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Subject Liaisons in Academic Libraries: An Open Access Data Set from 2015

Neil Nero and Anne Langley

abstract: The work of subject liaison librarians in academic libraries has morphed to include a variety of roles that reach beyond the traditional. This study captures responses of 1,808 participants from land-grant, Oberlin Group, and Association of Research Libraries (ARL) institutions to a questionnaire about subject liaison librarians. The questionnaire contains eight demographic questions, five questions about liaison responsibilities, seven outreach and instruction questions, three traditional reference questions, two scholarly communications questions, three collection development questions, and an open-ended question. This is the largest data set compiled to date on academic subject liaison librarians. The data set has been made available on an open access basis in hopes that use of the data will facilitate cross-study comparisons.

The Data Set

The data set created for this study, "Subject Liaisons in Academic Libraries: An Open Access Data Set from 2015," is comprised of data collected about subject liaison librarians and the work they are doing in academic libraries. The data set has been made available on an open access basis. It contains information from 1,808 participants, specifically librarians from land-grant institutions, mostly large public universities; the Oberlin Group, mostly small liberal arts colleges; and Association of Research Libraries (ARL) libraries.

The participating librarians answered eight demographic questions, five questions about subject liaison responsibilities, seven outreach and instruction questions, three traditional reference questions, two scholarly communications questions, and three collection development questions. There was also an open-ended question that asked for comments of any kind. Two of the questions were standardized: Q9 "Where did you get your library/information science degree?" and Q13, type of library. Information deemed to have identifying characteristics has been redacted and labeled "REDACTED - Identifying Information."

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Background

We began planning our project with the idea that we would gather and analyze data about how subject liaison librarians did their work in this time of rapid change in scholarly publishing. It seemed important to investigate the work done by liaison librarians given the multiple new options for researchers in social media and the renewed and revitalized emphasis on instruction for academic librarians. As we discussed our ideas and read the literature, we realized that no one had done a massive data-gathering project on subject liaison librarians.

This realization solidified our approach to creating the survey and designing our methodology. Open data sets had become more common but had not reached the literature in our profession. We decided that, through a broad survey of a targeted population, we would gather data from a wide perspective of librarians on the activities and trends in their relationships with academic departments and on the other work that subject liaisons do. We felt it would be an important benchmark for the profession to have a snapshot of what one type of academic librarian does in the early twenty-first century. Finally, we wanted to share these data in a way that many people could use them by making our results available in an open access data set.

Our data set is open to library professionals to analyze in any way they see fit. We provide the instrument along with the data so that anyone can replicate our study or build on it. This data paper is the presentation of the survey design, with links to the open repositories where it and the instrument can be found; our methodology; a discussion of the process; and an invitation to the profession to take part in, continue, and build on the data analysis and assessment.

Literature Review

A review of the literature shows multiple studies that survey liaison librarians, faculty, and students about various subjects related to liaison librarianship. This data set builds on the methodologies from more focused surveys of subject liaison librarians and attempts to expand upon them by asking a wider array of questions pertinent to more constituencies.

Recent ARL SPEC (Systems and Procedures Exchange Center) Kits have provided systematic surveys of ARL libraries. Susan Logue, John Ballestro, Andrea Imre, and Julie Arendt focus on library instruction and outreach, traditional responsibilities, new trends, and the amount of liaison involvement in student and faculty needs. They found that while “faculty deem library services a low priority in their daily lives,” it becomes even more important for liaisons to build relationships in order to integrate information literacy into the curriculum.¹ Building on this, Rebecca Miller and Lauren Pressley’s survey gathers data on current changing roles, emerging trends, and goals and strategies among ARL liaison librarians. They found that successful liaisons continue to be proactive and to embrace new and expanding roles in education.²

Tom Glynn and Connie Wu surveyed 41 liaison librarians at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick to identify preferred practices in academic librarianship. They found that e-mail and face-to-face contact were most effective when communicating with faculty and academic departments.³ Georgina Hardy and Sheila

