September 2000

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The Successful Liaison Program: Librarians and Classroom Faculty As Partners In the Instructional Process

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*This article grew out of a lively lunch presentation at the **1999 Charleston Conference** about the library liaison program at **Millersville University (MU)**, Millersville, Pennsylvania. The program is designed to coordinate the basic components of the university library curriculum, comprising information services, collection development, and library instruction. All twelve library faculty serve as liaisons to academic departments. Adjunct faculty often have liaison assignments as well. Liaison librarians work together with departmental faculty partners, integrating library services within the general education curriculum as well as in specific disciplines.*

Development of the Program

The library liaison program started as a pilot project in 1989. Each librarian was assigned an academic department based upon subject expertise, interest, or a combination of both. Some librarians were initially reluctant to participate because of already full workloads, but each became a liaison librarian to at least one academic department. By 1991, the program had solidified to include all academic departments, and written guidelines focusing on collection development were in place.

During the next several years, the program was expanded to include faculty partnerships in the areas of library instruction and the integration of information technology into the curriculum. During the same time, subject specialists were hired in the areas of business, science, and social sciences. Year by year, there was some reassignment of liaison departments as faculty complement changed.

In 1996, an outcome of a third library program review was the development of a five-year plan, "Strategic Framework for Ganser Library, 1996-2000." The liaison program officially became one of four curricular programs supporting the university library's mission of integrating information literacy throughout all academic curricula. (The other curricular programs are information services, collection development and management, and development and planning.) It is important to note that all librarians participate in each of these programs at various levels. For

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to monitor issues that are being discussed.

No matter how slick the plans or how thorough the background information, a liaison program can easily falter without proper marketing and assessment. These are perhaps the most difficult steps, as most of us are not used to "selling" ourselves and the library's resources. However, that is exactly how we need to be seen: as a resource for our communities of faculty, students, and staff. In order for us to effectively work with them, and for them to best work with us, they need to know what services and resources are available. Additionally, they need to know the basic logistics of how they can reach us, where we are located within the library, and so on. In turn, we need to assess our marketing and liaison approaches. We need to know how we are perceived, and be ready to act on the input gathered,[3] so the liaison activities need to be reviewed periodically for effectiveness: what techniques are working, and why or why not? Have departmental dynamics, or technologies, shifted, requiring new approaches?

Effective marketing can also alleviate some of the difficulties that arise in liaison work. Most faculty, and many graduate students, are unwilling to acknowledge ignorance; even if they are confronted with an unfamiliar resource, such as seeing a database through a new interface, they will usually not ask for help, and instead end up not using all the capabilities provided by the resource. Market your assistance: let them know the interface will be changing, and offer to hold training sessions, either with groups or one-on-one. Reassure them that there is no way they can be expected to keep up with all the technological changes--that is your job.

The other main difficulty which may arise is that of territory. Turf battles are fought often enough in departments, and there is little need for the librarian to get involved. Acknowledge that you do not have the same knowledge of the subject as they, the scholars in the field, do. What you can offer is diplomacy and expertise in getting them to the appropriate resources, and providing training if they wish. A multi-faceted liaison program which includes a lot of departmental contact--through office hours, credit courses, and the like--can be especially prone to territorial issues. Marketing can again save the day, if your role is well-defined and non-threatening.

Relationships between departments and

librarians take time to build, so try to keep the long view in mind. It is imperative in these times of rapid change that we maintain our ties to the human community; often this can be done by using the very technology which would, if we let it, prevent us from doing so. Liaison work is time-consuming[4] and challenging, yet it is also one of the most satisfying, productive activities of a librarian's career. 🌳

Endnotes

1 **Tom Gilson**, "*ATG* Interviews David Tyckoson, Head, Reference Services, CSU Fresno," *Against the Grain* (September, 1999): 40+.

2 For more information on the issues surrounding classroom instruction, see **Helene Williams**, "User Education for Graduate Students: Never a Given, and Not Always Received," in **Trudi E. Jacobson** and **Helene C. Williams**, eds., Teaching the New Library to Today's Users, *Neal-Schuman*, 2000: 145-72.

3 See the recent case study, by **Zheng Ye Yang**, "University Faculty's Perception of a Library Liaison Program: A Case Study," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* (March 2000): 124-28.

4 Note the discussion by **Thomas Izbicki**, "Faculty Liaison in the Electronic World," *Against the Grain* (November, 1996): 32.

example: all librarians are either primary instructors in the library instruction program or members of an instructional team; all librarians provide reference service; all librarians participate in the annual resource request planning process. Approval of the five-year plan meant that the liaison program was now considered one of the primary links between the Library Department and other departments in the Academic Affairs unit.

