

Tradition + Evolution: Providing Scaffolding for Librarians in a Time of Change

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Mira Waller, Hilary Davis, and Scott Warren, "Tradition + Evolution: Providing Scaffolding for Librarians in a Time of Change" (2018). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*.
<http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5703/1288284317052>

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Tradition + Evolution: Providing Scaffolding for Librarians in a Time of Change

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Abstract

Changing technology, evolving research methods and requirements, shifting expectations in teaching and learning, and the ongoing transformation of the scholarly communication landscape have all given libraries more opportunities than ever to participate in the full research life cycle, including areas previously considered outside their scope.

As a result, libraries have been seeking ways to evolve the liaison role and its influences on collections, services, and the identity of both libraries and librarians. Some changes have been more fluid while others have been more prescriptive. Some roles have shifted in direct response to a specific need, for example, supporting research data management and funding compliance. In other cases, anticipated needs such as lab-integrated support and grant collaboration are driving the shift. In all cases, libraries are grappling with how best to position their liaisons for success.

In this interactive Lively Lunch session, facilitators Mira Waller, Hilary Davis, and Scott Warren provided a brief overview of what is happening in their libraries and posed questions to guide a focused discussion around the changing roles and duties of liaison librarianship. Participants shared lessons learned while gleaning best practices regarding the ways in which changing roles and new paths have simultaneously opened opportunities and posed sticky challenges.

Lively Lunch Discussion

Introduction and Overview

Waller began the Lively Lunch by introducing the facilitators of the session and asking participants to actively engage in a dialogue, so that the session would be truly interactive. Next, Waller noted that many, if not all of the audience were in the room because they were a part of, in charge of, interested in, and/or affected by the ongoing changing nature of liaison or subject specialist librarians; and that liaison roles are evolving to try to meet the shifting needs of patrons around research, teaching, and learning. Like many libraries, North Carolina State University (NCSU) Libraries and Syracuse University (SU) Libraries have been exploring ways to evolve the subject/liaison librarian role to best meet new needs, while continuing to meet necessary traditional needs by a combination of leveraging technology, realigning priorities, providing training in new skills, and reimagining positions.

Waller shared that NCSU Libraries has been shifting from a support model to actively engaging and collaborating with scholars throughout the academic and research life cycle. At the same time

NCSU Libraries has tried to allow for experimental approaches and organizational flex by providing opportunities and resources to pilot new services, as well as encouraging staff to take risks. Functional roles have been established and separated from traditional liaison roles, for example, a new Data & Visualization Services Department was launched; but the NCSU Libraries has also allowed for traditional liaison roles that include some functional responsibilities—such as a new position titled Research Librarian for Life Sciences & Research Metrics. NCSU Libraries has also been engaging in new and shifting partnerships with campus stakeholders such as the Office of Faculty Development and the Office of Research and Innovation.

Waller also shared that the NCSU Libraries recently participated in the Association for Research Librarians Liaison Institute, along with other Triangle Research Libraries Network colleagues (UNC-CH, NCCU, Duke, NCSU). By the end of the institute, it became clear how much each of the institutions had already accomplished, and how much each one still had to do, as well as the perspective that even though we may share many similarities, each of our institutions has approached shifting liaison roles very differently.

Waller ended the introduction and overview to the Lively Lunch by introducing Mentimeter, an online tool that allows for interactive audience participation through the use of mobile devices. Participants were informed that for the rest of the session, Mentimeter would be used to facilitate audience participation. Any information provided by participants through Mentimeter would not be associated with identifying information, and all data gathered through Mentimeter would be available to participants by November 16, 2018 at <http://go.ncsu.edu/trad.evol.chas2018>.

Getting to Know the Audience

In order to get know the audience a little more and to facilitate their becoming familiar with using Mentimeter, we asked participants a series of demographic questions.

Demographic Questions

Question 1: What type of institution do you work in?

