

# Finding Common Ground: An Analysis of Librarians' Expressed Attitudes Towards Faculty

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**SUMMARY.** Information literacy listservs provide opportunities to discuss a range of instruction-related issues. One common theme is librarian-faculty relationships, including positive interactions and complaints. Content analysis is used to investigate librarians' discussions of faculty in BI-L/ILI-L postings from 1995 to 2002. By isolating and anonymizing postings reflecting librarian-faculty relationships and examining these through the authors' experiences as trained librarians and full-time faculty, the paper explores: (1) how librarians frame faculty relationships; and (2) librarians' perceptions of faculty attitudes. The paper concludes with suggestions for transcending unsatisfactory

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experiences with faculty to forge relationships that benefit those individuals both groups must reach—students. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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### ***INTRODUCTION***

At universities and colleges, librarians and teaching faculty are increasingly working together to offer students support in building strong academic information literacy (IL) skills. However, forging and maintaining strong working relationships between faculty and librarians is no easy task. Misperceptions about different work roles, as well as misinterpretations of personal motivations related to IL instruction, can hinder the development of productive collaboration. By examining and reassessing beliefs about one another, faculty members and librarians can develop strategies for finding common ground in the instructional environment.

### ***LITERATURE REVIEW***

There is an extensive body of literature in library and information studies (LIS) that examines trends in information literacy education. Librarians and LIS scholars have examined professional and theoretical issues involved in guiding individuals in the use of information resources, the design of successful library research projects, and the development of information strategies for lifelong learning. Approaches in the literature address a number of contexts—from public to academic libraries, as well as corporate and other special information centers—and focus on the full range of activities that comprise information literacy instruction (e.g., library tours; database searching sessions; critical evaluations of Web resources). Many of these have been written with the specific goal of sharing IL successes in order to guide others in the development of new programs, in the assessment and revision of existing sessions, in the use of technology, or in the management of other incidental instructional components (e.g., Bodi 1990; Druke 1992). Many

professional and scholarly articles also explore the importance of having key outsiders “buy-in” to the importance of information literacy instruction as one core component to the success of these endeavors (cf. Julien 2000; Julien and Boon 2002). Many articles that address the academic context, in particular, regularly identify the support of teaching faculty as a vital component of successful IL initiatives. Before examining librarian’s expressed attitudes and experiences with faculty, it is important to first understand the practical and theoretical contexts surrounding this issue.

### ***Faculty and Librarians’ Roles in Information Literacy— A Clear Divide***

One of the most prevalent themes discussed in the IL literature is that of the experiential separation between faculty members and academic librarians. Although both groups are engaged, at one level, in pursuing the shared goal of educating undergraduate and graduate students, there are many points of difference that affect the faculty-librarian relationship. Numerous articles portray reference librarians’ professional goals (i.e., aiding and teaching students in the effective use of information resources) as being at odds with faculty members’ research, teaching, and service work. In these discussions, librarians are placed in a supporting role on campus, as individuals whose primary purpose is to offer support for learning activities, particularly, undergraduate students’ information needs (e.g., Farber 1999; Hanson 1993).

At the same time, faculty members are portrayed as sitting outside—yet connected to—the daily activities of the academic library. Here, faculty are discussed primarily in their roles as teachers who set curricula for their students (and by extension, influence librarians’ work in supporting students’ needs). Hardesty (1999), for example, identifies faculty as “the most important group, outside of librarians, who need to understand and appreciate the educational role of the academic library” (243). However, he notes that a major point of conflict is a faculty culture that privileges research, content and specialization, while undervaluing teaching, process and undergraduate students (244). Hardesty marks faculty members’ resistance to building library instruction into their classes as a natural reaction to living under constant time constraints, spending “most of their day doing something for which they have little formal training—teaching” (244), and having a limited exposure to librarians’ skills and expertise due to inadequate library support during their own undergraduate or graduate study. While Hardesty

(1999) makes clear that faculty members' actions (or inactions) concerning the library arise more out of ignorance than malevolence (244), other authors are less forgiving, and judge faculty members' inattention to IL as a competition that must be tamed, turf that must be claimed, or as a battle to be won (e.g., Chiste, Glover, and Westwood 2000; Snavely and Cooper 1997).

