

Partnership

Canadian journal of library and information practice and research

Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l'information

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Canadian Librarians as Research Ethics Board Members: An Exploratory Case Study

Bibliothécaires canadiens en tant que membre des comités d'éthique de la recherche

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Special Issue on Libraries and the Pandemic
Numéro spécial sur les bibliothèques et la pandémie
Volume 16, Number 1, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078574ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v16i1.6141>

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Publisher(s)

The Partnership: The Provincial and Territorial Library Associations of Canada

ISSN

1911-9593 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Lacroix, D. (2021). Canadian Librarians as Research Ethics Board Members: An Exploratory Case Study. *Partnership*, 16(1), 1–9.
<https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v16i1.6141>

Article abstract

Very little is known about Canadian librarians who sit on Research Ethics Boards (REBs) or Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). There is some background information on various roles of librarians on REBs, but that is usually from the perspective of one or two authors and often relating to the health sciences. Librarianship continues to evolve, especially in the areas of research data management, research support, and scholarly communication. It is, therefore, important to understand the changing expectations and responsibilities that librarians may have in Canada in order to encourage and support them as they meet institutional needs. This exploratory case study will document the reasons that motivate Canadian librarians to sit on REBs, the training they have received, the benefits achieved, and their overall experience.

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The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research
Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l'information

vol. 16, no. 1 (2021)

Features (editorially reviewed)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v16i1.6141>

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Canadian Librarians as Research Ethics Board Members: An Exploratory Case Study

Bibliothécaires canadiens en tant que membre des comités d'éthique de la recherche

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Abstract / Résumé

Very little is known about Canadian librarians who sit on Research Ethics Boards (REBs) or Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). There is some background information on various roles of librarians on REBs, but that is usually from the perspective of one or two authors and often relating to the health sciences. Librarianship continues to evolve, especially in the areas of research data management, research support, and scholarly communication. It is, therefore, important to understand the changing expectations and responsibilities that librarians may have in Canada in order to encourage and support them as they meet institutional needs. This exploratory case study will document the reasons that motivate Canadian librarians to sit on REBs, the training they have received, the benefits achieved, and their overall experience.

Très peu est connu au sujet des bibliothécaires canadiens qui siègent aux comités d'éthique de la recherche (CER) ou aux comités d'évaluation des établissements (CEE). Il existe quelques informations générales sur les divers rôles des bibliothécaires au sein des CER, mais elles sont généralement présentées du point de vue d'un ou deux auteurs et concernent souvent les sciences de la santé. La bibliothéconomie évolue toujours surtout dans les domaines de la gestion des données de recherche, du soutien à la recherche et de la communication savante. Il est donc important de comprendre que les attentes et les responsabilités des bibliothécaires au Canada changent afin de les encourager et les soutenir lorsqu'ils répondent aux besoins des établissements.

Cette étude de cas exploratoire documente les raisons qui motivent les bibliothécaires canadiens à siéger aux CER, la formation qu'ils ont reçue, les avantages obtenus et leur expérience générale.

Keywords / Mots-clés

research ethics boards, institutional review boards, academic libraries, librarians, communities of practice, case study

comités d'éthique de la recherche, comités d'évaluation des établissements, bibliothèques universitaires, bibliothécaires, communautés de pratique, étude de cas

Introduction

The roles of Canadian academic librarians vary naturally within and across institutions. Variance of responsibilities exists due to the librarians' professional job descriptions, experience held, and/or populations served, but also due to the intrinsic variety of tasks that necessarily occur for academic libraries to function. James, Shamchuk, and Koch (2015) conclude that in Canada "[i]t is clear both librarian and library technician roles and responsibilities are perceived to be growing in scope and complexity" (p. 14). The evolving multifaceted roles of academic librarians are well described especially in health sciences librarianship. However, as a humanities and social sciences librarian at the University of Alberta Library in Edmonton, my public service role is also evolving into contributing to internal and external teams and meeting patrons' information needs because of the groups to which I belong independent of serendipitous patron visits to the library building. I associate such groups or teams to communities of practice (CoPs), which Wenger et al. (2002) define as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 9). CoPs provide librarians new opportunities to contribute to the needs of the institution alongside faculty and students and allow librarians to "get out of the library [...], talk with those we serve about what they are doing and what their goals are, and think about what the institution needs and not what the library needs" (Plutchak, 2004, p. 296). One such CoP, in which University of Alberta librarians have been involved, are Research Ethics Boards (REBs), also known as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Librarian membership and involvement in REBs is not well documented beyond the health sciences and in Canada. This article will contribute a broader context and an overall understanding of why and how librarians meet their institutional needs and benefit by serving on REBs.

