

Title: *Dangerous liaisons? Defining the Faculty Liaison Librarian service model, its effectiveness and sustainability.*

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## Abstract

### **Purpose**

Many university libraries are adopting a Faculty Liaison Librarian structure as an integral part of their organization and service delivery model. This paper examines, in a pragmatic way, the variations in the definition of the role of the Faculty Liaison Librarian, the expectations of those librarians, their library managers and their clients and the impact of environmental factors. The Faculty liaison librarian role is not entirely new, evolving from the traditional subject librarian and university special/branch library role. However the emerging role is characterised by a more outward-looking perspective and complexity, emphasizing stronger involvement and partnership with the faculty and direct engagement in the University's teaching and research programs.

### **Methodology/approach**

Following a review of the literature and other sources on the rationale and role of library liaison, the current developments, drivers and expectations are discussed.

### **Findings**

Dynamic external and internal environments of universities are driving the evolution of library liaison, so the role description is still fluid. However the breadth and weight of expectations is now such that the effectiveness and sustainability of the role has to be addressed.

### **Practical implications**

While a dynamic, broader and more intensive role for the Faculty Liaison Librarian is emerging, more thinking is needed about the extent of that role and its sustainability. What, for example, are the priorities for the Faculty Liaison Librarian? What traditional activities can and may have to be abandoned? These considerations are necessary not only to guide the librarians but to help define the attributes and skills required for the position and to determine the institutional support it requires.

### **Originality/value**

Contemporary critique of this well established but diverse library service.

### **Keywords**

Academic liaison; Faculty liaison; liaison librarians; academic partnerships

## **Paper type**

General review

## INTRODUCTION

Faced with multiple challenges to their historical role as the major provider of information resources in a university, mostly based on the pervasiveness of digital technology, university libraries are attempting to redefine their core activities to maintain their relevance. New activities and services include providing quality learning spaces, creating metadata, virtual reference services, information literacy, selecting and managing resource licences, collecting and digitizing archival materials, and maintaining digital repositories. (Campbell, 2006.) However, as Campbell opinions (p. 20), as a group these activities do not amount to a fundamental purpose for the academic library. To define a role for the present and future, one broad approach for university libraries is to engage more closely with the University's core activities of research and teaching. While the mission of the University library has always been to support the work of the university, this was often a passive mission, in particular to build collections which would be used in teaching and research. The mission was something like the hope expressed in the popular baseball movie "Field of Dreams": "build it and they will come." Even if collections and facilities are built in close collaboration with teachers and researchers, there is now no guarantee that they will come. The alternatives for sourcing information are now readily available. Realising this, university libraries are seeking to embed their activities within academic programs, rather than just supporting or aligning with them. A key strategy to accomplish this has been promotion of the role of liaison of library staff with academic staff, frequently through designating some librarians as "Faculty Liaison Librarians" whose primary task is to liaise with faculties, colleges or academic departments.

## EVOLUTION

The Faculty liaison librarian role is not entirely new, evolving from the traditional subject librarian and university special/branch library role, but is now recognised as a major and even essential activity. Almost 30 years ago a short, seminal article by Laurence Miller set out the challenges even then facing academic libraries as the primary information providers and suggested that this necessitated the marketing of library services and closer integration of these with academic programs (Miller, 1977). The author defined liaison work as "a formal, structured activity in which professional library staff systematically meet with teaching faculty to discuss stratagems for directly supporting their instructional needs and those of their students." This formal activity was distinguished from the occasional contacts which are common between libraries and faculty (Miller, 1977, p. 213).

