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Darby Orcutt

North Carolina State University at Raleigh, dcorcutt@ncsu.edu

Mira Waller

North Carolina State University at Raleigh, mpark@ncsu.edu

Scott A. Warren

Syracuse University, sawarr01@syr.edu

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What Are Subject Liaisons When “Collections” and “Subjects” Don’t Matter?

Darby Orcutt, Assistant Head, Collections & Research Strategy, North Carolina State University at Raleigh

Mira Waller, Associate Head, Collections & Research Strategy, North Carolina State University at Raleigh

Scott A. Warren, Associate Dean for Research and Scholarship, Syracuse University

Abstract

In this interactive lively lunch discussion, participants explored issues around how the traditional subject liaison role is evolving. Users increasingly require functional information support (e.g., for geographic information system (GIS) or data mining) rather than simply domain-specific. At the same time, reports from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Pilot Library Liaison Institute and others have noted self-conscious trends toward developing liaison roles that engage and support the full research life cycle, as opposed to traditional service models focused on building and promoting library collections as more or less fixed products. Hosts Darby Orcutt, Mira Waller, and Scott Warren outlined some the major theme surrounding the future of these new roles and with participants explored questions that include: What does it mean to be a collections librarian in this new world? What new skills do we need to develop? What old skills should we not lose? How do we adapt both our institutions and our individual staff without sacrificing our (or their) very identities?

Lively Lunch Discussion

The lively lunch began with Waller providing a brief introduction and a call for attendees to actively engage in the discussion around how the traditional subject liaison role is currently evolving and what the future holds post transformation. The following questions were provided to participants at the start of the discussion to provide food for thought throughout the session:

- What are the sacred cows around liaisons?
- Do you expect your current role to continue as is? Is it already changing?
- Do you see yourself as a deep expert, generalist, or functional specialist?
- How important are spaces to your current role? To your library as a whole?
- When are too many disparate skill sets too many? Too many subjects?
- What are the trade-offs when we chase the latest trends?
- Where do liaisons sit in your organizational structure? Where should they?

Waller ended the introduction by taking a straw poll of the room to get a sense of how many attendees were at institutions that had already begun changing

or modifying the responsibilities of these roles. Many of the attendees raised their hands. Waller then turned over facilitation to Warren, who took participants on a deeper dive into the concept of the subject liaison librarian identity.

Warren began by noting how that the central identity of subject librarians has become more fluid and perhaps even transitional in recent years. A once stable and common understanding that the role encompassed working with a small number of disciplines, building collections, teaching information literacy sessions, and staffing a reference desk can no longer be assumed. In part this is because the former common identity originated in a print-based world predicated upon the need to provide faculty with easy access to print journals and books. However, online journals have overwhelmingly replaced print, many branch libraries oriented around departments have been consolidated within larger interdisciplinary libraries, and far fewer subject librarians staff reference desks as service models have shifted. Perhaps most importantly, there has been a steady amalgamation of areas to which subject librarians liaise. Taken collectively, these changes raise many challenging questions that touch on aspects of professional identity.

Services

- What functions of a subject librarian are central to identity? What are peripheral?

- What is it that only subject librarians can do?
- What does it mean to identity to no longer be a one-stop shop? To promote library services plus their own services.
- Service provision versus project management—can subject liaison identity incorporate the latter or is predicated upon the former?

Expertise

- What happens if subject librarians are no longer be perceived as having disciplinary expertise?
- When are disparate skill sets overwhelming?
- When do many subjects become too many subjects?
- How do subject librarians and a growing cadre of functional specialists whose expertise spans disciplines relate?

Organizational Culture

- What does organizational structure mean for identity as a subject librarian?
- Is identity tied to a physical location? A branch library or being embedded within an academic department?
- Is it tied to faculty relationships? What happens when faculty rarely visit a library?
- Where should liaisons sit in an organizational structure? Collections? Teaching? Some type of Reference? A mix of all three? Or something new?
- What about the challenge of professional affiliation as liaisons become responsible for more disciplines? What if they also wish to develop deeper expertise in a functional area? For instance, can we really expect liaisons to attend Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), Charleston, and Library Orientation Exchange (LOEX) even though their jobs may touch on all three? Finding a professional home matters to identity.

Orcutt outlined some possible alternatives to the traditional subject specialist identity, beginning with a now common approach that many institutions are taking: The functional specialist. With liaisons increasingly covering many more disciplines, true disciplinary expertise seems to be less valued by institutions. Many institutions are abandoning true subject specialization, and others are paring it back considerably to align with institutional strengths or priorities. Functional specialty emphasizes nonsubject specific skill sets. In pursuing this type of approach, libraries must ask:

- What sort of functional experts do we need?
 - Digital humanities?
 - Data science?
 - Visualization?
 - Open science?
 - Scholarly communications?
- Do functional needs outweigh disciplinary?
- Which skill sets are easier to train versus recruit?
- What if more institutions move in the direction of functional specialty? What might be lost collectively?

Orcutt then introduced for discussion a new possible way of conceiving of librarian identity: The concept of librarians as interdisciplinary specialists. Rather than focusing on traditional disciplinary expertise, the interdisciplinary specialist would be seen as bringing expertise on the “edges” of fields, including both facilitating the intersections of various disciplines as well as where these disciplines intersect with the functions of librarianship.

- Just as the “edges” define great collections, can they define great liaisons?
- Do researchers need more help at the boundaries of their fields?
- How could liaison roles address the increasing interdisciplinarity of research?

Orcutt, Warren, and Waller then took participants through discussion around the following themes: Collection, research cycle, new spaces, and new

technologies. Regarding collection, attendees explored the following questions:

- Can we trust vendors/demand-driven acquisition (DDA)/patron-driven acquisition (PDA)/document delivery and automate most collecting?
- Should collection management be a functional specialty?
- Is automation outsourcing? Does it undermine trust in our 'brand'?
- What role do liaisons play in creating content?
- Collecting beyond books, journals, databases—how does it impact your work?
 - Faculty brands
 - Research data
 - Evolving scholarly record

Regarding the research cycle, participants explored the following questions:

- Should we be inserting ourselves more upstream or downstream?

- Identify/research reputation management
- Funder mandates
- Grant support
- How far can we rely on third-party solutions?
- Is this type of work a subject specialist role or a functional specialty?

Participants explored the following questions around the theme of new spaces and new technologies:

- Are these driving organizational structures or vice versa?
- What positions are needed to maintain them?
- How do these two factors impact more classical services and roles?
- How is space accorded? What services are moved to the forefront?

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