

What Are We Trying to Build?

Barbara Rockenbach, Associate University Librarian for Research and Learning, Columbia University

This compilation of articles brings together ideas on the changing roles and opportunities for academic library liaisons with faculty. Five institutions share their reorganizations and redefinitions of what it means to be a liaison in today's research library in this issue of *Research Library Issues (RLI)*. There are many commonalities across the five approaches, as well as differences based on the different contexts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; the University of California (UC), Riverside; the University of Guelph; the University of South Florida; and the University of Texas (UT) at Austin.

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Much has been written in recent years about the role of the library liaison.¹ The value of this particular aggregation of articles is that these institutions have shared the outcomes of some of the changes made to liaison work over the last decade, in the case of Guelph, and over shorter time periods for the other institutions. The articles reflect on not only what work liaisons are doing, but **how** that work is done. Guelph structured their reorganization of liaison work around the question, “What are we trying to build?” This is an excellent place for all of us to start as we think about the value and future of the work liaisons do on our campuses.

To begin with commonalities among the approaches contained in this issue, it is clear that values are critical to all institutions reconsidering liaison work. For the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), values are at the heart of the work they are doing. Values of openness, social justice, and diversity and inclusion are the cornerstone of the MIT approach, or as the article states, MIT Libraries “are determined

to help reshape the information ecosystem so that it fosters, rather than hinders, our planet’s urgent needs for expanded and inclusive education, research, access to information, and publishing— inclusiveness that accurately reflects and involves the many voices and perspectives on the human condition.”

All five institutions are striving for a rebalance of activities done by liaisons to ensure that duties and responsibilities for liaisons are not just additive. As new spheres of activity emerge on our campuses, how can we ensure that we keep up without overburdening liaison staff? For Guelph, as the research needs of campus increasingly put demands on library staff or the “librarian was expected to do everything,” the library needed to determine what could be given up and how to reorganize the work of liaisons. Guelph moved away from a subject liaison model in which the staff was organized by departmental and subject liaisons because this model meant they were organized to do the small stuff, not the big. In other words, “individual librarians could complete small-scale initiatives, but coordinating anything across the liaison team was a complex negotiation.”

Alignment with campus priorities and efforts to, in the words of the University of South Florida article, “more effectively support the research and teaching mission of the university” is also a thread that connects these five approaches. It is clear that finding ways to support campus efforts is an area of opportunity for liaisons. For UC Riverside, this opportunity presented itself in their strategic planning process in which they identified “the needs of campus stakeholders, to develop vision and goals, and to create a road map to ensure that we continue to meet and anticipate the campus curricular and research needs.” This focus on strategic alignment is not only valuable for rethinking liaison work, but also for ensuring the library is part of collective problem-solving in our institutions.

A 2016 study of library directors by Ithaka S+R noted that since 2013 there have been:

...notable declines in the share of respondents [library directors] who agree that they and their supervisor [provost or dean] share the same vision for the library...a strong indication of the perceived division between library leadership and leadership elsewhere in the institution....²

This study highlights an apparent disconnect between what university administrators think about the role of the library and library staff within an institution and what library directors think about their role. However, the study found that when a library had engaged in strategic planning, the library was more apt to be in alignment with its institution's administrative leadership. Many of the institutions represented in this issue of *RLI* used their own strategic planning process as a foundation for rethinking the work of liaisons. For UT Austin, campus alignment is at the center of their reorganization. Their new overarching organizational structure is called the Academic Engagement division and consists of Teaching and Learning Services, Research Support and Digital Initiatives, and Scholarly Resources.

To the question of how we do the work we do, several institutions discuss training in this issue of *RLI*. Training comes in many forms and for much of the last decade, training for liaisons has been skill-based. We identify the new work of libraries, such as digital scholarship, copyright education, data management, project management, etc., and then offer skill-based training sessions. In an attempt to rebalance the work we do in moving away from some services, such as in-person reference or discretionary collection development, we make way for new work through skill-based training. What is innovative about some of the approaches outlined in this issue is the focus on building metacognitive skills rather than just job-based skills. This is most strongly illustrated in the work that Guelph is doing on learning to function as a team. Guelph staff have been organized into teams to enable speed and agility. They use a team development model created by Bruce Tuckman: the “forming, storming, norming, and performing” model.³ In essence, Guelph has identified that to work differently we

have to develop new habits of mind and learn to learn in new ways. This is a larger systems-based approach rather than an individual development approach. Focusing on working as a team asks liaisons to consider how their success is dependent upon interpersonal skills as well as knowledge.

One of the major differences seen across these five articles is the role of disciplinary subject expertise. For the University of South Florida, their approach combining what they call the three prevailing models—traditional, functional, and subjects teams—is built on the idea of “research platform teams” supporting specific disciplines. The teams are comprised of subject librarians with master’s degrees in the target disciplines, functional specialists such as GIS librarians, and staff

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supporting collection building. Working closely with faculty in academic departments and schools, a team has been formed to support the School of Geoscience, for example. For this institution, subject expertise remains at the center

of their approach and organization. For institutions such as Guelph, MIT, UC Riverside, and UT Austin, subject expertise is either replaced or supplemented by functional expertise.

Additionally, the MIT model, unlike the others, acknowledges changes in liaison work that account for a more active, participatory user. Libraries are now both educating users in the digital age and amplifying the work and creations of users. Users engage in creating products and scholarship in library makerspaces, in library-based journal publishing programs, and in other innovation and experimentation activities hosted by the library. The MIT model argues for a more expansive and global definition of users—not just as consumers but producers, makers, and creators.

All articles in this issue share a focus on defining values, ensuring that the library is meeting the current and emerging needs of campus, and engaging in innovative pedagogy supporting the library's role in the educational enterprise. Together these articles offer a road map or possible futures for institutions considering change in the area of liaison.

Endnotes

1. See Rita Vine's "Selected Bibliography on Library Liaisons" on pages 76–79 of this issue of *RLI*, <https://doi.org/10.29242/rli.294.7>.
2. Christine Wolff-Eisenberg, "US Library Survey 2016," Ithaka S+R, April 3, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.303066>.
3. Bruce W. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin* 63, no. 6 (1965): 384–399, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0022100>.

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