



Social Capital as Operative in Liaison Librarianship: Librarian Participants' Experiences of Faculty Engagement as Academic Library Liaisons



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the foundational concepts of social capital as operative in liaison librarianship. Participants were interviewed and asked a series of open-ended questions aimed at soliciting responses about the foundational aspects in question, including motivations to engage, trust, trustworthiness, shared values, relationship dynamics, influence, and network growth. The focus of the analysis is the interviewee's responses and statements about their own personal interaction with faculty as well as their reflections on their relationships. Responses were categorized and coded as *shared commitment*, *interrelational dynamics*, and *network positionality*. The findings raise intriguing dynamics for liaison librarianship in the 21st century as academic libraries are challenged to broaden their reach and services and demonstrate increasing return on investment.

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“Certainly with the deeper relationships (with faculty), there is a connection to our personal lives and more holistic selves. That certainly is the case with those I have a deeper relationship with. [...] When I became a librarian, I did not foresee that role but as the library walls have collapsed there's just more and more of that kind of thing on the horizon.”

–Study Participant.

INTRODUCTION

Engagement is a popular concept in higher education in the 21st century. It features prominently in a number of vision/mission statements, strategic plans, broad conference themes, and sundry other arenas such as scholarly publishing and pedagogical training. In the academic library realm, student engagement remains a perennial favorite of those publishing in the field. Intellectual inquiry spans a broad range, from the role of the academic library in student engagement (Kuh & Gonyea, 2003; Snavely, 2012), the role of the library and its services in the academic community (Cho, 2011; Denda, 2013; Diaz, 2014; Salinero & Beardley, 2009; Sidorko & Yang, 2011; Stamatoplos, 2009), space considerations (Bennett & Bodnar, 2010; Chan & Wong, 2013), to the role of literacies, pedagogies, and curricula in engagement (Denda, 2015; Gibson, 2006; Jankowska, Smith, & Buehler, 2014; Klipfel, 2014; Mayer & Bowles-Terry, 2013). Student engagement is often the focus and is typically posited as a form of engagement between library/librarian and student. Seldom considered is the role that the librarian–faculty engagement

plays in student engagement and learning. Liaison librarianship is an ideal vehicle for investigating the ways in which librarians engage faculty. Faculty engagement is oftentimes a necessary component of student engagement since the delivery of literacy services often occurs in a faculty-mediated environment. Through qualitative inquiry, this study seeks to address the dimensions, foundational elements, and overall character of US liaison librarian–faculty relationships as reported by liaisons actively working in the field of academic librarianship.

Scholarly inquiry into academic liaison librarianship often focuses on the activities that take place in a liaison relationship as well as the importance of and satisfaction with aspects of the liaison service. As a result, a number of insights have emerged over the past two decades about the ways liaison programs function, the needs and desires that faculty have, and the mis/matches that characterize faculty–librarian liaison relationships. Yang (2000), for example, surveys the importance of various services to faculty as well as any perceived improvement thanks to the liaison's efforts. Librarians have a different level of understanding of liaison outputs from faculty, as Arendt and Lotts (2012) discovered, where faculty indicate they are interested in enhanced communication from the library, which was not prioritized to the same extent by librarians. Mismatches between library liaison and faculty member in terms of understanding and expectations are a relatively common finding that serve as a reminder that many aspects of faculty–librarian relationships still remain unstudied (Christiansen, Stomblor, & Thaxton, 2004) or misunderstood. Largely missing is a qualitative consideration of the interrelational dynamics inherent in liaison activities that also contextualizes the contours of liaison–faculty relationships.

One possible lens for investigating the dynamics and factors that help to contextualize faculty–librarian relationships as defined through liaison work is to apply an external framework to the viewpoints of those most active in the relationships themselves. Social capital as a practical and operative concept is an under-researched concept in the literature of academic libraries but presents a useful paradigm for exploring the often amorphous and sometimes invisible nature of the individual relationships that partly constitute a successful liaison program. The library, nonetheless, is a place for the enhancement of social capital through the gathering and sharing of messages and ideas (Lehto, Toivonen, & Iivonen, 2012). The emphasis on social capital relocates the locus of services from what is provided to how it is provided. Practitioners writing about liaison activities explain liaison librarianship at its most basic: “Library liaisons must initiate, establish, and promote their relationships with faculty members in the departments they are assigned to assist” (Moniz, Henry, & Eshleman, 2014, p. 35).

Gibson and Coniglio (2011) take this one step further and posit the liaison librarian as the change agent *par excellence* in situating the library in its 21st century role:

Repositioning the academic library within scholarly workflows, research practices, and application of new knowledge in the curriculum and with the institution's varied constituencies is the path to engagement for the library. The entire library organization will need to change to chart this path into this integrative role, but subject specialists or liaison librarians will be the key change agents in shaping this new role for academic libraries (p. 95).

