Library-Faculty Relations – Gaps and Bridges:
Connecting within our Communities

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The Context

In the world of academic librarianship, the tricky issue of librarian/faculty relations looms large. I am now one of a legion of librarians who have tried, or are trying, to dissect this beast, diagnose the problem and prescribe a cure. And I do think we need a cure, not an analgesic – though the cure will take time and tenacity.

In discussing this with a colleague, I shared thoughts from an article addressing the issue from a sociological perspective. The authors say (and I'm paraphrasing here) that while there's mutual respect between faculty and librarians in terms of expertise in their respective fields, there's a disconnection between them. Faculty doesn't fully understand librarians' work and its scope, so the faculty sees librarians as *service providers,* in a subordinate role. Librarians are preoccupied with this and view it as a problem. And now I'm quoting: "In striking contrast to the perspective of librarians, faculty perceives no serious problems in relations between the two groups, nor do they identify any negative consequences arising from this disconnection" (Christiansen, Stombler and Thaxton, 118).

In other words, it just doesn't concern them.

Summing up, I said to my colleague: "So we're like jilted lovers."

She retorted, "We can't be jilted if we were never actually in a relationship!"

I conceded. It really is more like standing at the edge of the dance floor without faculty names on our dance cards.

Of course I'm exaggerating. I know there are many excellent relationships between faculty members and librarians, and many examples of positive and fruitful results arising from them. That said, I know many librarians who are not where they want to be in this particular relationship domain.

Before continuing, and to set a further context for this talk, I want to question strongly – if not completely discard – two common perceptions. Perceptions which, I believe, get in the way of healthy, vigorous and productive relationships between faculty and librarians.   Perceptions that ostensibly demonstrate how librarians are *different* from faculty.

Perception one: Most librarians are not trained as teachers.
Neither are faculty members. This is not to say the nature of our teaching is exactly the same as that of faculty, but we do share the challenge of translating a deep, unique area of knowledge and expertise to students – most often without benefit of rigorous pedagogical training.

Perception two: Librarians are service providers.
So are faculty members. At least when it comes to students. While our respective jobs do have distinguishing elements, to my mind this is not one of them. Service is not a "bad" word, but it is one we librarians must ease out of our lexicon as a defining characteristic that *distinguishes* us from faculty.

Librarians do, indeed, support faculty in a way that faculty does not support librarians. But with our service-provision perspective – in an academic environment increasingly yoked to a business paradigm – librarians run the risk of applying to faculty those ubiquitous C-words: client and customer.

Which makes librarians… what?

Language is important. I am interested in working toward a language that arises from a culture where librarians and faculty members consider each other as (here are two *different* C-words) colleagues and collaborators in both teaching and research.

For the duration of this talk, I would like us to engage in something radical. I would like us to take complete responsibility for any and all gaps that exist between librarians and faculty. Here's why: Doubtless you know of the plethora of literature discussing

librarians' perceptions of faculty, and faculty's perceptions of librarians, and librarians' perceptions of faculty's perceptions of librarians, and so on (and on).[1]

Maureen Nimon, from the University of South Australia, makes this apt statement: "Frequently advocates attribute their lack of success in achieving the required response in their audience to failures on the part of the targets of the message, rather than any insensitivity on their part to the views of those targets" (21). At a certain point, librarians just need to get on with it. I believe we've reached that point.

The Exploration

In Fall 2006, the University of Guelph Library asked me to take on a special project – essentially, to explore ways in which the Library might augment and improve its support for research and teaching across disciplines. This included strengthening our relationships with faculty, looking at potential collection and program enhancements, and unearthing opportunities for greater Library collaboration with campus people and departments.

