Acknowledging the Academic Library: Impact Evidence in Scholarly Monograph Front Matter

A Summary Report of Library Assessment
June 2017

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Relates to: Bicentennial Strategic Plan (Imp. 4, Obj. 3; Imp. 5, Obj. 5; Imp. 6); 2016-
                       2017 PTS Action Plan (High Initiative 2; Priority Item); Library Strategic
                       Plan (Goal 1.1; 2.1; 2.2; 4.1).

                       Library mission statement: The Princeton Theological Seminary Library
                       strengthens teaching, inspires learning, broadens access, fosters
                       research, embraces change, and advances and preserves knowledge.

Artifacts/data: 130 acknowledgements citing library impact on scholarly work.
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Objective

Like many academic and research libraries today, Princeton Theological Seminary Library has a
dual mission. Its primary focus is supporting the research needs of local stakeholders in support
of the seminary's curriculum: students, faculty, alums, trustees, administrators, and staff.
Beyond institutional boundaries, the library is also charged with supporting advances in
scholarly research in theology, religion, and cognate fields broadly.

The Library has recently developed an array of assessment models to track library impact on
student outcomes and faculty productivity. However, harnessing a compelling method of
gathering evidence of library impact on the scholarship of its many visiting researchers has
been challenging.

This summary report outlines research to document evidence of library impact attested in
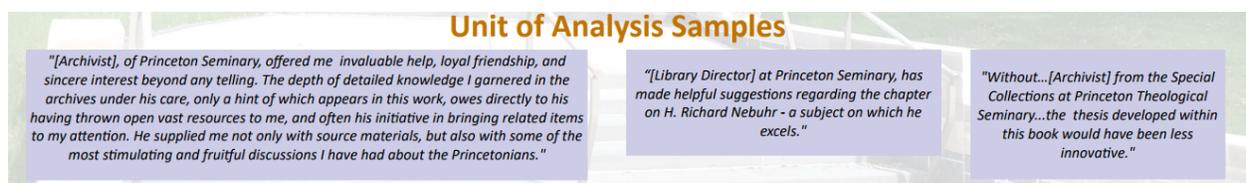monograph front matter acknowledging Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

Methodology

The library is honored to welcome local, regional, national, and international scholars virtually and in-person to use its unique special, digital, and general collections. As an open-stack, no-registration library that is open to the public, the library does not have any mechanism for tracking and analyzing who is coming in its doors and what materials they engage. For digital visitors, we have a similarly imprecise "click trail" of online usage statistics for library web tools and digital collections. Yet we know anecdotally that the library has significant impact on guests' scholarship. To explore this dilemma, we explored two research questions.

R1: What documentary evidence exists to demonstrate the Library's impact on research in religion and theology?

R2: What patterns in the data suggest ways to understand guest researchers' needs?

For those visiting scholars for whom we do have contact information, we hoped to avoid using an unsolicited email survey if possible. Like many academic libraries, PTSL is eager to respect patron privacy. We were concerned that visiting researchers might feel their privacy had been invaded or feel they were under digital surveillance in the library and thus hesitate to use the library in the future. Thus, the final research design for this study is both unobtrusive and nomothetic.

