



# Moving from Collecting to Connecting: Articulating, Assessing, and Communicating the Work of Liaison Librarians

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**abstract:** In the twenty-first century, academic libraries and librarians have recast the narrative by turning outward, engaging more deeply across the university. No longer solely focused on collecting, libraries now embrace connecting with their campus communities to foster consumption, production, curation, preservation, collaboration, and inquiry around cultural resources. This paper will discuss the ongoing efforts of the Rutgers University Libraries, New Brunswick to investigate the changing roles and responsibilities of library liaisons—roles and responsibilities that are changing from transactional to relational in many academic libraries. The article will provide a historic overview of the work of library liaisons that has led to the recent appointment of a Liaison Assessment Committee at Rutgers. The committee is charged to describe the work liaison librarians currently undertake, to map liaison responsibilities to the libraries' mission and service priorities, to share that work with stakeholders, and to assess the relevance and impact of the librarians' efforts.

## Introduction

For more than half a century, students, faculty, and administrators considered the library the heart of the academic enterprise. Both subject specialists and reference librarians interacted daily, side-by-side, with their respective faculty and students in numerous central, branch, or specialized libraries. As their institutions changed and new methods for creating and disseminating scholarly information emerged, the campus community no longer used the library to identify scarce resources, to retrieve

*portal: Libraries and the Academy*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2020), pp. 285–304.

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materials from closed stacks, and to study quietly in isolated research carrels. Academic librarians endeavored to articulate their existing and changing liaison roles, which had developed from the merging of subject specialists with functional specialists, such as digital humanities librarians and scholarly communication librarians, to strengthen relationships on campus and tell the library's story.

## Literature Review

### Subject Specialists, 1970s and 1980s

In 1974, Eldred Smith described subject specialists' "strong liaison role, between the library and their clientele, representing the needs of the faculty and students to the library and explaining the capabilities and problems of the library to its users." Smith also noted, however, that as these specialized roles emerged, tensions arose between the quality and quantity of services offered, and he questioned whether the generalist should be replaced by more in-depth specialists. He asked, "Can relatively costly specialist programs continue and even be expanded in the face of dwindling budgets and mounting workloads?"<sup>2</sup> These same questions persist today as academic libraries seek to strengthen their liaison relationships in the face of declining resources. Many liaison librarians ask what models might emerge to respond to changing needs without exacerbating the tensions between cost-effective functional or transactional services, such as interlibrary loan and virtual reference, and more in-depth liaison relational services.

Later in the 1970s, Laurence Miller built upon Smith's notions of subject specialist roles, defining *liaison work* as the "formal structured activity in which professional library staff systematically meet with teaching faculty to discuss stratagems for directly supporting their instructional needs and those of their students."<sup>3</sup> He believed those relationships required more than occasional contact and speculated that they would likely result in routine work receiving priority over more creative but less tangible activity.<sup>4</sup> Like today, Miller was concerned that librarians did not maintain an appropriate level of commitment for this essential function, contending that it required "continuous follow-up, excellent internal communication . . . sustained interest, and a willingness to share and learn from experience."<sup>5</sup> Most important, Miller saw liaison work as one of the few approaches that could ensure the library's viability as a "primary campus information agency."

In the early 1980s, Allen Veaner predicted a decade of academic librarianship that situated the librarian's role as "proactive analyst, subject expert, counselor, consultant, linker, and intermediary in the cycle of scholarly endeavor and scholarly communication"—an interpretive relationship-building role that chiefly resided with liaison librarians.<sup>6</sup> During this decade, libraries began to automate many of their processing techniques and provided remote access to many collections, allowing them to centralize and consolidate a multitude of departmental and branch libraries. Not surprisingly, face-to-face contact between librarians and faculty diminished. Little was written about the specific role of liaisons in this changing environment until the late 1980s, when a team of library liaisons at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio, recognized the need to improve communication and outreach. They surveyed faculty's perceptions of the library,

hoping to identify ways to shift faculty's view of the library from a book repository to the "primary information agency for the university." Their survey discovered, however, low expectations for the library and frustration with holdings and other services.<sup>7</sup> Into the 1990s, themes around improved communications with faculty to alter their perceptions dominated the discourse about liaison librarianship.<sup>8</sup> Concerns about improved relations continued into the new century with numerous studies pointing to gaps in understanding between librarians and their campus communities.<sup>9</sup>

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### The Changing Landscape, 1990s]

