

From Engaging Liaison Librarians to Engaging Communities

Anne R. Kenney

"It would be interesting to revisit UMN Libraries in three years and see how they are doing," wrote Kara J. Malenfant in her 2010 article "Leading Change in the System of Scholarly Communication: A Case Study of Engaging Liaison Librarians for Outreach to Faculty."¹ Malenfant had documented a culture shift underway at the University of Minnesota (UMN) Libraries that focused liaison work outward toward campus engagement. In preparing this companion essay, I interviewed University Librarian Wendy Lougee, who affirmed that the forces at work then had ripened and matured at UMN. She noted that the shift described in the article had been underway for some time, so the expansion to scholarly communication was a natural extension of efforts to embrace a full spectrum of services from creation to curation. The library had earlier brought in R2 consulting to streamline workflows associated with the full spectrum of "selection to access" for monographs, moved aggressively to reconceive technical services, shifting greater investment to shelf-ready approval plans, devoted resources to developing a campus repository, and in general had embraced the concept of the diffused library.² These process improvements freed up capacity within existing staff to pursue other work.

Within this context, the University of Minnesota became an early leader in the liaison movement, and Associate University Librarian for Academic Programs Karen Williams articulated a forceful sea change from a collections-centric to an engagement-centered model for librarianship. In the process, the campus came to view the library as a critical component in the scholarly communications infrastructure.

The leadership and change process at UMN provided a strong exemplar for others to follow. Probably its most significant impact has been to influence the adoption of liaison functions at other academic libraries. At both ALA meetings in 2014, for example, approximately fifty coordinators of liaison programs from thirty-five academic research libraries met under the auspices of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) to discuss ways to improve the liaison model.³ Similar gatherings and presentations on liaison activities have become a normal part of library conferences today.

Given the fairly widespread take-up of the liaison model, what are some of the challenges that have arisen since Malenfant's 2010 article? This essay focuses on six key issues that will affect the model moving forward.

1. Definitional Issues: "Who's on first?" Abbott and Costello

As the portfolios for liaisons expand to meet news demands and expectations, it is clear that no one liaison can do it all. Some institutions have reversed a convergence trend that brought together instruction, reference, and collection development into one portfolio. At the 2014 ALA midwinter liaison meeting, for example, several libraries indicated that

Anne R. Kenney is University Librarian at Cornell University; e-mail: ark3@cornell.edu. © 2015 Joan K. Lippincott, Attribution-NonCommercial (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) CC BY-NC.

they have divorced collection development responsibilities from liaison responsibilities. More significant in terms of definitional issues is that domain specialists are increasingly reliant on functional experts to provide much-needed expertise in addressing changes in research, teaching, and learning. These pairings provide stronger outreach but can raise turf issues. As Lougee noted, "A key concern at UMN and elsewhere is to determine the model to coalesce subject domain and specialist expertise and determine who has primacy in what areas." Should subject expertise trump functional skill sets in deepening engagement with faculty and students? There is a mutual dependence between domain liaisons and functional specialists, but developing a mutual model for working across functional areas is a challenge. Interdependence has yet to lead to an appreciation that liaison work is important but individual labels less so. Minnesota has sidestepped the issues by moving to embrace four to five initiatives with leads and sponsors bringing together necessary expertise from across the organization to address major programs, such as in the area of data curation. Assigning liaison responsibility to teams instead of individuals was suggested at the ALA summer meeting.

At the college library level, the role of library liaisons appears to be growing, but the emphasis is tightly coupled with teaching and learning rather than research. The Library Liaison Program at Gettysburg College involves the identification of both library liaisons and faculty liaisons for academic departments.⁴ Similarly, at Philander Smith College, the Library Liaison program links a librarian with a faculty representative from each division who serves on the Library Committee.⁵ At Swarthmore College Libraries, a liaison is a librarian who formally serves as a contact to student groups on campus.⁶ In one area, that of library publishing, comprehensive and college libraries are joining research libraries to connect more deeply with faculty beyond the curriculum.⁷