A Brief Overview of REBs

Canadian universities, like the University of Alberta (UA), that receive research funding from the tri-council federal government agencies (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and Canadian Institutes of Health Research) are mandated to organize REBs. REBs oversee ethical compliance of human research with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, also known as TCPS 2, (Canadian Institutes of Health

Research). Similarly, animal research must comply with the Canadian Council on Animal Care through the University's Animal Care and Use Committees (ACUC). Small educational institutions have only one REB to review research studies, while larger institutions have multiple REBs, usually divided up as health and non-health research. The director of the UA's research ethics office, Susan Babcock says that it is harder to determine the separation within health, but "generally is linked to whether or not the REB is reviewing research by MDs and/or clinician/scientists" (personal communication, November 28, 2016). This exploratory case study looks at librarian involvement in institutional REBs for human and animal research across Canada. The two librarians who conducted the study are members of the University of Alberta's REB 1, which looks at any non-health research that includes in-person interviews, focus groups, ethnographies, or community engagement and instructor-led course-based research assignments; and REB 3, which limits itself to non-invasive health research involving patients and health information.

Overview of Librarian Roles on REBs/IRBs

Librarian REB engagement roles vary, but often involve health sciences librarians rather than those in non-health areas. At George Washington University's Himmelfarb Health Sciences Library, Sullo (2016) identified serving as an IRB member as one of the institution-level roles librarians may consider. Similarly, Stemmer Frumento and Keating (2007) reported that the Greenwich Hospital IRB included the library director, who "conduct[s] a literature search to obtain review articles" (p. 118) for committee members. Hospital librarians serve as advisors, as well as full board members according to Harvey (2003), who said that the librarian serving on an IRB "is an integral part of the research efforts of the institution, and acts as the source of impartial information for the other committee members" (p. 101). As for animal care and use committees (ACUCs), Steelman and Thomas (2014) surveyed 60 librarians across the United States and Canada and found that 58% of the respondents performed literature searching for animal use protocols (AUPs), 35% reviewed AUPs, and 27% also had committee voting privileges. The existing literature on REB librarian involvement is almost exclusively limited to the health and animal-care fields and often limits librarian roles to an advisory or consultant role.

The University of Alberta Context

In 2019, the University of Alberta Library (UAL) proposed to formalize a suite of teams that align with its strategic priorities of scholarly communication, supporting research, inclusion, student experience, and Indigenous initiatives. The teams' membership includes most librarians, who are expected to spend around 40% of their time on team projects. Serving on an REB is not part of the formal proposed team strategy; however, one could argue that reviewing research studies for ethical compliance could easily be a part of the scholarly communication or research data teams' interest. Ethics review aligns well with the supporting research and inclusion priorities that the library has set for itself. Librarians serving on REBs can help researchers consider how managing their data and publishing apply to participants. In fact, Plutchak (2004) urged librarians to focus all of their efforts on doing whatever they have to do to make the most of those

opportunities: “that means getting out of the library and talking with those we serve about what they are doing and what their goals are. It means thinking about what the institution needs and not what the library needs” (p. 296). At the University of Alberta, two librarians have recently served the institution on two REB committees: one REB for social science research and the other for health sciences research.

My invitation to join the REB 1 came as a proposal from the former UA data librarian, Chuck Humphrey, who recommended me to the research ethics office (REO) director, Susan Babcock. The director was very open and excited to have a librarian sit on REB 1; in fact, she had just attended a research data management conference organized by the university library when the invitation was extended to me. My colleague, Trish Chatterley, who also worked on preparing this study, became involved in REB 3 in her position as a health sciences librarian. Both she and I reviewed research studies in compliance with the TCPS 2 and were full board members on equal footing with the other members, who were all faculty except for the community representative.

In addition to the research experience we already had as professional librarians, Trish and I received ethics training before sitting on our respective REBs. The REO provided us with an introduction to the Alberta Research Information Services (ARISE)¹ online system, which is the platform by which principal investigators (PIs) submit their research study ethics applications to the REB. We were given the opportunity to evaluate a research study following a reviewer’s checklist under the supervision of an REB staff member. I also took A pRoject Ethics Community Consensus Initiative (ARECCI) Level 1 training course for “assessing the ethical risks of projects that don’t require research ethics approval” (Alberta Innovates, 2020). As a member of the Health Research Ethics Board (REB 3), Trish was required to complete the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) training and was given a copy of the Alberta Health Information Act. We also both complied with the REBs’ recommendation to take the Canadian federal government’s TCPS² CORE (Course on Research Ethics) online tutorial² to learn the TCPS 2 guidelines³.

