

What do Liaison Librarians Do? An Exploration into the Tasks and Perceptions of the Role

Mónica Colón-Aguirre^a and Kawanna Bright^b

^aUniversity of South Carolina, USA

^bEast Carolina University, USA

colonagm@mailbox.sc.edu, brightka19@ecu.edu

ABSTRACT

Liaison librarianship is one of the most common roles in academic libraries, but it is one which is not as central to LIS education as expected. Given the significant investment students make obtaining their master's degrees, programs need to ensure that students are well prepared for the job market; however, studies indicate that many LIS students and professionals do not feel their programs have adequately prepared them for it. This work explores the main tasks performed by academic librarians as well as how these professionals perceive their role, with the purpose of providing information useful for LIS faculty in curriculum creation.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Curriculum; Pedagogy; Academic libraries

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Liaison librarians; academic librarians; LIS education; LIS curriculum

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Liaison librarianship is one of the most common roles in academic libraries (Bright & Colón-Aguirre, 2022). This role usually refers to positions which conduct a wide array of functions, which include establishing relationships with a user group, collection management for a specific disciplinary area, conducting instruction related to that disciplinary area, eliciting information about curricular changes, providing reference services, and bringing user perspectives to the technical services department, among many others (Schloman et al., 1989). While academic liaison librarians tend to conduct these functions with a specific clientele in mind - including a school, a department or college - the main goal is to offer centralized services in a personalized and relationship based system (Church-Duran, 2017).

The services offered by liaison librarians have traditionally included outreach, collection development, instruction, scholarly communication support, and reference (Miller & Pressley, 2015). In more recent years, the roles have also been growing and now it is not uncommon for liaison librarians to provide additional services, such as offering scholarly impact and metrics information, promoting the institutional repository, and research data management (Miller & Pressley, 2015).

The role of academic liaison librarian is one which is not as central to LIS education as expected, although the literature presents examples of preparation in other areas which are related to liaison work, for example instruction (Bewick & Corral, 2020). A study focused on academic library liaison education conducted by Attebury and Finnell (2009) found that only 20.6% of those surveyed had heard about the liaison role in one of their required courses, and only 23.9% heard about it in an elective course. The issue of how well LIS programs are preparing students for their careers seems ever-present in the field's literature and is one which merits our attention especially considering the significant investment students are making towards obtaining their master's degree, which in the United States currently averages \$62,650. (Hanson, 2022).

Given this significant investment, programs want to ensure that students are well prepared for the job market; however, studies indicate that many do not feel their programs have adequately prepared them for it. In the case of reference librarianship, for example, Goodsett and Koziura (2016) reported that very few of their research participants noted "reference and liaison work" as an important element of their LIS education. In general, these participants thought more courses in instruction and technology areas, as well as more guidance in which courses to take would have been useful in preparing them for their work (Goodsett & Koziura, 2016).

One thing that is clear is that LIS education cannot be effective if programs are not in tune with what are the requirements of the profession. This work explores the main tasks performed by academic librarians as well as how these professionals perceive their role. This information is useful for LIS instructors and programs, in general, since as one of the most common jobs in LIS, it will help programs plan curriculum that responds directly to the needs of the field. The main research questions explored in this work are:

RQ1: How do academic liaison librarians describe what they do?

RQ2: What are the main tasks performed by academic liaison librarians working in the US?

METHODOLOGY

This work is based on the second phase of an explanatory sequential mixed method project. The project as a whole started with a survey which was answered by 366 academic

librarians who work as liaison librarians in the United States and Canada. The survey prompted participants to provide their contact information if they were willing to participate in a follow-up study. A total of 12 participants were identified and selected for this second phase of the study which consisted of qualitative interviews; 11 of those who were invited were interviewed.

The interviews were conducted through WebEx video conferencing platforms and recorded with participant permission. Transcripts were created through WebEx's automatic transcription service and corrected by the researchers before being sent to the interviewees for member checking. The finalized transcripts were coded by the researchers. Interviews were analyzed inductively starting with a round of open coding through constant comparative analysis. After the open codes list was created, the researchers followed up with a round of axial coding which allowed the creation of more abstract categories based on the initial open codes. All codes included here were agreed upon by the researchers.

RESULTS

Work identification

Liaison librarianship is a term that is loosely defined in the literature; therefore we consider how those who hold this title identify themselves professionally. In this research, participants were asked to define their work and as part of this explanation most provided the ways in which they define what they do for the main constituencies with which they work. Participants described themselves using various terms, but most of these highlighted the function of connection that is part of their position. In this aspect, terms such as "networker," "point person," "advocate" and "go to person" were common ways in which participants explained the nature of their role to their patrons. It is important also to highlight here that the main patron base mentioned by participants were faculty, with graduate students also commonly mentioned. Undergraduate students along with staff and researchers were mentioned less frequently as a focus population.