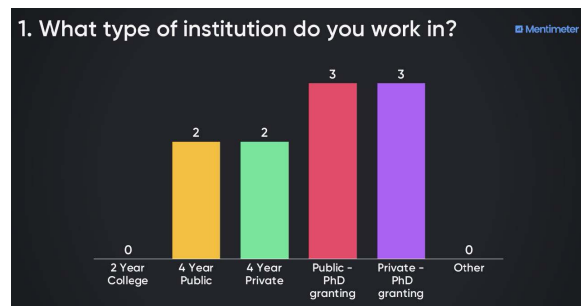


Figure 1.

The audience was almost evenly split between working in four-year public, four-year private, public PhD granting, and private PhD granting institutions. And while it was surprising that we had zero response for two-year colleges and other areas outside of academic institutions, further discussion around this question revealed that some attendees actually worked for a library consortia or in a community college system.

Question 2: Do your liaisons work with single departments, several departments, a school or college, or something even larger?



Figure 2.

Half of the respondents identified themselves or their liaison librarians as working with several departments. The other half indicated that they or their liaison librarians worked with a single department, a single school or college, or multiple schools or colleges. When asked for more information, participants shared that they had difficulties in differentiating between working with several departments and working with multiple schools or colleges, especially since “several departments” might span multiple colleges or schools.

Question 3: What is your role?

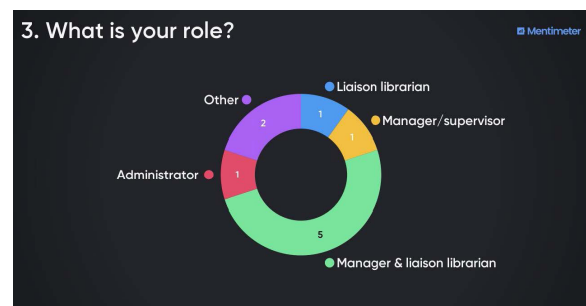


Figure 3.

We were not surprised to see that the largest number of respondents identified as both manager and liaison librarian, but we did expect to see more attendees self-identify as a liaison librarian. Once the demographic questions were asked, Waller turned over facilitation to Davis and Warren, who moved participants into the core discussion section of the session.

The Core Discussion Questions

We asked the audience a series of discussion questions addressing the roles of liaison librarians as well as what opportunities and challenges are being faced as a result of changing roles.

Question 4: Do you see liaison librarians as deep experts, generalists, functional specialists, or all of the above?

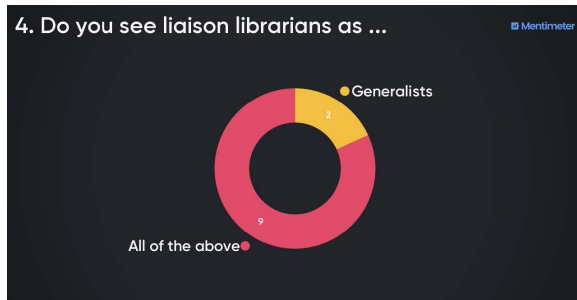


Figure 4.

Most agreed that liaison librarians are deep experts, functional specialists, and generalists. In fact, how we define functional specialists may vary widely. For some, a functional specialist focuses on specific services, such as data visualization, scholarly communication, or research metrics. For others, a functional specialist focuses on collections and specific subjects. At what point are all liaison librarians acting as functional specialists operating within the context of a set of subjects or disciplines?

Question 5: What new opportunities have opened up for library/librarian engagement at your institution?

New opportunities that have surfaced as a result of changing roles of liaison librarians centered on grantsmanship: librarians developing and providing expertise in writing grants as well as acting as collaborators on grant-funded projects. Davis noted that at the NCSU Libraries, many liaison librarians are actively engaged as co-PIs or as senior personnel on grants, often in partnership with campus researchers. Likewise, liaison librarians are increasingly

