

# Service, Gender, and Liaison Librarianship

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In 2018, Rita Vine published ten “observations” on the state of liaison librarianship and how liaisons can better align with university priorities, based on her work with the Association of Research Libraries liaison institutes held between 2015 and 2018.<sup>1</sup> This work is part of a push in the past ten years among library administrators to “rethink” liaison librarianship. The conclusions of this rethinking have been that liaisons must deepen outreach efforts, focus more on the university’s mission, and be more willing to put aside core library services and values in favor of changing higher education and information environments. In addition, this effort asks administrators to, when plausible, reduce liaison numbers in favor of so-called “functional specialists.” But where has this push come from? Does liaison librarianship actually need rethinking: is it broken?

The argument of this chapter is that recent efforts to “fix” liaison librarianship seek to erase a feminized vision of “service,” in which the library and librarians are answerable to the needs they perceive in their relationships with students and faculty. This approach is rejected in favor of “marketing” and “outreach,” in which librarians are answerable to the desires of the library and university writ large. What terms like “mind-set

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1 Rita Vine, “Realigning Liaison with University Priorities: Observations from the ARL Liaison Institutes 2015–18,” *College & Research Libraries News* 79, no. 8 (2018): 420, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.79.8>.

change” and “reskilling” belie are the reining in of liaison autonomy.<sup>2</sup> Instead, liaisons should be flexible, able to mold to what the library and university prioritize and deem relevant and to do so on the institution’s timetable. Where liaisonship traditionally involves significant horizontal labor—across departments and with faculty, students, and other campus communities—the new liaisonship is significantly more vertical. Instead of a model that emphasizes teaching, listening, and service—professional attributes characteristic of feminized labor—the new liaison responds to the needs of university and library administration and convinces faculty and students that these are also their needs.

Ultimately, the discussion of reimagining liaison librarianship is part of a storied tradition in which librarians—particularly those at research-intensive institutions—feel the need to reimagine librarian labor periodically in order to maintain relevance. These attempts to maintain relevance through re-tooling are ultimately meant to disassociate the field from devalued and feminized forms of labor. We will be using Roma Harris’s analysis of librarianship in the early 1990s to frame our analysis of the discourse surrounding the library liaison over the past ten years. As Harris points out, the cycle of reinventing librarianship recurs due to anxiety about the feminized particulars of service as traditionally practiced by librarians.<sup>3</sup> We argue that the impetus for reskilling liaisons is the same gendered professionalization dilemma identified by Harris in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> To make this argument, we will 1) review the relationship between liaisonship, as it has developed, and gendered definitions of service, 2) examine why there is a reconsideration of the liaison role at this particular historical moment, and 3) develop suggestions for how to respond to the push toward reinvention.

## A Brief History of Liaison Librarianship

A search for work on liaison librarianship in Library Literature and Information Science Index results in 224 articles, published between 1986 and 2016; the same search in Library and Information Science Abstracts

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2 Nisa Bakkalbasi, et al., “ARL Library Liaison Institute: What We Learned About Needs and Opportunities for Reskilling,” *College & Research Library News* 77, no. 3 (2016): 94–56, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.77.3>.

3 Roma M. Harris, *Librarianship: The Erosion of a Woman’s Profession* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1992).

4 Harris, *Librarianship*.

results in 1195 articles published between 1976 and 2018, the vast majority of which (1160) were published after 2000.<sup>5</sup> Despite the high number of results, these searches undoubtedly miss articles about liaison librarianship, because as Craig Gibson and Jamie Wright Coniglio point out, liaison librarians are also subject librarians, subject specialists, subject bibliographers, bibliographers, subject liaisons, reference librarians, and occasionally embedded librarians, blended librarians, and field librarians.<sup>6</sup> Both these searches and job titles are biased towards large research institutions and members of the Association of Research Libraries, as smaller libraries often have less differentiation in roles, and library workers who perform the same sorts of work as liaison librarians might have different titles. We also want to note that we are sensitive to critiques that too much conversation around academic libraries and librarians focuses on ARL libraries. We do think that our observations and arguments hold true for any library worker who performs the “soft” work of liaison librarians. Further, changes at the ARL level can precipitate and encourage similar changes at smaller institutions, depending on the leadership and aspirations of those institutions. Librarian-student and librarian-faculty ratios are different between ARL and other institutions such as regional comprehensives and liberal arts colleges, as are institutional missions, but ARL practices can and frequently do become norms for all academic libraries.

Fred J. Hay provides the most thorough overview of the early history of liaison librarianship from its beginnings through the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> After World War II, the United States Departments of State and Defense pushed for the development of area studies expertise and departments at universities, as well as the library collections to support them: “the expansion of subject specialization at U.S. libraries was initially a national defense activity.”<sup>8</sup> Librarians, often those with language expertise, were hired to work

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5 Searches were done for “liaison\*” as a keyword and “academic” as a subject in both databases.

