
Models of Librarian and Teaching Faculty Relationships

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ABSTRACT Librarians' relationships with teaching faculty are a critical component of library success in connecting users to resources and providing engaging services. However, many librarians report challenges relating to teaching faculty. Librarians should proactively manage their relationships with teaching faculty as both sides share the goal of enhancing student learning and research. When collaborations are successful, the users/students benefit most. Librarians should start their outreach by ensuring faculty are aware of collections and services. Then, they can work on better identifying teaching faculty needs and interests. The hard, and ongoing, work of building these relations comes as librarians develop their communication skills, understand teaching faculty as library patrons, strategize the next steps in the relationship, foster mutual trust, and leverage their complementary expertise. Librarians that have good working relationships with teaching faculty at their institutions are better able to contribute to their library's mission and enrich student learning and research.

Academic librarians and teaching faculty share the common goal of enriching student learning. The nature of librarians' relationships with teaching faculty can help or hinder this goal in a variety of ways. This paper seeks to chart out the nature of this relationship as well as map best practices for fostering a healthy relationship. To do so, I will describe the relationship both from the point of view of librarians and from teaching faculty to articulate the often quite different ways both sides perceive this relationship. Then, I will discuss attitudes and practices from the library and information science literature that promise to enhance relationships between teaching faculty and librarians for the mutual benefit of both, as well as for students. Most of the library and information science literature on these relationships take the form of case study reports on collaborations or partnerships. While some best practices can be gleaned from these examples, comparatively little focus is given to the nature of the re-

lationship itself (Phelps and Campbell 2012, 15). It will be important, then, to focus this essay on the literature dealing directly with the history, nature, and best practices for successful librarian-teaching faculty relationships.

In recent decades, the nature of academic librarianship has shifted to a more service-centered approach rather than a strictly collecting and access approach. Subject, reference, or liaison librarians (hereafter *liaison librarians*, for simplicity), who are a key connection point between the library and the teaching and research of a higher education institution, have moved from primarily focusing on collection development to engaging students and researchers with library services (Filgo and Towers 2021, 3–4; Cooper and Schonfeld 2017, 2–3). Where services are prioritized, the relationships between academic librarians and their constituents began to take on greater importance. This shift corresponds to recent suggestions that libraries and librarians should focus more on contributing to the creation of scholarship and research (e.g., Lewis 2019). To contrast with this new understanding of academic librarianship, “a collections focus was dedicated to the end-point of scholarship: the books, journals, and other documents that fill the shelves of the library” (Filgo and Towers 2021, 5). Relationship-building and collaboration with teaching faculty naturally arises from this shift in library goals. Although libraries have undertaken significant changes in recent decades, this does not guarantee that faculty themselves are up-to-date on how the library operates or what librarians can offer (Creaser 2014, 205).

Altogether, this led to the development of the liaison librarian (or its functions) as a changing role within the academic library. Liaison librarians likely have the goal of serving and enriching the learning and research within their institution, and to do this effectively, relationships must be built with teaching faculty. Teaching faculty are often the most effective mediators between librarians and students due to the role they play in students’ education (Schlak 2016, 415). Even apart from a desire to collaborate with faculty for its own sake, this student-centric goal of liaisons can form the ultimate “why” for building these types of relationships (411). The Association of Research Libraries, in a 2009 publication, offered a similarly relationship-centric perspective on liaison work: “new kinds of relationship building, particularly with faculty, are central to effective liaison functions” (Hahn 2009, 1). But whose loss is it if teaching faculty and librarian relationships fail? The answer to this question highlights,

for many librarians, the reason for the relationship in the first place: it is primarily the students' loss when these relationships are ineffective (Schlak 2016, 416). When relationships thrive, all parties involved benefit in substantial ways. This has been demonstrated in the numerous case studies within the library and information science literature reporting on the outcomes of librarian-teaching faculty partnerships and collaborations. (For an illustrative example, see Tucci, 2011.)

However, historically and in their contemporary configuration, academic librarians and teaching faculty remain highly separated. There are organizational reasons for this, such as the fact that librarians mostly work in the library building whereas teaching faculty are spread throughout an institution's campus. Librarians usually follow a comparatively rigid and inflexible working schedule as well (Christiansen et al. 2004, 118). There is also the matter of the relative social prestige of the two professions, with teaching faculty work considered more highly valuable than "service" centered library work (119). Some of this mismatch is certainly due to the lack of awareness of what librarians do and how they contribute to higher education, but it remains nonetheless a potential obstacle for effective relationships between the two groups.

