The Role of a Liaison Librarian in the Field of Anthropology at a Large Research University

I believe that the larger question is about the role of a liaison librarian at a research university in general. Who are one’s primary constituents, what services do they require, what are one’s duties to the library system and university community in general? These are all questions that need to be addressed before looking at any specific duties for an anthropology liaison librarian.

A liaison librarian must stay current with the latest reference sources in a general way, to aid in reference work at the reference desk, open to all in the university community. This is especially so at a library with a “Commons” area, where one never knows who will be requesting help. This includes traditional reference sources, electronic databases, electronic and print journals, etc. One also needs to be a good communicator and have a heart of an educator, for that is a large part of one’s role as a librarian in today’s ever changing world of technology. One must also evaluate these materials and explain to their clients the positive and negative aspects of them, without judging them, as well as educating them on how to find and evaluate sources for themselves. Naturally, many of these duties vary, depending on the specific position.

A position for an undergraduate instructional librarian will have all the general knowledge mentioned above, but will specialize in the area of instruction in critical thinking skills. A liaison librarian will also have the general knowledge needed for instruction and to work a reference desk at a large institution with a varied cliental. However the liaison librarian to a specific department or departments will specialize on resources that are important to that discipline. At a research university one’s clients will be undergraduate and graduate students, as well as faculty. It is important for the librarian to have at least a broad understanding of the theories and practices of that discipline. This is especially so for working with graduate students and faculty. It is important to be in touch with the faculty and understand where their own research is positioned, and talk to them about the journals and books they read, and the colleagues and theorists they respect in the field. This is essential in building a relevant collection. It is also important for the liaison to have a genuine interest in that discipline.

In short, a liaison librarian at a research institution must stay current in the technology and resources in reference librarianship and information literacy instruction, with an emphasis on those resources most relevant to the discipline one liaisons with. One must understand the literature, theories and practices of the discipline well enough to work with students and faculty to help them find what they need to carry out their research and to help develop a strong collection. One must build a relationship of respect and mutual trust with one’s clients in that discipline so that when a new source is available, one’s clients will value the suggestion and take the time that might be required to understand it. If there is no trust, it will be difficult to introduce new technologies. Change is not always easy.

A liaison to anthropology has its own quirks in that anthropology itself consists of four fields. While most practitioners in the field specialize in one of these sub-fields, a liaison librarian will have to at least have a cursory awareness of the theories and practices in all four, perhaps with a specialty in one area as well. Each discipline’s fieldwork practices differ, sometimes significantly. This is especially important in a program like that at Gainesville where the department prides itself in its cohesion between the four sub-fields. The librarian will research and maintain all types of reference materials. It is his/her duty to learn about new materials and resources and introduce them to the students and faculty of the department. Regular communication with the members of the department is critical.