Developing “Fabulations”: Factors that Influence the Development of Successful Research Collaborations Between Liaison Librarians and Faculty Members

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Introduction

What is a “Fabulation”?

The term “Fabulation” can be considered an accidental portmanteau, coined by study participant Margo when asked to describe her collaboration with faculty member Beth. In essence, a “Fabulation” is a fabulous collaboration, which is how Margo attempted to describe her relationship with Beth and the words just naturally merged. While the moment in the interview brought laughter, the new word remained present within the study and serves as an apt description of the research collaborations found between the study’s liaison-faculty pairs. But while the liaison-faculty pairs who participated in the study were indicative of how these research collaboration relationships could work, there was a marked lack of discussion of these relationships found in the Library & Information Science Literature (LIS).

While discussions of liaison librarians collaborating with faculty members can be found in the LIS literature, most of these collaborations are instruction or classroom-based. Even articles with titles that would suggest a variety of collaboration, such as “Reflections on Surveys of Faculty Attitudes Toward Collaboration with Libraries,”¹ focus only on instruction collaborations. Less often discussed in the literature are research-based collaborations between liaisons and faculty members, an absence noted by Creaser and Spezi². Mentions of research collaborations often took the form of desired or suggested work for liaisons.³ Why do these research-based collaborations seem to be so rare? And what can be learned from studying these collaborations, that might also help other liaisons interested in developing research collaborations with their faculty? These were two of the questions explored in a larger mixed-methods dissertation study designed to examine the role of liaison librarians as research collaboration partners. This paper presents several factors, identified through a cross-case analysis of seven liaison librarian-faculty collaboration case studies, that appear to influence the success of these research collaborations and may serve as a blueprint for other liaisons striving to develop similar relationships with faculty.

Literature Review

Liaison Librarians

For the purpose of the study, liaison librarians were defined as “librarians assigned to a specific client base (a school, department, college, research center, or co-curricular unit) in a personalized, relationship-centered system of service delivery.”⁴ This definition was selected due to its emphasis on the relationship aspect of liaisons’

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work, which aligned with the idea of investigating a research collaboration relationship. It should be noted that within this definition there is also an emphasis on service delivery, which could be interpreted as not including the concept of collaboration. However, definitions of collaboration offer enough flexibility to allow for collaboration to be considered a form of service delivery.

**Collaboration**

Due to the range of possible definitions for the term collaboration, a single definition was identified to help guide the study. Within the study, collaboration was defined as a mutually-beneficial process guided by shared norms, rules, and structures in the pursuit of a shared goal. This definition offered flexibility when determining what would constitute a research collaboration between a liaison librarian and a faculty member. Specifically, research collaborations between liaisons and faculty members focused on the role of the liaison as a member of a grant team, provider of a literature or systematic review for faculty research projects, and co-presenting or co-publishing with a faculty member. Activities that liaisons might engage in related to faculty research but outside of a collaboration, such as locating resources for faculty, suggesting search terms or relevant databases, assistance with selecting a journal for publication, citation-management software training, and editing/proofreading faculty submissions, were labeled as research support.

**Liaison research support.** The distinction between research collaboration and research support was made to focus the study specifically on research collaborations and not on the support work that liaisons have engaged in for many years. As far back at 1961, Edward G. Holley saw librarians as being “peculiarly situated to render direct and effective aid to [faculty] scholarship.” While liaisons are seen as supporting faculty research in numerous ways, the push for them to take more active roles in faculty research as collaborators has become more prevalent in recent literature. But even with this push, the question of why these relationships are not already prevalent still needs to be addressed. The answer to this question may lie in research that looks at the liaison-faculty relationship itself.

**Liaison-Faculty Relationships**

Within the LIS literature, connecting with faculty was often mentioned as part of being a liaison, though the nature of this connection varied, ranging from relationship building, to partnering, to consulting, and collaborating. Regardless of the terminology used, the importance of liaisons forming relationships with faculty in order to be successful in their work can be found in the literature, although mostly in an anecdotal fashion. Moniz, Henry, and Eshleman go so far as to call establishing relationships with faculty “the cornerstone of good liaison work.” But despite seeing the relationship between liaisons and faculty members as highly important, empirical research into the relationship itself has been scant, with three studies that approached the topic empirically and focused on the relationship dynamics identified.

