A Closer Connection:
Reflections on the Designated Librarian Program

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Providing librarian-led instruction in foundational undergraduate courses presents opportunities to enhance students' academic success by introducing key information literacy skills in the early stages of their college careers. However, designing sustainable, scalable ways to deliver instruction and build relationships with teaching faculty poses challenges since certain key library learning services tend to be time-intensive and heavily personalized (Rodwell & Fairbairn, 2008). This challenge might be particularly notable in instances where many sections of these courses are offered to accommodate large numbers of students (Phillips, 2016), which may require support from a team of librarians as opposed to just one librarian. At the same time, regular and personal contact between librarians and faculty is an important part of teaching and liaison models (Arendt & Lotts, 2012; Silver & Trott, 2014), which means we must strive to develop instructional models that support routine and effective communication with faculty.

In this article, we explain how Teaching, Learning, & Information (TLI) librarians at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) developed and implemented a model for managing instructional relationships with the non-library faculty that teach sections of two foundational undergraduate research and writing courses. In the process, we emphasized personal contact between librarians and faculty and made our services more scalable by giving librarians better control of their schedules. By establishing the Designated Librarian Program, we moved from a reactive model in which faculty requested librarian-led instruction, to a proactive model in which librarians instigated relationships with faculty to ensure students received instruction and other services at the optimal point in the semester.

A Reactive Approach to Instruction Scheduling

VCU is a large research university with approximately 24,000 undergraduates and 7,000 postgraduates enrolled. Faculty in VCU's Department of Focused Inquiry (FI) teach research and writing for students in their first and second years. Most VCU students are required to take three sequential courses: UNIV 111: Focused Inquiry I; UNIV 112: Focused Inquiry II; and UNIV 200: Inquiry and the Craft of Argument. With each course building on the previous one, students are able to hone the research skills required to support their academic work throughout their tenure at VCU and beyond. Five librarians work with FI faculty members to provide course-integrated instruction sessions for nearly 300 sections of UNIV 112 and UNIV 200 annually (because the UNIV 111 curriculum does not call for extensive library use or academic research, we do not provide instruction for this course, but instead offer in-person or virtual tours). In addition to the team-based approach to providing course-integrated instruction (usually one session per section per semester), an important component of our relationship with FI is the appointment of a single, departmental primary library liaison, who cultivates what we refer to as a "faculty-embedded" model of liaison librarianship in which the liaison serves on FI's curriculum committee, textbook committee, and many other work groups so that she may affect change at the curricular level through collaboration with faculty, in addition to the integration of course-integrated instruction sessions into the curriculum.

Prior to 2016, our method for pairing TLI librarians with FI faculty who requested library instruction was largely reactive. The library liaison to FI reminded faculty, in meetings and via email, to request librarian-led instruction via an online form. Faculty could indicate a specific librarian they preferred to work with, if desired, and the library's instruction scheduling coordinator would try to accommodate those requests. However, that wasn't always possible due to scheduling conflicts, instruction requests placed with minimal lead time, and varying librarian workloads.

After using this method to schedule instruction for nearly a decade, some drawbacks were clear. First, the onus of requesting instruction was on FI faculty, while the primary library liaison could only send reminders. Although we encouraged FI faculty to request instruction at least two weeks in advance, some waited until the last minute, which left librarians scrambling to meet the request in a short amount of time or negotiating a different date that was often not ideal for the class. This process sometimes left librarians feeling like they were subject to the faculty members' demands, as opposed to acting as academic partners. Based on the way requests came in, TLI librarians had little control of the way their schedules unfolded throughout the semester, which made it difficult to plan for and complete other projects.

Additionally, faculty requested some librarians more than others. For example, the primary liaison to FI—who is highly visible to FI faculty by virtue of attending departmental meetings, retreats, and sitting on the curricu-

lum committee—was often requested. Newer librarians with less established relationships with FI faculty were requested less often, thus resulting in imbalanced instructional workload across the department when we attempted to pair faculty with their preferred librarians.