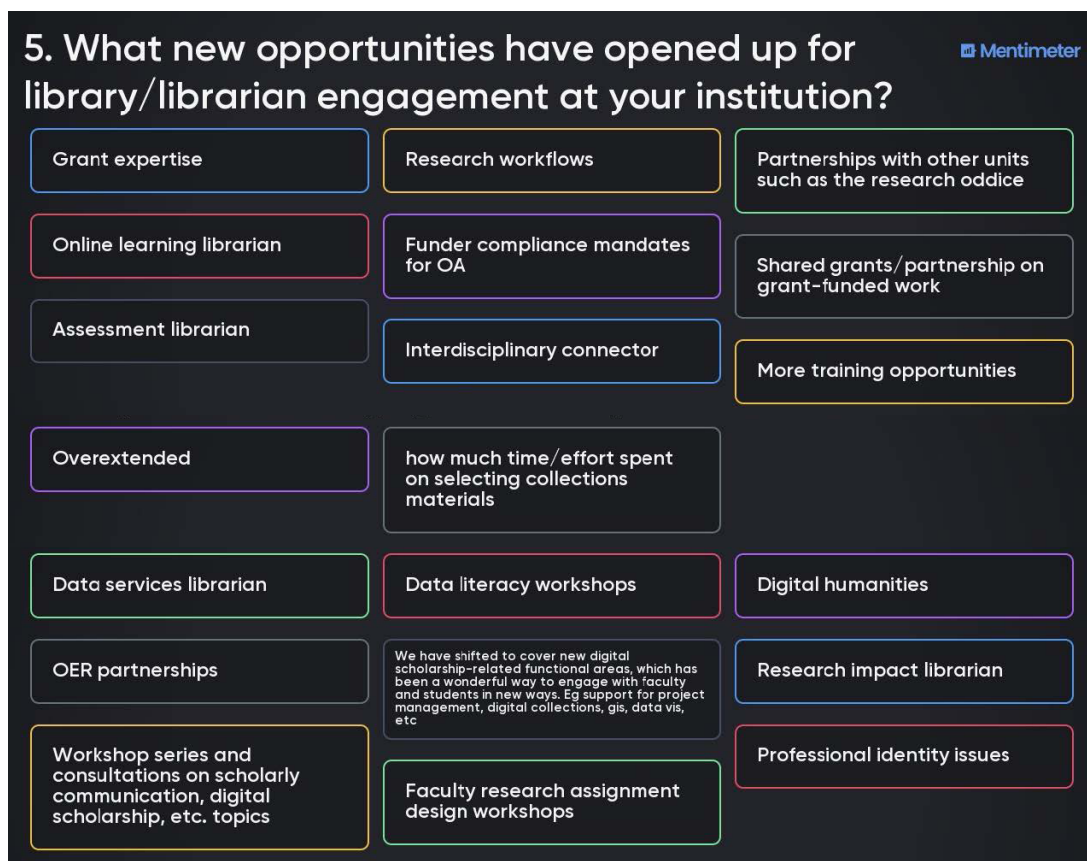


Figure 5.

involved in providing guidance for data management planning, data sharing in compliance with grant-funded mandates, as well as support for broader impact statements (a core component of NSF grant proposals).

Other opportunities shared by the session participants centered on new librarian roles—online learning librarian, assessment librarian, data services librarian, and research impact librarian, reflecting the wide spectrum of responsibilities that liaison librarians are now expected to address. At the NCSU Libraries, functional areas are incorporated within some subject liaison roles and reflect some of these themes including research metrics, data science, analytics, and public science.

In addition to roles, several participants mentioned that they or their colleagues have been involved in more training opportunities to support the new roles and/or responsibilities that lead to opportunities to partner with other units such as campus research offices on research workflows, digital scholarship projects, and facilitation of cross-disciplinary collaborations. Several participants described being involved in open education resource selection as well as workshops focusing on data literacy, research design, researcher identity, project management, and data visualization.

Question 6: What challenges are you/your colleagues facing as a result of changing librarian/ liaison roles?

