

The librarian is in

By Daniel K. Blewett

Keeping office hours in an academic department

A bibliographer in today's academic library environment must be a flexible and multi-talented individual. This person must not only provide reference service, bibliographic instruction, and develop a library's collection in a certain subject area, but also conduct effective liaison work with the faculty. Lawrence Miller said, "Liaison work is one of the few potentially effective methods we have to make an impact on the problem of the nonuser [or inefficient user]. At the same time, it can assist in maintaining the library's visibility as the primary campus information agency."¹

Efficient liaison work requires effective communication to departments about what the library is doing, as well as hearing the complaints and suggestions from the faculty and students.² One must conduct a variety of outreach activities to maintain and improve effective relations and communications with the faculty.³

History and political science are very much print-oriented fields, much more so than the sciences, which do much of their research in laboratories. Indeed, the library is the laboratory for many academicians. When a report was received that a California university had bibliographers conducting office hours in academic departments, it was decided that Loyola University should experiment with a similar program for these two academic departments.

Planning

Issues that were considered during the preliminary planning process included:

1) Could this additional role be added easily to the bibliographer's workload? Since fac-

ulty liaison work is a natural and important part of a bibliographer's duties, changes could be made in other portions of my workload to allow time for this experiment.

2) Would the absence of the bibliographer cause staffing problems in the Reference Department? The Cudahy Library is fortunate in having enough reference staff to be able to handle any reference questions coming in while the bibliographer is gone, so this was not considered a problem.

3) What would the bibliographer be doing while in the office hours? The librarian would be making contacts with the faculty and students, providing assistance with their information needs, informing his clientele of library activities and services, and working on projects he had brought from the library.

4) Would publicity about a successful program create a demand in other academic departments for more service that the library could not meet, due to staffing and time constraints? So far this has not proven to be a problem.

Intended audience

To alert the faculty and students to the availability of this new service, appropriate announcements were made in departmental meetings, flyers were posted in the library and in the departments, and individuals were informed by word of mouth. With regard to the types and numbers of visitors, experience has proven that faculty members by far outnumber all other visitors, as expected. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the bibliographer is positioned close to their offices, so it is easy for them to just drop in, rather than having to make a special trip to the library. Most of their questions usually have something to do with collection development, such as ordering a book or asking why a particular title is not in the collec-

tion. Research questions are much fewer in number, but more interesting to work with.

It is important to focus on faculty in that they are a relatively stable population of library users who need to be informed of new bibliographic sources and research techniques. Also, through them, librarians can reach more students, either directly when a professor brings a class into the library for a bibliographic instruction session, or indirectly when the professor tells the students about some new source or service in the library, or else encourages them to seek out librarians for research assistance.⁴

Graduate students are the next most numerous visitors, and most of their questions concern how to do certain types of research, either for themselves or for faculty members. This makes sense, since they are supposed to be learning how to carry out more complicated research projects, and since many of them do not know how to conduct library research. It is important to catch graduate students early in their training, so as to educate them on the role and importance of librarians, how to conduct research effectively, and to open their minds to the wide range of information resources available. Of the two departments, I get more research questions from graduate students in political science than in history. Perhaps this is because many of their questions deal either with government publications (always a confusing subject), or current information that is harder to find and which may require the use of various computer systems to track down.

The departmental secretaries consult with me about problems they are having in completing some faculty request having to do with library procedures, such as hours or services. It is rare that they ask a more standard reference question for other types of information.

Undergraduates are the least frequent visitors, probably because they are in the department offices less than the other patron groups. Also, because their information needs are generally less complex, they are usually satisfied with the assistance they receive at the library, so they rarely make it a point to seek out the librarian during office hours, or even at the library for that matter. They also tend to have little patience with learning about new reference tools or research techniques.

Location

Librarians, like business people, know that location is of primary importance. The same holds

true in this instance. Not every academic department will have the equipment or space resources to offer the librarian a good place to hold office hours, so one may have to work from an informal seating area.

In the History Department I am allowed to use the faculty study. Although it is not situated with the administrative offices, it is surrounded by faculty offices. The real plus of this site is that there is a computer available through which I can access the library's catalog, as well as the university gopher and the Internet.

In the Political Science Department I am allowed to use an office in the administrative suite. This is an excellent location as there is a lot of traffic through the area by both students and faculty. Visibility is important: let the faculty see that you are helping people during the office hours, and not just at the library.

