

## **The Prevalence and Practices of Academic Library Journal Clubs**

Philip Young<sup>a</sup> and Luke Vilelle<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Catalog Librarian  
University Libraries, Virginia Tech  
P.O. Box 90001  
Blacksburg, VA 24062-9001 USA  
Tel. (540) 231-8845  
Fax (540) 231-3694  
[pyoung1@vt.edu](mailto:pyoung1@vt.edu)  
(corresponding author)

<sup>b</sup>Public Services Librarian  
Wyndham Robertson Library, Hollins University  
P.O. Box 9000  
Roanoke, VA 24020-1000 USA  
Tel. (540) 362-6592  
Fax (540) 362-6756  
[lvilelle@hollins.edu](mailto:lvilelle@hollins.edu)

This is the author's accepted manuscript (AAM) of:

Philip Young, Luke Vilelle, The Prevalence and Practices of Academic Library Journal Clubs, *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Volume 37, Issue 2, March 2011, Pages 130-136, ISSN [0099-1333](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jalib.2011.02.004), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jalib.2011.02.004>.

Copyright © 2011 Published by Elsevier Inc.

## **Abstract**

An increasing number of references to journal clubs in library literature, and the recent creation of clubs at the authors' institutions, sparked curiosity about how widespread journal clubs are in academic libraries. An online survey announced on library listservs assessed their prevalence and practices. Library journal clubs seem to be a relatively recent phenomenon, and are more widespread than previously thought, though not pervasive. Library journal clubs promote current awareness, analysis skills, group cohesion, and intra-library knowledge, and offer a low-cost professional development opportunity in times of budget difficulties. Practices that sustain journal clubs can maintain these benefits.

## **Introduction**

For most librarians, keeping up with developments in the field means attending training sessions, going to conferences, and following journals, blogs, and listservs. A recent report indicates that librarians spend an average of 22 minutes a day reading library-related print publications and another 10 minutes on blogs.<sup>1</sup> Are the thoughts provoked by these readings shared with colleagues? The rise of journal clubs (sometimes called discussion groups or reading groups) in academic libraries is an attempt to keep up with developments in the field, share knowledge, and apply it to practice where possible.

The authors both started journal clubs at their institutions to encourage the discussion of hot topics and evolving trends in the library world. Confronted with a number of obstacles, such as motivating colleagues to lead discussions and finding ways to sustain the group, the authors investigated the literature to see what best practices might exist. The papers in the academic library literature were all case studies, with none addressing how common such journal clubs might be in academic libraries or possible best practices. (Some literature in the field of health sciences librarianship, where journal clubs are more common, did take a more research-oriented approach). However, the authors noted an increase in the number of papers describing journal clubs forming at various institutions. Wondering if this was a new phenomenon, the authors created an online survey that they announced via library listservs to measure how many journal clubs exist and to try to identify best practices where possible.

Journal clubs began in medicine, and were one method of moving the profession toward evidence-based practice over expert opinion. Journal clubs served the purpose of developing critical analysis skills, such as evaluating methodology, and applying new knowledge to practice. Sir William Osler began the first journal club at McGill University in 1875<sup>2</sup>, and they are still common in medicine today.

But how common are they in academic libraries? The authors' findings from the survey, which drew responses from 18 academic libraries, indicate that journal clubs are a relatively new phenomenon that is spread across all types of institutions, no matter the size of the library or the employment status of the librarians.

In the library literature, only one article has collected evidence related to journal clubs, and that was an internal survey of participant attitudes.<sup>3</sup> In medicine, a systematic review of the practices of effective journal clubs is available,<sup>4</sup> but some aspects of medical journal clubs do not translate well to libraries. This survey's results do not provide enough data to conclusively identify best practices, but do pose questions and ideas that current journal club administrators, and those considering starting journal clubs, would be wise to consider.

### **Literature review**

There is relatively little mention of journal clubs in library literature. Most articles concern journal clubs in medical or health sciences libraries. A literature search showed that the earliest reference was for a journal club begun in 1974 that included librarians from several medical institutions in Chicago.<sup>5</sup> Journal clubs in medical libraries tend to be associated either with the Medical Library Association (MLA) or have emerged from the Evidence-Based Librarianship movement. MLA journal clubs (now called discussion groups) are focused on a single topic, have a limited number of meetings, and offer continuing education credit.<sup>6</sup>

For example, Seago et al. relate the start of a journal club to obtain continuing education credits from the MLA, though only three librarians of a larger group pursued credits.<sup>7</sup> The club followed MLA guidelines by hosting at least eight discussion hours, through six 90-minute meetings. The topic was total quality management (TQM), and participants assisted in writing a mission statement for the library. Tomlin describes another MLA journal club, a hybrid club in which three of the six sessions were conducted via listserv.<sup>8</sup> Internet-based journal clubs offer several advantages, including the removal of geographic and scheduling obstacles, and the author found that participants provided more thoughtful responses. However, online sessions lack the camaraderie of in-person meetings.

