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Mira Waller
NCSU Libraries, mpark@ncsu.edu

Shelby J. Hallman
NCSU Libraries, sjhallma@ncsu.edu

Author ORCID Identifier: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3829-1803>

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When the Wind Blows: Changing Roles for Changing Times

*Mira Waller, Department Head, Research Engagement, NCSU Libraries,
mpark@ncsu.edu*

*Shelby J. Hallman, Research Librarian for Engineering & Entrepreneurship, NCSU Libraries,
sjhallma@ncsu.edu*

Abstract

Subject liaisons have traditionally focused on providing domain-specific services and collections. Recently, however, their roles have shifted from a support model to actively engaging and collaborating with scholars throughout the academic life cycle and research enterprise. At the same time, users increasingly require functional information support (e.g., for GIS, data visualization, or data mining) in place of or in addition to domain-specific services. As the liaison role continues to evolve, finding the right balance between the roles of generalist, subject specialist, and functional expert will provide both challenges and opportunities.

This proceeding focuses on a case study of two librarians in the North Carolina State University (NCSU) Libraries who started out in the Collections & Research Strategy Department and ended up in a new department, Research Engagement. One librarian transitioned from being a libraries fellow into a new role as research librarian for Engineering & Entrepreneurship and the other librarian transitioned from being the associate head of the Collections & Research Strategy Department into being the head of the new department. The librarians will share their perspectives and experiences around helping to shape this new department, including figuring out the role of the new department in the organization, building an identity, and developing goals and priorities. The librarians will also share what traditional skills were still needed in their new roles and what strategies were employed for identifying and building new skills.

Introduction

As teaching, learning, and research become more interdisciplinary, data-driven, technology based, collaborative, and open, the role of subject liaisons continues to evolve in order to best support the shifting needs of patrons. Like many libraries that provide subject-specific and liaison-modeled services, NCSU Libraries has worked hard to ensure that its subject and liaison librarian model is in alignment with and continues to adapt to the needs of NC State University's campus and community.

This proceeding details the most recent changes around the NCSU Libraries liaison model through a case study of two librarians who started out in the Collections & Research Strategy Department and ended up in a new department, Research Engagement. The librarians share their perspectives and experiences around helping to form this new department, including building an identity, developing goals and priorities, and figuring out the role of the new department in the organization. The librarians also share what traditional skills were still

needed in their new roles and what strategies were employed for identifying and building new skills.

Overview

Prior to 2015, NCSU Libraries distributed liaisonship among six distinct departments. See Figure 1 for a visual breakdown of the organizational structure.

Research & Information Services focused on subject-specific support, information literacy instruction, and reference services. In a way, Research & Information Services offered services traditionally aligned with liaisonship, with the exception of collection development. Collection Management oversaw all aspects of managing library collections through subject-based collection managers. Research & Information Services and Collection Management provided joint subject support, often working closely together to best liaise with colleges and departments. Four other departments, three of which are branch libraries, offered liaison services to specific colleges. The Design Library, Natural Resources Library, and