As much as possible, I embarked on this journey without a fixed agenda. I realized that I didn't know enough to set one. It would have been folly, for example, to conduct surveys and focus groups at early stage. Instead, I decided to meet with people individually – people who were willing to engage in *exploratory* conversations, and who had some link to the spirit of the project. That meant faculty (including Deans and Associate Deans), the university's educational development unit, and its information technology unit (which, at the University of Guelph, is a sister to the Library under the auspices of the Chief Information Officer). I talked to people from the union that represents faculty (of which librarians are members). I consulted my Library colleagues (librarians, Learning Commons staff, the e-learning unit). I also consulted with people from other universities. To date, I have talked formally with nearly fifty people and

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[1] For example, see: Bruce, 2001; Cunningham and Lanning, 2002; Doskatch, 2003; Ducas and Michaud-Oystryk, 2003; Feldman and Sciammarella, 2000; Ivey, 2003; Kotter, 1999; Stebelman et al, 1999; Stubley, 2006.

informally with many more. I have attended workshops and conferences related to academic teaching. And I have mined the literature on libraries and library-faculty relations.

What questions did I ask in the one-to-one meetings? It would be almost true to say: "I didn't." Almost, because questions did arise of course, but chiefly from what the interviewee said. In the main, I just set the stage and asked people to comment. And comment they did. Without exception, each interviewee brought a new lens to the topic at hand and unearthed variables I would not have thought of otherwise.   I didn't stop people from going off on what might be considered tangents. They were free to discuss whatever was their greatest passion or delight, deepest concern or perplexity, or most pressing issue or suggestion.

This process has been invaluable. Here are some reasons why:

- I have learned things that I doubt could have been discovered in any other way. Asking someone to complete a survey or participate in a focus group is not the same as inviting someone to share their thoughts and perspectives in the privacy of their office.
- That privacy, and relatively unstructured format, allowed *me* a freedom as well – to follow up on new or unexpected ideas, to take the time to dig deeper.
- As my own knowledge and understanding grew from one conversation to the next, I was able to make more and more connections between ideas and concepts and – over time – between people.
- I now have a better grasp on the kinds of questions to ask in a survey or focus group.
- I was able to respond to individuals' expressed needs either by referring them to their liaison librarian or by following up myself.
- I built relationships.

A Few Conundrums

As I mentioned earlier, the faculty/librarian relationship issue has been around a very long time. Currently, there is something peculiar afoot that exacerbates the problem: the thing we have given faculty, which pleases them most, is the thing that is making the problem worse.

Of course I'm referring to technology.

Faculty is over the moon about electronic databases and online journals. Every faculty member with whom I spoke noted these things as being among the greatest – if not *the* greatest – the Library provides. And in the next breath what did they say? *So I never come to the Library any more.*

We know librarians had this relationship problem even when faculty members *did* come to the library, because we were (we still are) physically separate from them. I return to the sociologists, who say this is a separation that

> impacts the opportunity for meaningful interaction and the mutual recognition of *expertise* and collegial respect. Changes in information technology over the past two decades have *accelerated* this separation, as faculty report that they use the Internet in their offices or at home to accomplish their work responsibilities and goals. (Christiansen, Stombler and Thaxton, 118, emphasis added)

In the first year of this century, Charles Martell wrote a thought-provoking, two-part paper in which he coined the term "disembodied librarian". Martell says that in the digital age library buildings will disappear, and

> [as] librarians *increase* their responsibilities in virtual (invisible) space, their presence in real space decreases. As librarians become immersed in cyberspace, the process of disembodiment *accelerates.* (106, emphasis added)

To complicate matters, faculty is swamped:
- with classes that are growing in size each year
- with learning and using new technologies for teaching and research
- with grant applications that are becoming increasingly complex

With respect to the last point, one science faculty member described the time-consuming process of procuring industry and government "partners", and the pressure to think of his research not as much in terms of pure exploration but in terms of commerce. He said, and I quote: "Every time I sit down to dinner or go the bathroom or take a walk, I have to be thinking of the socio-economic impact of my research."

But if faculty members are so busy, why aren't they knocking down our doors – real or virtual – to capitalize on our expertise? In that regard, here are some of the things I have discovered from speaking with faculty members at the University of Guelph:

- A professor developing a bibliographic website on a specific topic had not thought of contacting her liaison librarian for assistance.
- A Dean planning a comprehensive pedagogical training program for graduate students had not thought of including the library in planning that program.
- It never crossed the mind of a director of a research unit to involve the library in literature searches for grant proposal preparation.
- Another faculty member said she thought a librarian wouldn't be of assistance with her research because the librarian would not possess knowledge specific to her discipline.
- A professor working on a departmental committee developing a graduate student research-skills program did not realize that librarians have knowledge and expertise in that domain.