Other journal clubs in medical libraries emerged from the transfer of evidence-based practice from medicine to libraries. For example, Doney and Stanton relate the start of a journal club for Nottingham area health librarians that emerged from the first Evidence-Based Librarianship conference in 2001.<sup>9</sup> Their analysis of a Department of Health document extracted parts relevant to health libraries, which were then used to support "strategy documents, bidding for funding or materials, or generally raising the profile of their library." In most meetings, participants compare two articles. Pearce-Smith found that it can be more difficult to use evidence-based practice techniques in librarianship, because "the majority of research in librarianship consists of descriptive surveys, observational studies, case studies, qualitative research or expert opinions."<sup>10</sup> In Pearce-Smith's case study, health librarians held monthly meetings, in which they evaluated

articles by using two checklists created through a series of workshops called Critical Skills Training in Appraisal for Librarians (CriSTAL).<sup>11</sup> Librarians tended to select the article first, rather than a topic, which reverses standard evidence-based investigation. Herron and Haglund describe a medical journal club in Stockholm that also uses the CriSTAL checklists to evaluate articles.<sup>12</sup> The group meets about every six weeks, and staff may use work time for reading and evaluating articles.

However, not all medical library journal clubs use a formal article evaluation tool. Koufogiannakis et al. describe a journal club of medical librarians that emerged from mentoring relationships.<sup>13</sup> Readings are viewed from an analytical perspective, but no formal evaluation tool is used, and the convener sends a summary by e-mail.

Beyond medical libraries, four articles were found on journal clubs in libraries, although only three were focused on library literature. All of the latter have been published in the last decade, perhaps indicating that the practice is spreading from medical libraries. Hickman and Allen describe the start of a journal club at Kutztown University in April 2004.<sup>14</sup> Volunteers were solicited to select an article of interest to them, prepare discussion questions, and moderate the hour-long monthly session. One discussion of field librarianship began a similar initiative at the library. Kraemer relates the start of a journal club at Oakland University in the fall of 2004.<sup>15</sup> Two articles are covered at each monthly lunch hour meeting. Barsky describes a journal club that increased attendance by opening the meetings to library and information science students as well as other university units.<sup>16</sup> The journal club receives numerous requests to collaborate with library committees. Stebelman relates the start of a library journal club at George Washington University that was not focused on library literature.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the club focused on readings to enable reference librarians to stay current in their subject specialization.

From the literature, the authors reached some tentative conclusions about the structure of journal clubs and their benefits, as well as common problems. The authors also used their experiences, as organizers of journal clubs in their respective libraries, to inform these conjectures.

The most common schedule is a monthly lunch hour meeting, as is the case at both Hollins and Virginia Tech. Schedules may also take into account busy times of the semester by not scheduling meetings those months (as done at Hollins), or by not scheduling meetings during summer months when many participants might be on vacation (as previously done at Virginia Tech).

The groups usually have a convener, who oversees most aspects of the group's operation. Duties include scheduling and communication (including announcements of meetings as well as solicitation of readings and volunteer discussion leaders). Less frequently, the convener may also update a website or blog and/or create a brief summary of the article or discussion for circulation afterward. Evaluations of the journal club are required for MLA discussion groups, but otherwise are not common. Only one case study shared an

example of evaluation,<sup>18</sup> and neither Hollins nor Virginia Tech has evaluated their journal clubs.

Benefits identified include staying current with the literature, learning new topics, identifying gaps in the literature, developing critical appraisal skills, and personal interaction. Kraemer notes that the journal club is a way of sharing the load while keeping up with developments in librarianship. The Hollins library pitched its reading group as a way to stay current with the profession. Virginia Tech's journal club began after two librarians discovered in conversation that both had read a recent report, and agreed that it would be useful to meet regularly to discuss such readings. Both authors also thought that frequent readings and discussion are more important than ever given the rapid changes in the profession created by the online environment.