Organizational Structure - 2015

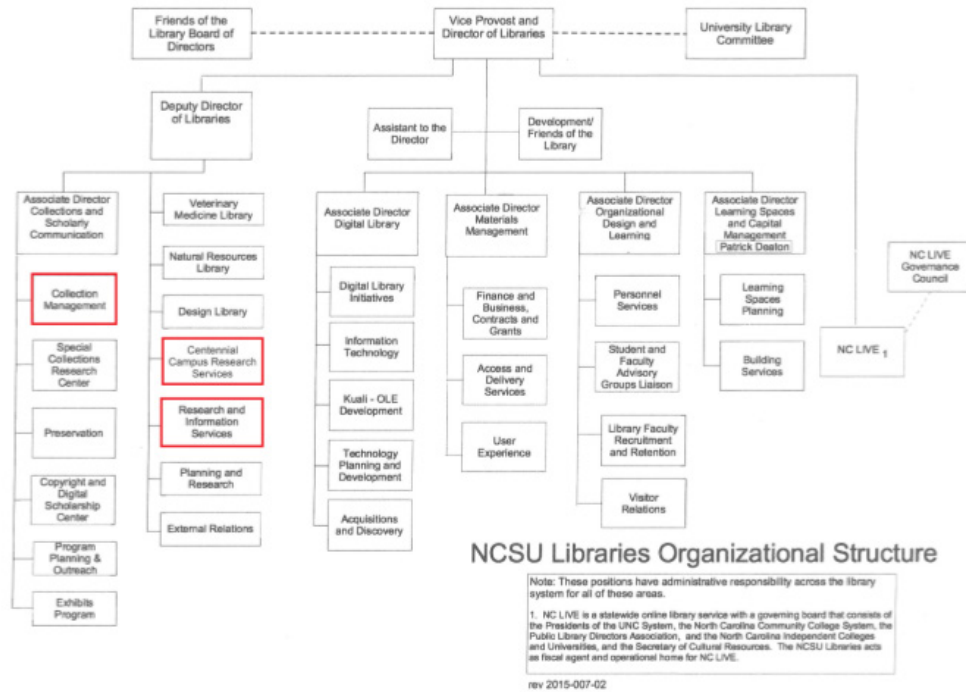


Figure 1.

Veterinary Medicine Library all provided their name-sake colleges with fully integrated research support including reference, information literacy instruction, and collection management. The final department, Centennial Campus Research Services, provided liaison support to the Colleges of Engineering and Textiles. It is important to note that in all six departments librarians learned and supported new skills and services beyond the department scope, to best meet NC State University's needs.

In September 2016, as part of a restructuring process, the NCSU Libraries created a new department, Research Engagement. The new department consisted of four librarians from the formerly existing department, Research & Information Services, and the entire Centennial Campus Research Services Department. As a part of the process, the Collection Management Department became the Collections & Research Strategy department. After the reorganization, the three branch libraries continued their subject-specific services, while increasing collaboration with the newly formed Research Engagement. See Figure 2 for the NCSU Libraries' organizational structure after the process.

Our Process

On August 7, 2017, Mira Waller became the interim department head of Research Engagement, and Waller and Shelby Hallman, NCSU Libraries fellow, moved from the Collections & Research Strategy Department to the new Research Engagement Department. Our first objective, together with others in the department, was to identify our unit's role in the NCSU Libraries. Prior to the restructuring, both the Research & Information Services and Centennial Campus Research Services departments were responsible for deep domain-specific support and instruction, reference and consultations, and research support services. With the exception of collection management, both of these departments had provided services in traditional and emerging areas of liaison librarianship. See Figure 3 for a closer look at the departments affected by the restructuring prior to the process. See Figure 4 for a closer look postprocess.

Once we recognized the similarities between the work of the two combined units, we were able to use the similarities as a foundation for establishing Research Engagement's role in the organization.

