

Rita Vine

Realigning liaison with university priorities

Observations from ARL Liaison Institutes 2015–18¹

Since 2015, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) has designed and delivered eight² one-to-two day liaison institutes to participants from a dozen ARL libraries across North America. Modelled on the 2015 institute held at Cornell University,³ institutes are designed for liaison librarians, functional specialists, and managers who engage regularly with faculty, students, and academic administrators. Participants work in small groups to understand the changing landscape of librarian-faculty engagement by examining possible future scenarios for research libraries by placing themselves “in the shoes” of specific user groups to understand their needs and challenges. Through those insights, they consider new and needed ways to advance teaching and research excellence at their local institutions.

The overarching goal of the institutes is to acknowledge a library’s primary traditional services (instruction, collections, reference) while challenging conventional thinking about what is needed for the future and how best to provide it. Exercises are designed to help librarians move from “what’s in it for the library” to “what’s in it for the university.”

While individual institutes have various goals, objectives, and local contexts, our team of facilitators⁴ has observed several common perspectives, concerns, and challenges that have been revealed in greater or lesser degrees across all the institutes.

Our top ten observations, which have been represented across all institutes, are presented

below, followed by some suggestions for how library leadership may constructively address these.

Top ten observations

1. *Liaison librarians would benefit from greater exposure to institutional research priorities at their university.* Provostial and decanal units are powerful drivers of institutional priorities. So too are nondepartmentalized units such as student services, central research services, and teaching centers. However, in most research libraries, the opportunity to know and understand these groups is generally the responsibility of only the most senior library managers.

It has been striking how little exposure liaisons have had to top-level provostial and decanal priorities. This includes priorities that could help shape liaison work in alignment with the larger university and also help address the biggest problems that keep senior administrators up at night.

2. *Liaisons find it easiest to engage in classroom support and access library resources. Research engagement is harder.* Moving into

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new areas of engagement is challenging when faculty continue to see librarians as buyers of content or helpers of students.⁵ Liaisons experience little pressure from individual faculty to venture into new areas that have not been typically associated with libraries. If asked to engage in new areas, some liaisons find it intimidating to step outside of familiar roles to probe and advocate for new capabilities and services that faculty may not be ready to discuss, or which liaisons may not yet fully understand.

3. *Liaisons are both eager and anxious about shifting their roles from service to engagement. Anxiety manifests itself in feeling inexperienced or untrained in technical areas.* Librarians who participated in an institute wanted to increase their relevance and value to their institutions. While many liaisons were on board in principle with the shift from service to deeper engagement in research, they repeatedly stressed the need for training, and many were reluctant to take action steps before feeling fully qualified to do so.

The need for training in many different and complex *technical* skills, like data numeracy, publishing practices, and research data management, led our team to conclude that while these persistent training requests might be interpreted as resistance, they may also be indicators of liaisons' deep discomfort with—and very legitimate fear of—not knowing.

While this training-requirements-as-resistance was challenged during several institutes by liaisons who were comfortable engaging in outreach without deep personal expertise, these librarians were mainly outliers in their libraries.

One participant in the 2015 Cornell institute⁶ described liaisons as “stem cell librarians,” meaning that they need to grow into whatever is needed in response to user needs. Another participant in a 2017 institute challenged liaisons to “leave behind the culture of fear and move to a sense of joy and adventure” and challenged managers to adopt this perspective, as well. However, despite these calls for greater flexibility and

adaptability, a persistent feeling of anxiety over expertise pervaded many institutes.

4. *Many liaisons' professional identity and value system revolves around disciplinary, service, and openness, and less around outreach and impact.* Discussions at the institutes revealed some persistent values and attitudes that may be out of sync with emerging institutional practices. In a rapidly changing research university where interdisciplinarity is common, and where users have become fully self-sufficient in accessing resources, many institute participants remained attached to fairly narrow disciplinary liaison assignments.

Liaisons' high regard for strict definitions of user privacy made it difficult for some to understand the malleability of those values from an institutional viewpoint, and harder for liaisons to accept future scenarios that embraced analysis of student or faculty data for academic or reputational objectives. Similarly, their commitment to openness made it difficult for some to understand the pressures of faculty publishing. Finally, the rejection of any commercial sales or business model that could inform liaison work (even the use of the word *customer* was a big discussion point in early institutes) seemed out of sync with their library's reliance on commercial vendors for products and services. We note that in our most recent institutes, we encountered a more nuanced view of these values,⁷ yet some tensions in these areas remain.

5. *Some liaisons see outreach and engagement as equivalent to advocacy, library “flag-waving,” and sometimes “not my job.”* Most liaisons attending institutes instinctively viewed success as accomplishments that make their library look good, and consequently focused on activities that bring value to the library rather than to faculty or the university writ large. Many liaisons felt that the goal of attending faculty meetings was to advocate for or market library services. A small minority of liaisons considered outreach to be an unnecessary use of their time, although we wondered if that assertion masked a fundamental discomfort with the activity.