Attempts to describe the role of liaisons and provide guidance for navigating changes in the landscape of libraries and scholarly communication were initiated by the American Library Association (ALA). The chief ALA divisions involved were the Reference and Adult Services Division (RASD), renamed the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), and the SPEC (Systems and Procedures Exchange Center) Kit program of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).<sup>10</sup> In 1992, the RASD issued the "RASD Guidelines for Liaison Work," which focused primarily on "the relationship, formal and informal, that librarians develop with the library's clientele for the specific purpose of seeking input regarding the selection of materials."<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the revised 2001 RUSA "Guidelines for Liaison Work in Managing Collections and Services" were "intended to help librarians identify library user groups in various types of libraries and to suggest ways these groups can be involved in collection services and issues." Both documents sustained the primary focus of liaisons as selectors, not as proactive intermediaries who would build relationships, tell the library's story, and lead a discourse on the changing role of scholarly communication, information literacy, and other emerging issues facing scholars and students alike on campus.<sup>12</sup>

Like the Reference and Adult Services Division guidance, a 1992 ARL SPEC Kit stressed the centrality of collections, but it added the importance of communication and mediation of service problems, along with reference, instruction, and new faculty orientations.<sup>13</sup> Gail Latta, the kit's author, recognized that the diminishing role of the physical collection promised to give way to the emergence of the user as the central focus of library services—an emphasis that would require liaison librarians to monitor, anticipate, and respond to users' information needs. The next ARL Liaison SPEC Kit, issued 15 years later, added the need for more specialized knowledge, understand-

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ing of politics and culture, departmental outreach, and communication of departmental needs to the library.<sup>14</sup> With the publication of the 2015 *SPEC Kit 349: Evolution of Library Liaisons*, Rebecca Miller and Lauren Pressley found that three-fourths of liaisons surveyed had additional roles involved with marketing and outreach, scholarly communication, embeddedness in courses, and data management support.<sup>15</sup> Among the new attributes expected of these liaisons were collaboration and teamwork, a user-centered focus, a passion for research, an ability to build partnerships with faculty, team-based work, and proactive engagement.

### Reimagining the Role of Liaisons, 2000–2015

In the new century, library leaders began reimagining academic libraries, informed by Wendy Lougee's "Diffuse Libraries" issued by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) and by *No Brief Candle: Reconceiving Research Libraries for the 21st Century* published by the CLIR.<sup>16</sup> Lougee's groundbreaking report contended that libraries would spread throughout the campus and beyond and would increase their involvement in the processes of scholarly communication and the building of information communities. These developments would impact not only libraries' structures but also the scope and boundaries of their responsibilities. Lougee applied her vision to shape the University

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of Minnesota Libraries' "Changing the Paradigm" initiative. It included development of a position description framework, later adopted by many ARL libraries, including those at The Ohio State University in Columbus and Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.<sup>17</sup> In 2013, Karen Williams, who worked at Minnesota with Lougee, cowrote with Janice Jaguszewski the groundbreaking ARL report "New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries," which prompted subsequent ARL reports on transforming relationships with campus communities.<sup>18</sup> Academic library liaisons began experimenting with new models of engagement that included embedding themselves more actively in campus programs and building stronger relationships with specific programs, such as graduate education, online education, study abroad, humanities, and art.<sup>19</sup> These attempts to engage more actively to increase their impact occurred just as more attention was accorded to assessment of library value and impact.<sup>20</sup> In a 2009 special edition of *Research Library Issues*, ARL's Karla Hahn encapsulated the transition underway for liaisons: "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."<sup>21</sup>

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## Telling the Library's Changing Story, 2015–Present

By 2015, the discourse changed from redefining the proliferation of duties to leveraging the roles of liaison librarians as communication conduits to shift from a transactional to a more engaged and strategic liaison model.<sup>22</sup> Members of the profession embraced new tools for engaging their academic constituents, turning outward to bridge the gaps between them and their campus communities. The ALA launched its Libraries Transform Communities initiative together with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, a nonprofit organization that coaches and encourages people and organizations to solve pressing problems and change how communities work together. The initiative trained more than 4,000 librarians to deepen their engagement and align their priorities more closely with the aspirations and concerns of faculty and students across the academic enterprise.<sup>23</sup> The librarians built more partnerships and collaborated more beyond their walls—what Nancy Kranich has referred to as revamping their jurisdictions beyond their “edifice complex.”<sup>24</sup> About the same time, the ARL began hosting an annual Liaison Institute, documented by Anne Kenney of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, who reflected on the impact of rethinking liaison roles and concluded:

It is time for liaisons to work across institutional borders to create a suite of tools . . . that result in actionable information, sharable measures, collaborative metrics, and compendia of best practices, storytelling, and case studies that will lead to the development of a community of practice centered on engagement.<sup>25</sup>

## New Structures for Engaging Campus Communities

More recently, ARL published additional findings and case studies from the Liaison Institutes that encapsulate the concerns and actions underway across academic libraries to shift liaisons from a service provided to faculty and students to greater engagement with campus communities.<sup>26</sup> Noteworthy about this report is that research library liaisons are

- eager but anxious about shifting roles from service to engagement;
- overwhelmed with finding time, space, and motivation for deeper outreach;
- uncertain how to deepen relationships with faculty;
- unclear how their work intersects with that of functional specialists;
- concerned how teamwork translates into recognition;
- prepared to shift from subject to functional teams as budgets no longer support the old subject specialist approach; and
- challenged by boundless expectations.

The libraries participating in the case studies—the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario; the University of California, Riverside; the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge; the University of South Florida in Tampa; and the University of Texas at Austin—indicated they had begun to transform their liaison roles. These initiatives paralleled trends throughout academic libraries documented over the last few years, including

- reskilling of liaisons and development of more functional expertise;
- breaking down users into segments, such as graduate, undergraduate, and international students;



- developing greater empathy for the struggles of faculty and students;
- communicating more frequently and deeply with faculty to understand their research and teaching challenges;
- increasing involvement with non-departmentalized units on campus—such as Rutgers Honors College, Rutgers Global, the Zimmerli Art Museum, and Career Services—which are often the drivers of institutional initiatives and university priorities.

To implement this transition, each of the five ARL libraries, while finding its own way, shared new directions. These new paths included the use of internal teams and collaborations to solve university challenges; consideration of incentives and rewards for these new structures; and documentation and assessment of improved relationships, collaborations, and communication.

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Recent trends demonstrate widespread proliferation in the range of activities addressed through liaison work, such as learning commons, digital repositories, data services, digital humanities, and critical information literacy training. As budgets tighten, liaisons have assumed more roles that require new skills and more specialized expertise. No longer can liaisons become proficient themselves in each new capacity; rather, they must partner with other specialized colleagues and, at the same time, communicate their own expert capabilities more

effectively. Such transformation requires teamwork to leverage expertise and advance research. By adopting a more engaged model of service in such a dynamic era, libraries can reconceptualize and articulate new roles at the boundary of their organizations by deploying their library liaisons in transformative ways.

### **Transforming Liaison Relationships at Rutgers**

Paralleling developments at academic libraries around the country, the Rutgers University Libraries pioneered the communication, strengthening, and reimagining of liaison roles over the last three decades. Subject specialization dominated liaison work at Rutgers in the 1970s and 1980s. With increased automation, however, the libraries centralized many functions, decreasing librarians' face-to-face exposure to their constituents, who were diffused over five campus locations in New Brunswick and Piscataway, New Jersey. In 1991, a library task force was formed to advise liaisons how to familiarize themselves more successfully with departmental curricular needs, hone their subject expertise, and work with colleagues to enhance their communication with departments.<sup>27</sup> A decade later, another working group reviewed earlier findings and recommended new approaches to improving liaison relationships. Through a survey, the group uncovered best practices used by colleagues at other institutions to communicate with faculty but found varied





success across the campuses and widening gaps between libraries and the broader community as the need for on-site visits to the library diminished. Like other academic librarians across the country, those at Rutgers recommended strengthening and deepening communications, particularly personal ones, to “humanize the digital library to the greatest extent possible.”<sup>28</sup>

By 2010, struggling to reimagine their roles, the Rutgers librarians launched a discussion that asked: What is the future role for library liaisons at Rutgers? After a deliberative dialogue in which they weighed possibilities and found common ground for future action, they formed a Liaison Action

