

# **Library Impact Practice Brief Relationship between Library Collections and the Recruitment and Retention of Faculty at UT Austin**

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Please also see:

Full report at <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/9030>

Research data at <https://doi.org/10.18738/T8/EAKPUD>

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## **Issue**

The study at hand, an in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of the relationship between institutional resources and faculty who are making career decisions, answers the question “(How) do the library’s collections play a role in attracting and retaining top researchers and faculty to the institution?” For this study, the research team gathered data through literature reviews, an online survey, and in-person interviews, as the relationship among libraries, their collections, and the specific and affective drivers of faculty career decisions had not previously been studied in depth. While the research was limited to one university, The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin), the results could be used to nuance and articulate understandings about the impact of library collections on the recruitment and retention of faculty members at similar research-intensive universities. Furthermore, these understandings can help libraries attend to institutional, faculty, and researcher needs and to appropriately and responsibly allocate resources moving forward.

## **Why It Matters to Research Libraries**

Much of the data gathering and assessment work done in libraries assumes a commonality of logic, from the interpretation of usage statistics to the significance of cost-effectiveness to the allocation of space. However, as strategic and lasting decisions move from vision and assessment to implementation, the authors have learned a powerful lesson: the affective response to libraries will determine the success or failure of any given project. Politics, culture, and sentiment are real. They need to be included in assessments and then addressed directly to achieve success.

## **Objectives**

1. Assess whether library collections factor into faculty decision-making processes at the time of both recruitment and retention.
2. Examine the UT Austin context-specific nuances of faculty decisions about coming to and staying at the university in relation to their perceptions of UT Libraries’ collections.

## **Key Performance Indicators**

To address the question “(How) do the library’s collections play a role in attracting and retaining top researchers and faculty to the institution?” the research team gathered data through three independent but related processes: literature reviews, an online survey, and in-person interviews.

The team developed the survey and interview questions and methodology based on the only related study by Cluff and Murrah and on Ithaca S+R Research Support Services program analyses of discipline-based collections and research trends, issues, and support needs and challenges.<sup>1</sup> Questions were also informed by trends identified in the literature that indicate that discipline and research methodologies matter—scholars in humanities fields judge collections and expect things from them differently than STEM scholars do, for instance.<sup>2</sup> The interviews were recorded and transcribed; and the resulting data along with the survey comments were subsequently coded and analyzed using grounded theory methodology.<sup>3</sup> The research team also reviewed the overall trends in the quantitative survey data, analyzed response variations by demographic breakdowns, and compared the results to the interview transcripts. Attention during coding and analysis was focused on the themes that arose around what the interviewees identified as their understanding and use of library collections, as well as their career-based decision-making processes.

## Data

*Full research data available at <https://doi.org/10.18738/T8/EAKPUD>*

In 2019, the research team sent the online survey to UT Austin faculty members (lecturers and professors) hired or promoted within the past five years (2013–2018) as identified by UT Austin’s Office of Academic Personnel Services in the Provost’s Office. The authors intentionally designed the survey tool to be short—taking less than five minutes to complete—and all answers were optional. The team distributed the survey via individual email messages with data gathered through UT Austin’s instance of the Qualtrics survey tool. Qualtrics allowed responses to be anonymous unless respondents wished to make themselves known. Over the course of one month, the survey was successfully distributed to 991 people and received 284 responses, for a response rate of 29%. The research team utilized the Qualtrics Report function to determine trends in the quantitative data.

The research team also conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews to gather data. The team designed the interviews to be completed in 60 minutes or less and to take place in the participants’ primary workspaces on the UT Austin campus. Due to the in-depth, localized nature of this study and the lack of intent to generalize the findings, purposive sampling was employed to select a diverse group of interview participants from the recently hired and promoted faculty lists provided by UT Austin’s Office of Academic Personnel Services in the Provost’s Office. To ensure a reasonable range of experiences and opinions were gathered rather than a representative sample, faculty were recruited for in-person interviews based on academic rank and discipline. Over the course of three months, the research team conducted 13 faculty interviews distributed across disciplines (arts & humanities, social sciences, and STEM) and rank (assistant, associate, and full professors) without overlap in departments. While the research team successfully completed the minimum number of desired interviews (12), enlisting faculty members for the interviews was

initially difficult. The research team believes this is due to the original timing of the requests in the middle of the semester, which can be a busy time for faculty.

