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## **Liaison Year One Redux: A Snapshot of the Academic Business Librarian Professional Development Landscape**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this article, Edward Lim discusses the challenges and strategies he faced in his first year as the business liaison to the University of Connecticut's School of Business. He captures the many communities formed by business librarians around a geographic region or topic, such as entrepreneurship. He notes publishing opportunities for business librarians. Lastly, Edward offers advice on professional development for those new and seasoned in business librarianship – mostly North American professional opportunities – from his perspective, having worked previously in Singapore, and Shanghai, China.

**Keywords:** Professional Development, Community of Practice, Publishing, Library Associations

In March 2020, the author started his new role as the Business and Entrepreneurship Librarian at the University of Connecticut. Except for the month-long training spent in New York City with New York University Libraries, his entire professional life was spent in Singapore and Shanghai, China. The author began as a business librarian at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has served in a business liaison position for business schools in the past decade. Currently supporting a business school at an “R1”, flagship university recognized as a Public Ivy, his position at the University of Connecticut (UConn) offers an expanded perspective on international business librarianship. The author shares his views on this journey and offers advice on professional development for those new and seasoned in business librarianship.

### **FIRST YEAR AS THE BUSINESS LIAISON**

Cramer wrote a series of blog posts under “Liaison Year One Redux.” His perspective originated from both the COVID-19 pandemic disruption and the faculty turnover at the business school. He focused on activities that business librarians in their first year would typically prioritize, such as getting to know an academic department (2021b) and what to say in a faculty department meeting (2021a).

Similarly, the author took on a business librarian in the U.S. for the first time. However, he had been a business librarian in Singapore and Shanghai for almost a decade. Looking back at his time at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, the author realized how beneficial it was to

be part of a team of five to six business librarians in a large research-intensive university. The author could focus on just one of the business school departments, such as information technology, operations management, or accountancy. He would often consult someone within our team of business liaisons for reference help and talk about business librarianship. The head of the business library in Singapore was a veteran business librarian comfortable with all types of business reference questions.

At New York University Shanghai, the author was the sole business librarian. However, he could reach out to colleagues on the New York campus, and the 12-hour time difference meant that the author could follow up by the next day. At his current institution, there are no other business librarians. Drawing from his experience, the author highlights three themes he feels are valuable for new and seasoned academic business librarians.

### **Evaluating What Business Resources Is Right for the Institution**

What happens when one starts a job as a solo business librarian at a large university? One inherits a set of business-related subscriptions. At UConn, the author's priority was to track existing subscriptions of business-related resources funded by the library, business school, and other university departments. Cramer (2020) briefly stated how business librarians spend time managing the business collection, assessing what is required, balancing the needs of providing a diverse collection with new teaching and research requirements, and listening to the feedback from faculty. It is a systematic process as we continue to evaluate our subscriptions – like the work of the Census Bureau.

### **Building Competencies in Business Research Data**

Access to data resources is the lifeline of business researchers looking to publish. Many librarians support business research at our institutions. Arguably, there is a continuum when we think about the role of the business librarian in providing research support. The business school could solely be responsible for acquiring business data resources on one end of the continuum. On the other end, the business librarian and the university library are heavily involved. Trauner (2017) outlines Duke University's approach to "one-off data purchases" as a part of a broader reflection on what new roles we can play.

Kalinowski & Hines (2020) helped me understand what business research data entails and provided a framework where the author could offer data-related business research support. It allowed him to ask reference interview questions that were appropriate for business research data.

Business resources are constantly evolving, so the author could no longer rely on sheer memory work. He set time aside to explore and track the hundreds of data sources related to different business topics. In addition, the author wanted to document how these data sources were relevant to business researchers. He adopted the process shared by Kalinowski (2019), using the Notion platform because it allows "easy linking between various notes/records," creating a knowledge base of business research data available to UConn colleagues (<https://s.uconn.edu/b-research-data-kb>).

## **Making Sense of the Licensing Behind Business Resources**

Eventually, one goes down the rabbit hole of reading license agreements to determine access methods, authorized users, and termination clauses. The author was fortunate that his union had successfully negotiated for additional professional development funds as the COVID-19 pandemic unraveled. The generous funds for professional development allowed him to afford an expensive Certificate in Licensing Digital Content (\$749 when the author participated, now \$849), conducted by Lesley Ellen Harris. She is an authority in copyright law, having worked closely with North American librarians. It is a self-paced program that follows a cohort model, with course mates to discuss and work together on assignments. Completing the certification takes about four months, including office hours with the instructor. Upon completion, the author felt less of an imposter (syndrome) whenever he had to examine a license agreement.

