
Measuring Impact of Liaison-Faculty Relationships: A Multi-Factor Assessment Framework

Lisa R. Horowitz, Courtney Crummett, and Tracy Gabridge
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA

Abstract

Over the past decade, liaison librarian practice at the MIT Libraries and elsewhere has evolved from a collections and reference focus towards user-focused roles of outreach and instruction, similar to roles described in ARL's report, "New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries." Traditional assessment practices for liaison work, such as counting reference transactions or instruction sessions, or evaluating collections coverage, cannot capture the impact that strong relationships with university communities have on their teaching, learning, and research activities.

Through assessment of activities intended to enrich relationships between liaisons and faculty, this study evaluated the impact of liaison librarian outreach. A mixed-methods assessment process used desired outcomes, objectives, measures, targets, and results to generate a multi-dimensional view of liaison work that neither depended solely on traditional kinds of inputs and outputs, nor on surveys or focus groups to generate data. The study focused specifically on relationships that were developed between liaisons and new faculty. Of twelve measures addressing three objectives, the MIT Libraries were able to show impact for nine, while gathering useful benchmark data for the rest. The results of the assessment were then used to further improve liaison practice. Implementation of this assessment has proven especially valuable when what is being measured (in this case, relationships) is intangible and hard to quantify.

Introduction

Liaison librarian practice at the MIT Libraries has been evolving away from a collections and reference focus towards user-focused roles of outreach and instruction over the past decade, similar to roles described in ARL's report, "New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries."¹ Traditional assessment practices for liaison work, such as counting reference transactions or instruction sessions, or evaluating collections

coverage, do not capture the impact that strong relationships with university communities have on their teaching, learning, and research activities.

This article describes a mixed-methods assessment process that was used to increase understanding of the impact of liaison librarian outreach activities. The extendable and repeatable assessment framework uses desired outcomes, objectives, measures, targets, and results to generate a multi-dimensional view of liaison work that neither depends solely on traditional kinds of inputs and outputs, nor on surveys or focus groups to generate data. The results of the assessment illustrate the impact that a set of faculty-liaison practices has on faculty and library services. Details of the assessment and the assessment framework demonstrate how it can be adapted for other kinds of assessment.

Background

The MIT Libraries support a community of about 11,000 students, of which 40% are undergraduates and 60% are graduate students. They are taught by a faculty of about 1,000 and a staff of about 9,000. In 2010, the MIT Libraries implemented a system-wide reorganization, one aspect of which brought the liaison librarians into a single department, spanning all library locations and all academic disciplines. At that time, liaison librarian position descriptions were updated to emphasize new and existing roles, such as outreach to MIT communities. In the first year, the department developed shared principles for liaison work that crossed disciplines and subject specialties.

As part of that effort, the liaison department considered the kinds of practices all liaison librarians use, despite the high variability of the research and teaching approaches across the discipline-based communities they serve. Coming together as a team, they began to build common practices such that each liaison librarian no longer had to invent an approach on their own. One area the department tackled first was the practice of contacting new faculty. The

institute welcomes between 40 and 50 new faculty each year.

Prior to the reorganization, liaisons' practices of contacting new faculty were inconsistently implemented. There was no systematic way to learn of new faculty appointments across all academic departments, and liaisons conducted a variety of outreach activities to establish contact. The newly organized department implemented a common approach in order to build a strong, relationship-focused practice for faculty. A list of new faculty is now routinely acquired from the MIT Office of the Provost and a list of activities and resources (sample e-mails, possible discussion points, etc.) were created to enable the liaisons to approach this task consistently. Additionally, a minimum set of expectations was developed. Each of the 23 librarians with liaison responsibilities at the time of the study was expected to:

- Contact every new faculty member in the liaison's assigned departments, labs, or centers
- Make an effort to learn about the new faculty member
- Try for a face-to-face meeting, with at least one follow-up message if initially unsuccessful

Methodology

An assessment process in the MIT Libraries has come to involve a cyclical series of steps originally based on the Balanced Scorecard² system that follow the initial **goals** of a project or service, identify the **objectives** that are to be assessed, determine what **measures** illustrate success in achieving the objectives, define **targets** for each measure, and then select tools to capture the data. These are the steps

involved in developing this multi-factor framework for assessment.