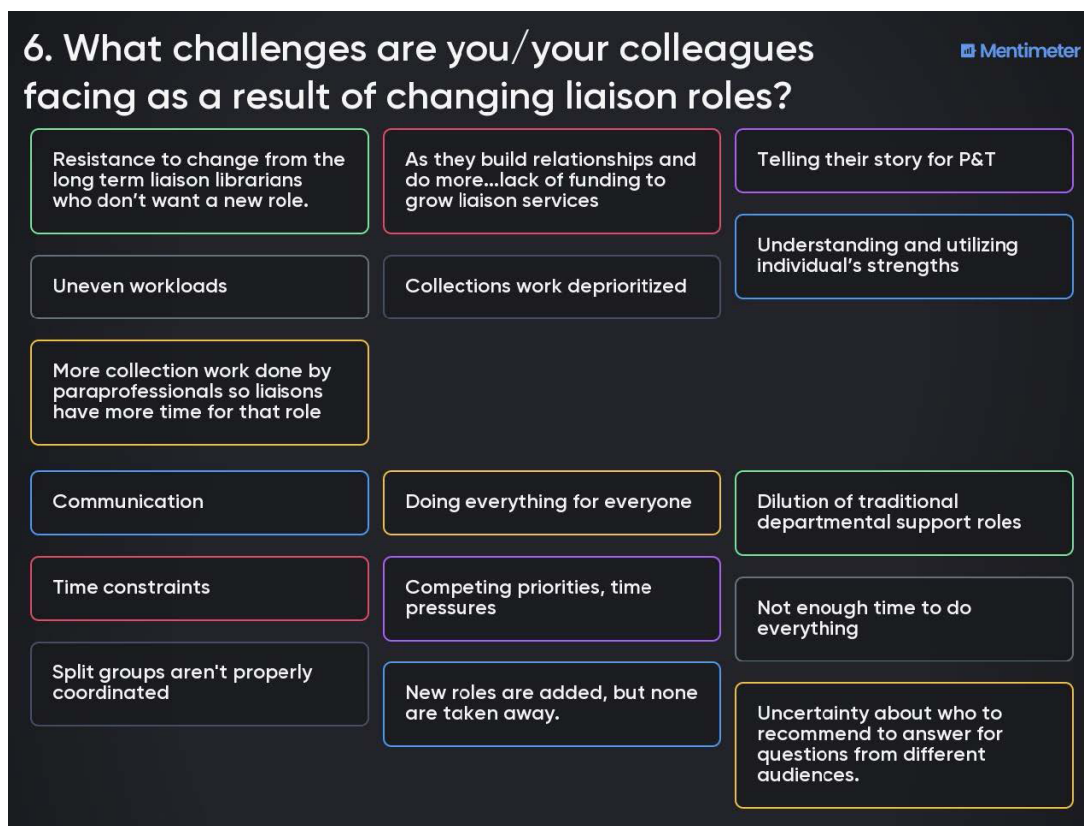


Figure 6.

The extent to which these new opportunities limits other core work such as collection development and assessment was discussed. Some participants added that while these new opportunities are welcomed, they also lead to feelings of being overextended (“doing everything for everyone”). We are operating at the interface where our core responsibilities

haven't simply been replaced by these new roles and new responsibilities—many liaisons are balancing the need to maintain their core roles and existing responsibilities while helping their organizations generate more value to stakeholders through these new roles. Some reported that late-career librarians are resistant to adopting these new roles and

responsibilities. What can we do to minimize burn-out and frustration? Many libraries are taking steps to develop vision, mission, and goals within this changed landscape to create a path to get through the changes and reconcile balancing the “core” with the “new.” For example, NCSU Libraries is partnering with nonlibrary entities (e.g., graduate school and postdoc associations) to help expand capacity for workshops via the Peer Scholars program (<https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/events/series/peer-scholars>).

Other challenges that participants articulated during the discussion included communication and lack of

coordination between units in libraries. These particular challenges make it difficult to determine how to refer students and researchers to other colleagues, leading to potential inconsistent customer service experiences and perceptions of being disjointed. Lack of time and competing priorities were also represented as challenges, leading to dilution of traditional or core responsibilities, uneven workloads, and deprioritization of collection development and management.

Question 7: What changes in your collections infrastructure have impacted liaisons the most?



Figure 7.

While there were many answers to this section, few were surprising. Centralized budgets to support interdisciplinary resources, package deals that limited individual liaison involvement, and newer evidence-based strategies that required more complex back-end support were all mentioned as forces that tended to impact (and generally limit) how liaisons interact with collections. Warren noted that collections have become complex enough that he thinks of collections specialists themselves as a type of functional expert. As a result, such positions now require more extensive knowledge and regular participation in the collections world than

most liaisons can provide. This is likely to be particularly true at larger libraries such as those in the Association of Research Libraries, with their greater capacity for specialization. At Syracuse University (SU) Libraries, for instance, two Collection Development and Analysis Librarians specialize in guiding collections workflows, looking at collections through a university rather than disciplinary perspective, and liaising directly with vendors. This has freed limited academic liaison bandwidth for more direct services to faculty and students and has helped enable the SU Libraries to develop organization-level strategies for building collections.