Silver (2019) wrote a concise guide for someone new to licensing, focusing on the terms and conditions found in our license agreements. This guide is valuable for any learner hoping to start immediately without stumping up for the cost of certification.

## **Minding Our Language: An Important Part of Liaison and Outreach**

Business jargon is arguably an intimidating aspect of business librarianship, as many non-business librarians would remark to us. Cramer, Campbell, & Scanlon (2017) offers a valuable tip in our instruction when partnering with business faculty: use professional business terminology such as “competitive intelligence databases” when describing certain business databases and “research consultants” when referring to librarians. In addition, we want to be communicating the value of our library databases (often monetary, but not limited to). The rallying cry: if we speak the language of entrepreneurs, we can engage our audience better. When communicating our value as research consultants when speaking to business faculty and student audience, the same can be said. As a result, the author has tweaked his language in his instruction and emails to business students and researchers.

## **FINDING A COMMUNITY OF BUSINESS LIBRARIANS**

Ross (2009) discussed three challenges for business librarians aspiring to keep up with business reference, proposing three resources: (a) colleagues and peer groups, (b) professional literature, and (c) professional development. Other business librarians have also emphasized the importance of the community with different strategies; Zabel (2008) focused on the role of professional associations on mentoring opportunities, Hayworth (2008) on resources for early-career business librarians, which include mentoring, serving in associations, and publishing in professional journals. Lastly, Bordelon (2008) reviewed the various networking avenues beyond library associations for business and economics librarians.

Being the sole business librarian in an institution can feel isolating. The author wanted to find a community of business librarians in New England or Northeastern U.S. from whom he could learn. The author became part of the newly formed Business Community of Interest under the Boston Library Consortium (BLC; <https://blc.org>), connecting with fellow business librarians. BLC members are academic and special libraries from Massachusetts, Connecticut, New

Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Maine. They organized the *BLC Business Librarianship Speaker Series*, open to library workers across New England.

The author cannot overemphasize the value of finding a friendly and safe space within one's determined business librarian community. He provides a comprehensive list of the communities he is aware of based on geographic reach.

### **Regional Groupings and Activities for Business Librarians**

The invisible gorilla in the room is Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS) membership. A personal membership to ALA and Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) would cost \$217 per year (2022 regular rates); membership to BRASS has no additional fees.

One highlight is the monthly BRASS Virtual Discussion, facilitated by the Business Reference Services Discussion Group Steering Committee. It usually happens on a Friday afternoon, and there is a designated notetaker. Even if one cannot attend, meeting notes are available post-discussion, posted on ALA Connect.

The BRASS Symposium is an excellent platform to hear from other academic business librarians and present to peers. It is usually organized every semester (twice annually) by another BRASS committee – the Business Reference in Academic Libraries Committee.

Next is the BRASS Publisher's Forum, organized by their Business Information Sources Committee. These forums are usually organized thematically and feature speakers from vendors of business resources. Look for announcements of their ad hoc events on ALA Connect or BUSLIB-L (discussed later).

Another option is a full membership with the Special Libraries Association (SLA), which comes at a similar cost of \$220 per year (2022 full member rate). One can then opt to be part of the Business and Finance Division at no additional charge. There is no rivalry or competition between these two large bodies of business librarians. However, it is becoming exclusive because of the high membership costs. Most new business librarians will not be able to justify or afford to spend almost \$450 to be a member of both associations.

Thankfully, the BRASS New Business Librarians Group (<https://groups.google.com/g/new-business-librarians-group>) requires no membership to ALA and RUSA. It is an interest group for business librarians within their first five years of professional work. The co-chairs of this Group have been gracious to allow the author's participation even though he does not exactly fit the criteria. They facilitate a monthly one-to-one random coffee chat, which the author remains grateful for, as it connected him with many business librarians in North America during the pandemic.

