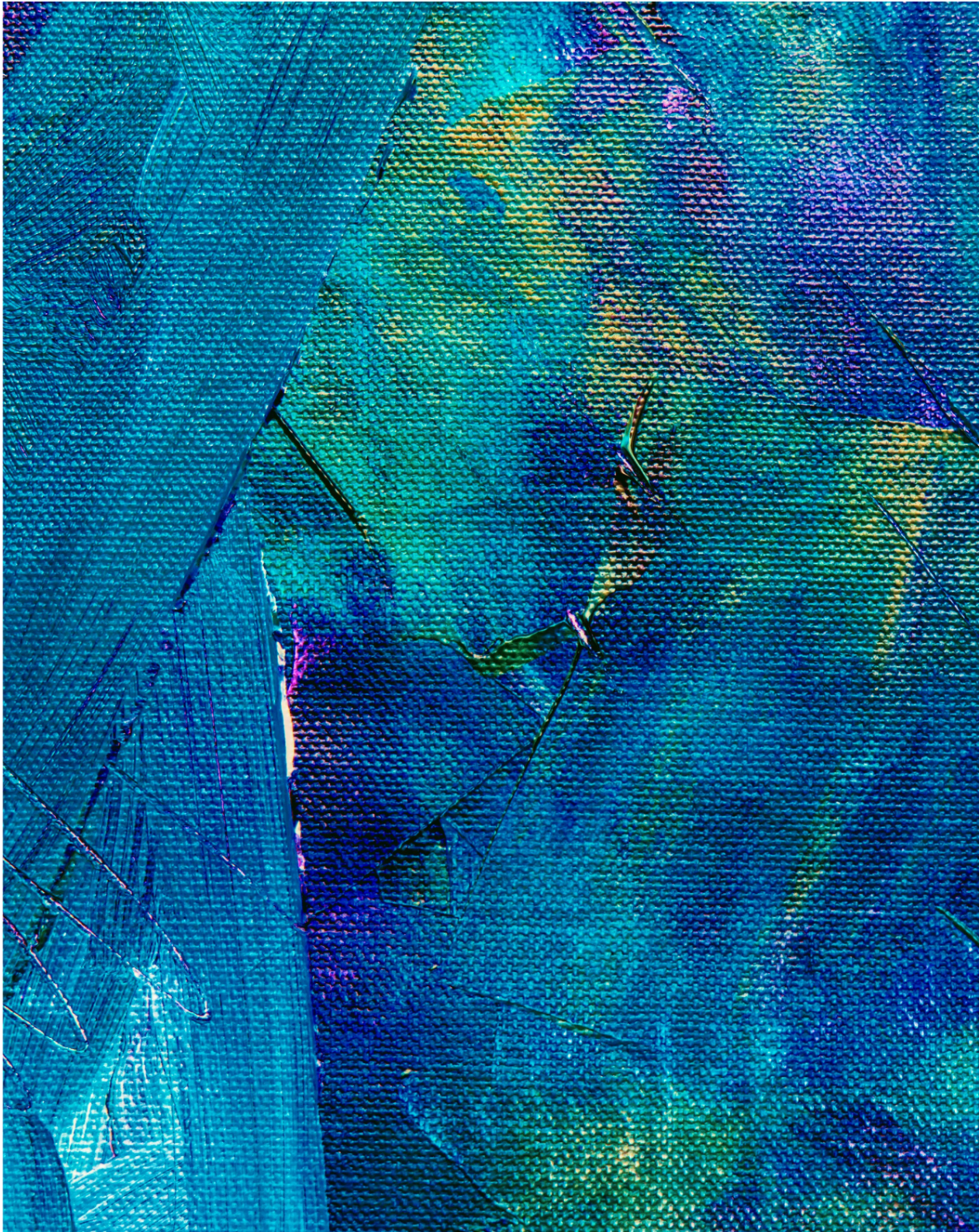




ENDNOTES

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From the Editor

Welcome to this year's edition of *Endnotes: The Journal of the New Members Round Table*, the journal dedicated to supporting library school students and early-career librarians. This edition contains nine peer-reviewed contributions of scholarship and two book reviews, reflecting a record number of articles published in this journal. I and the editorial board of *Endnotes* are thrilled to bring volume 14.1 to you.

In this volume, our authors tackle some of the most pressing opportunities and challenges facing contemporary librarianship. You will explore practical case studies on campus collaborations, from interdisciplinary STEAM camps for pre-service teachers to strategies for building trust and community belonging through library partnerships. Our conceptual papers dive into critical issues, offering actionable insights on designing low-barrier youth programming, building career resilience amidst political polarization, serving first-generation students through peer consultation, and understanding Gen Z information behavior regarding misinformation. You will also find reflections on the role of AI tools in academic libraries, a comprehensive thematic review on academic hiring practices, and reviews of new and noteworthy texts in the field.

Endnotes is committed to creating a welcoming space for LIS students and early-career librarians to publish their research. Many of our authors are first-time writers, and it is our mission to offer guidance through the publication process to ensure they feel confident in their work.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the Endnotes Committee for their dedication and hard work. This year we saw a very high number of submissions, and I am amazed how a small committee can do so much in a short amount of time. I also thank the American Library Association for its continued support in making this publication possible.

I hope you find inspiration and practical value in this volume. Please take time to engage with the scholarship featured here, and I encourage you to consider submitting your own work to *Endnotes* or volunteering with the New Members Round Table in the coming year.

Sincerely,
Jessica Swaringen, Editor

Editorial Policy

Endnotes (ISSN: 2159-0591) is the scholarly publication of the ALA New Members Round Table. The purpose of *Endnotes* is to provide support for LIS students and librarians who want or need to publish scholarly articles and to publish peer-reviewed research directed at new librarians. The *Endnotes* Committee oversees the publication of a peer-reviewed e-journal, *Endnotes: The Journal of the New Members Round Table*. The journal will be published on the ALA Web site and indexed in Library Literature. Each edition of the journal will contain at minimum two scholarly articles written by LIS students or early-career professional and/or scholarly book reviews of titles relevant to students and new librarians. The journal follows a policy of double-blind refereeing of articles in advance of publication. For more information, please visit <https://journals.ala.org/index.php/endnotes>

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Collaborations Across Campus: Examining Pre-Service Teachers' Experiences with a Library STEAM Camp

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Abstract

As both place and service, academic libraries serve a vital role at the center of the university—as a point of connection and possibility. In this article, we describe the UTA Libraries STEAM Camp, a collaborative project in which pre-service teachers designed hands-on STEAM workshops for campers ages 8-13 held across various spaces in an academic library. In addition, we share lessons learned and adaptations made across multiple iterations of the workshops and how we evaluated the impact of the experience on multiple stakeholders.

Article Type: Case study

Introduction

Over the past decade, many academic libraries have designed makerspaces, sometimes called “FabLabs,” which are spaces that combine technology, craft materials, and tools that spark makers’ creativity as they create both physical and digital artifacts (Dougherty, 2013). There are myriad reasons for bringing makerspaces into the academic library: encouraging creativity, developing critical 21st century skills, and building community (Mersand, 2021). As makers explore, discover, and create, academic makerspaces can serve as points of connection and possibility, bringing together people, activities, and new ways of learning.

Established in 2015, the UTA Libraries FabLab offers training, support, and resources to support innovation and entrepreneurship for students,

faculty, and staff. Previous studies have documented the role of the UTA Libraries FabLab in building students’ maker literacies and competencies, such as problem-solving, communication, design thinking, and knowledge sharing (Peery & Chivers, 2021). The FabLab has also presented new opportunities for creating connections with multiple audiences, including community partners and K-12 students.

