

# Introduction: Positioning Liaison Librarians for the 21st Century

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**L**iaison positions exist at nearly every research library, and a recent ARL member survey documented a substantial broadening of liaison roles<sup>1</sup>. Many believe that liaison librarian functions are becoming more central to fulfilling the library's mission in a digital age. While research libraries may agree on the importance of the position, how to reconfigure liaison work has become a topic of broad concern. Identifying emerging roles and determining how to develop corresponding liaison capabilities are common challenges.

The articles in this special issue highlight several new roles that are being fostered in research libraries and offer different leadership perspectives on the change process. Two authors are associate university librarians with broad responsibilities for managing the development of new functions and responsibilities of their institutions' public services staff (Williams and Dupuis). Two are programmatic experts leading the development and delivery of services that require liaison support for effective engagement with faculty clients—scholarly communication (Kirchner) and data management (Gabridge). Our fifth author is a liaison librarian with a personal commitment to reinvention (Whatley) describing the change process from the inside.

Amidst the diversity of stories and assessments gathered here, several recurrent themes stand out. New forms of relationship building, particularly with faculty, are central to effective liaison functions. New kinds of relationships are needed to respond to the changing work of faculty and researchers and to constantly evolving learning outcomes, research processes, and communication practices. In addition, research libraries are increasingly seeking to influence

larger dialogs about changing practices that are occurring on campuses and within disciplines. Liaison librarians need well-developed, high-trust relationships to create strategic opportunities to participate in and influence disciplinary and departmental decisions.

It is also evident that the range of activities addressed through liaison work is growing. As a consequence, liaison librarians increasingly need the ability to acquire new skills and leverage more specialized expertise among their library colleagues in service of their clients. Liaisons cannot be expert themselves in each new capability, but knowing when to call in a colleague, or how to describe appropriate expert capabilities to faculty, will be key to the new liaison role. Just as researchers are often working in teams to leverage compatible expertise, liaison librarians will need to be team builders among library experts where this advances client research.

New liaison roles are not emerging *de novo*, but rather in continuity with established roles. Consequently, the articles describe developmental processes from the perspective of particular roles and institutions. While there may be growing consensus on where to go, how to make the journey is a pressing question. Organizations will need to map out different routes to address their particular circumstances, but for fellow travelers the authors have some helpful observations and astute insights to offer.

<sup>1</sup> Susan Logue, John Ballestro, Andrea Imre, and Julie Arendt. *SPEC Kit 301 Liaison Services*. Association of Research Libraries, 2007.

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