The next sections will investigate how each side views the relationship and its dynamics, starting with the librarian side. One sociological study discovered that they, along with teaching faculty, perceive a large separation consistent with the research above. Only librarians, however, view this gap as problematic and detrimental to student learning (Christiansen et al. 2004, 118). Because librarians often have the goal of serving students, poor relations with teaching faculty are seen as obstructing that goal. In a study of popular librarian-focused listservs, Given and Julien discovered that many postings contain a highly pessimistic view of faculty personalities. When librarians talk to one another in this way, they are more likely to share these views. "The vast majority of postings were quite negative in their assessment of faculty members' attitudes" (Given and Julien 2005, 33). Many librarians feel they are treated unfairly or viewed unequally by teaching faculty. This dynamic has led some librarians to strategize about ways they can gain esteem by asserting themselves as equals in the academic environment. Meuleman and Carr, for example, advocate for liaison librarians to stop using the language of "service" and instead frame their work as "partner-

ships” to enhance student learning (Meulemans and Carr 2013, 80). They’ve identified a handful of anxieties present on the librarian side based in perceptions of teaching faculty views of the value of academic librarians. To address these anxieties, they’ve counseled librarians to set out their teaching philosophy and policies and to be clear with teaching faculty on the goals of any partnerships (82–83). This advice, however, is clearly illustrative of the large gap that librarians perceive between their own self-understandings and the perceptions they have of the faculty. Because many faculty do not see librarians as experts in a research field, however, this strategy of librarian self-assertion has the potential to backfire if performed without heeding this wider dynamic of academic culture.

From the faculty side of the equation, they do not perceive the separation in the same way. To many teaching faculty, the gap is not understood as particularly problematic when compared with their goals of research or teaching. “They do not identify any negative consequences as arising from this disconnection” with librarians (Christiansen et al. 2004, 118). While there are hundreds of published articles on how librarians can successfully navigate their relationships with teaching faculty, there is no comparable literature from the other side, written mainly by teaching faculty on the relationship. To gain perspective on teaching faculty’s views, some library and information science researchers have undertaken studies that involve interviews or analyzing the case study literature to glean insight to variables that teaching faculty view as contributing to successful collaborations. Overall, one recent research report downplayed the librarians’ problematic perceptions by uncovering that faculty are, in fact, generally satisfied with their libraries and librarians (Fagan, 2020). Where the gap surely exists, however, is in faculty awareness of what libraries and librarians can offer, as well as the unique skills of librarians. Focusing one’s outreach efforts to faculty on marketing for awareness may pay outsized dividends.

In one study using a survey methodology, nearly one-third of teaching faculty admit to never collaborating with a librarian to any extent. Of these, most respondents indicated that they did not know or were not aware how librarians could help their research or teaching mission (Perez-Stable et al. 2020, 62). Corroborating this reasoning, another interview-based study discovered that faculty want librarians “to align their services in ways that make them easily understood by faculty” (Schlak 2016, 415). While some of these

collaboration differences are likely due to various institutions' academic cultures, these similar findings suggest that librarians should learn how to better market their skills and services to a clientele that is often simply oblivious to how librarians can contribute. Perhaps this is due to librarians themselves not identifying the true needs of teaching faculty, and instead, attempting to utilize library jargon or traditional librarian-centered work in their collaborations. One quantitative study in the literature found that the single most important aspect to librarian-teaching faculty partnerships was whether the librarian had correctly both identified and understood the needs of teaching faculty. Amante et al. write, "The most important variable was needs identification and understanding... The identification and understanding of needs has a determining impact on the willingness of faculty to collaborate" (Amante et al. 2013, 100). This suggests, alluding to some of the best practices, that librarians should develop relational intelligence skills at all stages of their collaborations with faculty by acutely understanding what it is that teaching faculty need. It is critical to be honest with oneself about what faculty needs truly are, irrespective of what individual librarians want them to be. Librarians should be aware of planned courses, the overall curriculum, new faculty, recent publications, and faculty research plans at their institutions. While general best practices apply, it is always most effective to tailor library services to the actual needs of one's patrons within their unique setting.

Since "relationship building is the cornerstone to all liaison work," librarians should develop a pragmatic approach considering the above dynamics and perceptions of teaching faculty relations (Filgo and Towers 2021, 28). In the Association of Research Libraries report on the future of liaison work, it is noted that "liaison librarians need well-developed, high-trust relationships to create strategic opportunities" as a way to enhance and participate in student learning and faculty research (Hahn 2009, 2). Librarians should take seriously the skills necessary for any healthy relationships and they should draw on their complementary expertise to serve student and faculty learning and research. Relationship skills include empathy and understanding of the other party, so this might involve undertaking analysis of curriculum or teaching faculty research interests in a way that is not simply ad hoc. Better relating to teaching faculty and their mission starts with a deep understanding of what it is that faculty are doing and working on. Librarians can employ a variety of methods

to aid in this understanding, like developing spreadsheets for curriculum and faculty interests, or by simply asking teaching faculty about their research interests (13) in informal settings.