**Satisfaction with the liaison relationship.** A 2012 study by Arendt and Lotts took an interesting approach to studying the liaison-faculty relationship, using a survey to try to determine whether there was a correlation between liaisons’ perceptions of their success as liaisons and faculty satisfaction with the work of the liaison. The researchers found that liaisons felt they were successful, but their perceptions of success did not correlate with faculty satisfaction—faculty tended to be satisfied regardless of how successful the liaison felt. While an interesting result, Arendt and Lotts relied on a survey to collect their data and did not actually speak with the liaisons or faculty members about their relationships.

**Social capital in the liaison-faculty relationship.** Where Arendt and Lotts took a quantitative approach to understanding an aspect of the liaison-faculty relationship, Tim Schlak chose to qualitatively investigate these
relationships using social capital as the research operative. Through interviews with eight liaisons, Schlak was able to create a framework for viewing liaison-faculty relationships based on the concepts of commitment, contribution, reciprocity, trust and trustworthiness, and network positionality. Unfortunately, Schlak’s study suffered from potential bias in participant selection and an exclusion of the faculty perspective, as he only interviewed liaisons about their relationships with faculty.

Relationship-building factors. The third study identified offered the most relevant investigation into the liaison-faculty relationship, as Díaz and Mandernach interviewed both liaisons and faculty to explore the relationship-building efforts of the liaisons. The researchers were able to identify best practices for relationship-building, including having equal interest in the project, following through on work, having a shared understanding of project goals, pushing boundaries, having good two-way communication, building trust, and networking. This study offered a strong foundation for the cases reviewed in the current cross-case analysis, as it identifies potential factors that could impact the relationship between liaisons and faculty members. Unfortunately, the study itself only took place at one institution and did not focus specifically on research collaboration relationships.

The Research Collaboration Relationship

While discussions of the relationship between liaisons and faculty (whether anecdotaly-based or empirically-based) exist, the question of whether liaisons and faculty were engaged in research collaboration relationships remained unanswered. What was suggested in the literature was that factors that might impact a liaisons’ ability to form a relationship with a faculty member would also specifically impact the development of a research collaboration relationship. Three suggested factors included liaisons’ status at their institution, liaisons’ research productivity, and liaisons’ research abilities or skills.

Some literature suggested that liaisons needed to have the same status at the institution as the faculty member in order to be viewed as a potential research collaborator. Related to having the same status, others suggested that liaisons should have the same expectations, especially around research productivity and publication. Biggs suggested that faculty willingness to even see a liaison as a potential research collaborator could be impacted by a lack of scholarly publication by the liaison. And Fonseca and Viator encouraged liaisons to publish more, especially in the faculty member's discipline area, in order to encourage faculty to see them as possible research collaborators. Finally, liaisons’ training and skills related to conducting research were seen as impacting whether faculty would see the liaison as a potential research collaborator, with individual librarians suggesting that their own lack of training in research methodology negatively impacted their ability to be successful research collaborators.

Impetus for Study

The paucity of research that directly investigates the liaison-faculty research collaboration relationship offered an impetus for the development of this study. While the results reported here are part of a larger mixed-methods study, this impetus served as a driving force behind the design of the qualitative strand. This strand set out to understand how faculty and liaisons perceived the collaborative research relationship, including the factors that impacted the success of those relationships.

Methodology

The results included in this paper offer a snapshot of the full dissertation study undertaken to understand the work and faculty relationships of liaison librarians. This section offers an overview of the methods used to identify the factors outlined in the results section.
Sample
The cases utilized in the study consisted of seven pairs of liaison librarians and faculty members engaged in a research collaboration relationship. The seven liaisons in the study were volunteers who expressed interest in participating in the study after completing a survey to collect data on the work and perceptions of liaison librarians. Each liaison was contacted and asked to identify a faculty member who would also be interested in participating in the study. Initially over 300 liaisons volunteered to participate and 10 were selected for the study. Of these 10, seven were engaged in research collaborations and were included in the final cross-case analysis process. Demographic information about the pairs is presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair (Institutional Status)</th>
<th>Carnegie Classification &amp; Institution Description</th>
<th>Relationship Duration</th>
<th>Project Initiator</th>
<th>Faculty Discipline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mike (Faculty, Tenured) &amp; Paul (Associate Professor, Tenured)</td>
<td>Master’s—Larger Program; Large public university</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margo (Tenured Associate Professor) &amp; Beth (Adjunct Faculty)</td>
<td>Master’s—Medium Program; Medium-sized public state university</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Mutual</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ursula (Faculty, Non-Tenure Track) &amp; CoCo (Associate Professor, Non-Tenure Track)</td>
<td>Master’s—Medium Program; Private, liberal-arts college</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane (Staff) &amp; Chdine (Tenured, Full Professor)</td>
<td>Doctoral—Highest Research; Private, Ivy League university</td>
<td>28 years</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Art &amp; Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolores (Tenured, Associate Professor) &amp; Suzanne (Tenured, Full-Professor—Retired)</td>
<td>Doctoral—Moderate Research; Mid-sized, private Catholic university</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Mutual</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose (Staff) &amp; Christine (Tenured Associate Professor)</td>
<td>Doctoral—Moderate research; Private, Catholic university, liberal-arts focus</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Liaison</td>
<td>English Lit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanita (Administrative Staff) &amp; Mark (Tenured, Full Professor)</td>
<td>Baccalaureate—Arts &amp; Sciences Focus; Small, private liberal arts college</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Liaison is listed first