6 Craig Gibson and Jamie Wright Coniglio, “The New Liaison Librarian: Competencies for the 21st Century Academic Library,” in *The Expert Library: Staffing, Sustaining, and Advancing the Academic Library in the 21st Century*, eds. Scott Walter and Karen Williams (Chicago: American Library Association, 2010). Some of these titles were trendy when the chapter was written, but are less common now. “Bibliographer” is used in the literature, but generally only to refer to usually deceased white men who might better be referred to as bibliophiles or book collectors.

7 Fred J. Hay, “The Subject Specialist in the Academic Library: A Review Article,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 16, no. 1 (March 1990).

8 Hay, “Subject Specialist,” 12.

with area studies and soon thereafter for other subjects. By 1960, most large universities had liaison librarians. This was not without conflict; as early as 1970, the “extinction” of liaison librarians was predicted, as approval plans and patron requests made subject expertise unnecessary.<sup>9</sup> Hay, in contrast, argues that “functionalists” in libraries will instead go extinct, that collections should not be left to vendors, and that liaison librarianship is valuable, even in the face of rapid change and “increased demands for user-oriented services.”<sup>10</sup>

Hay identifies five categories of liaison librarian work: collections, reference, liaising with faculty, cataloging, and “bibliography,” which includes instruction and guide creation.<sup>11</sup> Stephen Pinfield, writing a decade later, echoes these core responsibilities but also argues that “The role of the subject librarian is changing. Some of the most significant changes include the following: The old job...plus; More emphasis on liaison with users; Advocacy of the collections; New roles; Enquiries—the new way; Working with technical staff; Selection of e-resources; More information skills training; Organizing the information landscape; Involvement in educational technology and learning environments; Team working; Project working.”<sup>12</sup> These new roles require new skills, namely: “Subject expertise; People skills; Communication skills; Technical / IT skills; Presentation and teaching skills; Financial management skills; Analytical and evaluative skills; Team-working and team-building skills; Project management skills; Flexibility; Ability to learn quickly; Vision.”<sup>13</sup> More than 20 years after Hay’s article, Moniz, Henry, and Eshleman, who begin their book with “The role of the library and librarians on campus has changed dramatically in the past two decades,”<sup>14</sup> identify essentially the same areas of work: liaising with departments/faculty/staff, subject expertise, collection development, instruction, guides and tutorials, and evaluation. They

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9 We note the similarity of this line of argumentation to current discussions around collections work.

10 Hay, “Subject Specialists,” 16. We also note the similarity of this language to current discussions of librarianship.

11 Hay, “Subject Specialists.”

12 Stephen J. Pinfield, “The Changing Role of Subject Librarians in Academic Libraries,” *Journal of Librarianship & Information Science* 33, no. 1 (2001): 33–34.

13 Pinfield, “Changing Role,” 37.

14 Richard Moniz, Jo Henry, and Joe Eshleman, *Fundamentals for the Academic Liaison* (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2014).

heavily emphasize “relationship building” as the key to liaison work. Gibson and Coniglio replicate these lists, adding scholarly communication, emerging technology, marketing, and public relations,<sup>15</sup> and other articles add even more areas: data management and curation, digital scholarship, and grant administration.<sup>16</sup>

What we mean to suggest here is that there has been a fair amount of continuity in understanding liaison work within academic libraries, and even new areas of expertise are not disconnected from older versions of that work. As recently as 2017, Jennifer Church-Duran described liaisons as “librarians assigned to a specific client base (a school, department, college, research center, or co-curricular unit) in a personalized, relationship-centered system of service delivery”<sup>17</sup> and noted “most [liaison positions] contain five common core categories of anticipated work: (1) engagement/outreach, (2) collection development/management, (3) research or reference support, (4) teaching and learning, and (5) scholarly communications,” with added work in research impact, digital scholarship, educational technology, and data management.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, as Alice Crawford<sup>19</sup> observes, there has been a sense of anxiety around liaisons, at least since Pinfield’s publication in 2001, which Crawford identifies as the “first sense of real anxiety about the role.”<sup>20</sup> Not incidental to that anxiety, we feel, is the fact that, as Pinfield notes, “Subject librarians often make up a significant proportion of the senior (‘academic-related’) staff in the library.”<sup>21</sup> Over the past ten years, that anxiety has ramped up. The Association of Research Libraries has been leading an initiative for the past decade called Reimagining the Library Liaison, which thus far has included at least six reports, three articles, three in-person meetings of liaison supervisors, three conference

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15 Gibson and Coniglio, “New Liaison Librarian.”

16 Rebecca K. Miller and Lauren Pressley, *SPEC Kit 349: Evolution of Library Liaisons* (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, November 2015), <https://doi.org/10.29242/spec.349>.

17 Jennifer Church-Duran, “Distinctive Roles: Engagement, Innovation, and the Liaison Model,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 17, no. 2 (2017): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2017.0015>.