The UTA Libraries STEAM Camp is a collaborative project in which undergraduate students enrolled in a teacher education program designed and implemented hands-on STEAM workshops for campers ages 8-13. This program has offered the chance to extend the FabLab’s reach to a broader audience. Across two iterations -- held in spring 2023 and spring 2024 -- pre-service teachers worked collaboratively with library staff to learn about the university library’s spaces and resources, including the

FabLab, studios, and archives, and how to utilize these resources in designing experiential learning experiences for children.

In this article, the authors outline how different stakeholders came together to build an innovative experiential learning opportunity for both university and K-12 students. In addition to describing the background and structure of the camp, we detail how pre-service teachers utilized library resources to design experiential workshops and the impact that this experience had on their views of teaching and learning across informal and formal learning spaces. We also share how we made adaptations across multiple camp iterations, evaluated the impact of the experience on K-12 students, and created a sustainable model for connecting our campus and community.

Literature Review

As interest in academic libraries' implementation of experiential learning opportunities has grown (Kolb, 1984), there is a need for more models of practices and programs to encourage scalability and the development of new activities. Our study is grounded in the idea that experiential learning provides learners of all ages with invaluable opportunities to wonder, explore, and move between abstract and concrete knowledge. Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41).

Research has begun to explore how academic libraries can utilize makerspaces and maker services to bring more experiential learning opportunities to their campuses. Nagle argues that there is a "chronological trend towards more student-centered, hands-on, and inclusive spaces" (2021, p. 185) that encourage users to find new and innovative approaches to solving problems that build agency and self-efficacy. These efforts have often included developing spaces for students to make, create, and explore.

In addition to offering new experiential learning offerings, these spaces also create outreach opportunities for a variety of audiences, including K-12 students and the public. For example, Coleman and McGraw (2009) describe the need for academic libraries to develop comprehensive K-12 outreach programs to prepare students for higher education. In reports of other camps held in academic libraries (Baker, 2018; Smith & Marquez, 2021), faculty and librarians have worked to integrate making and maker technology into curriculum as a way of academic libraries to serve as a place of exploration, collaboration, and experimentation with research for youth. For example, Baker (2018) details how providing day camps at the Abilene Christian University makerspace offered unique opportunities for homeschooled students to engage in hands-on, personalized learning. Through the Maker Academy, youth and families were introduced to free and open-access educational resources that supported their learning goals.

While there has been growing interest in how academic libraries can engage with various stakeholders, including academic departments, staff, and the public (Harland et al., 2017; Wynne et al. 2016), there is a need for more specific models for how academic libraries can serve as a nexus for experimentation and learning across the campus and community. This is particularly important in the post-Covid landscape, when there has been some re-centering of the library on campuses. During the Covid-19 pandemic, most instructors and learners took their environments online, and this shift has extended past 2020. Libraries have an enviable opportunity to re-imagine their services and align with campus strategic values and goals. As library administrators conduct space surveys and make plans for remodels, they have been planning for more social engagement events, workshops, and promoting a sense of belonging with the library at its center. These efforts can also include creating or redesigning spaces to be more friendly towards outreach and welcoming to K-12 groups to academic library spaces.

UTA Libraries Experiential Learning Initiatives

UTA Libraries has a demonstrated history of supporting and pioneering experiential learning. The UTA Libraries Fabrication Lab (hereafter referred to as the “Fab Lab”), was created in 2015 and grew from a cluster of 3D printers in the corner of the Central Library into a dynamic, bustling space with a fully outfitted shop room, glass and pottery kilns, sewing and embroidery area, vinyl printers, multiple 3D printers, laser cutters and a screen printing dark room is being built out currently. The FabLab’s strategic placement on the library’s ground floor ensures that all students, faculty, and staff have access to creative technologies, regardless of academic major.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Central Library underwent an extensive first floor renovation, intentionally earmarking space and designing for experiential learning initiatives, including a dedicated classroom and studio space with recording studio booths, a soldering/robotics room, and a print design area, collectively known as the Creative Spaces and Studios. This area is divided into three spaces: The FabLab, Studios, and Basement. The FabLab houses machines such as 3D Printers, Laser cutters, embroidery machines, glass kilns, and a shop room. This 8,000 square foot space proved to be an ideal space to host workshops during the day camp. The Studios space holds a robotics room with soldering stations, a motion capture room, and sound studios. Additionally, the library debuted a dedicated gaming basement in spring 2020 that received little use prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but is now a bustling space where many students gather to play and learn. The Basement includes gaming consoles, video games for circulation, group gaming tables, PC gaming, tournaments, workshops, and virtual reality technology.

These updates coincided with the formation of a dedicated Experiential Learning Department. UTA Library’s Experiential Learning Librarians have demonstrated interest and expertise in curriculum development. Additionally, they are

well versed in the creative technologies in the Studios and FabLab spaces and work alongside faculty to integrate the use of these technologies into curriculum. The librarians learn how to use creative technology, spaces, and resources and communicate these opportunities to faculty so faculty can dedicate their efforts to instruction.

Experiential Learning Faculty Fellowship Program

The Experiential Learning Faculty Fellowship (ELFF) was created and funded during the COVID-19 pandemic and the program was implemented when students and faculty began returning to campus in fall 2021. This fellowship opportunity offered faculty a stipend for reconceptualizing and partnering with library staff to fully integrate the library’s experiential learning resources with academic course content. The ELFF program was advertised via various outlets on campus and interested faculty submitted a course syllabus, ideas they may have, and a statement of interest in the program. Use of library technology (FabLab, Gaming Basement and/or Studio Space) was mandatory. This program continues and is unique in its scope and intention.

UTA Library STEAM Camp

The initial STEAM Camp was a result of successful ELFF application; a UTA College of Education faculty member applied to build more experiential learning opportunities into a course taken by pre-service middle school teachers in their junior year. Our collaboration began in October 2022 with a series of meetings to go over the syllabus and the needs of the pre-service teachers. The aim of the course redesign was to provide a comprehensive introduction to the library’s experiential learning resources and to help students engage in experiential learning throughout the semester. As we discussed potential avenues for collaboration, we thought through multiple possibilities, including having the pre-service teachers design artifacts for their future classroom, build conceptual lessons for use in K-12 schools, and conduct research projects on the FabLab.

As library staff discussed our previous experiences with hosting camps and activities for K-12 students, we realized that we had an opportunity to provide pre-service teachers with an authentic learning experience in which they would work with small groups of K-12 learners during an all-day STEAM Camp. One challenge for many of our faculty and staff with young children is the availability of childcare on dates when the university is open but public schools are closed. We decided that hosting a STEAM camp on one of these dates would not only offer a unique opportunity for students to work with youth in an interactive, hands-on environment, but it could also provide a valuable service to the university.

The UTA Libraries STEAM Camp has now been through two iterations that took place in spring 2023 and spring 2024. The 2023 STEAM Camp was the first camp to take place at the UTA Central Library and, in addition to collaboration between the UTA College of Education and the Library, this initiative required cooperation and coordination with the UTA Libraries FabLab, the Library Systems and Technology department, UTA's Compliance Office, and the UTA College of Education's Marketing Department.

All pre-service teachers enrolled in the course visited the library by January 2023. During this first meeting, we introduced the project, provided a tour of library spaces, and engaged in initial brainstorming regarding lesson topics and ideas. In a subsequent class session, the pre-service teachers came to the library to meet with subject matter experts, including FabLab and Studios staff, and present their project ideas. Library staff provided feedback regarding materials, feasibility of timeline, and creative technology recommendations. Additionally, a member of the UTA Libraries Open Projects and Partnerships team met with the class and explained Open Access publishing, copyright dos and don'ts, and how their group lesson plans would be available on the UTA Libraries institutional repository for others to reference and implement (UTA Libraries, 2024).

