Brecha entre investigación y práctica bibliotecológica. Cómo reducir la distancia

The gap between research and library practice. How to reduce the distance

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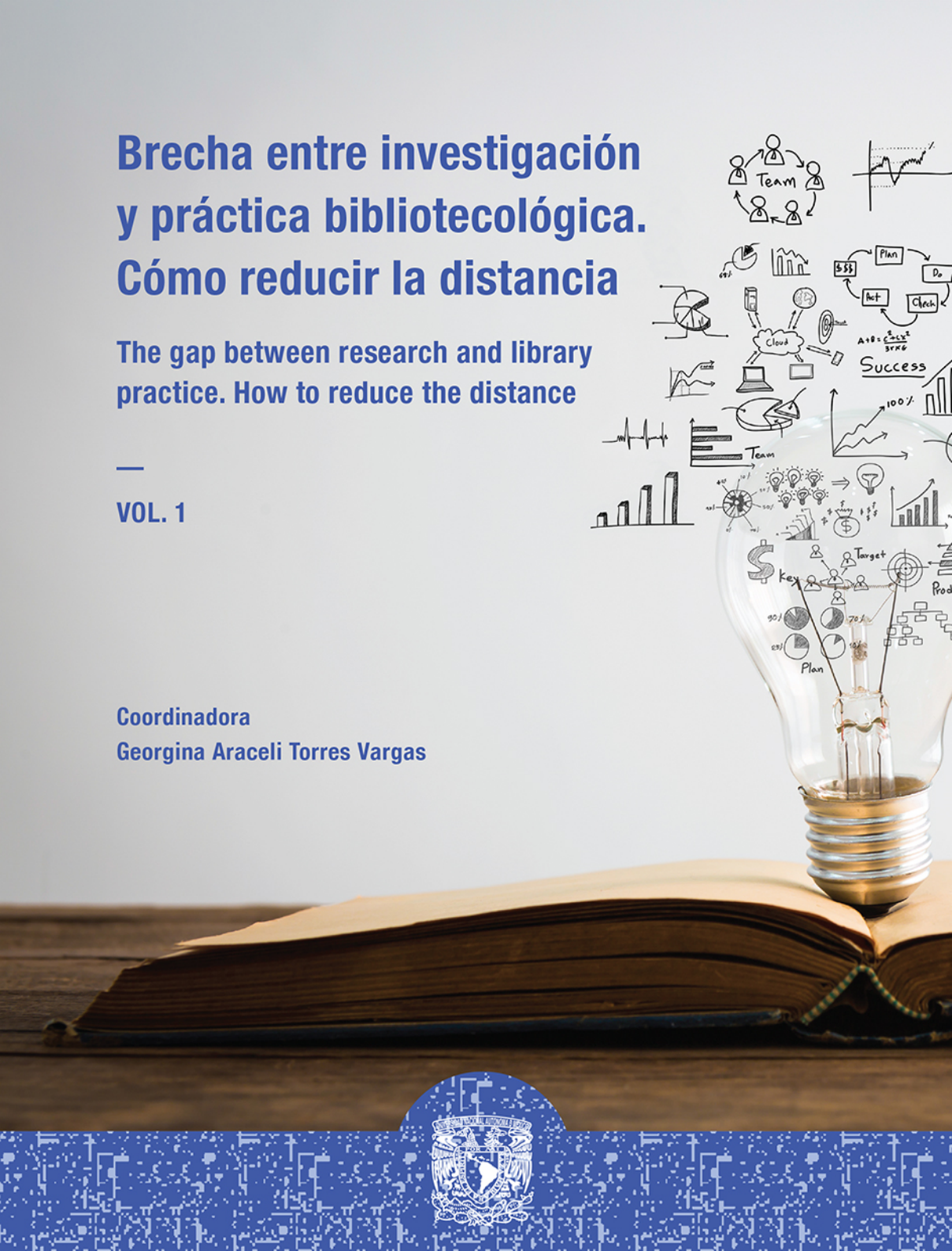
Georgina Araceli Torres Vargas



