



Evidence Summary

Structured Interviews Reveal That Reference and Liaison Librarians – as Engaged, Proactive Partners – are Vital to the Academic Enterprise

A Review of:

Johnson, A.M. (2020). Reference and liaison librarians: Endangered species or “vital partners?” Views of academic library administrators. *Journal of Library Administration*, 60(7), 784-799.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1786979>

Reviewed by:

Joanne M. Muellenbach
Library Director and Associate Professor
California Health Sciences University
Clovis, California, United States of America
Email: jmuellenbach@chsu.edu

Received: 11 Nov. 2021

Accepted: 4 Jan. 2022

© 2022 Muellenbach. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons-Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike License 4.0 International (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed, not used for commercial purposes, and, if transformed, the resulting work is redistributed under the same or similar license to this one.

DOI: 10.18438/eblip30080

Abstract

Objectives – To investigate the current state and prospects of reference and liaison librarianship.

Design – Structured interviews consisted of 10 questions that lasted between 30 and 75 minutes.

Setting – Fourteen medium-sized, urban universities geographically spread across the United States of America.

Subjects – Fifteen library administrators with at least 10 years of experience.

Methods – The author contacted academic library leaders from 17 benchmark institutions and head librarians from other R1 institutions whose libraries were members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) or whose campus size and characteristics mirrored the author’s institution in that they were medium-sized urban universities. The study examined five primary questions and included an appendix with the 16-item survey instrument. The structured interviews included 10 questions about

the current state and prospects of reference and liaison librarianship, along with questions related to demographics. The author transcribed the interviews and removed all identifying information. Since the interviews were structured and thus thematically similar, coding software was not used. The author compiled and analyzed the responses to the questions.

Main Results – The concepts of connecting, discovering, listening, and partnering were inherent in the definition of being a liaison librarian. In general, the library administrators, all of whom had been in the profession for 10 years or more, felt that liaison librarians should be active in furthering scholarly activities in such areas as grant-writing, generating scholarship, or data curation. There was an emphasis on outreach, being proactive, and engaging with faculty, which raised an important question for administrators: Is this skill set too broad for any one person, and if so, how can the library profession collaborate to draw upon each other's strengths? There was a consensus that while the work of reference and liaison librarians is vital to the academic enterprise, this work need not be situated at a central reference desk. Rather, librarians would be physically embedded or electronically linked to students and faculty, helping them to formulate answerable questions, locate high-quality, evidence-based information in specialized databases, or provide support in such areas as open educational resource development, augmented reality, or scholarly communications.

Conclusion – In the view of current library administrators, being a reference and liaison librarian means partnering proactively with students and faculty to ensure a deep understanding of their teaching, learning, and research needs while also maintaining a thorough knowledge of the libraries' collections and resources. To accomplish this, the librarian must be visible to their constituencies, tell memorable, authentic stories of what they have to offer, and build lasting relationships. Reference and liaison librarians require traditional knowledge of library functions and systems and teaching skills and possess qualities such as collaboration, communication, and flexibility. Overall, library leaders believe that liaison librarians will continue to be vital partners and that without a central reference desk, there will be a deeper integration within the academic enterprise.

Commentary

Even as far back as 1978, academic reference librarians were challenged to demonstrate their value and engage in high-level scholarly and teaching activities (Aluri & St. Clair, 1978). To this end, library leaders are involved in reenvisioning the liaison program structure and balancing functional versus subject expertise. An ARL report regarding liaison roles revealed an emerging focus on engagement, requiring an outward focus as libraries monitor and respond to changes in stakeholder demands, needs, and practices (Jaguszewski & William, 2013). Since 2015, the ARL has offered eight one- to two-day liaison institutes to their members, and the overarching recommendations for liaisons are to foster deeper and frequent communications, seek workplace collaborations, and reach out to non-traditional campus units, which are often drivers of institutional initiatives and priorities (Vine, 2018).

Applying the Generic CAT appraisal tool (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014), I found the study to be clear and well organized, with sample responses to the interview questions and an appendix with the interview questions. The study's author, Johnson, has in-depth knowledge about liaison librarian services. She conducted a thorough literature review that traced the historical perceptions of reference librarians, published a peer-reviewed study on this topic, and served as a library administrator at an R1 institution whose library is an ARL member. The author acknowledged a limitation related to the types of libraries included in the study: library leaders were only from benchmark institutions or from medium-sized, urban universities. Future research may wish to expand to include library leaders from diverse ethnic groups and larger, international academic institutions, focusing on specialized subject disciplines.

Johnson provided the participants' anecdotal responses to the questions examined. Still, the study would have been enhanced if it provided an analysis for the question, "What reference model do you use?" Such responses would have revealed a useful benchmark about the participants' reference philosophy. Using participant codes or pseudonyms would have added context to their comments and allowed us to link sets of responses throughout the analysis. Details regarding the interview period, mode, and the process for collecting, analyzing, and storing the data would have decreased any bias concerns. There is also a lack of clarity regarding liaison, reference, and subject librarians and if they are the same or maintain unique aspects. While the study participants were individuals with at least 10 years' library experience, it is unclear how long they served in leadership positions. Further information regarding the methodology could help future researchers build upon this subject area.

The findings of this study can assist academic library administrators in strategic planning and inform programs in library and information studies that include courses on emerging library roles or a library administration component. In addition, librarians in these roles may wish to solicit user feedback by conducting focus groups or distributing surveys to inform their future services. This study is an important starting point from which further research will provide more significant insights into the role of liaison librarians as vital partners in the academic enterprise.

References

Aluri, R., & St. Clair, J. W. (1978). Academic reference librarians: An endangered species? *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 4(2), 82–84.

Jaguszewski, J. M., & Williams, K. (2013). *New roles for new times: Transforming liaison roles in research libraries*. Association of Research Libraries. <https://www.arl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/nrnt-liaison-roles-revised.pdf>

Perryman, C., & Rathbun-Grubb, S. (2014). *The CAT: A generic critical appraisal tool*. <https://www.jotform.us/cp1757/TheCat>

Vine, R. (2018). Realigning liaison with university priorities: Observations from ARL Liaison Institutes 2015–18. *College & Research Library News*, 79(8), 420–423, 458. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.79.8.420>