



High Touch Library Services: Reaching Faculty and Students Across Campus through Liaisons

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we will provide a definition of academic library liaison work, explain its benefits to patrons as well as college and university libraries, discuss the variety of activities that academic library liaison work entails and review successful methods for becoming effective academic library liaisons. The authors' goal of this research is to reaffirm perceptions and practices of colleagues currently serving as library liaisons on their campuses and to provide an introductory guide for those just entering the field of academic librarianship. This paper includes the results of a survey conducted by Montana State University Libraries-Bozeman in the fall of 2008. The survey was sent to all faculty in the departments of Native American Studies and University Studies. In addition to these departments the survey was also sent to a small number of select faculty from other departments including Sociology and Education.

The purpose of the survey was to determine the awareness and effectiveness of Montana State University Libraries' established liaison program; an additional intent of the study was to identify areas in need of improvement as well as any new services desired by the libraries' patrons. The participants' responses were kept anonymous and the survey consisted of 15 multiple

choice questions with three individual comment fields. Participants were required to answer 12-13 of the 15 questions based on their prior knowledge of instruction and reference services offered by the libraries. The authors used Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) and distributed the survey link through non-library departmental staff, via the campus email service.

KEYWORDS: Information Literacy, Library Liaisons, Outreach, Academic Libraries, Collection Development, Assessment, Library Instruction, Bibliographic Instruction

Defining Liaison Work in an Academic Library

The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) provides us with definitions of "liaison work in managing collections and services" based on five points (RUSA, 2001).

1. *Liaison work is the process by which librarians involve the library's clientele in the assessment and satisfaction of collection needs.*
2. *Liaison work includes identifying user needs, evaluating existing collections, removing extraneous materials, and locating resources that will enhance the collections.*

3. *Liaison work enables the library to communicate its collection policies, services and needs to its clientele and to enhance the library's public relations.*

4. *Liaison work enables the library's clientele to communicate its library needs and preferences to the library staff and governing body.*

5. *Librarians with collection development responsibilities have various titles, including acquisitions librarians, bibliographers, collection development librarians, liaisons, selectors, and subject specialists.*

The first point refers to how we as academic librarians involve "clientele" in the collection development process. For academic librarians our clientele can be defined largely as our faculty and students. Point two mentions several of the key areas of involvement with faculty and students through liaison work. Identifying the user's needs so we can best serve those needs is the overall primary goal of liaison work. This point also clarifies the key role that our users should play in weeding projects and the locating of materials, especially unique or field specific materials. Points three and four discuss the role of communication with constituencies as an integral component of our work, stressing the importance of communicating the needs of faculty from across campus to the library, as well as conveying library policies, information about services, etc., to library patrons. Point five clarifies, mainly for librarians, that reference and collection development librarians are not the only ones who should or do serve as departmental liaisons.

The RUSA definition of liaison work covers the core areas and clarifies the wider role of liaison work, in particular with regard to collection development. The RUSA guidelines were originally written in 1992 and revised in 2001. Since that time electronic delivery of information and services has grown. This increase in services offered to users at a distance provides new and expanding roles for academic library liaisons. With the traditional ways of delivering information quickly fading and the clear movement toward delivering information and services at a distance, the role we as academic library liaisons play is changing. In the 21st century we need to compete with Google and the desire for instant information, good or bad, that it represents. As the amount of information available and the number of services libraries offer electronically increases, there has been a corresponding decrease in the need, from our patrons' point of view, to walk through the doors of our libraries. Now more than ever we need to meet our patrons where they work in their departments, offices, dorms and classrooms. While the proliferation of the internet presents us with competition for meeting users' information needs, it also presents us with an efficient and effective avenue for marketing our services, that is, via email. Targeted emails to our liaison faculty offers us a vehicle for serving their needs practically anytime, anywhere while fulfilling our liaison responsibilities through a timely and effective means.

Due to some of the changes in the type of work academic library liaisons do, in particular with regard to distance services, we are forced to alter our definition of liaison work. In 2009, an academic librarian serving as a liaison needs to be a promoter, marketer and ambassador for the library. They need to make faculty and students aware of the services their libraries offer and materials available to them. They need to become partners with their liaison departments in teaching information literacy skills to students and faculty and insure that all areas of collection development and maintenance take into account the needs of their liaison departments.