18 Church-Duran, “Distinctive Roles,” 261–63.

19 Alice Crawford, *New Directions for Academic Liaison Librarians* (Oxford: Chandos, 2012).

20 Crawford, *New Directions*, 4.

21 Pinfield, “Changing Roles,” 33.

presentations, and a video. This is just since 2009; prior to that, ARL had also done one survey of library liaisons in 1992, which argued: “Until recently, the library collection has formed the focus of library activity. But as the physical collection becomes less central, the user is becoming the focus of library services. The role librarians are to have in this decentralized information environment could depend largely upon the effectiveness with which liaison librarians are able to monitor, anticipate, and respond to users’ information needs.”<sup>22</sup> This more or less resonates with earlier discussions around liaison librarianship, such as those described above. Why then has liaison librarianship recently become something that needs to be “reimagined?”<sup>23</sup>

Church-Duran suggests that the imperative to revise is connected to a shift to “engagement,” which is distinct from service and services. “Engagement,” she contends, “occurs as libraries cultivate the ability to anticipate changes in users’ environments and expectations, and then build scalable, innovative services that intersect at key points with the research and the learning cycles.”<sup>24</sup> This definition of engagement seems to have been first articulated by Lorcan Dempsey in 2013: “By engagement, I mean that libraries are working to create distinctive value in the research, learning and teaching workflows of their users in ways which go beyond the provision of collections,” which he acknowledges libraries have always done, although it was not specifically called “engagement” but rather “services.”<sup>25</sup> We suspect that this is primarily rebranding; the actual work may or may not be that different. At the same time, subject and liaison librarians are consistently counterposed to “functional” specialists (see, e.g. *Research Library Issues*, no. 294 and *New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries*), which erases the relational, interpersonal element of

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22 Gail F. Latta, *SPEC Kit 189: Liaison Services in ARL Libraries* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 1992), 5.

23 Which can also mean “destroyed.” Some libraries described in the ARL reports have gotten rid of liaisons entirely. We do not mean to suggest that liaison work is the only or best way of organizing librarians or performing library work, but we do want to note that “reimagining” can mean many things.

24 Church-Duran, “Distinctive Roles,” 258.

25 Lorcan Dempsey, “Three Challenges: Engaging, Rightscaling, and Innovating,” *Lorcan Dempsey’s Weblog*, July 5, 2013, <http://orweblog.oclc.org/three-challenges-engaging-rightsscaling-and-innovating/>.

“liaison,”<sup>26</sup> the domain knowledge implied by “subject,” all while instrumentalizing the work of both the library worker and the patron into something that is above all “functional.”

### Crisis and Gendered Labor

John Buschman has argued that “we have been declaring crises in the field for more than thirty years. Further, we seem unable to clearly identify what we mean or effectively address the problems we identify.”<sup>27</sup> He goes on to say:

My contention is that this confusion represents a fundamentally shallow analysis of the nature of events buffeting the profession, and the continual naming of and responding to crisis has come to represent our professional culture. When the “leading lights” of the field...almost continually engage in contradictory and unbridled hyperbole and “futuring” over such a long period of time, then it is little wonder that librarians have felt almost perpetually under siege. The future need for their institutions and expertise seems always in doubt. Further, by focusing on the epiphenomena of the moment, authors in the field and the leadership of the profession will never adequately address the issues that are at the core of what is happening to librarianship. The call-and-response of crisis, quick and shallow adaption (and the resultant perpetual status of anxiety of librarians), will go on indefinitely.<sup>28</sup>

The recent imperative need to reimagine liaison roles is just such an example of hyperbole, futuring, and creation of crisis; this is distinct from a thoughtful, reflective, and evidence-based consideration of how and why

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26 Janice M. Jaguszewski and Karen Williams, *New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 2013), <https://www.arl.org/storage/documents/publications/nrnt-liaison-roles-revised.pdf>; Rafia Mirza and Maura Seale, “Who Killed the World? White Masculinity and the Technocratic Library of the Future,” in *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, ed. Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017).

27 John Buschman, *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy* (Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), 3.

28 Buschman, *Dismantling*, 6.

the work of liaison librarians has changed, or might change in the future, and how we might adapt. We are invested in our work, are willing to do things differently, and as such endorse and seek out thoughtful change. The shift from “service” to “engagement” is a strategy to erase the gendered nature of much liaison work, which, at its core, relies on the creation and maintenance of relationships. The lists of liaison duties and skills are primarily rooted in interpersonal interactions with students and faculty, other library workers, and even vendors.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, as Lisa Sloniowski, drawing on Dee Garrison’s work, writes, “It would seem that the so-called traditional librarian roles of teaching, research help, and collections management were in fact tied to a gendered circumscription of the role as libraries emerged as publicly available entities during the late Victorian period in the Western world.”<sup>30</sup> She goes on to say that “librarians and archivists provide a form of largely ignored reproductive and affective labor in the knowledge production of academe, and are an unrecognized production culture within the knowledge work of the university”<sup>31</sup> and notes that there is also differential valuation of library work, with reference and liaison work being less valued than information technology work. Similarly, Juris Dilevko and Lisa Gottlieb studied obituaries of librarians and found they tended to focus on what they call “big” librarianship—the flashy and showy—to the exclusion of “small librarianship”—the small, daily, and interpersonal.<sup>32</sup> They suggest that in attempting to enhance the perception of librarianship, we have focused on a “male model of professionalism” which emphasizes “managerial prowess and ever-faster, ever-bigger information technology systems.”<sup>33</sup> At the same time, we’ve neglected “those aspects of librarianship that focus on small daily acts that assume extraordinary meaning in the lives of countless patrons.”<sup>34</sup> Small librarianship is feminized, neglected, and devalued, and those who practice it are seen “through a negative gendered portrait that emphasizes obsession with order, dowdiness, and

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29 Moniz, Henry, and Eshleman, *Fundamentals*.

