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Reaching Out to the Faculty: Providing Subject-Specific Academic Resources

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Abstract

Library journals frequently have articles emphasizing the large gulf that seems to exist between academic librarians and teaching faculty members. Librarians view this divide as a serious problem and have suggested different strategies to overcome it. Ideas that have received particular prominence include establishing library liaison relationships, providing course-integrated instruction, and encouraging library/faculty research collaboration.

This article focuses primarily on a different method of engaging the faculty. Regularly sending teaching faculty helpful articles and web sites related to their academic disciplines is an easy and effective way to do outreach.

The Gulf between Academic Librarians and Teaching Faculty

In addressing the gulf that exists between librarians and teaching faculty members, one report stands out as particularly interesting. “A Report of Librarian-Faculty Relations from a Sociological Perspective,” was published in The Journal of Academic Librarianship in 2004. The report originally was presented at the American Library Association in 2002, and it provides a sociological analysis of the librarian/faculty member. The authors, two of whom are professors in sociology and one of whom is a librarian, examined the relevant library literature on the topic and then interpreted this data in a sociological perspective.

The report made significant points both about the relationships between librarians and faculty and attitudes held by these two groups. They found “an asymmetrical disconnect that exists between librarians and faculty.” The authors viewed the two groups as “loosely coupled,” having limited interaction with each other.

The report noted that both librarians and faculty are aware of this gap, only librarians seem to view it as problematic. Librarians view the rift as problematic both in the way teaching faculty perceive them and in their ability to work with and assist the faculty. Faculty members, by contrast, see no problems with their loose relationship with librarians. The report suggested that job difference might partly explain the faculty perspective. While librarians work mainly in the library, faculty work in their offices or at home, with little time in the library. Also, the report contrasts the “organizational subculture” of the two groups, where “libraries encourage a culture of sharing, cooperation, and collaboration,” and faculty culture emphasized individual scholarship and preparation.

Academic Outreach through Subject-Specific Resources

Providing teaching faculty academic articles and other resources on a regular basis is a good way to fight against the librarian/faculty rift. There are several reasons why this is the case. First, sending articles and resources meets a vital faculty need. Teaching faculty tend to have busy schedules and have limited time to find articles for personal study or use in the classroom. Many faculty members have expressed appreciation for the articles I send, often mentioning that they will use them in upcoming class sessions.

Second, sending articles and resources helps foster librarian/faculty communication. Sometimes teaching faculty members will reply back to an email I have sent with thoughts about the item they have received. Once I sent an article about the Hershey Company, and a faculty member replied back that he had been to Hershey, Pennsylvania once for a conference, and the city has many chocolate-related features. Another time, a faculty member...
mentioned that the article she received was on her Ph.D. dissertation topic.

Third, outreach through academic resources provides more opportunities for reference and instruction. Frequently, faculty members will reply to an email with a question about locating a book or using a database. They also will tend to contact me, rather than another reference librarian, when requesting an instructional session. This is because they recognize me from all the articles sent out. My ongoing contact is also a regular reminder of the library services, so that on occasion faculty members who have not previously requested instruction will do so.

Fourth, outreach through academic resources provides the librarian with a greater familiarity with the different academic disciplines on the campus. This subject familiarity helps teaching faculty view the librarian as engaged in useful academic work. This familiarity also helps the librarian have confidence in their academic knowledge, which is helpful when communicating in person with teaching faculty. Several times I have been in large gatherings, such as receptions or luncheons, and been seated next to faculty from different disciplines. I have not found it difficult to have conversations in these settings, often about recent developments or issues in their academic area.

Guidelines for Academic Outreach through Articles and Resources

Having presented the problem of the gap between academic librarians and faculty members, as well as a solution for this problem found in article and resource outreach, it is now important to discuss a few guidelines for this outreach. First, as a general rule, send short articles that discuss recent research or survey information rather than sending large research articles. Faculty members are busy and would probably prefer to read about the research; then, if they are interested, they can locate the research article on which the shorter one was based.

Second, be particularly cautious when sending out articles in the areas of political science, religion, and ethics. These are controversial fields, and special care should be made not to cause offense. I generally send out political science articles that represent a conservative Republican stance, because I perceive that these best match the beliefs of the faculty in that area.

Third, be sure to skim the entire article that is to be sent out; while you will not have time to read all the articles, be sure to skim them to make sure nothing offensive is in them. Only once has someone requested that I stop sending articles, but she did so after becoming angry with an article in the field of communications. I had not skimmed that article very carefully.

Librarians need to build stronger relationships with teaching faculty members. Various strategies have been suggested for doing this, but one that is both enjoyable and effective is reaching out through articles and other resources. This method of outreach allows librarians regularly to communicate with, and provide service to, the teaching faculty. This kind of outreach ties librarians directly to the academic work of faculty members.

REFERENCES:


4 Christiansen, 117.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 118.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.