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An Academic Liason Program: Making It Work

Helen Williams
University of Washington, helenew@u.washington.edu

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c/o Katina Strauch
209 Richardson Avenue
MSC 98, The Citadel
Charleston, SC 29409

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Acquiring Minds Want to Know — Library Liaison Programs

Guest Editor: **Joyce L. Ogburn** (University of Washington)

Three articles present information on how library liaison programs work. The lead article, written by **Helene Williams** at the **University of Washington**, provides an overview of the basics of successful liaison programs. The next two articles are institution specific. **Irene Risser**, **Marjorie White**, and **Geraldine Benson** from **Millersville University** provide a look at how their liaison program is structured. **Ladd Brown**, **Molly Cox**, and **Nancy Seamans** complete the set with a description of the college librarian program at **Virginia Tech**.

This section was inspired by the article about **Millersville University**, which developed from a Lively Lunch presentation at the **1999 Charleston Conference**. Thanks to them for sending in their contribution for ***ATG*** to publish! — **JLO**

An Academic Liaison Program: Making it Work

by **Helen Williams** (English Studies Librarian, University of Washington, Seattle, WA) <helenew@u.washington.edu>

With the deluge of information on how technology is changing the face, mission, and infrastructure of libraries, there is an increased need for strategies to deal with these changes as they affect our core programs. These activities have long-range consequences, be they collection building or instruction and reference-related, and they will easily outlive the day-to-day technology issues of database interface changes and quirky printers. Fortunately, in all library environments, and academic ones in particular, there are opportunities to come out from behind the technology, or use it to our advantage, in working with users to meet their needs. There has been much discussion of successful elements in instruction and reference programs, but not nearly as much attention has been paid to the activities of subject specialists/selectors and their connections on campus and within the library. The era of the invisible bibliographer is pretty much over, and today's subject selectors usually have reference and instruction duties in addition to their liaison tasks. With this added visibility and increased workload comes the need to provide successful liaison strategies.

Given the above-mentioned goal of meeting user needs, the first step in a liaison program is to identify our users. As **David Tyckoson** said in an *ATG* interview,[1] we need to know our community; he was referring to reference collections and their users, but his advice holds especially true for subject selectors. In most academic libraries, selectors are usually given discipline- or department-based assignments, and at first

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If Rumors Were Horses

Forgot to tell y'all that the wonderful **Jill O'Neill** <jilloneill@nfais.org> has turned her considerable energies and expertise to **NFAIS** (National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services)where she will be Director of Planning & Communications. Jill will be in Charleston where we can all congratulate her. She will be conducting the preconference, "Searching the Web: Getting What You Want Without Wasting Your Time."

The effervescent **Digby Sales** (U. of Cape Town, South Africa) will be at the **Charleston Conference** talking about the Knowledge Commons which they have created in his library.

Charles Strum, the obituaries editor of *The New York Times* will be speaking at this year's **Charleston Conference** at the Friday night Optional dinner in the Exchange Building at the foot of Broad Street. Chuck

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What To Look For In This Issue:

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glance it seems easy to identify the community: faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate majors. However, there are major users of collections and services, such as research assistants and departmental staff, and it is important not to overlook these groups.

Another deceptively easy question is that of what our community needs. "Information!" you may say, but there is more. The groups in our community are disparate and their differences must be recognized. For example, graduate students are more likely to need in-depth training in subject resources whereas departmental staff often need just the answer to their questions (and quickly). However, if a staff member frequently uses library resources, then training is a more appropriate response. Given time, usage patterns will emerge so that the librarian can predict who will need what when. Time is usually at a premium, though: librarians new to the campus or those given assignments in new areas are often expected to hit the ground running. There are shortcuts to learning a department's needs and potential wants, including:

Reading through the curriculum vitae of the faculty. Department staff are usually happy to supply them. Look for current research areas so these needs can be addressed, but also keep an eye out for older research patterns. The latter can often be an indicator of collection strengths.

Finding out what courses are taught. Browsing the course catalog or the department's Web page will provide descriptions and show departmental emphases. Find out how the faculty teach, as well: do they utilize lab space or classrooms with multimedia stations? If so, they may well be fairly technologically literate, which in turn will influence the level of training they will need.

