Learning about Grey Literature
by Interviewing Subject Librarians [*]

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Abstract

During the 2003-2004 academic year, library staff at the University of Rochester studied how faculty members find, use, and produce grey literature to do their scholarly work. We formed a research team that included an anthropologist, librarians, a graphic designer, computer scientist, programmer, and cataloger, and we learned the methods of work-practice study[1]. With funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), we then interviewed twenty-five faculty members in art and art history, economics, modern languages, linguistics, physics, and political science with the hope that what we learned would be useful in designing additions or modifications to our institutional repository[2].

As we conducted and analyzed the interviews resulting from this study, we discovered that some important questions about grey literature still remained. What exactly constitutes grey literature for Rochester's faculty in today's digital world? To what extent do our faculty members create and use grey literature, and might that material be deposited in our institutional repository? We also knew that the information gained from the departments studied under the aegis of the grant was necessarily limited, and we were interested in somehow expanding the reach of the study. We wanted to know which types of grey literature are most prevalent in all the disciplines and departments on our campus, not just the ones represented in our study. Could we tap into the expertise of subject librarians who work with faculty to inform our understanding of the grey literature used in other academic departments? Ultimately, we hoped that what we discovered would be useful in providing support to faculty who wished to make their grey literature available via our institutional repository. To learn more, the five subject librarians who were part of the larger research team – the authors of this paper – interviewed all of the River Campus Libraries subject librarians on the topic of grey literature.

Getting Started

To begin, the five of us questioned each other about our own faculty members' use of grey literature to ensure that we were asking the right questions and to get a sense of how best to conduct the interviews. Interviewing subject librarians was important for several reasons. In our larger study, it was difficult to ask faculty some of the most basic questions regarding grey literature. Grey literature is not a term used by most faculty members. In addition, we found that faculty research, even within the same department, tends to be narrowly focused, making it a cumbersome and unrealistic task to get a general sense of the variety and range of grey literature from faculty members only. By contrast, our librarian colleagues were readily accessible to us, already had some familiarity with grey literature and with our project, and were enthusiastic about exploring the topic with us.

While most librarians are familiar with the term grey literature, we discovered that there was much that subject librarians did *not* know about grey literature, especially in disciplines other than their own. We all found it useful to pool our knowledge and make cross-disciplinary comparisons.

For consistency's sake, we provided a standard definition at the beginning of each interview. We defined grey literature as, "that which is produced by government, academics, business, and industries, both in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishing interests and where publishing is not the primary activity of the organization."[3]

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[*] First published in *College & Research Libraries News* 66, no. 7 (2005)