A liaison should be active in promoting library services and collections. By actively promoting our services and collections we increase our number of users and overall use of our libraries. Being a marketer for the library essentially means selling our resources and services to our patrons and demonstrating why our resources are better, showing them how we can help them and their students to become better researchers through the reference and instruction services we offer. As librarians we know there is a difference between Wikipedia and the Encyclopedia of Mycology, and it is our responsibility to make sure our patrons know it as well. It is also our responsibility to get our patrons to use the academic materials that we acquire to support their disciplines, in addition to Web resources such as Wikipedia. We can have the greatest services and resources in the world available but if our patrons are not using them then they are worth naught.

In addition to selling our services and resources, an important part of being a marketer is determining our patrons' needs. Determining what our patrons want and actively providing them with information on what we have available to help fulfill their information needs is likely the most important role we play as academic library liaisons. Continual contact and communication with our patrons provides us with a channel for user feedback and assessment that is invaluable.

Being an ambassador for the library simply means being involved in liaison departments' activities. Attending faculty meetings, playing a role in accreditation and supporting and attending liaison department events can help form relationships with faculty, administrators and students that have direct benefits for the library. The RUSA guidelines for liaison work in academic libraries suggest librarian participation in campus organizations and the monitoring of campus media to learn about upcoming events involving liaison departments (RUSA, 2001). Stoddart and his fellow authors recommend a multitude of other means for fostering communication with your liaison departments, including offering brown bag workshops or informal lunches with faculty, enlisting the help of an already established faculty advocate within a liaison department to assist you in promoting your

liaison services, hosting an open house at the library, meeting potential faculty during their campus interviews and giving them a tour of the library, getting to know the administrative assistants in your liaison departments since they serve as the communication centers of their departments, and many other suggestions (2006).

What are the benefit of liaison work to our patrons and our libraries?

The benefits of liaison activities for everyone involved are clear. The greatest benefit for our patrons is a better understanding of the services and resources available to them through the library and ultimately the fulfillment of their information needs. Knowing about available resources is a vital part of research. Patrons also gain a trusted contact in the library and a direct connection for offering feedback and assessment of library holdings and services. In having a library liaison, faculty members gain a partner in their research. Liaisons can assist faculty with purchase requests, offer reference assistance with both faculty and student research queries and provide library instruction to their classes.

The instruction services that we as library liaisons offer can make students more effective researchers and therefore more likely to succeed in their college careers. It can also help them become better lifelong learners. Library instruction is a positive involvement for everyone. The faculty gain by having more competent researchers in their classes, students acquire research skills that will provide direct benefits throughout their college careers and beyond, and library liaisons gain by having real face-time with students and the ability to shed light on the library's role in their education. We live in a world where finding enough information is no longer an issue. Today the issue is finding good, relevant and trusted information. Information literacy skills are essential to a student succeeding in higher education. As Vicki Feast states in her 2003 article titled *Integration of information literacy skills into business courses* "As knowledge becomes outdated very quickly, students need information literacy skills to access, understand and use the current knowledge of their discipline area."

The personal contact, or face-time, that results from in-class library instruction can have long-term benefits. Having the opportunity to meet with a class of students in any discipline gives us an opportunity to dispel any stereotypical views of librarians held by our students. We can become a familiar and approachable face for them, making it easier for them to ask for assistance with their research. As liaisons one of the vital aspects of providing instruction is making sure they see us as a resource. We must make certain that the students we reach know, in no uncertain terms, that our job is to serve their research needs. They may not walk away from the library instruction session with the ability to recall all they were shown but if they know who they can ask for assistance

then the instruction session was a success. Students are more comfortable approaching someone they are familiar with and in-class instruction can provide them with a friendly face in the library that they can seek out when they need help with their research.

Our future is reflected in our students' use of and need for libraries. They are not only our largest patron group today but will become our alumni and faculty in the not so distant future. We need to reach students, and their instructors offer us the best bridge for doing so. Instructional faculty have always had connections with students that librarians can only envy. Reaching our faculty through our liaison work increases our chances of reaching their students. Faculty who are users and proponents of the library will be more likely to create students who are also users and proponents of the library and all it has to offer.

