

Reimagining Academic Publishing: Community-Engaged Market Research for Liberata

1. Introduction

Community-engaged research opportunities in economics remain relatively limited, yet they play a vital role in bridging academic inquiry with ethical leadership and real-world impact, which are fundamental principles of the Laidlaw Scholars Program. To pursue a project that reflected both my academic background in behavioral economics, decision science, and publishing, and the program's commitment to community-engagement, I conducted extensive outreach to researchers. This process ultimately led me to Liberata, a pre-launch academic publishing platform that represented a distinctive opportunity for meaningful contribution and the potential for lasting impact.

Within Liberata, developed as part of a Duke Bass Connections research team, I assumed responsibility for leading the platform's first market research initiative. The project centered on refining Liberata's core concept and communication strategy through direct engagement with academic stakeholders. At its core, this work sought to explore how a new, incentive-aligned publishing model might restore credibility to academic scholarship and to uncover what is required to transform such a deeply entrenched system.

2. Liberata: Context and Project Mission

Academic publishing is broken in ways that many academics have come to accept as normal: misaligned incentives, unfair credit systems, and a lack of accountability that makes it hard to trust what's published. Three core issues underlie this breakdown. First, we don't have accurate or fair metrics for contribution, which leads to inflated authorship, prestige signaling, and barriers for those outside elite networks. Second, peer review is under-incentivized and inconsistent, despite the enormous labor it requires. One study estimated that researchers spent over 100 million hours on peer review in 2020, equivalent to more than 15,000 years of collective work, which is valued at over \$1.5 billion in the U.S. alone (Aczel et. al., 2021). Third, replications, which are arguably the most important form of scientific accountability, are rarely performed because there's no incentive to do them. In the Open Science Collaboration's 2015 reproducibility project, only 39% of results were subjectively judged to have been

properly replicated (Open Science Collaboration, 2015). As Ioannidis (2005) famously argued, a combination of low statistical power, bias, and selective reporting means that many published findings are more likely to be false than true. Taken together, these issues fuel growing mistrust in research, rising retraction rates, and a publishing system that rewards gaming the system over producing reliable science.

Liberata is being developed as a response to these structural failures. Unlike platforms like ArXiv, which prioritize access but not quality, Liberata introduces game-theoretic mechanisms that reward meaningful contributions at every stage of the publishing process. The platform replaces traditional authorship order with “contribution shares,” quantifying credit more transparently. It also includes a marketplace for incentivized peer review and another for incentivized replication. Liberata is designed to be open-source, equitable, and independent of private publishers, with its aim being to make academic publishing fair, transparent, and credible for the researchers and communities who depend on it.

Academics like professors, graduate students, librarians, and journal editors are all navigating a system that doesn’t recognize or reward much of the labor they do. But the ripple effects are larger: taxpayers fund research that’s locked behind paywalls; startups, governments, and healthcare systems make decisions based on findings that may not be reproducible; and flawed studies are amplified, leading to wasted resources and public mistrust. Overinvestment in bad science hurts universities and distorts downstream applications across science, policy, and industry.

My market research focused on those most directly involved in the publishing process: professors, PhD students, postdocs, scholarly communication librarians, and journal editors. These groups are extremely familiar with how the system works and feel the structural problems most acutely. They experience pressures to publish in prestigious journals, the lack of incentives for reviewing, and the consequences of unclear authorship credit firsthand. While other groups experience the fallout, these are the people best positioned to speak to how the current system fails and what a viable alternative would need to offer. Listening to them first is crucial to building a platform that addresses the root of the problem before scaling outward.

This kind of systemic reform aligns strongly with the values of the Laidlaw Scholars Program.

Liberata is bold, ambitious, challenges the long-standing academic norms, and tries to build something better in collaboration with the communities it's meant to serve. Because the platform is still pre-launch, that listening process is essential.