When it comes to specific tasks performed, the most commonly mentioned by participants were those related to instruction, user services, and collection management. Instruction here is defined broadly, although most participants mentioned one-shot style instruction, especially in the form of workshops; some participants indicated they engage in sustained, long-term instruction efforts, including being embedded in a classroom and at least one participant mentioned teaching a for-credit course centered on the library which is offered at their institution. User services here refers to tasks which relate to the more traditionally defined reference work, which included reference consultations, time staffing the reference desk (either in person or virtually), and research assistance provided to a specific discipline or program. As for collection management, the most commonly mentioned tasks related to collection development activities such as materials' selection and ordering materials.

Overlapping/Unclear roles

While all participants identified as liaisons and talked about the tasks central to their liaison role, a few hinted at some blurring of the lines between their liaison responsibilities and the other activities they perform as academic liaison librarians. Participant Taylor, for example, indicated this when they shared: "And then I do a lot of - I mean, I guess it's liaison stuff. But I

do a lot of research consultations with students and, or sometimes faculty.” Blair, after sharing a list of their responsibilities, noted that sometimes their liaison work “...bleeds a little bit into my function. I have a function role too. I'm a DH librarian. So, sometimes I work with programs outside of those two liaison areas to help with their research.”

The aspects which defined their work as liaisons were not just focused on the tasks they perform, but also for whom. When asked to define their role, participants unanimously defined it by the programs, units, or departments with which they work. This aspect is definitional to the role of liaison librarians (Church-Duran, 2017), but just because liaisons are assigned to work directly with a unit does not mean they do not serve other units, or even individuals outside of units, with similar services. For example, Casey noted:

I also have some interaction with the med school faculty. And even though they are not my liaison area, they are my supervisor...that's her area. But because I'm here in the building and I see them a lot. And I've gotten to know several of them pretty well...they have become good friends. And so, you know, I have a lot of interaction with the faculty and the students here too. And sometimes that line can get a little hazy...and can get a little hard to...know what to do.

Another aspect important to highlight here, is the number of units with which participants were tasked to work directly. The numbers varied and the definition of a unit as well. Some librarians worked with entire colleges, while others worked with a hodgepodge of departments or programs. What was most common was that some of the areas were not directly related to each other. Therefore, the work varies, as different disciplinary areas have different foci, the nature of the materials used varies, as well as the type of information needs the patrons will require (Keeran & Levine-Clark, 2014)

By further commenting on the fuzzier lines their tasks may take, especially when it comes to who is the recipient of those services, participants highlighted the complexity of their roles. Most participants mentioned how their work has additional responsibilities which, although not central to their day-to-day activities or defined by their disciplinary areas, are still important to the role. In this realm, Rory, a life science's librarian, highlighted some general activities related to more traditional reference work that deviated from their central tasks and disciplinary area when they stated that they do reference services for areas outside those under their purview: “And then I also do chat and general email reference as well, but that's not as much just for the [life sciences].”

This sentiment is echoed by Reese, a veteran liaison in charge of assessment at their library, who also pointed out how the work tasks have a way of overlapping even if they fall outside of their main area:

I think every part of my job kind of relates to something else that I'm doing. So I never really feel like I'm working in a vacuum or anything like that. If I'm doing something in terms of assessment I can make it go into instruction or I can make it go into my liaison responsibilities and vice versa.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented here demonstrate the complexity inherent in the variety of tasks and audiences which liaison librarians serve. The work, as described by the participants, is heavily focused on instruction aspects, with a significant component of reference services and collection management. It is important to highlight that the work extends beyond those areas with which they are assigned to work directly as liaisons. The blurring of the lines was not

necessarily perceived as negative by participants, but it is something that is important to consider by those who are going to become liaison librarians as well as LIS educators in charge of preparing them.

Programs need to ponder on these findings, especially when considering which components will be necessary for their students to be familiar with if they embark into work as liaison librarians. Programs must prepare students for the reality of multi-layered work which includes blurred lines of responsibilities and requires a wide array of skills. Librarians defined themselves in terms of creating connections between the library, its available services and collections and those they serve, so aspects centered on service are essential. In addition, topics related to instruction, reference services, and collection management must be part of the curriculum as these tasks were central to the work as described by participants, echoing the findings from the survey where these courses were highlighted as recommended by liaisons (Bright & Colón-Aguirre, 2022).

The information presented here should be carefully considered for purposes of curriculum creation, especially due to the availability of employment which tends to be more prevalent in academic library scenarios and focus on areas of public services particularly for entry level positions (Tewell, 2012). These findings are also important given that many graduates of LIS programs still do not think that they were adequately prepared for their jobs (Bright & Colón-Aguirre, 2022; Godsett & Koziura, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The academic liaison librarian position is both vital and visible in most academic libraries' efforts to provide a wide array of services to their higher education communities. Despite the importance of the role, liaison librarian responsibilities are often poorly defined and the role itself is not as notably addressed in current LIS curricula. From the liaison perspective, blurring of the lines between their liaison roles and other responsibilities that they are tasked with, often makes it difficult to truly understand what their liaison role is, and can impact their work with faculty, graduate students, and their colleagues. But even within the nebulous nature of their role, liaisons do have a clear view of themselves as networkers, point people, and overall connectors between their assigned liaison areas and the myriad of services offered by their libraries. LIS programs can consider ways to support students' transitions into liaison roles by acknowledging the unknowns while offering them opportunities to gain the skills needed to be bridges for their campus communities.

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