Upon completing these two data-collection processes, each member of the research team spent the following two months analyzing the quantitative survey data and independently coding the qualitative data from the interview transcriptions and survey comments using an open-coding, grounded-theory approach. The team then came together to compare and align those independently generated codes and categories and to explore the relationships among them, as well as to identify areas of overlap between survey and interview data. In this axial coding process, four overarching themes emerged: access to collections is a priority, assumptions about collections are widespread, local special collections are deeply impactful to certain faculty, and factors that influence recruitment and retention are generally personal and multifaceted. The team then parsed interview excerpts and survey comments associated with each of these four themes into sets for deeper analysis and discussion.<sup>4</sup> The findings within each theme explore differences across disciplines and research methodologies, given that previous studies found variations in these areas when it comes to recruitment and retention.

The research team acquired Institutional Review Board (IRB) review and approval in advance of data collection. The survey and the text of the semi-structured in-person interview questions can be found in the Texas Data Repository, where supporting materials and anonymized data from this study are openly shared.<sup>5</sup> While the survey garnered a decent response rate and provided supporting data, the core of the value and lessons learned from this study reside in the interview data. Due to the five-year time span of the recently hired and promoted faculty lists and the time commitment and general nature of qualitative assessments, this research is not something that can be more systematically or automatically gathered in the future. If the research team were to repeat this study to determine any changes in the responses and themes, then it would likely be best to conduct it in another five or more years.

## Resources Required

1. **People:** The research team consisted of four people who worked on this study together for a year and a half. One person took on a project management role and the rest of the work was either assigned based on expertise, evenly divided up to work on individually, or done collaboratively.
2. **Skills:** Each member of the research team brought necessary and unique experiences and skill sets to the project, which included:
  - a. A librarian with arts, humanities, and area studies expertise
  - b. A librarian with STEM and social sciences expertise
  - c. A librarian with special collections expertise
  - d. A librarian with assessment expertise

3. **Technology:** Technical needs were minimal and readily met through resources already available through the university. The research team met on campus in library meeting rooms or online using Zoom. The survey was administered and managed through Qualtrics. Box was employed for sharing working documents. Audio recorders were redeployed from a past project and on-site transcription services were called on to transcribe the audio files. (Transcription services are offered through UT Libraries but are fee-based. UT Libraries “paid” for these costs as part of our participation in the project.) Microsoft Excel and Word were used to analyze the data and write up findings. The final report, supplementary materials, and data were published via institutional repositories.

## Lessons Learned

### The Research Itself

Full report available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/9030>

#### *Access to Collections*

While distinctions between collections themselves and access to them is clear to those of us working in libraries, faculty do not make these same delineations. The research at hand, especially the qualitative input, revealed that faculty expect immediate, preferably unmediated, access to information, be it physical or online. Across the disciplines, unfettered, seamless, and efficient access to a wide range of materials, both physical and electronic, is important. Interrupted access, by contrast, is not ideal access. While faculty greatly appreciate service efficiency and are willing to use interlibrary loan or to request materials from off-site storage, they do not like having to do so; it changes their workflows, causes delays, and ultimately, irritates them. They expect more from “R1 institutions of our caliber.” Ultimately, if the library cannot provide efficient access, faculty made it clear they will (and do) go elsewhere to gain access to materials, be that to previous institutions, to peer networks, to social media, and, alas, to sites of pirated material.

#### *Assumptions*

Of surveyed faculty, 89% reported that considering library collections had not occurred to them during recruitment because they assumed the UT Libraries would have what they needed. This mindset was particularly common among those who identified as scientists or social scientists. Faculty from these communities tend to come from other large, research institutions, and they imagine their library experiences will translate seamlessly. As one professor stated, “I just need UT to have access to the journals I use, and it’s all pretty similar across all R1 universities.”

For the most part, STEM and social sciences faculty assumptions held true; faculty from these communities, who rely heavily on journals and the occasional book, generally emphasized that they were well served by UT Libraries' collections. The arts & humanities faculty interviewed were much more sensitive to the possibility that some libraries are more able to support their research than others, and they came to UT Austin with fewer unchecked assumptions (82% in arts & humanities versus 96% in STEM assumed UT Libraries would have what they need). This is particularly true for those whose research depends on special, unique, and historic collections.

### *Special Collections & Contextual Strengths*

While many participants shared expectations that collections should be on par with other R1 research institutions, several interview participants also identified the value of special collections to their research and teaching. Of the 284 faculty surveyed, 72 (25%) regularly use archives and special collections in their work and 108 (38%) use foreign-language materials. A few faculty members in the arts & humanities and social sciences named specific archives on campus, listing special collections as a major reason why they came to UT. In terms of disciplinary differences, arts & humanities faculty most clearly articulated the impact of archives, special collections, and foreign-language materials in their research and teaching.