The library decided to harness digital tools--including Google Books, HathiTrust, and the Internet Archive--to search the front matter of monographs for notes of author recognition of the library's impact on their work. The research team ran test searches on all of the historic variations of the library's name, as well as library staff names, over the years. Extracts that mention the library were exported from the search tools into data mining software, searching for meaningful patterns in visiting researchers' patterns use. Software tools Voyant and Excel were used to create graphs and data visualizations.
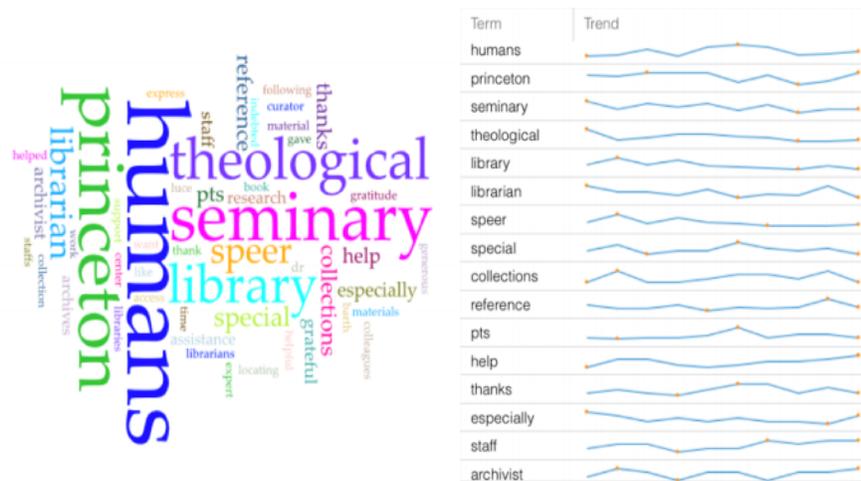

Unit of Analysis Samples

"[Archivist], of Princeton Seminary, offered me invaluable help, loyal friendship, and sincere interest beyond any telling. The depth of detailed knowledge I garnered in the archives under his care, only a hint of which appears in this work, owes directly to his having thrown open vast resources to me, and often his initiative in bringing related items to my attention. He supplied me not only with source materials, but also with some of the most stimulating and fruitful discussions I have had about the Princetonians."

"[Library Director] at Princeton Seminary, has made helpful suggestions regarding the chapter on H. Richard Nebuhr - a subject on which he excels."

"Without...[Archivist] from the Special Collections at Princeton Theological Seminary...the thesis developed within this book would have been less innovative."

Three example excerpts from scholarly monographs noting library impact.

Results

The results corroborate anecdotal evidence of the Library's positive impact on guest users' scholarship as documented in over 130 data points in the study sample.

R1: What evidence exists to demonstrate the Library's impact on research in religion and theology broadly?

- PRIMARY FINDING: This methodology creates a viable, replicable means for demonstrating library impact on scholarship broadly.

- Results corroborate anecdotal evidence of the Library's impact on guest users' scholarship as documented in 130 (120 Google, 3 HathiTrust, 4 Internet Archive; 3 physical) data points in the study sample.

- Study sample date range from 1936 to 2017 demonstrates a long pattern of the library's "history of care."
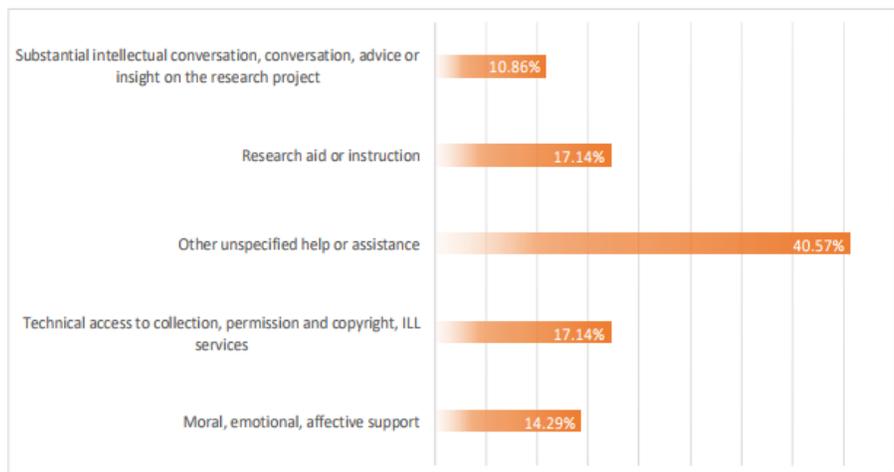

