SPEC Kit 301

Liaison Services

October 2007

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Introduction

A SPEC survey on liaison services in libraries that was conducted in 1992 concluded that, "Until recently the library collection has formed the focus of library activity. But as the physical collection becomes less central, the user is becoming the focus of library services. The role librarians are to have in this decentralized information environment could depend largely upon the effectiveness with which liaison librarians are able to monitor, anticipate, and respond to user's information needs."[1] Since then many changes have taken place in libraries and in society. Electronic communication and electronic publications have changed library patrons' expectations and challenged libraries to provide access to a wide variety of materials while adjusting to their patrons' constantly evolving information seeking behaviors and technological needs.

Since 1992, the definition of the liaison role also has changed. The 1992 RUSA guidelines for liaisons described the liaison role as primarily to gather information for collection development.[2] The 2001 guidelines have an expanded definition of liaison work that includes five components. Three components stress collection development and two emphasize purposes beyond collection development, namely public relations and communicating clientele needs to the library staff and governing body.[3] Now, librarians are taking on a number of new roles and responsibilities including partnering with faculty in the classroom, acting as academic advisors and mentors, and providing computer software and hardware support.

Background

This survey sought to identify the current roles of liaisons in ARL libraries and any changes in focus in their interactions with academic departments. It explored whether liaisons are being reactive to faculty and student needs, partners in providing teaching/library instruction, pioneers in the new electronic world or have limited involvement with the academic departments, and documented how libraries mix the activities of traditional liaison responsibilities with the new trends that are fostered by the evolving needs of today's library patrons.

The survey was distributed to the 123 ARL member libraries in May 2007. Sixty-six libraries—63 academic and 3 non-academic—responded by the deadline for a 54% response rate. Only one of the academic libraries does not provide liaison services to academic departments in their university; these services are not applicable to the non-academic libraries. Twenty-nine of the responding libraries (49%) began offering liaison services before 1980. A number of respondents couldn't provide an exact start date but made comments along the lines of, "as long as the library has been in existence" and "for decades." Those who could provide a date show that a wave of new, or newly defined, programs has started each decade from the 1960s to today; the most recent program started in 2007.

Liaison Assignments

For 44 respondents (75%), defining who liaisons are and what they do was determined through administrative decisions. However, a significant number of respondents stated that librarians' perceived needs of academic departments were a major factor in determining these services (33 responses or 60%). Formal and informal meetings and conversations with faculty members also played a role. In most of the responding libraries (52 or 85%), there is a liaison assigned to every department on campus. At the other nine, only a few departments have a liaison.

Department Participation

Thirty-three respondents (61%) indicated that all departments on their campuses take advantage of services offered by library liaisons. The 24 respondents who indicated that only some departments take advantage of liaison services were asked to estimate the percentage of participating departments and to describe which departments those are. The majority report that participation falls between 75% and 90%; only two campuses have less than 60% departmental participation. The respondents listed a wide range of participating departments across disciplines. Many commented that participation level varies between departments since each department has different needs. A handful of respondents indicated that sciences are less active than social sciences and humanities, while one indicated that sciences are the most active.

All of the responding libraries are actively seeking ways to increase departmental participation and employ various strategies to achieve that goal. An analysis of respondents' comments show that library liaisons tend to target their services to teaching and research faculty more than undergraduates, but it appears difficult to get their foot in the door. Almost all of the libraries encourage liaisons to attend departmental meetings and, in addition to formal meetings, many organize social events for liaisons and departmental faculty. Most

respondents also indicated that they employ such promotion strategies as newsletters, e-mail, or presentations for key university committees to increase departmental participation. Six respondents indicated that they increased the presence of liaisons in academic units by providing liaisons with office spaces or office hours in academic departments. A few shared strategies that can help campus faculty become more active, such as inviting faculty to contribute to library publications, including faculty on library committees, and creating liaison advisory teams. One respondent commented that their librarians are "over-extended" and therefore expectations are carefully controlled. On most campuses however, liaisons constantly work to implement new services.

The survey asked which members of the department are eligible for liaison services. Responses indicate that liaison outreach is inclusive. Faculty of all types—teaching and research, adjunct and lecturer—are high on the eligibility list, followed closely by graduate teaching assistants and other graduate students. Roughly three-fourths of the respondents also include administrative staff and undergraduates. A few include the general public.

Liaison Responsibility Assignment

Only five libraries report that most or all of their librarians are assigned as liaisons. The criteria for these liaisons are summed up by one respondent, "interest, subject knowledge, availability, instruction skills, public service ethic." When the liaison pool is narrowed to just *some* librarians, subject expertise is still the number one criteria and "Subject Librarian" appears to be synonymous with liaison. Those with collection development responsibilities also commonly act as liaisons, but the largest group to shoulder liaison responsibilities is the public service librarians. Other library professionals with liaison responsibilities include administrators, language specialists, and media specialists. Support staff liaisons typically have cataloging or service desk expertise.

