

A Tale of Two Position Descriptions: Writing a New Liaison Librarian Position Description

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Introduction

Position descriptions are ubiquitous, yet their formats, uses, and audiences are quite diverse. They serve many functions: to orient new employees, to both guide and reflect institutional goals and strategic planning, to supplement legal contracts, to give structure to performance reviews, and to aid in recruitment. In a fast-moving and innovative environment like Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Libraries, it is easy for a position description to become out-of-date. Indeed, the liaison librarian position description at this institution had mostly stayed static over a period of years, while the librarian responsibilities evolved. GVSU Libraries desired to better align the liaison librarian position description with the work liaison librarians were doing. Accomplishing this task required multiple brainstorming sessions and the formation of a committee. This article describes in detail the process of changing the GVSU Libraries liaison librarian position description and the outcome while sharing what other libraries can learn from our work.

The liaison librarians started with one big question: *Does the current liaison librarian position description really need to change?* There was a lot to unpack in that simple question: had librarian jobs changed that much? Did the inflexibility of the current description truly inhibit clear evaluation of performance? The answer was a clear yes. But why rewrite the existing document? We realized the original was dated, too long, and challenging to evaluate. The current position description also did not reflect our progressive library and forward thinking librarians. We now had an opportunity to more clearly communicate what we do. Improved communication would benefit not only the librarians tasked with the work but also help others in the library better understand the work. A new position description could even enhance our future recruitment efforts.

Liaison Position Description Committee

Everything began in Fall of 2013 when two department head librarians kicked off a conversation about the liaison librarian position description. It started with a Research and Instructional Services (R & I) division-wide brainstorming session on the responsibilities and desired attributes of liaison librarians.¹ The brainstorming was prompted by the ARL document *New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries*² and acted as a primer for future discussions.

Laying the Foundation

Between Fall of 2013 and Fall of 2014 liaison librarians attended webinars on new roles for librarians and other liaison-related professional skills in order to gauge our local practices

against national practices. Throughout the process we kept careful notes on various themes, concepts, and trends, all of which were diligently retained and woven into the position description revision. It was critically important not to lose the momentum from those early discussions. We found it to be particularly important to take care with group suggestions and be transparent with how those suggestions informed decision-making; ideas tend to flow more freely when everyone trusts they will be thoughtfully considered.

In September 2014 the head librarians held a day-long retreat to further explore the definition of “liaison librarian” and to draft a framework for librarian practices. The result from this additional brainstorming was brought to all liaison librarians in December 2014 to further explore their changing roles. The outcome of this group brainstorming session was the creation of a small committee of liaison librarians, the Liaison Position Description committee, charged with developing a new position description. Five librarians (Mary O’Kelly, Emily Frigo, Elizabeth Psyck, Kim Ranger, and Ashley Rosener) volunteered for the committee to develop a draft liaison librarian position description by May 2015. All were liaison librarians, but three had distinct position descriptions which would be informed by the new description, including a unit head, a first year coordinator, and a government documents librarian. Our liaison areas spanned undergraduate and graduate arts and humanities, social sciences, interdisciplinary programs, and professional programs. Our length of time in the profession ranged from three to twenty-five years.

Committee Process

The Liaison Position Description committee began work on January 16, 2015, by carefully reviewing thirteen guidance documents consisting of past job descriptions, notes from the various brainstorming sessions, articles and position papers such as *Intersections of Scholarly Communication and Information Literacy: Creating Strategic Collaborations for a Changing Academic Environment*,³ recommendations and best practices, the University Libraries Scope of Work, and the Association of College and Research Libraries’ *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators: A Practical Guide*.⁴ Our goal was to ensure alignment with current University Libraries practice and future-oriented trends in the library profession. The model description from The Ohio State University Libraries’ *A Framework for the Engaged Librarian: Building on our Strengths* inspired the side-by-side listing of competencies and best practices we later adopted.⁵ Language from ALA, ACRL, and ARL helped our group update the broad expectations of a modern liaison librarian. The notes from previous team meetings helped set the context for the revisions and ensure all voices were heard. We gave ourselves permission to start with a blank slate: no expectations, no template, and no prescribed format. This freedom spurred unexpected creativity that ultimately resulted in an entirely new framework for liaison librarians.