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Team to follow up on recommendations, including the drafting of a vision statement. To strengthen relationships with the Rutgers community they identified engagement-centered themes—“getting in the flow of users” and embedding liaisons on campus—as vital to shaping their work.<sup>29</sup> The Liaison Action Team also adopted the University of Minnesota position description framework to describe the responsibilities of the library’s faculty liaisons, modifying it to reflect local conditions and adding a series of “indicators of impact.” Moved to the top of the list of responsibilities was “Engage and collaborate actively as liaison to designated members of the Rutgers University–New Brunswick community,” reflecting the higher priority of this role in the hierarchy of expectations. Collection-related subject responsibilities moved down to fifth in the list of seven key responsibility areas, reflecting the trend toward reliance on approval plans, patron-driven acquisitions, and bundled purchasing of licensed databases. Just as important to the framework was an additional set of internal and external impact indicators that document how liaisons can self-assess their progress and determine where they need to act, both individually and collectively. Among the external indicators listed are

- invited to participate in faculty and campus undertakings;
- welcomed, valued, and appreciated by the broader university community;
- engaged with the academic life of students and faculty and focused on what they need most, helping them succeed;
- repositioned, diffused, and embedded into the broader university community;
- referenced, aligned, blended, and incorporated into university goals and interests;
- heightened visibility, impact, and use.

Internal indicators include

- understanding of faculty interests, culture, aspirations, and struggles;
- aligning of individual and collective tasks;
- articulating the meaning and value of contributions in a consistent, collective way;
- enabling, encouraging, and recognizing innovation in building and expanding relationships;



- broadening of skills and competencies;
- leveraging collective ideas creatively to innovate and implement new and improved service models.

To initiate action, the liaison librarians at Rutgers looked to success stories and “low-hanging” opportunities that could be easily accomplished to deepen their relationships. They discovered, however, that they were unsure how to turn outward to widen the conversation with their colleagues on campus. To leverage opportunities

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for greater impact and to engage more authentically, they adopted practices and tools developed by the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation.<sup>30</sup> The Rutgers liaisons began by launching a series of conversations on campus, initially focused on the experience of undergraduates, followed by those of graduate and international students. These rich community discussions provided a sense of the aspirations and

concerns of the Rutgers community that opened new possibilities for the liaisons to engage more actively with colleagues across the campus.<sup>31</sup> By uncovering what the Harwood Institute calls “public knowledge,” the librarians began to identify and take intentional steps toward a more engaged approach to library programs and services. These small measures, or “pockets of change,” rippled outward, opening new possibilities for relationship building. Among these steps were

- reimagining more engaged celebrations to build community;
- engaging more actively with the Honors Program, Study Abroad, graduate school, distance learning, and other programs;
- partnering to promote civic engagement activities through voter registration; a Constitutional Café, which convened a dialogue about the value of the Constitution; and a political awareness learning community, which helped students identify information about local political issues; and
- redefining job descriptions for new recruits to reflect a variety of functional specialties to engage more actively on campus on issues related to data, copyright, Web and digital services, the undergraduate experience, and instructional design.

Similar conversations within the library found librarians eager to engage but uncertain how to do so. They wanted to focus their liaison work more on specific communities. They also indicated an eagerness to work through teams and build partnerships, beginning with undergraduate education. Efforts to deepen their understanding of the campus community revealed possibilities for moving forward and helped inform their work with intentionality, ultimately with the goal of increasing their relevance, significance, and impact.

The creation of an Undergraduate Experience Team illustrates in greater detail how one of these measures accelerated change. The team emerged from the knowledge gained





through the community conversations and included two new librarians whose jobs were redesigned accordingly: an undergraduate experience librarian and an instructional design specialist. The team's goals included identifying opportunities to engage with students, building connections, maximizing effectiveness, and developing a "sandbox" where they could experiment with new ideas free of risk. The team is charged with turning outward to make intentional choices that

- identify and define the community;
- learn about and assess the needs of the community through research as well as community conversations;
- build relationships and develop partnerships;
- develop and participate in programs that bring people together within the community;
- share findings and insight with other teams and throughout the libraries.

Although these efforts to reimagine the work of liaisons seemed promising, new leadership of the Rutgers University Libraries and additional budget cuts prompted the librarians to recognize that they needed a more holistic effort. They had to further integrate the role of subject liaisons with functional specialists as positions were vacated and new models were deployed to cover campus units no longer assigned to a subject specialist.