Finally, this reactive model resulted in a lack of continuity and relationship building, as faculty members often found themselves working with a different librarian each semester. Despite librarians' attempts to cultivate relationships with faculty through both email and in-person meetings, lack of consistency in faculty-librarian partnerships from semester to semester inhibited deep collaboration. Workload for both parties increased due to the additional communication necessary to reach agreement on basic elements of instruction sessions and we found that it was often difficult to move beyond simple lesson planning when working in an unfamiliar partnership.

Envisioning and Implementing the Designated Librarian Program

After soliciting feedback in 2016 through informal conversation with FI leadership and a pre-fall semester meeting open to all FI faculty, TLI librarians designed and implemented the Designated Librarian (DL) Program. The defining characteristic of the program was the assignment of a librarian to each section of UNIV 112 and 200 at the beginning of the semester so that each librarian could more readily initiate direct, tailored communications with faculty members, as opposed to the other way around. Our approach has parallels to increasingly popular "personal librarian" programs in which students are paired with librarians, but our focus is on effectively educating students by way of developing faculty-librarian relationships (MacDonald & Mohanty, 2017; Moniz & Moats, 2014). Additionally, although we do have a library liaison appointed to FI, we needed to embrace a more class-specific model with multiple librarians involved than what is typical of the liaison model of librarianship in which a librarian is usually assigned only at the departmental level. That approach presents challenges for the cultivation of individual faculty-librarian relationships given the size of the FI department, which is a challenge likely experienced by many university libraries at institutions with large first-year curricula. The DL Program allowed us to continue a faculty-embedded approach to managing FI relationships at a more individualized level.

We sought to achieve multiple goals via the DL Program, including but not limited to:

1. Providing high quality teaching and research services to FI students.

2. Deepening the relationship between FI faculty and TLI librarians.

3. Balancing workload among the TLI librarians and helping TLI librarians better plan their semesters.

To implement the DL Program each semester, we do the following:

- The primary liaison to FI creates Google Sheets spreadsheets listing all UNIV 112 and 200 sections with faculty names and class meeting times.

- Next, she assigns TLI librarians to each faculty member and their sections. First, we pair librarians and faculty who have worked together previously. We divide newer faculty and those who have been "bounced around" amongst TLI Librarians based on each librarian's workload and job responsibilities.

- She creates/revises template emails that librarians send to their designated UNIV 112 and 200 faculty at the beginning of the semester. The emails explain the DL Program and library services available, including instruction. In practice, template emails are used frequently for new librarian-faculty partnerships, while established pairs may communicate in a more casual style, but with the goal of conveying the same information. In-person meetings between librarians and faculty are encouraged.

- Librarians utilize a communication tracker to coordinate outreach to faculty. This is a Google Sheets spreadsheet that lists recommended email reminders (e.g., "Reminder to UNIV 200 faculty to request library instruction"; "Reminder about availability of consultations") to be sent throughout the semester.

- Librarians schedule instruction sessions for their respective sections, noting when each section is scheduled on the Google Sheets of UNIV 112 and 200 classes.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Program

Since implementing the DL Program, we have assessed its merits through an informal survey to FI faculty and by routinely soliciting librarians' feedback. Overall, we feel we have achieved the previously articulated goals of program: it has enabled us to provide excellent teaching and research services to FI, balance our workload, and deepen our relationships with FI faculty.

Both librarians and FI faculty indicate that the program facilitates deep relationships with one another and has improved working relationships in multiple ways. After working with faculty members over multiple semesters, librarians are able to develop a shorthand with

them, creating more efficient communications. Librarians are able to tailor communication with each faculty member, which allows us to avoid spamming faculty with unnecessary email reminders and focus instead on targeted communication approaches. Similarly, this approach allows librarians to enhance the level of communication to new faculty members in the department, ensuring they are fully aware of library services.

