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# A Tale of Two Liaison Programs: University of Central Florida Libraries and Louisiana State University Libraries Partnering for Subject Librarian Excellence

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# A Tale of Two Liaison Programs: University of Central Florida Libraries and Louisiana State University Libraries Partnering for Subject Librarian Excellence

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## Abstract

Are you considering establishing a new or re-invigorated subject liaison program in your library but don't know how to begin? Why not partner with an established liaison program at another library?

Throughout the spring and fall of 2015, key public service managers at Louisiana State University (LSU) Libraries visited six Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL) to see, among other things, successful liaison programs. The LSU librarians were particularly impressed with the University of Central Florida (UCF) Libraries' three-year-old reimagined subject librarian program. Following this visit, LSU managers began reworking their program by fine-tuning liaisons' program assignments and creating a liaison training program that focused on academic program profiling, faculty profiling, curriculum mapping, curriculum integrated instruction, increased liaison visibility and accessibility, and proactive outreach to faculty and students.

In this article, public service heads from UCF and LSU discuss how their liaison programs are the same and how they differ, how librarians collaborated in finding new ways of reaching faculty, what the challenges are in their current programs, and what the future may hold. Hopefully, lessons learned by UCF and LSU will provide insight for other academic libraries wishing to create liaison programs designed to support student and faculty success at their own institutions. (Please see http://guides.ucf.edu/ucflsu for graphics.)

## What's in a Title?

At UCF Libraries, liaison librarians are referred to as subject librarians. At LSU Libraries, they are referred to as subject specialists. Is there a difference? Although UCF and LSU refer to these librarians by slightly different names, they are functioning as library liaisons to specific academic departments and colleges at both institutions. Within this article, when these librarians are discussed as a whole, they are called "liaison librarians". When the authors refer to them within the UCF or LSU institution, the terms "subject librarian" for UCF and "subject specialist" for LSU are used.

## How the UCF/LSU Partnership Began

During summer and fall 2015, two newly appointed LSU public service managers, Associate Dean for Public Services Lois Kuyper-Rushing and Head of Research and Instruction Services (RIS) Cristina Caminita, travelled to six Association of Research Libraries (ASERL) universities to experience various approaches to liaison programs.

Much was learned on these visits to other campuses. UCF's subject librarian program offered a liaison librarian model that LSU sought to emulate. Following the trip to Orlando, LSU held summer workshops with its subject specialists, changing the focus from library-based reference services to a rigorous outreach program. The LSU program took off in its own direction fueled by the experience and expertise of the UCF program.

## UCF Background Information

University of Central Florida is a large metropolitan research university in Orlando, FL, with 63,000+ students. UCF offers 93 bachelor's, 84 master's, and 31 doctoral degrees, with a heavy emphasis on fully online and mixed-mode courses.

In spring 2013, the UCF RIS department initiated a new subject librarian service model to increase positive impacts on student learning, faculty teaching and research, and scholarly communication initiatives. There was a new emphasis on outreach, with subject librarians becoming more mobile, getting out of the library building, and spending

quality time visiting and communicating with their assigned academic departments and programs, faculty members, and students.

## LSU Background Information

Louisiana State University is a large metropolitan research university in Baton Rouge, LA, with more than 31,000 students. It is a land-grant, sea-grant, and space-grant university that offers 72 bachelor's, 70 master's, and 46 doctoral degrees.

In response to a new direction taken by the incoming dean at the LSU Libraries, the subject specialists began a process of outreach to their communities in 2015. After the aforementioned trip to various libraries, the focus for LSU's subject specialists moved from a passive, reactionary service to one that involved a more current approach, including greater librarian mobility, visibility, and spending time with faculty and students in their departments and classes.

## How Liaison Programs Are Alike

The UCF and LSU programs have several similarities, many of which are basic components of the 21st-century library outreach model. In both programs, most liaison librarians serve large constituencies, either entire schools or multiple departments. Liaison librarians in both institutions are expected to provide the following services for their areas:

- various aspects of collection development and management

- outreach to faculty and students via newsletters, e-mail, participation in academic meetings, and orientations

- instruction classes/small group workshops, research consultations

- creation of online research guides

- marketing of relevant library resources and services

An important feature of both programs is that liaison librarians are expected to maintain a strong online presence that will promote accessibility by including their photos and contact information on the libraries' website directory, database and research guide web pages, and newsletters.

