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## A Team-Based Liaison Approach to Science Coverage

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## A Team-Based Liaison Approach to Science Coverage

### Abstract

Liaison librarianship is an evolving specialty area in academic librarianship in which success is heavily dependent upon long-term relationship building between departments and librarians. In times of turnover and change the success of the liaison model is threatened due to the lack of continued staffing in liaison roles. This paper presents a case study of a team-based liaison coverage model for STEM fields during an extended period of turnover and change. Without this shared approach to liaison and functional duties, it would not be possible for only three people to provide service to over 14,000 patrons across multiple colleges.

### Keywords

academic librarianship, science librarians, liaisons

## **Introduction**

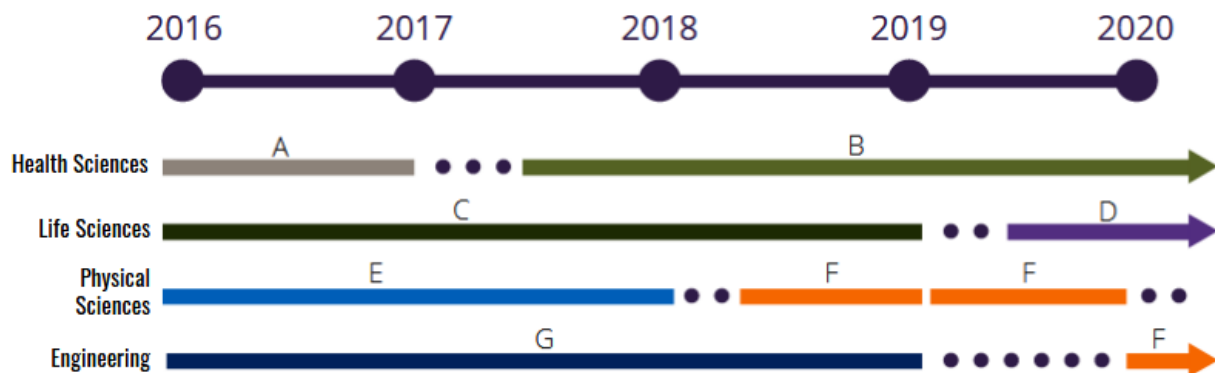
Liaison librarianship within reference, research, and information services library units is an evolving role in which success is heavily dependent upon long-term relationship building between departments and liaison librarians. In times of turnover and change, however, the success of the liaison model is threatened as staffing upheaval can lead to gaps in liaison coverage and library engagement with innovative institutional priorities. This paper presents a case study of a team-based liaison coverage model for STEM fields during an extended period of turnover and change. The paper identifies areas of need and expert level competencies among the team-based liaison approach as an alternative to subject-specific expertise, in contrast to the typical liaison model. It identifies the weaknesses and areas of growth in this model and discusses the ways that the team-based liaison approach to STEM field coverage contributes to high-impact, temporary library relationship-building with institutional priority disciplines. Overall, this paper serves as a model of a highly flexible liaison model that incorporates both high-level service with collegiality.

## **Liaison Timeline**

Starting in 2016, the coverage in the Sciences disciplines at Clemson University underwent a period of transition. Over a four-year period, the roles of Health Sciences, Life Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Engineering Librarian were all vacated and filled with permanent and, at times, temporary faculty librarian positions (Figure 1). Retirements, internal transitions, and new opportunities are a natural part of any institution's growth, yet filling these roles presents a challenge during the long faculty hiring process and for incoming librarians as they work to establish relationships. Offering Science Team support in subject area knowledge, institutional ties, and professional development support allows incoming science liaisons more ease in taking on these highly specialized roles. As of 2020, the Science Team is still operating at a deficit of one member, but re-envisioning roles and

departments has allowed science coverage to remain nimble and responsive. While the ongoing liaison coverage situation is hopefully a temporary problem, the team-based model offers flexibility and support during position changes.

**Figure 1. Science Team Liaison Timeline 2016-2020\***



\*Chart key: Line breaks represent a change in personnel/job title. Colors (also labeled with letters) denote an individual librarian’s roles. Dots along the timeline indicate a vacancy.

**Liaison breakdown**

The Science Team supports a significant number of Clemson students and faculty. Figure 2 shows the total number of undergraduate and graduate students and faculty in the Science Team’s liaison areas, by college (the department of Automotive Engineering is not included in these numbers, because its students and faculty are located or co-located at the CU-ICAR campus in Greenville, SC (~40 miles from Clemson’s main campus) and another librarian is liaison to the department).

Data presented in Figure 2 is from 2019, as 2020 data is not yet available. Data was obtained from the *Clemson University Interactive Factbook* published by Clemson’s Office of Institutional Research, at <https://www.clemson.edu/institutional-effectiveness/oir/factbook/>.

**Figure 2. Liaison Area Breakdown (2019 Data)**

College	Undergraduate Student Enrollment	Graduate Student Enrollment	Faculty (Instructional/ Research/ Public Service)	All Students + Faculty
College of Agriculture, Forestry & Life Sciences	1,854	337	159	<b>2,350</b>
College of Behavioral, Social & Health Sciences*	1,194	194	71	<b>1,459</b>
College of Engineering, Computing & Applied Sciences**	5,510	1,446	334	<b>7,290</b>
College of Science	2,678	633	262	<b>3,573</b>
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>11,236</b>	<b>2,610</b>	<b>826</b>	<b>14,672</b>

\*Public Health Sciences + School of Nursing Only

\*\*Automotive Engineering not included

It is interesting to note that in 2019, Clemson University had a total of 1,612 faculty members in all colleges (Instructional/Research/Public Service), so the Science Team of 3 Librarians currently supports roughly ½ of the faculty at Clemson University. On the student side, Clemson had a total of 20,195 undergraduate students and 5,627 graduate students enrolled in 2019. Again, the Science Team of Librarians supports a high number (approaching ½) of the total students enrolled at Clemson University.

