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Linda Lambert
Taylor University

Tami Echevarria Robinson
Whitworth University Library

Bob Triplett
Palm Beach Atlantic University

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Partnering with Faculty through Liaison Activities

Linda Lambert
Zondervan Library
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana

Tami Echevarria Robinson
Whitworth University Library
Spokane, Washington

Bob Triplett
Warren Library
Palm Beach Atlantic University
West Palm Beach, Florida

ABSTRACT

Anything worthwhile requires time and effort. Such is the case in building effective working relationships between librarians and teaching faculty. This article discusses collaborating and partnering with teaching faculty through liaison relationships and shares experiences of the authors partnering with faculty at their institutions. This article is an outgrowth of a panel presentation at the 2007 ACL Conference by liaison librarians representing libraries in the Southeast, the Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest. While partnering with faculty is both challenging and time consuming, it can be one of the most gratifying and productive activities in which librarians can be engaged.

The library's role in the university is seen differently by different constituencies on a campus. While librarians may see that role as being very central to campus intellectual activity, not everyone shares that viewpoint. Since that view of the library may not be self-evident to everyone, the library must find ways to promote itself to the campus community and engage the various constituencies. A library liaison program that reaches out to the teaching faculty is one of these ways. "Liaison work is one of the few potentially effective methods we have to make an impact on the problem of the non-user [or inefficient user]. At the same time, it can assist in maintaining the library's visibility as the primary campus information agency" (Miller, 1977, p. 215).

College Librarian Emeritus of Earlham College, Evan Farber, thought and wrote extensively about the role of the college library within the college, the importance of bibliographic instruction and the necessity of collaboration between the teaching faculty and the library.

"The library is not an end in itself – but exists to support, to promote, to enhance what is the heart of the college – the teaching/learning process – those interactions between faculty and students that go on in classrooms, in laboratories, in tutorials, over cups of coffee, wherever – interactions that contribute to students' intellectual and critical skills, disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge, cultural and cross cultural awareness – all those outcomes we hope for in an undergraduate education" (Gansz, 2007, p. 162).

Those interactions, of necessity, must go on among teaching faculty and librarians as well for the library to effectively promote and enhance the teaching/learning process. The communication necessary for partnering and collaboration occurs through these interactions.

Now is an amazing time to be a librarian. It is an understatement, but true, that academic librarians in the 21st century have a great many demands upon their time. Many Christian academic librarians tend to work in relatively small private college libraries that often are underfunded and understaffed, and thus wear many hats in the course of their careers. The result is that time has to be set aside and a high priority given to partnering with faculty or else it simply will not get done. This often means a re-evaluation of our priorities and a reallocation of our time.

To one extent or another, academic librarians come in contact with faculty. To capitalize on these contacts, librarians are called upon to establish deliberate intentional faculty liaison relationships. These relationships are part of a library's liaison program but the relationships themselves are as individual as the personalities involved. It is important to remember that whatever works for one liaison librarian may not work for another. What works in dealing with some faculty members will not work for other faculty. What works in one institutional culture may be different from what works well in another. Yet there is common ground. The bottom line, as Helen Williams points out, “is that there is no one-size fits-all approach to liaison work; just as with learning styles, it takes more than one method to reach everyone” (Williams, 2000, p.20). Therefore, a multi-faceted liaison program is really needed.

Simply attempting to assimilate the latest, greatest in technology can be a daunting challenge. Along with a world of rapidly changing technologies, librarians are challenged to collaborate with a new generation of faculty members. Younger faculty members often have fresh expectations and an advanced skill set that make them ready partners with librarians. Librarians have long been the bridge builders in advancing interdisciplinary connections, ably adept at working with a diverse faculty population. Our challenge is to continue to increase partnerships using our experience and expertise to support curricular goals where our faculty members need us most. In a 2000 study,
Ada M. Ducas and Nicole Michaud-Oystryk surveyed faculty and librarians separately to explore direct interaction at the University of Manitoba. “Both groups ranked information services as the highest point of interaction and research as the lowest. ... Responses indicated that some librarians are forging ahead in new directions, thus demonstrating that there are opportunities for more effective collaboration with faculty” (Ducas, 2004, p.347).

