

Judith E. Pasek

Organizing the liaison role

A concept map

With great anticipation, I wondered what topic I had been assigned for my on-campus job interview presentation for a librarian position with liaison responsibilities. The agenda indicated that I would have 20 minutes to explain how I would “build relationships with STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math] faculty and students to support research and instruction services in the 21st century.” My first thought was that my assigned topic was broad enough that I could shape it any way that suited me. So far, so good. My second thought was, “How am I going to fill 20 minutes talking about meeting, networking, and collaborating with faculty and students?”

I also wondered about the intent of the 21st-century timeframe. Was this a trick? It seemed like a long time to cover, mostly requiring a crystal ball, and clearly exceeding my projected lifespan. I quickly narrowed my topic to the first couple of decades in the 21st century. (I have learned that narrowing the topic is an essential early step in the research process.) I noted that so far the 21st century has been characterized by:

- rapid advances in technology,
- migration of resources to electronic and online formats,
- increased online conversations and collaborations,
- evolution from consumers of information to creators,

- increasing expectations for transparency and sharing of research data,
- trends toward more interdisciplinary studies,
- fast-paced STEM research and development with short publication cycles, and
- rapid obsolescence of certain types of information (e.g., computer manuals).

These developments underpin what types of librarian liaison activities may be effective in today’s academic environment.

My next consideration was whether approaches for STEM faculty and students, and in particular those in engineering, would differ in any significant way from other disciplinary areas. I started jotting down a few thoughts. For example, most resources that engineers and scientists use now are available electronically and can be accessed from their workspaces, often with little need to visit the library. Building relationships with STEM faculty and students therefore requires an active outreach approach rather than simply waiting for individuals to contact librarians. My notes did not fill a page. I needed to do some exploratory research. I sent emails to some working science librarians in my network, asking for their thoughts on the topic. Several responded with their experiences and ideas, confirming that my

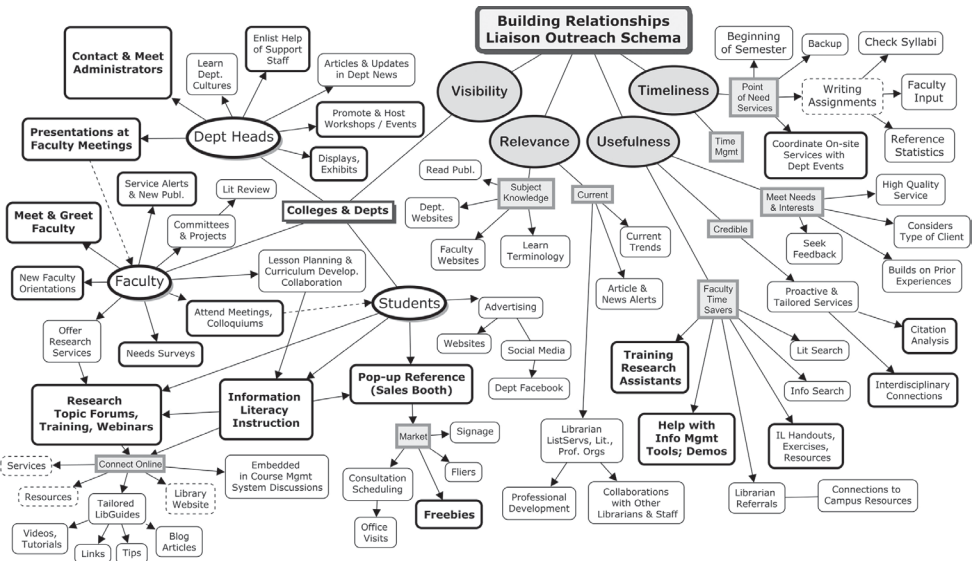
Judith E. Pasek is STEM liaison librarian at the University of Wyoming, email: jpasek@uwyo.edu

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initial ideas were on the right track. In particular, several librarians commented that meeting faculty informally and face-to-face at departmental functions is a key outreach strategy, and that outreach techniques need to be tailored to fit the local academic community, adapted for departmental variation.

I also was pointed in the direction of excellent LibGuides on the topic of liaison

this technique would help me now. I downloaded the free IHMC CmapTools software.² Adding text boxes, dragging them around the workspace, and connecting them with lines and directional arrows is much like working on a picture puzzle. As my diagram grew, I noticed some natural groupings of activities. Furthermore, they aligned with four elements I had identified to myself



Concept map of librarian liaison activities and relationships, emphasizing outreach approaches. View this article online for more detailed image.

librarian responsibilities and activities.¹ (Why hadn't I thought to search for LibGuides? Aren't librarians great?) As I looked through lists of liaison activities and read a few articles on the topic, I got more ideas. Soon my notes were filling several pages in a chaotic fashion. My notes seemed to cover almost every activity typical of academic librarians with a public service role. Every activity had the potential to lead to interactions with faculty or students. Numerous activities were interconnected. How would I be able to organize everything into a logical sequence? I had a new dilemma. How was I going to deliver all of this information in only 20 minutes?

I recalled having used concept mapping to organize complex information and relationships for past assignments. Perhaps

about what is required to engage faculty and students and provide high-quality, proactive customer service: visibility, relevance, usefulness, and timeliness. I added these elements to the main branches of the concept map (see above).³

Being *visible* means creating opportunities for communication by being present where your "customers" (i.e., faculty and students) are located, that is, within their departments and classrooms. Faculty may require different approaches than students. Fortunately, there are a variety of options for initiating interactions with potential customers. Examples include participating in departmental events and colloquiums, offering workshops, providing pop-up reference, and embedding information literacy instruction into course management systems.