Many business librarians are expected to deal with economic data as part of their job description. *Beyond the Numbers* (<https://research.stlouisfed.org/conferences/beyond-the-numbers>) is a low-cost and no-registration-fee biennial conference. The Research Division organizes the conference at the Federal Bank of St. Louis, coordinated by their Research Information Services staff. It aims to address the challenges of economic information.

An often-mentioned conference that business librarians attend is the *Charleston Conference* (<https://www.charleston-hub.com/the-charleston-conference>). It is held annually,

usually in November. There is usually an informal gathering of business librarians because of the conference's focus on collection development.

What are the North American communities for business librarians? If one belongs to the top business schools in North America, one might already be a part of the Academic Business Library Directors (ABLD; <https://sites.google.com/view/abld>). It is an exclusive group of 40+ members, primarily business library directors. Every year, members write a review of their library, summarizing new and ongoing library initiatives, organizational change, changes in physical spaces, collection and vendor issues, and other issues affecting their library. This report is shared internally among members; the rest of us will read the summarized report published on *Ticker*. It is like a *State of the Union Address* for business librarians because of what it communicates.

There are business librarian groups centered around a physical region or geography for the rest of us who do not qualify for ABLD membership. Some include public librarians, and others are exclusive to academic librarians.

One of the more active groups is BLINC (Business Librarianship in North Carolina; <https://nclaonline.org/BLINC>). They are a subsection of the larger North Carolina Library Association (NCLA). BLINC is responsible for organizing the Entrepreneurship & Libraries Conference (ELC; <https://entrelib.org>), formerly known as the Entrepreneurial Conference. The name can be misleading since ELC organizes free quarterly workshops on entrepreneurship – again, a topic or area associated with many business librarians.

The other major active group is SOUCABL (Southern University and College Academic Business Librarians; <https://soucablconference.mozello.com>). They organize an annual conference featuring participants from the Southern U.S.

Other regional groups include the Business Librarians of Cal State (BLoCS), for librarians who support business education and research across the California State University system. There is the annual Midwest Business Librarian Summit (MBLS; <https://guides.lib.purdue.edu/MBLS>). Their planning committee members are librarians from Purdue University, Indiana University, and Michigan State University. Next, the Capital Area Business Academic Librarians (CABAL; <https://cabalinfo.wordpress.com>) started with members in the District of Columbia and has expanded to include academic business librarians in Maryland and Virginia. The Alberta Business Librarians group is a ground-up initiative started by Canadian librarians Nicole Mullings and Céline Gareau-Brennan in 2020.

### **International Groupings and Activities for Business Librarians**

All business librarians will eventually come across BUSLIB-L (<http://lists.nau.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A0=BUSLIB-L>) because it is central to business reference. It is an unmoderated discussion list with a constant exchange of information; stumper reference questions, new job opportunities, and other business librarianship-related announcements. It is an imperfect but accepted platform. Conversations are mainly from North American-based librarians but often replies from European and Asian colleagues when their expertise calls for it. Anyone with an email address can subscribe.

Similarly, ABLD has sister associations in Europe and the Asia Pacific: the European Business School Librarians' Group (EBSLG; <http://www.ebslg.org>) and the Asia Pacific Business School Librarians' Group (APBSLG; <https://www.isb.edu/en/apbslg.html>) respectively. They have a tradition of organizing a joint conference once every three years (at least in the pre-

pandemic times). The resulting acronym is a mouthful: ABLD-EBSLG-APBSLG JCM (Joint Conference & Meeting). The author was lucky to be involved in the organization and participation in the last joint conference held in Singapore in 2016.

One of the EBSLG member institutions – ZBW Leibniz Information Centre for Economics – organizes an International Conference on Economics and Business Information (INCONCESS; <https://www.inconecess.eu>). Similarly, the conference happens once every three years. During the pandemic, they introduced “Community Events” every three months. They usually have a call for presenters and feature an international line-up with speakers from within Europe, North America, and the Asia Pacific.

There is also the Latin American Council of Management Schools (CLADEA; <https://cladea.org>), as well as the Business Librarians Association (BLA; <https://blalib.org>) – formerly known as the British Business Schools Librarians Group (BBSLG).

