



Reflections on Student-Led Library Outreach as Prompted by the Position of Institute of Fine Arts Library Liaison

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Citation: Charvet, Claire. "Reflections on Student-Led Library Outreach as Prompted by the Position of Institute of Fine Arts Library Liaison." *Bridging Fields*, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2025). <https://doi.org/10.33682/wvmd-s4oe>.

The Graduate Student Association of NYU's Institute of Fine Arts holds a position for a graduate student to bridge the gap between the Institute's librarians and the students that use their collections. As this position intersects with Charvet's fields of study, reflections were prompted regarding the role of outreach, vocational awe, and community building through her time as library liaison.

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) of the Institute of Fine Arts (IFA) is a student-led organization which aims to advocate for student interests and build community at the Institute. Roles include the library liaison, an academic year-long post to be filled by a matriculated student at the IFA. I volunteered for this position and was accepted after an interview in September of 2024. I felt that my academic background as a dual degree student coupled with my professional experience in library work made me a helpful candidate. Further, I sought the opportunity to deepen my connection with the Institute's library, staff, and my fellow students. With a few weeks left in my tenure, I have achieved such connections and accessed another perspective to outreach

approaches in academic libraries.

The role of the liaison is to support the GSA's goals of student advocacy and engagement in the context of the Institute's library. The Institute and other NYU organizations send out an average of 10 emails a week, including communications from the library regarding programming. This creates a sensation of overwhelm and proves the work of event promotion and outreach difficult. As a student, I am able to make use of alternate channels of contact with more immediate reception, chiefly a student-only messaging group, as well as my first hand understanding of what messaging will resonate with students and when. A primary example would be a workshop on Zotero usage in October 2024. The Institute's library sent out two email communications notifying students of the workshop, one at the beginning of the semester in a summary of Fall programming and a second message at the end of September. I coordinated with the library's research librarian and messaged students with a reminder and brief summary of the event, emphasizing that complimentary pizza would be provided, one week then one day prior to the event. Many students attended and both myself and the librarians involved received positive feedback. In promotion of the IFA library, the GSA as a resource, and myself as library liaison, I facilitated a book sale in November of that year as well. While outside of the library's purview, I approached this event as one tangential to the library. The GSA book sale is an annual event, soliciting donations throughout the year and providing an approachable way for students to purchase books related to their scholarly interests. Books were offered to students at a sliding scale price, culminating in a free giveaway on the third and final day of the sale. Through this model, the GSA and myself were able to make a profit to support future programming while getting books in the hands of students, promote the library liaison as a resource to more of the student population, and inadvertently create community engagement. As students perused books and had questions about them, conversations emerged and first-year students further met and introduced themselves, myself included.

While I have assisted in supporting and facilitating events, I have found that the bulk of my role is being an accessible resource and point of contact for the library. I have fielded questions about book checkout procedure, navigating the library's online catalog, contacting librarians, and locating onsite books in the stacks—often before or after classes, during lunch, or on study breaks. I am happy to do so, but am interested in the enduring sense of mystery still experienced by graduate students regarding their library that seems to motivate this contact. Why would they come to me instead of the librarians, despite their consistent outreach and demonstrated engagement and consistent helpfulness for students and staff? Why does the GSA feel it needs a library liaison role in its organization?

In this covert-outreach approach, I feel that a student liaison can help mitigate library anxiety and deter overwhelm experienced by students. The librarians at the Institute are fantastic at conducting outreach projects and remaining available to students and classes to assist and activate the extensive collections they cultivate. However, for a variety of reasons, I believe that students at the graduate level, and in this school specifically, carry assumptions that are difficult to navigate. Constance Mellon first explored this sensation in a 1986 study of college students and their school library^[1]. Through qualitative

research, she found that a majority of students cited feeling lost and/or overwhelmed, both physically in their navigation of the library space as well as psychologically in their comprehension of the library's offerings. Further compounding this anxiety is the context of academic libraries, where, as highlighted by Mellon's findings, the action of asking a question can be interrogated as a signifier of lower capability and an admittance of inexperience. Unfortunately, the world of higher education has yet to embrace these aspects of the learning process and can perpetuate negative associations with them. Students hear librarians' outreach efforts and have a desire to use the library's resources, but approaching a librarian and asking questions seem to run into this surmountable obstacle of hesitancy and disorientation.