In October 2010, assessment of the impact of MIT Libraries' liaisons' practices for connecting with new faculty began with an emphasis on desired outcomes based on the minimum liaison responsibilities just described. Noting that the liaison responsibilities were just that, a set of activities required of the liaisons but disconnected from any desired outcomes or impact, the assessment group—comprising the head of the liaison department, two liaisons, and the assessment librarian—began by asking about the goals of the service. Why was contacting new faculty important? What would the faculty gain from these contacts, and how would relationships improve? The group identified three desired **goals** for contacting new faculty:

1. To increase the faculty member's awareness of library services that would help them in their research or teaching
2. To form a productive relationship with the libraries from the start, and to bridge their experience from a previous institution to MIT so they can return to their research more quickly
3. To contribute to having informed, aware students by enabling informed, aware faculty

With these goals, the assessment group was then able to brainstorm and define three specific **objectives** that could be accomplished to achieve each goal (Figure 1). The main objective was to establish ongoing, reciprocal relationships with the new faculty. By doing so, liaisons would increase faculty awareness of library services, and, in turn, would learn more about what the new faculty members needed in order to configure appropriate services to support them well.

Figure 1

Objectives
1. Establish ongoing reciprocal relationships with faculty
2. Increase faculty's awareness of the services that can help them in research and teaching
3. Learn more about new faculty needs to improve our liaison work and services to them

The assessment group then examined each objective to identify measures that would indicate success. In order to corroborate and confirm findings, multiple measures were chosen that together would offer a fuller indication of impact. Measures needed to accomplish three things:

1. Have an obvious connection to the objective to illustrate achievement of that objective.
2. Have a clear action that would indicate success.
3. Approach the objective from different perspectives, showing how both faculty and liaisons would be impacted by success.

The group developed, refined, and finalized sets of measures that filled these criteria for each of the three objectives (Figure 2). For example, one indicator to confirm that liaisons had established ongoing reciprocal relationships with faculty might be the percentage of new faculty who proactively made contact or followed up with their liaison

within one year. Evidence that liaisons were learning more about new faculty needs to improve services would include a number of proposed new services or activities that resulted from contacts with new faculty. (For a complete list of measures, see Figure 2.)

Figure 2

Objectives	Measure
1. Establish ongoing reciprocal relationships with faculty	Percent of new faculty contacted in their first year
	Percent of contacts that resulted in a reply from the new faculty member
	Percent of contacts resulting in face-to-face meetings
	Number of new faculty who proactively make contact or follow up with their liaison within one year (not counting initial contact back and forth)
	Percent of librarians who feel that they have an ongoing relationship with the new faculty member
2. Increase faculty's awareness of the services that can help them in research and teaching	Percent of new faculty who use library services for research or teaching purposes within their first years of research at MIT (1–3 years)
	Percent of new faculty who have shared library services with students
	Number of courses in which librarians are invited to participate with new faculty
	Percent of faculty who consider library services important or essential to their research and teaching
	Percent of new faculty aware of their liaison
3. Learn more about new faculty needs to improve our liaison work and services to them	Number of proposed new or changed, major or minor initiatives or activities that resulted from contacts with new faculty
	Percent of librarians who say they have made collections decisions based on what was learned about new faculty member

Objectives	Measure
	Percent of face-to-face meetings with faculty that resulted in the librarian's following up with additional information
	Percent of new faculty whose liaisons reported learning about them

