

In Practice:

Relationship Building Advice for Liaison Librarians: Putting It Into Practice and Troubleshooting

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Abstract

Liaison librarians depend on communication and cooperation to be successful, so professional publications about liaison librarianship regularly include discussions of relationship building methods. As a department of experienced liaison librarians, we identified the relationship-building ideas from previous publications that were proactive in nature and had worked for us. Even though the advice has been helpful, we faced challenges or heard about challenges from other librarians when we discussed implementing the ideas. To improve on the published ideas, we have added tips for putting them into practice and answered troubleshooting questions based on our experiences. Adapting to and working around challenges are necessary parts of liaison librarian work that have not been well-described in past publications.

Keywords: liaison librarians, subject librarians, library outreach, academic libraries, relationship building

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Relationship building is crucial to public-facing library work. Exchanging information with patrons to adapt collections and services to their needs is fundamental to libraries' success. For a liaison librarian, success is connected to familiarity, visibility, and usefulness. People in departments should know who their liaison librarian is and what the library offers. They should be willing to reach out to their liaison librarian with their questions or requests and see the library and their liaison librarian as contributing toward department goals. Developing strong connections for this success requires work, creativity, and tenacity.

No single formula or list of activities works in every situation. Liaison librarians benefit from a well-stocked toolbox of ideas. Entire books (e.g., Canuel & Crichton, 2021) have been written about what liaison librarians have done to reach their communities. Some authors have distilled ideas for relationship building and maintenance down to lists of activities. Holtze (2002) compiled "100 Ways to Reach Your Faculty." In 2014, Silver provided a similar list, clustered into phases and areas of liaison librarian work. More recently, Filgo and Towers (2020) mapped activities onto two axes: location and level of pre-planning. These lists, along with the case studies they drew from, provide many ideas for liaison librarians to use or adapt in their outreach work.

Sharing such tactics is a regular practice in our liaison librarian department. We also have seen an enthusiastic exchange of ideas when we gather with other liaison librarians at conferences. Challenges in applying ideas to unique contexts often temper the enthusiasm, however. While it is helpful to learn from others' successes, ideas often require adaptation.

For us, adaptation is in the context of a department of liaison librarians at an urban research university library. Liaison librarians are responsible for research support, instruction services, and communicating with patrons about collections, though not for purchasing decisions. We generally do not have other major work assignments, such as supervising physical library spaces or providing cross-disciplinary services like data service consulting. Even in these circumstances, with institutional support to work extensively with liaison departments, we have faced challenges in outreach work. These challenges include the common problems of limited time and money, as well as challenges specific to our university.

To build adaptation into compilations, we added details about how to put the advice into practice and about the challenges we have had to troubleshoot. We generally focused on activities directly connected to outreach or relationship building, and only included the reference, collections, and instruction parts of liaison librarian

work that involved outreach. Furthermore, we wanted to highlight ideas “small” enough to be within the skills of almost any qualified librarian. A suggestion to get an advanced degree in an assigned liaison field, for example, would require an investment of time and possibly money that is beyond the scope of this paper. We did include a few opportunities for collaboration that could be considered “bigger” ideas, as partnership is often a goal, but we limited ideas to those a wide range of liaison librarians would be likely to be able to adapt.

From this compilation, we highlighted activities that worked for us, despite challenges. Because we are liaison librarians working in a university with job responsibilities to connect to academic departments, we use the words “liaison librarian” and “departments” in this paper. Librarians with other titles, from research data librarian to instructional librarian to library director, also need to build relationships. We hope that librarians with outreach and relationship-building roles, regardless of title, can benefit from this discussion of challenges and find ways to adapt ideas in their circumstances.

The Advice: Introduce Yourself

Introducing yourself to potential department contacts is a common starting place. For example, emails can be sent to people listed on department websites before you have met them. You can introduce yourself to many potential contacts. The examples below are arranged by who is usually easiest to find at most institutions and who is likely to be the most important to reach first, but priorities will vary.