It is important to both libraries that subject liaison work is appropriately assessed and evaluated by including these assignments in their job descriptions and annual evaluations. The ways each program accomplishes this assessment differs, but the intent is the same. By giving weight to this important job responsibility in the annual evaluation, librarians are held accountable and can be rewarded for their outreach work. Both programs hope to make this evaluation process more robust and meaningful in the future.

Both libraries depend on their liaisons to serve as conduits for connecting end-users with new or underutilized library resources (such as e-books and e-textbooks, databases, electronic journals, and scholarly digital collections) to ensure a robust return on investment for these costly resources. The liaisons at both institutions market their library's resources via their e-newsletters, web-based research guides, library instruction sessions, and presentations at academic department and university-wide meetings and workshops. The UCF and the LSU programs include on-going training for these librarians. These are described in depth later in this paper.

## How Liaison Programs Are Different

While highlighting the similarities between the programs, it is important to acknowledge and understand the differences between the programs. These differences arise from many factors, including academic program differences at each institution, historical and cultural precedent at each library, and differing responses to new programs. None of the differences are great, but they are worthy of description.

At UCF Libraries, most subject librarians report to the Head of RIS, although each is also evaluated by the Head of Collection Development and the Head of Instruction (Teaching and Engagement) with regard to collection development and instruction activities. LSU Libraries' situation is similar but with a few differences. While a good number of subject specialists report to the Head of RIS, several have a primary home in another department. For this reason, the Associate Dean for Public Services works with the Head of RIS in directing the liaison program, and the Associate Dean contributes to each liaison's evaluation regardless of their home department.

Each year, the UCF subject librarians work with the Head of RIS to create an updated annual assignment/position description (AAPD) and goals, with definite but annually alterable percentages assigned to outreach, instruction, collection development, reference desk, creative work and professional development, and service, as well as annual goals. The AAPD also serves as the template for a monthly activity report and an annual self-evaluation that each subject librarian submits to the Head of RIS, and the annual evaluation that the Head of RIS completes for each subject librarian.

At LSU, staffing and evaluation are structured more rigidly. Faculty are hired with job descriptions that are alterable, but this is done almost exclusively when positions change drastically. Annual changes would be cumbersome for LSU's Human Resources. To tailor the subject specialists' work to specific needs arising each year, liaison librarians work with the associate dean each year to create "liaison goals" that are used to direct the librarian's work, and they are used in the yearly evaluation.

The UCF-AAPD outreach section encourages subject librarians to communicate scholarly communication information (as outlined by the scholarly communication librarian) to their assigned constituencies. The AAPD professional development section also encourages subject librarians to initiate or participate in scholarly presentations and publications relevant to their assigned duties.

While scholarly communication is important to the LSU Libraries, there are currently no specific goals for LSU subject specialists relating to these activities. Liaison librarians who are in tenure-track or tenured positions have research expectations that can be related to any of their personal research interests.

As is the trend in many research libraries, both UCF and LSU libraries are making efforts to reduce desk hours for liaison librarians. While their goals are similar, their solutions are varied.

UCF's RIS department began tracking its desk traffic in 2010 using Springshare's LibAnswers or Libanalytics (https://www.springshare.com/libanalytics/). Based on results gleaned from the collected data, in 2013 the UCF RIS department began employing several part-time librarians to staff the research desk on weekends, evenings, and afternoons, as well as to take on virtual reference

hours. This allowed subject librarians to decrease their hours at the research desk and virtual reference. Presently, liaison librarians work four to six hours per week on the research desk, allowing them more time for outreach activities, scheduled research consultations, instruction, and collection development.

LSU's RIS department began to record daily data concerning research desk traffic in 2014, also using Springshare's products. Each question was coded on the Reference Effort Assessment Data (READ) scale (Gerlich, 2002) in which the question codes are defined as:

1. Answers that require no specialized knowledge, skill or expertise (e.g., directional queries).

2. Answers that require a minimal amount of knowledge (e.g., call number locations).

3. Answers that require specific reference resources (e.g., searching the online catalog or introductions to online searching).

4. Answers that require consultation of multiple resources or complex searching skills.

5. Answers that require substantial time and effort, often by a subject specialist.

6. Answers requiring a great deal of time an effort (e.g., in-depth faculty or PhD student questions).

The results of their data collection showed that 64% of research desk questions were coded as "1" (directional questions), 25% were scored as "2," and 11% were assigned a score of "3" or higher. These results, showing that 89% of the questions at the desk traffic required little or no library training, led to reductions in hours of librarian coverage and staffing at the research desk. Desk hours for liaisons in RIS were reduced from six hours per librarian per week to an average of two hours per week. Simultaneously, liaisons began pursuing other means of supporting students and faculty using scheduled research consultations, instruction sessions for classes, and embedding in classes.