Term analysis of acknowledgments excerpts using Voyant.
Graph (L): Sinclair, S. & G. Rockwell. (2017). Cirrus. Voyant Tools. Retrieved June 5, 2017, from http://voyant-tools.org.
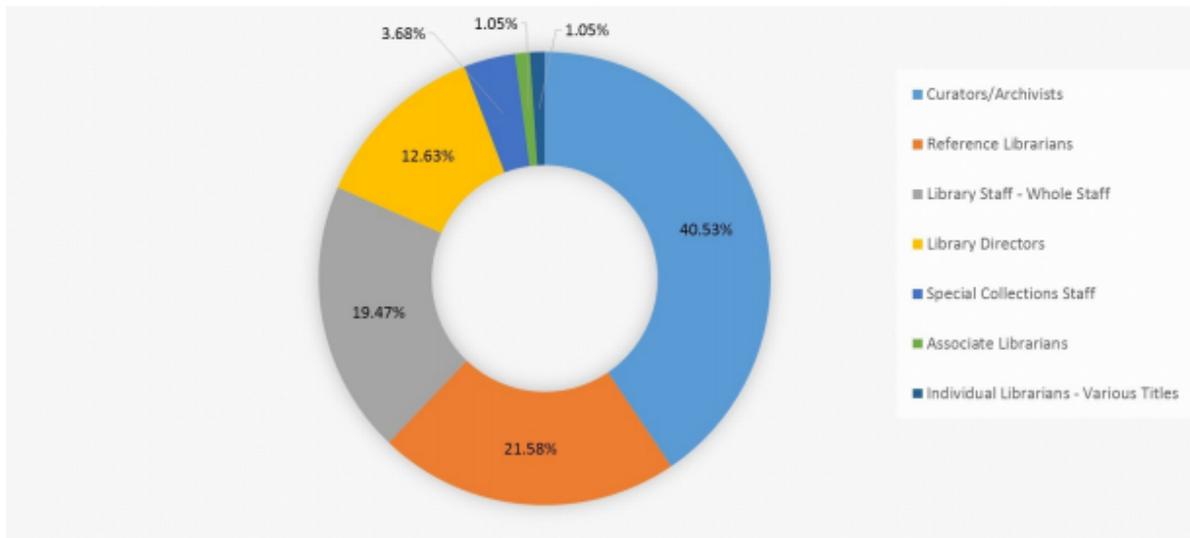*Graph (R): Sinclair, S. & G. Rockwell. (2017). Trends. Voyant Tools. Retrieved June 5, 2017, from http://voyant-tools.org*

R2: What patterns in the data suggest ways to understand guest researchers' needs?

- PRIMARY FINDING: Library staff from all areas of the library have impact on visiting scholars' research, with Curators/Archivists (40.5%) and Reference Librarians (21.6%) leading the way.

- The library contributes to visiting scholar productivity in a variety of ways:
    1. Moral, emotional, affective support
    2. Technical access, permission, ILL, copyright
    3. General (unspecified appreciation)
    4. Research aid or instruction
    5. Substantial intellectual contribution, conversation, advice or insight related to the research project

Percentage breakdown of types of library support that scholars featured in acknowledgments. Graph created in Microsoft Excel 2016 for Mac.

Scholarly monograph acknowledgments recognize staff across the library.
Graph created in Microsoft Excel 2016 for Mac.

Limitations and Conclusion

A couple practical realities imposed limitations on this study. First, results in the number and source of the extracts are skewed because not all books that might contain an acknowledgement of the library are necessarily indexed by Google, HathiTrust, or Internet Archive. As large-scale digitization projects increase coverage, a future data gathering project will undoubtedly uncover additional instances of library impact in acknowledgments sections. Second, the differences in digital library interface design, indexing, and searching models create further complications.

Even with these limitations, this methodology does provide a viable, replicable means for compellingly demonstrating Princeton Theological Seminary Library's impact on theological and religious scholarship broadly in new way.