

Liaison Engagement Success: A Practical Guide for Librarians

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Book Review: *Liaison Engagement Success: A Practical Guide for Librarians*

Filgo, Ellen Hampton and Sha Towers. (2021). *Liaison Engagement Success: A Practical Guide for Librarians*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 139 pp, \$65.00.

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In *Liaison Engagement Success: A Practical Guide for Librarians*, Ellen Hampton Filgo and Sha Towers tackle the broad question of what success looks like in the wide array of liaison work occurring in academic libraries. Filgo and Towers have both previously written and presented on liaison librarian work. Filgo is director of the Liaison Program at Baylor University while Towers, the associate dean for Research and Engagement at Baylor University, was the previous head of the Liaison Program at Baylor for seven years.

The book has three sections: chapters one through four address liaisonship history, mindset, and strategy; chapters five through eleven address engagement in academic disciplines as well as non-academic departments; chapters twelve and thirteen close the book discussing leadership and assessment of liaison efforts. The middle section (chapters 5–11) is particularly insightful in discussing how liaisons approach working with varied academic disciplines (humanities, social sciences, STEM, etc.) as well as non-academic departments within the university or college. These chapters provide an overview of how different academic disciplines approach key topics and current trends such as data management, data visualization, and scholarly metrics.

Chapter 12, “Leadership of Engaged Liaisons,” is a welcome addition as leading liaison work within or across departments can be a challenge. The discussion of frameworks and assessments for liaisons, with helpful examples, is an excellent way to conclude this book. This chapter considers various models for liaison work along with approaches to how the library assesses, supports, and engages liaison work.

This book is a part of the long-running series, *Practical Guides for Librarians*, and as a practical guide, it provides concrete steps, definitions, and examples towards what success looks like in liaison work. The formatting of the book helps to accomplish this goal. This book is an interesting and engaging read as a result of the use of pictures, callouts, bullet points, and an informal writing style. To further supplement the authors' examples, fifty-five liaison librarian narratives are included. Their locations include one UK library, two Canadian libraries, with the remainder coming from libraries in the United States. The full librarian narratives are freely available to download as a PDF from [the publisher's website](#).

The authors reference the additional librarian narratives throughout the book, often closing chapters with key quotes from pertinent examples as a way to provide additional context and insight. For example, chapter seven concludes with summative quotes from the narratives of librarians working in STEM liaisonship. These additional narratives are particularly valuable in the ways they show the range of opportunity and engagement in liaison work. Most of the book chapters also include endnotes with articles for continued reading. Between the librarian narratives and the cited articles, the authors provide a wide range of information regarding liaison librarianship in a variety of contexts.

There are three points of critique to consider. First, both authors are employed at the same institution and derive their own examples from working at that institution. The other librarian narratives are very useful and insightful, however having authors writing from two different institutional perspectives or experiences might have helped avoid the second point of critique. This second point being that while the authors insightfully note "your institutional culture will influence how you operate" (99), they themselves operate from the perspective that liaison librarians are working on campuses where the majority of faculty have active research projects. The vast majority of the examples in the discussions of department partnerships are also oriented towards research-based projects.

The third point of critique is the general philosophy of librarianship presented throughout. The authors argue that librarians need to be flexible and agile, with "readiness and willingness to pivot gracefully . . . to quickly adapt and grow in new ways in the only way to meet the evolving needs of our users" (22). In a book about successful liaisonship approaches, it is somewhat frustrating to encounter the invisible, ever-moving goal line of "evolving user needs," not least because meeting those needs occurs within the institutional context.

This same point of view is repeated in the discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the authors argue that the pandemic required "liaisons to pivot quickly to new modes of research support, as well as new modes for learning and teaching

... [such as] video conferencing tools, and video creation platforms” (69). Many academic libraries prior to the pandemic were already using video tutorials, online calendars for setting research appointments, and other technologies to work with students. The authors seem to buy into the myth of the “slow-to-change” or “technologically adverse” academic library instead of acknowledging the myriad of ways many academic libraries, prior to and during the pandemic, use a broad range of technological tools to support students and faculty. This focus on librarians “pivoting” also ignores the ways the pandemic increased the stress on academic library labour. The ability of a library to “pivot quickly” occurs within the infrastructure of the institution, which, very often, serves to determine the tools, resources, and number of staff for the library. It is inconsistent, then, to acknowledge that libraries, and librarians, work within their institutional culture yet hold libraries and librarians to an untenable standard of flexibility and agility without also holding the broader institutional structures themselves to that same standard. Librarians cannot, through their own efforts, “agile” their way to institutional change nor is it their responsibility to do so.

These three critiques notwithstanding, this book will prove informative for librarians in research-focused institutions who are new to the profession, working with a new liaison area, or leading a department of liaison librarians. The discussions of liaisonship across the disciplines and in non-academic departments are particularly useful and will be of benefit to liaisons working with those departments.