

## IS IT REALLY RESEARCH?

In June's *INCITE*, *Australian Academic and Research Libraries* Editor Bob Pymm wrote that research in all its forms is essential if we are to keep up and keep relevant with our changing professional world. His article got Mary Cain thinking about the real problems we face getting serious research done.

I can see what Bob Pymm is getting at in his *Last Word* column (*INCITE* June 2011) and would agree entirely that there is a need for more library research. But such research needs to be of a standard that both informs library administration and practice and contributes towards building a strong research culture. Exchanging anecdotes with fellow librarians as to what does and doesn't work is not research. It may be sowing the seeds of some research but it is not in itself research. Rather than enhancing research and demonstrating the need for such a practice, such exhortations, no doubt well-meaning, may only serve to demean the research project.

The same goes for using statistics to evaluate a collection or service. Conducting an inquiry that includes rigorous statistical analysis (which is quite different from the uninformed data collection that seems rife within some library systems) into a service or collection can be research. The only problem with using such methods to make an enquiry into a service lies in the fact that to conduct useful and good research in this area means an emphasis of some type on qualitative research and this, in turn, can be lengthy and expensive.

Frequently too, students studying for degrees in librarianship have to do a 'research' paper but given the constraints of their study program, this research can neither be in-depth nor of any real interest to the library community. For any of its frequently externally imposed shortcomings, it is probably only within the student body that we find active researchers; but only for the duration of their study or, even more woefully, for the duration of a particular course. This leads to my wondering to what extent any use is made of this research? Maybe someone might like to enquire into the research production within librarianship; who reads it and how it has informed library practice?

Hazarding a guess, I would say that most library research is not well-funded, certainly not for the long-term projects that much qualitative research might take. Bob does touch on one aspect of research or scholarship that does warrant more serious consideration and that is the time, and with that, the resources needed to adequately undertake research. As we move more to a theory of library management rather than library administration and as more and more libraries insist on applying business principles within their institutions, research, as a fundamental undertaking, becomes more invisible, less valuable and therefore difficult to justify and fund.

I also agree with Bob when he says that research shouldn't be left just to the academy, but anyone who has done any research knows the amount of time it takes up

and it is neither sufficient nor realistic to expect people, who may already have to allocate time to work and family, to give up what is left of their time to a project that will currently bring them little professional reward.

If research is essential, then it follows that library managers need to start allocating funding and time to it. Further, library staff who are keen on research, that is those of an enquiring mind, should be actively encouraged, whatever their status within the hierarchy. It is ludicrous that in some libraries library assistants who are Masters of Arts or Science or who have a PhD are discouraged from library research.

Rather than underplaying the work, time and overall commitment that needs to go into research, I would like to end by encouraging library funders, administrators, managers – whoever it is that has control of the purse-strings and the workplace culture – to tell us of their commitment to research and scholarship within libraries

and librarianship as well as obstacles that they encounter in fulfilling that commitment. It would also be interesting to hear from people who have researched, or who have had research ideas rebuffed, as to their experiences. That way we might be better able to ascertain

the realities of library research – and scholarship – and implement structures to support what is a professionally invigorating and truly worthwhile research culture.

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**Editor's note:** Watch for the September issue for more on this topic. And have your say – letters to the editor and contributions to *INCITE* are welcome. Contribution guidelines: [www.alia.org.au/publishing/incite/guidelines.html](http://www.alia.org.au/publishing/incite/guidelines.html)

# BOO!

Got a ghost in your library? Or a great historical moment in which your library played a part? This October, *INCITE* will be featuring histories, hauntings and heroes. So we want to know all about your library's great history moment and your library heroes. And your ghosts, if you've got some..

Deadline for stories is September 1, 2011.

Check the guidelines for contributions at [www.alia.org.au/publishing/incite/guidelines.html](http://www.alia.org.au/publishing/incite/guidelines.html) and email your stories and images to [incite@alia.org.au](mailto:incite@alia.org.au). Please note all images must be high resolution (at least 100Kb) and sent separately as jpg files. Images may be reproduced in print and online.