Other studies of faculty members' attitudes toward the library (and IL, in particular) provide additional context concerning faculty members' perceptions (e.g., Cannon 1994; Gonzales 2001; Leckie 1996; Leckie and Fullerton 1999). In an opinion piece entitled "What I want in a librarian: One new faculty member's perspective," Stahl (1997) puts a very personal face on the issue, noting that faculty members want: proactive involvement from librarians—tempered with an acute sense of when to back off; clear communication about the limitations of librarian support for research activities; to be asked for input on library collection development; and, information on new and useful resources within the library. In a companion piece to this work (entitled "What I want in a faculty member: A reference librarian's perspective"), Larson (1998) compiles her own list of wants and needs: faculty recognition that librarians are in the same business of serving students' needs; clear communication with librarians about what is going on in a course; a basic familiarity with the literature and research tools in the faculty members' field; and, involvement of librarians in the design of course assignments, so that they match available library resources. These two works show, in a very personal fashion, the complex issues and emotions surrounding faculty-librarian working relationships.

### *Librarians as Advocates for Collaboration with Faculty*

Many authors implore librarians to forge stronger, more effective working relationships with faculty, and collaboration in IL instruction is one of the most prevalent solutions offered in the LIS literature. Carlson and Miller (1984), for example, note that involving faculty members in library instruction not only allows librarians to be active participants in the library (beyond simple caretakers of the collection), but "the nature of the courses themselves may change, with more emphasis placed on independent library investigation as an integral part of the course" (484). Much of the current literature advocates this integrated model of faculty-librarian working relationships, and points to the development of formal IL courses and programs within established academic curric-

ula as ideal ways to meet students' needs with full faculty support (e.g., Eliot 1989; Stein and Lamb 1998).

While there are numerous benefits to be gained from collaborative partnerships, many authors also point to the pitfalls of poor relationships—particularly in light of existing problems that must be overcome in order to build effective IL programs. And, as many authors note, the onus is frequently on the librarian to create collaborative partnerships (e.g., Bruce 2001; Chiste, Glover, and Westwood 2000). Some authors see this role as one of faculty development, of teaching faculty about the importance of building the library into courses or assignments, and seeing beyond the library's collections to what librarians can offer students. Cardwell (2001), for example, notes that faculty members often create “problematic” assignments when partnerships with librarians are limited or non-existent; where faculty members fail to take the institution's resources into account when designing assignments, students are left to flounder as they attempt to complete assigned work (258). By forging relationships with faculty—by connecting with them at the reference desk, or conducting one-on-one consultations regarding IL strategies appropriate to their classroom needs—many authors point to the benefits that can be made in the development of IL programs, and in serving students' needs (e.g., Carlson and Miller 1984; Hardesty 1999; Iannuzzi 1998; Ren 2000; Winner 1998).

### **METHODS**

Cardwell (2001) advises librarians to “Subscribe to BI-L [ILI-L], or search its archives . . . An active listserv, BI-L[ILI-L] hosts informative discussions on all types of instruction issues. You will learn about programs, successful and unsuccessful, that have been implemented at other institutions. It is also a place for posting questions and joining in on current discussions” (262). It is the prominence of this listserv among IL professionals that prompted it to be selected as the primary source of data for this study. With approval from the moderator, the archives of the listserv were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis method, for postings that related to librarians' relationships with university and college-level faculty members. The seven-year period from September 1995 to December 2002 was included in the analysis. During that time, in May 2002, the listserv changed its name to ILI-L (reflecting the “information literacy” terminology), and got a new moderator. All the postings to the listserv for the period in question were

read, those that related to librarian-faculty relationships were separated out, and then these were inductively coded for apparent themes. To ensure trustworthiness, the qualitative analyses were conducted by two research assistants, and the authors. In addition, the number of postings relating to each major theme were summed to identify broad trends in posting patterns. In the sections that follow, the term “librarian” is used to refer to posters of messages on the listserv; these posters self-identified as having active roles in the development of IL programs and/or the implementation of instructional activities within their libraries.

