Association of Research Libraries

Iterative Evolution of the Liaison Librarian Role: A Brief Case Study

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Recognizing a need to evolve subject liaison responsibilities and related skill sets with an emphasis on digital research and pedagogy, The University of Texas Libraries (UTL) at the University of Texas at Austin has reorganized its Academic Engagement division and related approach to liaison work twice in the past two years.

The first iteration (in August 2016) established a large Research department comprised of four subject-specific liaison teams, still reflected in the four core collections foci of arts and humanities; global studies; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); and social sciences. These four teams were led by staff who were also liaisons themselves. The Research department also included Collections and associated staff managing print and electronic monograph, journal, and database subscriptions at the UT Austin and UT System levels. The Teaching and Learning Services department added service-point coordination and related staff to its team of instruction-focused functional experts. A newly created Digital Scholarship Team, comprised of functional experts aligned with the research life cycle, rounded out the Academic Engagement division. While aspects of this arrangement worked well, the Research department was too large and there was limited cross-collaboration between and communication among liaisons on the four subject-specific teams.

As of fall semester 2017, UTL created multidisciplinary "Engagement Teams" comprised of liaisons with individual subject-based portfolios working together with a particular focus. This transition aligned liaisons with similar strengths and interests, including teaching, data and digital approaches to research, and collection management, while

commingling disciplinary portfolios to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of modern research. Teaching and Learning Services took on an Engagement Team, a new department called Research Support and Digital Initiatives was created and took on two Engagement Teams in addition to the Digital Scholarship Team, and a new Scholarly Resources department was created for oversight of core, distinctive, and UT System-level collections workflows.

There are three Engagement Teams, each reporting to a team lead who is also a subject liaison:

- **Arts, Humanities, and Global Studies Engagement Team**, within the Research Support and Digital Initiatives department—eight liaisons focused on Digital Humanities/Digital Scholarship (DH/DS), working with collections as data, digital projects and exhibitions of born-digital/digitized collections content
- **STEM and Social Sciences Engagement Team**, within the Research Support and Digital Initiatives department—seven liaisons focused on digital methodologies, working with data, digital projects
- **Teaching and Learning Engagement Team**, within the Teaching and Learning Services department—six liaisons focused on pedagogy, information literacy, digital fluency

Additionally, four subject liaisons with particularly strong collection stewardship skills were placed within the Scholarly Resources department, and each is charged respectively with core collections coordination for:

- Arts and humanities
- Global studies
- STEM
- Social sciences

The three departments mentioned—Teaching and Learning Services,

Research Support and Digital Initiatives, and Scholarly Resources—are led by assistant directors, and these departments comprise the Academic Engagement division, led by the director of Academic Engagement.

Each of the three departments, while hosting an Engagement Team of liaison librarians or individual liaisons who work collaboratively, as in Scholarly Resources, also include other groups of staff who are not liaisons but rather are assigned to specific initiatives. Teaching and Learning Services has a team of five focused on Information Literacy, First-Year Programs, and Learning and Assessment. In Research Support and Digital Initiatives, the five functional experts on the Digital Scholarship Team support aspects of the research life cycle, specifically scholarly communication, research data management, GIS and DH/DS project work. (See pages 4–15 pertaining to Academic Engagement in the UT Libraries organizational chart, accessed May 23, 2018, at https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/d7/sites/default/files/ut-libraries-org-structure.pdf.)

> "...the Engagement Teams approach serves to align areas of affinity and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration."

As mentioned, the Engagement Teams approach serves to align areas of affinity and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration. And it allows subject liaisons to focus on projects suited to their interests and strengths (digital learning object creation, text mining or digital exhibitions, or print and electronic collections work) while working with others across Engagement Teams to develop alliances for load-balancing by sharing teaching, digital-focused projects, and collection development responsibilities.

This iterative evolution of roles and organizational relationships requires ongoing discussion, assessment, and adjustment. In the midst of these changes, we are also monitoring our budget and needs for

expertise and capacity that we lack, all of which factor into decisions we make to support both our faculty and students as well as our staff.

Questions about this model are welcomed by the author at jflaxbart@ austin.utexas.edu.

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