- Faculty (Filgo & Towers, 2020) including new faculty (Holtze, 2002) and faculty teaching key courses or holding key positions, such as director of research, department chairs, or even all faculty (Silver, 2014).
- Administrative contacts (Holtze, 2002) including academic advisors, administrative assistants, program directors, education coordinators, student engagement officers, lab coordinators, and career services employees.
- Student groups including student organizations (Silver, 2014) or graduate students (Holtze, 2002) via lists of teaching and research assistants.

Putting It Into Practice

- Prioritize your email introductions based on your goals. If information literacy is a priority, for example, review course descriptions and email instructors of classes with a library research component first.

- Include a point of action or make a request to encourage a response and turn an introductory email into two-way communication. For a department chair, you can ask to meet for coffee or ask to speak at a department meeting.
- Follow up with next steps when you get a response. For example, if you are invited to present, propose a date and ask for more details. When they confirm a time, send a calendar invitation.
- Offer options when asking for something. For a presentation, flexibility could be with date and time or by offering to present in-person, via Zoom, or pre-recorded video.
- Keep good records of the responses you receive. A growing list of clients and relationships helps you remember whom to contact in the future.
- Keep reaching out even when you are not new, to maintain and build relationships.
- Monitor announcements and reach out to new hires and re-contact people when they take on new roles.

Troubleshooting

What If There Is No Response?

If you follow up with another email, make it distinct enough to get attention. For example, instead of responding within an email chain, send a fresh email with a new subject heading and/or a new request.

Take advantage of opportunities to introduce yourself. If you hear about activities in the departments, work to be included. For example, if you hear that the new dean is having one-on-one sessions with all faculty, ask their administrative assistant for the same opportunity.

For the most important contacts, if sending email and getting yourself into situations where you can introduce yourself still do not work, it may be the time to be bolder. Consider a real-time medium like the phone or in person. Even when people do not answer phones, a voicemail message indicating you have sent an email, acknowledging that sometimes emails get buried, and explaining why you are trying to get their attention can prompt an email response.

For an in-person approach, you can stop by their office. Often, however, people are not in their offices. Sometimes adjunct faculty may not even have an office. In that case, it may be possible to identify one of their classes and show up outside of the classroom toward the end of the class period, so you can make a direct request from. A small gift bag with library giveaways is a nice touch. You can balance this boldness by

working to make the interaction non-threatening for the recipient: making sure it is in a public place, keeping the interaction brief and work-focused, and only continuing a longer discussion if they want to talk more. When one member of our team tried this, the adjunct faculty were appreciative of the effort to find them and to offer support in ways other university support services had not. For that librarian, it garnered agreement for a class presentation.

Even after you have done everything you can to introduce yourself, some people will still be difficult to reach. Take comfort in knowing you have done what is in your power and learned things to help you improve your strategies going forward.

What If They Ask for Something the Liaison Librarian Cannot Deliver?

Sometimes the excitement of getting a response is deflated by a request for something you or the library cannot provide, such as costly collection items, teaching outside the library's scope, or large partnership requests. Honest, open, and realistic discussions are an effective approach to clarify what you can and cannot do, so the goals of the departments, the library, and the librarian are achieved.

There may be room to negotiate. For example, one of our librarians presented during the last hour of an evening class at 9 p.m., and the attention level was low. Henceforth, the librarian has negotiated earlier start times or alternative modalities for that class. The negotiation may not always be simple. Sometimes requests are for liaison librarians to teach topics where they lack expertise. If it is an area within the scope of the library's mission and your job role, you can ask them to give you time to learn. Then, learn what you need to know and deliver.

When the request is not part of your job, it is better to act as a facilitator of solutions, rather than as the provider of solutions. You can work with or make a referral to a colleague or to another campus resource if someone else can better provide the service. Managing expectations and avoiding scope creep will enable you to provide the best, most sustainable service.

In the end, there are some requests, such as adding items to the collections that are far outside the scope or budget of the library, for which you simply need to give a simple, honest "no." Requests that cannot be met provide an opportunity for dialogue and education, so your contact can better understand what your library does offer. If the request is one you could see your library potentially providing in the future, it also gives you an opportunity to discuss possible future services or partnerships with library leadership.