6. *Finding time, space, and motivation to undertake deeper outreach is daunting to many liaisons.* Liaisons were very reluctant to identify any current activities that could be terminated or reimaged in order to make time for new forms of engagement. Particularly in institutions where librarians enjoy faculty status, finding time to engage in personal research concerned liaisons more than finding time for outreach.

7. *Liaisons want to deepen their relationships with faculty, but are unclear about ways to do this beyond sending an email and waiting.* Across most institutes, liaisons found it difficult to think of how to reach out to faculty, and figuring out how to follow up on unanswered replies was daunting. Many liaisons found it challenging to consider setting up one-on-one meetings with faculty to learn more about their research and teaching. Despite these gaps, neither communication nor faculty interviewing skills were identified as training needs by participants.

It makes sense that as insiders, liaisons may not realize how opaque a large research library can be to users, and may have discounted their value as faculty connectors to library services, resources, and individuals who could advance faculty work. Until encouraged in group activities to think more expansively about their value, many liaisons discounted their expertise in information management as worthy of a collaborative or partnership relationship. This may contribute to liaisons' discomfort with direct outreach to faculty.

8. *Many liaisons are unclear about how their work intersects with that of functional specialists, and may need prompting to see opportunities for collaboration with them.* Functional specialists who attended an institute did not always recognize the need to keep disciplinary liaisons informed when they interact with faculty in a liaison's assigned area. As a result, many liaisons remain unclear of what functional specialists are doing with "their" faculty, and are often not fully aware of the skills that functional specialists possess. Many liaisons at our institutes were unsure of how to collaborate with functional special-

ists without addressing questions of turf or feeling as if they would be abdicating their responsibilities as liaisons. Functional specialists did not always see their role in training their subject-based colleagues on emerging research trends. This siloed approach led many liaisons to view collaboration with functional specialists as simply referring an inquiry to a functional specialist for action, without collaborative follow-up.

9. *While liaisons place considerable value on traditional library services, they have difficulty articulating the value of those services when they put themselves in the shoes of their users.* Value proposition exercises allowed small groups to articulate the value of a library service (e.g., interlibrary loans, library workshops, LibGuides) to a specific user group (e.g., early career faculty, PhD students).⁸ Value proposition exercises were intended to challenge participants to objectively assess the value of existing services with an eye to making future adjustments, enhancements, or eliminations. At most institutes, these exercises produced weak value statements. Groups struggled to find value in aspects of traditional services, but had little appetite for serious reconsideration of services that may have lost all or most of their value relative to the time and energy expended to deliver them.

10. *For liaisons, teaming with others raises concerns about how teamwork translates into merit, promotion, and other tangible rewards.* Liaisons wonder how the need for increased teaming and collaboration will impact their reward structure. Individual work and outputs have been easily assessed and rewarded, making visible outputs, such as articles, user guides, brochures, or web content, the preferred method for documentation in performance assessments and tenure reviews. No scenarios at the institutes generated more discussion, questions, or challenges than those that suggested team implementation.

Concluding thoughts

We have learned much about liaison attitudes, values, fears, and desires from facilitating liaison institutes and watching librarians

consider and debate their future. Some challenges can be overcome individually, but key areas are hard to solve without managerial intervention to develop skills, provide opportunities for collaborative work, and support librarians as they venture into unfamiliar areas of outreach and engagement.

A distillation of our observations leads us to three recommendations for research libraries to consider to help their workforce move to a robust engagement and impact model.

- *Foster more frequent and deeper communication between librarians and faculty to understand their research and teaching challenges.* Good communication skills will make many aspects of liaison work easier and more effective. Better communication means better outreach, which should result in improved understanding of current and emerging faculty challenges across all aspects of research and teaching. Yet most liaisons neither see the need nor desire for communication and interviewing skills as important components of their work. Many liaisons will not take even modest communications risks, such as engaging in conversations with faculty in areas where they feel inexperienced, without strong but supportive management interventions. Managers will need to support reluctant librarians to develop their conversational, interviewing and listening skills, through a combination of training and practice.⁹

- *Find ways to help librarians use internal teaming and collaborations to solve university challenges.* Time and energy will need to be devoted to establishing positive co-working routines between functional specialists and liaisons. Managers will need to help these groups establish robust and frequent communications, co-working, and co-learning opportunities in order to develop needed ad-hoc teaming processes. Concerns about turf and who-does-what will need to be addressed.

