

A Framework for Articulating New Library Roles

**Karen Williams, Associate University Librarian
for Academic Programs, University of Minnesota Libraries**

In the last decade, new technologies have fueled fundamental shifts in the behavior and expectations of students and faculty. Digital content abounds and new forms of information access are evolving, giving rise to changes in the ways scholars communicate and disseminate their research. Libraries, traditionally focused on the products of scholarship, are now prompted to understand and support the processes of scholarship. The University of Minnesota Libraries have been a player in this paradigm shift, and are deeply engaged in the teaching, learning, and research processes.

Over the past several years, themes of engagement, of “getting in the flow of users,”¹ whether in virtual or physical contexts, have shaped the University of Minnesota Libraries’ planning and activity. During this time, a shift in our vision and mission statements reflects the changing paradigm. Our current mission affirms that the library is no longer the center of the information universe; rather, its strategic advantage comes from a broader portfolio of assets: our expertise and value-added services have become paramount. The University Libraries have two roles: as leader in areas such as information literacy, copyright, and authors’ rights and as provider of extraordinary information experiences — that is, engaging fundamentally in the lives of students, scholars, and citizens to improve individual productivity and the achievement of their goals.²

Thinking at the system level is always important, but it becomes critical during times of significant change. Moving from a collection-centered model to an engagement-centered one does not happen overnight. Systems thinking affects how we revise goals and priorities and how we reevaluate the infrastructure in place. We cannot look at parts of the organization in isolation but must examine how the pieces support and reinforce each other. Systems thinking helps us to keep department goals and

position descriptions in alignment with institutional goals and hire the right staff. And, in turn we must develop staff education efforts to support new roles and implement appropriate performance evaluation systems. At the University of Minnesota we have been working for several years now to transform the roles of University Libraries' and reconceive essential infrastructure to support those roles.

A New Position Description Framework

The liaison model is still very powerful, with librarians possessing both subject expertise and strong knowledge of the interests, activities, and priorities of local faculty and academic departments. The ability to build strong relationships is critical for most of the identified new roles and is something that good liaisons have always done well. For the last three years, we have been engaged in reinventing the liaison model. Key to our process has been the Position Description Framework, a document that serves as the foundation for all librarian position descriptions. This framework redefines

...it is not unusual to find ourselves occupying and defining a new role at the same time.

traditional roles (the "holy trinity" of reference, instruction, and collection development mentioned elsewhere in this issue by Kara Whatley) and integrates the new roles that librarians increasingly find themselves occupying. A key challenge we face in this process is that it is not unusual to find

ourselves occupying and defining a new role at the same time. The Library Department Directors and I used an iterative process to create the framework. We wrote an initial draft, which was distributed to liaisons. Their comments and suggestions were then incorporated into the document. The Framework has evolved to encompasses ten areas:

- Campus Engagement
- Content/Collection Development and Management
- Teaching and Learning
- Scholarly Communication
- E-Scholarship and Digital Tools
- Reference/Help Services
- Outreach (to the local community)

- Fund Raising
- Exhibit and Event Planning, and
- Leadership

The ten elements of the Position Description Framework articulate ten key roles for liaisons. Each element poses different challenges for redefinition. Some are relatively well understood and involve broadening the role to a wider range of staff. For others there are internal or external models that can be applied. Other roles represent virgin territory where the organization must grapple with how to move into the terrain. Implementing the Framework has required somewhat different strategies for different areas. Some elements focus on improving individual skills while others call on staff to work collaboratively with colleagues, faculty, and other campus professionals in new ways.

Lest this seem overwhelming, note that not all of the roles require the same amount of time to fulfill. Two key liaison activities in fund raising, for example, are generating funding ideas for use by the development officer and the grant writer (who are not librarians) and spending time with potential and key donors. These are important, but not time consuming, activities.

As we develop a framework for new roles, we must be aware that even our more traditional roles are undergoing significant changes. The University of Minnesota has developed seven undergraduate student learning outcomes (SLOs) for all undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. While all seven could be library related, the second, *“can locate and critically evaluate information,”* clearly calls for our involvement. To reach our approximately 32,000 undergraduates, we need models that scale. The one-shot invited lecture, a staple in most librarians’ instructional toolkits, does not. We are challenged to engage with faculty (who are participating in the required course mapping for learning outcomes) in designing integrated learning experiences for students that will help them develop their skills over the course of their undergraduate careers. This partnership role is one very different from that of invited guest lecturer.