The next step in the assessment framework is always one of the most difficult in any assessment process when benchmarks or previous assessment does not already exist: defining a level of achievement, a target, for each measure that would illustrate that the objective was accomplished. Because the liaison department was a new department and this work was a new type of assessment, targets were established based on informal and anecdotal data,

such as discussions with the liaison librarians, past experience, results of previous surveys, etc. For example, for the measure “percent of contacts resulting in face-to-face meeting,” the group developed a target of 40% based on prior liaison experience and the understanding that faculty have many demands on their time. A complete list of specific targets can be found in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Objectives	Measure	Target
1. Establish ongoing reciprocal relationships with faculty	Percent of new faculty contacted in their first year	100%
	Percent of contacts that resulted in a reply from the new faculty member	60%
	Percent of contacts resulting in face-to-face meetings	40%
	Number of new faculty who proactively make contact or follow up with their liaison within one year (not counting initial contact back and forth)	25%
	Percent of liaisons who report having an ongoing, reciprocal relationship with the new faculty member	No target set
2. Increase faculty's awareness of the services that can help them in research and teaching	Percent of new faculty who use library services for research or teaching purposes within their first year of research at MIT (1–3 years)	95%
	Percent of new faculty who have recommended library services to students	15%

Objectives	Measure	Target
	Number of courses in which librarians have engaged in subsequent conversations about new opportunities for library instruction	2
	Percent of faculty who rate library services important or essential to their research and teaching	75%
	Percent of new faculty aware of their liaison	No target set
3. Learn more about new faculty needs to improve our liaison work and services to them	Number of proposed new or changed, major or minor initiatives or activities that resulted from contacts with new faculty	4
	Percent of librarians who say they have made collections decisions based on what was learned about new faculty member	80%
	Percent of face-to-face meetings with faculty that resulted in the librarians following up with additional information	50%
	Percent of new faculty whose liaisons reported learning about them	100%

The actual results would eventually be weighed against those targets thoughtfully. Having a reflective discussion before and after gathering the data allowed the assessment group to consider what “impact” really meant, and the results of this study would then establish benchmarks for future assessment.

The importance of determining targets cannot be understated. The number itself has almost no value in and of itself; it is the *conversation*, the *reflection*, and *discussion* that leads to a target that is most important, as it manifests the values that underlie the anticipated outcome, and how much effort should be and is expected to be spent to reach that target.

With all three major aspects of the framework established, the assessment group was able to draw up an implementation plan that identified tools. The tools selected to gather data for each of these measures varied. The group’s intent was to identify as few tools as possible that could gather the most information, while simultaneously asking the least

from faculty, as they were least likely to respond to a lengthy survey or an interview request. Three tools were identified, and measures were adjusted if needed to get the most out of the tool.

The first tool was the new faculty contact worksheet (Appendix A). In the first six months, each liaison was asked to fill out a worksheet that captured some elements of their meetings or contacts with faculty, as well as the preparation involved. These worksheets were submitted to the head of the liaison department to collate and evaluate. The data from the new faculty contact worksheets would be compiled to determine six of the identified measures.

At no time was the aggregated data from the new faculty contact worksheet ever used to evaluate an individual liaison. Because each liaison had varying numbers of new faculty, different kinds of relationships with individual faculty, and strengths in how they worked, this exercise was not intended to appraise their work as individuals. Instead, data was collected to determine how well liaisons as a department were impacting the teaching

and research work of faculty. This was important to reiterate to the staff to reduce any hesitancy in supporting the assessment project and in encouraging the new practices.

As work proceeded in this assessment, one issue arose: liaisons did not have a common understanding of what defined an “ongoing relationship” with faculty. To generate that agreed understanding, liaisons participated in a group activity in which they characterized their faculty relationships to provide feedback about what constitutes an “ongoing relationship,” as well as to illuminate their perceptions about how relationship-building was going. This activity served as the basis for a liaison follow-up worksheet (Appendix B).