In recent years, the liaison program has concentrated on issues relating to budget allocation, program review, and library services. These were the issues that had formerly been the purview of a campus Library Advisory Committee. The library liaison program, now well known on campus, was again expanding its activities. Following the dissolution of the Library Advisory Committee because of the increasing emphasis on the liaison program, a campus-wide Library Liaison Advisory Committee was established. Growing from a 9-member advisory group to a 35+-member committee, the Library Liaison Advisory Committee is operating under guidelines that focus on collaboration in the following areas: collection development, distance education, information literacy, information technology, and library instruction. The committee serves as an advisory body for library services, facilities, technological development, and fiscal planning. It is a recognized means through which recommendations are formulated and channeled through the Director of Library Services and Library Department Chairperson to the Deans Council, Provost and Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and the University President. Committee members include all librarians, faculty liaisons to the library from academic departments and programs, and the library director. The provost is an ex officio member. In the future, student representatives will become permanent members. To broaden campus communication about the work and achievements of the liaison program, school deans and department chairpersons are also on the committee distribution list. The Library Liaison Committee has become even more visible on campus by holding regular meetings about curricular issues and library services.

The Library Liaison Meeting

The successful library liaison program is the product of extensive outreach by library faculty to the rest of the academic community. One such outreach activity at MU has been the annual and now semi-annual library liaison meeting. This meeting between liaison librarians and academic department library liaisons, school deans and department chairs may be convened as needed based on the provisions of the library liaison policy of the particular institution.

Meeting Planning

A successful liaison meeting requires advanced planning. Prospective participants are advised well in advance concerning the day and time of the meeting. Meetings are scheduled for a time during the semester, week, and day when most will be able to be in attendance for at least a part of the activities. Subsequent to a preliminary announcement advising program members of the meeting, a formal invitation is sent about two to four weeks prior to the actual date. This reminder includes information regarding precise time, location, and food service (if any). Also included is a preliminary agenda of discussion topics and procedures. Such preparatory activities serve to build enthusiasm and anticipation for the event.

Meeting Agenda

Liaison librarians and meeting organizers give much thought to the program agenda and what topics are to be included. Since one of the objectives of the liaison program, and thus the meetings, is a strengthening of the partnership between the two groups, it is important that primary attention is focused on those issues that are of concern to the faculty. In planning the agenda, librarians may ask themselves: "what do we need to tell the faculty, and what do the faculty need to tell us?" Liaison faculty are surveyed before meetings to determine concerns that need to be addressed. Recognition is also given to issues that are raised through the dialog within each liaison partnership. Discussion topics are also initiated by the library director and the school deans. The liaison committee strives to keep lines of communication open on several levels. Such communication is essential to the success of the liaison program as a whole and within each partnership. It was considered important to the success of the committee that several avenues be established in which concerns and issues are raised and investigated before a meeting and then included as agenda items.

Often the agenda centers around the Library's goals and objectives as these relate to various areas of collaboration, including collection development, library instruction, information literacy training (seminars and workshops), information technology, and distance education. Participants are also provided with information relating to the library materials budget; recent innovations in information access and technology; and new library resources and services. Of practical value at such meetings is a demonstration of the use of new databases and the navigation of any new interface with which participants might be unfamiliar.

Liaison Responsibilities and Structures

Liaison responsibilities span a broad spectrum of activities often associated with collection development and public services.

Collection Development Library materials budgets are allocated to both academic department and library faculty liaisons. Joint liaison activities include selection of new books, media, and serials; collection evaluation and weeding projects; and review/selection of electronic databases and electronic periodical collections available from on-or-off campus for MU affiliates. Some recent library initiated efforts in response to faculty requests are the creation of electronic order/interlibrary loan forms and a new acquisitions list made available from the library homepage. A possible extension of the liaison program would establish liaison connections with the development office and incorporate more diverse student representation into collection development activities.

Reference Services and Instruction Liaisons provide many public services, including functions such as electronic reference, remote reference in computer laboratories in classroom buildings across campus, classroom instruction that is course-related and sequenced, on-demand courses, general and subject-specific faculty workshops, distance education, and Virtual Library instruction.

Summary

Generally liaison programs focus on collection development activities as a set of traditional, established responsibilities. Most librarians attending the Lively Lunch supported and wished to continue their influence, cooperation and control of budgets for collection development. Some librarians reported budget allocations at their institutions as extremely political and beyond their influence. There was limited response to the idea of including student groups or other nontraditional groups in collection development/liaison activities. One positive response in this area came from a librarian working in a medical school library. Another pro-student response was offered by a recent graduate who is employed on the Information Technology side of an academic library. There are both subtle and organized factors, such as personal motivation, recruitment, diversity and gender goals, which allow traditional liaison structures to integrate change. We intend to continue our study of traditional and informal structures for academic liaison activities in collection development, instruction, and reference services in other libraries. 🌺