Personal interaction is frequently cited as one of the most valuable parts of journal clubs, and that is particularly true where librarians from different institutions come together for discussion.<sup>19</sup> Even within a single library, opportunities to interact with colleagues in other departments can be rare. Both Hollins and Virginia Tech found that participants come from a variety of departments.

Problems related to journal clubs are frequently related to sustainability. Librarians often have busy schedules, and lack of time can affect scheduling of meetings, attendance, and the number of attendees who do the readings. At Hollins, difficulties in getting participants to do the readings led to the scheduling of discussions centered on recent conference attendance and/or presentation slides, requiring a much smaller time investment. At Virginia Tech, lack of article suggestions and/or volunteers resulted in too much reliance on the convener, though advance scheduling and increased attendance have recently mitigated this problem. Burnout sometimes occurs because journal clubs tend to involve a small group of committed participants.<sup>20</sup>

The MLA discussion group model overcomes some journal club problems. Continuing education credits offer a built-in incentive, and the finite number of meetings prevents burnout. Furthermore, MLA groups are more evidence-based because they begin with a topic or question and then move to the literature for evidence. While readings are not always from library literature, knowledge from other fields can be integrated into library practice.

The practices of evidence-based groups in the health sciences, such as starting with a topic, focusing on peer-reviewed literature, analyzing methodologies, assessing impact on practice, using checklists, and recording summaries, have much to recommend them. However, the comparative rigor of some practices may not foster sustainability in academic journal clubs, which seem to value informality, networking, and open-ended rather than focused discussion.

Due to the limited number of articles on journal clubs in academic libraries, previous authors speculated that journal clubs are relatively rare. Hickman and Allen comment that the shortage of literature "may indicate that journal clubs, whether formal or

informal, are rare or nonexistent in academic libraries.”<sup>21</sup> Pearce-Smith speculates that “there are not many established journal clubs, or it may be that librarians are developing and attending these meetings, but are not evaluating them or publishing their experiences.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Purpose/Methodology**

From the literature and from their own experiences, the authors identified a number of questions they hoped to answer through their research.

- How prevalent are journal clubs in libraries?
- What are the practices of journal clubs in libraries?
- What benefits do journal clubs provide for their participants and their host libraries?
- How do journal clubs define their purpose?
- How do journal clubs make themselves sustainable?

The authors took two approaches to identifying academic library journal clubs. First, they used search engines to find clubs documented on the web. Differing terminology (journal club, discussion group, reading group) required multiple searches, and the searchers had to avoid results linking to far more common book clubs. The authors found evidence of 8 journal clubs in academic libraries (including one club discussed in the literature), whether via an archived listserv message or a fully developed website. This was necessarily an imprecise method, because some journal clubs may use an intranet not indexed by search engines, and other journal clubs may not have a web presence at all.

Because of the limitations of web searching, and the limited amount of info available on journal clubs online, the authors created an online survey using SurveyVT, proprietary survey software created at Virginia Tech. Issues identified in the literature and through the authors’ experiences helped to inform the survey questions. The survey instrument (see appendix) includes 25 questions (13 multiple-choice, 3 short answer, and 9 open-ended), and was open for three weeks in late April and early May 2010. Announced on four diverse listservs (Autocat, Collib-L, ILI-L, and ULS-L) primarily geared toward academic librarians, the survey reached about 13,000 listserv subscribers, though it is impossible to know how many duplicate subscribers exist across the listservs.

The survey received 22 responses, including the authors’ institutions. The responses represented 19 unique libraries, including 18 academic libraries, after accounting for duplicate responses from three institutions. Four respondents indicated their journal clubs had been disbanded, but these responses were retained in order to provide a more complete picture of journal club practices. Because there was only one respondent not from an academic library, the authors decided to only use the 18 academic library responses in evaluating the results. Thus, the results discussed below are limited to academic library journal clubs, active or not. The authors analyzed the results manually.

The survey also asked whether the respondent was a convener of the journal club. All 3 libraries with duplicate responses included a convener’s response. In those situations, the