While the sample was both nested and purposive, it was also a form of maximum variation sampling. This sampling process allowed the researcher to identify a sample that represented a broad range of institution types, liaisons’ and faculty members’ institutional status, length of relationship, and faculty disciplinary area. The variety of faculty discipline areas, in particular, was a benefit for the study as research has indicated some differences between disciplines in terms of faculty information needs, faculty use of the library, and how faculty view collaboration.

Data Collection
Data to complete the seven case studies were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation. Each member of the selected pairs participated in an initial in-person interview. Interviews were conducted individually for each member of the pair for three reasons: the use of slightly different questions...
for liaisons and faculty, to avoid scheduling conflicts, and to allow for comparison of responses to different questions as a means of gaining insight into the nature of the pairs’ relationships. Follow-up Zoom interviews were also conducted with all but two of the faculty members. Initial interviews lasted between 40 and 95 minutes, with follow-up interviews lasting between 10 and 45 minutes. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher, and transcriptions were shared with the participants as a form of member checking. Documents collected were directly related to the institutions and work of the liaison-faculty pairs, and included curriculum vitae, mission statements, liaisons’ job descriptions, faculty handbooks, strategic planning documents, performance and/or merit documents; university tenure documents; and samples of pairs’ collaborative work.

Data Analysis
Initial data analysis was completed in order to create seven individual case studies. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed using a four-stage process: 1) an initial reading of the interviews in the paired case where notes were taken and first ideas about the data as it related to the research questions were identified; 2) a second reading of the data where initial coding was done, including the identification of a priori and in vivo codes; 3) a third reading of the transcripts and identified codes in order to identify overlapping codes and select final codes for the study; and 4) a fourth reading to thematically analyze the transcripts and codes for each pair and combine codes into themes. The collected documents were also analyzed for each paired case, especially looking for information relevant to the pairs’ relationships and the institutional environments. The codes and themes, in conjunction with the information from the documents, were used to create the detailed case for each liaison-faculty pair. In order to determine the relationship themes that existed across the seven cases, a cross-case analysis was conducted. This cross-case analysis allowed for the identification of patterns and themes that existed in multiple cases, as well as differences. The factors that appear to influence the success of liaison-faculty research collaboration relationships were identified through this cross-case analysis.

Results
Emergent themes from each case revealed 48 themes that crossed at least three cases and seven themes found in every case. Combining similar themes allowed for the creation of 21 sub-themes, further classified into four categories: collaborator traits, collaborator descriptors, feelings/emotions, and potential barriers/facilitators. From these categories of sub-themes, factors that influenced the success of the pairs’ research collaboration relationships emerged, with the most salient factors when discussing successful research collaborations outlined here.

Collaborator Trait: Expertise
The cases revealed that faculty were searching for collaborators with specific expertise or knowledge, one of the traits most often mentioned as a quality needed for a successful collaboration. The pair that most exemplified this was faculty member Mark and liaison Amanita. Mark emphasized how Amanita brought expertise to the project that he did not have, and Amanita noted that she brought the technical expertise to their relationship, while Mark brought the subject matter expertise. In general, collaboration research has shown that researchers, especially scientists, are looking for someone with complementary skills or knowledge to their own. Participants’ views in this study aligned with this idea and also showed that this view crossed disciplines, as faculty members in business and architecture also expressed these views.
Collaborator Trait: Time and Interest

Also highly sought were collaborators with the time and interest to be involved in a collaborative project. This was of particular interest for faculty members who wanted to work with others who shared an interest in their research topic. One faculty member, Paul, considered having a shared interest as the starting point for a successful collaboration. And faculty member CoCo recognized that her liaison, Ursula, had “her own research interests, but she is interested in this enough to be part of it.” From the perspective of the liaison, this indicates the importance of not only knowing what faculty members’ research topics are, but also making sure that the faculty members know that the liaison shares their interest in the topic.