Already by the late 1980's a quite broad and mature view of liaison work is evident, with the idea of a partnership with faculty and a proactive library stand informing a liaison program. "Assigning librarians to work with specific departments in a systematic and structured way creates a channel of communication that allows the faculty's needs to be understood by the library and the library to be interpreted to the faculty", and a very wide range of activities is included in a liaison program: "Services performed by a liaison or subject specialist typically include establishing contact with user groups; communicating information about library policies and programs; eliciting information about curricula changes; selecting materials and collection development; instructing in library use; providing current awareness, reference, and bibliographic services; serving as a library ombudsman for users; and bringing user perspectives to the technical services departments." (Sehlomon, 1989, p. 496)

Despite this broad conception of liaison work, in the subsequent literature two dominant strands of liaison are evident. The first relates liaison work closely to collection development. So, for example, in the *Guidelines for Liaison Work* issued by the Reference and Adult Services Division of the American Library Association in 1992, liaison work is defined as "the relationship, formal and informal, that librarians (in this instance, librarians with multiple responsibilities) develop with the library's clientele for the specific purpose of seeking input regarding the selection of materials." (RASD, 1992) This emphasis on collection development appears even in an article which embraces the broader definition of liaison work (Suresh, Ryans and Zhang, 1995, p. 12), although in an accompanying article the same authors do note the missed opportunity for library liaisons to assist faculty and students with research (Ryans, Suresh and Zhang, 1995). The importance still given to collection development is evident in a recent description of the liaison program at the University of Hong Kong, though other significant duties are identified: "collection building; research consultation; instruction on subject-specific library resources; integrating library materials into teaching and learning resources; promoting library services; and fostering closer collection with faculty." (Chan, 2005, p.105)

The other major strand in liaison work associates liaison with information services, in particular the educative role of librarians. Information literacy, especially as a partnership between library and academic staff, is frequently seen as the major area for collaboration between the two, effectively displacing collection development. The rise of information literacy as a major activity for the liaison librarian is reflected in the range and type of articles that have been published in recent years about the liaison role. The articles frequently detail collaborative efforts with academic staff or look to inform librarians as to how they can attract academic staff into collaborative relationships.

## CURRENT PRACTICE

To look at the current practices of liaison, it was planned to look systematically at the websites of Australian university libraries, their newsletters and other publications to see how they portray and articulate liaison work to their clients and their own library staff. However this exercise, especially in relation to websites, quickly revealed not just the diversity in promotion of liaison activities but, disappointingly, an overall lack of promotion. Although several good examples exist, where liaison is identified and promoted on the library's homepage, in most cases it is difficult to find mention of liaison much less what is being offered. It would therefore be difficult for academic staff to find out about services offered, especially if they are not familiar with the significance of local library job titles. Apart from "Faculty Liaison Librarian" and "Liaison Librarian", these positions are also sometimes titled "Outreach Librarian" or "Contact Librarian" and possibly other variations. Confusingly, in some cases a "Faculty Liaison" can also be a member of the academic staff who liaises on behalf of the faculty with the Library. However, the naming of the liaison position is probably not as important as the definition and promotion of the role and the services which are offered. While lists of the types of assistance and services provided are sometime given on library websites, it is difficult to judge the extent or depth of this available assistance as the number of staff listed as "liaisons", even in similar sized universities, may vary considerably, for example, in a large university from more than 50 to just 6.

From practical examples in the literature and libraries' attempts to articulate liaison work, it is clear that "liaison" is extremely diverse and not a simple or consistent activity or approach. While some formal programs with plans, outcomes and evaluation, are described, liaison is frequently an activity, in the broadest sense communicating with academic staff, carried on, more or less intensively, alongside very traditional university library activities. As such it could appear too insubstantial to be the linchpin or a critical library activity, despite recognition in general terms of its importance. Frank and others (2001) also argued persuasively that traditional liaison programs were too passive and lack impact. "Current programs are too insular and library-focussed rather than client- and institute-focussed. The outgrowth of subject specialists in academic libraries to facilitate collection development and handle complex subject-base research is a step in the right direction, but the changing nature of scholarly communication and inquiry requires a more dynamic, communicative, and customized approach. ...Academic libraries must promote information consulting that is dynamic, proactive and adds value to the organization. "(Frank and others, 2001, p. 90)