In the first meeting we asked ourselves: *What does a good liaison do?* The initial answers were:

- Communication to faculty and university
- Instruction - broadly defined
- Collections/repository
- Scholarship (contributor)
- Services/resources
- Listening, receptive, advocacy, negotiating
- Making connections

- Events
- Training/teaching
- Relationships

These early thoughts reflected a combination of concrete (instruction, collections) and abstract (making connections, relationships, communication) responsibilities. We sought to balance our aspirations with actual practice, considering how the new description might affect our annual workload planning and subsequent annual reports. Our discussions ranged from whether the “research lifecycle” was an accurate description of the holistic support we provide to students and faculty to where to incorporate collection development activities in the finished document. We debated the merits of highlighting scholarly communication as a separate area of responsibility versus integrating it with information literacy and departmental liaison responsibilities. Most importantly, we never stopped thinking about how this document would be used by current faculty as well as future librarians for annual evaluations, salary adjustments, and the promotion and tenure process.

The committee found the combination of best practices and competencies contained in *A Framework for the Engaged Librarian: Building on our Strengths* to be highly inspirational.⁶ It had clean language, minimal jargon, and logical organization. We began to apply that structure to our institutional context by first deciding upon the competencies we wanted. Competencies would guide librarians in their work and aid us in determining needed professional development training for new and current librarians. We next brainstormed desired best practices for liaison librarians that were demonstrable and could help librarians with goal planning and writing their annual workload plans. We organized the list of competencies and matched them with best practice examples. As we refined our lists, we rewrote competencies as action verbs and best practices as gerunds, moving items from one column to the other and back again as we finalized our ideas. We deliberated about terminology, the number of examples, and the inclusion of broad concepts versus specific details.

To illustrate, one section of our previous liaison librarian position description...

INSTRUCTION AND OUTREACH

- Ensures that collections and services support current curriculum and research needs by establishing and maintaining regular communication with faculty members and students
- Analyzes course offerings and keeps abreast of developments in assigned fields
- Assists in preparing reports, such as curriculum planning, strategic planning and accreditation
- Seeks opportunities to inform faculty of library initiatives and issues
- Proactively develops relationships with faculty to learn individual research interests and library support needs for teaching
- Participates, promotes, and supports Libraries’ instruction program and initiatives
- Collaborates with departments in assigned liaison areas to embed Information Literacy into curricula
- Works with faculty to develop and deliver high-quality instructional programs that integrate Information Literacy into the teaching

was transformed to...

Facilitate Learning Opportunities	
Competencies	Examples of Best Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provides individual research support to faculty, students, and staff ▪ Promotes the integration of information literacy concepts and skills into the curriculum ▪ Develops effective instructional sessions and provides diverse learning opportunities ▪ Educates our community to be ethical and informed creators and users of information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Scheduling meetings with students to discuss a specific research assignment</i> ▪ <i>Writing and maintaining instruction plans that include curriculum maps and sharing with liaison faculty</i> ▪ <i>Developing tutorials, guides, and other learning objects</i> ▪ <i>Meeting with classroom faculty to establish learning outcomes</i> ▪ <i>Directing faculty and students to the libraries' copyright and fair use resources</i>

Communicating with Stakeholders

Within six weeks our committee drafted a new liaison librarian position description. To gather feedback, we brought it to a monthly R & I meeting of 27 librarians and staff. Although the position description was radically different, the response was broadly positive and the document was readily accepted with minimal changes. Everyone liked the overview language, structure, and competencies. Many colleagues commented that the new version was more reflective of our work, clearly written, and would assist with recruiting and orienting new librarians as intended. There was a bit of back and forth discussion on how to balance a holistic perspective with specificity. For instance, scholarly communications was not explicitly mentioned beyond the introductory overview statement. Rather, scholarly communication was woven throughout the document and there were references to copyright, fair use, Open Educational Resources, and the changing models of scholarship creation and dissemination. To bring more attention to this growing area of our work and a growing unit within the library, we added 'scholarly communication' to the first competency in the 'Model Lifelong Learning' section. We took all of the feedback received and finalized the draft.