Some thoughts which come to mind about library liaison programs are numerous ways library liaisons accomplish this role as collaborator. First, the traditionally known role of library liaison is larger than just collection management. Of course, this is a critical role for the liaison, but liaison partnerships are changing. The future of libraries, as we move away from “just in case” to “just in time,” means more personalized services for both students and faculty alike. When libraries are relying less and less on the bricks and mortar of the physical library space, liaison librarians can anticipate responding to new expectations.

In a January 2003 article Donald Frank and Elizabeth Howell claim “Libraries are being used differently. ... The ability to seek new or innovative relationships on campus underscores the success and vitality for academic librarians and libraries.” They advocate that “librarians need to progress from the basically passive liaison model to the proactive consulting model, getting out of their libraries and becoming information consultants who work closely with students and scholars in their offices, laboratories and classrooms” (Frank and Howell, 2003, p.24).

Terri Holtze’s 100 Ways to Reach Your Faculty is an excellent list of possible ways librarians can develop increased connection with teaching faculty. She offers a number of practical tips to consider. Among these are to “know what the hot topics are on campus (student retention, distance education, etc.) and what role the library plays in them” and to consider “holding office hours in departmental areas.” She also suggests “hosting a ‘published this year’ party including librarians who have published” (Holtze, 2002).

Teaching faculty also have a perspective and expectations of what type of interactions they find helpful when encountering the librarians with whom they work. A review of the literature on liaison activities reveals some interesting observations and tips for collaborating with faculty. Some of their comments are instructive to librarians engaging faculty in liaison work and collaborative teaching partnerships.

Aletha Stahl from Earlham College and Paul Jenkins from the College of Mount St. Joseph share some pertinent insights on what faculty want in a librarian or what qualities they think are important to be a successful academic librarian. Some of these include: “They should be technologically savvy. A lot of professors aren’t. So be patient with us.” Another faculty member said: “I think a challenge for librarians is to demystify the old notion of a library as hallowed ground. You want this image to remain in some ways, but you want to create an image of a library as more user-friendly than it has been in the past” (Jenkins, 2005, pp. 33-34). Stahl, an English professor, makes it clear that “proactivity is the first trait I want in a librarian … tempered with an acute sense of when to back off” (Stahl, 1997, p. 133). Librarians should be sensitive to and respectful of teaching faculty’s perspective, rather than being intrusive.

It goes without saying that liaison librarians need to use good judgment and tact in working with faculty in designing effective assignments or revising assignments. Instead of saying to an instructor that his/her assignment was poor or has serious flaws, try using phrases such as: “Have you considered using/doing …?” or ‘Are you aware that we now have … database/resource/etc. … available in the library?’” (Jeffries, 2000, p.123). Oftentimes librarians are in a unique position to offer suggestions to professors on how they can incorporate these resources into their assignments. For teaching faculty to be receptive to this, librarians must establish a collegial relationship with them individually.

On the issue of communicating by email versus telephone, the preferred method of communication is electronic. In a survey conducted by Shellie Jeffries at Wayne State

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The Christian Librarian, 51 (2) 2008

University, “80% preferred email for brief messages, with phone calls a distant second. … One rule of thumb to keep in mind when responding to a faculty member who contacts you is to use whatever communication form they used” (Jeffries, 2000, p.118).

The perception of the library is often an issue which liaison librarians need to work to change by being active and involved. Paul Jenkins refers to Larry Hardesty’s analogy, “In the minds of far too many members of the campus community an academic library is not the heart of an institution, it is its spleen” (Jenkins, 2005, p. 91). Hardesty goes on to say, “Many undergraduates barely know it exists, few know its purpose and most could live without it” (Hardesty, 1991, p.126). The old saying, “Don’t be out of sight and out of mind” is certainly valid. Personalized contacts and relationships with individual faculty members promote the sort of partnerships between librarians and teaching faculty and visibility that the library endeavors to maintain.

