

Blog Title: How Do Academic Librarians Use Research Impact Metrics? Results from a National Survey of Academic Librarians in the U.S.

[Subtitle] Altmetrics: What the is going on?

“There is a growing interest in altmetrics.”

“Altmetrics have become the newest tool among academic librarians.”

“Scholarly communication is becoming more enhanced by the use of altmetrics.”

You may have heard one or more of these phrases in the past few years, especially if you are in the field of scholarly communication. However, such claims bring to mind advertisements of the same flavor: “The hottest and most popular gadget on the market!” Most of us are guilty of getting excited about the latest trend, tool, or gadget. In contrast, many of us are skeptical and critical of new tools and metrics.

I’m part of a research team that wanted to test whether these claims about librarians’ love for altmetrics were actually true. Along with Sarah Sutton (Emporia State University, Kansas, USA) and Stacy Konkiel (Digital Science, Minnesota, USA), I helped survey US librarians to determine the actual awareness and usage of altmetrics among academic librarians in the USA. We also surveyed librarians about their awareness and use of other types of research impact indicators like citation counts, the Journal Impact Factor, and qualitative impact evidence. Our study (published recently in the [Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication](#)) was the first large-scale, national study of its kind.

Some of the most interesting results from this study include:

- Academic librarians with regular scholarly communication duties are likelier to use research impact indicators, compared with other academic librarians;
- There’s a growing interest among US academic librarians in using altmetrics as an indicator in promotion and tenure dossiers at institutions that offer tenure for librarians; and
- Faculty tenure and promotion requirements tend to influence the likelihood of librarians addressing JIF and citation counts during consultations

Let’s break this down in more detail.

Scholarly communication librarians are more “expert” in metrics than their colleagues

Not surprisingly, we found that academic librarians with regular scholarly communication duties (duties performed at least once a month) had more familiarity with and an overall higher usage of research impact indicators overall. Table 1 reflects this trend: much higher percentages of librarians with regularly scholarly communication duties responded “5 - I’m an expert” when asked to rank their knowledge of JIFs, citation counts, usage statistics, and altmetrics.

Research Impact Metric	Percentage of librarians who reported regular scholarly communication duties	Percentage of librarians that did not report regular scholarly communication support duties
JIFs	22.80%	5.15%
Citation counts	28.72%	8.58%
Usage statistics	24.47%	9.73%
Altmetrics	11.29%	0.60%

Table 1. Percentage of respondents who consider themselves “expert” in various kinds of research indicators

American academic librarians are increasingly using altmetrics in promotion & tenure

Our analysis also found that academic librarians’ interest in using altmetrics for promotion and tenure is a relatively recent phenomenon. Librarians previously on the tenure track were much less likely to use altmetrics in their tenure and promotion dossiers than academic librarians currently on the tenure track (Figure 1).

