

Liaison Relationships in Practice: Connecting with Architecture Faculty in a Polytechnic Environment

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Introduction

As Deborah discussed in her introduction to this panel session, there are many names to describe the many things that liaison librarians do. Regardless of the title we use, Deborah suggested a gradual evolution over time from this role being focused on collection development towards “communication and consulting-oriented tasks”.¹ I would argue that there is another, more recent shift occurring, in our approach to these efforts to communicate with our faculty. Our liaison efforts have in the past been described as “too insular and library-focused rather than client and institute focused.”² However, in 2007 John Rodwell & Linden Fairbairn described a gradual change in the role of the liaison, “characterized by a more outward-looking perspective and complexity, emphasizing stronger engagement and partnership with the faculty and direct engagement in the University’s teaching and research programs.”³

At Cal Poly’s Robert E. Kennedy Library, librarians have worked through several models of faculty collaboration, moving from a collections-focused arrangement, to a departmental liaison model, and most recently to what we call a College Librarian model, with the goal of achieving not just communication, but true collaboration, with faculty. Today I will describe our College Librarian model, talk about how I work within this model with the College of Architecture and Environmental Design

¹ Deborah K. Ultan Boudewyns, “Librarians and their evolving identity,” presentation given at ARLIS/NA 2009 Conference.

² Donald G. Frank, Gregory K. Raschke, Julie Wood, and Julie Z. Yang, “Information Consulting: The Key to Success in Academic Libraries,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 27, no. 2 (2001): 90.

³ John Rodwell, and Linden Fairbairn, “Dangerous Liaisons? Defining the Faculty Liaison Librarian Service Model, its Effectiveness and Sustainability,” *Library Management* 29, no. 1/2 (2008): 119.

(CAED), and then offer some insights into the challenges and opportunities I've faced as a new librarian networking with architecture faculty.

The College Librarian Model

At Cal Poly, we view our College Librarian model as being fundamentally different from the departmental liaison model that we previously operated under. In both models, each subject librarian is assigned to a college. However, in the departmental liaison model, each department within that college selected one faculty member who would serve as the communication channel between the librarian and the department. The result of this was that librarians had limited contact with any other faculty members, and their understanding of a department's needs varied greatly depending on the commitment level of the faculty liaison.

In 2003, the library recognized the limits of this model and moved to a new conception of faculty-librarian collaboration. The College Librarian model encourages librarians to have interactions with many different faculty members from each of their departments. Librarians explore working relationships with each faculty member depending on what will best meet their needs, from collection building, to research support, to instruction and assignment design. As a result, College Librarians at Cal Poly have a very flexible role, and are encouraged to define their work in a way that best serves the needs of their own constituents. Many academic libraries see their liaison programs as advocating for the library within academic departments <point out library-focused>. While we do some of this, we primarily see ourselves instead as advocates for our departments, bringing their needs back to the library. The assumption underlying this switch in perspective is that the library will evolve to meet the needs of our constituents, rather than us trying to convince faculty to change the way they work in order to make use of our existing services.

A major university that has successfully implemented a similar model is Virginia Tech. <switch slide> In their 2002 article on Virginia Tech's college librarian program, Nancy Seamans and Paul Metz describe characteristics that are very similar to what we are attempting to accomplish at Cal Poly. While Virginia Tech is a much larger university than Cal Poly, there are some similarities between the libraries. The library system at Virginia Tech has a centralized structure, with one main library and only three small branch libraries (Cal Poly has no official branch libraries, although some colleges, CAED included, have resource centers not managed by the library). At Virginia Tech, this arrangement allowed the library system to function with a relatively small staff, but resulted in "a physical and psychological remoteness of the library from the daily life of most faculty and serious students", which is a concern for Cal Poly librarians as well.⁴ Virginia Tech began their College Librarian model in the mid 1990s, in an attempt to bridge the gap between the library and the departments. The program has continued to expand over time, and "the college librarians are justifiably proud of their unique role at the university, where their primary responsibility is *not* to the library but, rather, to the college they serve".⁵ Virginia Tech's success is an inspiration to us at Cal Poly, who are newer to this model.