3. Goals and Scope of the Internship

The focus of my work this summer was to lead Liberata's first round of structured market research, with the goal of understanding how academic stakeholders perceive the current publishing system and how they might respond to a proposed alternative. My specific contribution centered on designing and deploying a survey that could surface early reactions, identify pain points, and highlight potential barriers to adoption. The deliverables from my internship included the survey itself, stakeholder-specific outreach emails and developing a Qualtrics email campaign, and a detailed synthesis of findings. The main questions that informed my approach were as follows: Are there fundamental weaknesses in Liberata's concept that stakeholders find confusing, unrealistic, or unworkable? What are the biggest frustrations academics face with current publishing workflows, and what would they need to see in a new platform to consider using it? What kind of messaging resonates with different types of users, and what might motivate them to engage with or adopt a new platform?

This research was especially critical at Liberata's current pre-launch stage. With many of the platform's details still in development, the team needed concrete insight into user priorities, hesitations, and expectations to shape both product design and communication strategy. My role was to help surface those insights, represent the voices of potential users, and ensure that the direction of the platform is informed by the people it's trying to serve.

4. Methodology: Community-Engaged Market Research

To better understand Liberata's core academic user base, I designed a stakeholder survey using Qualtrics, teaching myself the platform's more advanced features along the way. The focus was on gathering thoughtful, representative feedback through a process that emphasized clarity, accessibility, and respect for participants' time.

Rather than using pre-existing mailing lists or scraped directories, I compiled a contact list of over 2,500 academics. I used the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2025* and worked through the first 125 schools on the list to ensure that all selected institutions were research-focused and well-positioned to engage meaningfully with Liberata's goals and mission. I focused on four key academic stakeholder groups: professors, PhD students/postdoctoral researchers, scholarly communication librarians, and journal editors. From each institution, I aimed to reach 8 professors, 8 PhD/postdoc researchers, 2 librarians, and 2 editors, bringing the total outreach to roughly 2,500 individuals. Within the professor and PhD/postdoc categories, I intentionally selected participants across disciplines—two each from life/physical sciences, humanities, social sciences, and engineering/computer science—and varied levels of seniority, especially within the faculty group. This approach helped ensure a balanced, representative sample that reflected the breadth and complexity of the academic publishing landscape Liberata is working to serve.

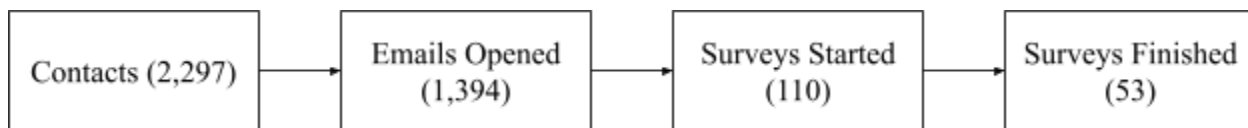
The market research process was designed as a two-part experience. First, participants were asked to view a [10-minute explainer video](#) outlining Liberata's mission and the broader challenges within academic publishing. The video served as essential context, encouraging more thoughtful responses to the survey. Following this, participants were directed to a Qualtrics survey link, where their unique response IDs were logged. The survey asked for feedback on what was clear or unclear in the explainer, participants' publishing pain points, general thoughts and critiques of the concept, and suggestions for features or incentives that might support adoption. Importantly, the survey intentionally included space for dissent. Many closed-ended questions offered options to challenge or reject the premise. For instance, in response to "What is the most valuable feature of Liberata?" one of the multiple-choice options was, "There are no valuable features of Liberata." These choices allowed participants to express skepticism and offered insight into potential resistance or misconceptions.

Thoughtful engagement and participation was incentivized through a raffle for five \$100 Amazon gift cards. Respondents received one raffle entry per open-ended question answered with a full sentence or more. Responses such as "yes" or single-word answers were excluded. To further gauge interest, at the

end of the survey, participants were asked whether they would be interested in a more technical or business-focused walk-through/pitch about Liberata. Those who answered "maybe" or "yes" were invited to provide their contact information, which will inform the next phase of outreach and market research in Liberata's ongoing development.

