

Enterprising liaisons: Evolving engagement

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Abstract

Liaisonship in academic libraries continues to evolve and librarians need to engage their entrepreneurial spirit to remain relevant in this rapidly changing and dynamic environment. Liaisons frequently have to balance responsibility for multiple academic departments and/or student populations such as veterans, athletes, or international students, with service and scholarship activities. Enterprising librarians can stay ahead of the curve by building a profile of the academic departments or student populations they serve and developing an engagement plan for the year. Building profiles is a research-gathering and reflective process that can provide insight into how liaisons can build relationships with their departments or student populations. The profiles then provide the foundation for generating an annual engagement plan. Plans consider outreach to students, faculty, and other campus partners, and thoughtfully map out a course of action. Engagement plans outline broad ideas and then break them into actionable items with deadlines. Planning ahead and balancing liaison workload can increase the likelihood of successful engagement throughout the year.

Keywords

- academic library liaison
- outreach
- subject librarian

Academic libraries have to contend with continual change, whether from internal or external factors. Managing the changing needs of faculty, students, staff, and community members, the financial constraints of tight library budgets, rapidly changing technologies, and more, in turn creates challenges for liaison librarians. Liaison responsibilities continue to evolve and may include engagement, teaching and learning, research services, collection development, scholarly communication, and others (Daniel et al., 2011). Liaisons may be assigned to academic departments, student populations such as international students, or an office or program such as the Student Learning Center. Liaisons are juggling multiple responsibilities and competing priorities (Johnson, 2018).

Many academic libraries have created new liaison models in order to facilitate liaison work. Banfield and Petropoulos (2017) describe five different liaison models including facilitator, domain, targeted specialists, engagement, and a four-tier system (p. 832). Houk and Crowe (2018) describe a model combining subject and functional teams at the University of North Carolina Greensboro (p. 65). Some models such as Duke University's, outline liaison best practices within responsibility areas (Daniel et al., 2011). Jaguszewski and Williams (2013) remind us that "the overarching framework for all changes is an increasing focus on what *users* do (research, teaching, and learning) rather than on what *librarians* do (collections, reference, library instruction)" (p. 4).

Regardless of the organizational structure or liaison model at an academic library, an individual liaison has an obligation to understand the needs of those they serve, engage a multimodal approach to meet these needs, and follow through with implementation of these approaches. While some approaches may work across all liaison areas, each has unique needs and may require a liaison to employ various strategies for engagement. Vine (2018) shared 10 observations from ARL Liaison Institutes including "6. Finding time, space, and motivation to undertake deeper outreach is daunting to many liaisons" (p. 2). Practical strategies such as building profiles and engagement plans can be valuable steps for liaisons to reflect deeply on the needs of their liaison areas and set a course for future action.

Building a Profile

University Libraries at Appalachian State University formed the Liaison Guidance Council to provide programmatic oversight and support to liaisons. Generally, the goal was to bring all liaisons together to share ideas and best practices and form a more cohesive liaison program. One challenge that surfaced was that there were multiple liaisons assigned to departments making it very difficult for external users to understand who to contact for support within the library. Internally, liaisons have different areas of specialty and may not have sole responsibility for a department's needs. We designated a single point of contact for each academic department to make it clearer to those across the university. A user would only need to know and contact the designated liaison for their department, regardless of their library need. The liaison would work internally with library colleagues to fulfill that requirement.

The next step in the process was for each liaison to create a profile of their department following an outline provided by the committee (see Appendix). The goal was to encourage liaisons to research various aspects of each department and reflect on the needs that the liaison might address. In order to assist liaisons in finding some of the data for the profile, a LibGuide was created with helpful links such as programs of study, department learning outcomes, and institutional data on student demographics within a major. Liaisons posted each department profile in a shared folder and a debrief session was held with all liaisons after completion.