It is perhaps no coincidence that our initiative is modeled after that of another polytechnic university. A polytechnic, regardless of its size or emphasis on graduate or undergraduate education, tends to be focused on teaching, learning, and discovery. At Cal Poly, faculty are thought of as "teacher-scholars", and it is significant that the word "teacher" comes first. We are (unlike Virginia Tech) a primarily undergraduate institution, and faculty are heavily focused on student success. This perhaps makes them more receptive to collaborating with librarians in areas related to curriculum and teaching. Involvement

⁴ Nancy H. Seamans and Paul Metz, "Virginia Tech's Innovative College Librarian Program," *College & Research Libraries* 63, no. 4 (2002): 324.

⁵ Seamans, 326.

in information literacy instruction, with varied forms of delivery, is one of the thrusts of college librarians' efforts.

As a final point about the College Librarian model, I should say that I don't intend to belabor the difference between the labels "liaison librarian" and "college librarian". This is just a matter of terminology. Indeed, there may be many libraries that call their librarians "liaison librarians", or "subject librarians" or any number of other things, but whose philosophy matches that of our "college librarian" model much more closely. Even in our own case, librarian's "college" affiliations are not rigid, and subject responsibilities are sometimes assigned in different ways, to redistribute workload or to foster a natural opportunity for interdisciplinarity, as was the case when I was assigned to work with the Department of Art and Design in addition my primary role with the College of Architecture.

The College Librarian model in the College of Architecture and Environmental Design

As the College Librarian for the College of Architecture and Environmental Design, I work with the departments of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, City and Regional Planning, Construction Management, and Architectural Engineering. The services that I have to offer to my faculty will likely sound familiar to all of you: I do in-person instruction sessions, I build a variety of online instructional support materials, I offer consulting on the design of research assignments and the creation of course reading lists, I offer research support to both faculty and students, and I build collections that meet campus needs.

However, the College Librarian model isn't about any of these things specifically. It is about building long-term, lasting professional relationships between librarians and teaching faculty.⁶ These relationships are the foundation that allows my day-to-day work to be successful, and they are what help me learn when an existing initiative needs to be replaced by a new one. So the question I hope to answer today is: how do I build these relationships with my faculty?

Well, I do all of the usual things that have been recommended in the literature.⁷ I have compiled an email list of all faculty, and I notify them on a quarterly basis of anything new that might be of interest. I attend departmental meetings. I contact new faculty each fall before the academic year begins. I keep up with faculty research and publications. I attend any and all campus events where I might run into my faculty. I am active on university committees. I'm also active with the Center for Teaching and Learning, offering faculty development seminars on faculty-librarian collaboration to enhance courses. All of these things, when repeated over time, go a long way towards building relationships. However, there are a few specific things that I've tried that I want to highlight, since their success left an impression on me.

1. **Start simple.** Begin your liaison endeavors with the faculty who will be most receptive to your advances. I have found that, in architecture, these tend fall into two categories: faculty who are teaching history & theory, and new faculty. History/theory faculty are natural collaborators because they are focused on research, and consider those skills to be important for their students, in contrast to studio faculty who often have different priorities. That is not to say that I haven't begun

⁶ Melissa Moore, "Reeling 'Em In: How to Draw Teaching Faculty into Collaborative Relationships," *Resource Sharing & Information Networks*, 17, no. 1/2 (2004): 77-83.

