

# Liaison connection

## Building a better community

In 2009, the University of Iowa (UI) Libraries realized it had a problem. Liaisons were not talking to each other across disciplines. The library system is composed of seven separate libraries and, like many large systems, the individual libraries had gradually become more and more silo-ed. Managers and library administrators from across the system regularly met and discussed policies, new initiatives, and environmental changes. At the liaison level, though, liaisons from different libraries rarely met or collaborated outside of formal committee meetings and working groups. Instead, liaisons worked at the individual library level to set strategic goals, start new initiatives, and share best practices. This lack of cross-library interaction resulted in a poor sense of community among liaisons and likely stifled cross-library collaboration that could have resulted in new or stronger projects.

Juxtaposed with these communication issues were changes happening at UI and in academia at-large. First, the university had embarked on a program of creating cross-disciplinary “clusters” on themes such as digital humanities, the aging mind and brain, and water sustainability. Each of these new clusters could be supported by a dedicated liaison, but it made more sense and was more efficient for existing liaisons in relevant specialties to work together, effectively mirroring the efforts of the cluster program.

Second, across academia, it became clear that scholarly communication was changing as new media and distribution methods met traditional publishing methods and economic models. Supporting new models of scholarly communication was going to affect all of the liaisons and require innovative approaches and collaboration across the system.

Faced with both internal and external pressures, it became clear that better communication and a better sense of community needed to be fostered among the liaisons.

For many years, the libraries had a system where there were instruction librarians and bibliographers; faculty in many disciplines worked with two librarians: one librarian for research and instruction and another librarian for collection development.

In 2010, in an attempt to mainstream the scholarly communication duties of librarians, the UI Libraries’ administration followed the University of Minnesota’s lead to add advocating for scholarly communication reform to the core responsibilities of liaison librarians.<sup>1</sup> These additional responsibilities increasingly required closer faculty-librarian relationships. There was general agreement that a one-on-one liaison model (rather than having separate collection development and research/instruction librarians) would be a more effective approach to establishing and maintaining these relationships. The role of a liaison librarian would need to be redefined so that whenever possible, the liaison should be able to meet all the library needs for faculty in their departments.

In an effort to help clarify the new roles and expectations for liaisons, The Iowa Framework<sup>2</sup>

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Jonathan Koffel is clinical information librarian at the University of Minnesota, e-mail: jbkoffel@umn.edu, Kathy Magarrell is head of research and library instruction at the University of Iowa, e-mail: kathy-magarrell@uiowa.edu; Ericka Raber is research and instruction librarian at the University of Iowa, e-mail: ericka-raber@uiowa.edu, Kelly Thormodson is assistant director of the Harley E. French Library of Health Sciences at the University of North Dakota, e-mail: kelly.thormodson@med.und.edu

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was created by members of administration, in conjunction with liaisons, as a guide for librarians who served as liaisons to academic departments, colleges, and programs. The Iowa Framework was based on a system initially created by the University of Minnesota and served as a guide in identifying priorities and specifying activities for 2010 work plans. This framework was to serve as a “checklist” to help articulate both ongoing and new roles and responsibilities performed by liaison librarians and was to reflect the kinds of activities that matched the libraries’ strategic plan.

The Iowa Framework was put in place in anticipation of the scholarly communication environmental scan initiative lead by the Committee on Institutional Cooperation, a consortium of the Big Ten universities plus the University of Chicago. This initiative created a focused outreach effort to talk with faculty about the scholarly publishing system. Liaisons were having more direct connections with faculty for these discussions, and the librarians needed a way to share their experiences. Rather than facing each department alone, they wanted to hear what their colleagues were saying and doing to aid each other.

As it happens, the libraries had recently implemented a new Intranet system (SharePoint), and Kathy Magarrell, head of research and library instruction at the Main Library, and Jonathan Koffel, then clinical education librarian at Hardin Library, requested a site for liaisons. The site would be the first step in facilitating communication and sharing between liaisons, a virtual space for liaisons to exchange ideas, collaborate on projects, and track outreach efforts. We called it the “Liaison Connection.”

About 45 librarians joined the site; this included everyone with liaison responsibilities, as well as librarians who work with faculty and students in different areas, such as digital publishing and research, data services, and so forth. The inclusion of nonliaison librarians in the virtual space resulted in the unexpected benefit of an increased intradepartmental awareness of librarian-faculty interactions.

The Liaison Connection provided a virtual space for meeting and information sharing, but

a physical space was still lacking. To remedy this and attempt to facilitate communication among liaison librarians, Koffel proposed holding regular informal meetings for liaisons to share information and ideas with each other. Given our library culture of committee charges, agendas, and minutes, the informal nature of the meetings proved to be a challenge for the liaison group. What would be accomplished in the meetings? How would the group be defined? These questions were answered during the first meeting: the group would meet to share ideas, identify issues, and work to address challenges.