Building relationships between faculty and librarians doesn’t happen overnight. As with all meaningful relationships, bridge building takes time so it is essential to keep the long view in mind. Michele Tennant’s conclusion is well worth noting. She says that “no matter how successful your program might be and how heavily marketed, some faculty simply will not be engaged by the liaison program. Spend precious time and energy with the many faculty members who appreciate the need for liaison services” (Tennant, 2006, p. 409). As with other activities, such as collection development, the library will be able to successfully engage some faculty members but not others, or perhaps some faculty members at only certain points in their careers.

The campus culture and the relationship of librarians to the faculty is also a factor that can either facilitate or hinder the working relationship of librarians with faculty. Faculty status for librarians is important as a symbol of equality as a teaching member of the academic community. In the experience of one of the authors, the difference in attitude of the teaching faculty toward librarians was quite pronounced when working in a university where librarians do not have faculty status versus a university where librarians do have faculty status. In the university where the librarians had a parallel track of career status, but not full faculty status and had no role in faculty governance, the teaching faculty considered the librarians neither peers, partners nor collaborators, and librarians were not given access to classroom teaching in the disciplines. Rather, faculty limited their contact with librarians to their usefulness in support roles to the teaching/learning process.

In contrast, at the university where librarians have full faculty status and participate fully in faculty governance, the teaching faculty consider the librarians peers and colleagues and interact with them collegially as they do with one another. This collegiality extends not only to their professional partnerships and collaborations, but socially as well. This indicator of how comfortable they feel with one another extends to how comfortable the teaching faculty are with collaborating and partnering with librarians. This kind of atmosphere affords many opportunities to interact with the teaching faculty, have casual chats among equals, and provide visibility for the library by attending lectures, sporting events, music venues, art exhibits, and other campus activities. The fact of the matter is that partnering with faculty is both challenging and time consuming. At the same time, it can be one of the most gratifying and productive activities in which librarians can be involved.

Three models of successful library liaison programs are illustrative of the time and effort required to effectively relate to the faculty in ways that demonstrate productive librarian-faculty liaison relationships.

Palm Beach Atlantic University

It has only been within the last couple of years that the author has really gotten serious about partnering with faculty in an organized manner. Sometimes a little nudging is needed to get moving forward. That came in the form of an annual Faculty Activities Plan and Report (FAPR) which Palm Beach Atlantic requires of every faculty member including librarians. The form for librarians is called the Library Faculty Activities Plan and Report.

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(LFAPR). Essentially it has six major areas; the section entitled Faculty/Student Relationships contains a plan and report of liaison activities.

At Palm Beach Atlantic an emphasis is placed upon goals and objectives, especially goals that are measurable. During 2005-2006 the library goals included a participation goal of 25% of fulltime faculty in collection development. So it became one of the measurable goals in the author’s LFAPR for 2005-2006 to determine what percent of his liaison faculty were involved in collection development activities. Another objective was for faculty/librarian collaboration in developing library-related activities, with a participation goal of 10% of fulltime faculty. This also became another measurable goal in the LFAPR for 2005-2006.

At Palm Beach Atlantic there is generally one teaching faculty member in each academic discipline who serves as the key contact person to the library. Since the author serves six academic disciplines he works most closely with these six individuals. However, he considers himself the library liaison to 51 full time faculty members which includes the School of Pharmacy, the School of Nursing, and the Natural Science and Mathematics faculty. He made the decision to go outside the library and meet with as many of these full time faculty in their own offices on campus as possible, to inquire of them concerning the specific goals as well as collaborating with them on a range of library issues. During the 2005-2006 school year individual meetings with 35 faculty members in these liaison areas resulted outside the confines of the library. During 2006-2007 his goal was to meet with each of the eleven new faculty members as well as the six returning pharmacy faculty with whom meetings did not occur during 2005-2006. All this resulted in a total of 52 individual meetings with faculty members in their offices, most lasting 35-40 minutes in length.

