Change is the only constant: Evaluating SFU Library's Liaison Program

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SFU LIBRARY

CONTEXT

Liaison librarian programs in academic libraries have changed significantly over the last several years with the shift to new liaison models and the creation of functional positions to accommodate new areas of growth such as scholarly communication, digital humanities, and data services.

SFU Library's Liaison Program, which provides support to researchers at all three SFU campuses, went through a redesign process in 2011 and then a further redesign in 2015. The major outcomes of the most recent redesign were the creation of new subject/departmental groupings and a number of new functional roles (Teaching & Learning and Digital Scholarship, for example). Portfolios continue to be held by individuals as opposed to teams, with the expectation that a team-based approach be adopted when appropriate—namely when a request, goal, or initiative requires both departmental and functional expertise. Subsequent assessment of the 2015 redesign highlighted the continually changing nature of liaison work, which led to the creation of the SFU Library Liaison Program Evaluation Working Group (LPEWG).

In the 2016-2017 academic year, this working group developed a survey for all SFU liaison librarians (departmental and functional). This survey was designed to provide a snapshot of the overall program from the liaison librarians' perspective, as well as to identify 1) areas of success, 2) issues that require further investigation, and 3) new areas of growth emerging in the work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous recent reports and studies have chronicled the continuing evolution of the established liaison model. The 2013 ARL report *New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries* detailed a shift from a model focused on research assistance (which became well-established after the bibliographer model) to an engagement model concerned with enhancing researcher productivity, empowering learners, and participating in the entire lifecycle of the research, teaching, and learning process (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013).

There are many useful studies describing the restructuring of liaison programs (Andrade & Zaghloul, 2010; Auckland, 2012; Banfield & Petropoulos, 2017; Glynn & Wu, 2003; Luckert, 2016; R. K. Miller & Pressley, 2015; Resnis & Natale, 2017). **However, there are very few studies—especially in Canada—that evaluate liaison librarian models or the changes that they are going through.** The research that has been done focuses largely on the return-on-investment of programs, rather than liaison librarians' perspectives and experience of recent changes and the evolving model that governs their work (Corrall, 2015; J. Miller, 2014). A short survey of the six liaison librarians working at the Health Sciences Library at McMaster University assessed workload and priorities, but was conducted in anticipation of a redesign rather than post-change (Banfield & Petropoulos, 2017).

To fully understand the effectiveness of liaison programs, we certainly need to ask questions about outcomes, but we also need to seek feedback and input from liaisons themselves about the impact of change, how they work, and what support they need.

A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT

Responsibility for assessment is distributed across all portfolios at SFU Library. In an effort to foster trust and engagement in the assessment process, the LPEWG adopted a participatory assessment process by consulting with other library departments, service points, and the liaisons themselves in order to draft survey questions.

INSTRUMENT

- SFU liaison librarians and the SFU Institutional Research and Planning department were invited to provide feedback on the draft survey questions.
- The final survey was built using the online platform FluidSurvey, and was comprised of 23 questions of varying styles: multiple choice, multiple answer, likert scale, and open ended.
- An invitation to complete the survey went out on the SFU Library Liaison Librarian listserv on May 2, 2017 and the survey remained open until May 15, 2017.
- Not all questions were mandatory, and librarians were told that their responses would remain anonymous.
- We received a total of 24 responses to the survey, 21 of which were complete.

FINDINGS

The majority of survey results were positive: Most librarians reported feeling that they could balance the demands of their workload and that the current liaison model is working well.

Survey questions covered a variety of topics, including communications and collections support, cross-campus travel and working from home, and anticipated future needs. What follows is a brief overview of responses of note. All comments have been lightly edited to protect the anonymity of librarians.

The roles of functional librarians are still evolving: Both functional and departmental liaisons are working to ensure that roles are well defined.

"Many functional areas seem to spend a lot time parsing out what they will and especially what they won't do, to the point where I generally feel it's better to do it all unless I'm absolutely desperate."

"I feel much more confident about one of my new subject areas, thanks to functional librarian support. I felt I could help students, and will have more input in their learning goals next year."

Looking forward, can you anticipate or identify trends or new areas of growth?
[Open-ended question, n=22]