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From Paucity to Partnerships: The State of Research Informed Practice in Libraries

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Introduction

Librarians looking to apply the outcomes of LIS research into library practices has been a significant theme in the library literature in the 21st century. Research and reports related to this topic have been published in a number of regions and across library types (Ardanuy and Urdano 2017; Haddow and Klobas 2004; Jamali 2018; Hall, Irving, and Cruickshank 2012; Pickton 2016; Roberts, Madden, and Corrall 2013; Turner 2002). These studies looked at both the level of research conducted by librarians inside and outside of academia, as well as the use of LIS research that is conducted by practitioners in academic and public libraries. Throughout the 21st century, a persistent gap has been identified between the type of research that is conducted in academic settings, and more specifically in LIS educational programs by faculty and PhD students, and the reference and application to that research in practical contexts.

At the same time, the perception that there are minimal or poorly articulated theoretical underpinnings to library practice is also prevalent in the library literature (Budd and Lloyd 2014;

Bruce and Candy 2012; Carlin, Hjorland, Myburgh and Tommaro). With a growing interest in developing more critical approaches to librarianship, there is considerable literature that reports the limited grasp of criticality with respect to librarian pedagogical practices (Bruce and Candy 2015; Radomski 2015; Schachter 2018). New theoretical approaches to library information literacy teaching are also being developed, such as through the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* 2016, which attempts to bridge the research of pedagogical and literacy theories into library practice. The *Framework* is informed by a number of teaching and learning theories and concepts, such as threshold concepts, transliteracy (defined as the ability to analyse critically information that appears in any form), (Thomas 2008), and metaliteracy (incorporating self-reflection as an aspect of information access and use (Mackey and Jacobson (2011). Outside of North America, other theoretical approaches are being explored to support developments in library practices. These theoretical approaches include a number of learning theories that have informed understanding of information literacy, such as practice theory; metacognition (Budd and Lloyd 2014), informed learning (Bruce, Hughes and Sommerville2012); and social theoretical approaches, such as phenomenology (Limberg, Sundin, and Talja 2012) and sociocultural perspectives (Budd and Lloyd 2014).

Perhaps this combined gap between the theoretical basis to many LIS practices and the lack of engagement in and the use of the outputs of LIS research can be reconciled through improved engagement and shared research programs between researchers and practitioners? This paper reviews literature on the topic of both aspects of this question, along with evidence from my research, and proposed suggestions for LIS researchers and library practitioners.

The Literature

Early in the 21st century, Turner conducted a study to examine the state of practitioner use of research to inform library practice. Through a self-directed questionnaire of New Zealand librarians, the research identified concerns that continues to resonate today. Turner identified applied research as the majority of research being undertaken in LIS, and action research in particular (which cannot be replicated, necessarily) as predominant. Turner also notes that LIS practitioners do not make great use of the literature:

> Library and information science (LIS) can be described as embodying a practitioner-driven field that gives little attention to basic research, and lacks a substantial and unique body of theoretical knowledge [...] This is due in part to its recent development [...] and the multidisciplinary nature of its theoretical frameworks (Turner 2002, 230).

Turner's findings and recommendations connected the perceived lack of relevance of the existing LIS research to the needs of librarians in practice, to the potential for researcher to be more aware of their potential audience of practitioner librarians:

> [...] the perceived inadequacy of research in addressing workplace problems is a major reason for not consulting it, and that the most effective strategy for improving relationships LIS research and practice is the encouragement of research that includes practical guidelines for the application of results in workplace settings (Turner 2002, 239).