### **Toward a New Model for Rutgers Library Liaisons**

Just as other ARL libraries envisioned new models for liaisons, the Rutgers University Libraries, New Brunswick launched another initiative in 2017 with the Liaison Assessment Committee to respond to concerns about assessment, workflows, and workload balances of library faculty and staff. Comprised of nine volunteer librarians from across the New Brunswick libraries, the initial task of the committee was to map liaisons or subject specialists to schools, departments, and units across the campus. The committee then broke into three subgroups to consider the future of library liaisons and subject specialists. The smaller groups surveyed the literature, learned more about what is happening at other institutions, and investigated liaison librarian "dashboards," user interfaces that, somewhat like an automobile dashboard, organize and present information in a way that is easy to read. To garner feedback from colleagues, the Liaison Assessment Committee hosted a Liaison Assembly luncheon in which Rutgers library liaisons shared stories and aspirations about their future roles, then elicited feedback for the final report with recommendations for future action.

Later, the Liaison Assessment Committee hosted a session to discuss how the organization will move forward with the work of library liaisons based on its recommendations. The session began with a literature review of the history and trends of liaison librarianship, followed by two exercises discussing liaison allocations of time and categorizing liaison responsibilities. These activities were based on an updated "Liaison Responsibilities: Goals, Actions, Framework, and Indicators" document with categories added to gather estimates of actual compared to aspirational time spent both individually and collectively by liaisons. Discussing the actual versus desired time spent on each function revealed that one size does not fit all circumstances. The many types of librar-



ians within the Rutgers University Library, New Brunswick—ranging from functional to subject specialists and from tenured full-time to non-tenure track part-time staff—assume different liaison roles, resulting in varying time spent engaging with campus communities. What became apparent is that increased communication with one another as well as sharing with the overall Rutgers community would be central to their success if they were to leverage their engagement role more effectively as advocates of the library's vision and message. Not only did they realize that one size does not fit all but also they recognized that library liaisons need different personal skill sets and preferences and engage with departments in a wide range of ways. Most important, it was clear that the liaisons wanted to change and move forward but were still uncertain how to do this together.

When working with the "Liaison Responsibilities" framework, one small group consisted of four tenured librarians: one functional librarian, two liaison librarians, and one half functional/half liaison librarian. This group concluded that liaisons are determined to increase their engagement with designated communities on campus, particularly through collaborations that advance teaching, learning, and scholarship. As reflected in the results reported in Table 1, half the group wanted to participate more actively in university-wide initiatives, while the other half felt they already had a good balance of time devoted to this task. Likewise, half the group indicated they spent sufficient time managing and selecting resources, while the other half would prefer to devote less time to this task, comparable to many studies in this article's literature review. Although one person in the group wanted to spend less time providing in-person and virtual reference services, members gave only 17 percent of their time to this task. Group members spent more time engaging and collaborating as liaisons than on any other task—20 percent of their time, or the equivalent of one day a week.

In a second exercise with small groups using the same "Liaison Responsibilities" framework, summarized in Table 2, liaison librarians determined the minimum level of liaison responsibilities needed to serve the Rutgers campus communities. The levels of responsibility ranged from core—that is, is critical or very important—to expert—that is, requiring special skill derived from training or experience—to point of contact, a person or department who can be approached for information or assistance on a specific topic. Finally, emerging from all the group discussions was how to define the term *liaison* going forward as the librarians reconcile ever-present differences between subject and functional specialists. Results from these exercises will inform how the librarians distribute their limited time and resources as they finalize their strategic plan and attempt to find new ways to engage the campus communities despite shrinking levels of staff and support.

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### Creating a Community of Practice

One of the key recommendations from the Liaison Assessment Committee was to create a formal Liaison Community of Practice, a group of practitioners who would help one



**Table 1.**  
Actual versus desired percentages of time spent by one group of Rutgers liaison librarians on various responsibilities

Responsibility	Actual percentage of time	Desired percentage of time*
Engage and collaborate actively as liaison to designated members of the Rutgers–New Brunswick community.	20%	↓↑↑
Participate in a dynamic and proactive user education program.	15%	↑↓
Engage faculty and students in adopting new modes of scholarly communication.	4%	↓
Participate in a full range of in-person and virtual reference services.	17%	↓↓
Select and manage resources in designated subject fields.	10%	↑↑↑
Build partnerships that engage information communities in collaborative projects that advance teaching, learning, and scholarship.	11%	↑↑
Participate in university-wide initiatives, communities, and task forces, and demonstrate commitment to continual professional development and scholarship.	9%	↑↑
Other		14%

\*Each up arrow indicates a member of the group who aspired to spend a greater percentage of time on the responsibility, and each down arrow represents a member who wanted to devote a smaller percentage of time to it.

