The ‘Hangout Factor’ in Library Liaison Work: An Exploration

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Introduction

In the library literature, many formal attempts have been made to define and list the diverse and varying activities of library liaisons. This paper is an exploration of the often-overlooked and seemingly insignificant interactions of liaisons. While social points of engagement aren’t necessarily thought of as official liaison work, we believe that these are the foundation on which all other successful liaison activity is built: the “Hangout Factor.”

Literature Review

Early definitions of liaison work specifically excluded any kind of informal work. Liaison work often focused on collection development, bibliographic instruction and communicating about library policies/services to user communities. The most recent definitions of liaison activities include the following list:

- Planned formal and structured activities
- Student-centered activities
- Counseling and advising
- Instruction
- Reference
- Outreach
- Administrative support
- Committee work
- Budget
- Policy
- Training
- Consultation
- Collaboration
- Brokerage

Recent studies of liaison work have begun to include hangout activities in descriptions of responsibilities.

- “An in-depth study of the activities performed by academic librarians in their roles as liaison conducted at the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, and the University of Illinois, revealed that while formal activities (such as collection development and bibliographic instruction) were frequently performed, informal acts of understanding the needs of the faculty and negotiating with them were also important.”

However, liaison work has changed since the early days.

While hangout activities are not often listed directly as responsibilities, the skills needed for them are often needed to be important.

- Relinquished the hangout space to the faculty member, but the faculty member performed collection development activities

Creating good relations with faculty through hangout activities is the precursor to collaborative activities – it can even make or break them.

- Librarians who appreciate and understand faculty members' needs and concerns are more likely to be successful in their roles as liaisons.

Our Theories

- More of the hangout activities take place on “faculty turf” or outside the traditional haunts of the librarian, which means good things can happen when we step outside of our comfort zone.

- Informal hangout activities can have a positive influence on the number and quality of the more formal liaison activities (such as collection requests, information literacy instruction, requests for collaboration, etc.)

- Creating good relations with faculty through hangout type activities is necessary to bring about successful collaborative work.

Defining the Nebulous

What does it mean to “hangout” with faculty or students in liaison work?

- Hangout encompasses the social and informal activities that can be a part of liaison work, but it also can happen during formal activities too.

- While hangout is networking, not all networking is hangout.

- While hangout activities are face-to-face contact (whether that’s formal – in a classroom, or informal – at a social activity), some hangout can happen in social media spaces as well.

- Hangout involves people/relationship skills, risk-taking, being comfortable with ambiguity and playfulness.

- The ‘Hangout Factor’ is what makes some of us stand out from others.

- The ‘Hangout Factor’ sets the stage for the growth of the relationship.

A Few Suggestions

- Be willing to expand your comfort zone and experiment with different kinds of hangout activities in your liaison work.

- Keep your eyes open to recognize hangout opportunities as they emerge.

- View hangout activities with a long lens, because there is a cumulative effect.

- Do not synthesize the social/hangout activities as “not real work.”

- Do not simply view hangout activities as distractions from your “real work” or as a sacrifice for something “greener,” but enjoy them as part of themselves.

- Make sure to record and assess the hangout activities that you do.

\[\text{Diagram showing the 'Hangout Factor' in Library Liaison Work: An Exploration}\]