

*the way I see it*

Meagan Lacy

# The virtues of a committed dilettante

## Embracing nonexpert expertise

I knew when I decided to pack my bags and move across the country to begin my career as an academic librarian that I would meet some challenges. Learning campus culture, navigating organizational charts, and building relationships with my co-workers and departments would all be a part of my initiation. Less clear was how I was going to define my role as a library liaison when I lacked subject knowledge in some of my assigned areas.

As a liaison to Spanish Languages and Literature, I met the position description's "reading and writing ability" requirement, but I hardly possessed expertise. *No worries*, I thought. *I am a librarian: I don't have to know everything; I just need to know where to find it.*

Librarians with subject knowledge possess an obvious advantage: a deep understanding of the scholarship and research process in their area enables them to better serve their academic users and gain credibility with teaching faculty. But, many librarians are assigned subjects outside of their expertise. What can they do to ensure good service to their departments?

The liaison's role will depend on faculty information needs, and liaising relies on the librarian's ability to ferret out these needs and respond to them. The imperative task is to gain expert knowledge about the department, not the discipline, and apply that knowledge to make oneself an indispensable part of it.

Shifting my focus from expertise to relationships, I have spent the past year experimenting and improving on ways to better connect faculty and students with

the library. Through this strategy I have learned this much: Success is had not by posturing as an expert, but by adding value and convenience to the work students and faculty do and by effectively communicating—*promoting*—that value. The following practices are the way I see liaisons making the best of their potential as information professionals.

1. *Sell*. Like any good salesman, begin by targeting your best prospects. Determine who is most likely to benefit from the library's collections and services. When you meet your students and faculty face-to-face, you can better anticipate their needs—perhaps identifying some that they weren't even aware that they had—and demonstrate how the library can offer solutions. Start by finding out what faculty are teaching and researching. Imagine what it is like to be a student: read course descriptions and note core requirements, being mindful of their sequence. Then, equipped with this information, commence with the shameless self-promotion. No flashy marketing tools are necessary: knocking on doors and handing out fliers are effective even in the era of Web 2.0. The point is to make sure faculty see your face. In fact, hand out a flier with your face on it. Go to faculty meetings (if you can). Attend faculty lectures or events. To capture the attention of my faculty, I offered to buy each of them a cup of coffee (passing out "coupons" cobbled together in minutes with Word and a Flickr image) in exchange for a conversation about their re-

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search interests and their students. Through this outreach, I was able to introduce myself to most of the department. As a result, I have received regular invitations to speak in their classrooms and to attend their events.

2. *Find new opportunities.* Assess your library's strengths and determine whether you can offer any new services to your students and faculty. For example, digitization projects are a major focus at the university library, so I invited faculty to participate in our institutional repository, offering to coordinate with the digital libraries team and to obtain the necessary permissions to deposit their work on their behalf. Promoting this service offered me the added opportunity to educate faculty about institutional repositories, open access, copyright issues, and copyright negotiation. It also helped me to redefine their expectations of librarians and academic libraries.

3. *Understand your collection.* In addition to writing a collection policy, familiarize yourself with selection tools. For Spanish I look at *Criticas Reviews* and *America Reads Spanish*, both online, and I subscribe to RSS feeds of book reviews from journals my faculty read (like *Hispania*). I also browse the humanities section of *HLAS Web*. These are invaluable collection tools for the non-subject expert since they can acquaint you very quickly with major figures and current research interests.

4. *Understand the publishing industry.* Find out the peculiarities of publication in your discipline. In Latin America, it's a prickly business. Not surprisingly, large media conglomerates dominate Spanish-language publishing. However, compared to the United States, print runs are small (around 4,000 copies). Distribution in Latin America is highly segmented and intra-continental distribution is almost nonexistent. In my case, setting up approval plans became

imperative. Not only does a vendor employ knowledgeable bibliographers who will select titles based on my profile, but the vendor also obtains these materials in a timely manner so I can get them on the library's shelves before they go out of print.

5. *Associate.* Look for professional organizations that can help you fill gaps in your knowledge. For example, the primary association for academic librarians specializing in Spanish and Latin American Studies collections is the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM). Its Web site and electronic list flows with helpful information—providing links to scholarly resources, major vendors, and news—and their annual conference rains with learning opportunities, including workshops specifically tailored to the non-specialist. For those who do not have the time or money to join professional organizations, another option is

to join an online community. For example, La Cuna is a social networking site devoted to mentoring Latin American and Iberian librarians.

6. *Continue your education.* Take advantage of being on a college campus and audit a course once a semester. Or work on another degree. Many tenure track positions are contingent upon applicants earning a second master's degree in their liaison area. Even if you don't go for a degree, you will still fashion some subject knowledge and obtain perspective on how your faculty teach and what they are teaching, and you will be better able to anticipate your faculty and students' research needs in the future.

Because departments are in a constant state of flux, adding value and convenience to the work students and faculty do will affect the liaison's indispensableness far more than any depth of subject expertise. ♪

### Six ways to become an indispensable liaison

1. Sell.
2. Find new opportunities.
3. Understand your collection.
4. Understand the publishing industry.
5. Associate.
6. Continue your education.