**Evidence Based Library and Information Practice**

*Evidence Summary*

# Embeddedness Creates Opportunities for Enhanced Library Liaison Services and Relationships

**A Review of:**
O'Toole, E., Barham, R., & Monahan, J. (2016). The impact of physically embedded librarianship on academic departments. *portal: Libraries and the Academy, 16*(3), 529-556. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pla.2016.0032

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**Abstract**

**Objective –** To examine whether liaison librarian interactions increase when librarians are physically embedded in their liaison areas.

**Design –** Natural experiment using quantitative measures.

**Setting –** A large, public university in the United States of America.

**Subjects –** Liaison librarian reference interactions.

**Methods –** This research is organized around four primary research questions that examine the effect of liaison librarian physical, co-located embeddedness on the following: 1) the frequency of walk-up reference transactions of the embedded location versus the service desk; 2) the frequency of reference and instructional transactions with liaison areas after the implementation of embedded services; 3) the frequency of walk-up transactions at embedded sites compared to the number of reference and instructional transactions after embeddedness began; and 4) liaison librarian participation in new collaborative or integrative activities with their liaison areas. Researchers used data collected between Fall 2012 and Spring 2014 and compared this to data collected in the pre-embedded period for Fall 2010 to Fall 2011. Data sources included the library's locally developed reference services statistics tracking tool, individual librarians' calendar appointment records, and

librarian performance agreements. The analysis uses descriptive statistics.

**Main Results –** Researchers discovered a decrease in the frequency of liaison librarians' walk-up reference transactions at the service desk, as tracked by transactions per hour, occurring before the transition, during the transition, and after the transition to embedded librarianship. They note a decrease of 45% in the number of walk-up interactions at service points for the three librarians involved in the study from the pre-embeddedness service period during Fall 2010 as compared to Spring 2012. The data show this decline through Spring 2013 before rebounding in Fall 2013 and Spring 2014. They identified a median decline of three transactions per hour at the service desk from the pre-embeddedness to post-embeddedness periods.

They identified an increase of 371% in the number of email transactions following the implementation of embedded librarianship as compared to the pre-embeddedness period. Telephone interactions declined overall during the research period, though they were already in decline before the transition to embeddedness began. The overall number of face-to-face reference appointments increased during the transition to embeddedness and continued to rise during the post-embeddedness period, with a 275% increase in the median number of appointments between pre- and post-embeddedness periods. The new embeddedness service did not have as significant an impact on the frequency of information literacy instruction sessions, with a small increase of 11.5% between the pre- and post-embeddedness periods, but it did spur the creation of online course research guides, which saw an increase of 54%.

Regarding the third research question, researchers totalled the combined numbers of reference transactions by phone, email, and appointment, and compared those against walk-up interactions and also against instruction activities. In both cases, they did not discover any apparent impact of embeddedness and the frequency of these activities.

The final research question addressed whether embeddedness led to liaison librarians having new collaborative and integrative activities with their subject areas. The researchers indicate that the liaison librarians "indeed experienced novel interactions with their assigned departments that fall into both categories" (p. 547). They highlight several types of activities experienced by the liaison librarians in the study, such as participating in the grant proposal process, assisting department projects, and involvement in student activities.

**Conclusion –** This library's expanded embedded library services led to an increased frequency of reference interactions, instruction opportunities, and opportunities for new collaborative and integrative activities between the liaison librarian and their subject area. This study reveals several opportunities for future research around embedded services as well as models of embeddedness, including opportunities to address impact and benefits of such services on the liaison areas.

**Commentary**

This study reflects findings in other recent studies showing that embedded academic librarianship leads to increased interactions between librarians and students and faculty. For example, Freiburger, Martin, and Nuñez (2016) highlight the benefits to instructional and collaborative interactions after eight years of embedded practice in the health sciences, while Connolly-Brown, Mears, and Johnson (2016) reveal the value of embeddedness for faculty and students in virtual environments, with a focus on remote library users.

This research provides a unique perspective on three academic librarians' experiences with embedded librarianship. Using Glynn's (2006) critical appraisal tool, the study is internally valid despite a number of weaknesses. There is limited generalizability of the methods or results beyond the specific liaison librarians at this particular library, as this study draws

upon measures (e.g., an in-house reference statistics tool) and circumstances (e.g., having a librarian's primary office located in the department they serve) that are unique to this institution. The small sample size is questionable, though internally the results do show that their local model of embeddedness has led to an increased frequency of librarian-to-liaison area interactions across the three disparate liaison areas examined.

The study benefits from the decision to use only quantitative measures, as this helps limit the influence of researcher bias within this self-study. However, this study would be enhanced by drawing on qualitative methods of self-study to examine the librarians' experiences in their own words. Such methods might allow this research to properly address the relationship between any benefits of moving to an embedded service and to further explore the impact of new collaborative and integrative activities examined in the final research question. Instead, this research only highlights a correlation between changing the embedded model and the impact of liaison interactions, without establishing a causal relationship.

This research has practical implications for academic librarians considering or engaged in physical embedded librarian services. Physical embeddedness is no longer new or unique to academic library settings, and this study provides further evidence those unique opportunities for embeddedness can be leveraged to help enhance relationships to one's liaison area. One area for future research not identified is how physical embeddedness, such as being located in one's liaison area, would operate for those liaison librarians serving multiple departments. Finally, as the authors note, this research suggests there are opportunities to link expanded library services to impact and success measures at the institutional level, such as academic success, student retention, and successful research collaborations and funding applications.

**References**

Connolly-Brown, M., Mears, K., & Johnson, M. E. (2016). Reference for the remote user through embedded librarianship. *The Reference Librarian, 57*(3), 165-181. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02763877.2015.1131658

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