

Debbie Morrow

Becoming a liaison librarian

Embedded in academia

The narrative of higher education frequently declares the library to be the “academic heart of the institution.” It’s not entirely clear in the lore whether the library purportedly at the heart of things academic refers only to a building and the portion of human knowledge contained within, or if it is generally recognized that there is a distinct heartbeat emanating from the activities of the professionals who curate, organize, and promote resources, and teach the ways of information-finding. I contend that to be an effective academic librarian is to be embedded in the life of one’s institution. To best facilitate connecting members of one’s academic community to information—good information, relevant information, the right information, information when it’s needed—an academic librarian must cultivate a broad awareness of the many interdependent systems that comprise the larger institutional body. A healthy, productive library faculty has its figurative finger on the pulse of the institution, and carries the oxygen of information and information-finding skills throughout every corner as blood carries oxygen from the heart to the body’s brain, organs, and extremities.

I came to academic librarianship in the 1980s with a fascination for the organic interconnectedness of activities needed to organize and provide access to collected knowledge, and very engaged by the role

that computers were beginning to play in replacing paper-based library management processes.

After 25 challenging years as a systems librarian, forever scrambling to keep abreast of the increasing pace of change in the sophistication, complexity, and numbers of digital technologies, it was time to take a new direction professionally. When offered the opportunity to move from the “back room” to the frontlines as a liaison librarian, I accepted. The opportunity came with a portfolio: my liaison assignments would include the College of Engineering and Computing, and the departments of Mathematics and Statistics. Now in my seventh year as a liaison librarian, I am moved to reflect on embeddedness, academic librarianship, and my present liaison librarian role.

Upon arriving at my current university in 1991, my primary responsibilities were behind the scenes. As systems librarian, it was my job to know how information flowed from person to person, from system to system, from office to database to OPAC, and to ensure that it flowed as smoothly as possible for our clientele. Throughout the

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library I felt deeply embedded and connected. Direct contact with the larger institution came through faculty governance service and periodic social and ceremonial events, and typically seemed incidental to my assigned job. In the library, I endured considerable tension balancing scheduled reference desk rotations with the focus needed to deal knowledgeably with “Anything With Electrical Plugs.” I was titularly the liaison for Math, Computer Science, Statistics, and periodically other departments. My liaison function then was almost exclusively the facilitation of faculty book purchase requests, with a smattering of classroom bibliographic instruction visits. I was a liaison, but not a liaison librarian.

In recent years we have devoted deliberate and iterative attention to refining our liaison librarian position description. An instructional role is the core of the position, and presently liaisons are all pressed to add at least awareness of effective tools and pedagogies for the online environment to our instructional skill sets. Nowhere in our liaison librarian position description does the buzzword *embedded* appear. Our roles are defined such that we are all what I might call *proto-embedded* librarians, empowered with the potential to deepen a relationship with a liaison department as opportunity may arise. There is no expectation or requirement that we become embedded by any definition, either virtually via course management systems or physically and functionally via programs such as Virginia Tech’s College Librarians.

Once I became a liaison librarian, competing obligations evaporated: I was unstuck from behind a general reference desk, and I was explicitly empowered to seek ways to effectively serve the students and faculty in my assigned programs. My responsibility became to explore and nurture relationships within my liaison departments, and perchance to become what Olivia Olivares has aptly described as “sufficiently embedded.”¹

By and large I am indeed the “go-to” librarian for my liaison departments, but embedded? I wouldn’t say so. But in one case, through observations made by others and reported in

the LIS literature support my recent conclusion that, for all intents and purposes, I have in fact achieved a degree of embeddedness with the School of Engineering. The school is self-contained in a complex of classrooms, labs, faculty offices, and student study spaces of its own, on a newer campus a half-hour commute from my library office on our original campus.

Over time I’ve obtained a locker to work out of; have made my face and identifying “Librarian is IN” sign familiar in a usual, visible spot during weekly on-site office hours; and have become known to office staff and the Engineering faculty. Drawing on years of systems librarian experiences, I’ve been able to make connections with students and faculty, learn something about their particular disciplinary information needs, and address those needs in various ways. Being present where my clientele are and responsive to their needs has produced a gratifyingly fruitful liaison relationship. My activities in and on behalf of the school span all areas of my responsibility as a member of an academic faculty, including professional effectiveness, scholarship, and unit, university, and professional service. I have become not only effectively, but *sufficiently*, embedded as a liaison librarian for the School of Engineering.

Being engaged and active within the university’s academic heart over many years has, it turns out, provided connections that continue to lead to opportunities for being a good liaison librarian for each of my departments. Additionally, I have great latitude to serve my own unit (the University Libraries) and continue building connections through activity in the wider institution. I believe I make a strong case for declaring an effective academic liaison librarian to be one who is embedded in academia.

Note

1. Olivia Olivares, “The Sufficiently Embedded Librarian: Defining and Establishing Productive Librarian-Faculty Partnerships in Academic Libraries,” *Public Services Quarterly* 6, no. 2–3 (2010): 140–49, doi: 10.1080/15228959.2010.497468. 