The Advice: Gather Information

Identify any information related to your assigned departments that you can access. Standard sources of curriculum requirements or institutional data about demographics and enrollment information include:

- bulletins, course schedules, textbook lists (Holtze, 2002), and syllabi (Silver, 2014);
- demographics available from the departments or university offices (Holtze, 2002);
- existing survey or research data (e.g., LibQual, Ithaka S+R, literature);
- departments' websites (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014), calendars, and event announcements;
- social media (Filgo & Towers, 2020).

Less obvious sources of information:

- Physical spaces can yield insights, even though the pandemic may have shifted where activities occur. Are there bulletin boards or digital signs? If so, you can gather more than superficial information, including who advertises what or if QR codes are more common than social media links. How are classrooms, faculty offices, or labs used? Visit the spaces at various times of day and days of the week to know if and when people are active in their spaces.
- Students are an underutilized source of information. You can identify departmental student groups that would be willing to share their perspectives. Opportunities also are available during consultations or before the start of classes you teach. Students' level of awareness about library resources and services could also speak to how much and which resources faculty promote. For example, do their professors endorse Google Scholar for their assignments? During orientations, do they remember the library or mention what librarians do to assist students?
- Survey your liaison librarian department faculty and students (Holtze, 2002) to discover their preferred communication channels, research interests, and what they need from the library. Your data collection can range from extensive needs assessments to a Google form to collect purchase suggestions or workshop ideas.

Putting It Into Practice

- The information gathered may help you prioritize whom to target for outreach. Curriculum mapping, for example, can reveal classes or instructors to approach.

You can create online research guides, such as LibGuides, focused on resources related to program strengths or emphases (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014).

- For a new liaison librarian, the onboarding process is a valuable time to gather information from your supervisor and colleagues, as well as information your predecessor may have shared. This information can help you understand or anticipate issues you may face. For example, are there assignments that regularly frustrate students and require awareness for those working at reference points? Did your predecessor have strong relationships with any faculty or staff that could carry over?

Troubleshooting

What If Departments Do Not Share Information About Themselves?

The library's internal information may help you indirectly learn about departments. Which collection items in those subjects are heavily used? Can you pull statistics about online research guide use? Do any trends stand out about your areas? These insights will be valuable, even if you struggle to break through institutional silos. If you can share the library's information to those departments, you can promote sharing by providing information and asking if your impressions of the departments are correct.

The Advice: Establish and Use Communication Channels

For liaison librarians, effective communication with departments is critical to success. Information gathering may have provided information about communication channels, but liaison librarians also may have to create their own. By selecting the appropriate contacts, channels, strategies, and content options, a liaison librarian can elevate the visibility of the library and expand opportunities for engagement.

- Provide materials, such as business cards (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014) or brochures, about the library to faculty, program directors, and other contacts. These can be shared with students at points of need, such as orientations or office hours. Regular check-ins with department administrators will help you determine the most effective opportunities.
- Send out newsletters (Silver, 2014), print or online, to your departments.
 - Share library-related faculty (Holtze, 2002) and student stories. Faculty and students from our departments have won library-sponsored contests and grants and shown their work in physical and virtual exhibitions, demonstrating the library's value.

- Share information about opportunities, such as for grants (Holtze, 2002) or professional development, that are most relevant to your departments.
- Share information on new library resources or publications (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014), but also remember resources do not have to be new to highlight. Students are always cycling through a college campus.
- Tell people about the services you offer as their librarian: customized, in-depth research consultations, workshops, and more (Silver, 2014).
- Let departments know what you are doing for them, such as the amount of money spent and successful collaborations (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014).
- Customize the back of your business card with a sticker linking to a key online research guide or with information about services you provide. They are easy to produce with mailing labels, label templates in a word processing program, and a printer.
- Hang posters or fliers on bulletin boards or digital screens (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014).
- Explore social media options (Filgo & Towers, 2020), such as department accounts and individual faculty or lab accounts for sharing information and making connections.

