Embedded librarians: one library’s model for decentralized service

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BACKGROUND

The Arizona Health Sciences Library (AHSL), housed in a building connected to the college of medicine, serves the colleges of medicine, pharmacy, nursing, and public health at the University of Arizona in Tucson, all in buildings located about 200 feet from each other around a large plaza. As in most other academic health sciences libraries, AHSL circulation and number of reference questions have been dropping [1, 2]. The building is used primarily by students to study, as faculty members rely on the library’s electronic collections to meet their information needs. Despite years of effort, the library was not integrated into the
curriculum of most of the colleges. One exception has occurred due to the participation of library staff in planning a new curriculum in the college of medicine.

In this environment, many in the library were concerned that both faculty and students were losing touch with the library and becoming less aware of library resources and services as time went by. The library leadership and many of the library faculty were aware of the informationist concept [3] and of the further development of this idea by the Medical Library Association’s Task Force on the Information Specialist in Context (ISIC) [4]. The library leadership believed that librarians, preferably with subject expertise, would best serve campus needs by interacting with the research and teaching faculty, rather than focusing on clinical support.

According to a recent review article by Rankin et al., the rationale for implementing the “traditional” informationist program “is the growing amount of biomedical information that challenges health care practitioners to stay current” [5]. In contrast, the Arizona program is more about maintaining contact with and providing basic services to a group of library users who have become distanced from the library. Perhaps “liaison librarian in context” would best describe the new program at the AHSL.

APPROACH

Seizing an opportunity that arose in 2002 when a new multidisciplinary research building (Bio5) was in the planning stages, the AHSL director approached the faculty member in charge of coordinating the research activities in the new Bio5 building. A plan was presented to place librarians from the AHSL and the Science and Engineering Library among researchers in the new building to provide information services on site. Given the multidisciplinary nature of the research (involving agriculture, medicine, pharmacy, basic science, and engineering), the librarians believed that researchers might find themselves outside their “comfort zones” when working at the intersection of two or more disciplines and that onsite librarians might be in a position to assist in literature searching or other information tasks. After the building was completed in 2007, an agreement was reached and several desks were provided in a connecting hallway between Bio5 and the Medical Research Building next door.

Before the building was opened, the idea of placing librarians among faculty and students was described at several meetings of the Library Advisory Committee. The associate dean for academic affairs at the college of public health heard the plans for Bio5 and asked if a librarian could be placed in the college. In April 2007, one AHSL librarian was assigned half-time to a desk in the Bio5 building and another was assigned half-time in the college of public health, where she was given an office on the faculty office floor. In the meantime, discussions were begun with the administration of the college of pharmacy. Late in 2007, a new library school graduate, who had done pre-pharmacy undergraduate work and was known to the pharmacy faculty, was hired to fill a library faculty vacancy. By December, this third on-site liaison librarian was at her desk half-time in the college of pharmacy. A fourth liaison librarian is now available every afternoon in a college of nursing office (see “Early Results”).

FUNDING

Shortly before a librarian was placed in the Bio5 building, a library task force had recommended merging the circulation and reference desks. The group further suggested that classified staff be trained to answer basic reference questions and that a librarian be on call if needed. This model was in place by the time the embedded liaison project got underway. No additional funding or positions were required. Librarians who had previously spent hours at the reference desk were available to work at remote locations. There has been no need to seek additional or replacement funding for these positions. In fact, keeping the librarians on the library payroll serves to reinforce the fact that the liaison service is a library activity and serves a common good. The only additional costs to the library were for laptop computers, telephone installation for some of the liaisons (if the college did not pick up the cost), and minimal office supplies.

EARLY RESULTS

After a full year in the college of public health, that liaison librarian is spending close to 95% of her time in the college. She serves on several faculty committees and grant teams, has provided literature searching to support 16 grant applications, and, working with faculty, regularly teaches information literacy components in 4 courses. She also provided 7 workshops during the first half of the fall 2008 semester. The workload has caused the AHSL to propose that another librarian spend half of her time in the college. This proposal was enthusiastically accepted, and a cubicle was made available for her exclusive use during the summer of 2008.

The college of pharmacy first provided its liaison librarian with a former storage space adjacent to the student lounge on the first floor, among classrooms. Pharmacy students arrived in large numbers in the student lounge at lunchtime, with little time to consult the librarian. With support from pharmacy faculty members, the librarian successfully petitioned the college for new space, a cubicle located on the faculty office floor, where faculty now drop by or schedule appointments with her for information consultations or consultations on grants, publications, and teaching. She now spends at least five hours a day in the college of pharmacy and the remainder of her day in the library, working primarily on information requests from pharmacy faculty and researchers.