Organizational Structure - 2018

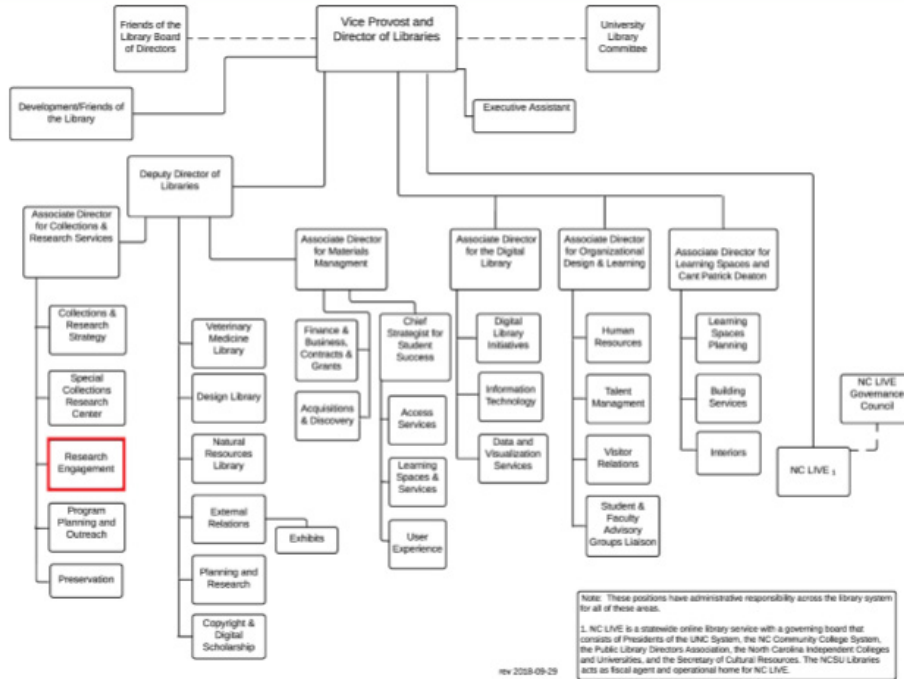


Figure 2.

Organizational Structure - a Closer Look - Before

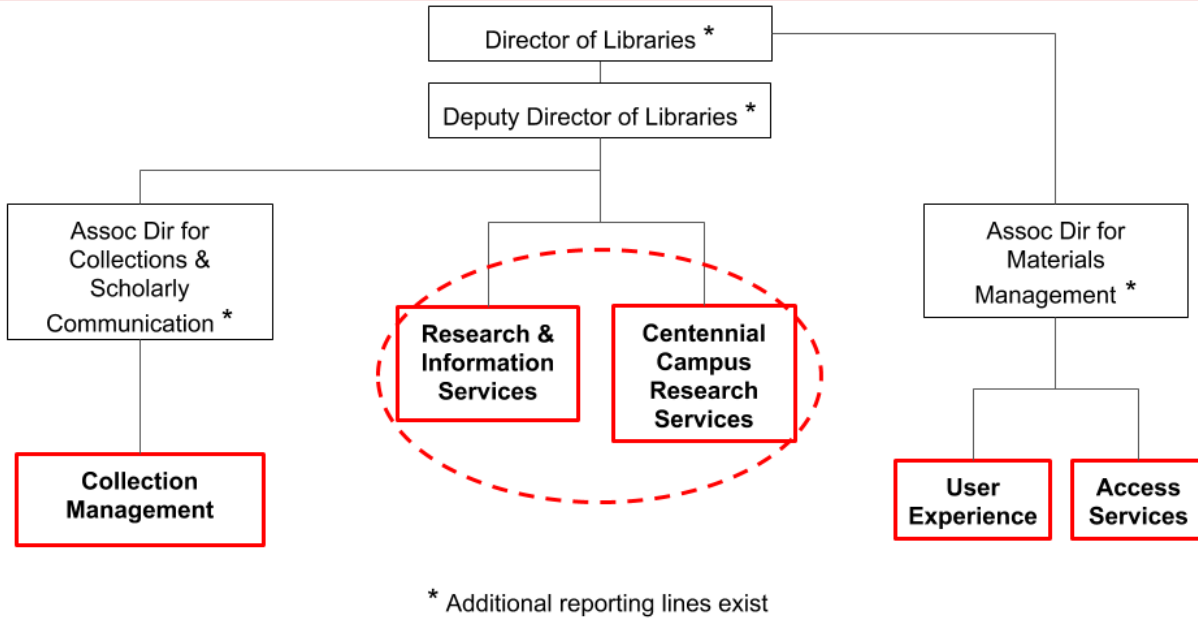
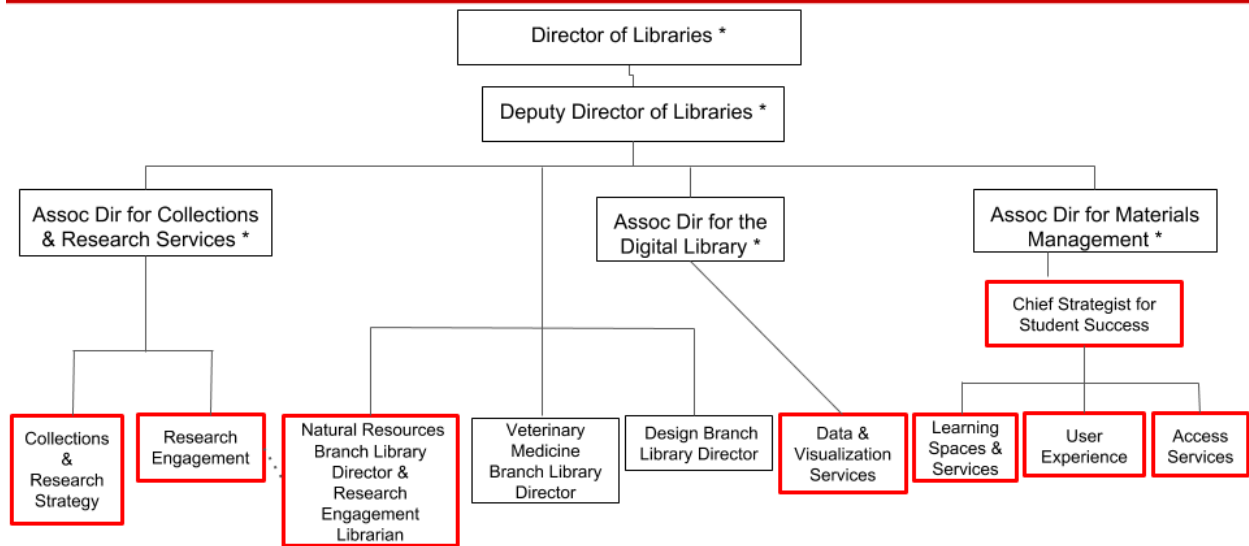


