication that are likely to be particularly important to your success. One is the need for excellent skills in oral and written communication. Much of the work of a ScholCom librarian involves reaching across disciplinary and organizational lines, so he or she must feel comfortable communicating in a variety of contexts, whether in a classroom, meeting, conference panel, or one-on-one collaboration. Second is the need for continued training and education—not only in the areas mentioned above, but also in topics specific to particular disciplines such as digital humanities, law, or public policy, which may affect the broader scholarly communication landscape. Conferences, workshops, webinars, lectures, and reading are an integral part of
a librarian’s continuing education in scholarly communication. Lastly, it helps
to have an enthusiastic commitment to the core priorities of scholarly commun-
ication: the accessibility of resources to all users, the fair treatment of authors
and creators, the development of sustainable and equitable models for creating,
evaluating, sharing, preserving, or accessing scholarship, and the need for change,
innovation, and collaboration. If we remember how central each of these issues is
to the librarian’s core mission of providing access to knowledge, it’s easy to find a
sense of purpose in the work of scholarly communication.

Skills and Credentials
There is no single course of training for scholarly communication librarians; there
are simply too many possible areas of expertise and experience for a single degree
or training program to cover. But don’t despair! No one expects you to have mas-
tered all of these subjects beforehand. Scholarly communication librarians may
come from a variety of different disciplinary or professional backgrounds, and it
isn’t unusual for them to be second-career librarians who have previous experi-
ence in academia, law, publishing, or other areas of library work. In fact, it’s a field
that is ideally suited to people pursuing an alternative career track after developing
a background in one of the specialized areas mentioned above, such as copyright
law, institutional repositories, or data management.

That doesn’t mean, however, that you cannot prepare specifically for a career
in scholarly communication. Typically, ScholCom librarians hold a traditional
master’s degree in library or information science, along with an undergraduate
degree in virtually any discipline. Although there are few library programs that
offer formal specialization in scholarly communication, you may be able to focus
on academic libraries, law librarianship, or digital libraries as a starting point. It’s
probably wise to take as many courses as you can in project management, digital
curation, copyright and intellectual property, or information literacy and instruc-
tion. You might also look for opportunities to volunteer or do a practicum in a
scholarly communication office or with a liaison and instruction department that
deals with scholarly communication issues.

Additional degrees or certificates are not necessarily required, but there are
jobs that require or strongly encourage holding a JD or a certificate in intellectual
property or contract law—particularly for copyright librarian positions. Some give
preference to those with PhDs who may have a background in scholarly research
and teaching, particularly if it’s an administrative position or one focused on out-
reach and education. But these are usually “preferred” rather than “required” qual-
ifications and not often necessary for entry-level positions. Advanced degrees in
virtually any academic discipline can be useful in scholarly communication since
almost every field produces research and participates in the scholarly communi-
cation ecosystem.
Other helpful forms of training include experience in the publishing industry or familiarity with digital publishing platforms, work with institutional repositories or digital curation tools, teaching experience of any kind, especially college-level instruction, and experience in public services and outreach. Good communication, writing, and organizational skills are essential—and in particular, experience in grant writing, project development, or academic research, writing, and publishing are highly valued.

**Advancement Paths**

At institutions in which librarians hold faculty status and/or tenure-system appointments, advancement usually proceeds along standard promotion and tenure lines, beginning as an assistant librarian and proceeding through associate and full librarian ranks over the course of five to ten years. These promotions may come with increased responsibilities and supervisory or administrative duties, which may eventually lead to an appointment as department head or dean. In libraries that do not offer faculty status, promotion usually entails continuing appointments and/or advancement to new positions with greater status. For example, a repository or data librarian may become a scholarly communication librarian and take on increased responsibilities for a broader range of activities related to publishing, copyright, and the other areas outlined above. It's a good idea to discuss the various tracks and advancement opportunities of any position you apply for but especially in one with as many different avenues as scholarly communication.

**A Day in the Life**

A typical day for a scholarly communication librarian probably begins as it does for most other librarians: answering email. As the title implies, communication is at the core of what we do, and it usually involves corresponding with faculty, staff, and other librarians from a variety of departments across the campus. A professor might ask about finding a journal for their newest article, avoiding predatory publishers, or investigating open access options. You might coordinate a meeting with other members of a work group focused on digital scholarship or collection development. Or you may be sharing the latest developments in your field with other members of a professional listserv or blog.

Often, this correspondence leads to other types of outreach, including class visits, department presentations, or collaborations with individual faculty. A department may want to learn more about scholarly impact metrics or ebooks for the classroom. A faculty editor may want information or tips about starting a new open access journal. Graduate students may need to learn about how peer review works in their field. Sharing information is the real mission of the ScholCom librarian, so finding opportunities to talk to faculty, students, editors, publishers,
administrators, or policy-makers about important issues affecting your own community occupies much of your time.

Regular projects that scholarly communication librarians might work on include library publishing projects (if your library supports a publishing program), open textbook initiatives like those developed by the Open Textbook Network, or grant-writing efforts to fund a variety of activities in the library, including the digitization of books, information literacy programs, or digital scholarship.\(^5\) You might also spend time developing information resources like LibGuides, web pages, handouts, or blogs devoted to scholarly communication. For those with subject liaison duties, you may develop instructional sessions for students in your discipline or help a faculty member find resources for their course website or online guide. Many ScholCom librarians also publish and present their own research on a variety of topics related to scholarly communication or their disciplinary subject areas.

### Endnotes


2. Though, notably, there were “spikes” of ninety-seven scholarly communication positions in 2007 and 107 positions in 2013, possibly due to economic conditions or new programs. Finlay, Tsou, and Sugimoto, “Scholarly Communication as a Core Competency,” 12.


### Bibliography