Services and advantages

- Faculty and students no longer have to call or walk over to the library for everything, they can just visit the librarian in the department for assistance (the convenience factor).

- Faculty and students can have more contact with their bibliographer, in a quiet and comfortable location, to discuss research projects or problems they are having using the library (the communication factor). John Donahue said, "dialogue with library faculty is an important first step in [a faculty member's] own academic use of the resources found in the library."⁵

- The bibliographer can use the computer (if one is available) to instruct visitors on how to use the library's databases or the Internet.

Negatives

As with most things in life, there are some negative aspects associated with office hours for librarians. An obvious point is that the person holding office hours outside the library does not have full access to the various printed and electronic information sources available within the library. The question must be written down and worked on later, or an appointment made to demonstrate research tools and techniques at a later time. Many times librarians must delay in answering a question due to lack of available staff, the workload of the librarian, and the complexity of the question. Faculty and students have, in my experience, been understanding of the limitations the librarian is working under while holding office hours, and are willing to wait a reasonable time for an answer.

Another objection is that attending office hours outside the library removes an experienced professional from the location where he or she is expected to be found by patrons and staff. In these cases it is accepted that either a message will be left for the absent individual, or someone else will handle the question.

Positives

Office hours should not be viewed as wasted time by either the librarian or the library administration. Librarians always have plenty of things that can be done outside the library, such as reading the mail, working on collection development, keeping up with the professional literature, etc. Not having all of the usual interruptions that occur when I am in my office is delightful. And getting away from the library, as well as interacting with other people in a relaxed setting, can be rejuvenating.

If a librarian is fortunate enough to use the departmental reading room for the office hours, then one can become familiar with the serial and monographic materials available in the department and see how they complement the library's holdings. The librarian could offer to organize the reading room during office hours, and maybe even be allowed to transfer to the library those items not already in its collection.

Perhaps the primary benefit is one that cannot really be measured scientifically, and that falls under the realm of improving relations between the library and the faculty. The faculty and students seem to appreciate being able to discuss with a librarian their problems and concerns about the library. I am now more aware of faculty and student research interests, they contact me directly for help more often, and more students are referred to me for assistance.

The faculty are powerful actors in the academic environment. It is important for them to see that librarians are more than just collection maintainers, and that we are supporting the institution's (and their own) teaching and research missions in imaginative ways. This can translate into valuable political support for the library during the institutional budget process.

Conclusion

Although both the negative and positive factors associated with a librarian's office hours are virtually unquantifiable, it is my opinion that the positives far outweigh the negatives. The negative factors appear to be relatively

minor, and should easily be addressed by proper consultation and planning between the bibliographer and library administration. This kind of proactive program improves library-faculty relations. Feedback from the faculty and students, to both myself and the library administration, has been very positive, and I have increased my personal contacts with the faculty and students of the departments for which I am responsible. As the faculty have become more familiar with me, and as I have proven that I can answer their questions and assist in their problems, I have become more accepted as a professional colleague. This is an easy and enjoyable noncopyrighted program that should be examined and adopted by other academic libraries.

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Notes

1. Laurence Miller, "Liaison Work in the Academic Library," *RQ* 16 (spring 1977): 215.
2. John Lubans suggests that librarians do not listen enough to their clientele. See John L. Lubans, "Sherlock's Dog, or, Managers and Mess Finding," *Library Administration and Management* 8 (summer 1994): 144.
3. Connie Wu, Michael Bowman, Judy Gardner, Robert G. Sewell, and Myoung Chung Wilson, "Effective Liaison Relationships in an Academic Library," *College and Research Libraries News* 55 (May 1994): 254, 303; and Richard M. Dougherty, "Needed: User-Responsive Research Libraries," *Library Journal* 116 (January 1991): 62.
4. Anne G. Lipow discusses faculty desires for convenience and control in "Outreach to Faculty: Why and How," in Linda Shirato, ed., *Working with Faculty in the New Electronic Library: Papers and Sessions Materials Presented at the Nineteenth National LOEX Library Instruction Conference Held at Eastern Michigan University, 10 to 11 May 1991*, Library Orientation Series (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Pierian Press, 1992), 7-10.
5. John M. Donahue, "Essential Dialogue," *Research Strategies* 7 (spring 1989): 54. ■