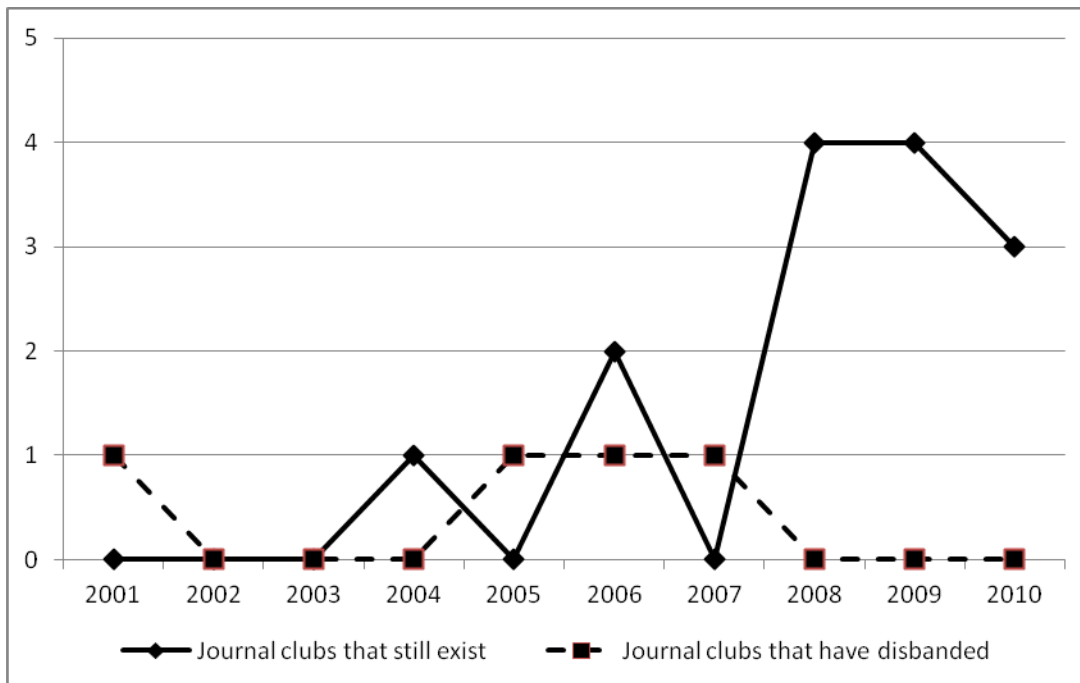
convener's response was considered authoritative when answers differed, based on the assumption that conveners know more about the group's operation and history.

## Results & Discussion

### Libraries with Journal Clubs

The existence of journal clubs in academic libraries seems to be a relatively new and growing phenomenon. Of the 14 journal clubs currently in existence identified in the survey, 11 (79%) formed in 2008 or later [see Figure 1]. The oldest club dated to 2004. Of course, there is another possibility – that these clubs frequently form and just as often disband. All four of the responses from journal clubs that are no longer in existence came from clubs formed prior to 2008 – none lasted more than 3 years.

**Figure 1: When did your journal club form?**



All but two of the represented institutions are located in the United States, with one response each from Canada and Singapore. No particular type of library seems more likely to host a journal club – responses came from libraries across a wide range of sizes, as determined by the number of librarians on staff, [see Table 1] and responses were evenly split between libraries that grant tenure (9) and those that do not (9).

**Table 1: Number of librarians on staff at libraries that started journal clubs**

Number of librarians	Number of libraries with journal clubs
1-10	3
11-20	6
21-30	4
31-40	3
41 and above	2

### **Journal Club Practices: Participants/Readings**

Responses indicate that attendance ranges from 4 to 20 participants, with an average of 8. Attendance as a percentage of the librarian population at an institution varied greatly. Most groups are open to paraprofessionals, though only 5 of the 18 journal clubs see paraprofessionals usually or always attend. Eight other clubs rarely or sometimes have paraprofessionals present, while 5 never do. Also, only 2 groups included librarians from other institutions, with one response “usually” and the other “sometimes.” Invitations to interested paraprofessionals and to nearby colleagues could represent two ways to grow journal clubs if desired, though travel and time issues are obstacles for the latter approach.

Another possibility to grow attendance would be to offer incentives. Survey respondents listed few discrete incentives for attendance at journal club meetings.

One respondent, from Singapore, belongs to an association that offers continuing education credits for journal club attendance, similar to the MLA discussion groups. This is a powerful incentive, but is not available to most librarians. However, one could envision the necessity for continuing education in an increasingly professionalized vocation, and the possibility of the American Library Association or one of its divisions offering credits for online journal clubs.

Food can be an effective incentive. As one respondent wrote, “We meet for breakfast, so that’s a yummy incentive.” In most cases food was not provided, but rather the meetings occurred during lunch or breakfast. One response indicated food was provided at the last meeting of each semester – this could be a low-cost way to increase attendance if professional development funds are available.