The importance of having time to collaborate was also raised by respondents, particularly related to the collaborators’ level of commitment to the project. Faculty member CoCo revealed that she avoided anyone who seemed to be too busy to fully commit time to her project. While CoCo was successfully working with liaison Ursula, this view did impact the possibility of future collaborations. CoCo even suggested that her sense of how much work Ursula was engaged in led her to hesitate approaching Ursula for new projects. Other faculty also noted how busy their liaisons seemed and how they were conscious of this when considering whether to invite the liaison to collaborate on a project. What this means for liaisons is two-fold: 1) Liaisons’ workload could be serving as a barrier to faculty approaching them for collaborative research projects; and 2) Liaisons need to make faculty aware of their availability, despite any impressions about workload that the faculty member may have. One liaison put this best when they said

“…what it makes me realize is that it might be wise for me to find ways to reassure her and myself that...I will let her know if I have any concerns about...any volume that might be created by the type of work we’re doing.”

The suggestion that librarians’ workloads might serve as a barrier to research engagement is not new, but only recently has attention been given to the idea that increased workloads could negatively impact librarians’ ability to engage in collaborative research with faculty.

Collaborator Trait: Prior Relationship

Schlak’s study of social capital in liaison-faculty relationships hinted that for some liaisons, a past relationship with a faculty member was important for successful future collaborations. This idea appeared within the results of this study as well, as six of the seven cases indicated that their prior relationship with their potential collaborator influenced the willingness to collaborate and the success of their collaboration. Not surprisingly, five of the pairs in this study initially worked together in the classroom before transitioning into a research collaboration. Faculty often noted that they preferred to collaborate on research with someone they already knew, partially because this prior relationship allowed them to already know the work style and work ethic of the other person. For liaisons, this also had the potential of morphing into invitations to collaborate with other faculty, as these faculty members saw the success of their colleague’s collaboration with the liaison, or the faculty member would recommend the liaison to their colleagues. For liaisons, this indicates the importance of establishing relationships with faculty in non-research settings like the classroom, as this could act as a catalyst for research collaborations.

Collaborator Descriptor: Equals

When describing their collaborators, one term that was universally applied was that of “equal.” Being seen and treated as an equal within the relationship was highlighted most often by the liaisons in the study. Liaisons, like
Mike and Amanita, pointed out how their faculty member treated them like an equal and how important it was for the success of their collaboration. And while faculty did not indicate concerns about being treated as equals themselves, some faculty did share their recognition of how important it was that they treated their liaison as an equal. Respondents also used other terms that symbolized the equality of their relationship, referring to each other as partners, colleagues, and peers.

Potential Barriers: Differing Institutional Statuses
While use of terms like partner, colleague, and peer may seem obvious in an academic setting, respondents did indicate that differences in status between faculty and librarians could deter successful research collaborations between the two. While those in this study were all engaged in successful collaborations, the realization from faculty that their liaison might not be viewed as an equal by other faculty was often discussed. For liaisons Amanita and Rose, who both have staff status at their institutions, having faculty members who did not hold this status against them was important for their ability to collaborate. In Rose’s case, her faculty collaborator Christine went beyond acknowledging the barrier that status created and became and advocate for Rose and for the library on her campus. For Christine, this was a way to leverage her position as a faculty member, and something she felt was “…the least I can do, right?” Faculty member Paul often acted in a similar manner, advocating for his liaison Mike by emphasizing the role he played in their research collaboration and making sure he was often listed first on their work.

Potential Barrier: Stereotypical Views of Librarians
One final factor that emerged as one that could impact successful research collaborations between faculty and liaisons was stereotypical views of librarians held by faculty members. While the faculty members in this study did not hold these stereotypical views, some discussed these views as being held by other faculty members. Mark, in particular, expressed concerns about liaisons being viewed as supporting faculty rather than as someone who could collaborate with faculty. Mark suggested this view of librarians as support could be held by older faculty and passed down to newer faculty in graduate school, perpetuating a view of “library science people as simply support. The way you would view the maintenance department.” While his liaison Amanita did view her role as supportive in nature, she also acknowledged that the term “support” was problematic and could be misused, especially when taken out of context:

I...don't like to use that word without having a specific context around it...I'll say that word to the people I already have a relationship with. But, that's not the first word I would choose either...there is often a mistake made where faculty think that the role that I'm in is more mechanical or more simple...than it actually is...I certainly have been in situations where faculty...come to me with...“I just need you to do such and such.” And they clearly don't realize the entire stack of technology and knowledgebase and everything that is behind that.