30 Lisa Sloniowski, “Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian,” *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 645–46, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0013>.

31 Sloniowski, “Affective Labor,” 661.

32 Juris Dilevko and Lisa Gottlieb, “The Portrayal of Librarians in Obituaries at the End of the Twentieth Century,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 74, no. 2 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1086/382845>.

33 Dilevko and Gottlieb, “Portrayal of Librarians,” 176.

34 Dilevko and Gottlieb, 176.

such stereotypical acts as ‘shelving, stamping, and shushing.’”<sup>35</sup> Dilevko and Gottlieb conclude that “There seems to be very little middle space or will to define librarianship in a positive way as an amalgam of small and caring acts that, summed together, positively affect the lives of ordinary and marginalized individuals.”<sup>36</sup> There is either big, flashy, masculine librarianship, which focuses on technology and innovation, or small, banal, sometime invisible, and thereby unimportant librarianship, which is one step away from domestic labor. Liaison work, within this will to reimagine it, is, and can only ever be, the latter.

Roma Harris has connected the emphasis on information technology in librarianship to the deprofessionalization of cataloging, reference, and collection work; she also connects this to the further devaluation of gendered labor and the movement of more men into librarianship: “It appears, then, that librarianship is in the process of developing into a male field insofar as what is being emphasized, preserved, and valued in this occupation are those aspects which are administrative and technical and removed from direct contact with patrons.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Rafia Mirza and Maura Seale argue that the emphasis on information technology within librarianship has resulted in the embrace of Silicon Valley technocratic solutionism and technological determinism that privileges work performed by white men while erasing and disparaging emotional, affective, and maintenance work that tends to be performed by BIPOC.<sup>38</sup> This appears in Dempsey’s formulation, in which engagement is tied to innovation: “In library terms, innovation has to result in repeatable and scalable services which can be supported over time. And this brings us back to the type of engagement that is valuable and the infrastructure that is required to support it.”<sup>39</sup> Connecting engagement to innovation works to associate liaison work and service with information technology, thereby masculinizing it; it provides a single solution to the complex problem of proving libraries’ relevance and thus securing funding in an age of austerity.

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35 Dilevko and Gottlieb, 175.

36 Dilevko and Gottlieb, 176.

37 Harris, *Librarianship*, 142.

38 Mirza and Seale, “Who Killed the World?”

39 Dempsey, “Three Challenges.”

## Liaison Librarianship in Crisis

Given the eternal recurrence of the crisis of librarianship, what differentiates the ARL attempts to redefine liaison librarianship “for the twenty-first century” from preceding attempts? As in these preceding attempts, the crux is to change and redefine the concept of service in the name of status and professional respect. On the one hand, this means moving away from a more feminine formulation of professional service, in which librarians do not “dictate what clients must do, but discover what the clients need to fulfill these needs by using specialized knowledge and skills.”<sup>40</sup> On the other, it means moving toward an “expert’ or paternalistic model of professionalism in which the professional knows what is best for the client.”<sup>41</sup> While feminine service is defined by a teacher-like approach in which a professional works with an individual, masculine service is defined by the lawyer and the doctor who will do the work for an individual. In this formulation, librarians must become more paternalistic toward their clients in order to be respected professionals and to survive as a field.<sup>42</sup>

While the pattern of defeminization remains constant in this new crisis of liaison librarianship, as evidenced in the ARL conversations, the mechanisms are particular to contemporary white neoliberal visions of masculinity. These mechanisms include the universality and rationality of technocratic ideology and the growth of administrative “accountability” culture. In its documentation of the liaison institutes and the conversation surrounding liaison librarians, ARL, and librarians responding to ARL, employ both mechanisms. The result is the primacy of the “functional specialist” and “functional teams.” Work must become tasks, since tasks are measurable and work is not. These tasks need to separate high-value work—such as supporting digital tools and trends—and low-value feminized work—such as student “care” and instruction.

This is not to say that functional specialists do not serve useful purposes in academic libraries or that new services are not necessary to respond to real technological changes in the way students and faculty do research. Rather, the favoring of a “functional” approach to staffing as a replacement for, rather than supporting, the work of liaisons is the outgrowth

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40 Gardner Hanks and C. James Schmidt, “An Alternative Model of a Profession for Librarians,” *College and Research Libraries*, 36, no. 3 (1975), [https://doi.org/10.5860/crl\\_36\\_03\\_175](https://doi.org/10.5860/crl_36_03_175), quoted in Harris, *Librarianship*, 19.