Haddow and Klobas also theorised about a gap in communication between LIS research and practice. Through a literature review related to LIS research and dissemination, the authors identified eleven gaps in communication: "a knowledge gap, a cultural gap, a motivation gap, a relevance gap, an immediacy gap, a publication gap, a reading gap, a terminology gap, an activity gap, an education gap, and a temporal gap" (Haddow and Klobas 2004, 30). They identified recommendations for closing these gaps,

including: involving practitioners in research; and improving the communication of research to practitioners. First, involving practitioners includes "education in research methods; encouraging library practitioners to enroll in higher degree courses; giving practitioners time to conduct research; and reducing other barriers to research activities in the workplace" (Haddow and Klobas 2004, 32). Second, improving communications could be realized by: publishing the outcomes of research in practitioner-focused publications; by researchers identifying specific practical applications of their research to libraries; summarizing their research into lay language; and through dissemination via continuing professional education. The potential for librarians to adopt evidence-based practices from other professions was an area of interest also for the LIS profession.

In the UK, between the years of 2009 and 2012, initiatives were developed to support LIS research and practice within the LIS community. The Library and Information Science Research Coalition was developed with intentions of undertaking initiatives with the aim to: "bring together information about LIS research opportunities and results; encourage dialogue between research funders; promote LIS practitioner research and the translation of research outcomes into practice; articulate a strategic approach to LIS research; and to promote the development of research capacity in LIS" (Hall, Irving, and Cruickshank 2012, 224). The results of these initiatives (including conferences and workshops on research techniques and reports on LIS) identified similar information as in other LIS contexts. These conclusions included, first: the need to work with professional associations to explicitly identify research competencies as an important aspect of librarianship; and second, to bring together researchers and practitioners, including practitioners from a range of different LIS communities, to encourage LIS research and librarian capacity for undertaking research.

Also in the UK, Roberts, Madden and Corrall (2013) explored the understanding that research in LIS had to date been either theoretical research conducted by academics, or practical research undertaken within specific practice contexts. They also proposed

that there are two distinct communities involved in LIS research —researchers and library managers— and that the outcomes of the research frequently does not lead to the mobilization of research knowledge within libraries. The authors conducted focus groups of UK iSchool researchers and content analysis of published articles to determine why researchers conduct research and how they ensure research knowledge mobilization from their research. Roberts, Madden and Corrall make a connection between the trend of evidence-based practice during the 21st century, and the perceived value of research into practices.

Not surprisingly, the recommendations from their study are similar conclusions from earlier research, including the need for researchers to: work more closely with practitioners to conduct research into areas of interest; highlight information about research practices and currency of the research within their publications; explicitly communicate the practical outcomes from the research; and to ensure that practitioners identify and are able to apply the research into their practices. More effective dissemination was identified as one means to ensure practitioners access research, including through the use of social media, and identifying practitioners as a significant audience for the article. These are similar to the recommendations outlined in the studies noted above.

Taking a different perspective, Pickton asked how a research culture could be developed in academic libraries. Pickton identified similar concerns and recommendations, from earlier studies, through a literature review and a case study from the University of Northampton. The demands on librarian time requiring, tangible support from management and administration to enable a research culture, was identified as necessary to help librarians build their skills to become effective researchers: "A common thread in discussions about practitioner research is that many practitioners feel they lack the necessary skills and expertise to conduct credible scholarly research" (Pickton 2016, 109). From policies to organizational planning, to mentorship and collaborative support networks within institutions, were recommended as positively influencing a research culture.

Nguyen (2017), on behalf of the Australian Library and Information Association, reported on the perceived gap in LIS connecting research with practitioners in Australia. One of the areas that they identified, through a survey of 172 participants from LIS schools and a range of library types, was that there are systemic barriers separating researchers and practitioners. Seven barriers they identified were "Awareness and perception; Connection and relationship; Funding; Passion and enthusiasm; Research culture and support; Research expertise; Shared understanding and interest" (Nguyen 2017, 4). Two of the specific recommendations that arose from the report, and that are applicable to the discussion in this paper include first: "Libraries and librarians should change the perception of their roles to include research as part of their role specification. This would be a powerful catalyst for a more dynamic, evidence-based profession"; and second, "LIS schools and academics should be active players in fostering collaboration between academia and practice. Applied research should not be regarded as less important than research of a more theoretical nature" (Nguyen, 2017, 5). Nguyen proposed that the mechanisms for how these recommendations could be enabled to support the development of research culture in practice involved funding librarians to conduct research (both to cover actual costs and time) and for LIS schools to formally partner with libraries to develop the research expertise of librarians in the field.