## Liaison Librarian Training

The UCF Libraries' RIS department, Office of Scholarly Communication (SC), and Information

Technology/Digital Initiatives (IT/DI) units work together to provide training for the subject librarians. The RIS department coordinates annual all-day retreats (Tierney. 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016), monthly RIS meetings, and an online subject librarian toolkit LibGuide to support the subject librarians' various assignments. SC and IT/DI work closely with RIS to coordinate frequent training workshops for subject librarians. These training sessions usually take place in library classrooms, which makes it very convenient for the subject librarians to participate. Subject librarians also are encouraged to learn as much as possible about scholarly communication and institutional repository issues and initiatives. The UCF subject librarian toolkit is available here: http://guides.ucf.edu/subject-librarian-toolkit.

LSU Libraries subject specialists training program has been tailored each semester to meet current needs. The bi-weekly sessions during the fall semester of 2015, focused on mapping (departmental, faculty, and curriculum) and LibGuide training as subject specialists began vigorous liaison work.

Before classes began in January 2016, UCF librarian Barbara Tierney traveled to Louisiana for a day-long workshop with LSU subject specialists. Tierney led liaisons in small- and large-group discussions, resources and ideas were shared, and questions were answered. Liaisons were energized by learning from Tierney about her approach to the liaison librarian program and hearing first hand of the successes her librarians were enjoying during early years of developing programming for their constituencies.

During the spring semester of 2016, LSU Libraries experts spoke on various services the subject specialists are charged with promoting. Sessions on copyright compliance for faculty, digital commons, and ORCID were presented, with a session wrapping up collection development for the fiscal year.

The summer sessions 2016 were dedicated to three-hour workshops in which librarians discussed their various experiences or expertise in areas such as embedding in classes, advanced LibGuide techniques, newsletter development, and innovations in interlibrary loan.

The fall 2016 training schedule featured librarians who are doing groundbreaking work in offering free electronic textbooks to our students, collection development staff assigned to fill gaps in our collection, and further information was shared on our institutional repository.

## Challenges of the Liaison Program

The two liaison programs share many of the same challenges, challenges that beset many librarians embarking on programs employing outreach to campus constituencies. These challenges include the following:

- Capturing the interest of various nonresponsive or minimally responsive departments to take advantage of our services.

- Convincing liaison librarians to leave the library as much as possible, to physically walk out the front doors in order to interact with academic faculty and students on their own turf

- Determining where the greatest need for new positions lies, creating these positions, and garnering funding for them.

- Supporting the increasing number of subject specializations and interdisciplinary programs

- Trying to make the academic program assignment load as equal and manageable as possible for each liaison librarian. Factors to consider when estimating load include student enrollment, graduate versus undergraduate program assignments, and numbers of faculty in each program.

## Conclusion

The 2015-2016 partnership between UCF and LSU has led to a productive exchange of ideas for liaison program best practices with regard to outreach, instruction, research services, training, collection development, and assessment, and it has served to foster or reinforce successful liaison programs at both libraries. In the short term, each library also has identified additional tactical challenges (such as the need to complete curriculum mapping to further the development of curriculum-integrated instruction, create formal liaison relationships with additional key university units, and develop enhanced liaison training and assessment modules) that lay ahead in the immediate year(s), and each library is working on solutions to those challenges.

In the long term, both libraries understand that as broad changes occur throughout higher education (changes such as increasing subject specialization, new interdisciplinary academic programs, evolving online and mobile learning modalities, and changing user behaviors) their current liaison programs must also change and evolve to stay relevant to their constituencies.

In recent years, library liaison programs at institutions such as the University of Minnesota, the University of Iowa, Ohio State University, and Duke University, have embraced a new type of liaison model which they call the "engaged librarian" that encourages an even deeper involvement with the academic community and more stringent sets of competencies and best practices (Ohio State Universities, 2011) than currently are in place at UCF and LSU. As UCF and LSU libraries move forward with the evolution and enhancement of their own liaison programs, they may look to this engaged librarian model for inspiration and guidance. In addition, as UCF and LSU look ahead to devising new methods and models for assessing their evolving library liaison programs, they may consider new assessment ideas being discussed in publications such as ACRL's "Assessing liaison librarians" (Mack, 2014).

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