"Info and data literacy course integrated instruction, programming targeted at faculty, and development of programming related to online presence."
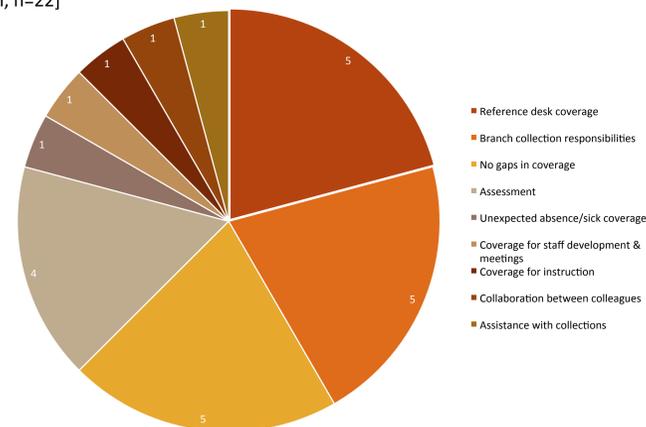
"Opportunities to align information literacy with current political events and and crises in journalism/ freedom of the press, as well as social justice. Active participation in Truth and Reconciliation through Indigenizing library spaces and collections..."
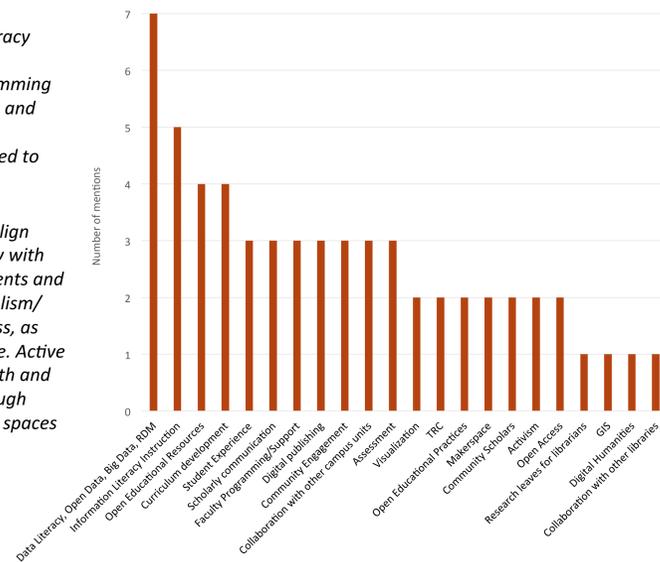
Over the past year, did you observe gaps in coverage of operational areas?
[Open-ended question, n=22]

"Reference desk coverage was stretched thin and it seemed difficult at times to find volunteers to cover available shifts during busy times of term. General instruction staffing [...] was often stretched thin during busy times of term as well."

Pie chart legend:
- Reference desk coverage
- Branch collection responsibilities
- No gaps in coverage
- Assessment
- Unexpected absence/sick coverage
- Coverage for staff development & meetings
- Coverage for instruction
- Collaboration between colleagues
- Assistance with collections

Geographic and branch-specific challenges: Space, staff, and operational demands and responsibilities vary depending on library location; some liaisons have departmental assignments that aren't based at their home campuses; and, despite the use of technology, librarians still face difficulties collaborating with colleagues across campus locations.

"It is challenging for liaisons to find time to commit to campus-specific activities [and] events."

SIGNIFICANCE

- **A response to a continually evolving profession**: Highlighting the ongoing change in liaison work, Church-Duran (2017) states that "academic libraries continually return to the same question: What is required to transform from the traditional model to one of innovation, collaboration, and partnership?"(p. 258). The survey is one way we have worked to gain a current yet future-oriented answer to this question.
- **A map**: The survey functions as a pin thrown down on a map, giving us a current picture of where we are after significant change, as well as signalling new demands and skill gaps that may be emerging and indicating whether there is clarity with regard to roles and job expectations. This was of particular importance in 2017 because we had a new incoming Dean of Learning & Research Services and providing her with a quick lay of the land and map was desirable.
- **A synergy of a bottom-up and top-down approaches**: The survey respects the work, expertise, experience, and evolving professional identities of liaison librarians by providing them with an opportunity to provide feedback from on the ground with regard to the current model and recent changes and to indicate expectations for the future. It also acknowledges and attempts to assess the emotional impact of change. All of this can then be used to inform future strategic changes at the organizational level.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Response rate:** The LPEWG was not able to calculate a response rate to our survey because SFU Library is still in the process of establishing which positions are included in the Liaison Program. This is mainly due to the fact that certain functional roles were created outside (and well before) the most recent redesign and therefore have varied administrative homes. Given the changing roles of liaison librarians at SFU, moving forward it will be important to identify who should receive the survey and ensure they have the opportunity to respond.
- **Anonymity:** It was our intention that librarians' responses to the survey would remain anonymous, but due to our small sample size we discovered that was not ultimately possible. As a result, comments were lightly edited and responses were presented in aggregate whenever possible to preserve anonymity. Before the survey is run again, it will be important to outline who will see the raw results and how the final results will be reported.

NEXT STEPS

- Outstanding issues identified in the survey results will be explored by the LPEWG in conjunction with the Associate Dean of Libraries, Learning & Research Services and other interested parties.
- With support of library administration the survey will be run again in the future.
  - **Participatory assessment**: Involving other library departments and the liaisons in survey creation was a success; the LPEWG will continue to employ participatory assessment in the future.
  - **Instrument:** As questions are developed and revised, the LPEWG will have to balance the need for information in new areas of interest and the desire for longitudinal results, while also keeping the survey a manageable length.
- As the current Liaison Program design evolves, the working group can broaden their focus to include new areas of development:
  - **CARL Core Competencies**: New questions explicitly exploring these may be added.
  - **Job postings**: These and any other documentation of job expectations may be explored to ensure they consistently reflect the current reality and continuing evolution of liaison work at SFU.

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