Research Coaching and the 3-Office Shuffle: Tales of a Library Liaison

By Jamie Dwyer

Liaison librarianship continues to gain momentum in our profession as students and faculty respond well to developing a relationship with a single librarian designated to work with their department or college. While this librarian doesn’t always have the answer (I always defer difficult copyright questions to my colleague!) he or she is a great starting point. Improving awareness of library resources and services often requires the librarian to be out of the library. Closing in on two years as library liaison to the College of Applied Health Sciences here at UIC, here’s some of what I’ve experienced so far:

If at first you don’t succeed...

It’s true: try, try again! This doesn’t mean using the same approach. Assessment & reflection are key in deciding how long to pursue an idea. After a semester of holding office hours in a tutoring center and getting very little business, I adjusted my plan and provided more one-shots with follow-up guided searching sessions and attendance at final project presentations. I reached out to a professor for a fall 2013 course via email and he declined my help initially; a year later, we worked together on assignments and library instruction for the same course after meeting face-to-face at a faculty meeting. Patience and flexibility are crucial to liaison work.

Multiple offices increase visibility but are logistically challenging

You can’t be in three places at once! Last semester I acquired keys to two shared office spaces in buildings across campus. I work with many users who travel between East and West campus, so the ability to meet on either side is proving very beneficial. Last fall I held research consultations with over fifty undergraduates at the Richard J. Daley Library on West Campus. In the Applied Health Sciences Building I have the chance to connect with students and faculty for a quick conversation during my office hours. There’s a water cooler effect that cannot be replicated by sitting in my “real” office all day.

Liaison roles should be fun

One reason I find myself enjoying this job is that I get to be creative and even silly in an environment that might not seem to support such antics. In my first meeting with a kinesiology professor a month into my job, he asked if it was okay to include my contact information in his syllabi and instead of calling me “Librarian” he wanted to use the term “Research Coach.” After years of playing and coaching volleyball, I was eager to jump on this particular bandwagon! I immediately created my sophisticated ClipArt logo of sorts in an attempt to brand myself. While it comes off as silly (a certain coworker does a combination eye-roll/giggle every time she sees...
it), I like to think it makes me a bit more approachable.

Be open, be honest, be yourself

I open many presentations with the “Two truths and a lie” game (three statements about me appear in my slides, two true and one false, and the audience votes) with the hope that sharing something slightly personal makes me less of a robot in the front of the classroom. My aches and pains are also a great way to break the ice with my physical therapy students - I genuinely want them to succeed so they can fix my knees someday! This is not to say that I walk into every room cracking jokes. I am aware that there is a time and place, but people tend to be more at ease when I am at ease. A genuine speaker/teacher/collaborator makes everyone more comfortable.

The last 20-plus months have been challenging, exciting, and very educational. The variety of research questions I help with (salmon fish farming, treatment for knee osteoarthritis, market research for at-home personal training companies, effectiveness of Zumba® classes in reducing chronic pain in postal carriers...) continues to amaze and intrigue me. Research coaching happens in many offices, hallways, and train rides, so ask away! If I can’t answer your question myself, I’ll be sure to connect you with someone who can. I have great colleagues.

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