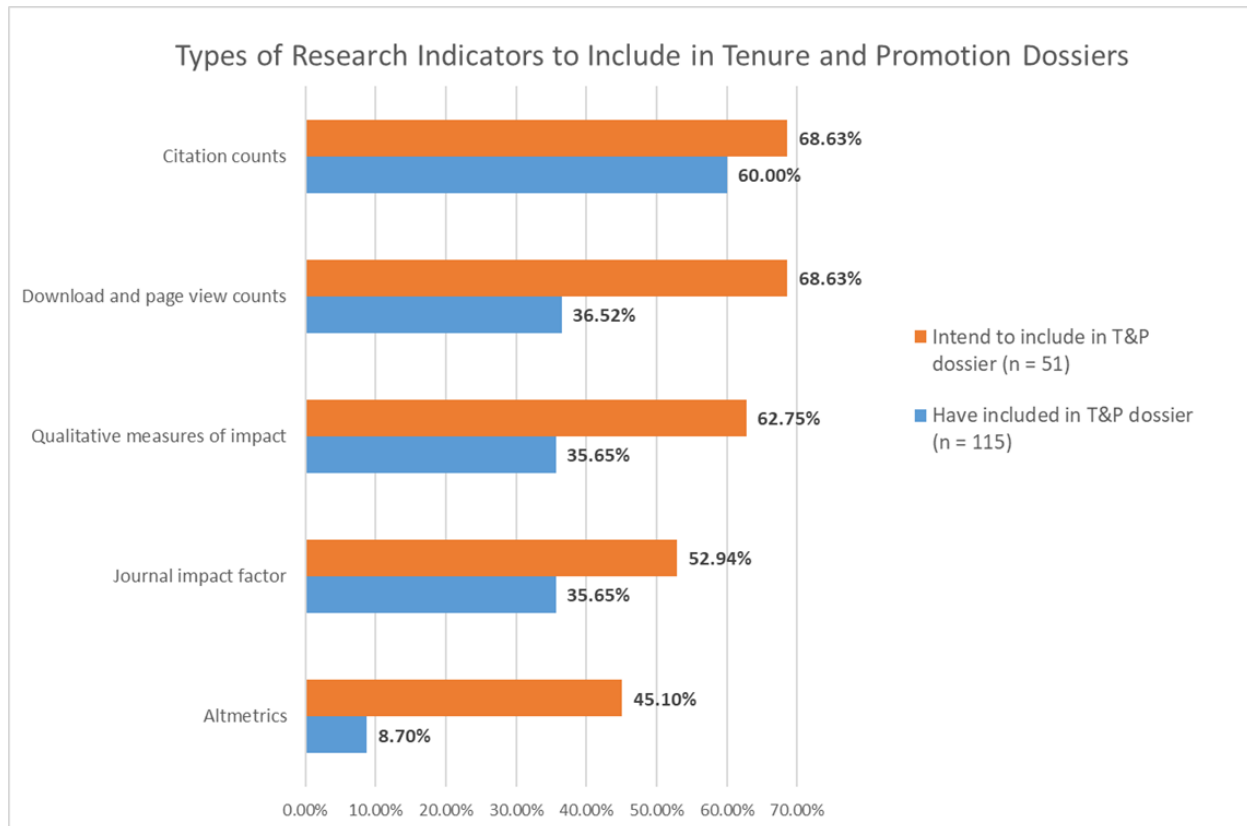


Figure 1. Comparison between librarians' past versus intended future use of research impact indicators in tenure and promotion dossiers

Of course, altmetrics have only been around for a few years, so it is only logical that tenured librarians would not have had much opportunity to use altmetrics in their dossiers. However, it is still exciting among altmetrics enthusiasts that this data shows a growing interest in the use of altmetrics among academic librarians on a more professional level.

Faculty want to learn about metrics for summative, not formative evaluation purposes

Though our research did not directly assess the use of metrics among faculty members, it did ask academic librarians about the likelihood of addressing research impact indicators during consultations with faculty. According to our statistical tests, the JIF, citation counts, h-index, and to some extent qualitative measures, are far more likely to be addressed during consultations with faculty concerning issues related to tenure, promotion, and grants than during consultations concerning publishing issues. What does this say about faculty members' use of research impact indicators?