The list of benefits for the library gained from a liaison program is long. First and foremost, we gain a great deal in merely having established working relationships with a large group of our patrons. That relationship serves several functions and is very much a cyclical relationship. The more we know about our patrons' needs the better we are able to serve those needs. The better service received by faculty the more likely they are to use the libraries resources and require that their students do the same. As prior researchers have stated, established contact with faculty can contribute to changes in the perceptions of the library as a book warehouse to that of the prime information agency for the university (Schloman, Lilly & Hu, 1989). Furthermore, successful working relationships with faculty allow librarians to be recognized as partners in the pursuit of teaching and learning, the central mission of the university.

An immediate impact of effective liaison work is an increased value for expenditures. Budgets for library collections and services are limited, and it is vital that monies are spent wisely. Knowing what our patrons need helps us make the most impact and get the best value per dollar spent. As we align our collection development more closely with the needs of our users we increase use of those resources, therefore increasing their value. With an increase in use comes an increase in patron contacts, both physical and virtual, with the library. Our gate counts, circulation numbers and value per dollar spent increase. Ultimately, recognition of the value of librarians also increases.

Liaison work can also impact how we spend our workdays. Our time can be used more effectively as we increase our understanding of the service needs of our patrons. If our patrons don't use a service, through our liaison contacts we can determine why not and either discontinue or improve the service so it is used. Knowing which services are valued or desired by our patrons helps us make the best use of our time and increases our



effectiveness and thus our value to our patrons.

Through being effective liaisons we increase the value of the library to our patrons and ultimately increase institutional support for the library. Our liaison relationships can help create strong advocates for libraries outside of the library's walls. Our patrons can be our greatest allies in advocating for increased budgets, additional staffing, new buildings, etc. Liaison work provides us with opportunities to increase the library's base of support and by doing so help insure our continued place in higher education.

One obstacle to library instruction, one of the core components of our liaison offerings, is time. Some faculty who are interested in and recognize the value of library instruction simply cannot afford to give up a single class period for the purpose of library instruction because it would mean that they would lose a day of conveying course content to students. A successful compromise that we as library liaisons can offer is to suggest that the faculty member either require that students attend a library instruction or research consultation session outside of class with the library liaison. This compromise would require that the liaison offer several possible meeting times outside of the regularly scheduled class in order to accommodate diverse student schedules. In the event that the faculty member chooses not to require an outside library session, the liaison can encourage the faculty member to offer extra credit to students who attend a library session outside of the class with a library liaison. A creative and successful liaison needs to continually explore alternative means for providing outreach and serving the needs of our clientele.

Requirements of an Academic Library Liaison

The main requirement of an academic library liaison is a willingness to try. Not all departments are the same and successful methods of reaching Art faculty and students may not work with those in the Chemistry department. Their needs are different and as liaisons we need to adjust our methods of reaching out to these various groups based on their unique needs. Liaisons should be prepared to fail in some of their efforts. Perseverance is necessary; it takes time, patience and tenacity to cultivate effective liaison relationships. And it often requires creativity and high touch, i.e., "showing up" both virtually and in person. To quote Thomas H. Palmer "If at first you don't succeed, Try, try again."

A brief list of approaches that aid in liaison work include:

- Teamwork – Liaisons should approach liaison work as a team effort. We should benefit and learn from our library colleagues by communicating with them about successes and failures in liaison work.

- Awareness – Liaisons should strive to stay current on new faculty in their liaison departments, as well as new programs, courses and department related events.
- Innovative Outreach – Liaisons should be willing to try new approaches for reaching faculty and students.

