Library Liaison with non-academic units: a new application for a traditional model

Candice Dahl
English Liaison/Library Instruction Librarian
University of Saskatchewan

Abstract

This paper suggests that traditional models of liaison librarianship, which focus on liaison with academic units such as teaching departments and specific colleges within institutions, should be adapted and then expanded to include non-academic units as well. Although the literature demonstrates that understandings of liaison work have evolved, it still contains almost no examples of how to extend library liaison beyond traditional academic units in a systematic way. As a result, existing liaison programs are too narrowly conceived, and the strengths of the liaison model are not being fully exploited. By adapting the structures in place to support traditional liaison, such programs can be expanded to include non-academic units as well. As a result, libraries gain opportunities for broader collaboration on campus. Suggestions for identifying targets for formal non-academic liaison are provided, as are guidelines for determining suitable liaison activities and ensuring administrative support within the library.

Keywords: library and information studies; library liaison; liaison program

Introduction

This paper suggests that the traditional model of liaison librarianship, which focuses on liaison with academic units, should be adapted and then expanded to include non-academic units. Although the exact configuration of responsibilities for traditional liaison librarians differs from institution to institution, duties typically include collection development, subject-specific reference and research help, instruction, and outreach or communication.[1] Liaison assignments are most commonly made to academic units (teaching departments and colleges), and are therefore usually subject-specific.

Though originally focused primarily on collection development, the liaison model has evolved to encompass a broad range of duties necessary to fully support and engage academic units on campus. The changing nature of liaison activities in libraries suggests that a broader understanding of liaison work and its potential is necessary. For example, non-academic units and groups (such as those related to student services and governance, and teaching and learning, for example) are also prospective user-groups with whom libraries may initiate formal liaison activities. While there is no shortage of evidence to demonstrate that strong relationships often exist between libraries and non-academic units, no systematic method for creating and maintaining such relationships has been set out in the

literature. Besides better positioning libraries to work closely with a broad range of users, applying the liaison model to non-academic units allows libraries to systematically create and develop partnerships on their campuses.

Literature Review

Liaison with academic units:
In the literature pertaining to liaison librarianship, liaison refers exclusively to relationships and duties based on subject- and department-specific assignments, and generally includes a collection development component. The 1992 Guidelines for Liaison Work, prepared by the Reference and Adult Services Division (RASD) of the American Library Association, are intended "to help librarians identify the various user groups of libraries and to explore ways these groups can be included in the process of collection building" (198). A later version of this document refers to "collection development and management" rather than just collection building, but the focus on collection as a central component of liaison remains (RUSA 107). The program at Baylor University described by Ochola and Jones also focuses on the collection development work that librarians do in consultation with faculty in academic departments (29-41). In their description of a restructuring of the liaison program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Mozenter, Sanders and Welch recognize that liaison work includes more than collection development, but the definition of liaison at their institution refers to responsibilities that "include any subject-oriented contact with departments and colleges" (432). Although in the model highlighted by Seamans and Metz liaisons are assigned to academic colleges rather than departments, the subject-specific focus is maintained (324-332). Pinfield also considers liaison librarianship to be subject-specific and department-based. Even though he notes that in the United Kingdom the role of subject librarians is changing to include more liaison work, that liaison work is tied to their subject areas of responsibility and therefore to one or more academic departments (32-38). The liaison programs assessed by Yang (124-128) and Ryans et. al. (14-23) also focus on faculty in academic departments, as do those described by Suresh et al. (7-13), Stoddart et. al. (419-427), Wu et al. (254), and Glynn and Wu (122-128).

Liaison with non-academic units:
The term liaison is used exclusively to refer to the responsibilities of academic librarians in relation to specific *academic* units. Examples of liaison-like activities with *non-academic* units are primarily referred to as outreach or collaboration. In most cases described, two or more parties come together to meet a specific need. The relationship may or may not be nurtured over time and usually does not operate within a formal structure.

