A liaison relationship is characterized by a close bond or connection. Soon after arriving as Dean of the University Libraries, Lance Query began discussion about and formal implementation of a new type of liaison program between the University Libraries and the academic programs, the library faculty and the teaching faculty. The structure is simple: each academic department or program in the University has been assigned a faculty librarian to serve directly as a liaison. Each of the recipient units was also asked to appoint a member of the teaching faculty to coordinate departmental issues and concerns with the faculty librarian. The result is also simple: a stronger and closer bond has been and is being developed between the two previously semi-isolated units. That bond has three interrelated components: collection evaluation and development, library or information literacy instruction, and research enhancement.

The liaison, in ideal circumstances, is not merely a funnel for ordering new library materials but works individually with the responsible faculty member and/or colleagues to identify and order appropriate additions to the library collections. A primary justification for acquisition is tied to the breadth and depth of the academic programming that exists in the department (minors, undergraduate degrees, and graduate degrees), but a more recent emphasis has added an even broader base of coverage—one that is sensitive to the research interests of individual faculty members. This latter perspective is increasingly important since the overall faculty profile has changed radically with numerous retirements and the resulting employment of new teaching faculty who have highly focused and well-developed research interests.

The majority of the books that are acquired for the University Libraries are obtained through an approval plan that has been developed to reflect the various subjects taught in the University. Since its inception, a single firm, Baker and Taylor, has served the University in this acquisition venture. However, the Libraries has just made a major change in vendors and, in so doing, has reviewed every academic profile with the departments and the new firm, Blackwell North America, Inc. The result is that materials received are based on collection development statements that have been re-reviewed by individual units. As programs multiply, change, and evolve in curricula and research emphases, the general approval plan has also been modified—again through the collaboration of departmental faculty and the University Libraries. Moreover, faculty liaisons work with departmental representatives to place direct firm orders and to review items that are identified by the vendor as profile-related. Although not tied explicitly to a detailed profile, serials acquisitions are also correlated with each department’s academic needs. Because a new serial approval is an ongoing expense and inflation for serials is much higher than most book resources, the addition of serials goes through a stringent review process. The library liaison can and should be both Scrooge and Santa Claus in identifying what is needed, arguing the need, and working to resolve the age-old problem of limited funds and changing needs.

Another major contribution of the liaison program is instructional classes for the faculty and their students. High-tech electronic classrooms in Waldo and the Education Library offer faculty librarians the opportunity to demonstrate to departmental faculty and students a variety of sophisticated databases from the basic FINDER book and periodical catalog of the University Libraries to the almost infinite resources of the World Wide Web. Following demonstrations of search techniques, the students, in turn, can utilize classroom computers to test, through practical assignments, what they heard and saw earlier. In 1995-96, liaisons offered hundreds of rudimentary instructional sessions to freshmen (or beginners at any age). Basic searching techniques in the different databases in WESTNET (e.g., FINDER, Dataquest I) and FirstSearch are commonplace presentations. A major focus of each session is to give the student a chance to complete an actual assignment while working in the classroom. Equally important, several departments have discovered that their library liaisons will offer more advanced instruction tailored to a particular class and research assignment. In order to plan and present such a class, the librarian and the faculty member must consult carefully so that the objective of the assignment and the search strategy meld into a logical whole. Again, the classes are structured so that after a demonstration by the librarian, there is a hands-on practice session in the classroom with both librarian and departmental teacher helping students to develop search strategies and select appropriate references.

Needless to say, these two main aspects, acquisitions and library instruction, of the tripartite liaison bond build an understanding of the individual research interests of the faculty as well as the purpose of a particular class in the education of the student. When the teamwork is most successful, the library liaison can anticipate at least some of the library needs of the instructor; assist him or her in research; provide updates on new or useful resources (books, serials, online databases and services); and act as a partner in the teaching/research enterprise. Success in the liaison relationship benefits both sides. The faculty gain essential knowledge of old and new resources and the students make better use of existing information in their learning experience. Librarians gain a broad knowledge of the curricula and a more specific awareness of research concerns of the faculty with whom they work. Ultimately, both share in meeting the challenge of the University "to provide students the opportunity to gain academic knowledge and develop the ability to apply that knowledge, ... and participate meaningfully in a rapidly changing world." ("Mission of the University," Western Michigan University, 1994-1996 Graduate Catalog, pp. 5-6).