

The University of South Florida Libraries' Evolving Service Model: From ROLES to Research Platform Teams

Maryellen Allen, Director of Academic Services, University of South Florida Libraries

Todd Chavez, Dean, University of South Florida Libraries

Responding to the profession-wide challenge to articulate the value and impact of academic library programs, the University of South Florida (USF) Libraries Academic Services department embarked on an ambitious exploration of the institution's need for and expectations of research and instruction services. Initiated in 2015, the study of USF's academic landscape concluded that it was time to substantively reconfigure the existing Liaison Program to meet requirements for the coming five to seven years. The Re-Imagining Our Library Engagement Services (ROLES) project began in March 2016 and teams were created to examine various aspects of the Liaison Program and to determine how the program could be re-imagined to more effectively support the research and teaching mission of the university.

In early March 2016, the assistant director for research services launched the project with a thorough exploration of the literature concerning liaison programs, and later developed a reading list of key sources to serve as a common foundation for all ROLES participants. The department's leadership team (director of academic services, the assistant director for research services, the assistant director for instructional services and the assistant director for digital learning initiatives) formulated the questions that would serve as the scaffolding for any liaison program emerging for the first time. From the initial exhaustive list, the group narrowed the questions to five areas of focus:

1. How are liaison programs in other universities structured and how do they work?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current liaison

- program at the USF Libraries?
3. What are the research and instructional needs of the faculty and students?
 4. What is the level of research in the current institutional curriculum?
 5. What quantitative data is available and which data is useful for the project?

A project leader and a Steering Committee oversaw the initiative. The Steering Committee was comprised of the librarians leading each of five teams aligned with the areas of focus. These teams included:

- **Models:** Tasked with exploring the types of liaison programs currently in use at other universities and their histories, structures, strengths, challenges, and advice to others.
- **SWOT Analysis of Liaison Program:** Tasked with identifying the current liaison model's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT).
- **Academic Needs:** Tasked with surveying the chairs and faculty in the academic departments to determine their needs from librarian liaisons with respect to research, collections, and instructional support.
- **Curriculum Team:** Tasked with examining the syllabi of academic programs to identify the level of research present in courses and assignments.
- **Data Gathering & Analysis:** Tasked with taking stock of the university to determine degree program information (program size, number of degrees awarded, trends, etc.) and faculty information (research areas, productivity, number of faculty per program, etc.)

Team members included librarians and other professionals from all departments within the library.

USF's Liaison Model: Past and Present

When the initiative began, the USF Libraries Liaison Program would best be described as traditional. This model had been adopted decades ago when there was a large Reference Services department with over 16 librarians and more than 15 graduate assistants from the School of Information. Assignments for “bibliographic instruction,” as requested by department faculty, were blended with reference desk and collection development responsibilities. Librarians were individually assigned to academic departments based on one or more factors: librarian interests, academic background, or relationship to a faculty member in the department. In an environment with an essentially “flat” budget, declining personnel levels, and retirements over the last 11 years, this model proved unsustainable. Even as the USF Libraries’ approach to reference and instruction services transformed into a more efficient program that applied library faculty where and when they were most needed and requested, it was clear that the traditional model had provided a beneficial and recognizable “face” or brand for thousands of faculty and students. Nonetheless, everyone understood that the Liaison Program needed to be reassessed. The goals of the new model were to preserve the “high-touch” benefit of a traditional model while exploring other models that more effectively allowed librarians to meet the changing instructional and research needs of faculty and students.

After much investigation into other models and their implementation at other academic libraries, and analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of our own program, the decision was made to combine the best aspects from each of the models studied.¹ The new model for the Liaison Program would employ the strengths of the three prevailing models described in the *ROLES Models Team Final Report*.² The comprehensive new model emphasized the liaison librarian as the USF Libraries’ ambassador to the USF community, meeting university goals and departmental research needs through collaboration within and external to the USF Libraries. This new model, as described in the *ROLES full final report*,³ would be structured to be adaptable for future

needs and assessable in part or whole.