In the end we considered our ideals and overarching characteristics as commonalities among us, and these became aspects of the overview statement. The resulting document (Appendix) is radically different from previous versions and provides the opportunity to benchmark our activities very precisely while still allowing individual interpretation.

Outcome and Applications

The process used by GVSU Libraries to update a position description may be duplicated at other institutions, although the outcome may be different. The single most important factor that contributed to this project's success was support from library administration to bring forward whatever our committee believed to be the best option. There

was a true freedom to break with the format of previous position descriptions and explore other ways to describe our work. Our committee received feedback from the Associate Dean on our first draft that was extremely valuable in helping to develop the final product. Perhaps most importantly, this feedback led to discussions about rewording portions of the position description to better reflect our intentions, rather than accepting suggested changes wholesale. From start to finish the process of reimagining what our work could look like was driven predominantly by the faculty. Depending on institutional culture, it may be difficult for administration to step out of the process, but our committee felt such freedom led to our success.

Another important factor contributing to our success was the documentation created and collected by colleagues recording past discussions about position descriptions in addition to preserved documents no longer in use. This documentation allowed us to build upon previous work and better understand how the way we described our work changed over the years. By basing our radical changes on documents and discussions colleagues were familiar with, we were able to build consensus amongst the faculty. We demonstrated there was continued interest in finding a better way to describe what a liaison librarian does while ensuring we did not need to start from scratch each time the conversation began again.

Challenges

It is important to acknowledge there are still some challenges and unknowns related to the changes made in the liaison librarian position description. Since the document is new, it has not yet been tested in the library or university personnel review process, although that will happen in February 2016. It is unknown what, if any, impact the different format will have on how we write our portfolios for contract renewal or annual reports of our work. The real test of any position description document is what happens when an individual is not performing their job. As far as the committee knows there have been no such concerns since this position description was adopted.

Thus far the new position description only impacts liaison librarians. We are hopeful that our changes will influence other position descriptions, especially within our R & I division, but there is no requirement that other positions use a similar format or philosophy when creating their descriptions. It was helpful that liaison librarians make up the largest cohort of faculty (thirteen out of twenty-nine) with similar professional responsibilities. In contrast, for the other sixteen faculty, their position descriptions tend to be unique and describe the role of one individual.

The design process described here took significant time. This includes not only the committee work described above, but also several years of conversations that examined our work, the words we used to describe it, and what the future of academic librarianship might look like. This long development process, in fits and starts, allowed our colleagues to grapple with the idea of change long before we presented a redesigned position description. Although at the time many of these conversations felt like dead ends, they served as a warm up period that produced the conditions ultimately leading to our success.

Another important factor to acknowledge is the culture in GVSU Libraries and on this committee. Our conversations were open and honest and, at times, challenging. Committee members felt comfortable asking questions and voicing concerns, pushing each other to better explain what we really meant in suggested changes. This was not always comfortable, as it

required each committee member to advocate for their point of view while also keeping an open mind, but it was a vital part of our process.

Finally, although we were able to propose a radical re-imagination of our liaison librarian position description, we were not able to update the entire document. Librarians at GVSU are faculty, and as such each position description includes a list of baseline expectations (Appendix). These baseline expectations are proposed and approved through a separate process, centered around the University Libraries Faculty Assembly, and could not be updated in the scope of this committee's work. This creates a somewhat contradictory situation where an innovative position description is followed by a very traditional set of expectations. We recognize this tension and have discussed the need to explore updating the criteria.

