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Dangerous Liaisons: Brainstorming the 21st Century Academic Liaison

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Brainstorming the 21st century academic liaison

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Presented November 7, 2018
About this Lively Session

Part 1
- Academic liaison roles – a brief trajectory
- Academic liaison roles – current issues
- Research from ASERL ARL Liaison Institute (April 2018)

Part 2
- Interactive exercises with live polls, un-conference-style:
  - Job description exercise,
  - Reflection exercise: liaison duties, strengths, pain points, and Takeaways for you and your home libraries.
  - Live poll compilations emailed to session participants,
  - Conference paper: https://works.bepress.com/antjemays.

Part 3
- Closing slides: Selected readings of leading liaison literature.
Part 1

Background
Academic Liaisons – a brief trajectory

- Early roots:
  - Subject bibliographer: Acquisitions, Collections
  - Subject expert: Reference, Instruction

- Evolving over time:
  - Proliferation of research and publications
  - Rise & growth of information literacy

- Growth of friction points:
  - Expertise, many roles -> how to balance?
Academic Liaisons – current issues

- **subject expertise – traditional focal areas:**
  - Subject knowledge: deep expertise; affinity from related field
  - Collections: development, management, deployment
  - Vendor knowledge (best source by subject/region)

- **growth areas → expertise needed → task creep:**
  - Collections + Assessment + Accreditations + Reviews
  - Reference + Instruction + Information literacy
  - Research consultations + data services
  - Outreach + strategic collaborations
  - Blurred lines: overlap, turf, who manages what...
New ARL ASERL Research

- ARL ASERL Liaison Institute, Georgia Tech, April 27-28, 2018
- brought together several research strands in a series of interactive sessions, building upon liaison literature.
Library / Academic Liaison Roles: Large-scale game changers

- Economic & digital realities:
  - financial
  - digital ecosystem;
  - changing nature of:
    - research,
    - teaching,
    - learning.

From Keynote by Anne Kenney (University Librarian Emerita, Cornell University and Interim Director, ARL), ASERL-ARL Liaison Institute, April 27, 2018
Library / Academic Liaison Roles:
Large-scale game changers, ctd.

- Global engagement:
  - Universities as global entities,
  - International campuses & student experiences,
  - Global research.
Library / Academic Liaison Roles: Large-scale game changers, ctd.

- Collaborative imperative:
  - Nodes in worldwide network,
  - Interdependence,
  - Operating at scale.
Library / Academic Liaison Roles: Large-scale game changers, ctd.

21st century information professional:

- Some members of the academy view libraries as antiquated.

Our challenge: raise expectations, deliver expertise, services, and resources.

→ strategic differentiators in academic success.
Library / Academic Liaison Roles: Large-scale game changers, ctd.

- Inadequacies in current liaison approach:
  - (1) program stasis,
  - (2) turf issues,
  - (3) inside-out view: what works for the library, not considering the evolving university & users.
  - (4) communication challenges: “the last mile”
    - the weakest link in the chain determines overall success.

From Keynote by Anne Kenney (University Librarian Emerita, Cornell University and Interim Director, ARL), ASERL-ARL Liaison Institute, April 27, 2018
Liaison Roles – Recommendations:

- Partner across campus -- examples:
  - Institutional research & planning,
  - Sponsored programs,
  - Campus office of research,
  - Patents & inventions,
  - Centers of teaching excellence,
  - Similar areas with cross-campus reach.
Liaison Roles – Recommendations, ctd:

- Develop intervention strategies:
  - Knowing *when* to do something is as important as knowing *what* to do.
  - **Timing:** sense of “right approach” at the “right time” stems from familiarity *and* regular collaboration.
Liaison Roles – Recommendations, ctd:

- Identify pain points and needs – for example:
  - Outreach to at-risk students.
  - Tap into university’s student success goals.
  - Fostering information-evaluation skills.
  - Engaging international students.
Liaison Roles – Recommendations, ctd:

“No one liaison can do it all”:
- subject expertise and functional expertise.
- distinct yet interdependent.
- team approach rather than individuals.
Liaison Roles – Recommendations, ctd:

- Move away from “one-offs”:
  - concentrated on “impacts at the department or disciplinary level”.
  - Use online tools & templates
  - Mine data to target specific faculty points (e.g., where they publish, their research areas)
  - No “one size fits all”
    - meet faculty & students in their spaces.