Attention must also be paid to conditions and criteria for performance assessment that accommodate and acknowledge team-based accomplishments that may have few visible

outputs. Libraries will need to consider how teams and collaborations can be encouraged, assessed, and rewarded. And moreover, if new outputs are better relationships, collaborations, and communication, how can these be documented, assessed, and accounted for in performance reviews, merit, and promotions?

- *Increase liaison activity with non-departmentalized units on campus, which are often drivers of institutional initiatives and university priorities.* Libraries may want to add liaison resources to step up connections with nondepartmentalized units on campus. Units such as institutional research services, teaching centers, and senior university offices can connect the library to high-level institutional projects and provide opportunities to engage more liaisons and functional specialists in these areas. Linking liaison librarians more closely to nondepartmentalized units and senior university administration on special projects may help expand liaisons' understanding of high-level institutional priorities, and excite them about their future.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Barbara Rockenbach, Columbia University; Kornelia Tancheva, University of Pittsburgh; and Elizabeth Waraksa, Association of Research Libraries for their valuable comments and suggestions.

2. As of March 2018, participant universities have been Cornell, Columbia, Toronto, Alabama, Buffalo, Minnesota, Illinois-Urbana-Champaign, Wisconsin-Madison, Oregon, Notre Dame, British Columbia, and Temple.

3. Association of Research Libraries/Columbia University/Cornell University/University of Toronto Pilot Library Liaison Institute Final Report, www.arl.org/storage/documents/publications/library-liaison-institute-final-report-dec2015.pdf.

4. Institutes typically have two facilitators. The facilitation team has included Judy Ruttenberg and Elizabeth Waraksa from ARL; Rita Vine, University of Toronto; and Barbara Rockenbach, Columbia University.

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Pablo Alperin, and Vincent Larivière. Commercial scholarly publishers promote and sell bundles of journals—known as big deals—that provide access to entire collections rather than individual journals. Following this new model, size of serial collections in academic libraries increased almost fivefold from 1986 to 2011. Using data on library subscriptions and references made for a sample of North American universities, this study provides evidence that, while big deal bundles do decrease the mean price per subscribed journal, academic libraries receive less value for their investment. We find that university researchers cite only a fraction of journals purchased by their libraries, that this fraction is decreasing, and that the cost per cited journal has increased. These findings reveal how academic publishers use product differentiation and price strategies to increase sales and profits in the digital era, often at the expense of university and scientific stakeholders.

“Academic Librarian Research: An Update to a Survey of Attitudes, Involvement, and Perceived Capabilities” by Marie R. Kennedy and Kristine R. Brancolini. This article reports the results of a 2015 survey that updates and extends the authors’ 2010 survey of academic librarians, to learn of the current state of their attitudes, involvement, and perceived capabilities in the research process. A key change in the 2015 survey is the use of an expanded research confidence scale, designed by the authors. They also added questions on research training and institutional support for research. The results of this survey add to the growing body of research examining the success factors for librarian-researchers. Research self-efficacy continues to be a predictor of research success. Institutional support for research, including both formal and informal mentorship, is increasing and associated with research success. ¶¶

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5. M. P. Long and R. C. Schonfeld, “Ithaca S+ R US library survey 2013,” <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.22787>.

6. N. Bakkalbasi, B. Rockenbach, K. Tancheva, and R. Vine, “ARL Library Liaison Institute: What we learned about needs and opportunities for reskilling,” *College & Research Libraries News* 77(3), 118–21, doi: <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.77.3.9456>.

7. A small amount of library literature over the past decade has referred to sales or consulting models for liaison, for example, N. King, and J. Solis, “Liaisons as Sales Force: Using Sales Techniques to Engage Academic Library Users,” *In the Library With the Lead Pipe*, www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2017/liaisons/; T. Franks, “Trusted Librarian: Corporate Service Models Build Collaborative Academic Partnerships,” *Practical Academic Librarianship: The International Journal of the SLA Academic Division* 6 (2):1–16, <https://journals.tdl.org/>

pal/index.php/pal/article/view/7033/6109; E. M. Wilson, “The Role of Library Liaison as Consultant,” *Kentucky Libraries* 77(1), 14–19; E. Thompson “Reaching out to researchers— from subject librarian to sales rep,” *SCONUL Focus*, 48, 4–6.

8. For a description and explanation of value proposition exercises used in the institutes, see M. J. D’Elia, “Running a Value Proposition Exercise in Your Library: ‘How-To’ Lessons from the ARL Liaison Institute,” Association of Research Libraries, www.arl.org/component/content/article/6-publications-a-resources/3567-webinarrunning-a-value-proposition-exercise-in-your-library-qhow-toq-lessons-from-the-arl-liaison-institute.

9. Some libraries are actively training their librarians in interviewing techniques, for example, see the work of M. Tsang at the University of Miami Libraries, <http://www.arl.org/storage/documents/Faculty-Conversation-Project-Tips.pdf>. ¶¶