Implications
The factors previously identified have the potential to play a significant role in liaisons’ ability to collaborate successfully with faculty on research projects. But what do these factors mean for the efforts of liaisons interested in creating research collaborations with faculty? Mostly, the findings suggest that what liaisons need to do is make sure that faculty are aware of them and their skills. This awareness may go beyond the general outreach that liaisons often do to inform faculty about the services and resources provided by the library. Instead, the focus is on the liaisons themselves and what they can bring to a research collaboration. With this in mind, the following suggestions are offered:
• **Showcase your expertise**: Liaisons should make sure faculty are aware of the expertise that they can bring to the research collaboration. This will likely be different for each individual liaison, but may include database researching skills, the ability to conduct systematic reviews, research data management knowledge, data collection or data analysis skills, and writing or presentation skills. Other areas of expertise are also possible, and liaisons should advertise their specialties directly to faculty.

• **Get to know your faculty’s research**: Liaisons should make an effort to identify the research topics and agendas of faculty. Often this is done so that resources and materials can be purchased for the library’s collections, but liaisons can also use this knowledge to determine if they share an overlapping research interest with their faculty. This is especially important for liaisons who may have an educational background, degree or prior research experience in the faculty member’s research area.

• **Make your availability known**: Liaisons’ workloads were a shared concern for both faculty members and liaisons. Liaisons should be aware of the fact that faculty members are very aware of their workloads and want to respect their time. It is up to the liaisons to make sure faculty know that a research collaboration would be welcome and that the liaison will be able to determine if they can make time for the collaboration. With this in mind, liaisons should also not wait for faculty to approach them with potential collaborations, but instead reach out to faculty to see if the liaison could collaborate with them on their research.

• **Build on classroom collaborations**: Liaisons often form very successful collaborations with faculty in classroom settings. These relationships have the potential to set the stage for research collaborations, including projects directly related to the work done in the classroom. Liaisons should view instruction relationships as a catalyst for research collaboration relationships, as liaisons known to faculty are likely to have a better chance of presenting themselves as future collaborators than those who are not known.

• **Present yourself as an equal**: Liaisons, even those who may hold a different status than faculty at their institution, should always present themselves as equal to faculty. While this may be easier for liaisons who hold faculty status, those who hold status as staff should also be aware of what they can bring to a collaborative research relationship and present their work and their efforts as equal to what a faculty member can contribute.

• **Combat stereotypical views**: One factor that may be the most difficult for liaisons to address is the stereotypical views that faculty may hold about librarians. Efforts to present themselves and their work in a positive light should be undertaken. This may include the idea of presenting faculty with a full menu of the services that liaisons can provide, having candid conversations with faculty about how librarians may be treated on campus (including exclusionary practices that may exist at some institutions due to their status), and emphasizing the education, training, and work that goes into being a librarian. Liaisons who hold multiple degrees should also emphasize these credentials when working with faculty.

Some of these suggestions are more concrete than others, but all have the potential to offer liaisons a pathway towards forming successful research collaborations with faculty.

**Conclusion**

Relationships between liaisons and faculty members in general are complicated. Adding research into the mix makes for an even more complicated picture. However, as this study suggests, there are some factors that can impact not only the success of liaison-faculty research collaboration, but whether these collaborations take place...
at all. By identifying these factors and acting to control, change, or work within them, liaisons have the opportunity to strategically position themselves as potential research collaborators for faculty. This study indicates that given the chance, liaisons can form successful research collaborations with faculty. Understanding the factors that influence the development and success of those collaborations can help liaisons turn those collaborations into fabulations.

Endnotes

25. A nested sample is one created by selecting participants for a second phase of a mixed-method study from those who participated in the first phase of the study. Specifically, the full study used a nested sequential sampling design. R. Burke Johnson and Larry B. Christensen, Educational Research: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Approaches, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), 238.
26. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select cases for the study based on how well they fit the needs of the research. For this study, liaison librarians engaged in research collaborations with faculty members were the sought-after group. Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, Research Methods in Education, 8th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 218.
31. One pair’s interviews were conducted via Zoom due to travel restrictions.

**Bibliography**


