**Influences on Library Liaison and Faculty Collaboration in Collection Development**

Timothy Butzen

Dominican University

School of Information Studies

**Abstract:** Much has been written about library liaison programs in academic libraries throughout the United States. Since their inception, liaison programs have emphasized the collaboration between librarians and faculty in collection development. This brief paper synthesizes relevant literature to identify the dynamics that currently influence this collaboration. Those that emerge here include liaison job descriptions and collection development policies, direct service and collaboration, information reciprocity, relational factors, and budgets. The paper concludes with suggestions for interdisciplinary collaboration and for future teaching and research.

**Keywords:** Library liaison, subject specialist, collection development, faculty collaboration

**Introduction**

Library liaison programs have long had a role in the collection development of academic libraries. Liaison librarians, sometimes known as subject specialists or subject bibliographers, emerged from the professionalization of collection development and the concurrent shift of acquisition responsibility from teaching faculty to librarians during the 1960s (SPEC, 1992; Jenkins, 2005). This transition elicited disagreement (Jenkins, 2005). Favorable opinions cited the lack of faculty enthusiasm, energy, and time to give to collection development and to do it well. Opposition stemmed from the theory that as teaching faculty, having a direct connection to students and their information needs would enhance the collection in ways librarians could not. The library liaison program serves as a “heterogeneous approach” (Jenkins, 2005, p. 45) to collection development by forging relationships between librarians and faculty and by distributing the workload of collection development to both parties. While the expectations of and demands for academic liaison librarianship proliferate and intensify, connecting directly with faculty for the purposes of developing the library’s collection has remained a dominant function of the liaison librarian (SPEC, 1992; Rodwell & Fairbairn, 2007). This is especially true for smaller institutions with smaller librarian-faculty ratios (Miller, 2014).

Miller (1977) is often cited as having written the seminal article on liaison librarianship; he defines liaison work “as a formal, structured activity in which professional library staff systematically meet with teaching faculty to discuss strategems for directly supporting their instructional needs and those of their students” (p. 213). The Reference and User Services Association’s “Guidelines for Liaison Work in Managing Collections and Services” defines liaison work as “the process by which librarians involve the library’s clientele in the assessment of collection needs and services and the measurement of user satisfaction with the collection” (RUSA, 2010, para. 3.2). Here, liaison librarians are those whose work is partially or completely dedicated to collection development and other liaison functions as outlined by their institution.

Guideline 6.0 specifically pertains to academic liaison librarianship. According to RUSA, liaison librarians should “[i]nvolve clientele in collection services and issues as much as possible, in order to ensure that the materials satisfy the clients’ needs and that the clients are aware of the materials and services available to them” (RUSA, 2010, para. 6.3.1) and meet regularly “with faculty to ascertain planned curriculum developments and to identify new resources” (para. 6.3.2). Silver (2014) defines this as active participation in two-way communication. RUSA also emphasizes the need to identify the liaison librarian’s constituency and to establish a process for user constituents to provide suggestions for the collection. Much has been written on this latter decree, and the remainder of this paper examines the dynamics that influence faculty-liaison collaboration in collection development.

**Liaison librarian job descriptions & collection development policies**

Academic librarians are often hired to serve as liaison librarians exclusively or to conduct liaison responsibilities as part of their overall duties. Collaborating with faculty on collection development is written explicitly into liaison job descriptions (SPEC, 1992; Macaluso & Petruzzelli, 2005; Attebury & Finnell, 2009; Carpan, 2011). Attebury and Finnell (2009) found that of 313 academic library job openings posted over a two-month time period, 29 percent specifically listed liaison duties. For example, the Rollins College Library Liaison Program Job Description states a liaison’s goal is to “[d]evelop partnerships with faculty to identify and act on appropriate areas for growth and weeding of the library’s collection and resources in the liaison areas” (Miller, 2014). In addition, Rollins library liaisons are expected to collaborate with faculty to utilize collection development funds, to assess the ongoing relevance of electronic and reference resources, and to optimize subject-based collection locations (Miller, 2014). Additional liaison-specific collection developments may include maintaining vendor profiles, assessing the collection for course creation and institutional accreditation (Henry, 2012), and discussing relevant market issues with faculty (Livingston, 2003). By recruiting and hiring librarians specifically for liaison duties, academic libraries effectively overcome any librarian resistance that may exist to liaise with the faculty and position their staff well to handle the potentially disengaged faculty members (Jenkins, 2005) or nonusers (Miller, 1977). For programs that select certain faculty to serve as library representatives, Suresh, Ryans, and Zhang (1995) recommend selecting those with a “commitment to library issues and interest in building the library’s collection” (p. 11). In recent years, resistance among librarians has decreased (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013). To ameliorate hesitation, Schmidt and Carstens (2017) encourage liaison librarians to ask questions pertaining to the faculty’s role in collection development above and beyond that captured by any job description.