The "General Information" component of the profile may seem basic but, during the debrief, it was found to be valuable by the liaisons. As an example, exploring the faculty of a department highlighted differing needs of new, adjunct, tenure-track, or administrative faculty. Some department websites listed the research areas of faculty giving the liaison a wealth of information for building connections with individual faculty members within their specialties. Many liaisons discussed the various ways they connected with the chairs of the departments or noted other key partners that they worked with. One liaison shared that regular communication with graduate program directors developed more direct opportunities for engaging with graduate students.

The "Undergraduate and Graduate Programs" components of the profile include a close look into the

degrees offered by the department. An examination of the curriculum might highlight courses involving research or writing where information literacy instruction might be useful. Data from curriculum-mapping projects are especially useful. Understanding the demographics of the students in the major, core required courses, student learning outcomes, graduate-level programs, and online courses all provide valuable information for how the liaison can effectively engage to impact student learning. One liaison found that a particular major had a high proportion of transfer students. The transfer students did not receive library instruction in the First-Year Seminar or introductory courses that other students received. Another liaison found that the graduate student thesis topics were posted on the department website.

The "Additional Details" component of the profile pulled together more specific library-related information about the department such as notes about collections or library research guides as well as other unique characteristics. The "Commentary" component encouraged reflection based on the actual information found for the profile as well as current or past engagement activities. Reflection on the data is important to combat preconceived notions about a liaison area. During the debrief session, many liaisons remarked that they learned something new about their departments. In addition, the conversations highlighted numerous opportunities for liaisons to partner with each other in order to best meet a need.

The data collected for the profile is combined with other information available in order to create a complete picture for the liaison. Gather survey data, feedback, and usage information if it is available. For example, a liaison could review which courses within a department had library instruction sessions. Schedule meetings with department chairs, program directors, and other key partners to learn more. Liaisons in specific subject areas may also find resources and ideas by searching the literature in their discipline or connecting with counterparts at other institutions. A close review of the data collected may reveal areas that require more attention by the liaison and may also reveal activities that are not productive and can be removed from their workload. While the profile is specifically created for an academic department, it can be easily adjusted for use to profile a student population or other unit on campus that has

an assigned liaison. Liaisons are encouraged to update the profiles at least annually or as information changes. An added benefit of the profiles is the documentation of the current liaison's knowledge, which makes the transition to a new liaison much easier after a retirement or a liaison's leaving for another role or position.

Turn Information Into An Actionable Plan

The creation of profiles generates individual and group ideas for working with liaison assigned areas. Creating goals and an engagement plan are a means for capturing these ideas and energy and turning them into action. Frankly, it can be easy to lose momentum on longer term initiatives when the daily work of instruction, consultations, and meetings fill a liaison's day.

One way to move the work of a liaison program forward is to incorporate liaison-related goals into an annual goal setting process. Goals are a part of the librarian faculty annual review process at University Libraries. Each year, librarians set annual goals and are reviewed at the end of the year on job performance and progress toward goals. Doran (1981) first introduced the concept of SMART goals, with the acronym standing for "Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic, and Time-Related" (p.36). The SMART format is used to create annual goals. Requiring liaison-specific goals highlights the importance of liaison responsibilities, allows individual flexibility based on unique liaison areas, and builds in a level of accountability.

Annual goals are fairly broad and meant to be accomplished over the extended time of a year or more. Liaisons need to break the goal down into actionable steps much the way librarians encourage students to break a research paper into manageable pieces. An engagement plan is a means for integrating the goal's actionable steps into a liaison's already hectic schedule.

Consider the earlier example of a liaison department that has a high proportion of transfer students. The liaison may review which courses have library instruction sessions as well as the content and usage of library subject guides and determine that transfer students may indeed be lacking adequate information literacy instruction in the major. The liaison may create the annual goal of increasing the number of information literacy instruction sessions in

the major by 10% and/or increasing the number of course sites who have a direct link to the library subject guide by 30% over the next year. In order to meet this goal, the liaison will need to consider multiple approaches in order to determine the actionable steps. These steps might involve meeting with the department chair, creating a marketing piece to promote services, attending a faculty meeting in the department, contacting individual instructors, updating library research guide content, or creating a video to show instructors how to embed a link to the library research guide in the learning management system.