Figure 3. Pre-reorganization chart.

Organizational Structure - a Closer Look - After



* Additional reporting lines exist

Figure 4. Postreorganization chart.

Building an Identity

To establish a mutually agreed-upon identity, the Research Engagement Department cooperatively engaged in a reflection process to identify skills aligned with our role, both internal and external. As librarians in an outward-facing role, we were poised to impact campus user groups through building relationships. In our inward-facing role, we were perfectly placed to collaboratively enhance team-based services and provide connection to campus users. As a department of subject liaisons, the precedent of traditional liaison roles across librarianship had to be addressed. If we wanted to truly embody the researcher-focused role, we had to look beyond tradition to impartially assess which skills best accomplished the support we hoped to provide, while leveraging the functional skills of other departments. During that process we were able to establish which traditional areas, services, and skills aligned with the department, which traditional skills fell outside our newly minted scope, and what emerging services and skills we could implement.

In the realignment of departments, certain skills traditionally paired with subject specialists were split among multiple departments based upon the organizational role of each department. Reference

services requiring immediate and transactional interaction, such as desk- or chat-based services, fell within the purview of departments responsible for service points, the main department being Access Services. Collection-centric skills, including direct collection management, approval plan management, subscription decisions, and budget management, remained with our sister department, Collection & Research Strategy and the three branch libraries. By dividing these skills among departments, the functional expertise (collection management, patron-service management) provided a solid foundation upon which subject specialty and liaisonship could be built.

As noted above, Research Engagement's organizational role mixes deep-subject specialty with the functional expertise of research life cycle support. In our reflection of the skills needed to accomplish that role, we identified a number of traditional and new skills necessary, as shown in Figure 5. The majority of the in-scope traditional skills revolved around specific spheres: domain-specific instruction, reference, and database subscription assessment. While desk- and chat-based reference were shifted outside the department, e-mail, phone, and scheduled consultations regarding domain-based requests remained within. Similarly, domain-based instruction at the

| Traditional Skills Outside Scope | Traditional Skills Within Scope | New Skills |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference desk • Chat • Collection management (direct) • Budget management & negotiations • Approval plan management • Gobi • Collections liaison to department/college • Usage statistics • Journal, handbooks, monograph subscriptions/decisions • Purchase decisions for individual media | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domain-specific reference support • - E-mail • - Phone • - Consultations • Domain-specific instruction • - Course level • - Department level • - College level • Departmental/college liaisonship • Domain-specific database subscriptions • Team-based assessment of database purchase/contributions • Citation management/tools support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data visualization • Data management • Knowledge of research collaboration & productivity tools • Grant & funding knowledge • Expertise in altmetrics • Knowledge of open science • Ability to consult on using high-tech spaces • Ability to consult on bibliometrics |