This manuscript is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication, portal 20.2.



## Table 2.

Minimum level of responsibilities needed to serve the Rutgers and New Brunswick communities, according to one group of liaison librarians

Liaison responsibility	Core*	Expert†	Point of contact‡
Engage actively with faculty, students, and staff in designated liaison areas to develop strong working relationships and assess information interests and needs to advance teaching, learning, and scholarship.		✓	✓
Embed physically and virtually in teaching, learning, and research through courseware, curricular planning, academic units, and other means.		✓	✓
Promote a broad range of library resources and services and communicate about emerging issues, such as scholarly communication, data management and curation, digital conservancy, mobile services, online reference, online tools, and the integration of information literacy skills into the curriculum.	✓	✓	✓
Work collaboratively with library and university groups to integrate tradition and digital scholarly resources into teaching and research programs.		✓	
Develop and maintain relevant, high-quality collections, tools, and services.		✓	✓
Analyze trends in departmental teaching and research programs, stay abreast of scholarship in relevant disciplines, and use this knowledge to respond to departmental initiatives.		✓	
Evaluate impact of liaison relationships/actions.		✓	
Seek opportunities to collaborate and establish partnerships.		✓	✓
Participate in local community activities involving New Brunswick Libraries and/or liaison area expertise.		✓	✓
Serve as an ambassador of the New Brunswick Libraries at local professional and community events.		✓	✓

\*A core responsibility is critical or very important to the work.

†An expert responsibility requires special skill derived from training or experience.

‡A point of contact is a person or department who can be approached for information or assistance on a specific topic.



another learn to do their work better. This recommendation grew out of an earlier Liaison Assembly, where liaisons came together to share best practices, discuss challenges, and identify opportunities. Feedback from liaisons throughout the assessment process indicated a desire to see this practice continue in a more formal way in recognition of how their work shares common elements though great variation in how it is accomplished. Specifically, the Liaison Assessment Committee recommended that a team assume an ongoing leadership role to establish and sustain this community of practice. In addition to organizing meetings for liaisons to discuss their work, this team could also maintain liaison documentation and onboarding of new liaisons to ensure they understood expectations as well as the tools and resources available to succeed. It was also recommended that the liaison librarians create an internal, online portal that includes policy documents, tools to aid in the delivery and assessment of instruction, outreach strategies, and information about how to articulate and communicate liaison activities effectively. As their role becomes less collection-centric and more connection-focused, liaisons find themselves engaging with their communities in exciting, new, and impactful ways.

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### Restructuring Liaison Responsibilities

Though liaisons at Rutgers target various departments, programs, and offices across the university, their experiences and approaches vary widely. When librarians told their stories at the Liaison Assembly, it became clear that each liaison had a different set of challenges and opportunities specific to his or her community. Structuring liaisons' work for the future remains a priority. The Liaison Assessment Committee encouraged discussion around the idea of disciplinary teams (such as sciences, social sciences, or humanities), functional teams (undergraduate engagement, scholarly communication, and the like), or both, highlighting the need to reimagine the current liaison model with ongoing evaluation and reconsideration. As Jennifer Church-Duran has stressed, "There is no definitive, one-size-fits-all formula for creating a dynamic, expansive, and successful liaison program that is guaranteed to thrive when faced with the challenges of an ever-evolving research, scholarship, and learning climate."<sup>32</sup> Librarians at Rutgers and beyond agree, however, that engagement must remain a top priority, or, as Ohio State librarians suggest, the "linchpin or guiding principle" for liaison work.<sup>33</sup>

The following examples highlight the range of interactions by Rutgers liaisons, reflecting an evolving environment in which they have begun to customize every aspect of their work to better meet the aspirations and concerns of their communities. These examples did not require large amounts of money or even, in some cases, any, yet they reflect an ever-increasing emphasis on connecting with the university's user communities and a reduced focus on collecting materials.



*Example 1: School of Environmental and Biological Sciences—Chang Library*

With the departure of the librarian serving the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences and a diminishing number of librarians on staff, Rutgers launched a virtue-out-of-necessity solution. The library decided to experiment with a team-based approach to support the entire Cook Campus, the home of the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences—one of the largest schools at Rutgers with over 6,000 students and a wide range of programs from agriculture, landscape architecture, and human ecology to oceanography. In the absence of a single subject specialist to cover all disciplines, the director of the Rutgers University Library, New Brunswick assigned a team of librarians to explore the sustainability of such key liaison tasks as collection development, reference, and instruction. The team consists of librarians with expertise in environmental and biological sciences, data management, scholarly communication, copyright, patents, and more. In addition to centralized virtual reference services, the librarians offer local, pop-up reference assistance at the Cook Campus Stephen and Lucy Chang Science Library. To facilitate instructional assistance, they channel requests through a campus-based request system to the team leader, resulting in higher participation by previously underserved populations.