Talking with a predecessor. Whether or not the person who was the previous liaison is still on campus, chances are she or he will be willing to share their experiences regarding who is working on what projects, what aspects of the liaison process did or did not work, as well as departmental politics (this can be a lifesaver!).

Once there is a sense of who comprises the community, and what the needs are, it is time to come up with techniques for reaching these groups. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to liaison work; as with learning styles, it takes more than one method to reach everyone. The following are just some of the approaches that have proven successful:

Holding training sessions, at various levels. These can be traditional library sessions for undergraduates, or more specialized training for individuals or small groups at the graduate or faculty level. Often, doing a session for undergraduates is a good way to reach (and provide training for) faculty.

Holding office hours. If possible, arrange for a space in the department; find a faculty member who is amenable to sharing her/his office for a few hours each week. Simply being a presence in the department advertises library services, and is somewhat akin to roving reference.

Attending faculty meetings. There is always information to present on changing library resources and services, so even if politics preclude you from these meetings as a whole, it is fairly easy to become an agenda item and again make your presence known.

Working with academic department liaisons or committees. If the department does not have someone specifically set up to work with you, ask that this arrangement be made. Having a committee or individual in the department who more fully understands the issues provides a direct conduit to the rest of the faculty. The same is true for graduate students; if there is a departmental committee, ask that there be a graduate student representative. Otherwise, work with the graduate student office to find a student willing to become a liaison. These committees help librarians deal with various issues and often provide input on collection development, such as new serial or big-ticket item requests. Committee members can also help prioritize purchases (such as going through approval forms), which provides them an eye-opening experience with librarians' everyday fiscal realities.

Meeting with faculty candidates during their on-campus interview. This serves two purposes: the candidate gets a much-needed break from the intense interview process, and the librarian can supply information about the research resources available in the candidate's area of specialty. This is also a good time to clear up any misinformation the candidate may have received about library services and resources. Another opportunity to meet with candidates is during association conferences. For example, when I attend the Modern Language Association conferences, I sit in on the preliminary candidate interviews and am available to answer questions the candidates have about campus resources. This process runs both ways, however: are departmental faculty involved with subject librarian searches? They can provide valuable feedback, as well as information to the candidate during the interview process.

Teaching credit courses. Librarians are often the best qualified to teach, or team-teach, the research methods courses in a discipline. Faculty may be hesitant to admit they are not comfortable with new technologies or interfaces, but an offer of assistance, from an instructional perspective, is usually appreciated. There are a number of variations possible, from teaching one or two sessions during the course to being the instructor of record with full responsibility for the course.[2]

Above all, the main point of being a liaison is being available. The more contact there is with faculty and students, the more you know about what directions the collections need to take, and what is needed in the way of instruction. The methods listed above involve face-to-face contact, but there are effective liaison techniques that rely on technology, rather than geography. There is e-mail, of course; beyond the question/response format used with individual faculty and students, e-mail can be used to reach the entire department. Most departments have an e-mail listserv, over which announcements can be sent. It is also useful to be on this list,

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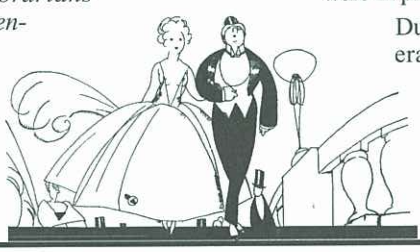
The Successful Liaison Program: Librarians and Classroom Faculty As Partners In the Instructional Process

by **Irene K. Risser** (Collection Development Librarian, Millersville University, Millersville PA) <irene.risser@millersv.edu>, **Marjorie White** (Social Sciences Librarian, Millersville University, Millersville PA) <marjorie.white@millersv.edu>, and **Geraldine Benson** (Government Documents Librarian, Millersville University, Millersville PA) <geraldine.benson@millersv.edu>

This article grew out of a lively lunch presentation at the ***1999 Charleston Conference*** *about the library liaison program at* ***Millersville University*** *(MU), Millersville, Pennsylvania. The program is designed to coordinate the basic components of the university library curriculum, comprising information services, collection development, and library instruction. All twelve library faculty serve as liaisons to academic departments. Adjunct faculty often have liaison assignments as well. Liaison librarians work together with departmental faculty partners, integrating library services within the general education curriculum as well as in specific disciplines.*

Development of the Program

The library liaison program started as a pilot project in 1989. Each librarian was assigned an academic department based upon subject expertise, interest, or a combination of both. Some librarians were initially reluctant to participate because of already full workloads, but each became a liaison librarian to at least one academic department. By 1991, the program had solidified to include all academic departments, and written guidelines focusing on collection development were in place.