Support for Change

The Framework clarified and created a shared understanding of new roles, but developing the needed capabilities is a different challenge. The addition of

A Sample Element from the Position Description Framework: Scholarly Communication

Minnesota's Position Description Framework document offers explication for each of ten areas, with examples of activities that would commonly be included. For example:

Scholarly Communication

- Educate and inform faculty, graduate students, and campus administrators about scholarly communication issues. Examples include:
 - Helping faculty and graduate students to understand their rights as authors
 - Contributing content to Libraries' copyright and/or scholarly communication Web sites
- Advocate for sustainable models of scholarly communication.
- Work closely with faculty and students to understand their changing workflows and patterns of scholarly communication; assist in the development and creation of tools and services to facilitate scholarly communication.
- Recruit content for the University Digital Conservancy (Minnesota's institutional repository)

This new role was implemented through the Scholarly Communication Collaborative that was launched by the Libraries about three years ago. It provides a useful model of the processes, issues, and challenges that have arisen as each element in the framework was articulated and integrated into liaison work. The group, which consists of liaisons and other librarians from our Collection Development office, planned and executed a mini-immersion program with speakers, designed to give all librarians in the system a solid foundation in scholarly communication issues. They also engaged all liaisons in an extensive environmental scan.

The rich results included identification of campus faculty who serve as journal editors and officers in scholarly societies, analysis of campus tenure policies for their consideration of alternative publications, and identification of a number of champions. Several of these champions lent their photos and points-of-view to the newly created Transforming Scholarly Communication Web site. Liaisons also recruited content for the University Digital Conservancy prior to its launch, so the UDC went live with content representing a wide range of disciplinary areas. We also had strong liaison participation in the ARL New Model Publications Study last year.

new roles to liaison portfolios automatically raises the question of whether existing liaisons feel comfortable and competent in these roles. At the University of Minnesota Libraries, we engaged in a knowledge, skills, and abilities inventory that allowed individuals to identify areas where they felt they had expertise and areas where they needed to learn more. Results of the inventory were returned by department, not individual, so that liaisons would not feel constrained in their self-reporting. The results of the inventory are being used to guide staff education efforts. Each year, liaisons set individual goals as part of the performance evaluation process and are encouraged to write both stretch and learning goals. The performance evaluation process itself was revised several years ago to bring evaluations into alignment and more accurately reflect

the expectations and the roles of librarians. We have also created some specialized positions to support and extend the work of liaisons. Examples of this include the Information Literacy Coordinator, the Grants Coordinator, and the Media Outreach and Learning Spaces Librarian.

The institution has also supported working groups that investigate roles that are wholly new, like that of supporting e-scholarship. Our campus VP for Research, the CIO, and the University Librarian recently created a group called the Research Cyberinfrastructure Alliance and charged them with “exploring research infrastructure needs and evaluating models that might align existing and new resources for more robust and effective support.” Both liaison and technology librarians are working with this group and, to date, they have developed a conceptual map of cyberinfrastructure components. Going forward, they will be developing guiding principles, identifying resource requirements, documenting existing capacity, and evaluating budget models.

What Gives?

While roles for liaisons are expanding, the number of hours in a day is not. Like libraries everywhere, we face the inevitable question of what we stop doing in order to accommodate new demands on librarians’ time. We have done several things to address this so far. A process improvement project entitled “From Selection to Access” resulted in much streamlined ordering processes and a significant increase in the use of approval plans, freeing up liaison time. We have made a distinction between what patrons can expect from on-demand reference services (walk-in desks) and expert help services, available by appointment. We are consolidating service points and decreasing the amount of time that librarians spend at reference desks. These changes have helped, but there is more work to do in this arena.

Parting Thoughts

Libraries face an ever-changing landscape with no shortage of opportunities to enhance the research, teaching, and learning enterprise. We consider our Position Description Framework a living document that needs regular review for alignment with a constantly evolving environment; in fact, some areas mentioned above are the result of a very recent revision. This working document reflects one institution’s view of new roles for liaison librarians, but there are many others who are grappling with and outlining new roles as well. In a talk at

the ACRL 2009 conference entitled “Subject Librarian 2.0,” Jim Neal, University Librarian at Columbia University, outlined several new roles for libraries including intermediaries and aggregators, publishers, entrepreneurs, policy advocates, and research and development organizations. The other authors in this issue present their institutional experiences and discuss the new roles that their librarians have undertaken.

¹ Dempsey, Lorcan, “Reconfiguring the Library Systems Environment,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 8, no. 2 (2008): 111-120, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/portal_libraries_and_the_academy/v008/8.2dempsey.html.

² Excerpt from “The University of Minnesota Libraries: Changing the Paradigm,” the 2009 ACRL Excellence in Academic Libraries Award Nomination, <https://wiki.lib.umn.edu/wupl/Staff.HomePage/2009%20ACRL%20Award%20Application.pdf>.

© 2009 Karen Williams



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>.

To cite this article: Karen Williams. “A Framework for Articulating New Library Roles.” *Research Library Issues: A Bimonthly Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC*, no. 265 (August 2009): 3–8. <http://www.arl.org/resources/pubs/rli/archive/rli265.shtml>.