

Outreach: What Works?

Catherine Essinger (cwessinger@uh.edu)
University of Houston

Irene Ke (ijke@uh.edu)
University of Houston

Abstract

This paper reports on an environmental scan of outreach activities conducted at the University of Houston Libraries in 2007 and the changes to outreach which have taken place in the intervening five years. The authors found that the development of long-term relationships and customized communication was essential to successful outreach.

Keywords: Outreach; Liaison librarians; Communication

Introduction

Despite being one of the primary responsibilities of liaison librarians, outreach is not extensively taught in MLIS programs. For many librarians, especially ones newly assigned to their post, outreach can be a daunting task with a number of potential conundrums. What basic principles can help build sustainable and effective communication with our users? What are the most efficient and effective outreach methods? How should a librarian respond when communication efforts are met with dead silence?

At the University of Houston (UH), librarians are generally trusted to strategize their own outreach efforts. Traditionally, UH liaison librarians adopt outreach strategies according to their individual strengths and approaches vary considerably. In 2007, the authors conducted an environmental scan to identify all outreach strategies used by librarians and tracked the level of response received from the various academic departments in an effort to evaluate the success of each strategy. While determining factors of outreach success can be evasive, certain principles have been shown to strengthen communication and result in more responsive academic departments. This process elicited tangible principles to guide library outreach at the University of Houston. The authors then convened a half-day workshop to discuss the results and to share strategies. In the five years

since the scan was implemented and the workshop held, most UH library liaisons have individually opted to change their approach to outreach, largely resulting in more effective activities.

Methods

An online survey containing nine open-ended questions was created and disseminated to all liaison librarians.

The questions were designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data. (See Figure 1.) Thirty-three completed surveys were collected, which cover 30 academic departments and three programs. Several librarians were directly approached afterwards with follow-up questions in order to clarify responses and gather additional pertinent data. (See Table 1.)

For the purpose of making valid comparison and meaningful interpretation, answers were divided into the five categories below.

1. Outreach effort levels are measured by departmental contact and support activities, and divided into three levels:

High (H): 30+ librarian-generated interactions impacted by high number of customized support activities

1. Academic department
2. My outreach efforts and department support activities over the past year have been...
3. This has resulted in...
4. How many times a semester do you typically visit this academic department?
5. How many times a semester do you typically contact the students and professors in this academic department by phone or email?
6. In what other ways do you communicate with your students and faculty?
7. My interaction with the department has been...
8. (Referencing #7) I believe that is because....
9. The following works very well in terms of my liaison work...
10. My liaison work is challenged by...

Figure 1

Medium (M): 10-30 librarian-generated interactions impacted by a limited number of customized support activities

Limited (L): 10+ librarian-generated interactions, required support activities only (requested instruction, collection development, etc.)

2. Response level is determined by a combination of numerical and descriptive responses to several questions; responses are based on the librarians' subjective evaluation of departmental involvement

High (H)
Medium (M)
Limited (L)

3. Characterization of outreach, if possible to determine

Personalized (E): highly personal contact with individuals (collaborative work, personalized correspondence, etc.)

Passive (A): less personal methods which may reach a broader audience

4. Novice subject liaison

Lack of longevity (Y): served the department two or fewer years

5. Challenging Department Chair or Liaison

If stated on survey (Y)

Results of the 2007 environmental scan

Frequency of interaction:

In general, departmental contact ranged from one to two email messages a semester to daily contact. Communication was overwhelmingly electronic. Personal interaction was limited and may take place in either a library or the academic department. Seventy percent of the academic departments and program faculty were visited by their research librarian four or fewer times a semester.