Having prior knowledge of your liaison department is preferable but it is not a requirement and does not insure the ability to provide effective service. You do not have to be an artist to be an effective liaison to the art department. In a survey conducted by the Texas A&M University Library more than half of the respondents did not think a subject background was necessary to be an effective liaison (Yang, 2000). That said, a librarian working as a liaison should strive to learn more about their liaison department's field, including the specific areas of research department faculty are involved in. The RUSA guidelines call for institutional support to enhance the skills of liaisons unfamiliar with an assigned department's field of study. Liaisons with little or no knowledge of an assigned department should consider taking an introductory course in the department and reviewing the assigned literature and assignments for both introductory and advanced courses. Regardless of our background knowledge, as liaisons we should continually seek to increase our knowledge of our department members' areas of study and research. Library liaisons should also recognize the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of scholarship and think more broadly in their collection development strategies; they need to cooperate more closely with their library colleagues who are liaisons in related disciplines (Glynn and Wu, 2003).

Institutional support that facilitates training opportunities in outreach and instruction for librarians is one of the key components in the success of a liaison program. Many librarians graduate with their library degrees without ever having taken any coursework in instruction, outreach, or marketing. As Richard Stoddart and his co-authors note, "Increasingly, librarians must find creative ways to reach out to faculty through library instruction, customized Web pages, and other types of specialized library services. In this age where Internet search engines compete heavily with libraries as prime information providers, liaison librarians must continually remind their clientele about the advantages of the library and the services they offer. Because of these increased pressures on libraries, new librarians need effective liaison and outreach training in order to be convincing advocates for their library on campus (2006)."

Discussion of MSU Library Liaison Survey Fall 2008

During October 2008, we surveyed 60 instructional faculty in our own liaison departments as well as a few select faculty in our other colleagues' liaison areas. We



received 24 responses, for a 40% response rate. We recognize that there's a certain level of bias in surveying our own liaison faculty, but we found the survey results to be valuable nonetheless. The results confirmed that we are reaching a high percentage of the faculty in our liaison areas and more important, that a majority of them are using our services and resources and overall they're happy with the service they're receiving.

Comments from survey respondents were positive overall. We received one comment from an instructor about a lackluster library instruction session. How can we address constructive criticism about content and delivery of library instruction? One way to improve instruction is to increase interaction with teaching faculty prior to instruction in order to create a comfortable working relationship with that faculty member, resulting in a better team-teaching rapport during the actual library instruction session. Such a positive rapport will allow the faculty member to be more candid during the session, at the point of need, about additional content that should be included during that session. It should be noted that with multiple sections of a course, such as University Studies 101 or Business 201, librarians who are not liaisons to those particular departments are called upon to help with the volume of instruction sessions because one liaison cannot always cover all requests. When a librarian provides instruction for a faculty member outside of their liaison area, there is less likelihood of a strong working relationship, potentially resulting in less satisfaction with the instruction session by that faculty member.

An additional constraint to a successful instruction session where students are allowed time for hands on experience with the various library resources is time. Some instructors have an unrealistic expectation about the amount of content that can be covered successfully in a one-shot 50 or 75 minute session. Successful liaison relationships with faculty can help to diminish these unrealistic expectations and even result in a second or even a third library instruction session in order to cover more content more effectively and include hands on time for students.

The survey results confirm to some degree that our liaison efforts are successful. However, in order to have a clearer picture of the success of our library liaison program across campus, an additional, more widespread survey is called for among all departments and liaison areas. Additionally, individual interviews with faculty and students, both undergraduate and graduate, would yield useful information about the strengths and weaknesses of our liaison efforts. We can't just assume that our liaison efforts are successful based on feeling or anecdotal evidence, such as occasional positive comments from faculty and students. While we may feel that we "know" that our work is successful, continuing to assess our efforts through periodic surveys, interviews, etc., we will be able to provide hard evidence to those to

whom we're accountable: campus administration, library administration, faculty, students, staff and the taxpayers.

Another area for future follow-up is with our distance faculty and students. A growing number of courses and complete programs are being offered online, but we currently lack effective means for assessing how well the library is meeting the information needs of distance students and faculty.

MSU Library Liaison Survey – Fall 2008: Questions and Responses.