## ***RESULTS AND DISCUSSION***

### ***Quantitative Analyses***

Prior to completing qualitative analyses of the postings to BI-L/ILI-L, some quantitative analysis was done to assess the relative interest in particular themes over the seven-year period. Postings marked as relevant to the faculty-librarian relationship theme were totaled by yearly quarter (i.e., January to March, April to June, July to September, October to December). Postings relating to perceptions of faculty (including their personalities, competencies, and roles) were by far the most common, with an average of 28.4 postings per quarter. Postings about librarians themselves were the next most prevalent, with 18.9 postings per quarter. Finally, postings that focused on librarians’ beliefs about faculties’ perceptions of librarians averaged 4.2 per quarter. These trends held for every quarterly period. Figure 1 shows these trends, and demonstrates that postings were greater in number between October and December in all years, possibly reflecting peak periods of instructional activity for librarians subscribed to the list.

### ***Appropriate Roles for Faculty Members–Librarians’ Perspectives***

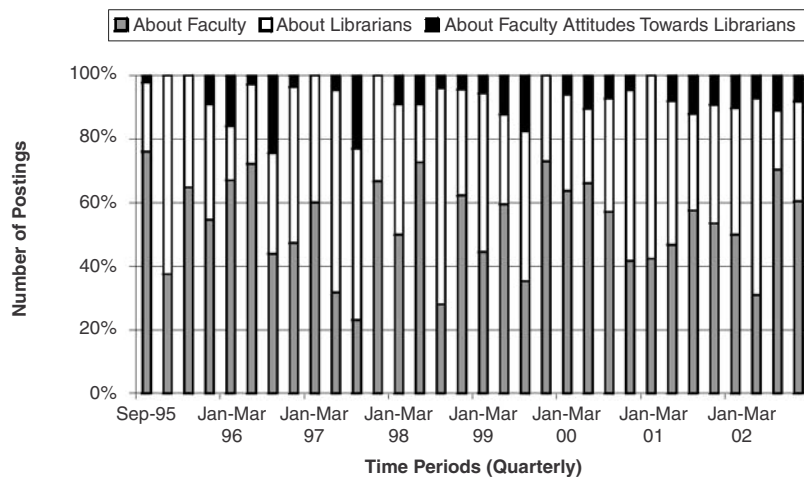
Listsers posters expressed a range of expectations for teaching faculty, from grading library instruction assignments, to dealing with plagiarism, to actively promoting information literacy initiatives. In general, librarians expressed a number of expectations concerning faculty members’ roles in information literacy instruction, including:

- Faculty should take on large (even primary) roles in IL instruction;

- Faculty should know library resources, understand the structure of the library and its services, be familiar with library jargon—and be able to teach these things to their students;
- Faculty should prepare feasible assignments that develop basic library skills, foster lifelong learning, provide students with variety, and teach critical thinking; in addition, faculty should teach students such specific skills as: computer literacy; ways to avoid plagiarism; how to distinguish between scholarly and popular journals; and, copyright.

At the same time, several posters recognized that librarians might also learn from the faculty members’ wealth of teaching experiences, and apply this knowledge to their own IL instructional strategies; one poster, for example, noted: “. . . we don’t get a full sense of what course instructors are up against—the depths of confusion, the short cuts students take, the dynamics of a class as a community. Teaching a course helps us figure those things out and it can really help those students that take it.” However, many librarians were adamant in their feelings that within the library, librarians should be in control; for instance, posters seem to agree that library spaces (such as classrooms) should be controlled by the library, not by individual faculty members.

FIGURE 1. Number of Postings Per Category



***Librarians' Relationships with Faculty Members***

Posters also described a variety of efforts to work with faculty, including developing workshops, and liaising with specific departments. However, as one poster noted, “integration and collaboration [with faculty] are slow, painstaking, and include the slippery terrain of being ‘polite.’” Some concern was expressed about how faculty conduct themselves during classroom instructional sessions (e.g., marking papers or reading while librarians were speaking; going away to conferences when instructional sessions are scheduled), articulating a theme of “faculty as delinquent children.” For example, one poster stated: “the next year she pulled the same thing,” as though faculty are trying to “get away” with some sort of bad behavior when they are absent from or complete other work during instructional sessions. Again, these attitudes are not universal, and some comments indicated that librarians at some institutions have experienced consideration from faculty, who typically give them plenty of notice for instructional sessions.