The outreach emails were then crafted and tailored to each stakeholder based on the specific needs or potential draws of Liberata for each group. For instance, the email subject for professors was: "Tired of journal fees and wading through poorly written articles?" while for journal editors it was "Want to build a publishing system with properly incentivized quality controls?" In the email body, key phrases and motivations were personalized. Librarians, for instance, received a message referencing "the economics of private journals and institutions" and the possibility of supporting "a new publishing system with marketplaces for peer review and replication services."

5. Results & Analysis



Although the initial goal was to reach 2,500 stakeholders across 125 top research universities, the final outreach totaled 2,297 due to gaps in available contact information. Reminder emails that were shortened for clarity were sent throughout the campaign to boost engagement, but response remained low. As shown in Figure 1, this outreach resulted in 110 survey starts and 53 completions, yielding a 4.8% overall response rate ($\#$ of surveys started/total delivered emails x 100) and a 48% completion rate ($\#$ of surveys finished/ $\#$ of surveys started x 100). The open-to-start conversion rate was 7.9% ($\#$ of surveys started/emails opened x 100).

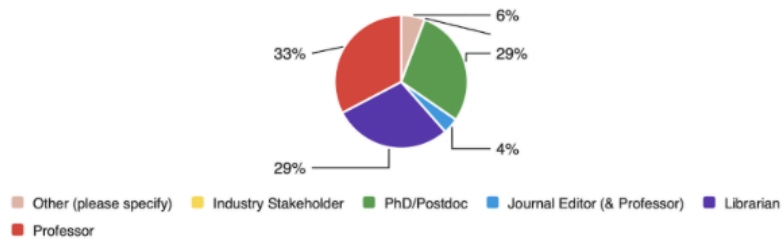
While overall participation was lower than hoped, the high completion rate suggests the main barrier was getting recipients to open and click through the email. Nearly half of those who started the

survey completed it, which indicated strong engagement from those who participated. Future outreach should focus on improving subject lines and tightening email messages to increase click-through rates.

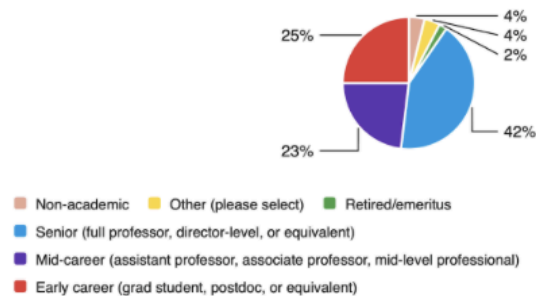
Respondent Demographics

Which of the following best describes your role?

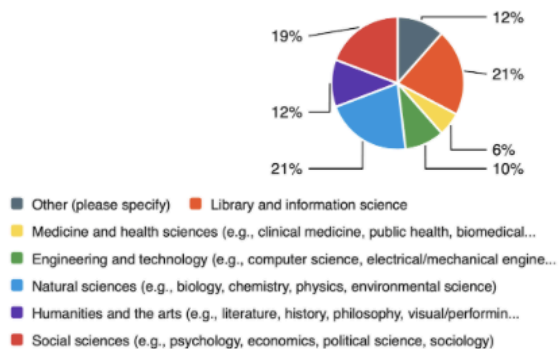
52 Responses



What stage of your career best describes you?



Which academic discipline best describes your primary area of work or research?



Respondents represented a broad mix of academic roles, career stages, and disciplines.

Figure 1: Academic Role of Respondents - Professors, librarians, and PhD/postdocs were evenly represented. Journal editors were underrepresented, likely due to difficulty identifying contact information.

Figure 2: Career Stage of Respondents - Nearly half were senior faculty, with strong input from mid- and early-career scholars. Senior academics shape institutional norms, making their support especially important. Early-career participation suggests openness to reform and identifies potential early adopters.

Figure 3: Disciplinary Distribution of Respondents - Publishing cultures vary greatly between disciplines, so the balanced spread here helps Liberata better understand which communities may be most receptive to the platform’s features and framing.