Once camp dates were planned and organized, the University Compliance Services Department was notified to ensure that the camp would align with the university's Youth Program Policy regarding the care of children. The initial meeting offered a debriefing standard operating procedures and training on how to use CircuiTree, which is a camp management tool required by compliance and is used across campus for any UTA sponsored youth programs where minors are in the "care, custody, and control" of an employee. The "Request to Host" is submitted and sent to the department's administration via the online platform. Allergies and medications are listed by the parents, and the hosts can make decisions on what is served for lunch and snacks. During the registration process, photography agreements were collected to allow us to photograph all camp participants on the day of the camp.

Since these camps involve minors in which the parents leave the children on campus, all the pre-service teachers, staff, and student employees who were scheduled to be around the campers were required to have a background check and complete the UT System Child Protective Training. To keep compliance with UTA policies and procedures, the pre-service teachers were required to go through a volunteer approval.

Collecting and Analyzing Data to Evaluate Stakeholders' Experiences

To measure the success of any library initiative or program, it's essential to collect and reflect upon data from stakeholders' experiences. For this project, we were especially interested in learning how the pre-service teacher candidates utilized library resources to design interdisciplinary experiential learning activities for K-12 learners aged 8-13, as well as how the library STEAM project impacted their long-term perceptions of teaching and learning. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, the researchers collected several sources of data created by pre-service teachers, including initial planning documents, lesson plans, instructional artifacts, reflections, and roundtable

presentations after the Library STEAM project concluded. All artifacts were collected in the academic course in which pre-service teachers were enrolled and were submitted through the university's learning management system.

Data was analyzed using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), which is an inductive approach to research that focuses on building theories to understand new phenomena. It is most appropriate for researchers who seek to understand how or why a particular event occurred, as is the case in this study. We also collected feedback from the K-12 students who participated in the camp and spoke informally with families about their experiences, which helped to provide valuable information that informed future iterations of the camp experience.

After each camp iteration, we met as a team to discuss ways to improve the experience for all stakeholders. For example, during the 2023 iteration of the camp, when the age range was 8 to 13, some pre-service teachers experienced behavioral issues with some of the oldest and younger campers. The following year, the age range was adjusted to 9 to 12 and campers were arranged into small groups based upon their age, which helped to resolve the behavioral issues. To accommodate the needs of K-12 learners with disabilities, we also had additional staff on hand to provide one-on-one assistance as needed.

Leveraging Library Resources

We found that the expertise of the library staff, and particularly their experience in working with learners of all ages, was crucial to supporting pre-service teachers as they grappled with both ideas for their lessons and ways to make those ideas into a reality. All nine groups reported leveraging the expertise of library staff members in various areas, including the Experiential Learning staff, FabLab staff, Archives support, and the Open Access team. Staff members served in various roles, including advising students on the most effective and efficient ways to use resources, helping to conceptualize

experiential learning experiences, and providing instruction in the use of different library technologies and tools. Pre-service teachers were also asked to design extensions and adaptations for K-12 learners with various needs and those with disabilities; library staff offered invaluable suggestions for making learning experiences engaging and accessible for all camp attendees.

Four of the nine groups chose to utilize FabLab tools and resources, including the expertise of FabLab staff members. For example, one group aimed to help their campers understand wind energy and wind turbines. Initially, the group wanted to have campers design and print a large wind turbine during the STEAM Camp. The FabLab staff helped the group to map out the time needed for printing large-scale models, which helped the group realize that not only would such a task not be possible in the time provided, but it would also mean that the K-12 students would spend most of their time watching the 3D printing without active engagement.

With the support of the FabLab staff, the group of pre-service teachers reimaged their project by printing pieces of smaller turbine models ahead of time to have students construct, build, and interact during the workshop. The staff also helped the group set up a 3D printer for students to visit so that they could see how the parts were constructed in real time. Ultimately, the lesson was successful in helping K-12 students learn about alternative forms of energy, and wind turbines more specifically.

The FabLab and Studios staff also assisted another group that wanted to design a large-scale board game in which K-12 learners assumed the roles of historical figures to answer trivia questions. The Studios team helped the group learn how to print the game board as a large-scale 36" x 48" poster, while the FabLab staff helped the group learn how to use the wood laser cutter to create game pieces designed to look like famous people in history (e.g., Amelia Earhart, Frida Kahlo) (see Figure 1).

The Library Special Collections on the sixth floor also served as critical support for three of the nine groups. For example, one group had a goal

of helping K-12 students grasp the importance of understanding history from multiple perspectives. To develop a fully integrated lesson, they worked with the Archives staff to identify multimodal resources, including diary entries, maps, and charts, that would allow students to analyze an event, synthesize information, and work across disciplines, including history, mathematics, and science.

Figure 1: Board game and mini-figures designed in UTA Libraries' FabLab



Changing Perceptions of Teaching and Learning

In their written reflections, pre-service teachers identified four primary ways that the project changed their understanding of teaching and learning: hands-on experiences with K-12 learners, impact on their views of K-12 teaching and learning, and knowledge of open access publishing initiatives. One of the most common topics was the need to be flexible and adjust teaching as needed.

For example, one of the groups had initially planned a workshop that utilized FabLab resources to help K-12 learners learn about propulsion and energy. As the group tested their workshop, which involved building and racing Lego cars propelled by balloons, they soon discovered that there were several challenges related to the attachment of the balloons and the propulsion. Library staff members helped the

group utilize a ramp to aid the propulsion. As Dee, a group member and future middle school math and science teacher, said, “Something I learned throughout the semester is that lessons do not always work out the way that you expect them to.” No matter how well we plan and prepare, there are a variety of factors that can impact student learning and engagement, such as student behavior, outside distractions, and unexpected events.

Pre-service teachers also identified key elements of informal learning environments that they planned to use in their future classrooms. As Dave, one of the candidates who worked on the wind turbine project, said, “student choice and a dynamic environment” are two pieces that he planned to incorporate into his future math and science teaching. Similarly, Elise, another pre-service teacher, said that the “Library STEAM Project helped her learn “to increase movement, flexibility, and usability” in lessons.

Similarly, K-12 students who participated in the workshops said that their perceptions of the library had changed because of the experience. Many had not anticipated that they would be making, creating, and composing with new tools, or visiting areas such as the Archives. The STEAM camp provided them with the opportunity to reimagine the library as a space for learning, doing, and thinking alongside their peers. Families also reported that the workshops offered an invaluable opportunity for their children to engage with STEAM concepts and topics in an exciting and engaging atmosphere. For children and families, the workshop offered a new opportunity to envision the university library as an accessible, community-focused space.

Building Synergistic Collaborations

Over the course of project implementation, we’ve found that the Library STEAM Project has had lasting and important impacts on university unit collaborations, pre-service teacher candidate participants, university staff members, and middle grades students. Working on this project has engendered several collaborative efforts, including FabLab training for College of

Education faculty, grant initiatives to provide K-12 teachers with experience in using the FabLab, and ongoing efforts to design interdisciplinary and co-curricular programming for students. The STEAM Camp will continue to be an annual event, and we hope to scale the project to involve more pre-service teachers and K-12 students.

For pre-service teacher candidates, the project offered a critical opportunity to understand the types of powerful learning that happen in informal spaces. Through designing learning opportunities that maximize use of library resources and spaces, they also learned valuable lessons about the importance of play, engagement, and experiential learning that impacted their views about K-12 teaching. They also learned about the role of open-access curriculum and gained expertise in creating and publishing lessons for a distributed audience.