Another attendance boost could be achieved by making the journal club a part of a larger meeting. Two libraries made their journal clubs a part of regular departmental meetings – one as part of an instruction meeting, the other as part of a reference meeting. Another library appended the journal club meeting to the start of the regular monthly library faculty meeting.



No libraries mentioned a requirement to attend stand-alone journal club meetings. While journal club attendance is frequently required in medicine and the sciences,<sup>23</sup> it is unlikely that required attendance would work in libraries, because a key component of participation is a willingness to engage in current issues. Plus, participation requirements might take away from some of the informal incentives to participate – “keeping it casual is important to us – we don’t want people to feel they have to contribute... we wanted the journal club to feel like something enjoyable and elective,” wrote one respondent.

Asked how often readings were peer-reviewed, 17 of 18 respondents answered usually or sometimes. Twelve of the 18 clubs sometimes include readings from outside library literature, and another 5 clubs have done it at least once, which could indicate they are examining related readings from a field such as higher education, management, or marketing. It also could indicate that some journal clubs may read items not relevant to the practice of librarianship, and sometimes function as book clubs. Yet another possibility is that the “readings” were slide presentations or webinars, and were thought not to be in this category. The survey did not ask for specific examples of readings, and only one was volunteered in the comments. Only one club always selected peer-reviewed materials from the library literature.

Most groups solicit a volunteer to select a reading and lead discussion. Sometimes this occurs through a round-robin approach in which every participant selects a reading at some point. Where reading groups are integrated into a mandatory department meeting, a session is assigned to each librarian. In a few cases, the convener is the primary selector, though respondents were not always clear as to whether other suggestions were welcomed. In at least one instance, the convener selects an article only when suggestions and/or volunteers are not forthcoming. The need to avoid a last-minute panic was cited by one response, and two-week advance notice is generally needed in order to provide sufficient reading time. One way to avoid the last-minute selection problem is to distribute the schedule for the semester and then ask volunteers to sign up for a meeting. This eliminates some of the meeting-to-meeting pressure on conveners.

### **Journal Club Outcomes**

Six respondents indicated that reading group discussions resulted in at least one direct effect on library practice. These outcomes included:

- a decision to staff the reference desk with students in the evening
- a survey that resulted in new signage
- changes to website language
- changes to web evaluation workshops

These respondents felt that their journal club generates a wealth of ideas for library improvement. One journal club’s emphasis on turning research into practice led them to frequently try new methods from the literature in the classroom or in assessment.

By contrast, another group operated with the explicit agreement that the journal club not “automatically generate work” for participants, because the convener felt that people would not otherwise attend. However, this respondent also indicated, “I know at least one project did come out of a discussion, and some of us have things we would like to implement, if we have the time.”

Although clubs that have directly impacted library practices are few, it is important to keep in mind that many of them are less than 2 years old. One respondent specifically indicated the journal club was hopeful that future discussions would lead directly to changes or projects in the library.

There may also be a disconnect between club discussions and later projects, as the vast majority of groups (14 of 18) do not record summaries of the reading or the discussion. Only 4 groups sometimes or always record summaries. Summaries of articles and/or subsequent discussion can be a quick way of recalling studies and their conclusions, and the comments made by the group. Otherwise, this information dissipates quickly. Summaries distributed or posted on a group website can also give the group a sense of accomplishment and substantiality, and can be referred to by those who could not attend. They can also document occasions when discussions are translated into changed or new practices, thereby providing a rationale for group continuation.

Although the survey found few direct outcomes in library practice, respondents mentioned several benefits that, though harder to measure, are important to participants.

One of the most important journal club outcomes is building a sense of community. One respondent indicated “greater group cohesion” has been an outcome of the club meetings, and another praised the meetings for allowing participants to get “to know each other better as colleagues.” This can be especially beneficial in libraries where staff may not interact often in the course of their duties. In addition to discussing professional literature, journal clubs offer an opportunity to better know colleagues and their jobs.

Gaining other perspectives can be one of the most valuable aspects of a journal club. Librarians and staff from different departments often add diversity of opinion to discussions. As one respondent wrote, the club has “given us a better understanding of what we all do at the library – for example, our archivist selected the reading for our most recent meeting. Through the reading and subsequent discussion, we had a better sense of what it is he does and his vision for the archives and library.” Librarians from other institutions can offer still broader views, and library interns or library school students (mentioned as participants by some survey respondents) can provide yet another viewpoint.