The Chang Science Library also serves as the sandbox for an innovative collaboration between the libraries and their users that reflects the libraries' efforts to turn outward and play a more significant role in their communities. In collaboration with the Department of Landscape Architecture, the libraries offer experiential learning opportunities for students in the Social and Cultural Aspects of Design course taught by two professors who aimed to engage students in exploring the complex relationship of people and the environment. As imaginary consultants hired to gather data and analyze existing resources and opportunities, 44 undergraduate students look for answers to two main questions: "What is the role of a library?" and "What role could the Chang Library play for the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences and for Rutgers?" Students are encouraged to apply techniques and methods based on their course readings and class discussions, and they deliver an end-of-term report assessing the Chang Science Library and recommending improvements. Rutgers librarians assist with the exercise by providing background information on past and current library practices, site visits, observation sessions, and classroom presentations. The initiative fosters deep engagement opportunities for both the students and the libraries, resulting in a wealth of data, interpretation, assessment, and reflections—a rewarding and engaging experience for students and librarians alike.

By extending the reach of the Rutgers University Library, New Brunswick beyond the Cook Campus, the Chang redesign project succeeded in several measurable ways. The project contributed short term to increased usage, including more visits to the Chang Library, added page views of discipline-based and other LibGuides, increased instruction requests, and doubled reference interactions. It also established regular collaboration with various departments on the Cook Campus, resulting in longer-term, beneficial relationship building. Similar projects now underway in the Art and Math libraries will benefit the Rutgers University Libraries in assessing gaps in service and outreach and reframing space planning to align more effectively with the aspirations and concerns of the campus community.





### *Example 2: Art Library*

The Rutgers University Art Library, while a popular destination due to its proximity to the New Brunswick Train Station and its central location on the College Avenue campus, stands far from several of the departments it serves. To compensate, the art librarian began in 2014 to hold weekly office hours in the lobbies of those distant units to meet with potential users. Arranged to suit student schedules, the art librarian brings a sign, laptop, brochures, candy, and sometimes library materials or a button maker. These embedded hours of service have led to many new collaborations and opportunities to engage more deeply, resulting in the art librarian serving on a Landscape Architecture Search Committee; invitations to department events; greater involvement in information literacy instruction sessions in undergraduate and graduate courses; increased discussions with faculty about their own research; class collaborations, including exhibitions by student designers at the Art Library; and invitations to participate in performance art. At the same time, reference questions soared.

An important outcome from these weekly hosted reference hours in department lobbies is that the library liaison is now seen as part of the department and respected as a trusted member of the community. Moreover, because the art librarian is often present when invited scholars and key figures from the university visit, the libraries are recognized as accessible, mobile, and engaged with the individuals they serve. When prospective students and parents tour these departments and the art librarian is present, future students and their families can meet a librarian and learn more about what is possible in a twenty-first century research library.

This weekly initiative hosting reference hours in departments started small with a simple, low-cost activity to learn more about these departments, getting to know them better and providing intentional as well as targeted outreach and engagement to meet their needs. Recently, the art librarian approached the chair of the Rutgers Landscape Architecture Department about installing a life-size cutout of herself in the lobby to create a librarian “presence” 24 hours a day, seven days a week within the department. The chair quickly embraced this notion on the condition that it not replace the librarian’s weekly, indispensable in-person visits to the department.

This successful initiative demonstrates that spending as little as two hours a week in a place where users learn and convene reaps big benefits for the library and its users, building stronger relationships with a liaison librarian and fostering a solid foundation for engaging with departments. In addition, a weekly departmental presence provides students and faculty consistent access to the libraries as opposed to the limited contact provided in a one-shot 30- to 90-minute bibliographic session—often the only library support students experience throughout their entire career in higher education.