41 Harris, *Librarianship*, 19.

42 Harris, *Librarianship*.

of technological solutionism and neoliberal administration. Both are outgrowths of recurrent anxieties in librarianship about status, professionalism, and the viability of our feminized service model. Further, the concept, which appears many times throughout the documentation of the ARL liaison institutes, of the “stem-cell librarian,” who is ever flexible and ever ready to immediately reskill to fit administrative needs, reflects the neoliberal primacy of the individual as responsible for their own survival.<sup>43</sup> As Karen P. Nicholson offers on this point, “If you’re not making it, you simply need to be more flexible, more agile, more entrepreneurial, more innovative, more resilient.”<sup>44</sup>

The growth of masculinized administration in libraries and academia at large is a major component of devaluing a feminized conception of service. This is evident in documents that prioritize efficiency, data collection, “rationality”, and compliance above all other values. In applying theories developed in literature surrounding fiscal accountability in women’s shelters to similar drives from library leadership, Christina Neigel argues “functionalist management practices do not leave adequate space for recognizing service that is grounded in how help and support is delivered in addition to what the help is.”<sup>45</sup> Administrative language pervades these documents presenting efficiency, data, and increased awareness of administrative desires all as methods to make liaison librarianship more viable and valuable into the future.

The primary accountability of the new liaison should be, according to the literature surrounding the ARL liaison institutes, the university. After all, Vine characterizes the exercises designed to instigate liaison reimagining as “designed to help librarians move from ‘what’s in it for the library’ to ‘what’s in it for the university.’”<sup>46</sup> However, the university as conceptualized

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43 The term “stem-cell librarian” occurs frequently in writing about this liaison institute. It appears twice in the 2015 report (Barbara Rockenbach, et al., Association of Research Libraries/Columbia University/Cornell University/University of Toronto Pilot *Library Liaison Institute Final Report* (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2015): 10, 21); in the 2016 *College & Research Libraries News* description of that report (Bakkalbasi, et al, “ARL Library Liaison Institute,” 118); and in Vine’s observations from the subsequent liaison institutes (Vine, “Realigning,” 420).

44 Karen P. Nicholson, “The ‘Value Agenda:’ Negotiating a Path Between Compliance and Critical Practice,” (keynote, Canadian Libraries Assessment Workshop, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, October 26, 2017), 10, <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/fimspres/49/>.

45 Christina Neigel, “LIS Leadership and Leadership Education: A Matter of Gender,” *Journal of Library Administration* 55, no. 7 (2015): 525, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2015.1076307>.

46 Vine, “Realigning,” 420.

here is not made up of students, faculty, and staff, and the university's goals are not an amalgam of the goals of those individuals. University goals are not gathered by building relationships with and listening to those who are performing the labor of the university. They are instead determined by data that should be collected by those liaisons, fed through the administration to "address the biggest problems that keep senior administrators up at night," then presented back to faculty in the form of "outreach."<sup>47</sup>

As presented by ARL, institutional goals are determined by administrative thought leaders and then sent downward for librarians to execute:

Another ramification of the service culture is the fact that the work librarians do is often conceived of as being about the librarians, about the library, and not about the larger institutional ecosystem in which the library operates. Additionally, because of this inward focus, librarians tend to be unable to see or imagine the impact of their work in the context of solving larger institutional problems. The institute organizers believe that librarians' success is no longer about the library looking good and by extension librarians looking good, but success is when the library is a part of collective problem solving at the university level. Institutional success is what matters and the library's willingness to be a vital and dynamic partner in that success will define its position at its institution.<sup>48</sup>

This final report from the first 2015 institute explicitly states that library liaison work is inward-focused and liaisons are not able to see the big picture, due in part to their minimal contact with university administrators. Further, the authors place the blame for this situation on what they term "service culture," which can be read as referring to a specific kind of service—that of answering the direct needs and requests of faculty and students. This hearkens back to a trend that Harris identifies in librarianship, which she notes as a trend in female professions more generally. Namely, instead of placing the blame on external pressures or systemic issues, librarians tend to blame themselves and the way that we practice our profession.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the insistence that libraries are not "responding to the needs of users" and are instead "designing services because librarians like to do

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47 Vine, "Realigning," 420.

48 Rockenbach, et al., *Library Liaison Institute Final Report*, 21–22.

49 Harris, *Librarianship*.

that work,” users are not setting the agenda.<sup>50</sup> Rather administrators are collecting data regarding the value of services and then adjusting services to offer library users who then become “clients” and “customers.”<sup>51</sup> Service, as represented by liaison relationships and using non-quantitative assessment to determine user needs, becomes undesirable. The 2015 institute report chides liaisons for having “a sense of liaison work being about service, not about outreach, nor about revealing possibilities that researchers might not be aware of.”<sup>52</sup> Put positively, the liaison of the future is proactive instead of reactive. Conversely, they are to put aside the feminized quality of listening in favor of marketing. This evidences itself in repeated contradictory phrasing that suggests that liaisons are not serving faculty by trying to serve faculty: the 2015 report offers “One participant wrote, ‘How can we translate what we do into solutions that faculty want?’, which illustrates this prevailing focus on the value in liaison work, centered on the library rather than on faculty or students’ needs.”<sup>53</sup>