There is evidence that this type of criticism is being addressed, and that the emerging role of a Faculty Liaison Librarian, while still not fully defined, is now characterised by a more outward-looking perspective and complexity, emphasizing stronger engagement and partnership with the faculty and direct engagement in the University's teaching and research programs. Dynamic external and internal environments of universities are driving its evolution, so the role description is still fluid. Key areas of activity include managing the

relationship of the library with a faculty, information literacy programs, collection development in the broadest sense, so as to include digital resources, participation in faculty planning for teaching and research and involvement in co-operative projects with academic and other non-library staff.

### NEW ENVIRONMENT

Clearly this is a time of flux in the definition of what the faculty liaison librarian role can and should encompass. Subject specialists have had to evolve their role on more than one occasion, and now it appears to be the time to do this again, “finding ways to evolve and survive” (McAbbe and Graham, 2005, p. 20). Changes in the environment, both internal and external to the library and the institutions they serve, are providing challenges on a new scale for academic libraries. The many challenges that libraries face have been documented extensively in the literature: the web and the multiplicity of online information resources for a client to choose from; the changing nature of academic research and the increasing multidisciplinary nature of discourse; the increasing technical sophistication of the clients that allows them to access information in different formats, reuse for new products and knowledge and not to be tied to the physical space of the library; the increasing need of academic institutions to capture more effectively their research output and make it available to a wider audience. All of these are providing libraries with the impetus to look for new ways to meet the demands of their clients.

One of the main responses has been through collection development, providing online access to a vast array of information through databases, electronic journals (current and backsets) and ebooks. This response has been highly appreciated by clients but it has also changed the nature of the relationship with them as it has reduced their need to access the physical space of the library and reduced the opportunity for contact between them and liaison librarians. The complexity of the information environment has, however, allowed liaison librarians to grasp the function of information literacy as one of the ways to re-integrate themselves with the faculties and their clients. Many academic libraries have promoted this educative task as the major part of the liaison librarians’ job.

Developments in Australia such as the Research Quality Framework, a new government framework to assess and boost the production of high quality and high impact research, are also providing opportunities for new ways to connect to the faculties and other administrative units within the universities. With public research funding being tied more explicitly to the perceived quality of research output, libraries can offer their expertise with the structuring of information, technical systems and metadata to build institutional repositories and provide wider access and increased visibility and exposure for the research output of the organization. This change has also meant new responsibilities for liaison librarians: promotion of the repositories and the possibilities they can offer to their clientele, negotiation around content and formats, discussion of technical issues, liaison with other library personnel or

assisting clients with tracking of their citations as evidence of their research productivity and its impact. Another area of involvement is assisting researchers with preparing research grant applications, especially where there may now be requirements for applicants to address up-front issues around the capture, storage and dissemination of the research resulting from the grant funding. This has the potential to see liaison librarians more involved from the beginning of the research process.

An internal driver for change is the way in which universities are changing their own funding models, to place greater emphasis on the performance outcomes that must be achieved. Strategic operating plans with key performance areas and indicators are becoming the norm for most institutions and this has impacted on libraries and their strategic plans. Many of these key areas, such as research and learning, involve the liaison librarians as a vital player in the achievement of the outcomes. The imperative to align library plans with university plans is driving academic libraries to re-evaluate their relationship to their institutions, seeking new ways to make themselves increasingly relevant and to be perceived as active participants in the work of the organization. One strategy is to utilise the Faculty Liaison Librarian as the spearhead, one of the frontline or “shock” troops, to build and manage the library’s relationship with their client faculties. While the liaison librarians have traditionally undertaken this “go-between” role, there appears to be greater expectations by library management that this engagement with the client groups should intensify and even move to a higher level, with a stronger outward focus and participation of the Faculty Liaison Librarian as an equal professional partner in the research, teaching and learning functions.