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*Example 3: Business and Entrepreneurship Librarian*

The business and entrepreneurship librarian serves as the liaison to the Rutgers Business School and as the libraries' point person for entrepreneurial outreach and support across the university. This responsibility extends to programs and departments beyond Rutgers Business School that engage in entrepreneurial or business activities and research, including programs in science (master of business and science), kinesiology and health (master of science in global sports business), and nonacademic units, such as University Career Services and the Office of Research & Economic Development. In 2017 and 2018, the business and entrepreneurship librarian partnered with the New Jersey Small Business Development Center at Rutgers–New Brunswick to teach market research techniques to local entrepreneurs in a series of five-week business planning workshops. The librarian developed a hands-on approach that gave participants the opportunity to learn about and use a variety of subscription-based, government, and other publicly available sources to gather data for their business plans.

To assess the effectiveness of the business and entrepreneurship librarian's contributions to the business planning workshops, the director of the Small Business Development Center offered access to longitudinal data gathered from participants regarding the outcomes of their business plans. In a survey administered by the Small Business Development Center at the end of each workshop, participants indicated overwhelmingly positive responses. The market research workshop, they said, gave them a stronger understanding of how to use the various tools and resources to strengthen their business plans.

Through this partnership with the Small Business Development Center, the business and entrepreneurship librarian connected with the university's newly formed Entrepreneurship Coalition, which brought together

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people from across the university, including university offices, academic departments, and student groups, to identify resources, discuss ideas, and strategize ways to promote entrepreneurship at Rutgers. The coalition provided the business and entrepreneurship librarian with many opportunities to engage entrepreneurship communities within the university, including Business School faculty who taught product development and business consulting courses. Additionally, the business and entrepreneurship librarian collaborated with the Office of Research Commercialization to develop and provide

research and instructional support for faculty and students participating in research commercialization programs organized by the office.

The business and entrepreneurship librarian forged stronger relationships with numerous campus communities whose needs differed as much as the disciplines and programs they represent. Since most liaisons traditionally work with smaller or more narrowly defined disciplines or groups, they are often challenged by broader multidis-



ciplinary initiatives but also enriched by such opportunities. While this approach may not work for every liaison, it highlights the specialized needs of an academic library's user communities and possible methods for engaging them.

### From Collecting to Connecting

For half a century, liaison librarians have strived to forge new and different connections as the library's conduit for communicating the valuable role of academic libraries. While they aspire to become more visible and relevant, liaisons are challenged by ever-widening perception gaps between librarians and their campus communities. The promise of a reorganization of the Rutgers libraries and a new strategic plan to reposition the libraries offer renewed opportunities to move forward. With budgets and staff dwindling, what comes next will take time and a commitment from all Rutgers library liaisons as well as continued support from the library's leadership. As Anna Marie Johnson has concluded, "Reference and liaison librarianship is in flux and faces threats in the forms of invisibility and disconnection."<sup>34</sup>

To connect more effectively with the Rutgers community, a new operating model based on recommendations of the Liaison Assessment Committee will describe how library liaisons and subject specialists can accomplish their goals, including assessment and alignment with the university's strategic plan. Given their experience with rethinking liaison roles, as shown in the case studies described in this article, the librarians believe they can turn outward and achieve greater engagement if they

- work more proactively with their community, not just provide services to it;
- partner to foster more collaborative initiatives;
- assess skills needed to achieve their goals;
- create a liaison community of practice with a corresponding dashboard of resources;
- devote more time and priority to connecting rather than collecting;
- incorporate their job responsibilities framework into their actual day-to-day efforts;
- leverage their operating structure to take advantage of the broad array of skills needed to build impactful relationships;
- build external and internal indicators into both individual and collective evaluations of their ongoing efforts;
- tell their story more effectively to both library and campus colleagues;
- move from talk to action.

The Liaison Assessment Committee was charged to describe the work currently undertaken, to map liaison responsibilities to the libraries' mission and service priorities, to share that work with stakeholders, and to assess the relevance and impact of the libraries' efforts. Like library liaisons elsewhere, Rutgers librarians participate in a proliferation of duties—many of them not evaluated or even articulated. Though they are committed to

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turning outward and telling their story, they must strive to have “a seat at the table” to achieve better understanding and respect for their contributions. The three examples detailed in this article show that when liaison librarians turn outward and move beyond collecting to connecting, they deepen relationships, extend their reach, and elevate their importance. Ultimately, liaison work is a story that should be shared in a way that is meaningful, far-reaching, and impactful. The Rutgers experience offers new models for transforming liaison roles and increasing the value of the libraries.

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