We found that a key component of the experience was offering reflection opportunities at numerous points in the process, including prior to, during, and after workshop implementation. When the pre-service teachers had the opportunity to share lesson ideas and roadblocks with experienced staff members, they got critical feedback that helped them to adjust their plans to create more successful and engaging lessons that used library technologies and resources. Specifically, we encouraged pre-service teachers to maximize the opportunities afforded by the spaces and technologies to create meaningful experiences for the K-12 students that they worked with. Focusing on Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb et al., 2014) and intentionally making room for reflection in the experience is a huge step towards more thorough and complete learning.

Recommendations and Extensions

We found that there's great value in thinking across academic and professional boundaries to share experiences, resources, and tools. While all of us have various experiences in creating and running programming for K-12 learners across informal and formal learning spaces, the

UTA Libraries STEAM Camp offered us the invaluable experience of rethinking an undergraduate program to center experiential and informal learning experiences. For any collaboration between an academic library and another unit, planning ahead is crucial. As we had built in several checkpoints for candidates to learn about library resources, engage in initial brainstorming, and then adjust and modify their ideas, we were able to engage the expertise of several library staff members, which enhanced the learning experiences. In the initial planning stages for any camp or workshop, we recommend developing a calendar and a series of scaffolded steps and responsibilities for planning, designing, refining, and rethinking workshop ideas.

We also found that reflection for both pre-service teachers and campers was critical for cementing learning goals and maximizing the learning experience. For pre-service teachers, the process of publishing their lesson plans in the open-access format provided an important avenue for them to think about the ways in which knowledge can be shared and accessed, something that they will be able to draw on throughout their careers as educators. Similarly, it's important to provide opportunities for reflection for campers as well. Suggested activities for incorporating reflection on the camper level can include a day journal, a pre and post survey, exit passes or an end of day decompression session. During the UTA Libraries summer camp, camper groups were provided with cameras that they used every day. On the last day, we created a slideshow with all the photos, and the slides were shown to campers and their parents.

We also recommend taking an active role in camp management and having additional staff available to provide individual assistance to campers who may struggle with the workshop content or behavioral issues. In future iterations, we plan to ask pre-service teachers to develop a series of "what-if" activities, or back-up learning opportunities that can be used on an as-needed basis. This work will help to offer a differentiated learning experience for campers and will also

help pre-service teachers learn how to prepare for classroom teaching, which required them to be equipped with tools, lessons, and resources to meet a variety of learning needs.

Another potential avenue that we are considering for future iterations is the expansion of the program to school sites and other locations. It's important to note that traveling to the academic library can be an impossible task for some K-12 groups. Barriers to access occur when there are not enough funds for school buses, or the academic library is already crowded during long semesters. For example, academic librarians from the University of Florida supported local diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at a local school through STEAM-based learning workshops and recycling curriculum used for a Girls Tech Camp (Birch et al., 2020). They received an "A+" from the school and feedback was overwhelmingly positive. This outreach took place at the school's campus, demonstrating the need and possibility for in-house and outside-the-library programming. We firmly believe in the promise and potential of bringing the maker mindset and resources into K-12 schools and informal learning spaces, thus opening up even more opportunities for the academic library to serve as a tool for connecting stakeholders, academic units, and community partners.

Conclusion/Summary

In the past year, UTA Libraries has shifted towards a research library focus and away from prioritizing K-12 field trips and engagement. However, the partnership between UTA Libraries and the UTA School of Education persists, and experiential learning opportunities will continue. Whether due to budget constraints, legislation or university-level directives, many academic libraries and universities are finding themselves reworking strategic plans and directives to be more student-ready. A Gallup study found that adults with "a great deal or quite a lot" of confidence in higher education (36%) were roughly the same number as adults with "little or no" confidence in higher education (32%) (Jones, 2024). Of course, there are a multitude of reasons for this sobering information, but the

role of higher education in producing students who are career-ready is crucial in this challenging environment. We must constantly collaborate between colleges and libraries to offer programs that give students the opportunity to experientially learn and grow.

As we have collaborated to build and sustain this program, we have come to recognize the value of the library as a space for connection—not just for university stakeholders, but for the broader community as well. Our work has demonstrated the promise of designing authentic experiences that allow students to think outside the boundaries of traditional teaching and learning environments, something that we hope will serve them well in their future careers as teachers. We've also found that, in addition to exposing K-12 students to new ways of thinking about the learning that happens on a university campus and within the academic library setting, projects like these have the potential to serve university faculty and staff by providing an essential childcare service.

We've learned many valuable lessons, including the importance of mapping out a scaffolded series of planning activities that allow pre-service teachers to draw upon the expertise of library staff, the inclusion of reflection for all stakeholders, and the value of developing a series of "what-if" activities to create differentiated learning experiences. Along with many other academic libraries, UTA Libraries has undergone restructuring since this paper was submitted due to staff realignment and hiring freezes. As such, librarians working in smaller teams do not currently have the capacity required to plan and execute the STEAM camp; however, there are newly embedded librarians in the Creative Spaces and Services team that will continue working with course integration at the university level. The FabLab remains a welcoming space for learners and teachers, including K-12 students who attend UTA-sponsored camps. While this particular program is currently paused, we are looking forward to implementing what we have learned in future programming for our students, faculty, and the wider university community.

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Trust by Association: A Case of Borrowed Confidence to Grow New Relationships

Kim Gerald
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Abstract

Archival collections shape our collective memory but have historically privileged the records of governments, institutions, and powerful individuals. This practice leads to archival silences that excludes communities outside the mainstream. Building more representative collections requires not only intentional collecting but also rebuilding trust with communities that have been historically underserved by archival institutions. This paper presents a case study from the University of Calgary Archives and Special Collections, examining how a significant queer archival collection was acquired through a process of "borrowed trust". In this case an established relationship between a community historian and a university faculty member created the foundation for a new relationship with the archives, and ultimately led to the donation of an important collection and the development of broader community partnerships. Drawing on scholarship on archival silences and reparative archives, this paper argues that when used carefully trust can be a transferable resource that facilitates ethical collecting, strengthen community relationships, and expand archival representation.

Keywords: Archives, Trust, Collective Memory

Article Type: Case study

Introduction

Archives play a critical role in shaping collective memory, yet they are not neutral institutions. Traditional archival practices have historically privileged records created by governments, institutions, and individuals with social and political power, resulting in significant gaps in the archival record. These omissions, often described as archival silences, disproportionately affect marginalized communities and contribute to the erosion of diverse historical narratives. Contemporary archival scholarship increasingly emphasizes reparative archival practices that seek to address these silences through

community engagement, relationship building, and trust.

This paper examines the role of trust in expanding archival representation through a case study from the University of Calgary, Archives and Special Collections. It explores how a significant queer archival collection was acquired through a process of inherited or "borrowed" trust, whereby an established relationship between a community historian and a university faculty member facilitated a new relationship with the archives. The resulting donation not only helped to begin filling a major gap in the institution's holdings but also created opportunities for broader community

engagement, research, and future collecting initiatives.

Drawing on archival theory and literature on archival silences, collective memory, and reparative archives, this paper argues that trust is a foundational component of ethical collecting practices. The case demonstrates how trust can be transferred through existing relationships and leveraged to foster new partnerships between archives and historically marginalized communities. Ultimately, the paper highlights the importance of transparency, community collaboration, and public engagement in rebuilding trust and strengthening the archival record for future generations.

Background

Archives are not neutral (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a). They are spaces of power that hold and shape our collective memory (Carter, 2006). Not all stories will make it into the archives, and the ones that do are often perceived as being more valuable or of holding more historical significance. These narratives will continue to be perpetuated and will inform how society understands and remembers the past.