From Keynote by Anne Kenney (University Librarian Emerita, Cornell University and Interim Director, ARL), ASERL-ARL Liaison Institute, April 27, 2018
Liaison Roles – Recommendations, ctd:

- Move away from “inputs” – for example:
  - Number of sessions taught,
  - Number of books ordered,
  - Number of contacts.

- Instead, aim for qualitative context-sensitivity.
Liaison Roles – Recommendations, ctd:

- Develop criteria for capturing “outputs” of liaisons to measure our impact:
  - Quantify goals, track progress.
  - Align actions with academic success measures:
    - Map liaisons to departments.
    - Define goals → align activities with goals.
    - Define success (ORCID registrations? Learning goals?)
    - Faculty and NIH public compliance mandates.
  - Research support requests.

From Keynote by Anne Kenney (University Librarian Emerita, Cornell University and Interim Director, ARL), ASERL-ARL Liaison Institute, April 27, 2018.
Liaison Roles – Recommendations, ctd:

- Focus on university indicators
  
  - Increase demand for library as strategic partner in productivity and impact measures.

From Keynote by Anne Kenney (University Librarian Emerita: Cornell University and Interim Director, ARL), ASERL-ARL Liaison Institute, April 27, 2018
Common themes from small group discussions

- Reduce, de-emphasize, stop doing -- examples:
  - inputs (orders, classes taught, etc)
  - antiquated procedure & task mechanics
  - Common themes: time-consuming, low return.

- Do more, start doing:
  - Emphasize the intellectual enterprise, align learning outcomes
  - Partnerships → intellectual collaborations → sustained relationships
  - Actively go to users, meet them where they are: formally and informally.
  - Sustainable support through online tools.
  - Marketing & outreach.
  - Common themes: strategy, impact, feasibility, sustainability.
Common themes, ctd

Self-assessment for liaisons:
- Keep customer profiles.
- Gather meaningful outcomes data with qualitative rigor.
- Surveys, and partner with departmental colleagues for survey distribution.
- Informal conversations with faculty.

Administrative support for liaisons
- Open communications about job functions’ relevance to changing times.
- Invite liaisons to write out their job in 5 years → help them get there.
- Celebrate small victories, especially in early-stage new types of campus-library links.
- Head off turfism: value contributions, encourage collaboration / respect.
- Beware of vague job descriptions. Avoid fluff.

Common themes:
Do’s: clarity, positive support.  
Don’ts: equivocation, inconsistency, bad data.
Major Themes from Liaison Institute:

- Everyone is struggling with similar issues.
  - Growth of volume and range of duties.
  - Task mix straddles organizational/divisional lines.
    - Bifurcation, fragmentation.
    - Discomfort with ambiguity.
    - Evaluation of effectiveness?
    - Balance between duties?
- Localized ideas and examples, but no common best practices.
- Solutions rooted in local conditions.
Taking the discussion home – an example:

- Exploring core competencies for liaisons with my library faculty colleagues
Part 2

- Interactives:
  - Analysis exercises
  - Reflection exercises
  - Mentimeter live polls
Interactive exercises & reflections

Live polls – 11 questions in 4 areas:

- **Basics**: organizations, roles, liaison setup – Q.1-3
- **Job description exercises**: current job ads’ description of liaison roles – Q.4-5
- **Reflection exercises on own liaison programs**: strengths, pain points, support, administrative strategies – Q.6-10
- **Closing thoughts**: key takeaways – Q.11
Interactive poll results:

The next 11 slides show session participants’ responses from the interactive Mentimeter live polls.
1. Basics: What type of organization are you with?
2. Basics: What is your role?
3. **Basics:** Does your organization have a liaison program?
4. Job description exercise: What important functions are missing?
5. Job description exercise: What stated functions are superfluous / distractions?