### STRATEGIC FIT

However, for this intensification to be successful there need to be crucial conversations taking place in libraries. If conversations are the communication in organizations that establishes the commitments (Flores and Ludlow, 1980, p. 95-96), then there need to be conversations about the future development of the liaison librarian role. At a time of rapid change and response, there is the risk of a gap between the expectations of management and champions of the intensified role and the liaison librarians themselves. The language of the leadership is of partnership, innovation, collaboration and closer relationships across the institution. Some signalling of a change in management thinking about the role of liaison may be seen where libraries have restructured their information and research services, or have changed some responsibilities of their liaison librarians, such as using other staff for frontline reference services and generic teaching programs. On the other hand, as noted above, there is a lack of prominence given on library websites, at least in Australia, to liaison librarians and their role. If there is a real desire for the liaison librarians to operate at a higher level, then how the library as a whole is organized, and how the librarians are marketed and the language used, needs to be raised.

For the Faculty Liaison Librarian the change is experienced in the day to day activity, involving reference work, teaching, collection development (both print and electronic), liaison and communication with client groups, creation of

resources and guides, one to one consultations, participation in teams, committees and working groups, and additional project work (Pinfield, 2001, p. 3). For many this expanded role would be seen as involving the bolting on of additional tasks to their existing work, with little or nothing being removed or transferred to other library staff. If the load is identified as being heavy already, then the idea of being more visible and available in the faculties and taking on more of a “research consultant” type role will be an additional burden. In practice, there is the risk that given a multitude of expectations an individual’s effort will be put into those particular activities in which she or he gets benefit, and a lessening of effort in those areas from which they get least satisfaction. This could then defeat or at least shift the effect intended.

To address possible differences in perception of the role of liaison librarians and the priorities for their part in achieving the library’s mission, the strategic intention of the library must come into play. While an organization can develop a strategic plan that has clear goals, it needs to then look to the fit between what it wants to achieve and how its resources are deployed to do this (Hamel and Prahalad, 1993, p. 77). Given that libraries are now operating in competitive environments and are seeking to redefine how core competencies can be better used to create relevance to their institutions, then this strategic fit also has a stretch quality to it that must involve change and risk. The strategic thinking of the library needs to address how it is allocating its resources. If liaison librarians are seen as crucial, then how are the library’s resources being leveraged to create the most favourable conditions for these librarians to attain the desired partnerships and to have the time to be innovative and core to the faculty activities? There needs to be a strategic focal point where there is convergence of the library’s thinking about the liaison role and the efforts of the library to maximize the potential success of the librarians (Hamel and Prahalad, 1993, p. 79). The expansion of the liaison librarians’ role cannot be left to chance or to the expectation it will just happen through natural growth. This is why the conversations need to take place and knowledge management systems need to be established to better utilize the insights gained through the experience and contacts of the liaison librarians as they work towards realizing these new relationships (Hamel and Prahalad, 1993, p. 80).

## PARTNERSHIPS

Another aspect to this change in emphasis for liaison librarians is the need to be innovative and to develop their capabilities to operate in a new way with academic partners and clients. Innovation and reorientation will not happen if expected simply to be integrated into existing ways of working. So, for example, special projects and working on grant teams with academic and other professional staff frequently does not happen unless staff can be released from their daily duties. Further, if there are to be closer partnerships with academic and other staff and library involvement is to become a natural part of the way they work, then library staff must be thinking about innovation and “in the public sector must be about facilitating the work of our primary constituents in ways that are new and useful *to them*” (Deiss, 2004, p.19). This means opening up practices to try different things, to take risks and to

experiment. The culture of an established library may work against this as it relies on practices it is comfortable with and that have worked for it in the past (Deiss, 2004, p. 23). For innovation to happen there must be strong strategy behind it, and there needs to be time to think, to plan and not just cope.