Conclusion

GVSU Libraries have a culture that is nimble, flexible, and comfortable with informed risk-taking. Over the past decade the libraries underwent transformational change. We undertook library-wide service training, enhanced the focus on student learning, and restructured divisions to take advantage of team-based efficiencies. This open environment encouraged a from-the-ground-up rebuilding of the liaison librarian position description.

While change may rarely be eagerly embraced, when approached in strategic ways it is more readily accepted. GVSU Libraries took a strategic approach to the introduction and adoption of a new liaison librarian position description. Librarians were pleased with the changes and the new position was adopted with no hesitation and only minor revisions. It was an enjoyable process and a positive learning experience for the committee and faculty involved. We came to committee meetings with open minds and respect for new ideas, which led to fruitful discussions.

During the upcoming years it will be useful to review how this position description works with our annual reviews, the tenure process, and new hires. We plan to review and evaluate our new liaison librarian position description over the next few years.

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References

1. The R & I division houses an associate dean, six staff, and twenty faculty librarians, three of which are department heads.
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3. Association of College and Research Libraries. Working Group on Intersections of Scholarly Communication and Information Literacy. 2013. *Intersections of Scholarly Communication and Information Literacy: Creating Strategic Collaborations for a Changing Academic Environment*. Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/publications/whitepapers/Intersections.pdf>.
4. Association of College and Research Libraries. 2008. *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/profstandards>.
5. The Ohio State University: University Libraries. 2011. *A Framework for the Engaged Librarian: Building on our Strengths*. Retrieved from http://library.osu.edu/staff/administration-reports/Engaged_Librarian_Framework_Dec2011.pdf.
6. Ibid.

APPENDIX

LIAISON LIBRARIAN



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Liaison librarians are the primary link between academic departments and the library. They support faculty and students through the research lifecycle by exhibiting best practices in information literacy, scholarly communication, data reference, and collection development. Liaisons communicate the importance of the library and its services to the higher education community. They provide effective instruction that integrates information literacy and scholarly communications. They advocate for library resources that support the curriculum. Liaisons have highly variable responsibilities that require tolerance for ambiguity, excellent time management skills, and attention to detail.

A successful liaison librarian will:

- Build relationships and engage with the campus community
- Facilitate learning opportunities

- Model lifelong learning
- Contribute to the success of University Libraries

The tables below list the competencies expected of a liaison librarian. The examples of best practices are a starting point for demonstrating those competencies but are not an exhaustive list. Librarianship requires flexibility and creativity, which likely will result in a wide variety of best practices.

Baseline Expectations in Professional Job Knowledge and Responsibilities

Build Relationships with Liaison Areas and Engage with the University Community	
Competencies	Examples of Best Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Facilitates problem-solving for the assigned programs in relation to library services ▪ Communicates and collaborates with liaison departments ▪ Pursues opportunities for relevant collaboration beyond liaison areas ▪ Promotes library programs and resources to campus communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Co-authoring a scholarly or creative project with faculty</i> ▪ <i>Participating in liaison department meetings to learn about faculty needs and share information about library programs</i> ▪ <i>Presenting at new student or faculty orientation</i> ▪ <i>Participating in campus events such as Student Scholars Day, faculty forums, sabbatical showcases, awards ceremonies</i>

