INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The University of Florida’s Health Science Center Libraries (HSCL) serve more than 12,000 faculty, students, staff, and administrators distributed among 6 colleges (dentistry, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, public health and health professions, and veterinary medicine) as well as associated centers and institutes (i.e., the Institute on Aging and the University of Florida Shands Cancer Center). Clients from other campus colleges such as liberal arts and sciences and agricultural and life sciences are patrons as well.

The original library liaison program began at the Gainesville campus in the spring of 1999 as an outcome of strategic planning. Developed by a work group appointed in January 1998, this program was based on fifty-two potential liaison activities in seven focal areas and aimed to increase communication with clients and to customize services [1]. To increase their effectiveness, liaison librarians would focus on the subject matter of a limited number of disciplines, and clients would have one contact person with whom they could form a more personalized relationship [2]. Liaison librarians volunteered for, or were assigned to, specific colleges or departments based on their knowledge, skills, and interests. Each served as a “personal” librarian to local and distance education clients with activities tied to the seven focal areas.

Individual librarians were assigned to the smaller University of Florida Health Science Center (HSC) Colleges of Nursing, Dentistry, Pharmacy, and Veterinary Medicine. The other librarians served departments in the two larger or more diverse colleges: medicine and public health and health professions. Ongoing program evaluations to address issues and challenges were planned.

By 2001, 9 liaison librarian positions were funded by the HSCL and 2 were financed by other HSC units (the college of nursing and the Genetics Institute). The 9 library-funded individuals served as liaison librarians at least part-time. While the 2 unit-funded liaison librarians performed the same liaison duties as the other librarians, they provided additional services...
requested by their units. In 2003/04, a formal evaluation of the HSCL liaison librarian program was undertaken with 2 surveys, one for patrons and the other for liaison librarians, which provided information on the use and perceptions of the program’s services and related issues. Further information was solicited from liaison librarians in 2 follow-up emails. Of the total 323 faculty and students who participated, 85.4% supported continuing the liaison librarian program [3]. However, the liaison librarian survey revealed some perceived barriers to the effective execution of liaison activities. In particular, the librarians expressed a need for a more structured approach to the program, more clearly defined expectations for their performance, and a formalized plan for training [4, 5].

Additional challenges arose to compound these issues. In the following months, two librarians retired, another took a year-long sabbatical, one left for a six-month maternity leave sooner than planned, and eventually took a position elsewhere, and a fifth librarian took an unexpected, extended medical leave. As a result, in October of 2005, liaison librarians met to discuss the evolution of the liaison librarian program, reassignment of liaison librarians to departments and colleges as staffing changes occurred, and issues that were identified in the evaluations of the liaison librarian program. This meeting resulted in the codified, levels-of-service document shown in Table 1.

The document categorizes possible services into a graduated list of those duties that liaison librarians are expected to perform: basic services that can be offered based on patrons’ needs and willingness to participate, elective services based on client requirements and librarians’ time constraints, and an outline of possible activities that may be performed only by unit-funded liaison librarians. It can serve a number of purposes including aiding liaison librarians when they set priorities, affording official sanction when deciding to accept or decline a client request, reminding library administrators that they should consult with liaison librarians before embracing new client initiatives, and assisting in the planning process when services need to be suspended during staffing or budgeting fluctuations. During the creation process, some liaison librarians expressed concern about inequality in the services provided to some academic units covered by library-funded liaison librarians. All liaison librarians finally agreed that use of the tiers document would address this issue.

**THE DOCUMENT**

The list of tasks was developed using three sources: clients’ expressed needs, the fifty-two potential activities identified in the earlier evaluation [3], and activities that liaison librarians were currently performing. Inclusion in the list was also determined by task characteristics: Which activities provided better visibility for the library? How much time was required in preparing for and performing the tasks? Were some services being offered based simply on librarians’ perception of need? For example, stand-
alone bibliographic instruction classes were still being taught although attendance had sharply declined.