The liaison follow-up worksheet was sent to liaisons after one year. On this worksheet, liaisons reported any further developments of their relationships with these particular faculty members, and they described any new or revised services that were built on their new knowledge of these faculty. The liaison follow-up worksheet would compile data on five of the identified measures.

At the end of the first year, the head of the liaison department sent a brief e-mail survey (Appendix C) to the new faculty about their use and needs for library services. The questions were based on the initial three objectives for contacting new faculty (see Figure 1). The brief e-mail survey compiled data

for three identified measures, overlapping some of the others, giving a contrasting faculty perspective.

In a fortunate circumstance, the assessment group was able to glean additional data from the 2011 MIT Libraries Survey,³ administered triennially. Questions were asked about faculty awareness and use of library services, as well as the importance attributed to these services. The Office of Institutional Research that administers that survey was able to generate a subset of aggregated results that applied to only the new faculty in our study, which could then be compared to the responses from the new faculty survey.

Results

The assessment group applied the multifactor framework to the liaisons’ outreach towards the 44 new faculty and tallied the results. The multifactor aspect of the framework offers several viewpoints for each objective, encouraging thought about each one. Overall, the project to implement new faculty contact practices that impacted library services was successful according to the results (see Figure 4). Out of twelve targets set, nine were met or exceeded, showing that the new faculty-contact practices led to relationships with new faculty that the department could agree were robust, and had an impact on library services and on the faculty’s teaching and research activities. For the three targets that were not met, the assessment has established benchmarks from which to thoughtfully improve the practice.

Figure 4

Objectives	Measure	Target	Result
1. Establish ongoing reciprocal relationships with faculty	Percent of new faculty contacted in their first year	100%	100% (44/44)
	Percent of contacts that resulted in a reply from the new faculty member	60%	66% (29/44)
	Percent of contacts resulting in face-to-face meetings	40%	48% (21/44)
	Number of new faculty who proactively make contact or follow up with their liaison within one year	25%	61% (27/44)

Objectives	Measure	Target	Result
	Percent of liaisons who report having an ongoing, reciprocal relationship with the new faculty member	No target set	48% (21/44)
2. Increase faculty's awareness of the services that can help them in research and teaching	Percent of new faculty who use library services for research or teaching purposes within their first year of research at MIT (1–3 years)	95%	83%° (out of 12 respondents)
	Percent of new faculty who have recommended library services to students	15%	47% (out of 12 respondents)
	Number of courses in which librarians have engaged in subsequent conversations about new opportunities for library instruction	2	3
	Percent of faculty who rate library services important or essential to their research and teaching	75%	59%** (out of 12 respondents)
	Percent of new faculty aware of their liaison	No target set	92%* (out of 12 respondents)
3. Learn more about new faculty needs to improve our liaison work and services to them	Number of proposed new or changed, major or minor initiatives or activities that resulted from contacts with new faculty	4	5
	Percent of librarians who say they have made collections decisions based on what was learned about new faculty member	80%	33%° (14/44)
	Percent of face-to-face meetings with faculty that resulted in the librarians following up with additional information	50%	61% (27/44)

Objectives	Measure	Target	Result
	Percent of new faculty whose liaisons reported learning about them	100%	100% (44/44)

*59% on targeted survey of new faculty responding to "How important are these services to your research or teaching activities?" on 2011 MIT Libraries Survey. Filtered for new faculty responses, 92% responded important or essential to "how important is each for your research or coursework?" on a variety of specific library services. Both represent a sample size of about 12 respondents.

° This target was not met.

The assessment group showed good intuition about how many faculty would respond to liaison contacts and how many would agree to a face-to-face meeting, resulting in targets that were easily met. More surprising was how many faculty proactively contacted their liaison librarian again within the first year. It is interesting to note that while liaisons assessed that they had ongoing, reciprocal relationships with almost 50% of the new faculty, they also reported that more than 60% of the faculty had contacted them within their first year of arriving at MIT. Despite that higher rate of contact by faculty to their liaison, this did not correlate with interpretation by liaisons as a sign of a well-established, reciprocal relationship. This may indicate that this metric was not a realistic measure of an ongoing, reciprocal relationship.