Methods of interaction:

The research librarians tend to interact with their academic departments and programs through a wide range of communication methods. These include personal contact, such as email/phone/in-person communication with individuals, and interactions within the context of instruction, social and university events. Within all communication venues, email and personal contact (e.g. lunch meetings) were the most commonly cited communication methods. Twelve librarians indicated that they worked collaboratively with their faculty on material selection. Nine librarians used weblogs or other online venues to inform faculty members and students about library services and collections. Sixteen librarians cite library instructions and orientation as effective means of collaboration and support. Seven librarians stated that they had participated in departmental functions and meetings. While many approached their department faculty and students outside the library, others listed reference desk interactions as valuable opportunities to get in touch with users. Branch librarians, obviously, have the opportunity daily to approach department users in their own space. Branch librarians also interacted more with their departments outside their home building than did librarian liaisons based in the central library, suggesting they were more comfortable with outreach in general.

Liaison	Outreach level	Response level	Characterization of Out Reach	Novice	Challenging Liaison/ Chair
1	M	H	E		
2	H	H	E		
3	H	H	E/A	Y	
4	L	L			
5	M	M	E	Y	
6	M	M	E/A	Y	
7	L	L		Y	Y
8	L	L			
9	L	L			Y
10	M	H	E/A		
11	H	H	E/A		
12	H	H	E	Y	
13	L	L		Y	Y
14	H	H	E		
15	H	H	E		
16	L	H	E		
17	L	M	E	Y	
18	L	L		Y	Y
19	L	H		Y	
20	L	H		Y	
21	L	M		Y	Y
22	L	L	E	Y	Y
23	L	L			Y
24	M	M	E/A		
25	L	L	A	Y	
26	L	L	A	Y	Y
27	M	M	A	Y	
28	H	H	E		
29	H	H	E	Y	
30	M	H	E/A		
31	H	M	E	Y	Y
32	M	M	E/A		
33	H	H	E		

Table 1

Some research librarians also adopted less individualized methods of communication but reached a broader range of users. These techniques included listserv postings, subject weblogs, flyers, newsletters, and bulletin board postings.

Several research librarians relied on a combination of both personalized and passive communication to support their departments and programs.

Challenges:

Eleven research librarians, one third of all respondent, cited an indifferent or nonexistent departmental liaison as challenging. Nine librarians stated that their liaison work is challenged by the inaccessibility of their assigned department, due to its size, faculty turnover, a surfeit of online students, or a nonexistent departmental listserv. Eight librarians feel that a lack of in-house support from departments within the libraries presents a challenge to effective liaison work. Eight respondents felt they lacked sufficient time for successful outreach. Other issues that were cited include lack of departmental communication, lack of access to professors' WebCT site, lack of support on promotion and marketing strategies, limited budget, a decentralized faculty and students, and staying abreast of trends and literature in their subject.

Correlations between outreach method and departmental response:

A high level of personalized outreach resulted in a high level response rate with positive feedback for all but one department (which generated a medium response level).

In 69% departments, outreach levels directly correlated to response levels. This suggests that a high level of outreach is likely to result in great response. (In the 10 other departments, nine liaisons characterized department response as more active than their own outreach levels.)

Highly personalized engagement appears to have a very positive impact on departmental

response. Of the 20 departments that receive highly personalized attention, 65% have high response rates, 30% have medium, and only one has limited response (5%).

Less individualized forms of support (subject blogs, printed flyers, etc.) appear to have no impact on engagement. Response levels are split amongst departments whose liaison typically engages in passive support. The response levels of departments that receive a combination of personalized and passive support were also examined. The combination does not appear to impact response levels.

Unsurprisingly, person-to-person contact, email and phone calls are the most effective in relationship building and getting inside views on the user population. The use of less personalized, but widely disseminated and more convenient media, such as subject blogs, newsletters and bulletin boards, generally failed to generate a similar level of response from users. According to the scan results, less individualized forms of support appear to produce almost no response from departments, unless combined with other personalized methods.

Personalized outreach does not, however, preclude highly targeted online activities. For example, weblogs and online guides devoted to a general subject tend to receive little attention, but if a webpage or online guide is created for a particular class, and has been incorporated into course instruction, it tends to be highly used and generates interaction with the target department. Likewise, general messages on a faculty listserv, accompanied by occasional personalized email messages sent directly to faculty members, produces significantly more results with little extra work.