In *Libraries within their Institutions: Creative Collaborations*, collaborations with non-academic campus units such as teaching centers, research centers, those devoted to student services and student learning, and others with whom the

library shares "collaborative campus spaces" are highlighted (Dewey 6). Forrest focuses on collaboration between librarians and higher education professionals, such as staff who do academic advising and career counseling, and those who work in other academic support offices, and sees a place for the expertise of librarians in the work that they do (11-15). Swartz, Carlisle, and Uyeki present a case study of collaboration between an undergraduate library and student affairs, which was initiated to address the issue of academic integrity at UCLA (114). Walter focuses on outreach to multicultural student centers and recognizes that some of this work can be accomplished "within the framework of…liaison with academic departments" but he does not propose methods for actually adapting the department-based model of liaison, nor does he suggest that specific liaison assignments to such non-academic units be made (438). Much of the literature on collaboration addresses the topic of information literacy, and Scales et. al. note that there is a "need for librarians to rethink and extend their collaborative skills beyond those they have used in traditional interactions with teaching faculty", and to interact more meaningfully with other players on and off the campus (22).[2]

Examples in the literature make it evident that a formal liaison program is not necessary for successful outreach and collaboration. However, the examples also demonstrate that a significant amount of time and resources are required to establish the relationships and parameters necessary for each initiative. Further successes are realized when a true partnership, in which all parties are equal and involved in planning and goal-setting, exists. In cases where one partner becomes involved mid-stream, earlier work must be redone or becomes unnecessary if priorities change (Swartz, Carlisle and Uyeki 119). Furthermore, the 'new' partner may not have equal status or established credibility. By having a liaison program in place, partners would be able to focus on continually anticipating and meeting needs that arise.

Summary:
While the literature describing liaison consistently refers to the relationship between librarians and a specific academic unit, initiatives undertaken with non-academic units are more commonly referred to as outreach or collaboration. Although this type of outreach is essential for libraries and beneficial for library users, such activities are frequently initiated only as need arises or is identified. A more systematic approach to building relationships with *non*-academic units offers many advantages and can be facilitated by adapting and expanding the liaison model typically applied to academic units.

Partnerships through Liaison

The defining characteristics of most formal liaison work in academic libraries are that librarians are linked to specific academic departments, that there is a budget allocation to support collection-building for those departments, and that liaisons engage in a combination of activities focused on collection development,

instruction, reference, and outreach or communication. In this model, liaison responsibilities are formalized: they are included in job descriptions, supported through some sort of administrative structure, and aligned with the academic departments or colleges in existence at the institution. The exact character of liaison relationships depends on factors such as the personalities involved, the shared history of the department and the library, and the extent of each department's reliance on library resources and services. Those that flourish can lay the groundwork for partnerships related to teaching, innovative services and other projects which may extend beyond the department itself and impact a broader segment of the academic community.

In true partnerships, involved parties have shared goals, engage in advance planning, and contribute substantively (Donham and Green 314). Department-based liaison is a venue for creating such partnerships and establishing the basis for the shared projects that are more and more becoming a part of the landscape in academic libraries (Franke, Raschke and Wood 90). It provides a built-in structure to foster and support the relationships necessary for projects that extend beyond liaison work and facilitate collaboration with a variety of partners.

In some ways liaison with non-academic units is parallel to that with academic departments. A specific librarian would serve as the unit's central contact at the library and be expected to communicate with, advocate for, and identify needs and opportunities within the unit. It differs in that it is currently not entrenched in the formal structures of academic libraries. The administrative structures necessary to support liaison with non-academic units are similar in form to those supporting more traditional liaison programs, although the expectations outlined must be specific to a non-academic liaison role.   A further difference is that liaison with non-academic units is not *necessarily* collections- or budget-based, as most liaison relationships with academic departments are.   However, it would be an advantage to have a budget allotment to acquire the resources required by the units themselves. As a result of these differences and the varying activities of each unit, the primary duties of liaisons with non-academic units also differ. Despite these differences, however, the benefit of initiating formal and sustained relationships with both academic and non-academic units through liaison is the creation of mutually beneficial partnerships.