In reorienting liaison, with rhetoric about building partnerships, embedding librarians in the work of the faculties and generally raising the library profile and relevance within the University, it would be useful and constructive to know if this is what potential partners and clients want. While librarians might want to redefine themselves it may be the traditional ideas about the purpose of libraries, even if they are cast in new ways through technology, that still appeal to these groups.

Many academic libraries execute standard client satisfaction surveys to seek client input on how they can improve services, collections and resources and determine what is important to the clients. These surveys are useful to obtain first hand information on how well the library is achieving its mission and to show any improvement over time in performance. However they tend to measure satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with tangible items. While these surveys give an indication of what the clients value by way of their preferences, they are not so useful for establishing the intangibles around what the clients see as being the key operations they expect from the library. So how can it be established in fact what the clients want from a liaison program? Do they know what they want anyway?

This is where the published professional literature is poor. There are very few articles on how academic staff view liaison librarians and their work; nor is there a lot of literature to establish that academics want to work with their libraries. One of the most useful articles involved a study of the perceptions of the faculty at Texas A&M about their newly instituted liaison program. While it is a small study it does raise some interesting points, such as that only a small number of the faculty, when encountering problems with their research, turn to the library for assistance, and faculty saw the most important role being the liaison librarians' updating them on services available and the ordering of materials and books (Zhang, 2000). Clearly it would be profitable for librarians to do more research into what academic faculty want, to better inform how the partnership roles can develop. Consideration has to be given as to how ready the clients are for change in the relationship with them, and what benefits they may expect to come from it. (Deiss, 2004, p. 21). This has implications for communicating and marketing services to them. Much will be affected by the "academic level, discipline and attitude of the individual academics." (Dale, 2006, p. 24)

## SUSTAINABILITY

As has been described, dynamic external and internal environments of universities are driving the evolution of library liaison, so the role description is still fluid. Liaison, in its diverse forms, is recognized as crucial. However the breadth and weight of expectations is now such that the effectiveness and sustainability of the role has to be addressed. A dramatic increase in the take-



up of library services is manageable when traditional and in particular automated services are involved. However given the personal nature of liaison work and its demands on the individual librarian, expansion and intensification of the work raises questions about its sustainability. Is it currently sustainable because demand is relatively low and therefore manageable? Is this so because most take-up of services is based on the individual academic's knowledge of what the library can offer and their desire to make use of it? Already the pressure on library staff produced, for example, by the success in instigating information literacy programs can be substantial.

Another aspect of sustainability and effectiveness is the availability and development of new skills and attributes necessary to the intensified liaison role. Many liaison librarians bring to their jobs a strong functional knowledge through their qualifications and experience. This may be enhanced with their subject knowledge, but if there is to be true engagement with academic staff then how successful this will be may rely on much wider skill and attribute sets for librarians (Dale, 2006, p. 22). The types of skills and attributes which are relevant to the enhanced liaison role would include the following :

- Confidence
- Communication and presentation skills of a high order
- Risk taking
- Flexibility and comfort with ambiguity
- Networking skills, being able to build coalitions and cultivation of clients and supporters
- Relationship or "account management" skills
- Negotiation, persuasion and influencing skills
- Reflection on practice and ability to learn/play
- Project management skills
- Promotion and marketing skills
- High level technical knowledge – not only for any production/publishing work but to be able to facilitate or mediate between parties to achieve outcomes

While aspects of these have been required in the past, the relation of these to traditional library skills requires consideration in selecting staff for liaison work as well as for planning staff development for those already engaged in or ambitious for liaison work.

## CONCLUSION

While a dynamic, broader and more intensive role for the Faculty Liaison Librarian is emerging, more thinking is needed about the extent of that role and its sustainability. What, for example, are the priorities for the Faculty Liaison Librarian? What traditional activities can and may have to be abandoned? These considerations are necessary not only to guide the librarians but to help define the attributes and skills required for the position and to determine the institutional support it requires.

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