Relationship Building One Step at a Time: Case Studies of Successful Faculty-Librarian Partnerships

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abstract: Building strong relationships between academic librarians and teaching faculty is paramount for promoting services and resources. While librarians face challenges ranging from new technologies to heightened expectations and fiscal difficulties, the key work remains in solid relationship building. Drawing on the experience of a group of subject librarians and teaching faculty at The Ohio State University, this study examines the qualities that help liaison librarians develop relationships with faculty and support ongoing library services. It explores how liaison librarians build opportunities for ongoing relationships and how they assess the successes or failures of those interactions. It chronicles interview findings that detail the importance of such skills as patience, expertise, follow-through, responsiveness, and individuality if librarians are to build solid relationships and fruitful collaborations. Finally, it offers some preliminary observations on the teaching faculty's understanding of the librarians' relationship-building efforts.

Introduction

L ibrarians have always served as connectors between expertise, services, resources, and users. Over the years, in response to economic, digital, and global realities, librarians have reconceived how they provide services. Innovation and connectivity across disciplines have become more important than ever. Consequently, liaison librarians continually redevelop and reshape their skill set to respond to the changing ecosystem of both the library and the university.

Several recent articles have articulated the need for new librarian positions in academic libraries. In "New Roles for New Times," for example, Janice Jaguszewski and Karen Williams discussed overarching trends in the types of librarians hired by

academic libraries.[1] They recommended that, to prepare for the future, libraries should hire "for competencies (skills in technology, deep data, deep subject, culture/language, etc.) rather than credentials; for potential (attitudes, aptitudes) rather than years of experience" and should create "career opportunities with new titles and new responsibilities to attract non-MLS professionals." In "Reinventing Our Work: New and Emerging Roles for Academic Librarians," Lori Goetsch re-envisioned librarians' duties into four core responsibilities: (1) basic consulting services, (2) management of the information life cycle, (3) collaborative print and electronic collection building, and (4) information mediation and interpretation.[2] James L. Mullins's article "Are MLS Graduates Being Prepared for the Changing and Emerging Roles That Librarians Must Now Assume Within Research Libraries?" acknowledges the seismic changes the profession has experienced and calls on library schools to better train librarians for this changing environment.[3] With these recommendations in mind, this article explores how these new skills, aptitudes, and responsibilities—coupled with core proficiencies such as expertise, understanding and listening, creativity, and follow-through—can assist liaison librarians in building relationships that flourish with teaching faculty. For the purposes of this article, *faculty* can be assumed to mean teaching faculty as opposed to librarians, though at Ohio State University librarians have faculty status and many also teach. This article also offers a perspective on how faculty approach relationship building and describes liaison librarians' efforts at intentionally developing these skills.

The Ohio State University (OSU) in Columbus is a world-class public research university and the leading comprehensive teaching and research institution in Ohio. With more than 63,000 students, the Wexner Medical Center, 14 colleges, 80 centers, and 175 majors, the university offers its students uncommon breadth and depth of opportunity in liberal arts, sciences, and professional programs. Its library system, anchored by the William Oxley Thompson Library, is among the top 10 public university members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and within the top 20 of 126 ARL member libraries. The OSU Libraries are a charter member of OhioLINK, a consortium of 91 academic libraries and the State Library of Ohio, sharing resources throughout the state. The libraries also enhance collections and services through the Big Ten Academic Alliance, an association of Big Ten institutions, most of which are flagship research universities.

The size and scope of OSU's massive library system have not shielded its faculty librarians from the changes that are prevalent throughout higher education and academic libraries. New patterns in user behavior, calls for collaboration, and information overabundance have led OSU's liaison librarians to prioritize engagement practices. Engagement represents a deeper interaction between liaison librarians and the academic programs they serve. This model revolves around thorough connections with faculty and students in the areas of collection development, instruction, research services, outreach, and scholarly communication. Developing effective relationships and partnerships is a core competency of this model.

Literature Review

During the past several years, the literature of academic librarianship has been preoccupied with change. An agile and creative learning environment has overtaken the

traditional model of a librarian lecturing. The research environment, once characterized by the solitary scholar battling reams of data, has morphed into a more collaborative and interdisciplinary approach. Today, networked technologies, information nodes, and communities of scholars and students work to create new knowledge and leverage multidisciplinary viewpoints to solve problems. In the midst of these transformations, academic libraries and liaison librarians continue to do what they have always done: collect and preserve the products of our cultural heritage, support faculty research and teaching, enhance student learning, and develop strategies for community outreach. For librarians, the notion of continuity in the midst of change is a perennial theme that both worries and invigorates the profession.[4]