Methodology

The exploratory nature of the study is directly related to the dearth of information on the prevalence of librarians as REB members in Canada, their roles, and their experiences. A number of relevant cases were collected and provided a picture of Canadian librarians as REB members. Following approval from REB 1, the case study involved sending an online anonymous Google form survey to academic librarians in 2017 through professional library listservs in Canada (e.g., Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians) and via the Canadian Association of Research Ethics Boards (CAREB). CAREB is a “community of REB professionals, namely chairs, members and administrators of research ethics boards” (CAREB, 2020). CAREB members were also given the opportunity to fill out a survey about librarian membership in REBs. The reason for including REB chairs and administrators was twofold: to reach

¹ <https://www.ualberta.ca/research/research-support/research-ethics-office/support/getting-started.html>

² <https://tcps2core.ca/welcome>

³ https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique_tcps2-eptc2_2018.html

librarians serving on REBs who may not be part of a professional association listserv, and to understand the reasons for which librarians sit on REBs from the perspective of REB staff. Both surveys were quite similar and resulted in quantitative and qualitative data. The librarian survey⁴ consisted of 23 questions, and the CAREB survey⁵ asked 18 questions of respondents regarding their institutional context, the involvement of librarians on REBs, and the benefits of their involvement.

Outline of Responses

Responses to the surveys were not numerous given the limited pool of potential participants. There were only five REB staff responses. As for the librarian survey, 17 librarians who were members of an institutional REB responded: 50% of these were from Ontario, 19% from Manitoba, 19% from Alberta, 6% from British Columbia, and 6% from Nova Scotia (Figure 1). Of the respondents, five were members of a social science REB, four were in a health-focused REB, and three were in a general REB. All respondents dealt with human participants, except one who also looked at animal care studies. All reviewed studies for TCPS 2 ethical compliance. As REB members, most librarians joined as faculty or members with disciplinary expertise; however, 3 held either an REB chair or administrative role. Other roles held were those of community member and ad hoc reviewer. The role of privacy officer was noted by one CAREB respondent. Three quarters of the librarians worked in academic/research institutions, while the rest worked in hospitals and community colleges.

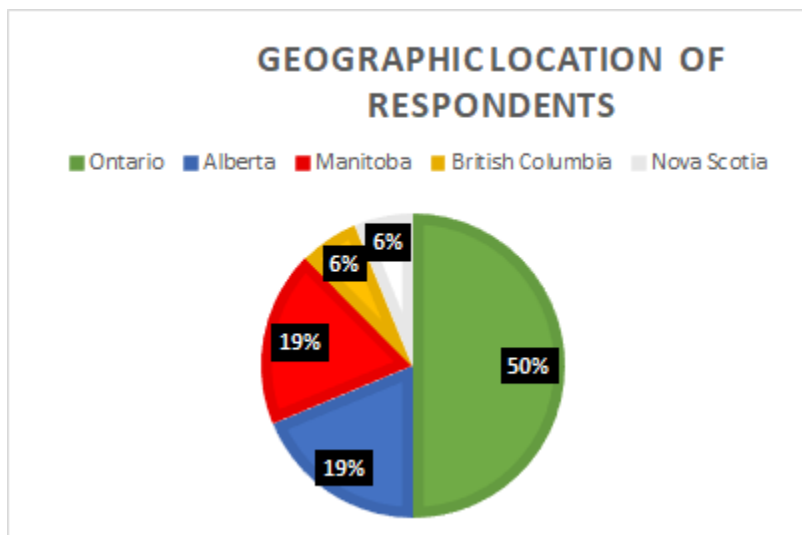


Figure 1. Provincial location of librarian survey respondents

Training for REB work

Of responding librarians who joined an REB, 88% learned to evaluate research ethics applications through self-study using existing documentation. In-person training delivered by REO staff was also a method of learning for 47% of respondents. Similarly,

⁴ The [librarian survey](#) is available for consultation in pdf format.

⁵ The [CAREB/ACUC survey](#) is available for consultation in pdf format.

41% benefitted from mentoring. One librarian remarked that subject area research experience beyond the MLIS degree was helpful in being able to evaluate REB ethics applications. It appears that self-directed learning is quite effective for the librarians who responded to the survey because all of them, except for one, were very to extremely confident with completing the tasks or responsibilities that the REB gave them. This may also be an indication of how well librarians are trained to take part in REB activities through their graduate studies and professional experience.