Putting It Into Practice

- Develop relationships with key contacts at your departments to help connect with your audience.
 - The academic department administrative assistant may be your most important contact. They often handle communications, social media, listservs, and bulletin boards, as well as managing calendars and spaces. If they do not, they know who does. While you hope to become a familiar face, students are more likely to pay attention to information endorsed by an insider, like the assistant, with whom they interact consistently.
 - Academic department chairs can help you target your outreach plans and messaging, and their endorsement of those plans may legitimize you with their faculty and students.
- Use the information you have gathered to tailor messaging to your departments.
 - For example, one librarian at our university surveyed art students about library use and was surprised to learn they often preferred posters in their spaces to social media.
 - Incorporating student input can enhance your strategy. Library student workers, particularly those active on social media, can offer insights into the content and tone that resonate with them.

- When available, a library public relations and communications department can help you craft messaging, produce professional materials, and promote your services and collections in campus-wide channels.
- Liberally use QR codes, URLs, and calls to action (e.g., 'register for this event') to make your communications actionable.

Troubleshooting

What If Key Contacts Do Not Reliably Distribute Information?

One of the most challenging aspects of executing a communication strategy is navigating things beyond your control. It is best to anticipate as many factors as you can and devise alternative strategies. If a key contact is not responding to email, expect that you may have to reach out more than once, find another contact, or make an indirect connection plan (e.g., papering their building with posters). When collaborating with partners, make sure every detail of your plan is mapped out, shared with everyone involved, and accompanied by calendar invitations and email reminders.

What If the Design Skills to Make Eye-Catching Posters and Fliers Are Absent?

You do not necessarily need to do all the work to create a poster or flier from scratch. Sometimes the college or university will have pre-made, branded templates available. At larger institutions, liaison librarians could work with the library public relations department to create a shared template, or there may be a colleague or student assistant with the skills to create posters or a reusable template that liaison librarians share. For example, a student assistant at our institution created a beautifully animated header for one liaison librarian's faculty newsletter. If you do not have anyone who can help, design tools such as Canva can be used to create a template.

Also remember posters and electronic or print fliers are for reaching a wide audience for a brief amount of time. A simple, personalized email, rather than a flashy poster or image-heavy email, can be remarkably effective when you are trying to reach specific people.

The Advice: Integrate Into Departments, Becoming a Familiar, Useful Face

Rarely are liaison librarians given the red-carpet treatment in the beginning. To become seen as a necessary player for academic success, you must make yourself and the value of your contributions known by providing excellent research support.

- Show up and participate at academic departments' public events, such as lectures, performances, or open houses (Filgo & Towers, 2020; Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014).
- Participate in groups, such as professional organizations and university committees, or training, such as grant writing or teaching enhancement, that members of your departments are likely to be part of (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014).
- Hold office hours in your departments' physical space (Filgo & Towers, 2020; Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014).
- When visiting departments, stop by and introduce yourself if someone has an open door or say hello if you see people you know in the hall (Filgo & Towers, 2020; Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014).
- Host pop-up events or displays at the departments with information or materials specific to their needs or interests.
- Implement a fast-response method for handling requests (Holtze, 2002). Even if you do not know the answer yet, give yourself a deadline, such as the end of the workday, so you at least acknowledge receipt of a request promptly.

Putting It Into Practice

- Work with your supervisor and others in the library so your absence from the library building to be at department meetings and events or non-traditional scheduling to meet department needs is understood within the library.
- Adapt your timing to the timing in the departments—both for the time of day and time of year (Silver, 2014). If the departments enroll students who work full time and have evening classes, the morning is not the best time to visit the department. Ideally you will be able to match your schedule to their schedule.
- Arrive early and stay late at meetings and events. Building relationships often happens in conversations before and after these gatherings.
- Do not wait for others to introduce themselves: approach them and introduce yourself first, offering your card.
- When people ask what you do, instead of focusing on your job responsibilities, let them know what your academic and research strengths are and how those strengths could benefit them.
- In addition to making yourself available, make yourself indispensable through the quality of your work. Departments' awareness of the liaison librarian's existence is not enough to guarantee a steady stream of requests for research or teaching support.