This is a significant problem, especially in Western archives, where there is a tradition of preserving and promoting the voices of powerful institutions, governments, and people of great wealth or privilege. This tendency tends to result in a single-story narrative that valorizes the accomplishments of individuals over collective movements, and that prioritizes stories of those with political or social capital over those on the margins of society. This method excludes the voices of competing narratives, often omitting the voices of those outside of the mainstream, and in doing so shapes our understanding of the past (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a).

While this tradition of preserving the records of the “great men of history” dates to the Ancient Greeks, 20th century archivists frequently took their queues from Sir Hilary Jenkinson.

Jenkinson (1892-1961) had a renowned career as an archivist in the United Kingdom that

spanned over 50 years, ending with his term as the chief administrative officer at the Public Records Office from 1947 to 1954 (Stapleton, 1983). He is often viewed as the father of archival science, and in 1922 Jenkinson first published his *Manual of Archive Administration* (1922), which is still taught as foundational archival theory.

Working primarily with surviving medieval documents or government records, Jenkinson’s perspective of what types of material has enduring value is already skewed. He tries to sell the archivist as a “neutral custodian” and “devotee of the truth”, whose role is more passive, and whose responsibility is placed on the acceptance and preservation of records from established institutions or people of power (Schwartz & Cook, 2002b). Jenkinson’s view leaves little room for archival appraisal, believing the records from these sources best support the accountability of history (Jenkinson, 1922).

However, even within his lifetime, some of Jenkinson’s theories were already seen as outdated. American contemporary Theodore Schellenberg (1903-1970) even once referred to Jenkinson as an “old fossil” (Smith, 1981). As another foundational theorist for archival practice, Schellenberg believed that the archives must be more selective in the material that they are preserving and strongly advocated for more appraisal within archival practice (Stapleton, 1983). Like Jenkinson, Schellenberg was also working with government records, and he was doing so at a time where new offices, departments, and records were being created in the United States at an unprecedented pace (Stapleton, 1983). Schellenberg understood that there are limitations to the space and capacity within the archives, and that a more robust selection process was needed in order to maintain the archives. However, even while advocating for better selection of archival materials, Schellenberg still prioritized records from places of privilege and power in the same Jenkinsonian tradition.

With these two men as the pillars of archival theory, it is unsurprising that contemporary

archives contain gaps within their collections. Berry (2020) identifies these gaps as “archival silences ... the voices you know should be in collections that simply aren't there”. These silences do not mean that these histories are unimportant or that they have no direct implications for the present day. On the contrary, these stories are incredibly important in order to have an accurate and honest account of the past. However, these gaps indicate that society is at risk of forgetting and that our collective memory is being compromised (Carter, 2006). As memory institutions, archives hold an immense responsibility to keep accurate accounts and must understand that failure to do so can result in the erasure of some narratives altogether. This power to eliminate certain histories from our collective memory has rightfully led to increased criticism for the archives when they privilege, preserve and perpetuate certain histories over others (Sutherland, 2017).

In *Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory*, Schwartz and Cook (2002a) expand on the role archives play in the production of history. They explain that archives are not neutral, and that they are reflective of the values of those who created them (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a). Institutions are beholden to stakeholders, investors, and policy, which all shape archival collecting practices. As well, every person who works inside the institution are themselves not neutral and come with their own inherent biases. In many ways the archive itself is a record of society's values at any given time, demonstrating who has worth through shifting collecting policies and archival processing priorities. Fredrikzon and Haffenden remind us that archival erasure is not passive or innocent, but is an intentional choice made everyday and often through mundane activities (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a). These circumstances contribute to the power archives have over collective memory, and reinforce the idea that history is both what happened and what is said to have happened (Trouillot, 2015).

The casualties of archival erasure are usually women, BIPOC, queer, disabled, or poor

(Sehgal, 2016). While these groups have always existed, traditional archival records are often lacking in representation in these areas (Carter 2006). Although many archives are making efforts to rectify these gaps, this historic and systemic exclusion has led to a mistrust in institutions to properly care for the records by the members of these communities.

To overcome this mistrust and to fill in archival silences, archives must first recognize the harm they have committed through past practices (Hughes-Watkins, 2018). They must also understand that just because they want to fill in these gaps, these groups are under no obligation to share their histories with the archives. These groups should be cautious when working with institutions that have historically undervalued and underserved them. In her book, *Urgent Archives* (2023), Caswell identifies that there can be value in seeing oneself in the archives, however she also identifies the need for more than just representational or token inclusion (Caswell 2023). Caswell calls for an active shift in conscious recognition of historic harms, followed by meaningful and consistent change (Caswell 2023).

Hughes-Watkins (2018) identifies this work as reparative archives. This is done through mindful engagement and community advocacy (Hughes-Watkins, 2018). It is done with the intention to uplift the community for community's sake and not for the benefit of the archive's reputation. While the end goal is diversification and inclusion of these stories in the collective memory, it is important to remember that it might look different depending on the community. While it could be the inclusion of these records within a traditional archive, it could also be helping to preserve and amplify these records where they are. Reparative archives take a lot of time, as the rebuilding of trust is not always easy, but is vital for creating and protecting a robust collective memory.

Case Study

As a student, I was taught the theories of Jenkinson and Schellenberg. The first records I

worked with were governmental or institutional, but the first people I worked with were from the community. By working with people, it was hard not to notice gaps in the records. Many people were not represented, were underrepresented, or were represented with harmful terminology. As an emerging professional, I felt like this should be an easy fix – I saw the problem, so why couldn't we fix it? Mentors and senior professionals in my field would shake their heads "didn't she know this would take time?".

While I understood that relationships develop over time, I also understood that our perception in the community mattered, and that while we were making some efforts, many initiatives were not visible outside the institutions. If we were not seen as being open to change or growth – how would people know that we were?

In 2022, I became the archivist for Southern Alberta History at the University of Calgary. This role, while still embedded in classical archival tradition, also came with the space and academic freedom to make incremental changes. I was able to present and discuss ideas with colleagues, and I was able to explore the ideas of community trust at conferences across Canada. When looking to create a tangible way to record the diversity in our collections, to identify our gaps and inform our collecting practices, I was immediately joined by colleagues eager to pick up the cause. While all these things were great, one of the most meaningful changes occurred through the borrowed trust of a professor from a different department at the University of Calgary.

The archives were contacted by this professor with a vague request to meet about a possible donation of records. Unsure what these records were, but always happy to chat about the archives, I joined a fellow archivist to meet with this professor, sure that between our subject expertise, one of us could help.

At this meeting, it was revealed that the professor was here on behalf of a friend. This friend was a local historian and had amassed the largest collection of queer archives in Calgary

through years of meticulous research and his own relationship building. With major projects under his belt and limited space to continue his collection, he was now seeking a long-term home for his archives. The professor knew that meetings could be difficult and he chose to act as an intermediary, protected by his place in the institution, to ask us what was possible. It was thanks to this professor's trust in us after this initial meeting that we were then able to meet with the donor about this material.

The archives were very excited about stewarding this material, and personally I was honoured that we were asked. Accepting this material into the archives would allow so many more people to see themselves within the archives, while also helping to fill a known silence. We spent almost a year working with the donor and having him connect with the people who helped build his collection to make sure we were all on board with the records moving to a research institution. These records were about to become a lot more visible than they were in private hands, and we knew that some of this material was sensitive.

After all the work to secure permissions, to arrange and describe, and ingest this material into the University of Calgary collections, I knew our next step was to celebrate. This was good work, and it deserved to be seen. The people who had spent years protecting and preserving these histories on their own deserved to celebrate; as many of them never thought their materials could end up in a space like this.

