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### Becoming a Subject-Specialist Librarian

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## **Becoming a Subject-Specialist Librarian** **by Brenna K. Helmstutler**

Before pursuing my MLIS, I had a Master's degree in Counseling and eight years of experience in higher education. As I began applying for positions before graduating in December 2003, I knew that I wanted to work in academic libraries and that my experience would be an asset, but I questioned whether I would get to directly use my Counseling degree. Two months after graduation, I began work as a subject-specialist (liaison) librarian for Counseling & Psychological Services as well as 3 other related programs.

Many academic libraries use the liaison model, in which librarians are assigned to work with at least one academic department (in larger institutions, it may be several). Given that LIS graduates often have prior Master's degrees and/or substantial expertise in a particular field, this model is of substantial benefit to potential librarians, academic departments, and libraries alike.

### Advantages

The department has a point of contact in the library with specialized skills, knowledge, and abilities  
The liaison can market services to his or her academic department that can increase student and faculty library usage as well as skill level in using library resources  
In working closely with the academic department, there is increased support of curriculum and research needs  
Overall, it increases the level of organization within the library structure  
Responsibilities

Primary responsibilities include:

Selecting print and electronic resources for purchase.

Each fiscal year, an allotted budget is available for each subject area which the liaison utilizes for books, videos, or DVDs. There is typically a separate budget for journals. A collection development policy is created for each department stating guidelines for the areas of emphasis and collecting levels based on whether a program is at the bachelors, masters, or doctoral level. A faculty representative works with the liaison to regularly review the collection development policy and disseminate faculty requests for materials.

Evaluating the collection.

The collection must be regularly evaluated by the liaison to ensure that it is current and meets the needs of the academic department. De-selecting, or weeding, is part of this process. Criteria such as circulation statistics and publication date are used to determine whether a book is retained in the collection. Additionally, due to the high cost of subscriptions and budget restraints, the liaison and faculty or a committee which reviews serials often reviews journals for possible cancellation.

Providing library instruction for faculty and their classes.

The liaison provides instruction that can either be a general overview of library resources, or specific resources to assist with a research project, course, or degree program. Ideally, the session is conducted in a computer lab setting in which students get hands-on experience with locating and accessing the resources that are being discussed. This is one area that liaisons can use as a marketing tool to generate requests for faculty and student assistance.

Personalized library instruction or reference assistance for faculty and students.

Also known as an individual consultation, faculty or students from a particular department can meet with the liaison in the library. This may occur as a follow-up from a class instruction session, a new faculty member wanting a library orientation, or an initial research inquiry.

Liaisons may also have general duties such as working at the main reference desk or in an academic department, and responding to inquiries via e-mail or in a virtual reference service. Liaisons with faculty rank are expected to publish and participate in service activities such as committee work or conference presentations to support promotion to the next level, which is an ongoing responsibility.

As with any type of librarianship, it is essential for subject specialist librarians to keep up with current issues in librarianship, technology, and their subject areas. This can be done by joining listservs, which are geared towards a particular specialty within librarianship (i.e. EBSS-L, which is for Education and Behavioral Science Librarians), and reading journals.

Qualifications:

#### Professional

In addition to the usual library-related qualifications, candidates for liaison positions will ideally have either degrees or experience in the subject areas with which they would be working. However, some schools may not require this depending on the current workload and/or potential of the liaison to work in a certain area. For example, my degrees and experience fit well with my current position; but when I was hired, I was asked to take on an additional program in which I do not have direct experience.

Also, prior experience in working with faculty or in higher education in general can be very helpful in knowing the organizational structure and politics that are part of the overall institution and the academic library.

Strong skills in technology are crucial for any librarian, but for subject-specialist librarians, they are especially important. At Georgia State, liaisons create research guides for their programs that are attached to the main library website. The research guides contain comprehensive information on and links to resources (see the research guides link at the end of this article for an example). Several of the liaisons also contribute to blogs within their subject areas by posting resource information, links to articles, and library news.

#### Personal

Strong time management and organizational skills are a must, especially if you are responsible for more than one program. Keeping a current schedule with meetings, reference desk hours, class instruction, etc. will help greatly in making sure you are working in a timely manner and will alleviate stress and memory problems. At Georgia State, we use an email system which includes a calendar and options to enter schedules and send meeting requests to anyone within the university.

Good communication skills and assertiveness are also crucial. Because this job is so tied to the academic departments and the faculty, it is important to communicate with faculty regularly with relevant library information, reminders of important dates, or invitations to request instruction sessions. Because I am new to Georgia State, it has been extremely helpful in my first few months here to meet with the chairs and faculty of the departments with which I work. Your success as a liaison can be measured by how much business you generate in terms of instruction sessions, overall contact, and general requests for assistance from your departments, so it is important to establish good PR. For example, I recently distributed a flyer to the faculty in my areas to schedule library instruction sessions for the fall semester, and plan to follow up with an email in a few weeks.

#### Job Search

The websites with library job postings include a plethora of announcements for subject specialists offering great opportunities for those with corresponding degrees. If you don't have the exact qualifications listed in the posting but have related skills or experience, apply anyway. Design your

cover letter and resume to effectively market your value in relation to the specialized aspects of the position. Use background research to your advantage at this point: reviewing the websites of the institution, the library, and the academic departments connected to the position will allow you to get a feel for the mission, goals and needs of each. Intersperse this information appropriately in the cover letter as well as during the interview to demonstrate genuine interest and initiative.

At the interview stage, you will inevitably be asked to present on a topic relating to your position responsibilities during the full-day interview. As you develop your presentation, be sure to indicate not only your knowledge of the selected topic, but also provide concrete examples of your experience or coursework as appropriate, as it will serve as a constant reinforcement that you have what it takes to do the job well.

Immediately after the interview, send a thank-you letter, again emphasizing your strengths to impress on the interviewers why you should be hired over the other candidates.

Once you are hired as a subject-specialist librarian, you will reap the benefits of working with academic departments in this capacity, and find your work simultaneously challenging and rewarding.

About the Author:

Brenna Helmstutler is an Education and Public Health Liaison/Reference Librarian at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia. View her research guides at <http://www.library.gsu.edu/people/bhelmstutler>.

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