

TAILor-made: The Enhancing of a Liaison Program to Meet the Needs of Veterinary Clinicians and Researchers

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INTRODUCTION

In 1998, the University of Florida Health Science Center Libraries (HSCL) initiated a formal liaison program to better meet the needs of library users in the six Health Science Center colleges; Dentistry, Health Professions, Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, and Veterinary Medicine. As the program developed, responsibilities in diverse colleges were subdivided between two liaisons, one serving the researchers in the basic sciences and one serving the clinicians. This became particularly defined in the services to the College of Veterinary Medicine (COVM).

BACKGROUND

Library liaison programs have been shown to promote communication with library users, facilitate patron needs assessments, and improve library services (Schloman et. al. 1989, Wu et. al. 1994). A formal liaison program was developed in 1998 as part of the HSCL's Strategic Planning Initiative (Johnson et. al. 1997). This formal program followed earlier efforts in which HSCL librarians served on Curriculum Committees to certain colleges (Frances and Fisher, 1997). At the start of the program, librarians were assigned to a college by matching their background, interest and previous college connections. A Library Liaison Program (LLP) workgroup was established to create a philosophy and activities for liaisons to follow.

Two of the first products of this committee were the "HSCL Liaison Program Philosophy" and seven focal areas on which the program would concentrate. The philosophy of the program set the guiding standard for the liaisons. The seven focal areas determined for the program included Communication, Collection Development, Education, User Services, Information Access, Library Liaison Program Evaluation and Liaison Librarian Development and are outlined as guidelines and goals for liaison services (Tennant et. al., in prep).

GENERAL LIAISON SERVICES

It was felt that specialization of services would lead to competence, better service, and confidence (both the librarians in themselves and the patrons in the librarians). As developed in the Library Liaison Program, general liaison services included teaching classes for a liaison's particular college, sending e-mail announcements, and involving college faculty in collection development.

There are several advantages to teaching the classes of an individual college, including consistency among multiple sessions and a strong comfort level among the students who know the instructor will be the same. Additionally, teaching fewer different classes (e.g., veterinary liaisons not needing to teach dental students) allows liaisons to specialize in subject-specific databases, and to become more proficient in those databases. Even when the number of sessions needed to cover a particular class was more than one librarian could teach, the liaison librarian would be the one to create the materials for the class and design the layout for others to follow.

Electronic mail is the primary means of communication between the liaison librarians and their users. Librarians use lists established by the college or create their own for faculty, staff and students in different departments. Since librarians began using e-mail to communicate with their users, we have noticed a significant increase in class registration, user participation in

library related issues and the sense that users find their librarian more accessible for questions, comments, etc.

E-mail has also made involving the faculty in the collection development process easier. Liaison librarians can fashion messages to their user's particular fields and this customization seems to facilitate interest by users, because they do not have to filter through information that does not pertain to them.

DEVELOPMENT OF BASIC SCIENCE/CLINICAL DIVISIONS

Once liaisons were assigned it became apparent that researchers and clinicians, even those in the same college, had very different information needs (Tennant et. al. 1999). The clinicians need to access information on particular diseases, disorders and their treatment quickly and concisely, as the subject of their information search (the patient) is usually in the clinic or presently being treated. The basic scientists have more in-depth information needs. This usually means complete coverage of a topic, requiring more resources, a greater range of available years and comprehensive search skills. With this in mind, liaison duties to both the College of Medicine and the College of Veterinary Medicine were divided between two librarians; one who covered the basic science departments and one who covered the clinical science departments.

The College of Veterinary Medicine had a fairly clear distinction between its departments. There are four departments, two clinical and two basic science. The clinical departments are Small Animal Clinical Sciences (SACS) and Large Animal Clinical Sciences (LACS). The basic science departments are Physiological Sciences and Pathobiology. The liaison responsibilities were easily assigned for the COVM. The two basic science departments were assigned to an HSCL librarian with a Ph.D. in Biology and a strong interest in research. This basic sciences liaison also serves the Ph.D. and M.S. students. The two clinical science departments fell to a

new librarian with a clinical background in Veterinary Medicine and a strong interest in the field. This liaison also works with the D.V.M. students and current residents. There is, of course, some overlap between the basic and clinical departments (e.g. some Ph.D. research students are actually enrolled in the Small Animal Clinical Sciences department; some clinical residents are actually in the basic science departments). Therefore, liaison librarians meet regularly to keep each other on track and be sure they are meeting their users' needs in a thorough and consistent manner. Communication between the two liaisons is crucial.