Corrall surveyed 32 subject liaison librarians in English, law, and chemistry in universities in the United Kingdom about roles, relationships, and competencies of subject liaison librarians. They found that liaison librarians had a wide range of activities, and they stressed the importance of communication, a proactive style, and a personal approach in working with faculty and academic departments.⁴ Ahmad Bakeri Abu Bakar surveyed liaison librarians at the International Islamic University Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur about the perceived value and satisfaction of the liaison program in meeting the needs of the faculty. Bakar recommended that liaisons continue to develop competencies in order to meet their responsibilities with faculty and academic departments.⁵

A number of surveys polled faculty members about liaison librarians. James Thull and Mary Anne Hansen surveyed faculty in their own departments (and a few other departments) at Montana State University in Bozeman to assess knowledge and satisfaction with liaison services.⁶ Jonathan Miller questioned faculty two years in a row to assess the programs and effectiveness of individual librarians. He found that faculty reported mostly good to excellent interactions with liaisons.⁷ Julie Arendt and Megan Lotts compared satisfaction with liaison services among both liaison librarians and faculty in chemistry, English, and psychology departments in the United States. They found that librarians were most satisfied with their performance based on time spent on liaison work and recent contact with the department. Faculty satisfaction was associated with familiarity and recent contact with liaison librarians.⁸ Michele Tennant, Tara Tobin Cataldo, Pamela Sherwill-Navarro, and Rae Jesano assessed liaison librarians, faculty, students, and staff at the University of Florida in Gainesville about “program and service awareness and usage, client-library relations and communication, client support for program, and liaison workload.” The survey was designed to evaluate the program and not the liaisons. They found that a core group of survey participants know about, use, and have positive regard for the liaison program.⁹

Methods

Participants

The authors identified 4,396 participants via library websites as having subject liaison responsibilities at 214 institutions, including all ARL libraries, Oberlin Group libraries, and libraries at land-grant institutions created under the Morrill Act of 1862. These libraries were chosen as a representative example of small, medium, and large institutions across the United States and Canada that would likely have liaison programs.

Because the primary goal for the survey was to create a large data set that would provide a useful and varied collection of data, we hoped to gather at least 1,000 responses. Our final count of 1,808 surveys completed includes a more than sufficient number of responses to show a snapshot of the populations surveyed.

Measures

The 29-item Subject Liaisons in Academic Libraries Questionnaire (see the Appendix) was constructed to assess how subject liaisons in academic libraries build, support, and



maintain relationships recently or currently with their academic departments. Additionally, we included multiple demographic questions and items asking about other possible responsibilities of these librarians, including instruction, outreach, traditional reference, and newer types of responsibilities, especially supporting scholarly communication.

Instrument

We used Qualtrics software to manage the survey. The types of questions broke down as follows:

- eight demographic questions
- five subject liaison responsibilities questions
- seven outreach and instruction questions
- three traditional reference questions
- two scholarly communications questions
- three collection development questions.

Both authors obtained approval for the study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at their respective institutions.

Timeline of the Survey

The survey was distributed over a four-week period from mid-November through early December 2015 via e-mail to the entire e-mail list created as described earlier. The initial e-mail solicitation was followed by three additional reminders sent in the subsequent weeks to those on the e-mail list whom the software identified as not having completed the survey.

Testing of the Survey Instrument

A select group of subject liaisons at the home institution of one of the authors tested the survey instrument. Testers came from a variety of subject backgrounds, including the humanities, the social sciences, and the sciences. Testers provided feedback that was incorporated into the final version of the survey instrument.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Analysis

This was a big undertaking, especially the compilation of the participant list, which was the most labor- and time-intensive part of the project. A large participant list, however, was key to the capture of a large set of data about subject liaison librarians. We not only think that the data set will prove useful to others who parse and analyze the data for their own research but also hope that this will be just the beginning of the creation of large open data sets for the profession. The analysis and open sharing of data about ourselves and our profession may lead to a deeper understanding of how we work, as it has in multiple other fields. It may also reveal how we can be more responsive to the needs of our users and those of society at large as we try to make sense of what it means to live in the information age.