Liaising more broadly

Because of the advantages of broadly-based initiatives on campuses, such as the development of media, teaching, and learning centres (Dewey 5-17), liaison programs with non-academic units should be expanded, nurtured and formalized. In contrast to the traditional model, an extended model links librarians to user groups which are united by something other than an academic discipline. Furthermore, this model is not necessarily based on a budget allotment or collection development needs, and helps focus attention on less visible user populations. By maintaining formal liaison programs exclusively with academic

departments and colleges, libraries are failing to develop and take full advantage of new opportunities. Projects such as the creation of information commons and other student learning centers, data and research centers, and specialized services for particular user groups do not necessarily originate in academic departments, but benefit from the participation of the library. In fact, these services are often operated by and housed within libraries. By having formal liaison relationships in place with a wide variety of non-academic units, the library is more likely to be involved in the initial stages of creating and planning programs and projects, and be in a better position to truly partner in their development.

Broadening the traditional understanding of the liaison model in academic libraries encourages the development of unique and non-departmental relationships and positions libraries to raise their profile on campus. It will enable libraries to meet a wider range of user needs and create new opportunities for partnerships. The proposed target groups will vary depending on the structure and focus of the library's parent institution. Keeping in mind the potential outcomes of liaison with non-academic units, three strategies for identifying candidates for a formal library liaison program emerge:

1. Take stock of unmet needs on campus. Units that gather information or conduct research (such as University advancement, finance, and communications offices; research centers; career, health and security services) can benefit from using library resources but are often unaware of what is available to them through the library. Groups for whom special programs have been created (minority or transfer students for example) may require special training and resources. For example, teaching assistants work directly with students and are expected to assist with research assignments but are sometimes ill-equipped for this task.
2. Scan lists of organizations and non-academic units on campus. Phone directories and websites are good sources of information about which units exist and how they are structured. Student unions, professional organizations and digitization centers are possible targets.
3. Identify service providers who have goals in common with the library, or who are more likely to meet their goals if they are in partnership with the library. Teaching, research, learning and writing centers require resources and expertise, both of which can be found in campus libraries. In order to avoid duplication of effort, information sharing and joint programs are essential.

By identifying unmet needs, the library can identify and even create new target groups for services and products; establish relationships with, and better meet the needs of, a variety of users; and integrate itself more fully across the campus. While the opportunities these units and user groups afford the library differ from those of faculty and the academic departments in which they are situated, they

are no less relevant or full of potential. Those with whom libraries typically form formal liaison relationships represent only a portion of campus networks and user needs.

Initiating Formal Liaison

Once target groups and units are identified and a liaison librarian is assigned, liaisons must identify the structures already in place to initiate outreach. Just as is the case with academic units, staff meetings, orientations, and social events are starting points for liaison. In order to reach users served by each unit, liaisons may take advantage of the unit's communication and publicity channels, participate in already-established programs such as workshop series and student orientation programming, and arrange for a presence on appropriate web pages.

Actual liaison activities for non-academic units would be less uniform than those undertaken in academic units. They may consist of training unit staff and users, offering jointly-sponsored programs, providing information research services, participating on advisory committees, advocating for the acquisition of specific resources, or providing a formal and reliable channel of communication. As with other types of liaison, the amount of time devoted to the task and the specific needs of both parties will determine the exact shape of the relationship. However, basic expectations should be clearly articulated, manageable and regularly assessed by the library.

Administrative support for liaison is necessary to formalize the program and create conditions in which it is allowed to flourish. Structures to administer and facilitate the work of liaisons may mirror those in place to support traditional liaison. For example, both programs benefit from having a coordinator, training opportunities and information resources. A program statement, in which the purpose, goals, and standards of liaison with non-academic units are outlined is necessary for assessment purposes and may differ from those in place for traditional academic liaison programs. Formal assessment supports liaison work by facilitating a process for gathering and reporting regular feedback, evaluating strategies and successes, and ensuring accountability. Writing liaison duties into job descriptions will help ensure that liaison work is not dependent upon personal relationships that change over time or end when one person departs.   This will also ensure that the workload associated with liaison is taken into account and assigned responsibly, and that effective liaison is valued and expected.

