

Social Networking 101 for Academic Librarians

The following list of questions is intended to help academic librarians identify what they know and who they know on their campuses. It is based on the assumption that the library's success is dependent on a variety of different individuals, offices, and departments. Students and faculty experience a library environment that may be quite different from that planned by the library staff. For example, it may be too dark, too bright, too hot, or too cold. Equipment may stay broken for months despite frequent work orders. Funding may not be allocated for a top-priority library project when plenty of money seems to be available for less important projects. The fault underlying many of these problems is often poor communication. Each campus department functions as an island, largely unaware of the needs and priorities of others. An effective library works closely with every department that impacts its well-being. Effective academic librarians know who is in charge of what, and they keep communication channels open. Comfortable, informal personal relationships are essential for this purpose.

The questions below will get you started thinking about your own campus and the way things happen there. You may want to use the questions yourself, or it may be helpful to use them as the basis of a workshop for library administrators or even for all academic librarians.

CUSTODIAL ISSUES

What are the names of the custodial staff members who actually clean your building?

How do you communicate with them? Do you greet them by name when you see them? How often do you stop to chat?

Does anyone on the library staff serve as a liaison with the custodial staff?
How does this work?

Do you see them during the day or do they work at night?

If they work at night, is it possible for someone on the library's evening staff to work more closely with them?

Who supervises the custodial staff who clean your building?

Do you know this supervisor personally? Does someone else on the library staff know this person personally?

Have you ever talked with this person about the problems he encounters cleaning the library? Have you ever talked about the problems that library staff and customers experience because of the building?

If you noticed that a custodian was not doing his job, would you tell the department head?

Does the department head know you well enough to trust your judgment or would he view you as a troublemaker?

MAINTENANCE ISSUES

When light bulbs, fluorescent tubes, or ballasts cease to function, what department do you notify?

Do you complete a written work order or do you report the problem in a phone call?

What individual in that department responds to your work order and assigns a maintenance staff member to take care of the problem? Do you know his name?

Have you talked personally with the person who makes these assignments? Is there anyone else on the library staff who knows this person well enough to chat comfortably about something other than a library complaint?

If the air conditioning failed, would you notify the same person? Do you understand the division of responsibilities?

Who is the head or director of campus maintenance? Is there just one department that deals with building malfunctions or is there more than one?

Do you know the names of each department head? Do you ever attend meetings with them? Have you ever made a point to get to know them individually?

If you have a serious crisis and call the head of maintenance, is he likely to understand that this really is important? Is it more likely that you will be viewed as just another complainer?

Have you laid the groundwork for such a call by sharing information about your maintenance needs? Have you learned what you can reasonably expect given their staffing and funding limitations?

If you called with a serious problem, would you have to introduce yourself? If you've established a comfortable relationship, you would probably express the problem quite differently and get a different kind of response.

MONEY ISSUES

Which individual in what department is the first to see the library's proposed annual budget?

Does this person make a recommendation to a higher-level administrator?

Do you know this person well enough that you could discuss the budget with her?

Have you ever made a point of discussing the library's needs and priorities with this person?

Have you ever had coffee with this person? Do you stop to chat when you encounter one another?

If this person does not understand the need for a budget item, is she likely to call you or someone else in the library for information?

What is the name of the administrator who approves the library's annual budget?

Have you spent time with this individual, discussing the library's needs and priorities?

Have you made it a point to develop a friendly, comfortable working relationship with this administrator? Would she be likely to call you if some part of the library's budget request was confusing?

STAFFING ISSUES

When the library has a staffing vacancy, you probably notify the human resources department or a staff member in another department charged with this responsibility. What is the name of the staff member who handles the routine procedures involved in listing, advertising, and filling a staff vacancy?

How do you notify this person of your vacancy? If you submit paperwork, do you follow up with a phone call to make sure it has been received and clarify anything that may be unclear or out of the ordinary?

Since most academic libraries are thinly staffed, delays in filling library staff positions can cause great inconvenience. Do you know how long it usually takes to take care of the required routine, bureaucratic procedures?

Have you ever discussed these procedures with the person who normally performs these tasks? Do you understand what sometimes holds the process up?

Can you check into delays without appearing to complain? Does this staff member understand how important it is for the library to fill the vacancy quickly?

What is the name of the department head who supervises the process?

Do you see this person in meetings? Do you stop to chat when the opportunity arises?

Of course, there are many other individuals and departments that impact the library's success, but you get the idea. Personal relationships are the lubricant that keeps the university functioning. If you and the other academic librarians are not connecting to the people who make things happen, then it's time for a change.