Journal clubs can provide an environment – as one respondent wrote, “a safe place for open discussion” – where participants feel comfortable sharing views that they might not express in a departmental meeting or in the context of the library hierarchy. Another respondent mentioned that journal clubs allow for “discussion of controversial issues such as getting rid of reference service.” Again, since most of these meetings take place

outside of department meetings, they can allow for more open discussions than might occur in a formal meeting.

Finally, the exchange of ideas is an important part of many journal clubs, as several respondents mentioned a variation on this theme. One respondent said the journal club “gives us a chance to dream a bit together.” The clubs can also facilitate advice-sharing as well as potential collaborations. One respondent specifically mentioned that mentoring occurs.

### **Purpose of Journal Clubs**

The survey asked respondents to provide their journal club’s mission statement if there was one, or otherwise put the purpose of the journal club into their own words. Two respondents indicated their journal clubs had mission statements, but only one respondent shared the statement:

“[The journal club] is a method for instruction staff at the [institution] to share innovative ideas in and resources for instruction in order to stay aware of current practices and keep our teaching fresh.”

Respondents who put the journal club’s purpose in their own words provided a variety of reasons for the club’s existence. The authors sorted the purposes, including the above mission statement, into the following categories, with examples from the responses. Some respondents listed multiple purposes for their journal club.

- Stay current on developments in librarianship (8)
  - “Keep our head in the profession of librarianship, not just doing the day-to-day work.”
  - “To get together and talk about what other libraries are doing/studying.”
  - “To discuss current issues in academic librarianship.”
- Literature discussions (6)
  - “Informal lunchtime discussion of an article/articles dealing with a topic relevant to libraries or library staff.”
  - “To create a space for discussion.”
- Affect current library practices (4)
  - “Hopefully spark some new ideas and initiatives.”
  - “To figure out new programs, services and activities we can pursue at our library.”
  - “Keep our teaching fresh.”
- Networking (2)
  - “To enjoy each other’s company and interest in libraries in a new way.”
- Professional development (2)
- Encourage faculty/administration dialogue (1)

The top two purposes, staying current on developments in librarianship and creating a space and time for literature discussions, are very similar, but the authors separated them

because clubs with the purpose of staying current in the field seem to be expressing a broader view than those who are just focused on literature discussions.

Not surprisingly, given the few direct effects on practice noted in the literature or by survey respondents, only 4 respondents expressed a desire to affect current library practices. More unexpected, given the frequent mentions of collegiality in the outcomes part of the survey, was that only 2 respondents cited a networking or social purpose.

Asked whether the journal club was fulfilling its purpose, 11 respondents replied yes, 3 respondents were not sure, 2 respondents replied no, and 2 respondents did not answer. There was no common thread among purposes that were more or less frequently met.

The uncertain responses on whether the meetings are fulfilling their purpose(s) came from two journal clubs that started meeting in 2010 and one journal club that had disbanded. The two no responses came from groups that had disbanded. One had expressed a purpose of creating “a space for discussion.” The other had expressed a purpose of keeping “our head in the profession of librarianship, not just doing the day-to-day work.”

However, when examining whether the purposes of the journal clubs have been met, it must be kept in mind that only three groups have conducted an evaluation. No clear evidence exists as to the successfulness of these clubs. The lack of evaluation also suggests that most groups remain casual. Evaluation implies a degree of formality and if acted upon can improve the experience for participants. Asked whether any changes were implemented as a result of evaluation, only 2 of the 3 replied. One indicated that a list of topics was created in order to ensure that meetings would be of interest to everyone. In the other response, the evaluation revealed that librarians wanted to continue meeting over the summer break.

### **Sustainability of journal clubs**

Just as sustainability concerns are noted in the literature,<sup>24</sup> survey respondents listed several challenges to keeping a journal club running. The most common are the related concerns of scheduling and having enough time, mentioned by 6 respondents. It is difficult for many librarians to add another meeting to their calendar, and conveners struggle to establish a schedule that maximizes attendance. If the journal club is part of a larger meeting, it can get squeezed out when more immediate concerns take precedence.

The next most common concern is finding volunteers to choose readings and lead discussions (mentioned by 4 respondents). Because most journal clubs depend on volunteers and article suggestions, problems emerge when these are infrequent or not forthcoming. Sometimes volunteers don't follow through on their commitment, or a volunteer cannot be found who is knowledgeable on the issue or comfortable with moderating the discussion.

A third major concern is convener burnout (cited by 3 respondents), which can occur when most duties fall on a single person. As one respondent described, “Other librarians request meetings and will ask me about the club, but because of the demands of my job, it is incredibly challenging to stay on top of the organizing. We have not met this semester, due to this.” Scheduling meetings well in advance can reduce some of this stress. Clubs may also wish to explore an annual change of the convener, or designating two people to share the duties.