Jamali (2018) conducted a more recent study in Australia to find out how much research are library practitioners producing, and how much do librarians use research literature to inform their practice. Through a bibliometric study and interviews with librarians, Jamali found that while practitioners do publish research, many do not, as they feel they do not have the skills or resources to do so. At the same time, librarians felt that the academic research does not offer the practical outcomes that they require to be applied to their work. Similar to earlier studies, Jamali notes: "Practitioners' expectations of the research literature generated by academic researchers is not high for they believe academic research lacks relevance, applicability, and coverage" (Nguyen 2017,

9). And recommends: "The solution might be greater collaboration between researchers and practitioners in conducting research studies" (Nguyen 2017, 8).

Finally, Ardanuy and Urbano through a literature review, raised concerns over the research and application gap within Spanish libraries: "In LIS, the lack of harmony between knowledge creation and its professional consumption poses a major threat and impedes a coordinated response to the huge number of challenges faced wherever the discipline has a presence." They explore the idea that "LIS research is suffering from a degree of international isolation and a tendency towards ever weaker cooperation between academics and practitioners" (Ardanuy and Urbano 2017, 317). Their literature review identified this consistent argument from early in the 21st century to present day. The authors examined three aspects of the LIS literature: "an analysis of information consumption by practitioners and their assessment of LIS research works [...] as a source of information for the exercise of their profession", "works that have studied the gap from the perspective of evaluating investigation and publications and the limited impact of research projects on practice"; and "the role of practitioners in guiding research agendas" (Ardanuy and Urbano 2017, 318).

The study found a clear gap between practitioners and academia over time: "in the first place, we find an extremely low level of mixed authorship between practitioners and academics in two key Spanish LIS platforms of scientific/professional communication" (Ardanuy and Urbano 2017, 326) and which has declined over time. They recommend "that practitioners and academics must be encouraged to work more closely. This would have a huge impact on enhancing the relevance and rigour of LIS publication in Spain and in other European countries [...]" (Ardanuy and Urbano 2017, 327). What evidence that previously there had been less of a gap is not revealed.

The Gap in Theory to Practice: The case of Information Literacy and Library Pedagogy

This section examines the recent LIS literature and research related to the application of theory into LIS practice, and pedagogical practices in particular.

While the critical information literacy (CIL) approach has had a North American academic focus, other theoretical approaches are also being explored to support developments in library practices, as noted earlier. With respect to il teaching, the literature recommends that librarians develop more explicit understanding and application of pedagogical theory into library practices. While il teaching is the primary focus of many discussions, other library practices are being informed by developments in pedagogical and learning theories. Elmborg has been frequently referenced with respect to identifying the theoretical underpinnings to the work of librarianship: "Building on the foundation of the process models and other relevant learning theory, critical literacy represents the next evolutionary stage in the development of a theory of educational librarianship" (Jacobs 2008, 194). Elmborg, Jacobs, Downey (Jacobs 2008) and other authors have further developed the argument that librarians need to consider the interrelationship between all of librarians' educational activities for understanding and developing practices:

> When librarians talk about pedagogy, we frequently conflate it with information literacy sessions. Indeed, pedagogy and information literacy sessions are inextricably linked. However, I would like to argue that in order to work toward the theoretically informed praxis we need to broaden our definition of pedagogy beyond the teaching of information literacy sessions and think critically about how we describe our pedagogical work (Jacobs 2008, 3).