Reasons for sitting on REB and activities performed

Fifty-nine percent of respondents volunteered to sit on an REB (half of these volunteers did so to improve their understanding of human or animal participant research), and 41% of the respondents were asked to join because of an REB's need for a librarian to sit on the board. Once librarians had joined an REB, 53% served one to three years and 35% served four years or more. Only 12% of respondents had served less than one year. All librarian REB members reviewed studies, but two also chaired meetings and contributed to policy decisions or provided educational support.

Benefits of REB work

All respondents said they benefited professionally from sitting on an REB. Most of the benefits resulted in a better understanding of research methodologies and ethical concerns, the strengthening of faculty relationships, and a deeper understanding of the research happening at an institution. One librarian summarized this benefit by saying that REB membership “has furthered [their] connections in the academic community and led to additional research and scholarship opportunities.” This is in line with the literature on the topic, which says that serving on an REB “also educates the librarian by providing an awareness of the types of research conducted at their institution and an increased knowledge of the research process” (Harvey, 2003, p. 101). Likewise, REBs also benefited from having librarians join their ranks. In fact, the majority of respondents recognized that librarians bring specialized knowledge and perspectives to REBs. Librarians' experience with research data management, scholarly communication, and privacy/confidentiality issues are assets to REBs. One REB staff respondent reaffirmed that “librarians can bring invaluable expertise regarding literature reviews in research, research design, and especially data management plans to the REB review process.” Furthermore, librarians' interdisciplinary work brings an understanding of varied research methodologies to REBs, and a librarian's presence on an REB can help other members understand the type of research that librarians undertake—where there is sometimes a fine line between quality assurance and research. Experience on an REB also benefits the library where respondents work, including colleagues who come to librarian REB members for advice about navigating ethics application forms, ethical questions, or for information about REB structure and processes. Finally, only 18% of respondents recognized that library administration further acknowledges the expanding role of librarians thanks to their REB work.

Librarians' REB experience

The majority of respondents said that their work on an REB committee was a positive experience because of the learning opportunity it presented, the professional relationships they created, and the institutional service that it provided. One participant said the following about their REB work: "Love it. Great experience. Learning a lot. Great way to meet faculty. I think every university ethics board would benefit from having a librarian sitting on their REB(s)." Similarly, another respondent "highly recommend[s] that librarians create or take advantage of the opportunity to sit on a REB where possible." In fact, 12 out of 16 responses to the question regarding the value of librarians on an REB recognized that REBs can benefit from having librarians on the committee. Nevertheless, a few librarians found the experience somewhat negative because they received little acknowledgment or recognition by their library and/or REB for their contributions. They also admitted that they were self-conscious of the status difference between librarians and teaching/research faculty. Finally, 24% of respondents noted that REB work was time-consuming. The heavy workload is an aspect that Harvey (2003) also recognized by noting that REBs "usually meet monthly or bi-monthly for several hours per session" (p. 100) and have to read and review "at least one, sometimes two, very large binders of material [that] are delivered to the committee member approximately one week before the meeting" (p. 100-101). An anonymous IRB Advisor article also notes that librarians "enjoy their service on the IRB, despite the extra workload it can require," which is added onto their regular responsibilities ("Medical Librarians Can Be a Bridge Between IRBs and Researchers," 2011). However, at the University of Alberta, the REB workload is organized differently from what Harvey and the IRB Advisor note, as it is built into librarians' job expectations. REB staff review all submitted studies for any missing information and general ethical issues. Once those have been corrected, the studies are delegated to REB members for a more complete ethical overview. What Harvey described in terms of workload is more closely related to full-board reviews of studies, which only take place at the University of Alberta when serious ethical concerns arise and the initial reviewer(s) require the advice of all board members in consultation with the PI. In my experience, this is an uncommon occurrence and only happens for REB 1 two or three times per year. As might be anticipated, full-board reviews on the health-related REB 3 occur more regularly, often with two or three reviews discussed at each monthly meeting. In the absence of full-board reviews, REB member meetings are scheduled monthly and are usually cancelled at particularly busy times of the academic year and during the summer term.

Conclusion

This exploratory case study of Canadian REB librarian membership from the point of view of librarians sitting on REBs and from REB chairs/administrators provides a snapshot of the role, benefits, and experiences of librarians sitting on both human and animal REBs across institutions and academic disciplines. The results help understand that many librarians volunteer to sit on REBs and are asked to do so. It is through self-directed learning and mentoring that they are able to complete their REB responsibilities successfully. Many of the survey respondents agreed that librarian membership on

REBs is beneficial both to the librarian and to the REB itself. Most of the library respondents recognized that the experience of sitting on an REB was invaluable, despite some challenges regarding status and workload. Further research would be useful in investigating the particular contributions that librarians make on REBs and the actual benefits that REBs receive.

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