On the surface, university goals and services that are developed through quantified and quantifiable data that can inform decision making develops a “culture of assessment.” It is administration taking its thousand foot view to suggest action at the ground level. However, one could also argue that this is rather an expression of what Karen P. Nicholson calls “audit culture” and what Emily Drabinski terms “a kairos of compliance.”<sup>54</sup> We work in a time that prioritizes data that can be easily collected, ingested, and compared toward a stated goal of increased efficiency.<sup>55</sup> While efficiency is the promise of audit and accountability culture, the reality is increased surveillance and the internalizing of mechanisms of surveillance.<sup>56</sup> Feminist assessment does exist and is possible—it is formative, reflective, user-centered, and uses the information of assessment to challenge power

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50 Rockenbach, et al., *Library Liaison Institute Final Report*, 18.

51 Nicholson, “Value Agenda,” 11.

52 Rockenbach, et al., *Library Liaison Institute Final Report*, 21.

53 Rockenbach, et al., *Library Liaison Institute Final Report*, 7.

54 Nicholson, “Value Agenda,” 14; Emily Drabinski, “A Kairos of the Critical: Teaching Critically in a Time of Compliance,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (2017): 78, <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2017.11.1.35>.

55 Drabinski, “Kairos.”

56 Nicholson, “Value Agenda.” See also Alison Mountz et al., “For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University,” *ACME International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, no. 4 (2015), <https://www.acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1058>.

dynamics, not to reify them.<sup>57</sup> It allows qualitative information to remain qualitative instead of finding ways to quantify it for easy digestion and ensures that the information is useful to the individuals doing the work and using the services. This usable assessment, which centers the feedback of students and faculty to adjust and change practice is antithetical to the type of assessment whose reason for being “is to monitor and maintain quality.”<sup>58</sup>

The conclusion of the 2015 ARL report on the first liaison institute argues that: “the goals of the liaison program should be concrete, measurable, and attainable.” It also argues that “one of the areas of potentially greatest impact” for these institutes “is assessment and evaluation of liaison work.” In the next sentence, the authors take this even further: “On the one hand, libraries’ data about users is limited, and liaisons need to find ways to collect more data faster, so that evidence of current and emerging user behavior and practices will guide liaison practice.”<sup>59</sup> Assessment should be done with our users, not to our users. What is presented is not specific, context-driven, user-focused assessment foregrounding service, or even “engagement.” This is audit culture.

Audit culture values only that which can be counted and expressed outwardly (or upwardly), de-emphasizes relationship-building, which is key to quality service in our profession, and encourages self-compliance with quantitative regimes by tying them to evaluation, retention, and promotion.<sup>60</sup> Assessment defined by quantitative adherence to administrative goals is part of a larger project in academia to strip professionals of autonomy. In the case of liaison librarians, the effort is multi-layered. First, one must rein in the agency of the liaisons themselves. By adjusting the service relationship that the liaison has with their departments, libraries then can feed into the larger neoliberal university project of lessening faculty agency.<sup>61</sup>

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57 Maria Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2013): 71–87.

58 Nicholson, “Value Agenda,” 14.

59 Rockenbach, et al., *Library Liaison Institute Final Report*, 22.

60 Nicholson, “Value Agenda.”

61 Mark Olssen and Michael L. Peters, “Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy: From the Free Market to Knowledge Capitalism,” *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 3 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500108718>; Karen P. Nicholson, “Information Into Action? Reflections On (Critical) Practice” (keynote, Workshop for Instruction in Library Use, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, June 8, 2018): 2; Karen P. Nicholson, “The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries and the Values of Transformational Change,” *College & Research Libraries* 76, no. 3 (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.5860/crl.76.3.328>.

The 2017 ACRL presentation, including the work of individuals responsible for the ARL liaison institutes and the 2015 *SPEC Kit 349: Evolution of Library Liaisons* lists on its first non-introductory slide three outcomes for the presentation:

1. Participants will be able to explain the importance of strategically aligning their liaison activities with campus goals and priorities in order to support and lead initiatives within the context of their home institutions.
2. Participants will define and describe new metrics in order to measure and evaluate liaison activities and impact within an institutional and national context.
3. Participants will use a national dataset of library liaison activities in order to benchmark and reflect on their institution's liaison activities and practices.<sup>62</sup>

More than anything, these outcomes reflect the contemporary environment that has led to a push toward “reimagining” and the contemporaneity of the mechanisms that this reimagining are to use. First and foremost, the value of liaison activities must align with administrative priorities. Second, these activities must be measurable and cross-institutionally comparable. Third, liaisons must internalize and normalize the administrative point of view and the metrics associated with this point of view in their practices and activities.<sup>63</sup> Further, the same presentation identifies the problems gleaned from the first ARL liaison institute in 2015 and in doing so points to why we would need to reimagine the library liaison in the first place:

- Current measures of liaison work are not aligned with the current vision of liaison work, and everyone knows it
- The new vision requires new skills, new ways of working, and new tools

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62 Anne Langley, et al., “Anchors Aweigh! Navigating New Directions for Library Liaisons” (PowerPoint presentation, Association of College and Research Libraries Conference, Baltimore, MD, March 22–25, 2017): 3, <https://www.arl.org/storage/documents/Miller-ACRL-2017-Anchors-Aweigh-Navigating-new-directions-for-library-liaisons.pdf>.