During the next several years, the program was expanded to include faculty partnerships in the areas of library instruction and the integration of information technology into the curriculum. During the same time, subject specialists were hired in the areas of business, science, and social sciences. Year by year, there was some reassignment of liaison departments as faculty complement changed.

In 1996, an outcome of a third library program review was the development of a five-year plan, "Strategic Framework for Ganser Library, 1996-2000." The liaison program officially became one of four curricular programs supporting the university library's mission of integrating information literacy throughout all academic curricula. (The other curricular programs are information services, collection development and management, and development and planning.) It is important to note that all librarians participate in each of these programs at various levels. For

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to monitor issues that are being discussed.

No matter how slick the plans or how thorough the background information, a liaison program can easily falter without proper marketing and assessment. These are perhaps the most difficult steps, as most of us are not used to "selling" ourselves and the library's resources. However, that is exactly how we need to be seen: as a resource for our communities of faculty, students, and staff. In order for us to effectively work with them, and for them to best work with us, they need to know what services and resources are available. Additionally, they need to know the basic logistics of how they can reach us, where we are located within the library, and so on. In turn, we need to assess our marketing and liaison approaches. We need to know how we are perceived, and be ready to act on the input gathered,[3] so the liaison activities need to be reviewed periodically for effectiveness: what techniques are working, and why or why not? Have departmental dynamics, or technologies, shifted, requiring new approaches?

Effective marketing can also alleviate some of the difficulties that arise in liaison work. Most faculty, and many graduate students, are unwilling to acknowledge ignorance; even if they are confronted with an unfamiliar resource, such as seeing a database through a new interface, they will usually not ask for help, and instead end up not using all the capabilities provided by the resource. Market your assistance: let them know the interface will be changing, and offer to hold training sessions, either with groups or one-on-one. Reassure them that there is no way they can be expected to keep up with all the technological changes--that is your job.

The other main difficulty which may arise is that of territory. Turf battles are fought often enough in departments, and there is little need for the librarian to get involved. Acknowledge that you do not have the same knowledge of the subject as they, the scholars in the field, do. What you can offer is diplomacy and expertise in getting them to the appropriate resources, and providing training if they wish. A multi-faceted liaison program which includes a lot of departmental contact--through office hours, credit courses, and the like--can be especially prone to territorial issues. Marketing can again save the day, if your role is well-defined and non-threatening.

Relationships between departments and librarians take time to build, so try to keep the long view in mind. It is imperative in these times of rapid change that we maintain our ties to the human community; often this can be done by using the very technology which would, if we let it, prevent us from doing so. Liaison work is time-consuming[4] and challenging, yet it is also one of the most satisfying, productive activities of a librarian's career.

Endnotes

1 **Tom Gilson**, "*ATG* Interviews David Tyckoson, Head, Reference Services, CSU Fresno," ***Against the Grain*** (September, 1999): 40+.

2 For more information on the issues surrounding classroom instruction, see **Helene Williams**, "User Education for Graduate Students: Never a Given, and Not Always Received," in **Trudi E. Jacobson** and **Helene C. Williams**, eds., Teaching the New Library to Today's Users, *Neal-Schuman*, 2000: 145-72.

3 See the recent case study, by **Zheng Ye Yang**, "University Faculty's Perception of a Library Liaison Program: A Case Study," ***Journal of Academic Librarianship*** (March 2000): 124-28.

4 Note the discussion by **Thomas Izbicki**, "Faculty Liaison in the Electronic World," ***Against the Grain*** (November, 1996): 32.