Facilitate Learning Opportunities	
Competencies	Examples of Best Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provides individual research support to faculty, students, and staff ▪ Promotes the integration of information literacy concepts and skills into the curriculum ▪ Develops effective instructional sessions and provides diverse learning opportunities ▪ Educates our community to be ethical and informed creators and users of information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Scheduling meetings with students to discuss a specific research assignment</i> ▪ <i>Writing and maintaining instruction plans that include curriculum maps and sharing with liaison faculty</i> ▪ <i>Developing tutorials, guides, and other learning objects</i> ▪ <i>Meeting with classroom faculty to establish learning outcomes</i> ▪ <i>Directing faculty and students to the</i>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develops learning materials in a variety of formats and technologies ▪ Adjusts instructional practices to meet learner needs ▪ Teaches students, staff, and faculty in liaison areas and across campus ▪ Participates in and supports student employee, staff, and faculty training, seminars, and discussions 	<p><i>libraries' copyright and fair use resources</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Creating a lesson plan that addresses scholarly communication topics in the discipline</i> ▪ <i>Promoting open education resources</i> ▪ <i>Evaluating instruction sessions</i> ▪ <i>Leading or participating in training sessions for student employees and library staff</i> ▪ <i>Leading professional development sessions for librarians</i>
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Model Lifelong Learning	
Competencies	<i>Examples of Best Practices</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develops expertise relevant to liaison areas ▪ Maintains an awareness of trends and issues in higher education, academic libraries, scholarly communication, and disciplines served ▪ Participates in professional development to advance skills in the field of librarianship ▪ Shares professional and scholarly expertise with colleagues to foster development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Discussing changing models of creating and sharing scholarship within disciplines</i> ▪ <i>Reading book and database reviews</i> ▪ <i>Participating in a professional association section or discussion group</i> ▪ <i>Attending a range of internal and external workshops and conferences</i> ▪ <i>Inviting colleagues to collaborate on scholarship</i> ▪ <i>Mentoring a new colleague through writing an article</i>

Contribute to the Success of University Libraries	
Competencies	<i>Examples of Best Practices</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Aligns work to the broader University Libraries strategic plan and Research & Instructional Services goals ▪ Supports University Libraries' programming ▪ Participates in library assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Referencing the goals in the workload plan</i> ▪ <i>Participating in the planning of library special events</i> ▪ <i>Submitting data about instruction, collection, and reference activities</i> ▪ <i>Preparing for meetings</i>

<p>and evaluation activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Builds and manages a collection relevant to the curriculum ▪ Identifies growth opportunities for the University Libraries ▪ Understands and supports the University Libraries service philosophy ▪ Practices evidence-based decision-making ▪ Recognizes the iterative nature of collection development, instruction, scholarly communication, library advocacy, and assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Selecting and deselecting materials according to regularly updated collection development policies</i> ▪ <i>Promoting scholarly communication support services to faculty</i> ▪ <i>Listening attentively and with respect to diverse opinions</i> ▪ <i>Participating in new first year initiatives</i> ▪ <i>Using library data to evaluate services and make appropriate adjustments</i> ▪ <i>Adjusting the format and content of library materials selected in response to changes in the curriculum.</i>
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Baseline Expectations in General Professional Behaviors and Values

- Develops and maintains thorough knowledge of job
- Works collaboratively and cooperatively with librarians and staff within unit, across the library organization, and across the university and the larger community
- Manages professional relationship and responsibilities in a manner that reflects well on the GVSU Libraries
- Demonstrates flexibility, openness, and receptivity to new ideas and approaches
- Demonstrates innovation, creativity, and informed risk-taking
- Demonstrates effective and efficient use of resources
- Demonstrates commitment to the values and principles of librarianship
- Participates in professional associations, societies, or consortia

Baseline Expectations in Scholarly and Creative Activities

(see Library Guidelines in addition to general statements below)

- Presents papers, publishes articles, leads workshops, and/or conducts training sessions outside of the University to share professional expertise
- Collaborates with colleagues at other institutions and libraries
- Engages in continuing education related to professional duties and assignments
- Conducts research for the betterment of library services and practice

Baseline Expectations in Service

- Regularly provides service to the unit, the libraries, the university and the profession; provides service to the larger community when opportunities arise

Area of Significant Focus

- Every librarian will have the option of choosing an area of significant focus for the year. The area of significant focus can be derived from any of the areas of responsibility or it may be a special project in or out of the libraries or the university.
 - The area of significant focus will be negotiated early in the academic year between the librarian and his/her unit head or director. The results must be measurable and the related work should represent a commitment of about 10 hours a week on average
 - It must meet identifiable campus needs and fit within the resources and strategic plan of the libraries