⁷ Literature such as: Christine Black, Sarah Crest and Mary Volland, "Building a Successful Information Literacy Infrastructure on the Foundation of Faculty-Librarian Collaboration," *Research Strategies* 18 (2001): 215-225; Stephan Macalusa and Barbara Whitney Petruzzelli, "The Library Liaison Toolkit: Learning to Bridge the Communication Gap," *The Reference Librarian*, 43, no. 89/90 (2005):163-177; Susan Logue, et al., *Liaison Services*, SPEC Kit 301 (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2007).

to develop relationships with studio faculty, just that I don't beat myself up if those contacts seem to take more time and care to nurture into productive working relationships. I've also found new faculty to be very receptive to a welcome note and an invitation to the library's annual New Faculty Reception. New faculty are, obviously, new – many have just arrived in a new city where they may not know anyone, and must learn the ropes of a new institution on top of prepping classes they may never have taught before. They tend to be thrilled to find a friendly face who can help them acclimatize to their new environment and prepare for the academic year ahead. Many of the relationships I began with faculty who were new in the same year that I arrived at Cal Poly (2007), have developed into strong and regular working collaborations that I expect to stand the test of time.

2. **Put yourself where they'll naturally be.** This is more than just getting outside the library and taking up an office within the building where the faculty offices are. If the department or college gives you an office in some dark corner of the building where there is space free, faculty are not going to find themselves there by happenstance. They tend not to wander the halls socializing. You need to be more strategic. Perhaps this means that you'll need to be the one wandering the halls stopping by their offices. Perhaps it means lobbying for an office space near a high-traffic area – near the administration offices, near a major gallery or studio space, or near the lounge or restrooms. For me, it turned out to be the college's Media Resource Center. This facility, primarily focused on the college's image and materials samples collections, is a real hub within the college. While I certainly meet and assist many students during my office hours there (I aim for an average of one full day a week at my desk in the MRC), an added bonus is running into faculty when they drop by. It was through such informal interactions that I became involved with the materials collection, and am

currently in the process of co-authoring an article with a member of the architecture faculty as a result.

3. **Communicate appropriately and with intention.** When I first began in my current position, I met with many of my departments and basically just told them about all of the services the library offered. This received a lackluster response; it was information they'd heard before. This year, when I meet with departments, I have a specific purpose in mind that will be of interest to those particular faculty members. Last quarter I met with the city and regional planning department to show them a specific online research guide that I had created, called "The Planners' Toolkit". This guide, created as a result of specific comments made by several faculty members, has been a hit and I've since been asked to teach several instruction sessions supported by the guide. The meeting was successful because I had something to say that was meaningful specifically to them. I should note, however, that what works for one department may not work for another. As a new hire I was told by one of my department chairs that faculty meetings were not an appropriate time for me to communicate with faculty in that department – the department is so big and unwieldy that they have difficulty just getting through the agenda items they consider to be vital. Some battles are not worth fighting. I find other ways to communicate with faculty in that department.

4. **Show that you value the things that they value.** One of the most successful things that I've done is to attend student crits and exhibitions of student work. When a faculty member sees me there it shows them that I care about something that has occupied much of their time, energy, and passion for the last semester. In my college, just like in all of yours, studio faculty spend many, many hours with their students and come to care deeply about the projects and the students themselves. A show of support for the students is a show of support for the faculty as well. I have even started to

volunteer to be a reviewer of student work at these events; despite my lack of confidence in doing this, both students and faculty seem to appreciate the different perspective that I bring.

Challenges of the College Librarian Model

Being a liaison librarian is not always easy. I'll start by sharing some of the general challenges that are part and parcel of the College Librarian model, and then share a few personal challenges that I myself struggle with every day as a new librarian.

1. **Keeping the team together.** Under the College Librarian model, our colleges are the center of our existence (while at work, that is!). College Librarians who have built strong relationships with their faculty tend to see these people as their closest colleagues. However, there is work to be done within the library that will benefit the student body as a whole. While the contributions of College Librarians to broad library initiatives is extremely important, it is very hard for us to find the time to come back and focus on the library. It is a challenge for us to remember to return from immersion in the specific, to instead consider broadly the issues facing our library and our campus, and work as a team to address them. When difficult decisions such as budget cuts become necessary, also, we must take care to balance our roles as advocates for our colleges, with our roles as stewards of research access for the campus as a whole.
2. **Proving our worth.** Building long-term, lasting professional relationships takes a significant amount of time and energy, the expenditure of which can at times be difficult to quantify.⁸ Can I put on a statistics sheet the fact that I was 5 minutes late for a librarian meeting because I ran into so-and-so and asked her about a course she's been developing for next term? It is the accumulation of these