Liaison work in this model becomes more than simply relating information. The library and librarians are required to become “diffuse agent[s] within the scholarly community” (Lougee, 2002, p. 4). A discourse is needed to give shape to the ways in which librarians advance the library's mission and how they go about instantiating themselves into the life of a scholarly community as well as how they exist in relation to others. The aim of this article is to discover whether the theory of social capital is useful for exploring the relationship dynamics behind liaison librarianship. The intent is to illuminate the experiences of successful liaison librarians that relate to social capital and to push the investigation of work-related interpersonal factors into this under-explored domain. Yet the recent exhortations of the preceding authors indicate that a model of faculty engagement that describes the constituent elements of liaison–faculty relationships is required for academic librarians in the 21st century. This study presents a dispersed but highly contextualized paradigm that represents a new way of looking at faculty–librarian interactions.

Charting the social capital landscape as it applies to liaison relationships may hold implications for academic librarians and administrators who seek organic ways of promoting stronger ties to the faculty, increasing the level and quality of engagement with faculty, and thereby enhancing the contact and engagement with students. In addition, this research discusses the level of engagement a liaison has in a given faculty network. The framework that emerges from this study should prove valuable in situating social capital as a unifying concept that ties together previously unconnected strains of the liaison literature, including trust, shared meaning, faculty–librarian collaborations and relations, intellectual capital, and discussions of skills and competencies. As one of a handful of studies on liaison librarianship to present data collected from the field rather than amassed out of other scholarly articles, this paper takes an innovative approach to the areas of faculty–librarian relationships long recognized as understudied (Phelps & Campbell, 2012).

BACKGROUND

This article seeks to bring together social capital and liaison relationships in ways that permit the interrogation of previously invisible or

unspoken aspects of a liaison's interactions with faculty. The overall focus is on the individual's experience rather than on the broader social unit. This paper is the first in a series that will eventually arrive at the social unit level of librarian–faculty interaction. The second paper will reproduce this research from the faculty member's perspective, and the third will bring the two perspectives into a coherent whole presenting a broader focus on social capital as a group phenomenon as well. Note that the use of the term ‘liaison’ in this paper signals the librarian and not a faculty member. While this is likely standard practice at many institutions, there was some lack of certainty throughout the research process that needed to be clarified as the project progressed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research questions were tentatively stated at the outset; and these focused on what is exchanged in a relationship, motivations for liaison work, and the balance in faculty–librarian relationships. As is often the case in qualitative research, the research questions were refined during data analysis to focus broadly on the personal aspects of relationships, networks, and communications (Dey, 1993). The categories that emerged out of the data review were *shared commitment*, *network positionality*, and *interrelational dynamics* (see “Methods” below as well as Appendix A).

The initial research questions were open-ended and focused on generalizations and social capital that seemed reasonable to the director of a medium-sized library. They included:

- How is social capital configured in librarian–faculty relationships?
- What are librarians and faculty members contributing to their relationships? What is the capital that is exchanged between librarian and faculty member? What does that exchange look like?
- Are trust, trustworthiness, and shared meaning important aspects of liaison librarianships?

Rather than attempting to quantify some dimension of social capital, this study seeks out individual librarians' perspectives on their roles within a liaison network or faculty community where engagement is critical and situates the librarian in relation to: 1) the structural dimension of social capital, including network formation; 2) the relational dimension, including trust, trustworthiness, and shared values; and 3) the communication dimension, including patterns of communication emerging out of liaison programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

LIAISON-FOCUSED LITERATURE

The literature on liaison librarianship is fairly extensive, ranging from published monographs, surveys, and journal articles to white papers and extended reports in magazines. The scholarly focus is likewise diverse but predominantly emphasizes individual instances of faculty–librarian collaborations, evolving liaison skills and competencies, the evaluation of liaison activities, and re/structuring or modeling of programs. To a much lesser degree, the relationships themselves and relationship building are the topic of investigation. As this inquiry is targeted at relationship building and strengthening, librarian–faculty dynamics drive and organize the review that follows.

While Jaguszewski and Williams (2013) are the latest to emphasize the “capacity to cultivate trusted relationships with faculty and others,” several others have noted the importance in previous work (p. 14). Phelps and Campbell (2012) present a systematic review of trust and commitment in liaison relationships as gleaned from 13 articles that are not explicitly about trust but rather other aspects of liaison work. They find that trust and commitment are essential in cooperation in almost all the articles and that trust and commitment may enable faculty

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