

So, a unicorn found you: Tips for managing an unexpected request for embedded librarianship from a faculty member

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Introduction

Embedded librarianship is often the goal for many liaison librarians and subject specialists. But what do you do when you were not actively trying to cultivate this type of relationship and the opportunity appears seemingly out of the blue? The work of liaison and subject librarians is detailed, focused, and time consuming so the thought of adding another demanding and time-consuming task can be overwhelming. What do you do when approached by a “unicorn”, a faculty member who asks you, without outreach or prompting, to be embedded in their research class? This article will offer some tips to adding this unique opportunity to your workload in a manageable way.

The basis for this set of tips stems from a class I've been working with since the fall semester of 2019 when a professor in the School of Human Resources and Labor Relations approached me to discuss a new model of class, they were going to have in the spring 2020 semester. This class was built upon the independent study model for courses, but it would utilize regular meetings to create a research based, semester long, experiential learning opportunity for students. I was asked if I would be interested in meeting with students regularly to discuss research strategies, tools, and databases available to the students. I agreed to participate since this was an interesting opportunity to trial embedded librarianship in a 400-level course with a small group of students but did not give my participation much other thought. At the time, I was a liaison for four other subject areas and departments at my university so I knew that adding this responsibility to my portfolio for the year would require some adjustment and planning.

Tips for Embedded Librarian Success

The following are tips and suggestions to utilize when starting out in your own work as embedded librarians that I think helped add to the success of my work:

1) Communicate with your supervisor or boss

Make sure you are communicating with your supervisor clearly and frequently. As mentioned above, liaison librarian roles already come with heavy and varied workloads that include collection management, instruction, and outreach. Embedded librarianship can have a variety of types of involvement but most usually mean some type of regular check-in with students as well as reviews of their work or questions which might involve additional planning and review time, and general emotional labor of connecting with students. Connect with your boss to discuss the opportunity for embedded librarianship and how you will likely need to shift some priorities around while working in the embedded librarianship model. Keeping the lines of communication open with your supervisor is important for them to understand the work you are doing and will allow you to access support if needed when schedules become complicated. For example, the class meeting time for my first embedded cohort bumped right up to the weekly staff meeting my supervisor held; because of our open communication I was comfortable asking to be potentially late to those staff meetings.

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2) Set clear expectations with the requesting faculty

Setting clear expectations for the work you will be doing with the faculty member and the students in the class is key for success. Communicating with the faculty member about workload will hopefully create more of a partnership than service model for the work accomplished. Additionally, it also helps you to get a better understanding of the time commitment being embedded will require. Some questions to consider:

- Are you expected to grade assignments?
- Are you expected to assign work to students?
- Are you just checking in with students weekly to go over additional research strategies for the new research tasks they have been assigned?

There are likely countless other questions you might need to have answered before you feel comfortable moving forward with an embedded librarian project. I, unfortunately, did not ask many questions before joining the project. One question that I am still working on asking successfully is, "Can I attend the students' final project presentation and see their final reports?".

3) Think about how you will connect with students

As an embedded librarian you will likely be in a similar role to an instructor but without major authority features like the ability to grade student work. While this might have some detriments there are also positives to this status when working with students. You are not grading them so students might be more likely to disclose confusion on research topics or other course issues since research can be a tough subject to approach with their instructors. In the past, students have seemed embarrassed to say they had limited research experience when I asked them about their comfort level with research during our first meeting together. Building trust and connection with students is vital to help them think critically about their project and become comfortable asking questions.

Because my experience being embedded started during the spring 2020 semester during the initial COVID-19 Pandemic lockdowns, we used Zoom for our meetings. At the time I was reading in higher education focused publications like *The Chronicle* and higher education focused Twitter accounts (Costa 2020, McMurtrie 2020, Yanders 2021, Ramachandran 2021, June 2021, Cangialosi 2021) that the switch to virtual learning had been difficult and students were reporting in interviews and on social media that faculty members were including sometimes arduous requirements like keeping cameras on and offering few to no accommodations for a variety of other issues. Knowing this, part of my plan to connect to and build trust with students was to embrace flexibility. In my meetings with students this looks like:

- Keeping cameras off in a Zoom meeting is okay
 - This helps with any internet bandwidth issues that can be present when everyone has their cameras on.
 - Trust the students to be engaged in the meeting even with their cameras off.
- Attendance is required but if you need to miss a session that is okay, please do your best to let me know of your absence in advance.
 - No questions asked; no doctor's, funeral notes or obituaries required.
 - Missing one class was fine but if it became a regular trend, I would reach out to the faculty member running the class to discuss.

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- Questions in advance of our sessions were encouraged
 - This allowed students to ask questions anonymously and hopefully with less stress or anxiety.
 - This also allowed me to prepare in advance so we could use our time together more efficiently.

My approach to flexibility likely stemmed from not asking questions about expectations for my instruction sessions (see tip two) so I felt free to approach teaching however I thought would work best for that cohort of students.

Conclusion

These tips can help provide some things for you to consider when working as an embedded librarian. Ultimately, it will be up to you to decide how you want to interact and work with students, but I would recommend trying use open communication and flexibility to build trust and judgement-free class settings where students feel comfortable asking questions.

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