This increased efficiency of communication coupled with ongoing relationships facilitated by the DL Program allows librarians and faculty to hone and refine specific lesson plans, which in turn allows the librarian to become an increasingly integral part of the class. Respondents to the survey praised librarians' "intimate awareness" of their classes, the "direct line of communication" between students and their Designated Librarian, and the "tighter bond" between faculty and librarians. In an open-ended question, one-third of all the respondents specifically expressed appreciation for the increased communication between faculty and librarians and/or the deeper knowledge librarians have of faculty members' classes and assignments as a result of the DL Program. Overall, 19 out of 29 faculty respondents expressed enthusiasm about the program and hoped to see it continue. Nine respondents were neutral to slightly positive (some noting that since they had already worked closely with an individual librarian even in our old instructional approach that this model is not much different than what they were already doing). Only one respondent expressed misgivings about the program due to the fact that she and her Designated Librarian struggled to find an amenable date for her librarian-led instruction sessions.

Furthermore, librarians feel better able to plan our semesters through proactive management of their relationships with faculty. We know the maximum number of library sessions we will teach, when certain faculty are likely to prefer instruction, and approximately how much time we will need to dedicate to conversations with faculty and lesson plan development. This proactive approach to instruction scheduling has also reduced the need for someone to act as an "instruction scheduler," which was a time-consuming role in the old request-based model, since each librarian now handles the majority of their instruction scheduling themselves.

In addition to its strengths, TLI librarians have discovered some challenges in the implementation of the DL program. The most notable issue has been providing services for FI classes in instances where a librarian has been out of the office for an extended period of time, especially unexpectedly. In these cases, we attempt to redistribute the absent librarian's designated classes to oth-

ers, and/or offer alternatives to faculty, such as a tailored list of online learning materials. The former is sometimes not feasible given other librarians' workloads. FI faculty are generally understanding, but it feels defeating to reduce the level of service provided to classes assigned to a particular librarian, especially if that librarian's designated faculty were prompt and organized in communicating with their librarian about preferred dates for library instruction. However, the underlying issue here is neither our old instructional model nor the DL Program: it is the fact that our department is understaffed. And, on the positive side, the DL Program allows us to communicate clearly and proactively with faculty who may be affected when we are experiencing a staffing crisis.

Another rare but notable issue was the infrequent instance in which FI faculty members and librarians were not well-matched to work with each other. On occasion, personal or professional differences inhibited a productive working relationship and addressing this was uncomfortable for the librarian and faculty member. In these few instances, we responded by diplomatically reassigning the faculty member to a different librarian. The goal of the DL Program is to build relationships, not force them.

Finally, librarians have been attentive to the fact that the DL Program could result in librarians and faculty getting stuck in an "instructional rut." Despite many benefits to building ongoing relationships with particular faculty members, it is possible that librarians and faculty could miss new, fresh perspectives that would be derived from working with new partners. This does not seem to be a problem now as much as it is something for us to be attentive to going forward.

The Future

Moving ahead, we plan to continue the program and look forward to refining the model and working to mitigate its challenges. For example, we are currently refining and developing a learning objects repository linked to information literacy learning outcomes for FI classes which can be used in multiple ways: as a supplement to in-person instruction; as an alternative to in-person instruction; for online or hybrid classes; and for instances in which a module-based approach works better to achieve faculty members' goals for their students. In order to avoid the potential "instructional rut" mentioned in the previous section, we will continue an established practice of routinely sharing instructional challenges and successes within the TLI librarians' group and beyond,

engaging in programming such as the VCU Libraries instructional mini-con, in which teaching librarians from across the library system exchange ideas about teaching to keep perspectives fresh. But even as it stands, TLI librarians and FI faculty feel that the DL Program has been successful and has had a net positive effect on our working relationships, and therefore the services we provide students.

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