Much of the literature critiquing teaching librarians' knowledge of theory relates to lack of evidence of application of pedagogical and critical theories — but the empirical research in this area

presents a more complex picture than the critiques suggest —. In a study of self-selected librarians, Schroeder and Hollister found that most librarians have an awareness of critical theories, and those who did not still had awareness of the need for critical library practices. In their study, Schroeder and Hollister hypothesised that librarians had a range of levels of understanding of critical theory, with the expectation of gathering information from those both who felt they did understand critical theory, and those who were less familiar. In a survey of North American librarians and other library workers in a range of library types, they received 365 responses which support the literature related to the interrelationships between librarianship, theoretical awareness, and social justice, such as in their conclusion that "the majority of librarians in this study who have no knowledge of critical theory regard service to historically underserviced and underrepresented populations as an inherent part of their daily practices" (Schroeder and Hollister 2014, 113). Based on the results of their survey, the authors identified the value of incorporating more theory (specifically critical theory) into library education. While their study raises a number of questions about awareness of theory, Schroeder and Hollister highlight the need for a more philosophical and theory-based foundation to librarianship. Tewell conducted a survey and interviews identifying North American academic librarians' application of critical information literacy in their practice. Tewell found that librarians were eager to participate in the development of critical information literacy practices: "The excitement regarding this type of teaching was especially notable among librarians who were relatively new to the profession" (Tewell 2018, 30). Librarians identified benefits that came with incorporating critical information literacy in their practice as: "Increased Engagement; Meaningful to Students; Meaningful for Librarians; Connecting with Faculty; Creating Community" (Tewell 2018, 24). As Tewell and others have found, librarians seemed to be interested in participating in developing their information literacy teaching practices with a focus on new approaches, as supported by critical and reflective practices.

In a study I recently conducted through online questionnaire and interviews with representatives from the 25 higher education public institutions in British Columbia, Canada, a similar set of challenges and responses were identified (Schachter 2018). With respect to being able to apply new theoretical approaches to their teaching practices, almost three-quarters of the librarians in the survey reported encountering barriers to applying new theoretical approaches. A number of consistent responses were gathered related to these barriers: a majority (65%) identified a lack of time or capacity, while, notably, more than half of librarians responded that teaching faculty resistance was a critical barrier to librarians' ability to implement new theoretical approaches. It is also interesting to note that a full quarter of librarians also pointed to librarian resistance or lack of interest by their librarian colleagues, as another barrier.

Beyond the commonly identified barriers of time, another barrier to new theoretical approaches identified was their organizational culture's resistance to change. Ten of the survey respondents also identified the challenge of bringing about change in their institutions as a barrier. This theme, revealed through questionnaire responses, included the impact of the organization's culture on the potential to change and evolve, or simply the challenge of trying to implement change within the context of teaching within another discipline's classes. Other barriers identified included a lack of interest by the librarians themselves, and poor training or lack of training in or understanding of pedagogy.

Some librarians identified examples of their ability to engage with theory related to critical information literacy, threshold concepts, and other learning theories. In particular those highlighted within the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* were remarked upon as far as how engaging with theory improved their interactions with the teaching faculty. Using the *Framework* was reported to offer one means of gaining the interest of the teaching faculty, particularly with the theory of threshold concepts. Underpinning all of this potential activity is the premise that improving knowledge of teaching and learning theories will

support the development of library practices, overall. As noted in other articles, the development of practical application of new models of theory-informed IL teaching are enabled through participation in peer networks (Bilodeaua 2015; Carson; Osborn 2017). Sharing not just the theoretical implication of practices but also the implementation strategies, offers great potential for the development of practices across libraries.

While the literature has historically described a dearth of librarians' understanding of pedagogical and critical theories, more recent focus in the literature on these topics and research into this area, such as that noted above, are revealing something quite different. The perception of librarians' interest in and engagement with critical theory in support of LIS is becoming a consistent finding across different educational environments (Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier 2010; Kos and Špiranec 2015; Bury 2017; Secker 2017; Schroeder and Hollister 2014; Tewell 2018). The approach that librarians take toward teaching in a library context has developed the concept of library pedagogy, including the explicit incorporation of theory and the outcomes of research related to information library practices.