Some researchers have encouraged the exploration of relational skills developed in the world of business or philanthropy. Bales argues that the approach to relationships in philanthropic studies is easily translatable to librarians because it involves considering each constituent individually while slowly and sustainably advancing that relation for its mutual benefits (Bales 2015, 550). Bales, for instance, employs a spreadsheet where the status and next steps for each relationship is closely tracked. While this could appear over the top, other researchers have had success employing relationship-building methods from the world of business and sales, which they deem “relationship marketing” (cf. Norris, 2019). The key variable for these scholars is the cultivation of trust in the relationship, such that both parties are aware of the intentions and goals of the other and have proved mutually helpful over time (Phelps and Campbell 2012, 16). The importance of trust shows up often in the literature. Therefore, focusing on it can be a useful counter to the pessimistic attitudes on the part of librarians discussed above. In the arena of trust, collaboration projects should, ideally, be of equal interest to both sides of the relationship so that perceptions of ulterior motives are less likely (Díaz and Mandernach 2017, 277).

If just starting or attempting to forge relationships with newer faculty members, librarians may simply plan an informal coffee or lunch meeting with individual faculty members to get to know them better. Kuchi has argued, along these lines, that it is crucial for librarians to meet faculty (and other patrons more broadly) in their own environments rather than simply relying on interaction when they come into the library (Kuchi 2022, 663). Librarians should regularly seek out contact with faculty in the environments where the faculty reside, perhaps at groups, programs, or events outside of the library. An added benefit to this style of institutional participation is that librarians can become “insiders” to these groups and participate at that privileged level. This can help shape faculty perceptions and expectations of librarians, as more than simply cloistered service or support staff, but as active participants in the educational life of their institutions. Put in more basic terms, the mere fact of librarian visibility elsewhere on campus can help change patron perceptions.

Leveraging their complementary expertise and skills is another way that librarians can contribute to successful teaching faculty-librarian relationships. Problems are more likely to arise when librarians view the relationship through a strictly competitive lens, as if they were competing with faculty for students' attention or contending with faculty who think librarians are not true subject experts. Both fields of competition are, in my view, losing battles. Instead, librarians should draw on their extensive knowledge of the research process, information literacy, and knowledge of resources as a demonstration of their value to the academic mission. Teaching faculty are unlikely to consider librarians as equal peers in their field of study, but they are much more likely to acknowledge how librarians can better help students with certain aspects of the learning process (Cooper and Schonfeld 2017, 8). Approaching the relationships from a non-competitive point of view is better suited to develop the relational trust that collaborations thrive upon (Given and Julien, 2005, 36). In this way, the existing difference between teaching faculty and librarians identified above can be reframed positively. Librarians have a complementary expertise to offer academia, and do not need to worry as much about whether they or faculty are better suited to teach students or share subject expertise. By focusing on the mutual goal of improving student and faculty scholarship, librarians can collaborate with faculty on grounds they will perceive as helpful and jointly beneficial (Perez-Stable et al. 2020, 66). Some faculty have even reported a genuine improvement in relations when their expectations of librarians are gently challenged through complementary expertise (Díaz and Mandernach, 2017, 277). The trust that librarians hope to gain from teaching faculty might come more sustainably through this leveraging of mutually reinforcing expertise.

One final trend of recent research in academic librarian behavior comes through the concept of deference. McCartin et al. (2022) studied deference behavior among librarians in relating to faculty. They discovered that librarians are often unnecessarily deferential to faculty in ways that harm students and the faculty they are trying to serve. Light pushback on faculty ideas is indeed one way to foster additional trust and reframe faculty perceptions of what librarians can offer. For example, librarians should feel comfortable suggesting alternative lesson plans for information literacy sessions in the classroom or going beyond the syllabus in helping students with research assignments for which they are uniquely suited. This demonstrates

the value of what librarians offer, provides a chance for librarians to do more than mere service or support, and encourages faculty to leverage the complementary expertise of librarians in educating their shared students. Some librarians have had success in this model by assisting teaching faculty with understanding bibliometrics to improve the research output of their institution (Vinyard and Colvin 2018). Another similarly unmet need identified in the research is for librarians to help faculty to stay up to date on their field's scholarship by reporting new publications, trends, or highlighting influential scholarly conversations that may have been overlooked (Arendt 2012, 173). There are a multitude of other possibilities, but they all involve utilizing the strengths that librarians have honed through training and experience so that they position themselves to offer a unique service to the academic mission.

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