Challenges

Particular challenges of expanding the liaison model to non-academic units include resource allocation and the practices of the organization in which liaison is to occur. Developing an awareness of these challenges will allow libraries to assess their ability to engage in and formalize broader liaison activities on their

campuses. It will also alert them to the issues to address when developing structures necessary to support an expanded liaison model.

Resources
At a time when neither human nor financial resources in libraries are available in abundance, both staffing and budgetary considerations must be taken into account when contemplating an expansion of services. In order to minimize the workload increase of liaison librarians, a careful assessment of existing liaison relationships should be made. Whenever possible, complementary assignments should be identified. Assigning the same liaison librarian to academic and non-academic units that are related in some way will ensure the most natural fit and minimize the learning curve for the librarian. For example, if the campus writing centre is managed through the English department, the English liaison may also become the liaison for the writing centre. Health sciences liaisons are likely to be apt liaisons to the student health centre. Instruction librarians, whether or not they have liaison assignments with academic departments, may have the background and interests that make them suitable liaisons for student learning centers.

Workload increases may also be managed by having as many pre-prepared resources as necessary for the particular needs of each program. Such resources might include a description of the program for unit directors or managers, contact information of staff members in non-academic units, program feedback and evaluation templates, and easily-adaptable publicity materials.

If the liaison program is assigned a coordinator and existing liaison assignments are broadened, a significant increase in the number of staff members may be unnecessary. However, budget allocations for liaison support staff and collection development in the areas of interest to the units would enhance partnerships. Libraries must be mindful that liaisons need adequate time and energy to devote to their responsibilities in order to produce the most effective and lasting results.

Organizational Practices
Formalizing liaison relationships in the way suggested here may, in some instances, conflict with common or accepted practices in the library or the organization of which it is a part. While the advantages of a formal relationship include the availability of support structures, resources, recognition, and continuity, some organizations thrive in a continually changing, highly adaptable and flexible environment in which strategies and relationships can be quickly and easily reconfigured. In such instances, structures are cumbersome and commitments may often be regarded as being short-term. Therefore, a formal expanded liaison model may not be suitable.

Another challenge comes from organizations in which non-academic units have developed strong relationships with the library through a variety of avenues and contact people. They may feel better-served by the depth and breadth of

informal contact. In such cases, units may not be receptive to a more formal model. In cases where little or no contact with the library has existed in the past, units may doubt the need for a liaison relationship or be unaware of the advantages it can bring. Finally, there may be an unwillingness to commit the time or resources needed for the relationship to be mutually beneficial.

Whatever practices exist between the library and the non-academic units on campus, careful assessment of unit needs, communication practices, and history with the library are important factors to consider when initiating a formal liaison program.

Conclusion

Liaison programs that focus on teaching departments and colleges are common but too narrowly conceived. By extending the liaison model to include non-academic units the library gains both partners and an increased presence on campus. Both libraries and these non-academic units will benefit from the formalized relationship that the liaison model offers, especially at a time when integrated services and shared spaces are increasingly present on university campuses. The failure of libraries to attend to the broadest possible range of user groups and their needs leads not only to missed opportunities, but also to a lack of understanding of the place of libraries in the teaching, learning and research activities of their institutions. In order to support non-academic liaison and a transformation to a more comprehensive model, formal administrative provisions must be made and the structures put in place to support traditional liaison must be adapted and adopted. By applying the principles of established liaison programs to non-academic units, libraries can position themselves to engage in more systematic and inclusive liaison initiatives on their campuses.

[1] A sample of definitions can be found in Ryans, Suresh and Zhang 14-23; Zheng Ye Yang 124-128; and Suresh, Ryans and Zhang 7-13.

[2] See also Sanborn 477-481; and Johnson, McCord and Walter 19-37.

Works Cited

Dewey, Barbara I. "The Embedded Librarian: Strategic Campus Collaborations."