Four levels of service have been identified and codified. Table 1 illustrates types of liaison librarian activities for each level of service. The activities outlined in level one are informational and skill building in nature and are expected of all liaison librarians. This first level of services requires the librarian to initiate and maintain communication with clients regarding library services, news, and issues; develop sufficient knowledge about the units in order to advocate for specific resources; and become familiar with the assigned subject areas.

Activities outlined in level two, basic services, are provided based on clients’ needs and willingness to utilize a service or include a liaison librarian in an academic activity. For example, a liaison librarian cannot perform mediated searches, provide course-integrated instruction, or serve on college or departmental curriculum committees without client buy-in. Thus, the majority of these services are not required of liaison librarians unless clients request or agree to them.

Level three, discretionary services, consists of more time-consuming and subject-specific services that are provided at the discretion of the liaison librarian, based on the librarian’s experience and available time. This level gives the librarian the most latitude for making service decisions and the authority to accept or decline the client’s request.

Level four consists of those services that may be performed only by unit-funded liaison librarians. Because those librarians accommodate virtually all their academic units’ requests, the list of these services is open to future additions. The activities are often nontraditional librarian services, for example, planning seminars or designing academic websites.

Since its adoption, the document has proved useful in a number of instances. Several of the HSC colleges with distance education programs have occasionally asked a liaison librarian to travel to offsite locations to teach. In the past, there has been tension between liaison librarians and library administrators concerning time allowed to travel and library compensation for travel. During the creation of the tiers document, librarians negotiated with library administration to resolve the situation. Today, if liaison librarians have the time and library obligations are met, they may travel to distant sites to teach, provided that the academic units are willing to compensate travel costs.

A second example concerns grading library-related student assignments. While such grading is extremely time consuming, the librarians were reluctant to give up this opportunity as it highlights liaison visibility and partnerships with HSC faculty in the educational mission of the university [6, 7]. The existence of the tiers document gives liaison librarians the freedom to negotiate with faculty and to explore various methods of grading. The use of e-learning computer grading now saves one liaison librarian more than forty hours each semester.

The liaison librarian can also use the tiers as a guide for professional growth and a tangible measurement of accomplishment. For example, meeting the requirements of level one strengthens the librarian’s knowledge and skills in the assigned subject areas. The tiers document affords individuals the freedom to progress at their chosen pace to gain confidence and expertise. When presented with exciting opportunities, such as collaborating with clients for research and publication, librarians can gauge whether or not they have the required proficiency and time to participate. The tiers document provides the sanction for these decisions.

DISCUSSION

The liaison librarian tiers document has a number of potential advantages. A clearly articulated list of expected activities can help guide liaison librarians in their work. It also protects library-funded liaison librarians by providing authority to decline requests for level-four services, such as obtaining copyright permissions or providing document delivery for faculty.

Such a list could offer direction in prioritizing duties during times of budgetary and staffing shortages. Using the levels as a ‘pricing guide’ would facilitate the pursuit of financial assistance from colleges to fund additional unit-based liaison librarian positions and aid in designing appropriate job descriptions for those positions.

On the other hand, strict application of such a document might prove detrimental. If an academic unit could not afford to fund its own liaison librarian yet required only level-four services, the unit’s request would have to be refused. This could cause harm on several levels. Restricting services could limit the librarian’s opportunity for professional growth and desire to respond to client needs and could undermine the library’s relationship with the unit and ultimately dilute the overall positive impact of the liaison program. While fairness seems to demand equal services, the makeup and changing needs of diverse academic units certainly require individual, personalized, and nonidentical services [4].

In 2007/08, the University of Florida underwent extreme budget cuts. Funding for three open HSCC librarian positions was eliminated. Given what will almost certainly be permanent staff reductions and the continued growth of the client base, the viability of the liaison librarian program in its present form is uncertain. A new HSCL strategic plan is being formulated, and the librarians are exploring ways in which the liaison program can evolve to meet ongoing challenges and opportunities. A future survey of the liaison librarians is being planned to determine if they have used the liaison librarian tiers document, particularly if they have found it helpful in deciding whether to accept or deny services.

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