That said, we invite you to look at the data set. We have deposited it in two institutional repositories: (1) Princeton Institutional Repository, <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp01v405sc863>, and (2) ScholarSphere at Penn State University, <https://scholarsphere.psu.edu/files/hd76s019k>. The data set includes a CSV spreadsheet—a comma separated values file, which allows data to be saved in a table-structured format. Think about and act on the mining and analysis of the data for your own research interests and needs. We are excited and curious to see what others do with and think about this snapshot of data.

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Appendix

Survey Instrument

Subject Liaisons in Academic Libraries: An Open Access Data Set from 2015
Q0 Browser Meta Info

- Browser (1)
- Version (2)
- Operating System (3)
- Screen Resolution (4)
- Flash Version (5)
- Java Support (6)
- User Agent (7)

QICF Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research project “Subject Liaisons in Academic Libraries: A Data Set and Analysis.” This consent document explains the purpose of this research project, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. This consent form should be read carefully and completely. Questions and concerns may be addressed to the researchers and office identified at the end of



the consent form. Researchers and affiliations: Neil Nero, Behavioral Sciences Librarian, Princeton University; and Anne Langley, Associate Dean for Research, Collections and Scholarly Communications, The Pennsylvania State University.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to gather an extensive snapshot of data about subject librarians/liaisons, their responsibilities, and how they interact with their departments. One of our priorities is to make the data set open access.

Procedure: Participation in the study consists of answering questions in an online survey that should take less than 10 minutes to complete.

Instruments: The survey will be administered via Qualtrics online survey tool.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. Subjects have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate without penalty. Simply close the survey to withdraw.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: No identifying data on subjects is requested. No one will ever link the data collected to any individual. Data will be collected through the Qualtrics secure server.

Risks: There are no anticipated risks of participation.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits for study participants. However, it is hoped that through the creation of this open access data set, future researchers in this area of library work will be able to use the data as a starting point for their own research.

Questions about the Research: Questions regarding this study may be directed to Neil Nero, Behavioral Sciences Librarian at Princeton University, at (609) 258-8601, nnero@princeton.edu, or Anne Langley, Associate Dean for Research, Collections and Scholarly Communications, The Pennsylvania State University, (814) 865-0401, anne.langley@psu.edu. If you have concerns about the research or about your rights as a participant, please contact the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, Human Research Protection Program, Assistant Director, Phone: (609) 258-0865, e-mail: irb@princeton.edu.

QC Do you consent to participate in this research study?

Yes (1)

No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to Are you sure you don't have 10 minutes . . . If Yes Is Selected, Then Skip to End of Block

Qbug Are you sure you don't have 10 minutes to help create an open access data set about subject librarians/liaisons, their responsibilities, and how they interact with their departments? Your input will be used to help academic librarians and future researchers. Please say yes! Do you consent to participate in this research study?

Yes (1)

No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Q1 Do you have subject liaison/librarian responsibilities in your current job?

Yes (1)

No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Q2 Is being a subject liaison/librarian your:

- main responsibility (1)
- one of multiple responsibilities (2)
- other (3) _____

Q3 How many subjects/ departments do you support?