**Statistical Overview**

Figure 3 presents statistics from 2020 (as of 10/8/2020, as data was needed for the 2020 SCLA Annual Conference Poster Session) that emphasize the high number of interactions the Science Team has with faculty and students in their liaison areas, as well as the large monographs budget managed by the Team. All data, other than the monographs budget, was obtained from statistics that are maintained in the Springshare products LibGuides, LibAnswers, and LibInsight.

<b>Figure 3. 2020 Science Team Statistics, as of 10/8/2020</b>	
STEMM Instruction Sessions (courses, graduate orientations, summer programs...)	83
Other STEMM Workshops (Predatory Publishing, Patent Searching, Web of Science...)	24
Reference Interactions-TOTAL	957
Reference Interactions-READ Scale 4 (Reference Knowledge and Skills Needed) and up	268
# of LibGuides/Views	74/68,240
Monographs Budget (2020-2021)	\$276,694.77

To highlight a few numbers, the Science Team taught 83 instruction sessions for STEMM courses, or STEMM-related orientations or summer programs. Members of the Science Team also led 24 additional workshops on STEMM topics relevant to multiple fields such as Predatory Publishing, Patent Searching, and how to search specific STEMM databases. The Science Team had 957 reference interactions, 268 of which ranged from a 4 on the READ Scale (where reference knowledge and skills are needed) to a 6 on the READ Scale (supporting in-depth faculty and PhD student research). Finally, the

Science Team's monographs budget is \$276,694.77 for 2020-2021, which is being used to purchase requested items from faculty and students as well as STEMM eBook packages.

Overall, these statistics show that the Science Team has stayed very busy in 2020, despite the pandemic, and has been especially flourishing despite all of the liaison turnover that Clemson Libraries has experienced in recent years.

### **Institutional Priorities**

Comprehensive coverage in the Sciences is necessary to support institutional goals, as outlined in the ClemsonForward plan. To that end, this model of liaison coverage supports the goals of research and the academic core (Clemson University, 2016).

Support for the research goal in the ClemsonForward plan includes the growth and sustainment of the research infrastructure through library resources. Library resources, such as print and electronic materials, liaisons, technology, and more, provide researchers with the tools and information necessary to succeed in their goals. The Team specifically supports five of the six innovation clusters outlined in the ClemsonForward plan (Clemson University, 2016).

Instructional services and collections which target the enhancement of the classroom experience are a major component of the support for the academic core goal. Additional support comes in the way of providing space and resources for interdisciplinary engagement.

In addition to tying Science Team liaison work to overall Clemson priorities, the work of the Science Team helps address gaps in Library services as outlined in the Clemson Libraries Carnegie Research 1 Task Force Report. In the report, designed to survey and benchmark peer institutions and provide recommendations for Libraries' growth, several opportunities are identified that the Science Team builds upon through their interdisciplinary services. The Science Team's work directly addresses the gaps in services for graduate students and related to scholarly communications, as it pertains to

providing support for systematic reviews and patents and trademarks. Connecting the flexible, team-based liaison model for coverage in the Sciences to institutional priorities indicates that this model, coupled with high statistics, is succeeding throughout the strategic growth of the University and Libraries.

### **Alternative Competencies**

In addition to liaison duties, members of the Science Team offer specific expertise and leadership in a variety of functional areas. This expertise allows for cross-training of members, which provides additional coverage of both liaison and functional areas. The team shares a listserv to facilitate shared coverage, which makes it easy for any given member of the team to lend their knowledge to an interaction and allows for simplified coverage if a team member is out of the office.

Within the team, there are experts on patents and trademarks, systematic reviews, research methodologies, and outreach and marketing. Team members provide training, both internal to the team and external to library patrons, create learning objects (such as LibGuides or handouts), and participate in consultations on various aspects of these functional areas.

The Science Team also has a member who represents the team when collections decisions are being discussed. This team member leads the collaborative purchasing used and provides updates about library-wide purchasing practices and procedures.

This method of sharing workloads and cross-training on expertise allows for the Team to balance their workloads by providing a system where individual members can step up or step back based on the weight of their schedules at any given time. Additionally, this team approach improves the level of service provided to patrons by allowing for a faster response and for the expert most skilled in their question area to respond. Without this shared approach to liaison and functional duties, it would not be possible for only three people to provide service to over 14,000 patrons across multiple colleges.



**Conclusion**

Though the Science Team strives to provide collaborative library services, there are opportunities for improvement, including cross training in scaffolded instruction outcomes per discipline, analysis of Sciences collections to determine interdisciplinary gaps, and internal and external outreach of Science-related programs and tools. Distribution of instruction and reference remains a challenge during staffing gaps, though these challenges are offset by establishing a model of collaborative and specialized support.

In this paper, a model for team-based liaison coverage in the Sciences is explored as implemented at Clemson University Libraries. Over a period of turnover in liaison roles, the Science Team encountered the additional hurdles of expanded enrollment, faculty, and institutional priority in growing disciplines in the Sciences. Despite these significant challenges, the Science Team has maintained and even grown their level of engagement during the period described, indicating the success of the team-based support model and unique opportunities to further enhance this liaison model.

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