Liaison's Department Assignment

For the majority of librarians (80%), liaison activities are their primary responsibility, but for other professionals and library staff liaison activities are secondary to other responsibilities of their jobs. For the great majority of respondents, department assignments are based on the liaison's subject expertise (95%) or position in the library (69%). Some libraries also consider distribution of workload as a way to determine assignments. All of the responding libraries reported at least one liaison who serves more than one academic department. Although most libraries assign no more than four or five academic departments to any one liaison, four libraries indicated that more than fifteen departments were assigned to a liaison. In the 1992 SPEC survey the largest number of departments assigned to one liaison was 12; in this survey the largest number is thirty-one.

Liaison Services

The survey asked what services liaisons provide to their academic departments. All respondents indicated that their liaisons offer departmental outreach and communicate department needs back to the library. All but a few also offer reference, collection development, and library instruction. A significant number provide scholarly communication education. Examples of other services include digital project support, individual consultations, advice on copyright, and exhibits, among others. Several respondents noted that not every librarian provided all of the services listed, though.

While types and number of services may differ from liaison to liaison, they all appear to use a wide range of methods to communicate what those services are to their departments. At the top of the list is sending information via e-mail. A close second is the in-person approach, such as attending departmental meetings, meeting with faculty individually, and orienting new faculty. Most post news on the library's homepage or newsletter, send promo-

tional materials to their departments, host special events, or use electronic discussion lists and blogs to communicate their services.

New Liaison Training

Almost all of the libraries provide some form of training for new liaisons whether informal or formal, just an overview or more extensive, provided by a supervisor, peer, or an assigned mentor. Collection development is the most common aspect of the training that liaisons receive. Also common is training in reference, instruction, and outreach methods. A number of libraries provide introductions to the liaison's departments. Others schedule regular meetings of liaisons. More than a fifth of the comments indicate that the training for the liaison role is unstructured, but several are planning a more rigorous program.

Administration of Liaison Services

Almost half of the respondents reported that their liaison services are self-administered by individual liaisons without a central coordinator or administrative body. About a quarter reported that liaisons are centrally administered, either by a coordinator, committee, or the library administration. In a few cases, two or more unit heads have joint responsibility. In other cases, administration varies by library or unit.

Evaluation of Liaison Services

About half of the survey respondents report that there has been some sort of evaluation of their liaison services. The most common evaluation method is to track the number of instruction sessions and/or reference or research interviews. Some have conducted user surveys or interviewed members of their departments. A few have conducted focus groups. Several respondents mention the liaison's annual performance report as the main evaluation method; several others specify that they have used the LibQUAL+® user satisfaction survey.

Challenges of Liaison Services

The survey asked respondents to describe up to three top challenges for their library liaisons. Responses cover a wide range of concerns. The most common challenge described is establishing and maintaining contact with faculty, especially when they seem time-pressured, uninterested, or unresponsive to outreach, are on campus only part-time, or think that library services compete with teaching time. Another challenge is time constraints on liaisons: they have competing responsibilities, are assigned too many departments or departments outside their area of expertise, or may struggle to keep up with new technology, new ideas, or changes in their departments. A third challenge can be described as communication: how to get the word out about liaison services to the right people when they are receptive to the message.

The 1992 SPEC survey included a similar question that asked, "What barriers to effective liaison work do librarians encounter at your institution." In both surveys, concerns about unreceptive faculty and about lack of time or expertise were indicated. Although the two surveys are not directly comparable because of differences in question wording and response presentation, it is notable that ten libraries in the 1992 survey marked over-demanding faculty as a challenge, but this concern was barely mentioned in the current survey.

Conclusion

More than half of the academic ARL member libraries provide liaison services to departments at their universities. While only a few libraries assign liaison responsibilities to all librarians, the others have hired or trained a cadre of librarians and other staff who have the subject experience, social skills, and interest to make this their primary job responsibility. Most of these libraries assign a liaison to every department, though not every department takes advantage of the available services. Liaisons are using a variety of high-tech and in-person approaches to reach out to their departments. A large majority of the responding libraries provide liaison services

not just to tenured and tenure-track faculty but to students and others in the departments they serve. Most liaisons offer a range of services from collection development to reference and instruction to research support, digital project consulting, and more. Almost all of the libraries provide training for liaisons to ensure effective service, though only about half have formally evaluated their success.

There are many challenges to making a liaison program successful. Each library is in a different environment. Different departments have different needs. Many respondents noted that department-liaison relationships are dependent on a number of factors, including the ratio of liaisons to departments, the personal relationships that liaisons have established with faculty, students, and staff in their liaison departments, and the ability of the liaison to have time to devote to this job responsibility.

Just fifteen years ago, over-demanding faculty was a concern for some libraries and establishing and maintaining contact was a concern for others. Now, establishing and maintaining contact is a consistent concern. While many liaisons make establishing and maintaining contacts a priority, faculty deem library services a low priority in their daily lives. Getting the opportunity for instruction, helping students in their research, and integrating information literacy into the curriculum are some of the many challenges that face liaisons today.

References

1. Latta, Gail F. *Liaison Services in ARL Libraries*. SPEC Kit 189. Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, November/December 1992.

2. Liaison with Users Committee. Collection Development and Evaluation Section. Reference and Adult Services Division. American Library Association. "RASD Guidelines for Liaison Work." *RQ* 32, no. 2 (1992): 198–204.

3. Liaison with Users Committee. Collection Development and Evaluation Section. Reference and User Services Association. "Guidelines for Liaison Work in Managing Collections and Services." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2001): 107–09.