Adaptation to these changes continues to be a topic of conversation among librarians. The literature is crowded with articles centered on new employers' requirements for library professionals, the information professional of the future, and even the concept of blended professionals. Andrew Cox and and Sheila Corrall, in "Evolving Academic Library Specialties," find optimism in librarians' ability to extend their reach beyond their traditional support for scholarship and "into specialties embedded in academic departments and research teams."[5] Maria Bonn, in her article "Tooling Up Scholarly Communication

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Education and Training," offers a list of skills that extend beyond excellence in written and verbal communication to include understanding of copyright law and author contracts as well as familiarity with emerging modes of scholarly communication and its economies.[6] Robert Janke and Kathy Rush focus their attention on the role librarians play as part of research teams and conclude that librarians contribute to research partly through their ability to "navigate issues related to copyright and open access policies of funding agencies."[7] Nisa Bakkalbasi and her coauthors report on the results of an institute centered on opportunities for re-skilling liaison librarians, which uncovered "the necessity to take a broader view of liaisons' work and the context in which they do it."[8] Perhaps more impactful, their report concludes that liaison and library success "occurs when the library is a part of collective problem solving at the university level."[9] In short, the profession is attentive to the need for retooling its professionals and for seeking a larger, more visible impact in the research and academic enterprise.

Librarianship has paid less attention to the idea that promoting strong relationships is foundational to supporting deeper engagement between librarians and faculty. Relationship building, some members of the profession seem to believe, will just happen. The literature that tangentially addresses the issue focuses on the idea of customer service management, sometimes dwelling on the notions that libraries are businesses, with users as their customers, and that "academic libraries could benefit from leveraging certain business practices to increase user satisfaction."[10] Glenn Masuchika, borrowing from the field of marketing, argues for considering that the "reference desk is a primary interaction point for direct marketing of the library" and describes it as a "potent agent" in creating a community of "returning scholars."[11]

Other articles are discipline-specific in their efforts to approximate the notion of one-to-one relationship building. Julia Martin and her colleagues in "Relationship Building with Students and Instructors of ESL" argue for the creation of a relationship between the library and ESL (English as a second language) instructors that would give ESL students an increased level of comfort with approaching the library and using its services.[12] In the context of business librarianship, Hyun-Duck Chung's article "Relationship Building in Entrepreneurship Liaison Work" offers an interesting model of relationship building consisting of three basic steps: (1) events as opportunities, (2) turning those opportunities into relationships, and (3) "cultivating those relationships through collaborative projects that can improve student learning and scholarship through synergistic outcomes."[13]

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From this limited body of literature, it is clear that librarians are beginning to think about relationship building. They are recognizing it as an important component of their duties, and some are making tangible efforts to approach it in a more programmatic fashion.

Methodology

Creating synergistic outcomes or results greater than the sum of their parts is the core mission of relationship building. For this study, the researchers interviewed subject librarians and faculty for three purposes: (1) to determine how skills, aptitudes, and responsibilities assist liaison librarians in building relationships with faculty; (2) to clarify the role that core proficiencies, such as expertise, understanding, creativity, and follow-through, play in the building of relationships between librarians and faculty, and (3) to ascertain if there are common qualities in successful library and faculty collaborations. This study qualified and was approved as Institutional Review Board (IRB)-exempt research.

The research team invited nine liaison librarians and special collections curators to participate in the interview process, and seven accepted. Each participating subject then provided the researchers with the contact information of a faculty member with whom he or she had collaborated. The researchers contacted the faculty, and five agreed to interviews. The researchers developed a list of questions based on their observations and conversations about interactions between faculty and subject librarians and posed the same questions to each participant (see the Appendix). The questionnaire centered on the basic dynamics of relationship building. It covered such issues as interaction or point of contact, collaboration, follow-through, and success or failure. In other words, it delved into the natural synergy that exists between librarians and faculty members.

Findings

Based on the interviews, relationship building between faculty and liaison librarians has become more important than ever for overall success. The comments gathered from liaison librarians and faculty reveal that developing personal connections lies at the heart of our engagement model at The Ohio State University. To engage deeply is to forge newer and stronger relations that build trust and gain the respect of faculty. These efforts require time, continued care, and greater effort. Relationships, if not properly maintained and grown, fade away. Strong, lasting relationships have to be pursued.

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Although there is no unified model for relationship building, common themes and threads emerged during interviews of OSU's liaison librarians and faculty members. Together they offer a modest, yet useful, set of potential best practices in the area of relationship building. The first theme we observed was that the project should be of equal interest to both the liaison librarian and the faculty. One librarian spoke of getting "good return on investment." A faculty member described his interaction with a librarian as a "mutually beneficial event." In other words, faculty members and liaison librarians want to invest their limited time and resources in someone who will provide results both now and in the future.