For the objective of increasing the awareness of new faculty to services that are useful to them, the results were mixed, both from the perspective of getting results lower than expected, as well as some contradictory data from the different tools. The faculty survey data show that 83% of new faculty use library services for research or teaching purposes within their first few years of research at MIT, which is below the target of 95% despite the fact that 100% of new faculty were contacted with some sort of e-mail regarding library services. That could simply be that those faculty are not aware that they are using online library services, or that they really do not use journal articles, other library materials, or other library services at all due to the nature of their discipline or their current research.

Of more concern is that faculty did not rate the library services as important as anticipated (59% versus the target of 75%). These results did differ from a similar question posed on the MIT Libraries' triennial survey where 92% of new faculty rated specific library services as important. Of course,

there are two important issues here. First is the tiny sample size. Only about 12 faculty members responded to each of the two surveys (it is unknown if these were the same 12). Although this is 27% of the total, usually considered a responsible response rate for faculty, it cannot be said to be representative of the total 44. Second, the questions on the two tools were different, and it is therefore impossible to compare the results explicitly.⁴ However, these results do show the need for further investigation.

Efforts to establish a strong set of work practices in contacting new faculty did enable the liaisons to learn more about faculty needs and to address those needs proactively by adjusting or advocating for changes in services. Contacting new faculty did lead to new instructional opportunities and many new faculty indicated that they were actively telling their students about library services as a result of librarian outreach. There were five instances of new or different services—such as hosting a new kind of event with the community, developing a proposal to change a materials delivery policy, and changing an instructional approach for a class. On another measure, as expected and in alignment with the 100% target set, all liaisons did report taking steps to learn about the new faculty's research interests. Additionally, after the initial contact, they took the opportunity to follow up with additional information to about 60% of the new faculty, whether or not they had a face-to-face meeting.

One target that was not met was related to adjusting our collection practices due to new faculty research interests. The assumption made in setting that target was that the majority of new faculty contacts would result in an adjustment to collection practice. Because we are a major research institution, though, it is actually likely that our selection practices are essentially stable across collections in those areas,

and that only minor tweaks based on new faculty research areas would be required.

This assessment project was useful for giving the liaison department some insights into its operational effectiveness as well as the impact of its work on library services. It proved valuable for investigating the intangible measure of “relationship building,” and stimulated ideas for further improving new faculty contact practices in particular, and outreach practices in general. Having a common set of practices and expectations for contacting new faculty provided a useful structure to encourage liaisons to do this work. By having a common framework, liaisons had a structured way to share their ideas and tactics for relating to new faculty, which can inspire and enrich the activities of their liaison colleagues. Even though the needs of new faculty vary significantly across disciplines, having a common set of practices and expectations can still be put into place effectively without negatively affecting an individual’s custom approach to their faculty community. At the same time, while the results of this assessment project have been useful towards understanding aspects of operational effectiveness, what is very important is how the data is used to improve those operations going forward.

Conclusions and Next Steps

This assessment was done about five years ago. The department continues to gather data about initial contacts with new faculty. Having liaison librarians fill out information regarding their contact with each new faculty member reminds them of best practices around this infrequent task. The data gathering now includes questions to gather intelligence about the needs and pain points for new faculty. The department collates and shares that information with the rest of the library system to inform the improvement or development of library services.

However, this level of assessment effort, using the multi-factor framework with its many objectives, measures, and tools, proved too time-consuming for ongoing practice. Since then, we have expanded the contact practices to new post-docs, and new librarians use the practices to meet their entire faculty. In the meantime, since the report from the Task Force on the Future of Libraries⁵ has been written, our intent is to generate new assessment based on issues identified during implementation of these directions.