Through the help of allies on campus, we were able to host a launch party to celebrate the acquisitions of these materials. This event would include a hands-on tour through the new collection, light catering, and space for connection. All the original donors were invited, as well as members of the public. I was able to collect more stories about the records now under our stewardship, as well as meet with people who would be interested in growing the collection down the line in new and meaningful ways. This was all made possible through the continued properties of borrowed trust. By doing this public event with us, the collector signalled his trust in

us, and now those who had trusted him would also view us as trustworthy – at least to some extent. This single event created an entirely new network of people who might be interested in working with us, where they might not have considered it before.

Aside from the potential new donors, professors from across campus also reached out to see how they could incorporate these materials into the classroom. Graduate students reached out about how they could use these materials for their theses. Our perception was shifting; we were gaining a reputation for being open for queer research, after previously having almost no queer collections under our stewardship.

Since the acquisition of this major collection, we have been offered numerous other collections, for which I continue to be grateful. There are so many queer stories we are not yet able to share or support, but I am hopeful that we might be able to one day. I am indebted to our first major donor, and the professor who introduced us, both for their trust in us and for allowing us to borrow that trust to grow these vital collections. Their generosity in trust helped us to fill the void of an almost deafening archival silence.

Lessons Learned

Bruns (2024) writes that “trust is a central component in a partnership to fill archival silences, especially partnerships with historically silenced communities”. My experience growing queer collections at the University of Calgary could not be more accurately captured by a better quote.

By being open and receptive at the first meeting, we set off a chain of events that completely shifted our perception in the community and helped fill an archival gap. While the borrowed trust allowed us to start this process, it was equally as important that we advertised what we were doing through the celebratory event. Quietly taking in that first collection would not have helped us fill this gap in nearly the same capacity. By sharing what we were doing, the community came together in support and made it

the success that it was. It has framed us as being open to change and has brought in new donors, and it is through their continued interest that this project keeps going.

Conclusion

There are silences in every archive, but understanding where they are, and owning up to the policies that created them are fundamental to closing the gaps. It’s important to know how we got here, be conscious of our biases, and be aware of who’s voices we are uplifting, and who’s voices we are excluding, and why we are making these choices.

Traditional archives often excluded those on the margins of society, but their stories deserve to be remembered. At this time, the work of archivists must be focused on reparative archives, and rebuilding trust with all members of our communities. Archives are responsible for preserving the evidence of what came before. They validate our histories and our perspectives, and they hold our collective memories (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a). Without these records memories can falter, and these narratives will be lost, and society will be the poorer for it (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a). It is through our collective action these gaps can be filled, all histories can be preserved, and our collective memory can remain sharp.

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Spaces of Belonging: Building Connected Communities via Library Partnerships and Collaborations

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Abstract

In academic libraries, outreach and programming are strategic efforts designed to engage students, connect them with campus communities, and promote library resources and services. Targeted and specialized outreach programming with underserved students at ethnically diverse universities can contribute to student success. This article presents a case study that focuses on library collaborations and partnerships with affinity-based student success centers that primarily serve underrepresented student communities. Strategies for building inclusive collaborations and sustaining partnerships from the experiences of a librarian and a student ambassador are also shared in this article. These initiatives may be applicable to other institutions seeking to build campus collaborations and partnerships while understanding the impact of such efforts on library staff involved.

Article Type: Case study

Introduction

This case study presents collaborative projects, practices, and reflections between a student engagement and success librarian, a library student ambassador and affinity-based student success centers on campus, and discusses how this work shapes their sense of belonging at the university. While the authors are part of a larger team that includes other library faculty and student ambassadors, this article centers on their specific roles and relationships with these campus partners. It further highlights the impact of cross-campus collaboration and community engagement on professional development and retention for the authors.

Opportunities and challenges in developing embedded partnerships and inclusive

collaborations are shared in this case study. This work calls attention to how student-centered outreach can be varied and informal based on institutional context, such as campus culture and climate. Student engagement conceptualized in this case study encompasses social, cultural, and academic aspects.

Literature Review

As academic libraries share intersecting goals and roles related to student engagement and success with student affairs and support services, there are unique opportunities for collaboration and partnership at each institution (Kohout-Tailor & Klar, 2020; Poole, 2003; Swartz et al., 2007). Cross-campus partnerships, such as collaborative and creative programming, have shown to be beneficial to these programs and the library by leveraging resources, increasing

visibility, fostering collaboration, and diversifying student engagement (Bishop, 2018; Eshbach, 2020). Campus outreach to student affairs professionals can enable librarians to connect with students in nontraditional ways (Forrest, 2005; Hoag, 2016). Libraries have reported positive impacts from merging and integrating library and student support services (Crowe, 2010; Dettman, 2020). For example, integrating library services, such as reference and instruction, into existing student support programs and initiatives can be effective in increasing student engagement with the library (Love, 2009). Campus partnerships can also help address problems such as resources and funding by sharing staff, supply, time, and specialized skills to create high-quality programs (Meyer, 2014; Zitron & Drew, 2011). Partnering and collaborating with campus groups, e.g. student affairs and support services, can help the library develop innovative co-curricular programs that are academically, culturally, and socially engaging.

Campus collaborations can help the library build inclusive learning environments through both academic and social programs that provide diverse modes of student engagement. In a case study at Loughborough University, students shared their perception of the library as both a social space and a work environment, since they do not consider social and academic activities as mutually exclusive (Bryant et al., 2009).

Academic libraries can cultivate social learning environments with collaborative programming for students to develop connections outside of the classroom. Social events can help the library serve as welcoming spaces where students can build a sense of belonging through opportunities to meet and connect with other students, faculty, and staff, which “may lead to increased involvement in other academic and social activities, creating a positive cycle of engagement” (Eshbach, 2020). Social events also invite students into library community spaces with a message that the library may have more to offer than textbooks. Furthermore, expanding types of library programming through merging social, cultural, and academic engagement allow for more creativity in

developing targeted outreach programs with campus partners to connect with diverse student groups.

Academic libraries can deepen their engagement with nontraditional and underrepresented student communities through building cross-campus connections and collaborative programming with student affairs and support services, as well as student organizations (Walter, 2005). Campus partners, such as student success and multicultural centers, can help the library find and participate in shared spaces with student communities from historically underrepresented backgrounds and identities. Barnes et al. (2024) and Linares-Gray and Valletta (2024) provide examples of library partnership with student affinity centers and with community members, consisting of collaborative programming and integration of library programs within these community spaces. Additionally, library outreach can encompass connections with student-led groups and organizations to collaborate and develop specialized programming that reflects the interests of those student communities (Fontenot, 2013; Tinio & Chomintra, 2024; Truesdale et al., 2024). These efforts can involve building and nurturing relationships through embedded liaison roles with campus partners where librarians are assigned to specific services (Crowe, 2010).

Embedded librarianship can be explored in this context as an outreach model to form both informal and working relationships with campus partners. While there is a significant amount of literature on embedded librarianship as a type of outreach model within instructional and liaison contexts, its emphasis on relationship-building with campus partners outside of academic units is less examined and documented. Embedded librarianship can extend beyond academic partnerships through its overlap with outreach and community engagement, such as in public and K-12 libraries (Henry, 2013; Robertson, 2001). The work of embedded librarians consists of “focusing on the needs of one or more specific groups, building relationships with these groups, developing a deep understanding of their work, and providing information services that are highly

customized and targeted to their greatest needs” (Brower, 2011). Those embedded approaches can be applied and observed within outreach initiatives where librarians serve as liaisons to campus partners and departments, such as student affairs and support services. Embedded activities can include meeting and communicating regularly, providing individual consultation, assisting with and participating in partner programs, sending personal invitations to library events, and hosting office hours off-site (Silver & Trott, 2014). Additionally, those leading outreach often recognize that “many successful embedded librarian programs are established through informal encounters; something as simple as word of mouth from the students can grow into a permanently established, administration approved library collaborative” (Andrews, 2015). Embedded outreach librarians often engage in informal relationship-building efforts, which help them establish connections and identify opportunities that can lead to formal partnerships.