Follow-through also appears to be vital. Librarians must stay connected with their constituents. The quickest ways to ruin a relationship and damage a reputation, either by librarians or faculty, are to neglect key deadlines, fail to return e-mails, or not supply agreed-upon deliverables. One faculty member mentioned that he writes thank you notes to librarians after positive interactions because "he wants them to want to work with him in the future." By appreciating those involved and following through, the collaboration is strengthened. Additionally,

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by having a shared understanding of one another's project goals, librarians and faculty can manage expectations around scalability, especially the ability to accommodate the growth that would be associated with a project's success.

According to some faculty members, relationships are strengthened when librarians push boundaries and go beyond the expectation of suggesting services and sources. Asking probing questions, adding new insights, and pushing the faculty member's research in new and unexpected directions show both thoughtful enthusiasm and personal commitment to the success of the faculty member and his or her project.

Both librarians and faculty members insisted on the importance of good two-way communication. Listening to other people's stories is every bit as important as telling your own story. Librarians who built successful relationships used every tool and opportunity to create meaningful interactions and asked for feedback to iteratively improve for the future.

The need to build trust is also a crucial component of relationship building. One faculty member indicated that the level of trust between him and his liaison librarian is enhanced when the interaction alerts him to his "blind spots," "helps me to think broader," and "helps me to make things happen." Another hinted that his students do better when he emphasizes the expertise that the librarians bring to the class.

Networking is a critical key to building successful relationships. Librarians in our study are keenly aware of its importance and showed an interest in networking. However, networking is more than "schmoozing" and attending functions. The true value and essence of networking involves connecting with others. Networking hinges on finding connections and making those connections apparent to all concerned. It requires strong listening skills and the ability to provide context that illuminates larger connections around campus or trends in higher education more broadly.

Discussion

Many of the liaison librarians intentionally built relationships in a purposeful, systematic fashion. They sought diverse approaches making use of both the tools the library offered and the opportunities the departments they serve made available. Liaison librarians often relied on existing structures for fostering collaboration, such as departmental meetings, academic events, curriculum needs, and instruction requests. They also took advantage of informal encounters, such as social events, hallway conversations, and serendipitous introductions by other library staff. Some techniques they employed included mining the course catalog to find where services would be valued and then approaching those instructors; networking and explicitly making connections for researchers to services available in the libraries; promoting the librarian's subject expertise and offering to share knowledge; and working to embed the librarian or library assignments into the curriculum for the program. In this way, the librarians could leverage their limited time in impactful and strategic ways. For these efforts, the librarians often coordinated meetings, employed project management techniques, and ensured that key deadlines were set and met.

Unsurprisingly, liaison librarians' ventures into relationship building met with both successes and failures. Liaison librarians who deemed their efforts successful credited good planning, strong "ongoing conversations," and interactions with faculty where the project or class design was specifically tailored to students' needs as well as collaboratively and iteratively developed. In the words of one librarian, these behind-the-scenes collaborations often merged the instructor's and librarian's roles into a "seamless transaction." Other liaison librarians attributed good relationship building to solid networking, faculty's willingness to see them as colleagues, their own in-depth disciplinary knowledge, genuine interests in faculty research, the ability to be creative and adaptive, and word-of-mouth recommendations triggered by previous successes. In short, success begets success.

Relationship building can be evidenced when a one-time collaboration leads to additional projects, ranging from faculty members returning to seek additional help or clarification, continued conversations about subject matter or shared interests, or the opportunity for coauthored publications. Return interactions, programmatic growth, and

referrals point to acknowledgment and acceptance of the liaison librarian as a partner, expert, and colleague.

If liaison librarians built success on continued conversations, shared expectations, and flexibility, the opposite prompted failure. The authors noted that liaison librarians more readily pointed out failure than did faculty. Most liaison librarians indicated that the major deficiencies centered around poor communication, built-in systemic limitations, "poor chemistry," meager planning, and faulty timing. They also mentioned that the least successful interactions came from individuals they did not know, where they had trouble negotiating shared expectations,

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or where experiences felt "transactional, not integrated into the needs of the course." Finally, some liaisons experience not so much failure as a sense of incompleteness. At times, the project or class just "didn't hit the target" and would evolve and provide insight for a future collaboration with the same faculty member.

In this changing environment, faculty feedback illuminates how some faculty members perceive engagement efforts. Like liaison librarians, faculty members acknowledged that the academy has changed and that the growing amount of available information is a challenge for both them and their students. For students, "technology immersion," one said, is "not necessarily technology sophistication." Others summed up their high expectations for liaison librarians and libraries thusly: that "librarians can share their secrets" and "we expect the library to keep up so that we can keep up."