***Faculty Members' Attitudes and Competencies—  
What Librarians Have to Say***

One other significant theme on the listserv focused on posters' understandings of faculty members' personalities. Overall, the image constructed was negative. Teaching faculty were represented as:

- possessive and territorial about their class time, course credits, and “their” students;
- inflexible (i.e., not accepting of any course that is not created or taught by themselves);
- rude, “touchy,” and generally uncooperative;
- emotionally detached from the teaching role;
- in a “rut” or needing “renewal” in their approaches to classroom activities.

One frequent complaint expressed on the list was that faculty “lack vision” by not understanding that library instruction may require more than one 50-minute session. Various posters suggested that librarians should expect “trouble” from teaching faculty, that some faculty have “inappropriate” or “bad” attitudes, that librarians should expect their requests to be ignored (or “blown off”), and that some faculty need to be



“frightened” into “compliance” (by pointing out that familiar library resources are changing or being eliminated). Listserv subscribers were warned not to let themselves be “pushed around” by faculty, so as not to drain librarians’ “emotional survival bank.” Some posters noted that teaching faculty need to be “tricked” into paying attention to the library, by being cajoled with food and a low pressure environment. Although there were some allowances made for younger faculty, who were characterized as being eager to make a good impression and happy for help with instruction, some posters interpreted this enthusiasm as “laziness,” or a sure sign of an instructor trying to “get out of teaching” by letting a librarian run the class. Implicit in these examples is the notion that librarians are dedicated, caring individuals, who continually strive to meet students’ needs—despite their frustrations with faculty members’ questionable attitudes.

While the vast majority of postings were quite negative in their assessments of faculty members’ attitudes, some posters were much more generous in their judgments; positive descriptions referred to faculty members as:

- “reasonable” and “understanding” in terms of IL initiatives;
- having useful knowledge—including expertise regarding students’ class-based resource choices;
- in need of a “break”—due to time constraints, research demands and institutional obligations;
- “grateful” for instruction;
- working on a consensus model of decision-making (which can be, at times, at odds with librarians’ expectations for quick decisions relating to IL instruction).

One poster suggested that faculty ought to be treated with “care” as any colleague deserves. Although the majority of postings provide negative accounts of faculty-librarian interactions, the minority voices that contradict those images provide a hopeful tone to the discussion; that, in better understanding faculty members’ work roles and obligations, librarians may be able to push beyond feelings of frustration and outrage, to find a common ground that will fulfill the goals of most IL programs.

### ***Perceptions of Faculty Members’ Opinions of Librarians and Their Work***

The listserv postings were filled with assertions about the ways that teaching faculty view librarians and their work. While several posters

stated that some teaching faculty are supportive of their library and its goals, most of the perceptions on the part of librarians were less than positive. Many librarians felt that faculty members:

- do not understand librarians' work;
- do not appreciate that librarians often cannot provide instruction on an ad hoc basis, as students need it and wander into the library;
- do not see the intellectual content associated with library instruction;
- view library instruction as only tangential to class content;
- see library use as a set of mechanical skills, requiring only average intelligence to master;
- discount the term "information literacy" as ambiguous, or simply library jargon;
- do not respect librarians.

One poster noted that faculty members view the library as an "obstacle which must be dealt with as quickly and painlessly as possible." Related to this perspective was the point that, "Most faculty seem to view the library as an infrastructural resource and not [as] a learning resource." The bottom line seems to be the perception that faculty do not understand librarians as librarians understand themselves.

### ***How Do Librarians See Themselves?***

At the heart of this issue, then, one question remains: How do librarians see themselves in relation to the faculty members on campus? Some posters to the listserv clearly perceived themselves to be full-fledged faculty. Indeed, given the postings that appear on BI-L/ILI-L, it appears that many librarians appreciate being introduced to students as "Professor." By situating themselves as faculty, librarians perceive that they are able to gain credibility in the eyes of students. As one librarian noted: "I NEVER use the word 'serve' when describing what librarians do. I always say 'support' the faculty or the curriculum or student research needs. We facilitate, assist, co-teach, but we do not 'serve' the faculty." While this attitude is clearly empowering for librarians, particularly when trying to connect with students and gain legitimacy in the role of teacher, this approach also (even if unintentionally) places faculty as lesser on the meritorious rungs that define their academic work. Faculty members, for example, typically engage in research and service activities—in addition to their teaching responsibilities—and generally hold

doctorate degrees in their areas of specialty. To be equated with librarians, who may not do any research, and who typically hold master's-level degrees, many faculty may rebel and further strive to define themselves as very different from the librarians on campus. By attempting to gain legitimacy by placing themselves as equals, librarians run the risk of further distancing those faculty with whom they need to connect.