Case Study

Strategic Outreach and Embedded Engagement

Cal State East Bay is a federally designated Asian American, Native American, Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) and a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The Student Engagement and Success Librarian co-supervises the Library Ambassador Program, which aims to develop a community of students to lead peer-to-peer reference and programming. Library outreach directed towards affinity-based student success centers on campus has led to sustained collaborations and specialized partnerships. Furthermore, their shared goals for student engagement and success compelled the student ambassador to work across these spaces.

The Diversity and Inclusion Student Affinity and Resource Centers (DISARC) encompasses six centers, which include the Diversity and Inclusion Student Center (DISC), the Black Student Success Center (BSSC), the Asian

Pacific Islander Student Success Center (API SSC), the Latinx Student Success Center (LSSC), the Queer Unity Student Success Center (QUSSC), and the Undocumented Student Resource Center (USRC). The centers employ staff and students to develop programs and initiatives that support student success, retention, and advocacy, such as those centered around empowerment, belonging, and cultural engagement. Each center develops resources and services targeted to specific student communities while remaining open to all students. These centers serve substantial numbers of students as community spaces that provide a wide range of resources and programs critical to student wellness, belonging, learning, professional and leadership development, as well as social, cultural, and political engagement. They have robust programming with events and workshops throughout the semester, many of which are facilitated and led by student staff teams. These initiatives also include developing ongoing programs, such as workshops and events, with other student affairs and support departments on campus. The DISARC are campus spaces where the library can connect and engage with students from historically marginalized backgrounds and identities.

Inclusive and collaborative outreach programming involves building and sustaining relationships and connections that can withstand and are critical of institutional challenges, such as turnover and burnout. This work begins with learning about the campus and local communities, specifically their contextual histories, lived experiences, educational outcomes, student interests, and so forth. The authors observed that professional and student staff may not know why they should collaborate and engage with the library and how they can practically do so in ways that serve their students and staff without increasing workload that often comes with additional partnerships and programming. Furthermore, the benefits and reasons to connect with the library for support and collaboration may not appear obvious and enticing for several reasons, such as campus culture and prior history, so assumptions on library visibility and campus perception are

important to consider and examine. Additionally, it can be invasive and ineffective for the library to step into these student-centered, community spaces and present itself as a partner and collaborator without prior relationship and connection, since the library may be perceived as outside or not part of the community. Library outreach initiatives must recognize and address these factors, including distrust in institutions among students and staff, to build connections and trust that position the library as a resource for collaboration and support.

From their former experience as a student of color, the librarian recognized the value of relationship and community building within student support spaces, such as the DISARC, through informal, intentional approaches to nurture genuine connection and rapport. Their strategies to establish connection include attending and participating in weekly events, volunteering to support these events and programs, and finding ways to integrate library resources and services into these projects. New to the campus, the librarian had limited knowledge of staff and student communities, so these relationships took time to develop over the course of a few years before formal collaboration took place. Furthermore, these efforts explored opportunities to listen, observe, learn, and understand the interests and goals of students and staff within campus community spaces.

The DISARC are community spaces for students to gather and connect with peers, faculty and staff while engaging with social and cultural activities. On campus, students utilize these spaces to make friends, study, destress, spend time between classes, find employment, attend social and cultural events, and meet faculty and staff. The authors observed and recognized that these spaces can fill student needs without them visiting the physical library. This also reflects campus context where many students are taking online or hybrid courses. Furthermore, these community spaces may be less intimidating and more welcoming for students due to factors such as library anxiety and institutional distrust. The opening of the new library building on campus within the past few years may also contribute to

student hesitancy and perception. For example, student staff may be unsure about the appeal of using library spaces and resources for their events and programming.

The librarian viewed these factors as opportunities to explore an embedded liaison approach to share library information, such as resources that can support student staff with their projects as well as their academics and wellbeing. With trials and errors, this work consists of continuous efforts and ongoing engagement for the library to become a partner and collaborator within the community over time. For example, the librarian would attend weekly team meetings and informal gatherings with coordinators and student staff. The librarian gradually became a resource for booking library spaces, collaborating on events that take place in the library, helping with promoting events, and supporting projects that may benefit from library resources and services. From their experience, developing strong connections with coordinators, student staff, and leaders within community spaces on a personal level can be impactful and rewarding.

Through observation, the authors also gathered that having a consistent, familiar face within these community spaces can be a contributing factor in influencing student perception of the library as a welcoming space and resource for student participants, as well as faculty and staff, who frequently engage with their events and programs.

Social, Cultural and Academic Engagement

Within campus partnerships and collaborations, the library has shaped and evolved its role based on shared goals and values to sustain active engagement, such as through initiatives that merge social, cultural, and academic engagement. Table 1 illustrates main categories of initiatives along with their intended student and library outcomes. To reflect student interests, these collaborative initiatives integrate a mix of social, cultural, and academic components that also appeal to student staff involved. For example, a library partnership consists of working with the API SSC, along with

other student support programs, to coordinate annual campus-wide celebration of Lunar New Year for the past three years, such as taking students on field trips to community cultural centers. These field trips bring students outside of the university to engage with community members and spaces through activities with cultural, historical, and political significance, such as visiting an exhibition on Black and Asian solidarity and participating in a Lunar New Year and Black History Celebration. The Lunar New Year celebration that took place on campus this year in the API SSC with more than 80 attendees consisted of a human bingo activity, presentation, and cultural games. The librarian assisted student staff with researching and preparing for the presentation about the holiday while also facilitating a cultural game during the event. Library roles and contributions within these collaborative programming are shared in table 2. Through these experiences, students have opportunities to meet peers and develop community connections outside of campus.

Table 1: Initiatives and Outcomes for Students and the Library

Initiatives	Student outcomes	Library outcomes
Zine workshops and publications	Authorship and publication	Student scholarship
Exhibits	Storytelling and curation	Institutional memory
Workshops	Skill-building	Academic, professional and leadership development
Events	Campus and community connection	Student engagement and retention
Recurring programs	Sustained peer and campus networks	Embedded partnership

Table 2: Description and Examples of Library Roles and Contribution

Library Roles & Contributions	Description
Providing library resources	Supplying books, media, research materials, toolkits to support events, programs and workshops
Co-facilitating workshops	Partnering with student staff on events and workshops (e.g. zine-making, destigmatizing

Library Roles & Contributions	Description
	API mental health, resources for undocumented students)
Co-creating events and programs	Collaborating with student centers to co-develop events, workshops, exhibits, zine publications, book displays and digital resources
Planning activities	Designing and facilitating learning, interactive activities workshops and events
Reserving library spaces	Finding and reserving library spaces for events and workshops
Promotion	Advertising via library channels, social media and campus networks
Chaperoning	Supervising students during field trips and conferences
Logistics	Providing and arranging transportation, scheduling meetings, assisting with set up and clean up

Collaboration can consist of workshops and events outside of the library in student community spaces with student staff and coordinators. Collaborative programming is mainly centered around wellness and community engagement, such as a community gathering in the Diversity and Inclusion Student Center (DISC) during the election season. During this community gathering, the librarian facilitated a journaling session and shared library resources where students can search for reliable sources of information. The library has also provided and promoted resources for various events and workshops, such as by developing digital book displays and providing books for check out. Another collaboration for community engagement includes a semester-long book club in the DISC with the QUSSC where student staff selected the book and co-facilitated meetings. The book club became a space for a small group of faculty, staff, and student participants to build authentic connections outside of the classroom. Several of these collaborations are developing into partnerships through current plans to continue the book club for upcoming semesters and develop a series of wellness programs, including a wellness fair, with additional campus partners such as the campus food pantry.