2. The Pace of Change: "The future is already here—it's just not evenly distributed." William Gibson

In concluding her article, Malenfant wondered about the impact the external environment would have on the libraries' new direction, in particular the impending "sea change ahead for higher education." She speculated that technology, which enables informal scholarly communication exchange, might "eclipse the importance of formal publishing for evaluating and disseminating knowledge." Certainly libraries have moved into the publishing realm fairly quickly, offering solutions to shift from print to digital delivery and serving not only their own campuses but scholarly societies and smaller presses.⁸ Officially launched in July 2014, the Library Publishing Coalition now boasts nearly 60 institutional members. Despite such efforts, traditional academic structures and norms remain incredibly durable, especially those associated with promotion and tenure.⁹

Wendy Lougee noted that change takes longer than you think it should. The uptake for open access (OA) on Minnesota's campus, for example, remained modest for years despite the library's sustained efforts; and it was just this year that the UMN faculty passed a campus OA policy. Libraries may well represent the leading academic edge of change on university campuses, well ahead of their parent institutions. This context will shape liaison work for some time to come.

3. The Last Mile: "Mind the Gap." London Underground

The last mile is a phrase used to describe the weakest link in a communications chain between a supplier and a customer. The weakest link determines the level of connectivity even when other parts of a network infrastructure are robust. This term may also be used to characterize the typical bottleneck between a liaison program and its intended audience. Libraries placed great emphasis on the development and promotion of tools,

templates, repositories, and websites to facilitate faculty and student engagement. Library training programs, including demand-driven topical workshops, are designed to help prepare liaisons to interact with users across a broad range of issues affecting the scholarly communication cycle. Yet all too often users remain unaware of services and expert support available to them. Part of the problem is culture, but also one of approach. Liaisonship isn't something that is done *to* faculty and students; it's an effort to engage them in the course of discovery and knowledge building. Equally important is communication misalignment. Liaison efforts often fall just shy of their intended target. Sometimes a valuable service isn't intuitive. For instance, Cornell Library uses a bookmarklet called Passkey to help off-campus users connect to databases and journals without going through the library website. This very useful tool is underused in part because users do not understand from its name what it does, despite the library's heavy advertising of Passkey's advantages. Sometimes information is invisible to the user or hard to find because it is buried several layers down in a library website or the medium isn't the message—users become inured to e-mails, alerts, and blog postings. And sometimes when the message gets through, it's too general to have much of an impact on the user. For instance, faculty members may be familiar with intellectual property issues but unaware that the journals in which they choose to publish restrict scholarly reuse or the posting of articles on faculty websites and institutional repositories. And sometimes, it is the individual delivering the message: reaching deans, department chairs, or faculty leaders may reap huge benefits in spreading the word. Closing that last-mile gap will be key to effective relationship building.

4. Assessment: “The harder you fight to hold on to specific assumptions, the more likely there’s gold in letting go of them.” John Seely Brown

Literature on liaison work has offered general guidance for setting expectations and providing suggested actions and practices. These tend to be generic in nature and describe how to do the job but not how to measure progress, how to align liaison activities with academic goals, or define what constitutes success. Further, most efforts to quantify liaison activity are library-centered and focus on what the liaison is doing rather than what effect those activities have had. The ACRL “Standards for Libraries in Higher Education”¹⁰ represented a shift toward defining library effectiveness using an outcomes-based approach, focusing on “the ways in which library users are changed as a result of their contact with the library’s resources and programs.” Outcome-based assessment was also included in ACRL’s revised 2013 “Guidelines for university library services to undergraduate students.”¹¹ In a recent article, Jonathan Miller of Rollins College describes a method for self-reflective assessment of library liaison activities in small academic libraries.¹² It is anticipated that new assessment measures and methodologies will result from ARL’s strategic design and visioning effort currently underway.¹³ In addition, there are many customer relationship management (CRM) tools used in other contexts that might well be adapted for library use, such as Sales Force, that are designed to increase “customer loyalty” by bringing together information from a range of data sources that relates to users, their preferences, practices, and needs. Similarly, learning analytics tools used to assess trends and patterns from student-related data sets can be mined to create more supportive learning environments and services within libraries. Shifting focus from what liaisons do to what others do and how library relationship building efforts impact faculty, students, and the academy will be critical to the future development of this model.