In the area of instruction, the liaison librarians have tailored their services to meet the very different needs of the departments. In the fall of 1999, the basic sciences liaison developed a four-day training module that would adequately cover the skills incoming research students would need to learn. The clinicians, with their constrained schedules, require a single shot instruction session and this is what the clinical science liaison developed for the incoming D.V.M. students and residents. Databases and search examples are targeted to be relevant to the particular clinician or researcher and are introduced in these sessions. Databases taught to the researchers may include MEDLINE, CAB, GenBank and Web of Science while the clinicians may focus on MEDLINE, CAB, PubMed's Clinical Queries and Internet resources.

In addition to course-integrated classes and orientations for incoming students, the liaison librarians have been providing several "stand-alone" database classes at the Veterinary Medicine Reading Room. These include subject-specific classes of interest to veterinary medicine (CAB, Biological Abstracts, Zoological Record, Veterinary Web Resources) as well as those that cover a wider range of topics (PubMed, Current Contents Connect, Web of Science, Genetic Resources for Researchers).

EVALUATION OF SERVICES TO THE COLLEGE OF VETERINARY MEDICINE

A continual process of evaluation is required to ensure the changing needs of the patrons are being met. One method is to have evaluation forms filled out by students at the end of the instructional sessions. The forms consist of simple questions on how clear their understanding of the different sections are. We use these to adjust the time, pace and coverage for the next time.

Peer review of instructional sessions is also a valuable method of evaluation. A colleague will sit in on the session and evaluate the instructor and take note of how the students respond to their teaching methods. The two then meet after the session to discuss the performance's strengths and weaknesses. A formal peer evaluation program was started at the HSCL in the fall of 1999.

Specifically for the College of Veterinary Medicine, an e-mail survey was sent out in the spring of 1999 to determine user awareness of the liaison services available to them. This "Liaison Awareness" survey asked whether the user knew they had a liaison librarian and if so, what liaison services they had used in the past. The results were disappointingly low with only 25% of the users being aware of this special librarian. One interesting discovery was that the term used in the survey, "Library Liaison", was confusing for the patrons. Through this instrument, we found that users thought that "Library Liaisons" were individuals from the academic department who liaised to the library. We immediately altered the vocabulary in the entire LLP and began referring to the liaisons as "Liaison Librarians". This distinction seems to have greatly altered our users' perceptions.

Still, with such low user awareness, the liaisons felt immediate measures should be taken to improve their visibility. The name change to "Liaison Librarian" was one method. They also became more conscious of distinguishing themselves in all communication, particularly e-mail.

Another hurdle was the fact that the COVM is located approximately one mile from the other HSC colleges and the main library. This facility does have a Reading Room, which the library administers, but is staffed only by library paraprofessionals. A pilot study was initiated in the fall of 1999 in which the two liaison librarians would take turns spending 2 hours a week in the Reading Room. The pilot study has been widely publicized via e-mail distribution list to faculty, staff and students in the College of Veterinary Medicine. The liaison librarians are keeping usage/contact statistics, as well as learning the Reading Room collection and informally surveying such attributes as layout. It is expected that this pilot program will increase liaison visibility, facilitate communication with patrons, and allow the liaisons to assess user needs. In May 2000, use statistics of liaison librarian services at the Veterinary Medicine Reading Room will be compared to the statistics for liaison services that are provided to patrons from liaisons' offices (e-mail, phone, mail, in person visits). These comparisons will help determine whether a librarian continues to visit the reading room.

As reported above, the summer 1999 "Liaison Awareness" survey results indicated that most students and faculty in the College of Veterinary Medicine were not aware that liaison librarians had been assigned to the COVM. Additionally, there was little awareness as to what these liaisons could do for the library users. At the end of April 2000, following two semesters of liaison librarian visits to the Reading Room and extensive contact with users via e-mail distribution lists, liaisons will once again survey students, staff and faculty about their awareness and use of liaison services. It is predicted that the survey results will be quite different this time around, with both awareness and usage increasing.

SUMMARY:

To better serve the students, staff and faculty of the University of Florida Health Science Center, the HSC Library initiated a formal liaison program during 1998. The expected benefits of liaison subject specialization included increased competence and confidence in these areas and development of closer relationships and communication with library users, thus resulting in better needs assessment and service. For the College of Veterinary Medicine, two liaison librarians were assigned; one to deal primarily with clinicians and the other to serve the needs of the basic science researchers.

Although the liaison program was widely advertised and liaisons introduced to users via e-mail, the 1999 "Liaison Awareness" survey demonstrated the disappointing fact that COVM users were not aware of the liaisons. In an effort to rectify the situation, liaisons became more pronounced in their efforts to market their services, involve patrons in decisions including collection development, and to teach more classes at the distantly located Veterinary Medicine Reading Room. Additionally, a pilot program was initiated with the liaison librarians serving two hours a week at the reading room. Analysis of use statistics from the program, as well as a follow-up "Liaison Awareness" survey, will shed light on whether these increased efforts have paid off for the HSCL and its users.

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