The most commonly used tools to explore the impact of liaison work as described in the literature are surveys or interviews that seek to understand how aware or how satisfied faculty are with library liaisons or library services. While that data has utility, it does not allow for understanding which specific liaison practices are most effective at generating positive outcomes such as increased use of the library, better instruction engagement, and stronger relationships. Assessment that forces us to find ways to measure intangible results can provide more interesting data than satisfaction, and in turn, those outcomes might lead to real library impact, such as faculty and student productivity and success, and even as MIT’s mission states, “to bring knowledge to bear on the world’s great challenges.”⁶

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lisah@mit.edu, crummett@mit.edu, [tag@mit.edu](mailto>tag@mit.edu)

Endnotes

1. Janice M. Jaguszewski and Karen Williams, *New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries* (Washington, DC: ARL, 2013), accessed September 28, 2016, <http://www.arl.org/storage/documents/publications/nrnt-liaison-roles-revised.pdf>.
2. “Balanced Scorecard Basics,” Balanced Scorecard Institute Strategy Management Group, accessed August 15, 2016, <http://balancedscorecard.org/Resources/About-the-Balanced-Scorecard>.
3. “Assessment in the MIT Libraries: 2011 Library Survey,” MIT Libraries, accessed November 18, 2016, <http://libguides.mit.edu/assessment/2011librarysurvey>.
4. From the New Faculty Survey: How important are these services to your research or teaching activities? (Did not ask for a rating for each service). From the 2011 MIT Libraries Survey: How important is each [of the following LIBRARY SERVICES] for your research or coursework? (Listed each service and asked for a rating for each).
5. Institute Task Force on the Future of Libraries,” MIT Ad Hoc Task Force on the Future

of Libraries, last modified 2016, accessed November 17, 2016, [https://www.pubpub.org
/pub/future-of-libraries](https://www.pubpub.org/pub/future-of-libraries).

6. “About MIT,” accessed November 17, 2016,
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Appendix A: New Faculty Contact Worksheet

New Faculty Contact Worksheet

To be filled out for each new faculty member

Faculty Member Name: _____

Liaison Name: _____

Month of Initial Contact: _____

Have you had contact with this new faculty member? Yes: _____ No: _____

Notes:

Did you receive a reply from the faculty member? Yes: _____ No: _____
(if applicable)

If they didn't reply to your first contact, did you follow-up?
Yes: _____ No: _____

Did you hold an in-person meeting? Yes: _____ No: _____

Did you follow-up to provide the new faculty member additional information (i.e., either after the meeting or after the initial e-mail contact if no meeting was held)?
Yes: _____ No: _____

Did you take some action to learn about the faculty member during this process?
Yes: _____ No: _____

Appendix B: Liaison Follow up Worksheet

Administered six months after the end of the academic year in which initial contact was made with the faculty member.

Questions:

- Faculty member name
- Has this faculty member contacted you since your initial contact?
- If applicable, please list any new courses in which you are engaged as a result of your work with this faculty member.
- Based on your knowledge of and contact with this faculty member, have you advocated for any new library services or changes to existing services? If yes, please describe.
- Have you made any collection development recommendations or decisions as a result of what you learned about this new faculty member?
- How would you describe the relationship you have with this faculty member now?
- Please note: We recognize that it's not necessary to create an in-depth relationship with every faculty member, but are interested in understanding the nature of the relationships we are forming with our communities. Do you feel you have an ongoing, reciprocal relationship with this faculty member at this point?

Appendix C: New Faculty Survey

The MIT Libraries offer many services, such as course reserves, access to electronic articles, book delivery, etc.

1. Have you used any MIT Libraries services for research or teaching support since your faculty appointment?

Yes/No

2. How important are these services to your research or teaching activities?

Not Important

Somewhat Important

Very Important

Essential

No Opinion

3. Have you recommended any MIT Libraries' services to students?

Yes/No

Notes