- 1 subject/ department (1)
- 2 subjects/ departments (2)
- 3 subjects/ departments (3)
- 4 or more subjects/ departments (4)

Q4 I support departments in: (check all that apply)

- Arts and humanities (1)
- Social sciences (2)
- Science, technology, medicine (3)
- Research centers/Institutes in any subject (5)
- Other (4) _____

Q5 I identify my gender as:

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Trans* (3)
- Prefer not to disclose (4)

Q6 I have been a professional librarian for:

- 1–5 years (1)
- 6–10 years (2)
- 11–15 years (3)
- 16–20 years (4)
- 21–25 years (5)
- 26+ years (6)

Q7 Do you work primarily in:

- the central/main library (1)
- a branch library (2)
- other (3) _____

Q8 Do you have a library/information science degree?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to Q10



Q9 Where did you get your library / information science degree?

Q10 When you started in your current position, did you have:

a related degree in one or more of your subject areas (1)

any other subject related experience or training in one or more of your subject areas (2)

both (3)

neither (4)

If Any Other Subject-Related Experience or Training in One or More of Your Subject Areas Is Selected, Then Skip to End of Block. If Neither Is Selected, Then Skip to End of Block

Q11 My related degree is:

a bachelor's degree (1)

an additional master's degree (2)

a doctorate (3)

other (4) _____

Q12 Institution size – My current institution is:

small (1–5,000 student FTE) (1)

medium (5,001–15,000 student FTE) (2)

large (15,001+ student FTE) (3)

Q13 Library affiliation – My current library is:

an ARL member (1)

a land-grant institution (2)

an Oberlin Group member (3)

a combination of one or more above (4)

If you don't know, list your institution in the box below (5) _____

Q14 Do you have reference responsibilities in your current job?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q15 Do you have scheduled hours on a reference / information desk?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q16 Do you have scheduled hours doing chat or virtual reference?

Yes (1)

No (2)



Q17 Do you hold office hours?

Yes, in my own office (1)

Yes, embedded in department (2)

Yes, other (3) _____

No (4)

Q18 Do you have instructional responsibilities for your subject area(s)?

Yes (1)

No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to End of Block

Q19 Do you teach: (check all that apply)

undergraduate students (1)

graduate students (2)

faculty (4)

staff (5)

other (3) _____

Q20 Do you teach: (check all that apply)

one-off sessions (1)

multiple sessions (2)

for-credit sessions (3)

other (4)

Q21 Do you typically design the sessions: (check all that apply)

alone (1)

with colleagues (2)

with faculty (3)

with graduate students (4)

Q22 Do you have collection development responsibilities for your subject area(s)?

Yes (1)

No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to End of Block

Q23 Do you include faculty / department(s) in collection development decisions?

Always (1)

Sometimes, or only for big ticket or specialized purchases (2)

Never (3)



Q24 Do you include faculty / department(s) in testing electronic resources?

Always (1)

Sometimes, or only for big ticket or specialized purchases (2)

Never (3)

Q25 How do you interact with your department(s), faculty, staff? Check all that apply.

Advertisements (flyer, poster, etc.) (6)

Blog (1)

Cold call/pop-in (2)

Departmental meeting (3)

E-mail (4)

Event/party (5)

Included in departmental group e-mail lists (7)

LibGuide/pathfinder (8)

Newsletter (9)

Poster (10)

Vendor presentation (15)

Other (16) _____

Q26 How effective do you think your outreach is?

Very effective (I have strong relationships with my department(s), faculty, and staff) (1)

Effective (I have good relationships with my department(s), faculty, and staff) (2)

Mixed (I have good relationships with some of my departments, faculty, and staff, not others) (4)

Not effective (I struggle to get the department(s), faculty, and staff to respond to my efforts) (3)

Too early to know (I recently started my position) (6)

Q27 Do you have responsibilities for supporting scholarly communications and/or Open Access in your current job?

Yes (1)

No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to End of Block



Q28 I lead or participate in the following scholarly communications and/or Open Access activities? Check all that apply.

Giving OA presentations (alone or with another librarian) (1)

Soliciting CVs or citations from faculty (2)

Spread general awareness (4)

Other, describe: (3) _____

Q29 Please take this opportunity to share any other thoughts, tips, or ideas you may have.

Notes

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