Correlations between longevity of assignment and departmental response:

Newer liaisons tend to engage in limited outreach and receive limited response. Of the 17 librarians who've served as program liaisons for two or fewer years, 65% engage in limited outreach and 41% feel challenged by their department liaison or chair. Of the 16 librarians who have served departments longer than two years,

63% receive a high response and only two feel challenged by their department liaison or chair (13%).

Correlations between a challenging/nonexistent relationship with departmental chair/liaison and departmental response:

Half of the 16 subject liaisons who engaged in limited outreach identify their liaison or department chair (or lack thereof) as a challenge. Most of those had limited experience working with that department. The survey did not ask specifically what librarians did when facing the challenge of an indifferent or nonexistent liaison in the academic department.

Recommendations:

The authors distributed their findings at a half day workshop attended by nearly all liaisons. They made the following recommendations:

- Personalize outreach.
- Spend more time marketing and reaching out to departments, even though it might mean having less time for other activities.
- Find an alternative advocate who can build your reputation through word-of-mouth if your relationship with your assigned department liaison is not fruitful.
- Seek opportunities to meet department staff in person.
- As much as possible, administrators should commit to keeping liaisons assignments static.

Observations on Liaison Responses to the Environmental Scan

In the five years since the authors disseminated their findings and helped craft an outreach workshop for liaisons, they have observed a sea-change in liaisons' approach to outreach. Approaches are still quite varied and determined by the individual librarians, but communication is now far more likely to be personalized and flexible, and much of it takes place outside the library. Those librarians that follow the workshop recommendation typically report a high level of response from their departments and

successful relationships. The authors cannot take credit for this transformation. Many of the most successful liaisons arrived at UH after the scan and workshop. The structure of the department, however, has altered to such degree that the liaisons have the time and encouragement to focus more directly on outreach. Less time is spent on collection development and reference duties. In fact, reference service is now voluntary. A new marketing committee assists liaisons' outreach efforts with promotional materials and events. Outreach expectations are also clearly defined when new librarians are hired. The librarians have observed several changes and developments.

The Benefits of Waiting Patiently

A positive correlation was observed between the amount of time a librarian is assigned to a department and his or her level of response.

The scan seems to suggest it typically takes three years for the faculty to accept a librarian as part of its research team. Of the 17 librarians who served as academic department liaisons for two or fewer years at the time of the scan, 11 engaged in limited outreach (65%) and seven felt challenged by their relationship with a department liaison or chair (41%). These librarians appear hesitant to initiate contact with their departments and prefer to engage in much less direct contact than those who have served a department for three or more years. They also receive a much smaller response from the department, which may reinforce that reticence. The responses suggest that faculty members are reluctant to initiate work with their assigned librarians until they are confident librarians will be with the department for the long haul. Of the 16 librarians who served UH departments longer than two years, 10 received a high response (63%) and only two felt challenged by their department liaison or chair (13%). The most experienced liaison librarians have the luxury of receiving a high level of attention from their departments without having to initiate much contact. These librarians are often invited to participate in departmental events. Several are invited to attend social events with faculty members. Because they know the department faculty, staff



and students socially, interaction becomes very fluid, frequent and casual.

This suggests that faculty outreach is similar to other types of relationship building: it requires time to establish trust, respect and appreciation on both sides. Even a liaison's challenging first two years can, therefore, be viewed as productive because the relationship is developing in the background. This phenomenon also signals to library administrators the benefits of maintaining a stable workforce. Frequent changes in academic assignments and staff changes can lead to a less engaged user population, and also make the outreach assignment much more frustrating. Like many similar institutions, the library system at UH relies on librarians to take on smaller liaison assignments in addition to primary duties. It was typical for these additional assignments to be cycled amongst multiple librarians to avoid overstressing the staff. This practice, however, leads to a disengaged department unwilling to work with any of the librarians assigned to support them. The current trend, therefore, is to attempt longer commitments to every academic department.

The Effectiveness of Close Contact

While librarians adopted many outreach methods, the most effective one appears to be person-to-person contact. In their survey responses, librarians stressed the importance of appearing available and repeatedly reminding the department faculty and administrators of their presence. Successful methods adopted by UH librarians include attending department events and lectures, offering personalized orientation to new faculty members, participating in departmental orientations, and hosting office hours in the academic departments' facilities.