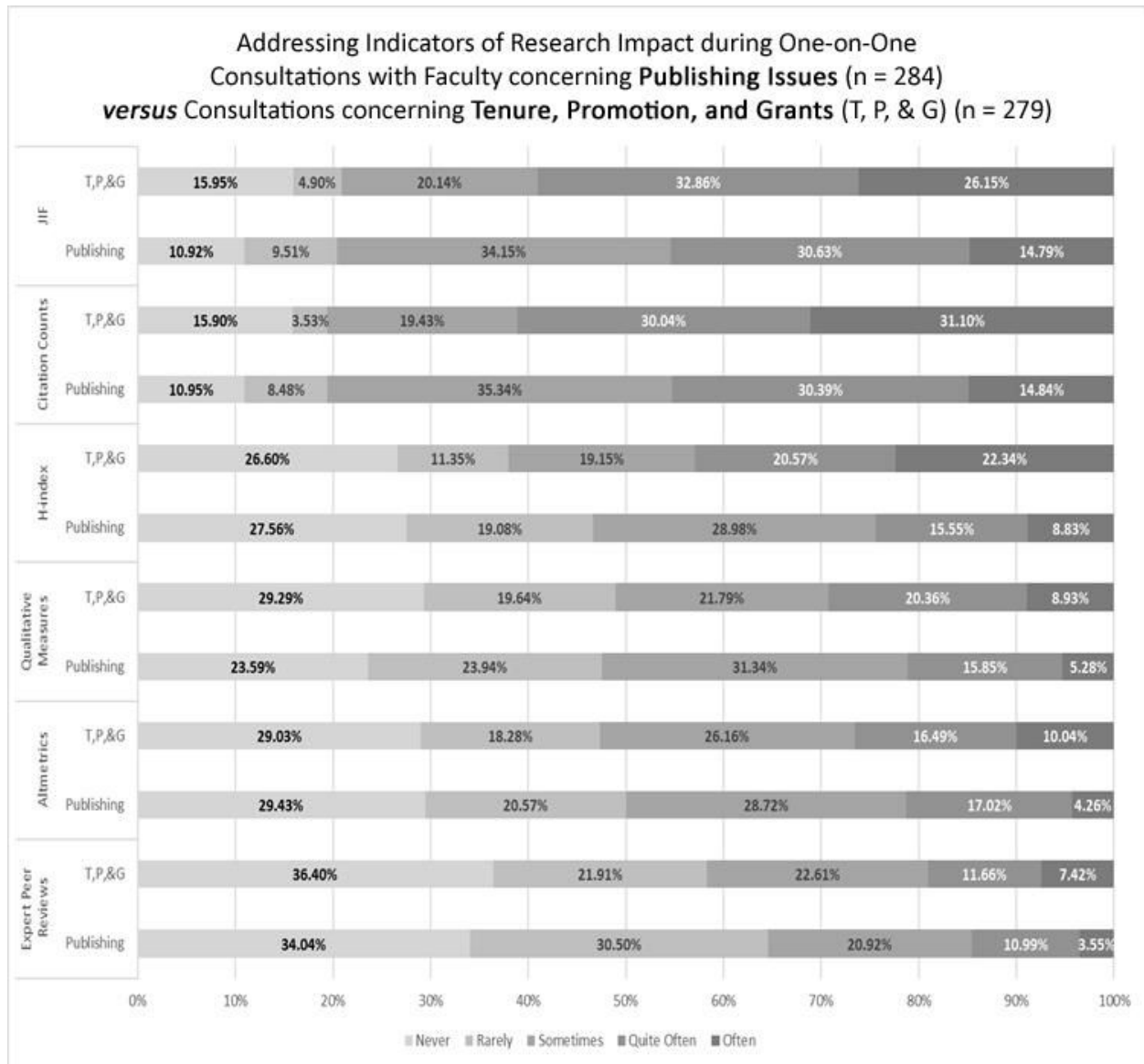


Figure 2. Differences between the frequencies of addressing indicators of research impact during one-on-one consultations with faculty concerning publishing issues versus tenure, promotion, and grants

First of all, we do not know for sure *why* these particular indicators were addressed during the consultations; faculty members could have initially asked about them, or the librarians could have mentioned them. We only know that the indicators were addressed by the librarians during consultations with faculty. At the very least, we can tell that assessing research impact may be more important for the sake of attaining tenure, promotion, and/or grants than it is for the determining how best to publish and disseminate research.

Other significant results are reported in [our recent publication](#) on this survey research, such as the reasons why librarians use the JIF and their varying levels of familiarity with certain research impact indicators. In addition, we emphasize the influence of tenure and promotion on researchers'

engagement with research impact metrics, and we call for more research on the influence of current research evaluation practices and career incentives on academic and scientific processes. Finally, and importantly, we call on the academic librarian community to take action in this important and emerging field to help influence and change current practices and to promote a healthier and more responsible approach to research evaluation.