Building a successful liaison program from the ground up

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Grigg, K. (2017) "Building a Successful Liaison Program From the Ground Up." *Library Connect Newsletter*, 15(5), np. Retrieved from "https://libraryconnect.elsevier.com/articles/building-successful-liaison-program-ground"

Abstract:

The liaison model in academic librarianship has an increased emphasis on engagement and embeddedness. It is moving away from traditional reference services and toward offering advanced research assistance and increased instruction. Shifting to this liaison model requires larger conversations on what traditional duties can be jettisoned to serve new roles and deepen existing engagement.

Keywords: Academic libraries | Faculty | Engagement | Liaisons | Embedded librarianship

Article:

The liaison model in academic librarianship has an increased emphasis on engagement and embeddedness. It is moving away from traditional reference services and toward offering advanced research assistance and increased instruction. Shifting to this liaison model requires larger conversations on what traditional duties can be jettisoned to serve new roles and deepen existing engagement.

Establishing a new science liaison librarian position

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) librarians transitioned to the liaison model in 2012. At the time, there was no designated science liaison; disciplines were distributed to librarians in a variety of departments. A position was created, and I began working as the library's first science liaison librarian in the fall of 2013. While other liaisons were still working with the same departments they had served prior to the transition, I was the first dedicated science liaison in the library. The librarians who had previously been assigned to these science departments had other full-time positions in various departments, and they did not have enough time to offer extensive services to the science departments.

Integrating library instruction into the curriculum

It is always challenging to begin a liaison position in an academic library and make connections, but especially so as the first dedicated liaison. If a department had never had library instruction, how could I create buy-in to begin integrating library instruction into the curriculum?

I started by looking at past instruction statistics to see what classes had been reached, gather a list of identified power users, and consult our list of departmental library representatives. Collections personnel can often identify which users tend to request journals and books the most often. I began by setting up meetings with any power users in a department, the library faculty representative and the department head, if possible. I brought handouts that described the services and resources I could offer as the liaison, including:

- Customized library instruction
- Assistance with research services
- Consultations
- Help with citation management tools
- Embedded assignments
- Library web guides

I did some light curriculum mapping to identify courses with the "writing intensive" marker, and asked if there were research assignments involved and if they had other suggestions for courses where library instruction might be appropriate. I then asked if I could attend the next departmental faculty meeting. At the meeting I introduced myself, talked about the services I could offer, mentioned some of the courses I thought might be appropriate for instruction, and asked the department members if they could recommend any others. I brought along the Learning Outcomes for Information Literacy Matrix (Figure A) and discussed how we use this matrix to plan our instruction sessions.

After the departmental meetings, I began by following up with the instructors of courses identified as possible opportunities for instruction and offered library instruction and custom web guides. I am not a natural salesperson; I don't think marketing comes naturally to many in our profession, but I tried to remember everything I learned from a previous life in retail sales. I asked "When can I schedule a library instruction session this semester?" rather than "Do you want instruction?" I expected some eye rolling from faculty, but was surprised at how many took me up on my offer.

Engaging faculty outside the classroom

In addition to contacting faculty to offer instruction, I showed up where I thought faculty might be present. I attended departmental lectures and events, and the tenure recognition ceremony each year, and pursued volunteer opportunities where I had a chance to network with my departments.

The first two semesters were spent marketing and building relationships, and finding ways to offer as much instruction as possible. As I began to build those necessary relationships with faculty, I was keenly aware that I needed to nurture them as well. I was able to deepen relationships via activities, such as:

- Presented once or twice a year, and arranged guest speakers, to my liaison departments on UNCG Libraries faculty grants in information literacy partnerships with librarians
- Participated in a couple of grant applications with the biology department

- Continued to grow my instruction program, including developing special workshops that were not course-related
- Offered product demos
- Collaborated on collection development
- Helped grade final presentations for the Computer Science Senior Project class
- Interviewed each department about their data management practices and needs (Figure B)
- Served as front-line support for basic data management and other scholarly communication questions from faculty, including help with our repository (NC DOCKS)

UNCG Libraries offers many innovative services, which helped me in terms of having valuable information to share in my marketing and promotion.