At the suggestion of the dean, the library changed the program title from “College of Pharmacy Liaison
Librarian” to “PILS: Pharmacy Information Liaison Services.” The librarian is so busy that a second librarian now spends several hours a day in the library filling requests for literature searches and grant research. In less than a year, the pharmacy liaison has conducted more than forty student and more than thirty-five faculty consults, and in the spring and fall semesters of 2008, she provided thirty formal classes. Both librarians work closely with faculty in four pharmacy courses, designing information literacy components that are taught in the classroom.

In the spring of 2008, the library director met with the college of nursing administration and described how the program had worked in the other colleges. The dean enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to extend the program to her college. An office was identified, and the nursing liaison librarians began providing onsite service in the fall of 2008. Two librarians share the office hours, research, and teaching, allowing AHSL to provide these services with existing staff.

Librarians in all three colleges have standing invitations to faculty meetings and regularly attend them. By attending faculty meetings, they stay informed about possible opportunities for teaching and collaboration. The meetings also provide a forum where news from the library or reminders of existing services can be shared. Liaison librarians in the health sciences colleges are in great demand for teaching, grants research, publications support, faculty and student consultation, and work on college committees.

Liaisons hold drop-in sessions for students in the college computer classrooms, instead of library-based classes on database searching and information resources. They have developed specialized curriculum pages, aggregating information resources for students in each particular college. After discussion with library administration, college deans have agreed to seek out opportunities to include librarians, where appropriate, in future grant funding.

The library has rethought its approach to the researchers in the Bio5 building. After a year, the liaison found that the needs of these basic science researchers were significantly different from those of the faculty in pharmacy and public health. Although the liaison librarian provided instruction in the use of Reference Manager and a “get to know your colleagues” activity was very successful, there was little demand for the searching and information-finding skills provided by a professional librarian. The liaison librarian often heard from researchers that they wanted to do their own searching. Accordingly, the library relinquished its space in the building, and librarians based in the library now serve Bio5 scientists.

Given the distributed nature and number of departments in the college of medicine, it is not practical to place librarians in any one location. Instead, these librarians work with faculty and students of the college of medicine primarily through participation in the evidence-based medicine curriculum and in case-based instruction. However, as the library has focused attention on the college, literature searches for medicine have increased from 121 in 2007 to 247 in 2008.

CONCLUSION

Rankin et al. list factors in three broad areas that contribute to the success of an informationist program: organizational factors, programmatic characteristics, and service provider characteristics [5]. Although not an informationist program and aimed at the teaching faculty and those doing qualitative or social science research (often in public health) as well as clinicians and basic scientists, the success of the AHSL “liaison librarians in context” may be attributed to some of these same factors. Organizationally, each college had a champion, a dean or associate dean who was an initial contact and supporter. The library placed a priority on the project and supported each liaison with needed equipment (laptops, etc.). Some of the matching programmatic characteristics include a “consistent sustained effort” on the part of the liaisons and the library; visibility and marketing of the program (through attendance at faculty meetings, special marketing events, visits to classrooms, and efforts to meet faculty members); and the almost automatic feedback loop between the liaisons and those they serve and the liaisons and the library. Perhaps the most important factors for the AHSL program are the service provider characteristics. The liaisons have strong interpersonal skills and an understanding of the cultures of the organizations and disciplines. All have the master’s of library science degree or equivalent, and some have additional training (two have attended the “BioMedical Informatics Course” at Woods Hole). One of the liaisons for the college of medicine is a medical doctor, and the nursing liaison is a registered nurse. They are motivated and enthusiastic with a strong personal service orientation. The librarians with less experience are quickly improving their searching skills and their backgrounds in the subject areas to allow them to understand the environments in which they work.

The authors consider this service an unqualified success. Librarians and library services are being written into grants. Liaisons have been included in 8 college grant applications during the first year of the program, with more anticipated in the future. The library liaisons are being invited into virtual and campus classrooms on a regular basis, with teaching up 40% compared to the year before the liaison program. This year, with more liaison librarians deployed, literature search requests have more than doubled over the previous year. The liaisons are the library’s most successful marketing tool. Ongoing contact with the faculty gives them the opportunity both to learn about needs and gaps in service and to spread the word about the library’s capabilities. Most importantly, librarians are viewed as partners who can contribute significantly to the mission of the colleges and the university. Last semester, a faculty member,
striding down a hall in the college of pharmacy, waved to the liaison librarian and announced to visitors, “Let me introduce you to our librarian.”

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REFERENCES


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