Since the scan and workshop, some librarians have elected to spend much more time inside their assigned departments. Some academic departments have given librarians office space in which to hold weekly office hours. Other librarians who could not acquire an assigned space simply sit in a public place within their college or department, armed with a laptop and a UH Libraries name badge as they engage the students around them. This practice offers more

opportunity for personal and customized interaction, as well as an opportunity to engage directly with students. At UH this practice has gradually expanded beyond academic departments to student services and other special campus groups that may benefit from collaboration with the library. For example, one of the social sciences librarians volunteered to serve as a liaison to the Athletics Center. The student athletes have a wide range of majors and they are typically not sophisticated library users. The librarian maintains regular office hours in the Athletics Center, helping these students find required readings and introducing them to online library services. This has helped lead to an unexpectedly strong partnership between the libraries and the Athletic Center. There are several other examples of close partnerships with student service departments that followed extensive relationship-building. The Women's Studies librarian hosts a summer reading club in the Women's Resource Center on campus. Another librarian liaises with the Center for Students with DisABILITIES that has allowed both departments to strengthen their support of disabled students with cross training. The LGBT Studies librarian now co-chairs the LGBT Resource Center's Advisory Board. These are a few examples of how close personal connections can lead to strong campus partnerships both in and outside academic departments.

The Importance of Finding Alternative Communication Channels

In 2007, one third of our librarians cited an indifferent or nonexistent departmental liaison as a primary hurdle. Nine librarians stated that their liaison work was significantly challenged by the inaccessibility of their assigned department due to its size, faculty turnover, a surfeit of online students, or a nonexistent departmental listserv.

An insufficient or non-existent communication channel is a significant barrier to outreach efforts. In the years since they conducted the scan, the authors have noticed that some of the librarians who reported communication problems have overcome that difficulty by building a different channel or fixing the existing one. Either approach requires creativity, constructiveness, persistence, and a willingness to be proactive.



Some problems cannot be solved quickly, but these challenges are good opportunities for librarians to experiment painlessly with new outreach techniques. For example, many of the librarians have intently focused their outreach efforts on new faculty members, introducing them not just to library resources, but to campus culture and a new city. Five years later, those new colleagues are becoming associate professors and some of them look upon the librarian who helped them early on as an equal and potential collaborator.

One librarian reported bringing “goodie bags” containing snacks, library information, and vendor giveaways to faculty and department offices. This allows her to continually meet new contacts in her assigned departments. Anecdotally, librarians report that repetitious activity is a key to success. Repetition helps librarians dealing with poor communication channels as well as new librarians who are often ignored by their departments.

Avoiding Cookie-cutter Outreach

Library middle managers and administrators also need to recognize and appreciate different research practices, teaching, and communication styles among the variety of academic disciplines and departments. The survey showed that librarians with limited success also tended to use exactly the same outreach strategy with different academic departments, even though the level of success they experienced with each department was very different. Over time, the more successful librarians adopt and devise different outreach approaches. While there is a tendency in many institutions to direct outreach with broad goals, library administrators should recognize the granularity of academic departments (both in their information needs and cultural values) and encourage outreach flexibility. While there continues to be some tension between broad system-wide goals and individual department needs, most UH liaisons have been able to customize outreach for their departments. More importantly, they have changed their expectations. Rather than becoming frustrated with a less responsive unit, most try not to expect uniform responses from their departments.

Conclusion

In today’s academic environment, with many activities and demands distracting library users, strategizing outreach efforts is essential. As with any relationship, it must be personal, communicative and evolving. In order to be effective, librarians working as department liaisons should be allowed to steer their own ship and respond to the granular demands and needs of their unique audiences. Because of online resources, faculty delivery services, and other modern conveniences, most professors no longer need to spend hours every week in the library. Liaisons, therefore, must go to the faculty to build partnerships, collaborate, and promote their services. At the University of Houston Libraries, mobility and flexibility nearly always lead to successful outreach.