Jenkins (2005) emphasizes the importance of maintaining a collection development policy by marking it “the foundation upon which all selection decisions should be based” (p. 37). This mirrors RUSA liaison guideline 6.1 which calls for collection development policies that “define the parameters of resources and services” (para. 6.1.1) and that are available to faculty and staff (para. 6.1.2). Camack (2017) specifies that the responsibility to develop library resources should ultimately rest with the librarian. As part of the faculty-liaison relationship, faculty should be encouraged to review the library’s collection development policies and provide feedback (Jenkins, 2005). In addition, many urge libraries to create and implement a training manual that covers faculty collaboration in collection development for liaison librarians (Suresh, Ryans & Zhang, 1995; Henry, 2012) and some have even put forth comprehensive toolkits to accomplish this (Macaluso & Petruzzelli, 2005).

**Direct service & collaboration**

Despite its roots in tradition, the collaboration between liaison librarians and faculty in collection development has contemporary relevance. Early assessments of the library liaison programs at Kent State University (Ryans, Suresh & Zhang, 1995) and Baylor University (Ochola & Jones, 2001) indicated that faculty and student material requests were the top (or one of the top) factors that influenced materials selection by both faculty representatives and liaison librarians. In a survey conducted at Texas A&M University, departmental faculty representatives ranked ordering books and serials for the faculty as the third most important function of the library liaison program (Yang, 2000). However, ordering books and serials according to faculty recommendations was cited as the most actualized service the faculty received from their liaison librarians. Similarly, in a survey of faculty at Rollins College in Florida, over 80 percent of respondents indicated that their liaison librarian has queried their opinion about library resources, the second most prevalent function of the library liaison program (Miller, 2014). In a national survey of liaison librarians and faculty, Arendt and Lotts (2012) found that 87.5 percent of liaison respondents provided discipline-specific selection of books and journals and 77.3 percent provided faculty participation in collection development and cancellation decisions. Importantly, faculty respondents corroborated liaison responses by citing these two services as the most prevalently exchanged services between liaison librarians and faculty.

In contrast, however, the same assessment conducted at Baylor University found that selecting books and serials was only the fifth most important service provided by liaison librarians, overshadowed by services related to current awareness work (Ochola & Jones, 2001). Similarly, a survey conducted at Montana State University - Bozeman found that only 27.8 percent of faculty respondents cited purchasing library materials as a service their department’s liaison librarian had provided them (Thull & Hansen, 2009). This could be a result of the lack of awareness surrounding a faculty member’s ability to participate in the collection development process. Miller (2014) suggests formative assessments such as satisfaction surveys can indirectly serve the purpose of informing faculty that this service exists to them.

Extant literature on academic liaison librarianship is careful to consider collection maintenance and weeding (and rightfully so!) an integral part of the collection development process that should include faculty input. Decisions made to either retain or deaccession a title or journal are often discipline-specific (Jenkins, 2005); this places the liaison librarian in a unique position to consider the decision from both the library’s and the faculty’s perspective. Schmidt and Carstens (2017) encourage liaison librarians to consider the ways the collection development policies and library administration support faculty input during the relocation or weeding process, especially when there is disagreement between liaisons and faculty or when faculty disagree with the weeding process entirely.

**Information reciprocity**

Thull and Hansen (2009) suggest that adherence to the principles outlined in RUSA Guideline 6.3.1 “is likely the most important role academic library liaisons play” (p. 532). As academic liaison librarians respond to users’ information needs in their collection development efforts and increase awareness of these resources, resources are used more frequently, thereby effectively enhancing the value of the library (Thull & Hansen, 2009). Indeed, faculty respondents to a survey conducted at Rutgers University indicated informing faculty of new online or print materials available at the library as one of the most important services offered by their liaison librarians (Glynn & Wu, 2003). Meier (2010) produced comparable results through a survey of mathematics faculty at a large research university who expressed interest in being sent notifications of new book arrivals. Similarly, faculty respondents in a national survey attributed greater importance to receiving notices of new publications in their discipline than the liaison librarians providing the service did (Arendt & Lotts, 2012). Nearly 90 percent of faculty respondents to a survey at Rollins College in Florida indicated this informing service as part of their relationships with their liaison librarian, the most prevalent service indicated (Miller, 2014). Miller (1977) cautions that this information exchange is a “fairly complex” interview process that should not “be limited to book orders and compilation of bibliographies” (p. 214). Glynn and Wu (2003) explain this trend as part of a “reciprocal” relationship in which faculty serve as the “primary source of information regarding a department’s library needs” (p. 125).