63 We would like to note that the embrace of neoliberal audit culture among academic libraries has not seemed to have resulted in large increases in library funding.

- Service & performance expectations are a work in progress
- The community needs new measures<sup>64</sup>

The problems laid out here are not with liaisonship as practiced. The problems are with liaisonship as identified and measured. With how we communicate “value.” The authors go on to present their view of “engagement” as “defined by what users do, not by what libraries do.”<sup>65</sup> Except this is exactly what good service already does.

Harris writes, “With automation, the field’s already low status will decline even further as more and more of its formerly professional tasks are performed by paraprofessionals and clerical workers. At the same time, the few remaining higher status activities within the field are being renamed. Through this process, librarianship’s identity as a low-status, female intensive occupation can be escaped by those who practice the ‘new’ higher status functions.”<sup>66</sup> If we stop calling the work that liaisons do “service,” if we re-envision it in ways that better align with administrative norms and the sexier technocratic parts of our profession, then maybe we can stay relevant. We should not serve, we should partner. We should not be oriented toward service, we should be oriented toward impact. Provide not information, but informed advice.<sup>67</sup> But do faculty seek out partnership or is this an administrative goal? Good service is already impactful. To gain more status, serve less like a nurse and more like a lawyer.

### Service, Relationships, and the “Functional”

The arguments that these ARL documents make about how liaison librarianship should be and can be “rethought” do not offer substantive changes from the actual day-to-day work that liaison librarians are performing. Outreach and engagement, after all, are not that noticeably different than attending faculty events, sending and responding to emails, doing in-house office hours, and so on. And the ARL documents do not entirely discount the value of relationship-building and empathy in liaison work. What is rethought in these documents, however, is the concept of service. The liaison of the future does not directly serve the needs of the users. They serve

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64 Langley, et al., “Anchors Aweigh,” 32.

65 Langley, et al., “Anchors Aweigh,” 33.

66 Harris, *Librarianship*, 134.

67 Langley, et al., “Anchors Aweigh.”

the needs of the university first and the primary need of the university is, currently, to disempower faculty and implement austerity.

The ARL documents do not argue that liaisons should be eliminated as a job category, simply that liaisons need to be taking on more “functional” duties and work more in tandem with “functional specialists.” It just so happens that functional duties frequently require less direct work with users and prioritize metrics and technological work associated with the more masculine areas of our profession. When functional duties do require direct work with users, they are frequently feminized, as in the case of general education or composition instruction or working with first-year students.<sup>68</sup> Teaching more broadly is feminized within librarianship, and teaching beginning students is often perceived as unskilled and thereby devalued. These positions, as well as positions like instruction coordinators, often take on a secretarial function organizing feminized labor and thus making it more accountable to measurement.

“Many liaisons are unclear about how their work intersects with that of functional specialists,” Vine writes in her 2018 observations, “and may need prompting to see opportunities for collaboration with them. Functional specialists who attended an institute did not always recognize the need to keep disciplinary liaisons informed when they interact with faculty in a liaison’s assigned area.” Following this, she writes, “This siloed approach led many liaisons to view collaboration with functional specialists as simply referring an inquiry to a functional specialist for action, without collaborative follow-up.”<sup>69</sup> Instead of giving functional specialists autonomy to do their work, the autonomy of both functional specialists and liaisons needs to be curtailed. The work between the two is not different, but mutually supportive. Rather, liaisons are to enable the “functional” services of the library—GIS, digital humanities work, scholarly communication support—through instrumentalized relationship-building. The term “functional” denotes instrumentality and displaces any notion of interpersonal relationship-building. This can cause problems when work that requires slow, concerted relationship-building, such as instruction, is treated as a function that a small number of people can perform.

Technology-focused “functional specialists” and liaison librarians are both doing useful work in the running of the library, but the liaison

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68 Rafia Mirza and Maura Seale, “Dudes Code, Ladies Coordinate: Gendered Labor in Digital Scholarship” (presentation, Digital Library Federation Forum, Pittsburgh, PA, October 23, 2017), <https://osf.io/hj3ks/>.

69 Vine, “Realigning,” 422.

institute documents suggest that by working together, functional specialists can do library work for faculty and liaison librarians can communicate the services of the functional specialist to the faculty and students. Lost is the nuance in which functional specialists are able to actually listen to and serve the needs of the faculty, to find a needed niche and respond to that niche. Instead, the functional specialist—at least those in highly valued technology-focused positions—serves as consulting expert while the liaison aids the connection of the faculty to the university's priorities.