Perception of Explainer Video

Respondents generally felt the video communicated Liberata’s goals and highlighted problems in academic publishing effectively. However, many found the platform’s core mechanics such as share distribution, reviewer incentives, and funding flows unclear. While the vision resonated, the explainer lacked clarity around execution. Future versions should include specific examples and visual walkthroughs to address these gaps.

Pain Points & Concerns

Theme	Summary	Sample Quote(s)
Institutional Inertia/Culture Change	27% of respondents had concern that Liberata wouldn’t be adopted because of entrenched publishing culture, risk-aversion, and difficulty persuading faculty/institutions	<i>“New systems like Liberata are doomed to fail...not enough scholars will participate.”</i>
Recognition and Career Risk	20% of participants expressed	<i>“Hiring and tenure committees</i>

	<p>fear that Liberata outputs won't "count" for tenure, promotion, hiring, or funding.</p>	<p><i>still value established journals."</i></p>
<p>Metric Anxiety, Incentives, and Gamification</p>	<p>20% of respondents expressed concern that assigning percentages and shares could create conflict and over-quantify scholarly work. Many framed this gamification or market logic that risks distorting academic values, reflecting values-based discomfort rather than functional critique. This must be addressed thoughtfully in future framing.</p>	<p><i>"Yet another capitalist gamification that will squeeze small and new researchers while further empowering well-established institutions"</i></p> <p><i>"An economy built around percentages – yuck."</i></p>
<p>Quality Control & Reviewer Credibility</p>	<p>17% of respondents had doubts about bias, transparency, and credibility without editorial boards.</p>	<p><i>"How are you going to maintain objectivity if we know who the reviewers are?"</i></p>
<p>Value Proposition Clarity</p>	<p>13% said they didn't fully understand what Liberata is or how it differs from existing platforms like Arxiv. This highlights a messaging issue: materials must clearly explain the platform's function and benefits.</p>	<p><i>"Too many unanswered, very important questions."</i></p> <p><i>"What is the real or base value proposition?"</i></p>
<p>Technical and Implementation Burden</p>	<p>10%, particularly librarians and IT noted infrastructure costs, integration challenges, and sustainability issues.</p>	<p><i>"If my library told me we had to install Liberata, I would know that will take time from developers."</i></p>

Note: percentages > 100 because many respondents gave answers spanning multiple categories.

Adoption Conditions

- Transparency around platform mechanics, governance, and monetization
- Endorsements from trusted funders or indexing bodies
- Institutional or peer uptake
- Compatibility with academic evaluation structures

“Strong support from the community and a national policy shift would help.”

Liberata must demonstrate proof of concept, gain community trust, offer cost-efficiency, and align with existing academic evaluation systems.

User Personas Identified

Persona	Description	Current Tools/ Solutions	Sample Quote
The Hopeful but Hesitant Postdoc	An early-career researcher motivated by equity and recognition, but wary of using a platform that might not “count” in promotion. Excited by the concept but needs clear proof of credibility and peer adoption.	Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Mendeley for visibility; increasingly turning to alternative metrics (Altmetric.com , PlumX) to demonstrate early online engagement alongside traditional citations.	<i>“Turning review and replication into valued contributions... was intuitive and well-presented.”</i>
The Tenured Realist	Senior academic with influence over institutional norms. Interested in reform but reluctant to endorse unproven systems. Needs clear examples and funder backing.	Relies on traditional metrics like Impact Factor, h-index, citation counts, and institutional metrics for evaluation; consults DORA or Leiden Manifesto frameworks to guide responsible use.	<i>“Contributing to Liberata might not ‘count’ in traditional evaluations.”</i>