5. Moving Up: “Always drink upstream from the herd.” Cowboy Proverb

As social action organizations have discovered, sustainable change often requires one

to look “upstream” to address root causes rather than treat “downstream” conditions.¹⁴ Employer wellness programs result from a realization that too many absentee workers suffered from preventable chronic illnesses because of bad habits rather than genetic tendencies. By focusing on nutrition, exercise, and other lifestyle changes, wellness programs ultimately result in savings for both employers and employees. Are there parallels on the academic side that library intervention strategies might help solve? Much of what constitutes current liaison work affects the symptoms rather than the root causes. Instead of addressing the high cost of journals as an economic or open access issue, for instance, is there work that can be done to consider how tenure drives publishing decisions? Can liaisons engage in the promotion and review process to advance new scholarly practices? An example of an upstream activity comes from the University of Minnesota Libraries. Instead of focusing on teaching research skills to students preparing term papers, UMN Libraries focused on issues of time management in creating assignment calculators to assist students in their work by breaking down seemingly daunting tasks into discrete and time-bound activities. Similarly, adjacency to other learner support services on campus, such as providing space in the library for writing centers, can lead undergraduate students to connect the dots between their work and the range of support available to assist them earlier in their academic efforts.

6. Moving Out: “Even farmers don’t use silos anymore.” Alice Pell, Professor of Animal Science Cornell University

Much of the liaison focus to date has been at the institutional level, yet this insularity is antithetical to the model’s further maturation. As noted above, the assessment efforts currently under way focus on measuring progress or success within a particular institution rather than inviting iterative development via benchmarking against peers. ACRL’s embrace of a *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* represents a major shift away from “a conceptual rendering to a full-fledged, living entity upon which to develop collaborative programs suitable for unique situations.”¹⁵ Could this inspiring framework serve as a model to create collaboration among liaisons not only within North America but around the world? Creating such a network that shares core understandings, a set of practices, a way of thinking, a focus on collaborative intelligence, and critical reflections could lead to an enlarged and more integrative development of the liaison model. It is time for liaisons to work across institutional borders to create a suite of tools, such as user surveys that result in actionable information, sharable measures, collaborative metrics, and compendia of best practices, storytelling, and case studies that will lead to the development of a community of practice centered on engagement.

Conclusion

Social and computing science has focused for over thirty years on Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), a field of study articulated by Stuart K. Card, Thomas P. Moran and Allen Newell in their 1983 book, *The Psychology of Human-Computer Interaction*. The Association for Computing Machinery defines HCI as “a discipline concerned with the design, evaluation and implementation of interactive computing systems for human use and with the study of major phenomena surrounding them.”¹⁶ Recent research has placed great emphasis on what I would describe as Computer-Computer Interaction. With the development of more powerful computing and networking capabilities, the vast growth in data, and increasingly sophisticated research needs, the shift to computer-generated inquiry, analysis, and problem solving has led to major advances in such fields as machine learning, natural language processing, data and text mining, visualization, virtual reality, medical diagnosis, P2P networking, and

artificial intelligence. In Computer-to-Computer interaction, the typical user becomes the end recipient rather than an active participant in problem solving. Users may not even recognize that they are wearing blinders that can limit their understanding of the problems that are being addressed. Human interaction, facilitated by the library liaisons, can help avoid this trap.

In 2011, Sherry Turkle of MIT wrote *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, in which she argued that technology advances have led people to detach from meaningful relationships with each other. Even social media, she argues, increases rather than decreases social isolation. Can library liaisons play a key role in revitalizing human-to-human interactions by engaging individuals collectively in problem solving, creativity, and the production of new knowledge and awareness? Can the library become the center for engagement on campus, with liaisons providing critical human support and analysis that cuts across technology, disciplines, hierarchies, social norms, and institutional and cultural contexts? By focusing on the process rather than the role, appreciating the unevenness of change, bridging the last mile, measuring impact and success, and moving upstream and outward, liaisons will reconfirm that not only is the library the place to go when you don't know, it's also the place to reengage with each other.