Catherine Hoodless and Stephen Pinfield place the rise of functional organizational structure within the larger context of aligning academic library goals with those of their institutions.<sup>70</sup> They go on to trace views that “functional teams provided a more cost effective, consistent, measurable and accountable level of service” from the 1970s to the mid-1990s.<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, the driver that Hoodless and Pinfield identify for the rise of functional teams was a local, institution-level view that “there was a problem with subject librarians that needed fixing.”<sup>72</sup> It is not an approach that can be applied everywhere successfully; not every library needs these teams and these roles. More than an actual need to change our core services and core service model in response to new demand, the deciding factors in adopting functional approaches seemed to be simply believing that a reimagining needed to take place, combined with the pressure of accountability and metrics. It is because of what Barbara Fister called a move from values to value that functional models and the challenging of liaison-style service has come to exist in the first place.<sup>73</sup> Vine argues in the ARL liaison institute observations that “persistent values and attitudes [...] may be out of sync with emerging institutional practices.”<sup>74</sup> That very well may be true, but does not mean it is our values that need to change.

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70 Catherine Hoodless and Stephen Pinfield, “Subject vs. Functional: Should Subject Librarians Be Replaced by Functional Specialists in Academic Libraries?” *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 50, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0961000616653647>.

71 Hoodless and Pinfield, “Subject vs. Functional,” 346.

72 Hoodless and Pinfield, “Subject vs. Functional,” 357.

73 Barbara Fister, “The Self-Centered Library: A Paradox,” *Library Babel Fish*, *Inside Higher Ed*, last modified August 28, 2012, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/library-babel-fish/selfcentered-library-paradox>.

74 Vine, “Realigning,” 421.

## An Endless Search for Relevance

As a profession we seem to have an aversion to our core duties and an attraction, instead, to innovation. Yet, as Jane Schmidt points out in her CAPAL keynote on bullshit in academic libraries: “Libraries run on the talents, skills, patience and hard work of maintainers.”<sup>75</sup> Despite this, we feel the need to continually reinvent ourselves to the point of losing our sense of what our jobs and core services are. Indeed, this is a fear that presented itself in the conversations among liaison librarians at the ARL institutes, who described how “the risk of irrelevance leads to exhaustive and exhausting re-imagining of library services and values.”<sup>76</sup> While the ARL documents recognize that new work and priorities cannot be additive and that librarians, with reason, fear more work without more time or compensation, the solution is to turn some core duties over to commercial vendors and deprofessionalize and neglect others.<sup>77</sup> As has been evidenced by the deskilling and outsourcing for cataloging and technical services work, the result is a loss in quality.<sup>78</sup> We end up doing lots of things badly, instead of leveraging what we actually have the professional capacity for toward new and developing needs we see in our users. Further, because of the reality of tight budgets, we attempt to reskill the liaisons we have away from work that still needs to be done instead of hiring more librarians who have the skills to expand our services. And when the librarians that have the scholarly communication, assessment, programming, and technological skills are actually hired and brought in, they are often a “New Hire Messiah:”<sup>79</sup> hired alone by administration with a vision, expected to know what to do from day one, and relied upon to develop services in order to make the library suddenly relevant again, often without adequate support.

In 1992, Harris suggested, “It appears, then, that librarianship is in the process of developing into a male field insofar as what is being

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75 Jane Schmidt, “Innovate This! Bullshit In Academic Libraries And What We Can Do About It” (keynote, Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians Conference, University of Regina, Winnipeg, MB, May 18, 2018), 11. <https://digital.library.ryerson.ca/islandora/object/RULA%3A7113>.

76 Rockenbach, et al., *Library Liaison Institute Final Report*, 18.

77 Bakkalbasi, et al., “ARL Library Liaison Institute,” 199; Schmidt, “Innovate This!,” 2.

78 Harris, *Librarianship*, 143.

79 Erin Leach, “Tall Poppy Librarians,” *Letters to a Young Librarian*, last modified October 9, 2014, <http://letterstoayounglibrarian.blogspot.com/2014/10/tall-poppy-librarians-by-erin-leach.html>.

emphasized, preserved, and valued in this occupation are those aspects which are administrative and technical and removed from direct contact with patrons.”<sup>80</sup> Her argument is not that librarianship will gain the status of a male field through this development—indeed, only a few pages earlier she writes about how a female field can only lose professional status by doing this. But the conversations around librarianship have not changed more than 25 years later.

As Roxanne Shirazi has suggested, “who is doing the work determines what is valued as work.”<sup>81</sup> The problem, then, is not that the work of liaison librarians (and other library workers) is necessarily irrelevant but rather that library administrations are scrambling for prestige by devaluing gendered service labor. This will fail as long as the work is performed by white women and BIPOC, because it is their labor. The way for libraries to interrupt the cycle of perceived crisis followed by frantic and flailing changes is to develop historical memory that recognizes this pattern and interrogates it whenever it appears. We must develop an historical view of the continuities in our work and profession, as well as the ways in which they have shifted and evolved. We must openly and forcefully advocate for the value of gendered service work both historically and currently. This essay is an effort in this direction.

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80 Harris, *Librarianship*, 142.

81 Roxanne Shirazi, “Reproducing the Academy: Librarians and the Question of Service in the Digital Humanities,” *Roxanne Shirazi* (blog), last modified July 15, 2014, <https://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities/>.

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