Recommendations and Conclusions

From the literature review and research with librarians in a number of jurisdictions, the persistent gap between LIS research and the development of library practices continues throughout the 21st century. A number of recommendations have been made, however, to reduce that gap and ensure that academic research efforts and librarian practical aspirations can develop into a persistent partnership.

While studies have shown that librarians express an interest in learning about theories that underpin their practices (Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier 2010; Downey 2016; Schroeder and Hllister 2014; Tewell 2018) there is also evidence of lack of awareness and lack of application of theory to the development of library practices (Bruce and Candy 2015; Budd and Lloyd 2014). Barriers

to librarians' ability to learn about and apply new theories and approaches to their practices have been identified in the literature (Booth 2011; Gross, Latham and Julien 2018; Hess 2015; Kim 2005; Tewell 2018; Yearwood *et al.* 2015) and these barriers include the sense of lack of time and capacity to learn about new theories.

Addressing the lack of resources in any one institution is possible through peer support and sharing initiatives between institutions. In trying to identify ways that this could be accomplished surfaced a number of challenges that are consistent in the literature related to developing practices in librarianship (Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier 2010; Drabinski 2014; Tewell 2018). These challenges include resistance to change, the barrier of time, and lack of LIS education and professional development opportunities related to understanding theory. One barrier to librarians' aspirations to apply new practices and theoretical approaches has been identified as the organization's culture (Limwichitr, Broady, Preston and David Ellis 2015; Maloney et al. 2010; Ramzan and Singh2010; Seymour 2012; Wilkinson and Bruch 2014). Addressing librarian resistance to new approaches is a critical first step in achieving the aim of implementing new theoretical approaches to library practices. In the higher education context, this can be accomplished by librarians engaging with educational learning theories, workshopping theories into practices, and mentorship for those who have limited awareness of theories.

With respect to both the application and the use of theory to inform practice, the development of practical application of new models of theory-informed IL practices are enabled through participation in peer networks (Bilodeaua and Carson 2015); Osborn 2017; Walkley 2018). Sharing not just the theoretical implication of practices but also the implementation strategies offers great potential for the development of practices across libraries. An expectation of scholarship and research into practices and theory would involve a commitment at library association and institutional levels, in support of practitioners.

In conclusion, a summary of recommendations that arise from the literature are:

> Recommendation 1: Researchers need to focus on improving the communication of their research. Specific mechanisms include: Improving the dissemination to librarians through practitioner-focused publications; through social media channels; through conference and workshops focussed on practitioners; and practical guidelines to the practitioner audience for application of research to practice.
>
> Recommendation 2: Researchers within LIS schools and beyond should seek more opportunities for research-practitioner partnerships in conducting research and in submitting joint publications on that research.
>
> Recommendation 3: Libraries, and in particular library administrators, need to Improve the capacity for their librarians to conduct research, through explicitly building a culture of research by: funding time release; educating librarians on how to conduct research; and providing internal communities of practice and mentorship opportunities.
>
> Recommendation 4: LIS schools need to clarify and reinforce their role to support research in the field, to foster understanding and value of research within their programs, and to support connecting researchers with practitioners in the workplace.

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La bibliotecología, como área que se dedica al estudio del conocimiento intencionalmente registrado, tiene dos vertientes: la profesional y la disciplinar. En cada uno de esos territorios, el practicante y el investigador de la bibliotecología hacen tanto una labor loable como aportes sustanciales; sin embargo, practicante e investigador pocas veces se observan y complementan. Hay diversos trabajos que han tocado el problema de la división o brecha entre práctica e investigación en bibliotecología; aun así, la convergencia entre ambas no se nota, por lo que ésta sigue siendo un tema pendiente.

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