Promoting and providing services to students

Along with marketing my services to faculty, I have also tried to build relationships with students. I have my own individual chat queue via LibraryH3lp that is embedded on all of my LibGuides. When I am in my office, I am logged in to answer questions. I also promote individual consultations, and after embedding the YouCanBookMe widget on my LibGuides, my consultation statistics have shot up. Next fall, I will be teaching a two credit class in Environmental and Sustainability Studies that will culminate with a backpacking trip with 16 students on the Appalachian Trail. It's important to build a following with both faculty and students.

Sustaining your liaison services: lessons learned

On a cautionary note, I would suggest that new liaisons recognize up front that relationships and opportunities build slowly, and build upon themselves. It is tempting at first to almost over market, and if you have too many takers all at once, it can be difficult to serve everyone. In retrospect, I probably should have piloted services and grown instruction one department at a time and then assessed how scalable my program was.

If you have multiple liaison departments, you need to ask yourself how embedded you can be. The gold standard of embeddedness means increasing engagement — more consultations with students and collaboration with faculty. At some point, there are only so many hours in the week.

So I would suggest that, when building an instruction program, push a service one or two departments at a time, assess the efficacy of these services, and decide how and when to keep rolling them out. My other suggestion is for new liaisons to not feel discouraged when they encounter faculty or departments who show little interest in collaborating. This allows you to focus on the departments that are interested first.

I keep abreast of changes in departments. A course instructor might have turned me down, but the next semester, if the course had a new instructor, I'd try again. One department head had not been very receptive to instruction in the past; when a new department head came on board, I contacted him. He was very receptive to library instruction, and now I average about 10 instruction sessions each semester in this department.

Be patient, persistent and strategic. Rome was not built in a day. Build on successes and grow your program at a rate that will be sustainable.

Figure A: UNCG's Learning Outcomes for Information Literacy Matrix

University of North Carolina at Greensboro University Libraries
Learning Outcomes for Information Literacy

	Beginning Outcome	Intermediate Outcome	Advanced Outcome
Determine what information is needed and why	**1.1** Identify an information need		
	1.2 Define an appropriate research question	**2.2** Construct a research question appropriate for the discipline	**3.2** Refine the research question based on existing information; Construct a research question of appropriate scope based on existing information
Locate appropriate resources	**1.3** Choose keywords that retrieve relevant information	**2.3** Apply vocabulary appropriate to the discipline	**3.3** Apply controlled vocabulary to retrieve relevant results as appropriate
	1.4 Apply the search connector AND to combine keywords	**2.4** Apply the search connector OR to broaden a search	
	1.5 Select relevant books, articles, reference materials, etc.	**2.5** Identify appropriate subject-specific databases to find relevant information	**3.5** Identify the core journals or resources in their specialization
	1.6 Identify appropriate virtual, human and physical information resources and services	**2.6** Identify subject specialist for the major field	
Evaluate, synthesize, and critically analyze information	**1.7** Distinguish between scholarly and popular articles	**2.7** Distinguish between primary and secondary sources where appropriate	**3.7** Evaluate the credentials of an author and/or publisher
	1.8 Evaluate websites for appropriateness as information sources	**2.8** Evaluate articles and websites for authority, accuracy, currency, coverage and objectivity	
Communication information ethically and effectively	**1.9** Communicates information from sources for a specific purpose	**2.9** Communicates and organizes information from a variety of sources for a specific purpose	**3.9** Communicates, organizes and synthesizes information from sources to fully achieve a specific purpose.
	1.10 Apply the proper citation style to document sources	**2.10** Apply the standard citation style for the major discipline appropriately	

Figure B: Questions for Data Management Interviews with Departments

Data Management Interviews

1. What kinds of format/data types are you using? (ie, images, spreadsheets, databases, genetic data, etc)
2. About what size are these data sets you produce? Gigabytes? Terrabytes?
3. Where do you store data during the project? How often are backups made? What methods do you use to organize the data? Where do you store data after the research is completed?
4. How long do you plan to keep your data?
5. Do your funding agencies require data management plans? (Are you involved with the generation of data management plans? If so, do you use any kind of data management plan tools?
6. Who else assists faculty and researchers in your department?
7. Do you share your data inside/outside the institution? If so, how do you do it? If not, why not?
8. Can you describe your use of secondary data, and if you have any problems or issues that arise with that?
9. What services can the library provide? What would be the best way to promote the services we provide?