The authors especially note the challenges faced by the four disbanded groups:

- “If others (particularly a supervisor) offer to organize the next meeting, and never does it, the group is dead.”
- “No one ever did the readings so the discussion was pointless.”
- “The usual – scheduling and time pressures.”
- “Scheduling. We had the meetings during regular instruction team meetings, when instruction died down and we had time breathe again. But then our instruction ‘season’ ended up going through the entire academic semester! We no longer had any time during our meetings to talk about anything but present-day instruction.”

The authors would add another threat to the sustainability of these clubs: their informal nature. Without a mission statement, organizational structure or clear connection to the library’s goals, many of these groups can disappear as quickly as they appear. And without any clear evidence of their usefulness (whether the case is built through evaluations or direct impacts on library activities), justifying their continued existence is a tricky proposition.

Evidence from the literature, the online survey, and the authors’ personal experience suggests that the following practices can contribute to journal club sustainability:

- Formalize the journal club structure (such as a mission statement, changing the convener annually, providing summaries, creating a website)
- Send out a scheduling survey before each semester to determine the day and time most people can meet
- Send out meeting days for the entire semester and ask for volunteers for open dates
- Skip the busiest months for librarians (usually at the beginning of semesters for public services librarians)
- Advertise incentives (such as food and drink, or that volunteer leaders can list discussion moderation on their annual activity report)
- Recruit library committees to utilize reading group sessions for their own information needs
- Use articles of a manageable length, and schedule longer readings after skipped months to allow maximum preparation time

## **Recommendations for future research**

Some questions were left unanswered by the survey. For example, the survey did not ask how frequently groups met, though this information was sometimes volunteered. The survey also did not anticipate that some journal clubs operate within a single library department and meet as part of a larger departmental meeting. The survey question concerning readings outside the library literature could have been better defined, as outside readings can be very applicable to library practice, and “readings” might also be audio-visual in nature. Likewise, while tenure may be a subject of enduring interest in librarianship, it may not be a useful proxy for the seriousness or scholarly environment of journal clubs, since there are often scholarly expectations or rewards in libraries lacking tenure.

One possibility for future research may be to more closely examine both long-lasting journal clubs and those that have disbanded, to try to compare/contrast their practices. The authors also discovered that because the practices of journal clubs are so variable, it was difficult to draw any particular conclusions from a single survey. Future researchers may wish to employ interviews rather than a survey to clarify responses and provide a fuller picture.

Future investigations may also wish to more closely examine the habits and motivations of those who participate in journal clubs. This survey took a meta-approach in order to gain a better picture of these types of clubs, but did not examine why or how individual librarians participate in the groups.

## **Conclusion**

Journal clubs exist in a wide variety of academic libraries, and in a range of formats. Although journal clubs have had relatively few direct effects thus far on library practice, they contribute greatly to a library’s sense of community and help participants understand perspectives from colleagues in other departments. The growth of journal clubs also seems to be a relatively new phenomenon, with many clubs starting recently. However, the lessons learned from disbanded groups (and the relative few number of clubs that have lasted more than 3 years) indicate that there are many challenges awaiting these new groups, including time pressures, convener burnout, and sustaining participation. Whether journal clubs become a permanent feature of academic libraries, as they are in many health sciences libraries, will depend on how well organizers and participants respond to these challenges.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors thank Lesley Moyo and Candice Benjes-Small for their suggestions.