⁸ Moore, 79.

tiny interactions which, over time, turn into collaborative relationships, but the process of getting there is one in which many types of activities, some of them decidedly social and even (gasp!) fun, blur together and overlap. It is a challenge for the College Librarian to show exactly what they're doing with their time, and so it is very important to have the support of library management – the librarians need to know that this unclassified bulk of their time will not be given away to other tasks. Especially when a model such as ours is first implemented, management needs to realize that it may take several years for the College Librarian's efforts to result in tangible projects and a significant number of countable, formal interactions.

Challenges for the New Professional

In addition to the general challenges faced by libraries operating under a College Librarian model, there are challenges that the new librarian experiences. Here are some tips based on my experiences in my first two years on the job:

1. **Be realistic.** I have met many amazing role models in the last year and a half since I became an architecture librarian. It's easy to berate myself for not having accomplished what they've accomplished. Remember that relationship building takes time, and it isn't always going to work the way you think it will. Small setbacks and frustrations are par for the course. For example:
2. **Always follow up.** Last year, my first year, I began a number of relationships with faculty that were built solely around scheduling and planning a one-shot instruction session. However, faculty used the experience to learn the skills themselves, and then neglected to book a session this year. This was my own fault for lack of follow-up and effort to build a deeper and longer-lasting relationship. I assumed that they would contact me again of their own accord, which wasn't the case. Next year, I

intend to follow up with everyone who has booked an instruction session at any time since I began at Cal Poly.

- 3. Have confidence!** Here is a confession: establishing relationships with faculty is, for me, by far the most difficult part of my job. That is really one of the reasons that I agreed to speak to you on this topic today. Because, to my great surprise, I have had success with this despite my lack of confidence, and I hope that my remarks today will encourage and inspire other new librarians in the audience. As not only a new librarian, but as someone who is relatively new to the working world in general, I don't have the benefit of a wealth of experience to bring to my interactions with the experienced and accomplished faculty at my university. While my education is varied and interdisciplinary, and allows me to perform my job competently, I feel that it is glaringly obvious that my architectural knowledge is at an undergraduate level and I'm trying to communicate coherently with people immersed in a specialized vocabulary. So what do you do about this? Well, continuing to study and keep up with the subject matter helps. But, primarily, you just have to continually push yourself to get out of your comfort zone. When I've done this, I've been pleasantly surprised by the results. Librarians are (generally) not architects, and faculty members do not expect us to be. When something comes up in conversation that you don't understand, ask – people enjoy being asked to talk about their work. Have confidence in the things you do know, and it will be enough for your faculty.

Conclusion

In the course of my reading to prepare this presentation, I looked at an article called "Going boldly beyond the reference desk: practical advice and learning plans for new reference librarians performing liaison work", written collaboratively by a group of five new librarians. In this article the authors quote

Thomas Edison as having said: “opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work”.⁹ This quote resonated for me. I find it easy to let outreach to faculty slip to the bottom of my to-do list because it seems difficult, and it puts me at risk of failure. However, in the short time I’ve been an architecture librarian, the efforts that I’ve made have paid off immensely, both in terms of the wide range of collaborative professional projects that I’ve initiated, and in terms of the satisfying personal interactions I’ve been able to have with exciting, engaging, driven people. I hope that the relationships I’m building with faculty at Cal Poly are ones that will last throughout my career.

⁹ Richard A. Stoddart, et al. “Going Boldly Beyond the Reference Desk: Practical Advice and Learning Plans for New Reference Librarians Performing Liaison Work,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 32, no. 4 (2006): 419-427.