The setting of the Institute of Fine Arts does not assist this sensation felt towards academic libraries. Located in the Upper East Side of New York, a few blocks down from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and across from Central Park, the repurposed Gilded Age Mansion preserves many visual signifiers of the wealth and exclusivity the area did, and continues to, represent to varying degrees. To access the library, students must walk through the building's marble lobby and up an expansive staircase, surrounded by neoclassical mouldings, gilded embellishments, and a centuries-old figurative tapestry. The library office keeps their door physically open to students with questions and facilitates research consultations. These settings, coupled with enduring library anxiety, create a predisposition to a sensation of inaccessibility that is difficult to navigate.

Interestingly, the library itself provides a solution to this issue as a reliable, shared community space for students. The Institute's head librarians are aware of this, and have embarked on several projects to boost library-sponsored programming, collection development, and physical changes to make reading rooms and stacks more comfortable and accessible^[2]. An enduring liaison program is arguably part of this overhaul as well. The position is a relatively new one, but has proven thus far to be a helpful insight to student perspectives on the library that go beyond surveys and self-reports.

Having a student that is readily available to answer questions and provide connections to resources mirrors that of the live chat box or reference desk most academic libraries employ. Further, the liaison position connotes a degree of anonymity and separation between question and responder in a similar fashion as a chat box. Although interactions are usually face to face and thus, highly personal, my position as an intermediary and fellow student creates the sensation of indirect contact with the library's team and ideally, more comfortability, resulting in direct questions unfiltered by. This assistance grows more important when coupled with an increased sense of community afforded by the in-person, activity based nature of the position. Students at the Institute are almost all commuters, with only small numbers living in graduate housing downtown. A majority are new to New York City, NYU, or both, and hold other positions and commitments outside of their coursework. The implications of providing an open, research oriented third space for students in both regular reading room usage and holding programs is positive for the library, as it increases student engagement with library staff and one another, where there is a demonstrated need.

An emergent point of reflection is that of my decision to pursue being library liaison. Fobazi Ettarh describes vocational awe as, "...the set of ideas, values, and assumptions

librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique.”^[3] Ettarh explores this concept as it relates to library funding and salaries for library worker’s rights, as well as the decision itself to pursue library work. Librarians can be seen as extensions of this sacred institution, “priests”, as Ettarh describes, and as a result often cite a near-spiritual pull or sense of “oughtness” towards their line of work. This two pronged critique of librarian’s hesitancy to self-critique, and self-sacrificial commitment to typically underfunded work intersects interestingly with my experience as library liaison. When I first became aware of this position through an announcement by the GSA at new student orientation, I felt compelled to apply as the only student at the IFA participating in the Dual Degree program. My personal passion for and professional experience in library work created the sensation that I “should” work as liaison, especially when coupled with the respect and vocational awe I hold to some degree for librarianship. While a rewarding experience, the position of library liaison is uncompensated, and touches on Ettarh’s notions of labor creep and inequity as it relates to this sense of duty. As outlined earlier, my position as library liaison availed me to my peers whenever they had questions regarding library use, both on and off campus. Further, the work of coordination, communication, and advocacy of the library arose in addition to my academic and professional workload. This created tensions which could likely be avoided in full-time liaison or outreach librarianship.

In addition, the terminology around this position prompted reflection and exploration. While the expectations and nature of my position were more in alignment with the title of representative or ambassador, liaison was chosen and integrated into the GSA’s terms of reference. A professional liaison librarian is an employed librarian who acts as the primary point of contact in specific departments, for example, Art History studies^[4]. Liaison librarians can inform library functions ranging from collection development to programming to instruction, all in support of the teaching of that specific department. My position differed in that I am a student, not an employed librarian, and my role was dependent on bridging student and librarian needs on a smaller scale. There is overlap between the two roles in their emphasis on subject specificity and intention of keeping library functions as current and useful to students as possible. My experience as library liaison for the Graduate Student Association was rewarding in that I was able to incorporate my MSLIS studies to my work as an art history master’s student, and connect with the IFA library team to another degree. A less expected, but still welcome outcome has been a larger consideration of library work, the impact of position terminology, and my experience with vocational awe.

Author Bio

Claire Charvet (she/her) is pursuing NYU and LIU’s dual masters program in Art History and Library and Information Science. Her work and research is based in critical approaches to archival work, the intersections of performance and visual art, and feminist and queer studies. She holds a B.A. in Art History and Psychology from NYU.

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