Libraries within their Institutions: Creative Collaborations. Ed. William Miller

and Rita M. Pellen. New York: Haworth Information Press, 2004. 5-17.

Donham, Jean, and Corey Williams Green. "Developing a Culture of

Collaboration: Librarian as Consultant." The Journal of Academic

Librarianship 30.4 (2004): 314-21.

Forrest, Laura Urbanski. "Academic Librarians and Student Affairs Professionals:

An Ethical Collaboration for Higher Education." Education Libraries 28.1

(2005): 11-5.

Frank, Donald G., Gregory K. Raschke, and Julie Wood. "Information Consulting:

The Key to Success in Academic Libraries." The Journal of Academic

Librarianship 27.2 (2001): 90-6.

Glynn, Tom, and Connie Wu. "New Roles and Opportunities for Academic Library

Liaisons: A Survey and Recommendations." <u>Reference Services Review</u>

31.2 (2003): 122-8.

Johnson, Corey M., Sarah K. McCord, and Scott Walter. "Instructional Outreach

Across the Curriculum: Enhancing the Liaison Role at a Research

University." <u>The Reference Librarian</u>.82 (2003): 19-37.

Mozenter, Frada L., Bridgette T. Sanders, and Jeanie M. Welch. "Restructuring a

Liaison Program in an Academic Library." <u>College & Research Libraries</u> 61.5

(2000): 432-40.

Ochola, John N., and Phillip J. Jones. "Assessment of the Liaison Program at

Baylor University." <u>Collection Management</u> 26.4 (2001): 29-41.

Pinfield, S. "The Changing Role of Subject Librarians in Academic Libraries."

<u>Journal of Librarianship and Information Science</u> 33.1 (2001): 32-8.

Reference and Adult Services Division, American Library Association.

"Guidelines for Liaison Work." <u>RQ</u> 32.1 (1992): 198-204.

Reference and User Services Association, American Library Association.

"Guidelines for Liaison Work in Managing Collections and Services (RUSA

Guidelines)." <u>Reference & User Services Quarterly</u> 41.2 (2001):107-10.

Ryans, Cynthia C., Raghini S. Suresh, and Wei-Ping Zhang. "Assessing an

Academic Library Liaison Programme." Library Review (Glasgow, Scotland)

44.1 (1995): 14-23.

Sanborn, L. "Improving Library Instruction: Faculty Collaboration." The Journal of

Academic Librarianship 31.5 (2005): 477-81.

Scales, Jane, Greg Matthews, and Corey M. Johnson. "Compliance,

Cooperation, Collaboration and Information Literacy." The Journal of

Academic Librarianship 31.3 (2005): 229-35.

Seamans, Nancy H., and Paul Metz. "Virginia Tech's Innovative College Librarian

Program." College & Research Libraries 63.4 (2002): 324-32.

Stoddart, Richard A., Thedis W. Bryant, and Amia L. Baker. "Going Boldly

Beyond the Reference Desk: Practical Advice and Learning Plans for New

Reference Librarians Performing Liaison Work." The Journal of Academic

Librarianship 32.4 (2006): 419-27.

Suresh, Raghini S., Cynthia C. Ryans, and Wei-Ping Zhang. "The Library-Faculty

Connection: Starting a Liaison Programme in an Academic Setting." Library

Review (Glasgow, Scotland) 44.1 (1995): 7-13.

Swartz, Pauline S., Brian A. Carlisle, and E. Chisato Uyeki. "Libraries and

Student Affairs: Partners for Student Success." Reference Services Review

35.1 (2007): 109-122.

Walter, Scott. "Moving Beyond Collections: Academic Library Outreach to

Multicultural Student Centers." Reference Services Review 33.4 (2005): 438-

58.

Wu, Connie, Michael S. Bowman, and Judy Gardner. "Effective Liaison

Relationships in an Academic Library." College & Research Libraries News 5

(1994): 254+.

Yang, Zheng Ye. "University Faculty's Perception of a Library Liaison Program: A

Case Study." The Journal of Academic Librarianship 26.2 (2000): 124-8.