- Observe your academic departments' research and teaching paths, listen to their concerns, and fine tune your services. Where they are heading, you should follow. For example, if your departments care about systematic literature reviews, everybody will feel the need to contact you in advance if they know you have the skills to understand and assist in this process.
- Follow what your predecessors did, but do not overdo it. Scholarly environments, academic departments, and information or instruction technology change. What worked before may not work now. Use what you are learning from your departments to decide when to follow your predecessor's practices and when to try something new.

Troubleshooting

What If Familiarity Extends to a Few People but Not to All Important Contacts in the Departments?

Meet someone, and, as the shampoo bottle says, rinse and repeat. Becoming a familiar face may start with five minutes in one class, which can turn into more time in another class. Think about it as a snowball effect. Once faculty and students know your face and know your skills, you become a necessary part of their teaching, learning, and research process.

Nearly Everything Is Virtual. When Is There a Chance to Talk If There Is Little Time for Informal Conversations with Department Contacts?

Use the moments that are available to tell people about what you can do. Virtual consultations with students are a great opportunity. Graduate students are especially excellent communicators to the faculty. Speak up to them about what you can do. The same is true in other situations, such as meetings with others inside academic departments and in virtual orientations. Rehearse, train yourself to recognize moments when it is appropriate to pitch your skills and services, and seize those moments.

The Advice: Build Personal Relationships

Strong personal relationships with department contacts pay off in the ability to achieve more by collaborating on shared goals. Building personal relationships requires patience and persistence. The best way to build personal relationships is to find common ground, which often goes beyond talking about work. Sometimes it is a book you can share, a coffee shop you both like, or a committee assignment that opens the door to other discussions.

- Say hello when you see department contacts outside of work (Filgo & Towers, 2020). If you have not met someone in person but have seen them on the website, you can still introduce yourself.
- Compliment them when you learn about their recent publications (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014). You can slip it into conversation or send emails to congratulate them on awards they receive.
- Send personalized invitations about events that would interest them. At our university, for the political science faculty, an invitation to library-hosted Constitution Day celebrations gets a strong response. Even if invitees cannot attend the event, they like being invited, and they often respond to the next email more quickly.
- Thank the contacts who are the biggest library supporters, including with hand-written notes (Holtze, 2002). Sending a hand-written note, rather than an email, stands out.
- Invite them to coffee or lunch (Filgo & Towers, 2020; Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014) and do not just talk about work. Ask about hobbies or the latest non-work book they have read or movie they have seen. Showing a genuine interest in another person encourages people to open up.
- Let friendship form organically if you interact with contacts from your departments outside of work (Filgo & Towers, 2020—citing many other authors). A librarian at our institution has encountered faculty at local park cleanup events, where they fell into step with each other and ended up spending an hour together. Sometimes it leads to friendship, but even if it does not, you have left them knowing that you care about the same things they care about.

Putting It Into Practice

- To find out about their publications, set database alerts for your departments' faculty and develop a way to track department publicity (e.g., follow on social media or schedule regular time to check the department website). If you cannot remember a publication when you bump into someone, confirm the information about them when you get back to the office, and when appropriate, send an email to congratulate them.
- Do not force yourself into uncomfortable situations. If your departments all go to the bar together on game nights, and you hate drinking and sports, use other events to build relationships.

Troubleshooting

What If It Is a Struggle to Make a Connection?

Many people in academia are shy around new people. If this is you, practice conversational starters beforehand. Practice ways to put other people at ease in case the other person is the shy one. In either situation, one technique is to imagine yourself as a host, so in your mind, you become the person helping other people make connections, rather than feeling like an outsider struggling to fit in. Another technique is to consider what questions you like to answer and ask them of others.

If questions about hobbies or conversations outside of work do not get a positive response, focus on talking about work and follow the other person's lead regarding suitable topics. Some people have firmer boundaries between their work and personal lives than others. Similarly, if small talk about books, movies, and hobbies goes in a direction you are not comfortable with, it is okay to shift the discussion to less personal topics. Remember that your goal is to build a better working relationship. It goes a long way toward building a collegial relationship by being sensitive to the comfort of everyone involved.