This trend seems to suggest a shift in the way liaison librarians interact with faculty in their disciplines. A 1992 survey conducted by the Systems and Procedure Exchange Center of research libraries in the United States found that in addition to recommending titles for the collection, teaching faculty were also involved in reviewing firm orders, approval plan profiling, and reviewing approval plan books at more than one-third of the respondent libraries. Jaguszewski and Williams (2013) observe that the definition of success in collection development has shifted its focus to the user such that approval plans and patron-driven acquisitions are reducing the need for individual selections by either a liaison librarian or a faculty. Results from a survey of liaison librarians at the University of Florida led to the creation of collection development guidelines that supported this shift of focus to the user (Silver, 2014). Of note here is the increasing consideration of the faculty as a user in addition to being a collection development partner. Suggestions such as “Evaluate user satisfaction with the acquisition process” and “Solicit and encourage ongoing faculty, staff, and student input regarding new items (regardless of format) for the collection” (Silver, 2014, p. 12) position faculty as users. While further analysis is necessary to determine the validity of this shift, it seems fitting with the projection of faculty’s role in collection development over time that they are increasingly considered the liaison librarian’s customer to be served.

**Relational factors**

Some have sought to examine the how the relationship between faculty and their liaison librarians influences collection development. Schlak (2016) observed the collection development responsibility of academic liaison librarians as a manifestation of the faculty network with which a liaison has regular contact. Termed “network positionality,” the influence of faculty and student needs are aligned with the library’s; the liaison’s desire to partner with faculty in collection development is driven by the faculty’s expertise not only in their subject areas but also on their students. This is related to the notion of “collegial trust” that emerged as important from liaison interviewees’ comments on the shared commitments of librarians and faculty; this trust permits liaisons to perform functions that involve faculty input, such as collection development (Schlak, 2016; Grigg, 2017). This demonstrates a shift from earlier research that found an “asymmetrical disconnection” between librarians and faculty, a relationship in which the librarian is the only one who finds the lack of connection problematic (Christiansen, Stombler, & Thaxton, 2004). Furthermore, Shen (2012) cites disparate organizational subcultures and differential standing within the university’s structure as barriers to faculty-liaison trust: “Faculty members do not trust librarians to make effective acquisition choices and librarians do not trust faculty to be responsible to make suggestions in the best interest of the university” (p. 16). There is little evidence to support this claim. However, it does demonstrate the oft-cited differences between the institutional priorities of librarians and faculty.

When considering the relationships between faculty and liaison librarians, it is important to note that those faculty-liaison relationships that are strongest have a greater tendency to influence collection development and library resources than do weak relationships (Schlak, 2016). Indeed, librarians involved with collections can often identify faculty who make frequent acquisitions requests (Grigg, 2017). This reflects the decision-making and purchasing authority often ascribed to liaison librarians in the budget (SPEC, 1992; Miller 2014), though liaison librarians do not always have the final say in purchasing decisions (Henry, 2012).

**Budgets**

Regardless of the shifting nature of how faculty relate to their liaison librarians, budgetary restrictions place a recurring straint on this relationship. Faculty and liaison librarians often compete for limited university resources and thus experience tension when discussing collection development (Shen, 2012). Shen (2012) underscores the importance of a long-term development plan and clear institutional priorities when budgets are tight. Additionally, Camack (2017) suggests the “perennial problem” (p. 678) of budget restrictions necessitates the rejuvenation of lapsed liaison-faculty outreach. Indeed, high rates of faculty satisfaction with the collection after University of Alaska Fairbanks’ dissolution of its library liaison program due to budget shortages (Jensen, 2017) provide a critical perspective on the efficacy of liaison work and a call to closely examine the benefits of such programs.