And these faculty members are *fans* of the library, and of librarians. So are most of the other people with whom I have spoken. Yes, they may have some specific reservations and suggestions, but they are our supporters, not naysayers.

The question is: What are they supportive *of?*

The logical answer is: They are supportive of what they *know* we do.

Which provokes the question: *What* do they know we do?

Irene Doskatsch, a senior Information Literacy Librarian says this:

> […] some within our profession claim that there is no consensus on core
> responsibilities and values and that a lack of professional self-understanding and
> self-definition has contributed to an inability to communicate to the academic
> community what it is we do and what we stand for. (113-14)

I interviewed one librarian who paraphrased a conversation she has had repeatedly with
faculty members:

> They say: What do you do?
> I say: What do you need?

I want to pause a moment and make sure I am not misunderstood. Librarians at the
University of Guelph do not sit on their hands. They are talented, hardworking and
innovative.

For example, two colleagues have been instrumental in embedding Information Literacy
into the curriculum of a four-year multi-disciplinary Bachelor of Arts and Science
Program.

Another colleague set up office hours in one of his liaison departments, set out to meet
and know faculty members, and taught many Information Literacy classes. As a result,
he was asked to teach a required university course on information management for that
department. He and a colleague conducted a study on students' perceptions of the
relevance of the course and its potential application to Information Literacy.

In less than three years at the Library, another colleague has published seven papers, three of which are peer reviewed and two of which are based on library user studies. One of those was a study of students in GLBT/Transsexual programs at Canadian universities – to see if those students felt that libraries were meeting their information needs.

In the past academic year, University of Guelph librarians collectively have provided library instruction and orientation to close to 6500 graduate and undergraduate students.

And so on. The point is not to set apart the University of Guelph. Most academic libraries have such stories. Rather, the point is to underscore that we not only can, but do, contribute in many ways to the advancement of teaching and learning.

Why doesn't faculty know about this?

The How

Teaching Support Services, or TSS, is the University of Guelph unit that offers educational development support to faculty. In the domain of relationships with faculty, educational developers and librarians share many of the same challenges. TSS works hard at getting out the message about what they do to support, and effectively collaborate with, faculty. One of the TSS staff, Peter Wolf, expounded on how he personally engages in such advocacy work, with this point sticking most in my mind:

> I jump up and down and wave my hands.
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> I jump up and down and wave my hands.

Yes, he did say it three times. Peter added that every year, the TSS Director does "the Dean's Council circuit," taking a list of TSS "things done" for each college. Every

Department Chair gets a page. Peter says: "This is about building credibility. It's one thing to say *we can,* it's another to say *we do.*" He adds, "It's not an initiative. It's a culture."[2]

I want to move back to that sticky problem of librarians' physical proximity to faculty or, rather, the lack of it. To do so, I will share in more detail what the "sociology paper" says about librarian/faculty relationships:

> Although the two groups are mutually dependent, and are both necessary to the successful functioning of any academic institution (whether emphasis is teaching or research), the two groups are generally separated. This is surprising considering their potential for interaction, collaboration, and shared interests in quality teaching and research. To an outside observer, the two groups may appear "tightly coupled" in organizational terms; that is, a change in the work processes of one would have a direct impact on the other […]. However, our findings indicate that the two groups are "loosely coupled:" that is, they have limited contact whereby changes in the work practices of one group would not necessarily have an impact on the other. (Christiansen, Stombler and Thaxton, 117-18)

One of greatest frustrations for University of Guelph librarians is this: they feel that they are not making a difference in the way they know they could, given the opportunity. Largely for that reason, some brilliant, capable, enthusiastic librarians are actually contemplating career changes.