Basically, what came out of these meetings involved more follow-up work, which is the outcome the author anticipated and had hoped would occur. In his capacity as library liaison, he has been able to serve as a sounding board about likes and dislikes concerning the library and to assist faculty with their own research. Far more than the baseline rate of 25% of his liaison faculty are participating in collection development activities. Approximately 63% are actively making recommendations for library resources. The goal of at least 10% of his liaison faculty developing and implementing library-related activities was easily met and surpassed. Approximately 66% are incorporating library related activities into their teaching and classroom activities. One rather unexpected outcome was the inauguration of a weekly prayer meeting in the new Warren Library.

A good bit of time and effort was invested in these meetings but it paid dividends in building relationships and a better understanding of the needs of faculty and students. This was a real learning experience and an eye opener in a few cases. The agenda for the meetings was flexible on what issues the faculty wanted to discuss in addition to the author’s key questions for them. Overall, the author was very pleased and gratified by his investment of time in these meetings. This past year he was able to secure the names of all 12 of the adjunct faculty members in his liaison areas and contact and communicate with each of them through email, phone, or in person. It is vital that the library partner with adjuncts in the teaching/learning process, as well. All in all, liaison work in the last two years has proven to be one of the most rewarding activities for the author.

Taylor University

Personalized contacts with individual faculty members frequently yield the kinds of solid partnerships librarians endeavor to maintain. But these partnerships can extend well beyond the individual faculty member to meeting with whole departments. Other critical linkages may extend beyond faculty to administrative assistants, writing center personnel, residence hall directors, honors program coordinators, faculty development and career development departments, athletes and coaches and more. For example, at Taylor University, in April 2007, the Zondervan Library and the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE) jointly sponsored a faculty lunch roundtable discussion. The CTLE funded a free lunch for 20 teaching faculty members to discuss “Wikipedia and Authority.” Two librarians
planned and executed the session by featuring a clip from satirist Stephen Colbert on “Wikiality.” The session was recorded as an audio podcast for wider distribution to faculty members who were not able to attend.

Library sponsorships may include book signings featuring faculty with recent book publications, art shows for faculty and student artists, and a career exploration night for students interested in library and information science. At Taylor the librarians have regularly promoted books and films by international and multicultural authors and directors in conjunction with the campus minority and ethnic student group. In conjunction with a book display the librarians have offered free bookmarks and various ethnic finger foods to highlight book displays.

There are several things that have worked over the years in our roles as library liaisons.

- Making an initial contact with every new faculty member who comes to campus in the fall.
- Focus on the faculty members who are receptive to what you can provide.
- Communicate regularly and widely to promote the services your library provides.
- Listen to your users and respond to their requests as you are able.
- Capitalize on needs that go beyond collection management. For example, offer to verify citations for those faculty members who are working on a book or article. The librarians double checked a bibliography that was submitted as part of a discipline specific accreditation report.
- Offer to go to the faculty member’s office to demonstrate a new database or tool in their major area. Librarians have done numerous visits to assist in the faculty member’s facility in using RefWorks.
- Meet with departments at least once a year to describe new features of the library.
- Meet with the departments as they formulate or implement goals. As part of the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) continual assessment model, our institution has been working diligently to develop departmental goals and objectives. The library has an opportunity to participate whenever the culture of assessment intersects with learning outcomes related to research, information literacy and critical thinking.
  - Librarian participation in committees that examine, revise or revamp curriculum.
  - Sit on committees: committees for tenure and promotion, search committees for prospective candidates, ad hoc committees, etc.
  - Co-present at professional conferences and workshops with a faculty member.
  - Offer individualized research consultation for faculty and upper division students.
  - Coordinate “field trips” to larger research libraries in your region for majors.
  - Pair with the Writing Center to offer research and writing workshops for students.
  - Send personal, encouraging notes to faculty
  - Take a class in your liaison department.
  - Buy and read faculty authored books.
  - Create web guides for classes within your liaison areas.
  - Respond to email requests promptly and follow through with what is requested of you.

**Whitworth University**

At Whitworth University the primary purpose of library liaison activity is collection development. Tangentially other connections emerge such as opportunities related to library research instruction or grant writing. Many of the contacts with faculty, rather than being an outcome of deliberate liaison activities, are nonetheless intentional outcomes of collegial interactions in the course of participation in faculty governance or discussions associated with faculty development. The librarians’ participation with teaching faculty in activities such as committees, discussion groups, and social functions are enabled by the full faculty status that librarians enjoy at Whitworth.

