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Liaison Academy: Refocusing on the Core Areas of Leadership

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Caitlin A. Bagley and Brad Matthies

Liaison Academy

Refocusing on the core areas of librarianship

Liaison librarianship was a model that our library had been attempting to practice for some time with mixed success. Our dean had phased in a liaison model two years prior, but after a two-year pilot, there were still not many meaningful changes in how instruction and collection development took place. During the course of 2021, after a season of retirements, a global pandemic, and a new strategic plan, the Gonzaga University library was left with six library faculty to serve more than 7,000 students. In addition to this, historically academic departments had been assigned to library faculty in a haphazard fashion, and within the department there was debate about how involved a library liaison should be with their individual departments. For example, should they teach to only their assigned departments or could other library faculty share the work of teaching to those departments? Did they just order books for that department on demand or was it more of a conversation? Or was book ordering something that even needed to be a part of their role?

With this background information in mind, the administrative team spent the spring semester of 2021 conducting a literature review on liaison librarianship. One source that rose to the fore was the newly published *Approaches to Liaison Librarianship* by Robin Canuel and Chad Crichton.¹ As the administrative team read this book, we noted four approaches to liaison librarianship: 1) the hybrid approach, which had subject specialist liaisons taking on wider scopes with more functional specialist approaches, usually due to staffing issues; 2) the teaming approach, which is usually ad hoc creation of small teams of liaisons to specific functional needs of departments; 3) the subject specialist approach, which had individual liaisons tied to unique departmental subjects; and 4) functional specialist approach in which liaisons were not tied to specific departments, but rather broad skillsets that applied to many departments, such as data, copyright, and special collections.

We decided that the functional specialist approach best described our library's liaison model. Additionally, we noticed that one frequently cited article was "New roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries" by Janice M. Jaguszewski and Karen Williams.² What we found useful about this article was how it identified five core areas of liaison librarianship and how library faculty could work in each of those areas. At the end of our team readings, we decided to adapt Jaguszewski and Williams's model of liaison librarianship in the creation of a weeklong summer intensive training for our library faculty. We called our training the Liaison Academy.

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Academy week

The week of Liaison Academy was timed to take place during the summer months, when classes were not in session and before major holidays, so that most library faculty would be available and not yet on vacation. The academy took place over six days, Friday to Friday, with the mornings blocked off for in-person learning in one of the library classrooms. This was all planned during spring 2021 with many COVID-19 protocols still in place. As such, we were unsure if these sessions would take place in person or virtually, so we planned all lessons with both formats in mind. Jaguszewski and Williams focus on five functional areas of liaison librarianship, so we decided that the structure of the Academy should do the same. We planned for an overview day, followed by individual days focusing on instruction, research, collection development, outreach, and scholarly communication. These were the five functional areas that all liaisons should have competency in.

In advance of the first session, we asked our library faculty to read the first chapter in *Approaches to Liaison Librarianship*. Doing so ensured that everyone had a basic understanding of the five functional areas of liaison librarianship that each of our lessons were based on. With this information as a common baseline, we were able to focus on how everyone's liaison work intersected with the functional area of liaison librarianship being discussed that day. There were no more directed readings after the first day, but each day did have some level of activity and participation built in.

With each day scheduled to take about three hours of time, there were a few essentials that were developed. These included handouts, readings, and guided discussion activities. In terms of a daily discussion, we closed each day by discussing how library faculty could integrate concepts from the day's lesson into their work as liaison librarians. Since most of our library faculty had newly assigned liaison areas, this approach worked well and brought relevance to the day's lesson.

Lessons learned

The one thing we would have done differently is be more purposeful in how we framed what liaison librarianship meant in terms of our library faculty's work and identity. The administrative team had spent so much time researching liaisonship, that we failed to consider how this new and changing information would be received by our library faculty. For example, the first day of the Academy was met with lots of questions about the overall intent of the Academy and how the new information reflected on their past work. There were many questions from our library faculty about whether they had been doing liaison work wrong or if the Academy was meant to be punitive. We were able to successfully address these concerns during an open discussion at the end of day one. However, this palpable sense of concern among the library faculty could have been avoided by better communication from the administrative team about the Academy's objectives.

Long-term strategy

The initial Academy week was great for focusing on specific attributes of liaison librarianship. Our concern, however, was that most of the lessons would lose urgency or be forgotten altogether after the Academy concluded. Also based on observations from the administrative team and feedback from library faculty, it became apparent that some of the topics of liaison librarianship were so complex or new that two hours were not enough to cover them. To address this challenge, we decided to continue the Liaison Academy in a monthly

format. These meetings took place on the last Tuesday of the month, and focused on one of the five functional areas of liaison librarianship. We strongly encouraged library faculty to lead sessions on any topic they had expertise or special interest in.

When an individual library faculty member would reach out with an idea for an Academy presentation, we would let them choose the topic as long as it fell within one of the five functional areas of liaison librarianship. To help them prepare, the administrative team would meet with them a week prior to go over their ideas and see if there was anything else we needed to clarify or assist with—particularly when it came to keeping presentations in line with the intent and ethos of Liaison Academy, providing greater context to work being done in the university as a whole, or, in the case of some librarians, by simply reassuring them that they were on the right track.

So far, the response from our library faculty is good with three having already led discussions on faculty outreach, instructional learning outcomes, and OER publishing models. Despite this success, there are no future plans for the Liaison Academy to continue beyond one year. If there is a strong desire from library faculty for continuation of the program, we could envision a less intense variation of the Academy. However, mostly due to the preparation time and commitment involved, our program is not sustainable for long-term application.

Gauging success

So how will we know if this program is ultimately successful? At the time of this writing, we are past the six-day intensive sessions and at the midway point of the monthly Liaison Academies. We plan to assess the program through two measures. The first is through our reappointment, promotion, and tenure process. Once a given library faculty achieves tenure, the *Gonzaga Faculty Handbook* calls for post-tenure reviews on a somewhat vague and organic timeline. Additionally, whether tenured or not, it was decided by library faculty and our dean that engagement in annual goal setting would be a valuable development tool that supports both pre- and post-tenure library faculty. Thus, after the six-day Academy, we saw many library faculty modify their annual development goals to be aligned with lessons learned during the Liaison Academy.

Secondly, we plan to track and watch library faculty interactions with their departments to see if there are any meaningful changes in interactions over the course of the next year. We will do this by comparing historic instruction requests to requests made this year, as well as looking at department interactions in general. There was a strong push this year to make connections at department meetings and to find ways to engage with the research agendas of individual faculty members. At the end of the year, we will compare these interactions to past ones and discuss what to continue and what to change.

Final thoughts

This model of this training is adaptable to almost any size library and can be scaled up into more focused lessons that new liaisons could review in a learning management system module. Alternately, if time is a constraint, the Academy content could be compressed into one intensive day or focus on fewer functional areas. We would not recommend holding the Academy without the facilitators having first read the above-noted articles by Jaguszewski and Williams and having a solid understanding of the five functional areas of liaison librarianship.

Additionally, providing some structure for the participants is advised. For example, selecting background readings, developing themed discussion activities, creating informational handouts, and keeping the participant groups small were all useful strategies for us. We do not recommend making the Academy a self-directed activity, as you would lose the educational benefits of a group discussion.

Overall, our Academy worked well for us because it was targeted at a small group of library faculty that had collectively decided to improve their skills in liaison librarianship.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Robin Canuel and Chad Crichton, eds. *Approaches to Liaison Librarianship: Innovations in Organization and Engagement* (Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2021).
2. Janice M. Jaguszewski and Karen Williams, “New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries,” Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, August 2013. *~*