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SUBJECT LIBRARIANS
RELATIONS WITH FACULTY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
BOTSWANA:
A REVIEW OF LIAISON
ACTIVITIES

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Introduction

One definition of the word “liaison” is the close intercommunication established between two parts to ensure mutual understanding. For a university librarian, liaising denotes cooperation, collaboration, and partnership between the subject librarian and the faculty member in order to enhance teaching, learning, and research activities.

At the University of Botswana Library (UBL), the term “library liaison” is used interchangeably with the term “subject librarian.” The library liaison, thus, is the person assigned to a specific academic department as the primary contact person for the provision of services to the faculty of that department. The term “library representative” is used to denote the person in an academic department who is the link for that department to the library for all matters concerning library services.

The main goals of the liaison program at UBL are: (1) to develop and foster direct and effective communication between the library and the academic department on all library services, and (2) to provide good public relations inside and outside the library.

Overview of the Subject Librarian System at the University of Botswana Library

UBL adopted the system of subject librarianship in 1981. The philosophy of this system is based on the strong liaison component built into it, so that the best “climate” is provided for collection development, information, reference, and instructional services.

The main functions of the subject librarian are: (1) to develop and maintain the subject collection in the library, (2) to provide subject oriented library instruction to students, and (3) to promote and provide reference and information services to all library patrons.
UBL launched its mission statement in the 1994/1995 term. The fundamental aims of this statement can be summed up as follows: (1) to foster a caring and supportive environment in which service to patrons is paramount, and (2) to respond speedily and appropriately to academic support needs, meeting the expectation of students and faculty alike.

In order to achieve these aims, several subject librarians are assigned to every academic department. The subject librarian/library liaison, also referred to as the faculty liaison librarian, is the librarian with both the subject knowledge and responsibility for a cluster of subjects in a related discipline. This system forms the very cornerstone of UBL's liaison activities.

As Brown (1997) puts it: “The simple fact about liaising with academics is that the more effort you put into it, the more effective it is. It takes you away from other tasks but, if effective, is probably the single most worthwhile activity that a subject librarian can engage in.”

At UBL, we feel the most important aspect of liaising is the development and nurturing of a cooperative relationship between the subject librarian and the academic faculty.

**Cooperative Collection Development**

Collection development is at the heart of subject librarianship at UBL. The subject librarian selects the appropriate library materials to support the teaching, learning, and research of a particular faculty or department. Subject librarians are information specialists in their own right, but not necessarily experts in the cluster of assigned subjects. Therefore, it is imperative that they liaise closely with relevant faculty members in selecting materials for a particular subject field. Librarian-faculty collaboration in book selection is a very important component of the liaison program since, if done right, it ensures a balanced collection.

There are many articles on librarian-faculty relations in collection development. Dominguez and Swindler (1993), Medina (1992), Chu (1997), and Neville (1998) consider cooperative collection development with regard to the workload of the subject librarians.

In order to build a “healthy” and balanced collection one thing is clear, both librarians and faculty must share responsibility. Cooperative collection development must not be seen in isolation. It is imperative that subject librarians, in addition to their collection activity, must be actively involved in curriculum development activities, in the evaluation of the collection, and in faculty research activities. The active involvement
of subject librarians assures the proper management and development of the library's collections.

Liaising can effectively be realized through formal committee structures in which the librarian is a member. For instance, as an Education subject librarian for over ten years, I have been a member of the following committees: Faculty Board, Faculty Executive, Faculty Research, and Graduate Studies. The membership in such committees is strategic, in that whatever decisions are made, the members are, rightfully, sensitive to library resource implications. It is incumbent on subject librarians to be active participants in the planning of new courses and programs. Brown (1997) reminds us that “an important part of your role is to listen to what academics and students have to say, and pick up any new information . . . Develop your role in the committee.”

Faculty perception of librarians is partly shaped by the role subject librarians play in committees. Professional relationships between the faculty and the subject librarians are established here. Recent formal liaison with the faculty has precipitated a number of requests for additional services including, specifically, the compilation of a bibliography on computers in education, the writing of a regular column on books in higher education in the *H E D U Bulletin*, and the assignment to be a resource person at the BERA (Botswana Educational Research Association) workshop on training education researchers.

To be sure, a liaison program must to be appreciated and supported by the Deans, heads of departments, and indeed the rest of the staff, to be truly successful.

**User Education**

Students and faculty at UBL are initiated into the services, facilities, and use of the library. In general, this activity takes the following forms: introductory orientations, formal bibliographic instruction (BI) classes/seminars, and programs designed specifically to build basic information literacy skills.

In liaison with faculty, the subject librarians at UBL develop, deliver, and assess the following:

1. Library Orientation for new students and staff.
2. Faculty library introduction.
3. Information literacy skills programs and BI's for undergraduate students.
4. Workshops and seminars for postgraduate students.
5. Instructional materials, user guides and web home pages.
It is essential for the subject librarian to introduce himself/herself to all new academic staff, and to arrange to give them an introduction to the library. One of Brown's (1997) tips is “Don't wait for academics to come to you . . . Go out of the library and meet them on their own territory.” The initial contact can be done through telephone, memos, and email, but all of these liaison methods should be accompanied by personal visits.

Once academics appreciate, for instance, the role of BI or information literacy in their teaching, they are more likely to encourage and promote it among their students.

Knapp (1959) has shown that student library use is mostly driven by faculty demands. Academic librarians are challenged with a broader education role. Baker (1995) poses a question: “How do librarians forge effective partnerships in the design of curriculum, course outcomes, and teaching strategies that value information literacy?”

Information literacy is a critical issue in higher education. It can only be successfully “tackled” by librarians who are working closely with academics. Increasingly, there is a movement towards resource-based teaching and resource-based learning. The object of this movement is to provide students with opportunities to develop the skills required to become independent researchers and lifelong learners. To accomplish this objective, it is crucial for the library to be more central to the students learning process.

Green and Gilbert (1995) emphasize the importance of information literacy in higher education, and argue “it is an area where communication, cooperation, and collaboration among faculty, faculty support staff, and librarians will be essential.”

**Information Services**

In consultation with the faculty, subject librarians at UBL develop and deliver information services designed to address the specific information needs of their faculties/departments. We feel that the library liaisons must do a needs assessment exercise first, for the service to be effective, though.

As background information, current information services at UBL include the following:

Current awareness services: Contents pages of new journals and Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI).

1. A faculty newsletter.
2. Displays and exhibits.
3. In-depth research consultation services.
4. Additional services, including preparing research guides and specialized bibliographies.
Conclusion

Liaising at UBL is at the heart of all subject librarian activities. It is therefore absolutely essential that we make an effort to maintain a liaison program which will ensure effective communication with all the academic departments for all of the library's services. As liaison librarians, we are academic partners, and should actively participate in the promotion of excellent teaching and research activities.

By monitoring curricular and research developments in assigned subject fields, subject librarians develop and maintain library collections for their respective faculties. It is vital that we should always be proactive, and not wait for the faculty to ask since they may never come forth on their own. Brown (1997) reminds us that most academics are very appreciative when librarians visit them in their offices.

We should remind ourselves that the benefits are immediate when the library is given a “human face.”

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