Being *relevant* requires currency and an understanding of the subject matter of interest to the customer. It means being able to speak their language and knowing specialized terminology. It means keeping current with rapid changes in technology, research directions, curriculum offerings, and scholarly trends. For student engagement, it means making an effort to connect to their experiences and interests to add meaning and put learning processes into context.

Being *useful* means matching resources and information to the purpose (e.g., research, coursework) and needs of the customer (e.g., undergraduate, graduate student, faculty member). High-quality service also involves anticipating needs and being proactive in providing services. Faculty are pressed for time, so offering services that can save them time can win their respect and support. Being useful can build credibility and repeat business.

Timeliness means being responsive and prompt in answering questions and scheduling consultations. It also means providing services at the point of need, timing delivery to when information and services are most needed or effective. For example, providing information literacy instruction on the research process and use of databases at the start of a writing assignment increases engagement by students.

The four elements of proactive customer service—visibility, relevance, usefulness, and timeliness—are interrelated and of equal importance in the implementation of liaison services. Visibility without relevance or usefulness results in failed communication and connection. Usefulness without timeliness results in reduced effectiveness or relevance. Activity options most directly related to each element can be mapped and interconnected with closely related activities in a given branch, as illustrated in the concept map. For clarity, the secondary relationships that would connect activities between the four branches were omitted.

As an example, a primary means for increasing visibility and communication with

students is to conduct information literacy instruction sessions, which falls under the visibility element or branch of the concept map. However, information literacy instruction is most effective when delivered at the point of need (timeliness element), that is, when students begin writing assignments.

Furthermore, instruction is best understood when exercises and examples are developed using appropriate subject terminology for the course and incorporate current issues (relevance element). Instruction is also facilitated by providing faculty and students with supplemental teaching resources, such as tailored handouts or Lib-Guides (usefulness element). When planning a primary liaison activity, it can be helpful to look at each of the other three branches in the concept map to identify complementary activities that will enhance proactive and quality service delivery.

The liaison concept map is meant to be a starting point for organizing and planning activities that facilitate greater connections with academic faculty and students. Although the concept map includes many activities typical of librarian liaison activities, it is not all encompassing. Many of the included activities could be further subdivided into additional activities or further explanations and relationships.

Under the usefulness element, with a purpose of increasing credibility via proactive and tailored services, is an activity labelled as *interdisciplinary connections*. One aspect of this might be letting a faculty member know about related research being conducted by another faculty member or group, who may reside in a different college or department—as a means for facilitating connections and collaboration.

Another example might be referring an engineer who has a new product he or she wants to develop commercially to a business librarian who can help research potential markets or companies, or locate patent information. Identifying the best options for various situations and customers likely will require some trial and error.

Becoming an effective liaison librarian in today's environment involves moving from a role peripheral to academic research and teaching, to a more integral and integrated presence within departments and programs. Faculty satisfaction with library liaisons increases when they have recent and direct communication, they know the name of their assigned liaison librarian, and they receive more types of services.⁴

Engaging faculty and building long-term relationships can be enhanced by shifting focus to showing interest in their research, offering newer research services (e.g., data management and repository support), and identifying opportunities for partnership. Engaging faculty in their scholarly pursuits can spill over to student engagement through teaching collaborations and sponsored events.

While developing relationships with individual faculty members is essential, the process of making initial contacts can be orchestrated at the departmental level. For new liaison librarians and new departmental assignments, a top-down approach of contacting department chairs to get their support may facilitate building relationships with faculty members. Participation in faculty meetings and committees can raise visibility. Building awareness of library services is a necessary first step to engagement, as faculty tend not to view librarians as instructors or research consultants. Promotion of an array of newer services, such as consultations on data management plans for grant writing, digital repositories and preservation, copyright and author rights issues, and scholarly communication, may expand perceptions of library services beyond traditional roles of collection development, reference service, library orientation, and issues resolution.

In the 21st century, the liaison librarian role has been evolving with advances in technology and shifting customer needs to that of a mediator, facilitator, and even a partner in using information and generating knowledge. Relationship building with the

community of faculty and students is central to effective delivery of library services, no matter how information dissemination, needs, and services might change in the future. Keeping up with trends and adding to the liaison librarian toolkit are essential to remaining relevant and effective. The liaison concept map offers a framework for organizing and planning liaison outreach activities.

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Notes

1. Lori Harrison, "Library Liaison Models in Academic Libraries," Bowling Green State University, University Libraries (LibGuide), last updated July 21, 2014, <http://libguides.bgsu.edu/libraryliaisonmodels>; "Toolkit for Librarian Liaisons: How to be a Subject Resource Specialist," Wayne State University (LibGuide), last updated February 24, 2014, <http://guides.lib.wayne.edu/LiaisonToolkit>.

2. IHMC CmapTools software: <http://cmap.ihmc.us/download/>.

3. A detailed version of the concept map is also available at http://repository.uwyo.edu/libraries_facpub/19/.

4. Julie Arendt and Megan Lotts, "What Liaisons Say about Themselves and What Faculty Say about Their Liaisons, a U.S. Survey," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 12, no. 2 (2012): 155-177, doi: 10.1353/pla.2012.0015. *z*