Brennan’s (2015) report of collection development and assessment at Pennsylvania State University’s health sciences library provides a means by which purchasing decisions are “connected to and justified by organizational priorities” (p. 43) and strategic plans. Data-driven analyses of the collection evidenced how the library responded to user needs, thus facilitating improved communication between liaison librarians and faculty (Brennan, 2015). Glynn and Wu (2003) observed the competing budgetary allocations for individual faculty purchase requests and for expensive yet wide-reaching serials subscriptions. They categorized the role of academic liaison librarians as operating out of a “crisis in scholarly publishing” in which restrictions are placed on collection development by the “inflation of periodical subscriptions” (Glynn & Wu, 2003, p. 125). In turn, this exacerbates the professional tension between liaison librarians and faculty when librarians cannot purchase solicited collection development requests. Baylor University’s “decentralized model of collection building” (Ochola & Jones, 2001, p. 29) in which academic departments receive a significant portion of the materials budget or Illinois State University’s allocation of funds for new faculty hires (Murphy & Buckley, 2013) may be of use in alleviating some of this tension.

However, some researchers recognize that serial and database subscriptions are important outcomes of faculty-liaison relationships. Indeed, liaison librarians met faculty needs at Texas A&M University by expanding access to journals and electronic databases (Yang, 2000). Faculty often appreciate this response to the proliferation of relevant electronic resources; however, such collection development strategies shift the nature of the faculty-liaison relationship to one that relies less heavily on access to physical library space and on faculty-liaison contact (Rodwell & Fairbairn, 2007).

**Conclusion**

As scholarship becomes increasingly interdisciplinary, there is a heightened demand for liaison librarians to broaden their collection development efforts by collaborating with liaisons from related disciplines (Glynn & Wu, 2003; Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013). This is especially important during the weeding process as certain resources may figure significantly into the collection by way of more than one discipline (Schmidt & Carstens, 2017). One way to accomplish this is to analyze trends in course syllabi as a collection development strategy (Henry, 2012; Miller, 2014). Another way is to expand liaison efforts to non-academic units (Dahl, 2007). Dahl (2007) contends that while these liaison partnerships are not often defined by a collection development mission, budgetary allocations for library resources aimed at supporting non-academic programs and offices would create a mutually beneficial partnership when “integrated services and shared spaces” (p. 8) are prioritized on university campuses. A third way of collaborating interdisciplinarily is to create a budget distribution model that reflects the areas of the collection that cannot be defined by a singular subject discipline (Shen, 2012). Yet another more recent proposal by Banfield and Petropoulus (2017) suggests the development of an “Archives, Special Collections and Collection Development Team” that would serve only the collection development functions of a liaison librarian on behalf of the entire institution, allowing for greater efficiency of efforts across disciplines.

This examination of the literature regarding faculty and library liaison dynamics highlights only one dimension of the liaison work going on in today’s academic libraries. Collaborating with faculty on collection development is now one of many responsibilities liaison librarians strive to accomplish as pressure to diversify their service offerings and to demonstrate their value increases (Dahl, 2007; Henry, 2012; Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Silver, 2014; Banfield & Petropoulos, 2017). Despite this, collection development remains a multifaceted aspect of liaison work in academic libraries. As has been shown, the dynamics between liaison librarians and faculty as they relate to collection development are codified in liaison job descriptions and collection development policies. These dynamics are categorized by the direct services liaison librarians provide their faculty as well as the exchange of information between the two entities. Relational and budgetary factors inform faculty-liaison interactions and have a strong influence on the outcome of collaborative collection development.

Attebury and Finnell’s (2009) study of LIS students’ understanding of liaison responsibilities takes on a new salience here; only 16.5 percent of LIS student survey respondents indicated learning about liaison librarianship in their required courses. Given the prevalence and complexity of liaison responsibilities in academic library positions, it seems fitting that LIS course instructors, especially those of courses focused on academic libraries and collection development, heed Attebury and Finnell’s suggestion to include content and discussions related liaison work.

Much of the research that constitutes this body of knowledge derives itself from survey methodologies. Many of these methods are borrowed over time and across institutions cultivating related yet insular studies that neglect the depth of faculty-liaison dynamics. In the future, survey methods should be complemented by triangulated research methods. Some studies have demonstrated the promise of using interviews (Schlak, 2016) and case studies (Henry, 2012) while others have introduced the value of focus groups (Kramer et al., 2011) to understanding these dynamics. It is the consensus of thinkers and researchers in this area that the future of collection development between liaison librarians and faculty is predicated upon successful communication and strong, positive relationships. In-depth, qualitative research methods are required to uncover the nature of these tools and to substantiate the trends identified through surveys.

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