Quite a number of criticisms were leveled at librarians by their own colleagues; the result is a clear indication of the complexity of librarians' feelings concerning their relationships with faculty. Some posters expressed frustration with peers who:

- do not want to expand their instructional activities beyond the “traditional”;
- are afraid to say no or offend, preferring instead to stick with their perceived public roles as “nice people”;
- are unmotivated (often due to feelings of “overwork and technostress”);
- believe that others see them as on the verge of “extinction” or as “second-class citizens.”

Although one poster noted: “The real enemy is in our ranks,” another was quick to say: “if we constantly cater to faculty, do things on short notice, etc., then we are complicit in devaluing our own time and efforts.” Another stated, “We librarians, along with our colleague professors have failed to instill in our students the joy of real research. We've made the whole process look so stuffy and difficult, or else we've provided so little real help in our one-shot sessions.”

There were several points of debate, demonstrating a lack of consensus among librarians about some of these issues. For example, some posters were more sanguine about their status on campus: “We reference/instruction librarians are all handmaidens to the research process, and the term is neither offensive nor pejorative. I have no problem in considering myself a handmaid, or handmaiden, to the teaching faculty. We perform a service, a necessary service, for them; but we aren't their peers even though we may have faculty rank or status.” Debate was also evident about whether librarians should train faculty to train students, or train students directly. Additional discussion focused on whether librarians ought to be teaching “computing” literacy, especially word processing.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The berating of faculty for not being intuitively information literate, or for not taking the time to become information literate is a puzzling attitude—particularly given librarians’ professed mandate to guide users and provide instruction in the use of information resources. However, this attitude may also hold the key to understanding the limitations—and complexities—of the librarian-faculty relationship debate. Both explicitly, and by implication of the expressed attitudes explored here, many librarians on the BI-L/ILI-L list made clear that they generally do not consider faculty members to be their clients—only those faculty members’ students. The images of troublesome, arrogant faculty, who have little understanding of librarians’ roles, point to a problem at the core of the relationship issue: that until librarians embrace faculty as clients themselves, deserving of the same level of respect and support afforded undergraduate and graduate students, IL librarians may continue to fight an uphill battle to bring faculty members onside.

By recognizing that faculty members and librarians are masters of their own (separate, but related) spheres, librarians may make strides in forging respectful and productive working relationships. As well, there are a number of concrete changes that librarians can embrace:

- Try not to presume arrogance, bad intentions, or disrespect on the part of faculty—they are people, just like librarians (or students, or other library clients), and all will have very different attitudes towards librarians and the library;
- Try not to presume that faculty are not committed to IL—or willing to open their classrooms to librarians; they may balk, at first—due to other time constraints or worries about competing institutional agendas—but this does not mean that they are not willing to be involved;
- Try to gain faculty members’ trust, by expressing an understanding of their busy lives; offer to provide help with their research or service work, as one way to gain access to their classrooms;
- Recognize that many faculty did not have the benefit of formal library instruction during their own education and have learned to access the world of information in ways that may appear inefficient and ineffective; over the years they have designed personal library-searching systems that work for them—so try to be patient in guiding faculty members in their use of resources, and be proactive in terms of instructional outreach;

- Treat faculty as clients of the library—offer to hold instruction sessions for their research assistants, or offer to set up monthly journal alerts.

All of these suggestions attempt to address a core issue, implicit in the postings examined in this study—respect. Librarians clearly desire it, and faculty members are no different. In order for librarians and faculty to work collaboratively in IL programs, both sides need to find a common ground—ways to speak to one another as colleagues, and also as clients-helpers. If librarians can lay the groundwork for building engaging, productive relationships with faculty by first connecting with them in their roles as researchers—the teaching role will soon follow.

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