Finally, some working relationships will be more distant than others. That is okay. Sometimes the work-based connection comes before, or even without, the personal friendship.

The Advice: Offer Instruction and Programming

One purpose of establishing and maintaining relationships with faculty and other departmental employees is to offer services, including instruction, as a path to better support student success. Even if it is outside of class time, bringing efficient solutions to academic challenges will make you an indispensable ally for your academic departments.

- Offer library instruction sessions to courses taught by your departments (Filgo & Towers, 2020; Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014).
- Offer and provide alternatives to in-class instruction. You can make a video or hold drop-in times for students to work on papers or projects and get help. You can embed content in the learning management system space for the class, including course-specific online research guides and tutorials (Silver, 2014). Even getting contact information in the syllabus is helpful (Holtze, 2002).
- Get time in department or program orientations (Silver, 2014).

- Hold sessions at the library that students would be interested in or in areas where you see a gap in students' knowledge, such as targeted workshops/webinars, tours, or orientations (Filgo & Towers, 2020; Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014).

Putting It Into Practice

- Start with whatever is established, such as one-shot classes that a predecessor may have taught.
- Contact instructors far enough in advance of the semester's start to give them time to incorporate information literacy into their class.
- Remind people you have taught for, before the next semester, that you are willing to do it again.
- Solicit invitations from other sections of a class, taught by other faculty, for a class you already teach for a different professor.
- If you are at an institution that uses calendaring software and you teach at the same time for a professor every semester, offer to be the one to send a calendar invitation to the professor for the class session you usually come to.
- Think about how to present 5-10 minute, 20-30 minute, and 50+ minute versions of your lesson. This gives the instructor more options for scheduling your visit.

Troubleshooting

What If the Liaison Librarian Does Not Have Expertise in the Assigned Subject Areas?

Disciplinary publications can introduce you to major topics in the field, and library or educational research can inform your approach to services. Subject-oriented email listservs—for both librarians and people in the fields you serve—are also a tool for gathering information. Introduce yourself to the listserv and invite others to share their insights about what a liaison librarian new to the subject should know.

What If the Professor Is Not Interested in Information Literacy Instruction?

If you do not hear a response from someone you reach out to, try again at the next opportunity, such as the next time the course is offered. Trying again the next semester also prompts you to check if someone else is teaching who is more interested.

What If an Instructor Decides They No Longer Have Time for a Class-Long Session?

Changes can happen for many reasons, so do not take it personally. Maintain contact with the instructor by checking in at the beginning of each semester. You can offer an online research guide or a brief video covering what you would teach in

person. Make sure your contact information is on any learning object, online research guide, or video so students can reach you. You can ask the professor to consider placing your contact information, appointment scheduling link, office hours, or links to key library resources in the syllabus or learning management system.

The Advice: Move Into Collaboration and Partnership

Collaboration or partnership is sometimes an end in itself, and sometimes it is part of supporting your departments or meeting library goals. Often these opportunities go beyond basic services and tap into your unique skills, serve specific needs on your campus, or allow for creativity that may not be explicitly in a liaison librarian's job description. Liaison librarians on our campus have hosted joint events with their departments, participated in applying for grants with faculty—some that led to collaborative grant-funded projects—and hosted a podcast with a departmental faculty member. Building these opportunities takes extra effort to make the partnership meet the needs of the librarian, the library, and the partners outside the library.

- Serve on or assist with committees within your liaison departments (Filgo & Towers, 2020; Silver, 2014). Librarians' blend of subject knowledge and information finding can be helpful on curriculum committees, thesis committees, and search committees. Even when not on the search committee, librarians also can be involved in departments' search and hiring process by meeting with or providing library tours for job candidates (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014).
- Host collaborative events with departments (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014). The balance of effort can vary. In some cases, you may be doing 90% of the work on a library-centric event, and in others you may be doing 10% on an event where you facilitate connections between the departments and parts of the library.
- Develop assignments together with faculty or co-design or co-teach a course (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014). You can also get feedback and work together on online research guides (Holtze, 2002).
- Collaborate on research. That may include everything from joint conference presentations or articles to collaboration on grant applications (Holtze, 2002; Silver, 2014).