Still – I am going to insist – it neither helps nor makes sense to blame faculty for this issue. If we want to collaborate with faculty on work that addresses those "shared interests in quality teaching and research," then we need to make a bigger and more focused effort. Which are empty words without concrete suggestions.

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[2] In advance of this talk, attendees were given a questionnaire (see Appendix) and asked to complete the first question. The remaining questions were not on the questionnaire. At this juncture in the talk, I provided questions 2, 3 and 4 orally, and gave participants time to answer them. A brief discussion ensued before I resumed.

I entered my exploration with a sense of not knowing and with an open mind. At this juncture, my mind is beginning to close around a key concept that, I believe, is crucial to remedying the separation between librarians and faculty. It is, as they say, a no brainer.

Remove it. Just *remove* the separation. Literally and radically.

This is not a new idea. In 1994, Virginia Tech founded a College Librarian Program where four librarians were placed in offices *within their liaison colleges,* where 75% of their time was dedicated to those colleges. By 2002, the number had grown to eleven. Seamans and Metz, who were part of this initiative, say:

> The role of faculty colleague […] has come as a largely unanticipated by-product of the college librarians' presence as collaborators and neighbors with the teaching faculty. It is not uncommon now for college librarians to attend the regular meetings of department heads with their academic deans, to travel with faculty to workshops or national meetings, or to serve on faculty search committees. A few have participated as co-investigators on grants, especially projects that include an element of collection building. (328)

Piggy-backing on that model (and others), the University of Michigan established a Field Librarian Program in three colleges:

> Within months of being hired, each field librarian was able to articulate their role within the individual context of their discipline, departmental culture, politics, and academic directions. Their ability to do so was directly linked to their "immersion" in the department. The following was critical to their success: participation of each department in hiring the field librarian, their physical location in the academic unit, and the early work of the field librarians in shaping their role. As a result, the field librarian was viewed as a colleague rather than as an external liaison. (Johnson and Alexander, 40)

While such models do exist, they are relatively rare. In my opinion, that must change. Unless it does, we are not going to close the gap between librarians and faculty – a gap that is widening (as already discussed) at an *accelerated* rate.

Can every university and college library follow precisely in the footsteps of Virginia Tech and the University of Michigan? Probably not. But we can begin to embrace the spirit of such models, which take librarians to faculty. *One* librarian housed in a department would be a start to making more meaningful contact.
Indeed, we must make such contact, and sustain it. Donald Dilmore studied librarian/faculty interaction in nine New England colleges. He found that "the measure of interpersonal contact was one of the strongest predictors of [positive] faculty perceptions and use of library services" (282). Felix Chu's study demonstrated that with respect to Liaison Librarians, faculty liked "the personal touch," the ability "to put names and faces together" (16). Wade Kotter said, essentially, that until librarians and faculty develop friendships (yes, he did use that word) and some consensus on the goals of higher education, collaboration is going to work not well or not at all (294-95).

Final thoughts

One of the people I interviewed at the University of Guelph is an expert in the area of curriculum development. I asked her how librarians could find a place at the curriculum development table. She offered many suggestions. In my view, the most important one was this: "Look for every portal. In other words, there's no one way. Find every opportunity and capitalize on it."

That conversation was pivotal in correcting a flaw in my thinking. My original perception was that strong relationships with faculty lead to collaboration.
My new perception is this: collaboration with faculty is not only a destination, it also the path and bridge to strong relationships with them.

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Appendix: Exercise

Think of specific, concrete things that you, as a librarian, have done this past year to support teaching, learning or research at your college or university. Think of specific, concrete things your library has done collectively. For example:

- I taught an online Information Literacy section to a Popular Music class of 30 students.
- The Library supported 600 courses by getting copyright clearance for 2500 documents and creating links to those documents in E-Reserve.
- I prepared a literature search for a History faculty member's grant application to conduct research on rural economy in New Hampshire.
- I collaborated with two a Sociology faculty members in designing a new online course.
- The Library procured access to 13 new peer-reviewed BioScience journals.

1. Write one of those things here:

2. Who knows about this (and how)?

3. Who else should know about this (and how)?

4. How do you know this activity has resulted in desired outcomes?