Several faculty members spoke to the need to have robust foreign-language materials in the collections. The role of librarians and other faculty who have worked to build these strong aggregations of materials over time was recognized. Other faculty discovered, and were somewhat surprised by, the depth of the collections in areas related to their research and the benefit of having access to physical copies of materials that are not readily available online.

Several faculty members emphasized the value of having multiple collections on campus—and nearby—for access to a broad range of documents—from early literature to maps, correspondence, and newspapers. In short, the proximity to other libraries and archives containing government documents, local historical records, and specialized collections is recognized as a tangible benefit for research and for engaging students in the research process.

### *Why UT Austin?*

When asked about their recruitment and retention decisions, 57% of faculty surveyed and 9 of the 13 interviewees said UT Libraries' collections didn't drive their decision to come work at UT. The factors they listed were generally personal and multifaceted. Furthermore, of the faculty that had been offered positions elsewhere but declined to go, a majority stated the library collections were not a factor in their decision either.

This does not mean that collections do not play a role at all in faculty recruitment and retention. 42% of faculty surveyed and 4 interviewees expressed that UT Libraries' collections **were** a driver in their decision to come work at UT Austin and many faculty described UT Libraries' collections

as important to their research and teaching efforts. Interestingly, a slight majority of faculty who were actively seeking a position elsewhere reported the quality of the library collections will be a factor in their decision

As referenced above, when looking at the disciplinary and research methodology breakdowns of these responses, collections played a much larger role in the recruitment and retention decisions of faculty who regularly use archival and special collections or foreign-language and international materials, who are disciplinarily aligned with the arts & humanities and to a degree in the social sciences.

## **The Research Process**

Beyond the research topic at hand, many lessons were learned through the process that could be extrapolated to future projects at other institutions.

### *Sampling & Iterative Reproducibility*

The study focused only on recently hired or recently promoted faculty as informants, both for interviews and in the anonymous online survey. This focus was practical as this informant group could be readily identified through the university's administrative offices while simultaneously purposeful in that faculty having recently made decisions were expected to be "closer" to the issues being discussed. Missing from this sample were faculty who declined an employment offer or who otherwise left the university due to lack of tenure or to better opportunities elsewhere.

The five-year time span for informant sampling provided a robust pool from which to gather data but prohibits more frequent repetition of the study. While libraries may want to be agile in making changes to their practices through frequent and iterative assessments, future research based on this model should build in multiyear gaps between research cycles.

### *Enlisting Faculty Input*

As with all things in academic settings, timing matters. The study at hand was conceived and intended to begin over a summer break when faculty might have more flexibility in their schedules. Delays in attaining IRB approval pushed the research to the fall semester, a busy time for faculty and librarians alike. This unfortunate timing was cited by many interview invitees as a reason they were not able to participate in the study. Future projects that enlist faculty input should take their schedules (both teaching and research) into account when launching a new study.

## Value

The connection between collections and faculty decisions to join or remain at an institution was not direct or explicit in the interviews or survey responses. Faculty do not have consistent nor shared reference points for what a “collection” is, often equating a collection with the “library” or the “services” offered in and through the UT Libraries. One STEM faculty member made this clear: “I can talk to you just in general about the resources that we use, like the journals or things like that...the databases...but I honest to God, have no idea what a ‘collection’ is.” Therefore, the question itself, “Do the library’s collections play a role in attracting and retaining top researchers and faculty to the institution?” remains unanswered directly, perhaps unanswerable as asked. Decision-making is complex.

While many academic and non-academic variables lure faculty to and encourage them to stay at an institution, the research at hand suggests that UT Libraries’ collections, and perhaps the ideas of what those collections represent, are becoming stronger driving forces in faculty criteria for future career decisions. Faculty actively seeking positions at other institutions report that the quality of those collections will be a factor as they make decisions to stay or to leave. They recognize that they had perhaps overlooked the libraries in their decision-making criteria for accepting an offer at UT Austin and express that they would consider adding this to their criteria if they seek a position at another institution. Faculty suggest that if the quality of and/or access to UT Libraries’ collections declined, this would be a “problem” that could factor into their retention decisions. Furthermore, the growing importance of the symbolic and structural signaling of the university’s commitment to and investment in UT Libraries (or lack thereof) was highlighted throughout this research. Many faculty members invoke the essential value libraries provide for both teaching and research endeavors and they express concern around this value being diminished if the libraries are not made a budgeting priority. Others state that they perceive a direct link between investment in UT Libraries and the university’s overall research and teaching mission. Finally, faculty have gone as far to say that, if they do not see more investment in the UT Libraries, that will be a significant factor in their personal career decisions of whether or not to remain at UT Austin. For them, the most visible symbol of this investment is in the collections, as faculty members repeatedly equate the libraries with collections. As one arts & humanities faculty member stated:

The quality of UT Libraries is fundamental to the quality not only of my research but of my general work experience at UT. I have benefited immensely from both the collection and the human resources the libraries offer, and I am concerned that these strengths will be diminished if support for the libraries is not a UT budgeting priority. I am considering going on the market again in the next few years, and one of the factors that will be involved in my decision at that point is whether the university has decided to invest more in the [UT] Libraries. If it hasn’t, that will be a serious negative in the “stay here” column.

Like Cluff and Murrah’s research over 30 years ago, faculty believe library resources to be critical to their professional success, productivity, and overall “satisfaction,” but those same resources are not explicitly considered in their decision-making to come to or to stay at an institution. Faculty assume that all large, well-funded universities will have large, well-resourced libraries that meet all their needs. As such, beyond responses from a handful of passionate users of special collections, causation was not discovered in this research. Correlation, however, particularly when parsing the intent of the research question, particularly that of “playing a role,” was certainly observed and well documented. In sum, in response to the core research question, “Do the library’s collections play a role in attracting and retaining top researchers and faculty to the institution?” the answer is an indirect “yes.”

## Recommendations for the Future

The research team would recommend the following to improve upon the research:

- Start the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application process as early as possible and schedule a time buffer to keep the research project on track. The team experienced delays with receiving IRB approval due to mix-ups over which form was the correct one to submit, which delayed the beginning of data collection.
- Carefully consider the sequencing of data-gathering activities, as qualitative and quantitative methods can inform each other. More closely match up survey and interview categories when writing the questions for each to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data for all sections. The “access to collections” theme was not explored in the survey but subsequently emerged in the interviews. As such, the research team did not have any quantitative (survey) data to compare the results with the qualitative (interview) data. Any future study seeking to replicate this work should consider asking questions about “access to collections” in quantitative data gathering.
- Prepare multiple solicitation strategies, carefully consider when is the best time to conduct this study for faculty, and anticipate recruiting faculty for interviews to take longer than expected. The research team initially wanted to interview 15 to 18 faculty but struggled to motivate faculty to respond to interview requests. Scheduling and completing interviews with the 13 faculty members took three months and the research team had much more success in the latter part of that timeframe. Conducting in-person interviews with 2–5 more faculty members would have been helpful in providing additional nuance to the findings.
- Value in-depth localized studies that are not comparative by design and encourage similar localized studies at other institutions. While libraries and librarians are often charged to contextualize their work within the larger community of practice (for example, large R1 libraries) and to conduct large comparative research projects, the team asserts that case studies are also particularly generative spaces.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> E. Dale Cluff and David J. Murrah, “The Influence of Library Resources on Faculty Recruitment and Retention,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 13, no. 1 (1987): 19–23; see reports from Ithaka S+R Research Support Services, [https://sr.ithaka.org/tags/research-support-services/?fwp\\_publication\\_types=research-report](https://sr.ithaka.org/tags/research-support-services/?fwp_publication_types=research-report).

<sup>2</sup> John F. Ryan, Richard Healy, and Jason Sullivan, “Oh, Won’t You Stay? Predictors of Faculty Intent to Leave a Public Research University,” *Higher Education* 63 (2012): 421–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9448-5>; Yonghong Jade Xu, “Faculty Turnover: Discipline-Specific Attention Is Warranted,” *Research in Higher Education* 49 (2008): 40–61, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-007-9062-7>.

<sup>3</sup> Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452230153>.

<sup>4</sup> Additional interview excerpts and survey comments that highlight the four themes and conclusion along with data tables and a literature review are found in the full report shared in Texas ScholarWorks: Maria Chiochios, Janelle Hedstrom, Katie Pierce Meyer, and Mary Rader, “Relationship between Library Collections and the Recruitment and Retention of Faculty at UT Austin,” Texas ScholarWorks, 2020, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/9030>.

<sup>5</sup> All anonymized data and supplementary materials for this research are shared in the Texas Data Repository: Maria Chiochios, Janelle Hedstrom, Katie Pierce Meyer, and Mary Rader, “Relationship between Library Collections and the Recruitment and Retention of Faculty at UT Austin,” Texas Data Repository, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.18738/T8/EAKPUD>.