Question 8: What enabled you to evolve liaison services in the direction(s) you want?

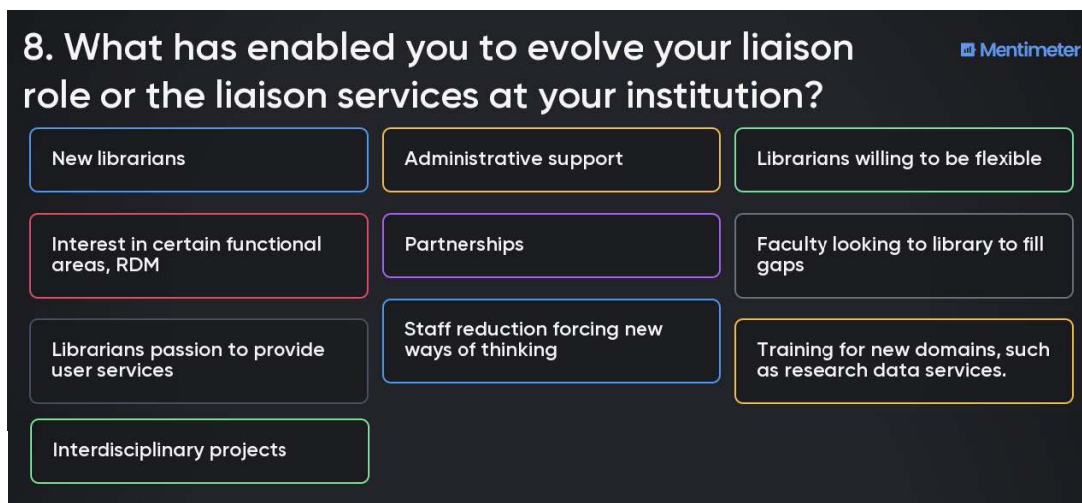


Figure 8.

This question sought to gauge if participants' answers would collectively produce a suite of strategies for different organizational structures or situations (e.g., retirements, budgets, smaller or larger libraries). While no one overarching strategy resulted, answers did tend to cluster around two poles—either positive drivers such as “librarians willing to be flexible” and “new librarians” or negative drivers such as “staff reduction forcing new ways of thinking.” However, positive incentives were mentioned more often, including recognition that external campus initiatives such as “partnerships” and “faculty looking to library to fill gaps” were ultimately leading the evolution of roles.

An ancillary issue regarding how to create “organizational slack” in liaison roles was raised. By this, the speakers meant developing enough internal capacity for liaisons to take on new functions without feeling overloaded. It could also mean having enough liaisons to adequately cover all academic areas plus newer functions. This “slack” would mean individual librarians did not commonly experience strong pressure to cover both expanded subject portfolios as well as new functional responsibilities. It was noteworthy that there were no meaningful differences in responses from large or small institutions. In other words, the same issues appeared at all scales of organization and service provision, which

in turn suggests no one has adequately solved the “slack” question.

Question 9: For this session, what was most helpful, and was there anything we missed?

While we intended to raise this question, time became limited due to the robust conversation feedback to the earlier questions engendered. Anecdotally, attendees seemed to find the immediate responses to questions on the screen helpful, as they were easy prompts for further discussion.

Conclusion

Libraries have more opportunities than ever to participate in the full academic and research life cycle, including areas previously considered outside their scope due to changing technology, evolving research methods and requirements, shifting expectations in teaching and learning; changes in how we assess and develop collections; and the ongoing transformation of the scholarly communication landscape. However, with these opportunities come challenges, as well as questions of identity, values, and priorities. As the liaison model continues to evolve, academic libraries will need to find the right balance between the roles of generalist, subject specialist, and functional expert, while navigating the surrounding challenges and opportunities.