For liaisons to a business school that is AACSB accredited, there is a virtual community for “Business Libraries and Research Centers” hosted by AACSB (<https://www.aacsb.edu/educators/membership/networking-communities>). It is a membership-only discussion forum. The BRASS Reference in Academic Libraries Committee also maintains a dedicated resource guide for business librarians wishing to learn more about the AACSB standards, created by LuMarie Guth (<https://brass.libguides.com/AACSB>).

On the topic of new initiatives, there is an informal co-op centered around business librarians sharing their instructional materials. It is co-organized by Annette Buckley, Kara Van Abel, and Orolando Duffus – all US-based business librarians. The Business Librarians Exchanging Instructional Materials (BLExIM; <https://sites.google.com/view/blexim-sharing>) are not affiliated with any professional organization. Anyone can contribute instructional materials or browse the registry at no cost. There is also a community of practice for business librarians involved in evidence synthesis (<https://groups.google.com/g/buslibs-srs>; email [zahra.pp@gmail.com](mailto:zahra.pp@gmail.com) for access), led by Zahra Premji. It was started in 2020, with several virtual meetups thus far. There is also a small online discussion group called *Entrepreneurship Librarians* (<https://groups.io/g/entrepreneurshiplibrarians>). Kae Bara Kratcha and Nicholas Albaugh started the group in 2019.

### **Awards and Financial Support for Business Librarians**

Again, BRASS plays a disproportionately large role here, with five BRASS Award Committees currently looking into individual awards. Four are relevant for academic business librarians, catering to different purposes; (i) the Research Award if you have a project in mind, (ii) the Student Travel Award, and (iii) the Academic Business Librarianship Travel Award, both to attend ALA Annual Conference. Lastly, (iv) the Excellence in Business Librarianship Award for those who have distinguished themselves in the field.

The Grants Subcommittee of BRASS is currently compiling grant opportunities for business librarians. It will be posted on the BRASS LibGuides (<https://brass.libguides.com>).

## PUBLISHING OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUSINESS LIBRARIANS

Many of us are required or encouraged to publish, regardless of our professional status as a librarian. This article focuses on the importance of professional sharing, learning from one another, just like when we participate in our communities of practice.

The most prominent peer-reviewed journal is the *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship* (JBFL; <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/wbfl20>). JBFL started in 2008 and published special issues almost every year. Another popular publication among business librarians is *Ticker: The Academic Business Librarianship Review*. It started relatively recently in 2015, published by ABLD.

Several less formal publishing avenues exist. *BizLibratory* (<https://bizlibratory.wordpress.com>) is a blog that is open to contributions from “any library worker who does anything related to business librarianship to share their thoughts, perspectives, and experiences.” *Academic BRASS* (<https://www.ala.org/rusa/sections/brass/publications/academicbrass>) is a similar platform published twice a year by the BRASS Business Reference in Academic Libraries Committee. Steve Cramer’s blog, *The Liaison Life* (<https://liaisonlife.wordpress.com>), features guest posts occasionally. All three are not peer-reviewed but enjoy a large readership from business librarians. Most importantly, they are free to read.

Two publications published by Information Today, Inc. are relevant to business librarians as they tend to cover business resources. Both are behind the paywall; (1) *Online Searcher* (<https://www.infotoday.com/OnlineSearcher>), published six times a year. A digital-only subscription will cost \$70 per year. (2) Next is the newsletter *The Information Advisor’s Guide to Internet Research* (<https://www.informationadvisor.com>), edited by Robert Berkman. The annual subscription is comparatively expensive at \$240, but the site license allows up to 5 readers, with ten issues published yearly. Consider pooling funds with fellow business librarians if one’s organization does not subscribe to either publication.

Lastly, Cramer observed that many business librarians have “published on topics outside of business librarianship” from his participation in external reviews for business librarians going for tenure (2020). There are ample opportunities to contribute to publications and venues not listed above. The BRASS Business Reference in Academic Libraries Committee compiled a list of library journal titles and non-library journal titles (<https://brass.libguides.com/ScholarlyPublishing>).

## FINAL WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Harwell (2008) wrote about his own experiences with burnout as a business librarian, and many of the points raised are still relevant today. The author acknowledges that our growth as business librarians is never-ending. It is okay to feel overwhelmed and underprepared, even as one makes time for professional development opportunities. Finding a community of like-minded business librarians can offer support in ways that may not be expected. These communities are why the author has found his footing in his new identity as an “immigrant business librarian.”



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