Figure 5. Skills table.

college, department, and course level remained a core facet of Research Engagement’s role, through which research relationships could be initiated and strengthened. Building relationships through college and department liaisonship enabled our department to not only assist researchers but to act as a connector between the researcher and library services broadly. Internally, the distributed model of traditional skills required a high level of collaboration to seamlessly support our users. Team-based assessment of databases is one example of that collaboration, as liaisons from Research Engagement and Collection & Research Strategy jointly determine subscriptions to subject databases to ensure continuity between collections and outward engagement and promotion of resources. In addition to retaining select traditional skills, we needed to incorporate new skills that match researchers’ needs to embody research engagement.

The identification of new skills to either learn, further develop, or continually support was based upon our defined role, researchers’ needs, and emerging trends within librarianship. Across the organization these skills have been integrated into functional and subject-focused departments alike. Our growth of these skills strengthened our ability to provide research support through the distribution and application of expertise. For instance, in the reorganization, a Data & Visualization Services

department was created to offer highly specialized visualization support. Research Engagement collaborates with Data & Visualization Services to connect researchers to the visualization support they need while still providing domain-specific expertise. Furthermore, certain engagement-focused services, such as the Data and Visualization Institute for Librarians, remained with Research Engagement. Other emerging skills included expertise in data management, research/productivity tools, grant/funder expertise, altmetrics, open science, high-tech spaces, and bibliometrics. Many of these new skills addressed the need for interdisciplinary facilitation and support across the university. By integrating subject liaisons into working groups supporting these emerging trends, the process of a researcher contacting the library for help and receiving expert feedback was streamlined.

Developing Goals and Priorities

Once we established the department’s role in the organization and developed a shared understanding of Research Engagement’s identity, we needed to clearly define and articulate the department’s goals and priorities. By establishing and achieving shared goals, we would be able to build upon and reinforce our department’s identity. It was also important that the entire department participate in the process of developing goals and priorities, so that everyone

would be invested and take ownership of Research Engagement.

We began by building upon our earlier analysis and identification of the traditional and emerging skills needed in our department. Each of the selected skills could be separated into two broad categories: areas we lead in and areas of overlap. We determined that domain-specific support, curriculum-integrated instruction, and research collaboration and productivity tools fell into areas Research Engagement took the lead in; and collection development, workshops, research support, and scholarly communication were areas where Research Engagement's skills overlapped with other departments' expertise. Waller then used these categories to draft broad, initial goals and priorities, placing priority on the areas where the department led. Next, the entire department worked to map and align the draft goals and priorities to the NCSU Libraries' strategic goals, as well as to revise, edit, and finalize the language. Finally, the goals and priorities developed by and for the Research Engagement Department were shared with and approved by the NCSU Libraries' senior administration.

Conclusion

Establishing a new department is both challenging and rewarding. In order to be successful, a shared sense of purpose and ownership must be developed and nurtured. And it must be an iterative and communal process. Over the past year and a half, we have worked hard to ensure that each member of the department is truly invested in Research Engagement's continued success. Throughout this process, we have learned that the department must be fluid and that we need to be willing to learn and incorporate new skills; and we have also realized that new opportunities come with change. Hallman was appointed research librarian for Engineering & Entrepreneurship on March 1, 2018; and Waller was appointed department head of Research Engagement on July 1, 2018. Organizational and structural change is a necessary and healthy way of ensuring that a unit continues to meet the needs of its members and serve the needs of its patrons. As the needs of our researchers, faculty, students, and staff continue to change, it is imperative that academic libraries evolve to meet them.