At the point of creating annual goals and mapping out the actionable steps to meet the goal, the liaison's workload may feel a bit overwhelming. This is where the creation of an engagement plan helps to integrate these steps into the liaison's workload over the long term. The engagement plan is a balancing act of what needs to be done and the timing of the work.

There are often numerous action items that need to be accomplished in order to meet a goal. Some items can be done concurrently and some items are contingent upon the completion of others. Some can be done individually and some require collaboration. Most importantly, the timing needs to be considered, which may include hard deadlines, the best timing to meet with someone, or the best time to accomplish the work. Supervisors and colleagues can provide feedback and ideas at this point of the process as well.

An engagement plan spanning a year is suggested. Building the plan requires the liaison to combine all the action steps from various goals and initiatives together and set deadlines. Initially, break action items into particular months and then set more specific deadlines in order to balance workload. A liaison might see that they have numerous hard deadlines at the start of the Fall semester. Balancing this work out over the previous months will be important to meet deadlines. Technology tools can be invaluable at this point. Consider using an online task list that connects with your calendar or a project management tool like Trello. Follow through is incredibly important so choose a tool that works for you and helps you to stay accountable. Check in with a supervisor or colleagues for support and maintain flexibility by adjusting action steps and deadlines as new information presents itself.

Ideas for Implementation

Profiles and engagement plans can be implemented in any size library and regardless of the organizational structure or liaison model in place. Consider customizing the department profile to your institution and creating a resource of helpful links for finding profile information. Information on university websites can be challenging to find and often have historical and current data available. Providing this resource will save individual liaisons time and ensure that everyone is using the most current information.

Generate conversations between liaisons by hosting liaison discussion groups or including liaison topics during established meetings such as library faculty meetings. Liaisons could also be matched in pairs or small discipline related groups to generate profiles together. Collaboration and discussion are important to ensure that liaisons understand that while the profiles are each unique, it is a group effort to provide liaison services.

Review your process for goal setting if you have one in place or establish a process. Incorporate liaison specific goals and provide training, if needed, on how to create SMART goals. Engage liaison supervisors who can guide individual liaisons with goal setting and follow up during one on one discussions. A liaison program may also set goals that all liaisons are involved with. Library technology staff might be able to provide insight or training on technology tools that could be used to set deadlines and track action steps.

Finally, consider how you will assess the progress of individual liaison work as well as the liaison program. *Assessing Liaison Librarians: Documenting Impact for Positive Change* is a valuable resource (Mack & White, 2014). Beyond annual evaluations or reports, provide opportunity for liaisons to share their experiences including what was successful and what they would improve upon. Whenever possible, have liaisons work together to share the workload of projects or initiatives that multiple liaisons can utilize and share best practices that might elevate all liaison work.

References

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DEPARTMENT PROFILE: TEMPLATE

Instructions: Make a copy of this template for each of your departments and rename the document by replacing the word “template” with the name of the academic department.

Liaison:

Date Last Updated:

Last Department Meeting Attended:

GENERAL INFORMATION

Department Name:

Department Website:

Department Location:

Department Chair:

Department Chair email/phone number:

Additional Department Contact:

Website of Department Faculty/Staff:

UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

Undergraduate Programs (including number of students):

Website(s) for Student Learning Outcomes:

Undergraduate Courses with Writing or Research (writing in the discipline, theses, capstone) Components:

Are there distance education or online programs in this department?

Distance Education Programs/Courses:

Undergraduate Student Organizations:

GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Graduate Programs (including number of students):

Website(s) for Student Learning Outcomes:

Graduate Courses with Writing or Research Components:

Are there distance education or online programs in this department?

Distance Education Programs/Courses:

Graduate Student Organizations:

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

Details About Accreditation:

Professional Societies/Agencies:

Grants/Special Projects:

Collections:

LibGuides or Other Learning Objects:

Other:

COMMENTARY

Please include other notable information including your personal thoughts, ideas, or initiatives.