Koffel and Ericka Raber, a liaison in the Main Library, successfully steered our “unmeetings,” guiding us to select topics for future discussion and getting us to agree on collaborative projects. One project included offering input to e-resources staff about the default search screens within some of our EBSCOhost databases. Another was developing a system to provide feedback to our information technology department about our resource discovery system. This project has resulted in continued open communication between liaisons and IT staff. Finally, a project with roots in the liaison meetings was the development of guidelines and recommendations for how to create robust, branded, and high-quality online tutorials across the libraries.

We surveyed liaisons in spring 2012 in an effort to gauge satisfaction with the liaison meetings and to elicit suggestions for improvement. Responses to the survey showed overwhelming support of and appreciation for the informal structure of liaison meetings. When asked how the meetings have been helpful in their liaison role, most respondents placed high value on the sharing of information: “The liaison meetings keep me informed and enable me to feel connected to my colleagues.”

In response to the routine “egg-timer” sharing part of the meeting, another liaison wrote, “It’s very helpful to see what others are doing and look for ways to work collaboratively.”

Another response highlighted the future focus of the group’s efforts. When asked how the meetings can be improved, among the suggestions offered were to have a theme for the

meetings, include readings provided in advance, and hold a more extended retreat for in-depth discussions.

At the same time that the liaisons were exploring ways to increase communication, Magarrell and Kelly Thormodson, head of health sciences education and outreach, and Kathy Magarrell were thinking and talking about the interdisciplinary changes occurring on campus. The new trend on campus was cluster-hires: faculty hired to do research on a particular topic that didn't fit into just one academic silo. The informal liaison meetings provided one outlet for discussing how to best serve this new class of patrons. At the meetings, however, this was just one topic among many, and there was not always time to discuss these changes in depth. Magarrell and Thormodson wanted to see how they as managers could expand on these discussions and provide more opportunities for liaisons to interact and get to know each other.

In 2009, they began a series of "Liaison Events" to give the liaisons time to get to know each other in a more social environment. The first event was a team trivia contest at a local pub. Liaisons were randomly assigned to teams, and each team tackled 18 trivia questions in the hopes of winning one of the coffee house gift card prizes.

The second event was the Liaison Olympics. Thormodson and Magarrell set up croquet, badminton, lawn darts, and bocce ball in a local park just south of the Main Library. Many liaisons participated, and it was fun to see friendly rivalries develop. The third event was Movie Night. Here they chose to show the classic librarian movie *Desk Set*. After watching the film, attendees discussed what has and has not changed in the library world in the many years since the movie came out. The events were voluntary and no university funds were used.

While it is almost impossible to find a time that worked for everyone, Thormodson and Magarrell tried to plan them far enough in advance that most liaisons were able to attend. So far about 50 percent of the liaisons have been able to participate, but they hope to increase this in the future with a cemetery tour and possibly an adult beverage tasting. Those who have

attended the events have really enjoyed them, and it is nice to see the different liaisons getting to know each other and having fun together. Informal and casual events like these are great for bolstering a sense of community. As liaisons talked at these events, they began to learn more about the common challenges they face as well as the unique quirks of each library or department. We learned that the business librarians see more patent questions than anyone knew about; there are two liaisons who regularly use and teach Zotero; and the main library reference desk regularly answers medical library questions for patrons via instant message.

Many positive developments have emerged from these efforts. Two of our liaisons brought in a trainer to teach a patent class and more liaisons have been doing cross-library training based on individual expertise (Web of Science, Zotero). The liaison discussion board is regularly used to communicate and share information with the group. And a new data management survey is being administered by two liaisons from different libraries working together.

Liaisons are constantly looking for better ways to support their users and better understand their environments. This focus, however, can result in liaisons not being aware of what is happening outside their own library. By actively engaging with their colleagues through message boards, information meetings, and social events, liaisons at the UI Libraries were able to build a better sense of community, identify common needs, and draft plans for tackling them. This movement towards collaboration mirrors the increasingly interdisciplinary cluster-based culture at UI and creates a more agile and collaborative staff, one that is better able to meet the emerging needs of our users.

## 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 & Research Libraries* 71 (Jan. 2010): 63–76.

2. "Iowa Framework for Liaisons/Subject Librarians," last modified April 2, 2009, [http://ir.uiowa.edu/lib\\_pubs/120/](http://ir.uiowa.edu/lib_pubs/120/). 