Putting It Into Practice

- Learn your organization's structure, how it handles new ideas, and how much care it exercises for employee well-being before you advocate for a major new collaboration.

- Listen to what your liaison departments complain about. What services or opportunities are they missing? If multiple units have the same complaint, brainstorm with a trusted colleague or supervisor about how an initiative can meet multiple goals.
- Learn what other libraries are doing and bring those collaboration ideas to your potential partners.
- Learn your institutional and library strategic priorities. Knowing them can provide a useful spur during conversations with contacts who might not yet be considering collaboration.
- When evaluating new collaborations, look for ways that the effort can cross departmental or similar boundaries and support students or faculty broadly.
- Be prepared to listen to ideas you “know” will not work at your library. Sometimes a new voice or push from departmental contacts outside the library can open doors. On the other hand, when departmental contacts are envisioning a \$100,000 project and you know there is a \$10,000 cap from library funds, it is time for a reality check and discussion of other funding sources.

Troubleshooting

What Happens When Potential Partners Only Want to Use the Library Transactionally—Like Checking Out Books or Reserving Spaces?

Send them links to articles or press releases about sample initiatives and ask whether they would be interested in similar initiatives. If they do not express interest immediately, be patient. Sometimes it can take a semester or several semesters for an idea to percolate, though sometimes their answer will remain “no” and your idea is outside the scope or budget of your potential partners.

How Are Big Collaborations Balanced Among Other Work Obligations?

Investigating at the beginning to learn the limits of your library can help, so you can predict how much flexibility is available for your other work obligations while you work on a big collaboration. Consider approaching your supervisor at the outset, explaining how the collaboration aligns with strategic goals at the library or your institution and asking frankly which of your standing responsibilities could be backburnered or temporarily assumed by a colleague. Projects sometimes extend beyond the normal workday, however, even with exemplary time management.

How Can Partnership Be Sustained After a Big Project?

Once a collaboration has met or surpassed its initial goals, there are multiple options. Learning from your departments through regular contacts, focus groups, or surveys can provide ideas about good next steps. Learning from other librarians also can spark new ideas. Sometimes projects just end, too, and moving on or focusing on basic liaison librarian services, especially if your library is short-staffed, is not failure.

Conclusion

If just using the right script, client relationship management software, or marketing approach ensured strong relationships with engagement and true partnership between academic departments and the library, library outreach work could be standardized. Outreach and collaboration are more complex, as they involve relationships between particular people—both librarians and others on campus—who bring their own experiences and preferences. A single tool cannot address the complexity of interpersonal relationships nor how situations can change drastically due to circumstances as common as a retirement or as unusual as a global pandemic.

Relationships exist within institutional contexts with specific opportunities and constraints. The suggestions and troubleshooting ideas presented in this article are more or less feasible depending on the people involved and institutional circumstances. For example, it may be easier for a librarian to become a member of a departmental committee at a campus where the faculty already view librarians as partners in research and teaching than at one where there are large separations and status differences between librarians and teaching and research faculty. Extensive partnerships are more practicable for a liaison librarian with few competing demands than for one assigned to many departments and roles, with barely enough time to cover basic job duties. Liaison librarians must choose the ideas that are most feasible, given their abilities, personal boundaries, and the institutional circumstances they face. One-size-fits-all is not possible.

A standardized approach would bypass the experience, knowledge, and creativity each liaison librarian brings to their work and would not recognize the uniqueness of their campuses. Building genuine relationships requires persistence. It is a “long game” taking time, effort, and honest conversations. Some amount of rejection and failure is part of the job. Giving up on a particular approach after trying, troubleshooting, and trying again is a reality. An important, but potentially emotionally challenging, part of giving up is the resiliency to regroup and decide what to try next.

We shared our approach to help others adapt outreach ideas and work through their challenges, hopefully making the regrouping less daunting.

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