## References

1. Jill Laster, "Report measures librarians' time reading job-related materials", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Available: <http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Report-Measures-Librarians/21641> (March 5, 2010).
2. Eugene Barsky, "A library journal club as a tool for current awareness and open communication: University of British Columbia case study", *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2009).
3. Nicola Pearce-Smith, "A journal club is an effective tool for assisting librarians in the practice of evidence-based librarianship: a case study", *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, 23, p. 32-40, 2006.
4. Y. Deenadayalan, K. Grimmer-Somers, M. Prior, and S. Kumar, "How to run an effective journal club: a systematic review", *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, 14 (2008), 898-911.
5. Richard S. Klein and Rose Slowinski, "Chicago Medical Library Journal Club," *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*, 64(3) (July 1976) : 320.
6. Medical Library Association, "Discussion Group Program," Available: <http://www.mlanet.org/education/discussiongroups>
7. Brenda L. Seago, Lynne U. Turman, Andrea S. Horne, Philip Croom, Karen Cary, "Journal club with a mission", *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*, 82:1 (January 1994) : 73-74.
8. A.C. Tomlin, "From dowdy to dandy: spiffing up the journal club", *One-Person Library*, 12:12 (1996): 1-3.
9. Liz Doney and Wendy Stanton, "Facilitating evidence-based librarianship: a UK experience", *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, 20 (Suppl. 1), (2003): 76-78.
10. Pearce-Smith, "A journal club is an effective tool for assisting librarians in the practice of evidence-based librarianship", pp. 33-34.
11. Booth, A. and A. Brice. "Clear-cut? Facilitating health librarians to use information research in practice," *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, 2003, 20 (suppl. 1), 45-52.
12. David Herron and Lotta Haglund, "Wrestling with the appraisal and production of evidence- and the winner is...!", 4<sup>th</sup> International Evidence Based Library & Information Practice Conference, May 6-11, 2007, Chapel Hill, NC, Available: <http://www.eblip4.unc.edu/papers/Haglund.pdf>

13. Denise Koufogiannakis, Marlene Dorgan and Ellen Crumley, "Facilitating evidence-based librarianship: a Canadian experience", *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, 20, suppl. 1 (2003): 73-75.
14. Theodore Hickman and Lisa Allen, "A librarians journal club: a forum for sharing ideas and experiences", *C&RL News* 66:9 (October 2005) : 642-644.
15. Elizabeth W. Kraemer, "Keeping up with the journals: a library journal club at Oakland University", *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 33:1 (2006): 136-137.
16. Barsky, "A library journal club as a tool for current awareness and open communication."
17. Scott Stebelman, "Taking control of continuing education: the formation of a reading group at George Washington University", *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, (September 1996): 382-385.
18. Pearce-Smith, "A journal club is an effective tool for assisting librarians in the practice of evidence-based librarianship", p. 39.
19. Doney and Stanton, "Facilitating evidence-based librarianship", p. 76.
20. Hickman and Allen, "A librarians journal club", p. 643.
21. Ibid., p. 642.
22. Pearce-Smith, "A journal club is an effective tool for assisting librarians in the practice of evidence-based librarianship", p. 33.
23. Deenadayalan et al., "How to run an effective journal club", p. 902.
24. Kraemer, "Keeping up with the journals", p. 137.



## Appendix: Survey Instrument

### Journal Club/Discussion Group Survey

This survey is intended only for those librarians who have met to discuss library-related literature as part of a discussion group, journal club, etc.

#### Which type of library do you work in?

- medical/health sciences
- academic
- other:

#### My library is located in:

- U.S.
- Canada
- U.K.
- Australia
- other:

#### My institution's name (This information is solely for the collation of responses from the same group):

#### Are you the group's organizer/convener?

- Yes
- No

#### What year did your meetings begin? (If ended, also include ending date)

#### On average, how many people attend?

#### How many librarians work in your library?

- 1-10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- 31-40

- 41 and above

**Do your meetings include librarians from other institutions?**

- Always  
 Usually  
 Sometimes  
 Rarely  
 Never

**Do your meetings include paraprofessionals?**

- Always  
 Usually  
 Sometimes  
 Rarely  
 Never

**Are your meetings:**

- in person  
 online  
 both

**How are articles/readings selected?**

**How often do articles/readings come from outside library literature?**

- Always  
 Usually  
 Sometimes  
 Rarely  
 Never

**How often is the article/reading peer-reviewed?**

- Always
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**If the meetings resulted in a direct effect on library practice, please describe (e.g. you read about a service that you then implemented in your library)**

**What other outcomes have the meetings provided, if any?**

**Is a summary of the article and/or discussion recorded and distributed?**

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**Have the meetings been evaluated?**

- Yes
- No

**If yes, what changes, if any, resulted from the evaluation?**

**Does your library grant tenure (or its equivalent)?**

- Yes
- No

**List incentives for attendance/participation, if any:**

**Does your journal club have a mission statement or other formal statement of purpose?**

- Yes
- No

**If yes, please write the statement here:**

**If no, please describe in your own words the purpose of the meetings:**

**Do you feel the meetings have fulfilled this purpose? Explain.**

**What challenges are there to continuing the meetings, if any?**

**Please feel free to say more about your group, or clarify earlier answers:**

A large empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for text input. On the right side of the box, there is a vertical scrollbar with a light gray track and a darker gray slider, indicating that the box is scrollable.