1. Did you know that a library liaison has been assigned to your department? (Yes or No)
Number of Respondents: 24
Yes: 87.5%
No: 12.5%
2. Do you know who your department's library liaison is? (Yes or No)
Number of Respondents: 24
Yes: 87.5%
No: 12.5%
3. Have you ever had contact with the library liaison to your department? (Yes or No)
Number of Respondents: 23
Yes: 78.3%
No: 21.7%
4. Did you know your departmental library liaison can provide individual research assistance to both you and your students through our Research Assistance Program (RAP)? (Yes or No)
Number of Respondents: 23
Yes: 73.9%
No: 26.1%
5. Did you know your library liaison can provide Library Instruction sessions to your classes that can be tailored to meet your students' research needs, i.e., for a specific assignment or course project? (Yes or No)
Number of Respondents: 22
Yes: 86.4%
No: 13.6%
6. Did you know that the library has a classroom for providing library instruction for up to 40 students? (Yes or No)
Number of Respondents: 23
Yes: 87%
No: 13%

7. Did you know that your library liaison is available to co-design assignments involving library research? (Yes or No)

Number of Respondents: 23

Yes: 34.8%

No: 65.2%

If you are aware of the Library's Research Assistance Program and Instruction Program please answer questions 8 & 9 and skip 10 & 11. If unaware please skip questions 8 & 9 and answer 10 & 11.

8. If aware of the Library's Research Assistance Program, have you ever used it yourself or encouraged your students to use it? (Yes or No)

Number of Respondents: 18

Yes: 72.2%

No: 27.8%

9. If aware of the Library's Instruction Program, have you used it? (Yes or No)

Number of Respondents: 18

Yes: 72.2%

No: 27.8%

10. If unaware of the RAP program would you use or recommend it now that you know? (Yes or No)

Number of Respondents: 7

Yes: 100%

No: 0%

11. If unaware of the Library Instruction Services offered would you use or recommend them now that you know? (Yes or No)

Number of Respondents: 7

Yes: 100%

No: 0%

12. Has your department's librarian liaison helped you with any of the following? Please check all that apply.

Number of Respondents: 18

- determined if the library holds a book, DVD, journal, etc. 33.3%
- provided Library instruction for one or more of your classes 88.9%
- co-designed or provided feedback on a library research assignment 5.6%
- assisting with requesting an item through InterLibrary Loan 22.2%
- purchased library materials 27.8%
- provided tours of the library for you or your students 38.9%
- assisted you with your research 22.2%

13. If you have used the library's instruction program, i.e., had a librarian teach your students about library resources and services, have you seen any impact on your student work? (Yes or No) (Comment Field)

Number of Respondents: 15

Yes: 73.3%

No: 26.7%

Comments:

- have not had any help in locating library resources and services from a librarian liaison.
- Jim Thull was the librarian that did our class instruction. He was FANTASTIC. Jim gave clear, concise instructions and tailored the class to my freshman students knowing that they would be doing certain assignments that would require lots of different sources.
- Students chose far more reliable sources and moved away from the world of Google and wiki.
- The instruction was very basic and not that energetic. It would have been nice to have the students work hands on by trying to find information through the databases. It also would have been nice to have a tour of the facility.
- I will find out tomorrow! Issue study is due...
- I have not used the full range of services because, as a department head, I rarely teach. I would, however, if I were to teach.
- Mary Anne Hansen is great! Did not know she could help with book ordering.
- Too early to truly tell, but they talked about the library and where to find resources within it afterwards.

14. What services would you like to see your library liaison provide that they currently do not? (Comment Field)

Number of Respondents: 3

Comments:

- Excited to utilize.
- semester updates on new acquisitions/journal titles
- unsure.

15. What other library services do you utilize that the library currently provides, if any? (Comment Field)

Number of Respondents: 20

- on campus delivery of library held and Interlibrary loan material 25%
- Interlibrary loan (ILL) service 55%
- online library materials purchase request form 15%
- chat/instant messaging reference services 10%
- e-mail reference services 5%



- e-reserves (placing material on reserve that is available to students online) 55%
- coffee bar 55%
- use of the DVD/video collection 50%
- electronic databases 80%
- special collections or archive materials 20%

Comments

- I felt the instruction could have given more examples of academic journals from various disciplines would have been helpful. My seminar course has students from several different academic backgrounds and it would have been beneficial from them to understand more about databases (eg. keywords)

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