The Critical Librarian	Infrastructure-focused expert with deep skepticism around scalability, funding, and governance. Concerned about technical and ethical details. Needs transparency and concrete roadmaps.	Manages subscription-based tools like Web of Science, Scopus, Journal Citation Reports, and altmetric platforms (Altmetric Institutional, Plum X) and facilitates researcher training.	<i>“There are a huge number of unanswered, very important questions... transparency, copyright, compensation...”</i>
The Optimistic Reformist	Mid-career scholar invested in open science. Resonates with Liberata’s goals but wants real-world validation. Likely to support if the platform delivers on its promise.	Actively uses preprint servers (arXiv, bioRxiv), and OSF/ImpactStory for altmetrics tracking, and platforms like PLOS that integrate article-level metrics.	<i>“Trying to use market models to incentivize academic labor... could be powerful, but only if structured carefully.”</i>

6. Strategic Recommendations for Liberata

Survey results and stakeholder feedback point to four strategic priorities, ranked below by urgency and potential impact.

1. Reduce Career Risk (Highest Priority): Early and mid-career researchers which make up a bulk of Liberata’s user group showed strong interest but hesitated due to concerns about promotion and tenure. Liberata must ensure outputs are compatible with ORCID, CVs, indexing systems, and secure funder or institutional endorsements.
2. Clarify Core Mechanics: Confusion around share distribution, reviewer incentives, and funding flows was common across stakeholders. Without clarity, trust and adoption are at risk. Short explainers, case studies, or demos should illustrate these mechanics in practice, directly reducing skepticism among librarians and senior faculty.
3. Minimize Technical Burden and Demonstrate Proof of Concept: Librarians and infrastructure-focused stakeholders voiced concerns about scalability, usability, and governance. A navigable pilot or beta would provide proof of concept.

4. Tailor Messaging and Improve Outreach Channels: Future engagement must go beyond tailoring messages to stakeholder concerns (credibility for early-career researchers, sustainability for librarians, and uptake for senior faculty). The low survey response rate suggests email outreach alone is insufficient. Future campaigns should explore more effective channels such as academic subreddits on Reddit, as well as social platforms like Twitter/X, to conduct market research and connect with stakeholders in spaces where they are active.

7. Reflections on Ethical Leadership and Learning

One of the most surprising things I learned this summer is how much leadership depends on context. In an academic setting, leadership often means contributing expertise or making a clear argument. But in a startup that is still pivoting, leadership looked different. It more so meant showing up consistently, being responsive to ambiguity, and remaining agile as the process shifted. Through weekly meetings with the team, including one-on-one mentorship, I was given space to explore and define my role. That space came with trust and responsibility as I wasn't merely an observer, but rather was shaping outcomes in real time.

Much of that responsibility came down to representing stakeholder voices with care. I was conducting outreach to professors, postdocs, librarians, and editors, so when they gave feedback, it was informed by real frustrations, risks, and experiences. I had to take what they shared and translate it into something that could guide Liberata's development. That process of listening closely, then making their concerns legible to a technical team felt like a kind of advocacy, and it soon became clear to me that ethical research prioritizes accountability to the people you're trying to serve.

This kind of community-engaged work sits at the center of what the Laidlaw Scholars Program values. First and foremost, it takes initiative to reach out, create from the ground up, and change course as necessary. It necessitates leadership, in the form of quiet perseverance, attentiveness, and critical thought, rather than necessarily theatrical leadership. And it is deeply rooted in learning: learning from others, learning from failure, and learning how to navigate systems that don't always make space for new ideas. I see Liberata's mission—to rethink how scholarly credit, labor, and trust are distributed—as fundamentally

aligned with Laidlaw's values of ethical disruption, transparency, and impact-driven work. Doing community-engaged research in that context meant conceptualizing that better systems are possible, and that research can help us get there.

Now, what started as a summer project has grown into a much deeper commitment. I've joined the Liberata team through Bass Connections for the upcoming academic year, and I'll continue working on outreach, strategy, and platform development throughout the fall and spring semesters, and potentially beyond. There's no defined endpoint, and that's what makes it both atypical and exciting. The work we're doing has the potential to change something deeply entrenched, and I feel incredibly lucky to be part of it. This project and the trust that's been placed in me to help lead it has been one of the most formative leadership experiences I've had, and one I'm still learning from.

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