Predictably, members of the faculty play a more passive role in relationship building. They more readily used the term "organic" when referring to their relationship-building approaches with their liaison librarians. They added that when they seek a librarian's input, they do so for "course-specific," "mutual interest," or "project-specific interactions." Like the liaison librarians, they rely on word of mouth from colleagues, casual encounters, or both to make connections when and where information or services are needed. Many referred to specific programs historically offered by the libraries, such as a grant awarded to integrate information literacy concepts into courses. These grants sought to design,

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incentivize, and enhance library/faculty partnerships and assess their effectiveness. At times, newer faculty inherited an established relationship with a liaison librarian based on specific course interactions.

In their attempt to build partnerships with librarians, faculty experienced successful interactions when approaching librarians with information-specific inquiries related to topics such as peer review, popular versus trade journals, database selection, and search-

ing. One faculty member indicated that his librarian has a good understanding of student and teacher needs and is now "part of the program." Others leveraged the librarian's subject expertise for tailored class instruction. Finally, one faculty member simply said, "I have found the librarians very eager to engage with me in these collaborations."

When asked to provide instances of relationship-building attempts gone awry, most faculty members could not come up with any. Their examples of failure were mostly transactional or systemic, such as an inability to get specific materials. One professor did bring up an instance years ago when there was "no value added" as part of the interaction with his liaison librarian. Overall, this lack of complaints speaks well of the ongoing liaison librarians' engagement efforts.

When prodded to address successful relationship-building outcomes, faculty members largely gauged success in terms of student feedback and attainment. If their partnership with the liaison librarian yielded measurable "progress in students' skills," "student success," or "students developed research skills," then faculty deemed the relationship profitable. Other outputs faculty members considered successful included "more than just getting an answer," "interaction will lead to more questions or broader perspective," "the librarian is (genuinely) interested in the work I'm doing," and "the possibility of partnering with librarians on scholarly output is another marker."

In the academic setting, the variety of disciplines and methodologies demands gradual yet continual adjustment, difficult compromises, and ongoing negotiations.

Finally, many of the faculty interviewed conceded that their liaison librarians were more engaged in teaching efforts. Librarians, one faculty member pointed out, "are not being used for personal research but for teaching activities." She was impressed by "their availability, knowledge, willingness to be present, to offer support, reliability, and the enthusiasm they expressed." It all "yielded much more meaningful engagement for her and her graduate students." This type of partnership, another faculty member indicated, is here to stay; "collaboration," he said, "is now a necessity."

Conclusion

From the comments and observations gathered through this study, it became clear that librarians at The Ohio State University are making a genuine effort at engaging their constituencies in a meaningful and productive way. They communicate, listen, participate, gain their faculty's trust, and invest in faculty successes. The beneficiaries of these efforts tend to agree.

Relationship building is a critical leadership skill. While it is intuitive to some, our research shows that it takes work and can be challenging because each relationship is unique and situational. In the academic setting, the variety of disciplines and methodologies demands gradual yet continual adjustment, difficult compromises, and ongoing negotiations. Relationship building is, however, a skill that can be developed.

Good relationship building represents a constellation of traits, values, and skills. Chief among them are patience (relationships take time), knowledge (know your con-

stituency and your discipline), follow-through (go the extra mile), sincerity (treat every interaction as your most important), responsiveness (acknowledge all requests and respond promptly), and finally, individuality (customization for classes or interactions is essential). Liaison librarians seeking to effectively and profitably engage their students and faculty through meaningful relations will be well-served by identifying their own cluster of traits, values, and skills and developing a sensible strategy to build and nurture them. By focusing on developing relationship skills, liaison librarians can better highlight the crucial roles they play in supporting the academic and research missions of the universities they serve.

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Appendix

Librarian Questions

1. Do you purposely and systematically set out to build relationships with faculty members?
2. What are your relationship-building strategies?
3. Please describe a recent interaction with a faculty member that went particularly well. What made it a success in your mind? How did you shape the conversation?
4. Please describe a recent interaction that went less well. What were the attributes that made it less successful?
5. What has changed in your work as a liaison since you started in libraries?
6. How do you know you're successful when reaching out to your departmental faculty?

Faculty Questions

1. Do you purposely and systematically set out to build relationships with librarians? What are your relationship-building strategies?
2. Please describe a recent interaction with a librarian that went particularly well. What made this a success in your mind? How did you shape the conversation?
3. Please describe a recent interaction that went less well. What were the attributes that made it less successful?
4. What has changed in your work as a faculty member since you started in academia?
5. How do you know you're successful when reaching out to your librarian?
6. Have you experienced a change in your relationship with librarian/Do you find librarians more engaged with you in the research process?

Notes

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