Selection, collections
De-selection of materials
Supporting technology for the whole library.
There is too much here. What percentage of time on liaison vs technology
Assistance with library technology; development and assessment of policies and procedures
"coordinate with database vendors"
General reference desk
Collection development policies
It's unclear if this job description has any subject/department liaison responsibility. Could be inferred, but it's not clear.
too much specialization liaison will end up with heavy instruction load that skews job role for certain time of semester or quarter
6. Reflection: What are core competencies for liaisons?
7. **Reflection:** What works well in your liaison program?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mutual respect</th>
<th>Autonomy for liaisons</th>
<th>Relationships with professors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>attending departmental meetings.</td>
<td>internal structure for liaison training and communication</td>
<td>(New) team structure works to people’s strengths and allows us to meet emerging needs of users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty respect librarians as teaching/information professionals</td>
<td>Subject and functional teams working together for training, communication, projects</td>
<td>Instruction - increasing; working with faculty,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A ministration support</td>
<td>Subject expertise combined with functional expertise</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Connecting with department admin assistants to open (figurative) doors.</td>
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*Willingness to explore/build a new liaison program that meets needs of various stakeholders. We are in early stages... new job descriptions, etc*
8. Reflection: What are pain points in your liaison program?

- High librarian turnover
- Wild Wild West - Other librarians reaching out to liaison programs without informing the actual liaison.
- Liaisons are overworked: much campus growth, same number of subject liaisons even as # of functional liaisons continues to grow. Sustainability!
- Time, liaison responsibilities are secondary to functional (but to do it "well" it’s a lot of work), varying levels of comfort with outreach and communication to faculty.
- High workload due to increasing instruction needs
- Lack of mentoring for new liaisons
- Liaison is being asked to represent everything the library does
- Work overload
  - Balancing between changing to meet current campus needs and constantly pivoting so quickly that we lose sight of core needs and values
  - Difficulty w teamwork and collaboration, building new relationships w faculty, lack of awareness of new expectations around assessment, outreach, project management/time management and planning
- Different liaisons doing different things and not sharing ideas to collective group.
- Large portfolios, competing priorities, lack of time to excel in multiple areas
- Knowledge
  - Not enough time to focus on faculty needs given all my other responsibilities. There is not a culture at my current institution of having close ties with the faculty. Our liaison faculty role is simply another title we have but with no responsibility.
9. Reflection: What support do you need for your liaison role?
10. Reflection: How can administrators help liaisons?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hire more of them!</th>
<th>Reward</th>
<th>Prioritize</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional development (time and financial resources)</td>
<td>Have a real list of expectations</td>
<td>Understanding roles, prioritize importance of liaison work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide educational opportunities</td>
<td>Provide clear goals, objectives, and priorities</td>
<td>Talk more openly about priorities and how to balance responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hire additional prioritization</td>
<td>I advocate for training, consider workload, try to encourage strengths, and discuss/implement change management and how to handle change</td>
<td>Include liaison work consistently in annual review process - both in goal setting and recognizing excellent work in this area. Recognize that even as a secondary responsibility, it's a lot of work. Provide space to do this work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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11. Closing thoughts: What key takeaways and ideas from this session will you try in your home institutions?

- Yes, we’re doing the same things as other ARLs (no one else has the answers either)
  - Survey faculty for needs.
  - Shift from quantitative measures to qualitative in liaison assessment. Continue to identify ways to provide support and training. We’re doing a lot of the best practices mentioned, but our liaisons still feel underprepared and overworked.

- Share finding as we revamp our liaison program—
  - Communicate concerns to administration liaisons share similar concerns
  - Try to not remain in a silo.

- Review changing roles and rethink appropriate structure
  - Being more cognizant of the pressures on liaisons and help support their growth in areas where they may not feel comfortable

- Advocate for manageable expectations, and focus efforts efficiently

- Be open, intentional, mindful about liaison roles and work and admin support
  - Celebrate / recognize liaison work and “wins!”
Part 3

- More background research:
  - Selected readings
Additional Readings