The collection development activity that the faculty liaison program is part of is a
deliberate way to involve the faculty, discipline by discipline, in having a voice about what resources are in the library in their specific subject area. The library director divides the materials budget so that book funds are divided among academic departments and librarians. Departmental allotments are not equal but are related to the size of the departments and the costs of materials in their discipline. The librarians each serve specific departments, determined by the subject expertise of the librarian. Each discipline on campus has a faculty liaison with whom the library liaison works in this capacity. That faculty member represents the teaching faculty of that discipline to the library. Any collection development requests, queries or needs are usually addressed through this established connection. The faculty request books up to the cost of the department’s allotment which the faculty liaison sends on to the library. Departments have until January to spend half of their allotment and must spend their full allotment by April. Funds not spent revert to each departmental liaison librarian, who then spends these departmental funds on books in the appropriate subject area to support curricula. The author has responsibility for six departments, thus working with faculty liaisons in the disciplines of kinesiology and sports medicine, biology, chemistry, physics, math and computer science, and sociology.

At Whitworth University what works and what hasn’t worked are similar to, and yet different from, the previous examples. The faculty seem to be too busy to set aside a great deal of time. So invitations to meet with them, either in their offices or in the librarian’s office, rarely are accepted. Occasionally invitations to lunch may be accepted, but that is seldom. Librarians are almost never invited to departmental meetings because the faculty feel that they have too much already filling their agendas. The library has an announcement of new books, originally distributed in paper to the departments and more recently electronically mounted on the catalog with a button labeled “New Books” with which some faculty seem to be satisfied. Because more formal appointments for meetings are seen by faculty as more than they can accommodate the majority of the time, less formal interactions have proven more effective.

There are many ad hoc opportunities for librarian-faculty interaction. Participation in faculty governance, social events and faculty development afford many opportunities to interact with the teaching faculty. These venues offer opportunities for casual chats in which invitations are easily extended for offering library research instruction, collaboration on assignments, and offers to teach their classes when they must be gone. Attendance at lectures, music venues, art exhibits, theater performances, book discussion groups and sports events promote visibility for the library. Seizing the moment with faculty individually seems to work best, usually when they seek research help themselves. Many times these moments do not happen in the library, but rather somewhere on campus or via email, and librarian follow-up is imperative. Often teaching classes when teaching faculty will be absent are welcome opportunities to promote good will. Offers to collaborate on assignments have also been accepted occasionally.

What has worked best of all and most consistently has been offering to buy each faculty liaison coffee at the Mind and Hearth café on campus. The Pacific Northwest culture often revolves around visiting over coffee and when the Library Director is buying the invitation is welcomed. This always results in half hour meetings that the librarians can count on with their respective faculty liaisons in each department once a year, usually during Spring Semester. The real importance of this meeting is an opportunity to listen to each other. The librarians and the teaching faculty really have different cultures within the learning/teaching process. The focus of the faculty is on content; the focus of the librarians is on process. Do we understand each other? The author is not sure we do. We certainly strive to. We certainly respect each other. And so we continue to work together.

Conclusion

The academic library’s role in the college or university is as effective in the teaching/learning process as its ability to extend itself
into the diversity of the campus community. Faculty liaison activities may be one of the most essential ways that the library can reach throughout the college to faculty of all disciplines. It is true that “a liaison program can become a victim of its own success in terms of increased workload” (Tennant, 2006, p. 408). Liaison librarians should expect more work as an outcome. Liaisons can become extremely busy and must balance their other responsibilities with this gratifying activity. As time allows, the investment of a librarian’s time in establishing relationships, partnering and collaborating with the teaching faculty benefits the whole campus community, supporting, promoting and enhancing the teaching/learning process. Faculty and librarians need what each can offer to provide the best teaching/learning experience and can best do so in collaboration. “While the two groups – teaching faculty and librarians – can and should work together, neither can do the other’s job” (Farber, 1974, p.157). †

REFERENCES