The Research Platform Team Initiative

In 2017, building on recommendations from the ROLES study and experiences from an earlier service model internally referred to as the Research Services & Collections unit, the dean of the USF Libraries launched a new service strategy that would take the bold recommendations articulated in the ROLES report to the next level. The Research Platform Team (RPT) model creates a series of librarian-led teams tasked with establishing deep relationships with faculty and graduate students in either an academic department or disciplinary cluster to provide targeted, focused, collaborative services that emphasize active participation (as opposed to support) in research, grants, teaching, and publication. Figure 1 provides a graphic overview of the concept. The RPTs will be complemented by an Academic Success Team of librarians with a primary focus on supporting the undergraduate student population.



Figure 1. Research Platform Team (RPT) concept

Each RPT employs the combined model approach to provide departments/disciplines with expertise in librarianship (for example, collection management, research support), functional expertise (for example, data management, publication support, GIS services, intellectual property), and subject expertise derived from education at or above the master's level of accomplishment. In forming the teams, the USF Libraries' leadership is committed to providing sufficient salary levels to recruit and hire librarians possessing a minimum of a master's degree in the target discipline. Additionally, each librarian leading an RPT will be complemented with one or more functional or subject experts to ensure that the level of support will meet faculty/graduate student expectations.

Each RPT will be able to draw upon a wealth of support across the organization, including seemingly disparate areas of activity as 3-D visualization services, digitization, fiscal support, intellectual property expertise, and more. The librarian lead for each RPT will also assume responsibility for collections (including the associated materials budget resources) that are unambiguously tied to the target discipline, while collections deemed general and multidisciplinary will continue to be acquired and managed by the Collections Department. The addition of responsibility for collections extends to the USF Libraries' Special Collections holdings based on the target discipline's needs. Finally, RPT members will be expected to teach credit-bearing courses within the department/disciplinary cluster, participate in grants, and engage actively in departmental research. In summary, they will be expected to become members of their departments even to the point of physically occupying space in that department or being jointly appointed.

In short, the RPT lead effectively becomes the director/head for liaison services, collections, special collections, digitization, GIS services, etc., based on the needs and expectations articulated by the faculty and graduate students in the target disciplines. Authority, budget, and accountability will all be decentralized as the RPT coverage extends across the institutional academic ecosystem. Department directors

will exercise their leadership responsibilities through the articulation of broad goals/objectives for RPT leads and provide direct traditional oversight for the library's core functional areas (for example, cataloging, acquisitions) and shared services utilized by multiple RPTs (for example, GIS services, fiscal services, human resources). In this brave new world of decentralization, the USF Libraries leadership will focus on ensuring constant communication and careful coordination.

Conclusion

At the time of writing (May 2018), the first RPT has been launched. Led by a librarian with a graduate certificate in environmental studies and complemented by a newly hired ABD subject expert in geoscience

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education, that team is focused on the School of Geosciences (including the more traditional disciplines of geology, environmental studies, and geography). Three Research Platform Teams will be in place by fall 2018. They

are the result of existing strong collaborative relationships with the departments and represent a translation of these relationships into a more formalized arrangement. The USF Libraries' five-year hiring plan includes 10 additional RPTs hired at a rate of two per year.

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and the importance of a service model “tailored” to specific disciplinary needs. There was no overlap in service interests. The challenge will lie in making good on each and every dimension of service we have proposed.

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Endnotes

1. After consulting with other institutions identified as USF peer and aspirant, three distinct models of liaison programs emerged: A traditional model, in which a librarian was assigned to liaison work for one or more academic departments; a functional model, in which librarians were assigned to specific library service categories but not to specific departments; and a subject team model, in which librarians assigned to specific departments were also organized by teams, usually based upon academic disciplines that were similar in their approach to research.
2. Andrew Smith, Kayt Ahnberg, Jennifer Friedman, Barbara Lewis, Bonita Pollock, and Susan Silver, *ROLES Models Team Final Report*, May 2, 2017, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/15mDKAFbUhtjm2-KG0HjIOSDdnXnvRYxi/view>.
3. Jennifer Friedman, Maryellen Allen, Susie Ariew, Jason Boczar, Nancy Cunningham, Bonita Pollock, Andrew Smith, Nora Wood, *Re-Imagining Our Library Engagement Services (ROLES): Final Report*

and Recommendations, May 22, 2017, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/15ylnqPxkl9QZmN2t27fBwXltFV34X3a/view>.

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