Notes

1. Kara J. Malenfant, "Leading Change in the System of Scholarly Communication: A Case Study of Engaging Liaison Librarians for Outreach to Faculty" *College and Research Libraries* 71, no. 1 (2010): 63–76.

2. Wendy Pratt Lougee, "Diffuse Libraries: Emergent Roles for the Research Libraries in the Digital Age," Council on Library and Information Resources, Aug. 2002, available online at www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub108/pub108.pdf [accessed 17 December 2014].

3. I am indebted to my colleagues at ARL for including me in a meeting on liaison librarianship on Oct. 6, 2014, that DeEtta Jones facilitated and included Judy Ruttenberg, Mark Puente, and Martha Kyrillidou of ARL, Jose Diaz (Ohio State), Barbara Rockenbach (Columbia), Melissa Just (Rutgers), Kelly Miller (UCLA), Peggy Fry (Georgetown), Rita Vine (Toronto), and Karrie Peterson (University of Pennsylvania). Notes from the two ALA meetings were shared with the group.

4. See description of program at www.gettysburg.edu/library/information/departments/coll_dev/liaisons.dot [accessed 17 December 2014].

5. See description at www.philander.edu/academics/library/docs/Libraryliaisonprogram.pdf [accessed 19 December 2014].

6. See definition at www.swarthmore.edu/libraries/library-liaisons [accessed 17 December 2014].

7. As an example, the membership of the Library Publishing Coalition includes academic and research libraries; see www.librarypublishing.org/community/members [accessed 19 December 2014].

8. Phill Jones, "What's Going On in the Library? Part 1: Librarian Publishers May Be More Important Than You Think," *The Scholarly Kitchen* (Dec. 1, 2014), available at <http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2014/12/01/whats-going-on-in-the-library-part-1-librarian-publishers-may-be-more-important-than-you-think/> [accessed 16 December 2014].

9. See, for example, Kerry Ann O'Meara, "Change the Tenure System," *Inside Higher Ed* (Jan. 13, 2014), available online at <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2014/01/13/essay-calls-reform-tenure-and-promotion-system> [accessed 16 December 2014].

10. Association of College and Research Libraries, "Standards for Libraries in Higher Education," adopted by the ACRL Board Oct. 2011, available online at www.ala.org/acrl/standards/standardslibraries#principles [accessed 30 November 2014].

11. "Guidelines for University Library Services to Undergraduate Students," *C&RL News* (Feb. 2014): 93.

12. Jonathan Miller, "A Method for Evaluating Library Liaison Activities in Small Academic Libraries," *Journal of Library Administration* 54, no. 6 (2014): 483–500, available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2014.953387> [accessed 19 December 2014].

13. Association of Research Libraries, "Strategic Thinking and Design Initiative," available online at www.arl.org/about/arl-strategic-thinking-and-design [accessed 19 December 2014].

14. Thanks to DeEtta Jones for sharing a wonderful annual report from King County, Georgia, that focuses on root causes for inequities: "King County Equity and Social Justice Annual Report," King County, Georgia, Oct. 2013, available online at www.kingcounty.gov/elected/executive/equity-social-justice.aspx [accessed 30 November 2014].

15. Association of College and Research Libraries, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education" (final), February 2, 2015, available online at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework> [accessed 5 March 2015].

16. Thomas T. Hewett, Ronald Baecker, Stuart Card, Tom Carey, Jean Gasen, Marilyn Mantei, Gary Perlman, Gary Strong, William Verplank, "ACM SIGCHI Curricula for Human-Computer Interaction," Association of Computing Machinery, 1996, available online at http://old.sigchi.org/cdg/cdg2.html#2_1 [accessed 30 November 2014].