The library has also supported student storytelling and creative publication through collaborating with campus partners on developing library zines and exhibitions. These zines provided spaces for student-led publications that center student voice and creativity. They also became opportunities for leadership and professional development as student participants in these projects have found avenues to publish with local community groups and present their work in workshops and classrooms. Library zine-making workshops began with the LSSC. As these student publications are created and shared on campus, academic departments and student support programs began requesting zine collaboration with the library. These workshops are co-facilitated alongside student staff who are leading areas such as activities, design, and theme selection. The library has also co-developed an exhibition with the API SSC and other campus partners to highlight API student life and history on campus. This collaborative project aimed to create space for students as curators and storytellers. The authors recognized that bringing library programming to community spaces beyond the library and university can be valuable in supporting student engagement and success. These efforts, which began with library programming within the student success centers, have gradually positioned the library as a space for collaboration and community where collaborative events and workshops can take place.

Student Ambassador Experience

The Library Student Ambassador's role in the library helped them gain experience for student-facing and project work that led to their involvement with DISC. In this position, the ambassador was the first point of contact when students entered the library. They greeted visitors at the information desk, answered questions, such as those about printers, study rooms, or student ID, and made referrals to appropriate campus resources, such as financial aid or registrar. Over time, these interactions developed into peer connections to check in about courses, majors, or

daily challenges. At the information desk, the student ambassador also explored creative ways to make the library feel more welcoming and student oriented. For example, they developed weekly whiteboard prompts located next to the information desk, such as those asking students about favorite study spots and hobbies, which encouraged participation and student presence in the library. The ambassador also helped curate book displays, such as "Blind Date with a book" for Valentine's Day, and activities to explore and test ideas for student participation, as well as observe what resonates with students the most.

Project work with a librarian provided a formal structure for brainstorming and planning events, workshops, and activities. The authors collaborated closely with one another each semester for the ambassador to plan at least two projects, such as suggesting improvements to the library website, developing an "ambassador spotlight" blog to introduce student staff, and leading library tours and presentations for students. They scheduled weekly meetings throughout the semester to check in and support each other's projects. Furthermore, they often partnered on outreach activities, such as meeting with campus partners and co-facilitating presentations and workshops. This enabled a consistent space for mutual support, discussion and reflection that helped strengthen the ambassador's skills in areas such as project management, collaboration, communication, and community engagement.

The ambassador's work in the library informed them about campus resources such as the DISC and their interest in working there. As a student assistant at the DISC, the ambassador greeted students, invited them to check in, and engaged them in conversation. Discussions frequently focused on topics such as cultural backgrounds, language, family expectations, and first-generation or international student experiences. The ambassador's prior experience in

facilitating welcoming and approachable interactions in the library made it easier to support students in the center and to foster a sense of shared ownership of the space with peers.

Social, cultural, and community-building programs at the DISC provided opportunities for the student ambassador to apply and strengthen skills developed in the library. The ambassador planned and facilitated at least one event per month, which consisted of general social gatherings and workshops with cultural activities. For example, the ambassador coordinated a “DIY Dandiya” event introducing Navratri traditions, in which students decorated dandiya sticks with paint, glitter, and ribbons while sharing food. A subsequent event “Diwali Meets Halloween” invited students to create torans using artificial flowers or Halloween-themed decorations alongside cultural foods, such as vada pav. These events were intentionally designed to be low-stakes, social, and educational that encourage students to learn about cultural traditions through shared creative activities. Additionally, the process for event planning at DISC closely mirrored the structured project work that the ambassador experienced in the library. In the DISC, each program was guided by a planning document that addressed budget, supplies, social media promotion, in-person outreach, check-in procedures, and post-event evaluation. At the end of every event, attendees were asked to scan and fill out a feedback form while student assistants and staff supervisors in attendance were asked to complete an evaluation form. Because the ambassador was already accustomed to breaking down library projects into these phases, they were able to adapt this structure at the DISC.

Through working at both the library and the DISC, the ambassador gained skills and experiences that are applicable and transferable to their professional and career goals. Additionally, the ambassador bridged information and resources across both spaces, such as

sharing library services and resources with students and staff at the DISC while informing library ambassadors and faculty about DISC events and news.

Reflection on Belonging

This case study highlights the impact of campus engagement on the authors’ sense of belonging and retention through their roles as a librarian and student ambassador of color. Although these experiences come with challenges such as burnout and cultural taxation, they also provide opportunities to build authentic relationships and networks of support. Their experiences reflect how belonging and retention for minoritized faculty and staff working in higher education can be supported by fostering social support (Wilson et al., 2026). Furthermore, this case study suggests that employing and mentoring BIPOC students can help libraries support retention and belonging for student staff, as demonstrated by case studies from Espinoza and Rivera (2024) and Pham and Muralles (2024). Being embedded within the library and community spaces through their roles provided opportunities to develop informal and formal connections that deepened their social and professional support on campus. This work further calls attention to the need for retention of BIPOC students and librarians, which is well reflected in the literature including the impact of both informal and formal mentorships (Johnson, 2007; Monnier & Dalal, 2024; Riley-Reid, 2017; Sterling, 2025).

Before stepping into these roles, the authors often felt disconnected from peers and colleagues on campus. The student ambassador experienced limited interactions with peers, faculty, and staff on campus outside of their classes. Therefore, working in the library created opportunities for them to make new friends and campus connections. As an international student arriving in the United States without family or friends nearby and as an early-career librarian of color who is new to the university, the authors both experienced feelings of isolation in

navigating campus spaces to find community. Their involvement and engagement in

community spaces on campus, such as the student success centers, have positively impacted their journeys navigating academia thus far. Through intentional community-building, the authors made strides in developing relationships with students, faculty, and staff across different spaces on campus.

For the student ambassador, attending orientations, cultural celebrations, and campus-wide initiatives as both a facilitator and participant allowed the ambassador to experience the university as a student and a staff member. As a member of the Library Student Ambassador team, they worked alongside librarians and peers toward shared goals and projects. Team meetings, collaborative planning sessions, and shared projects created an environment in which they felt their contributions were valued by the students and supervisors within the library. Similarly, at the DISC, being in a student staff team with a focus on community-building and peer engagement helped strengthen their sense of belonging on campus.

The authors' experiences in building relationships and community in the library and across campus have also encouraged and motivated them to step into other leadership and campus engagement roles on campus. For example, the student ambassador found more ways to get involved on campus through working as an orientation leader and being elected as an officer in student government and a student organization. While challenges persist, the ambassador now recognizes opportunities to foster belonging and community on campus, such as for those who may share similar backgrounds and experiences, through roles and spaces that center student leadership and advocacy, including in the library. Their journey from walking on campus largely unnoticed to serving as a student leader and liaison across multiple student-facing spaces has been one of their most rewarding experiences at the university. Similarly, the librarian has also found more opportunities and avenues to develop authentic connections and collaborations with

students, colleagues, and community members. For example, this has consisted of them getting involved in new spaces on campus and stepping into leadership roles, such as being elected as the faculty co-chair for the Asian and Pacific Islander Faculty and Staff Association (APIFSA).

Conclusion

The authors' efforts in building connected communities across the library and the student success centers have led to more collaborations and partnerships, including with other academic and student support departments on campus. The library has been developing monthly collaborations, such as events and workshops, with various centers, as well as continuing partnerships such as book clubs, zine publications, cultural celebrations, and film screenings. Sustained engagement among students and campus partners can also be observed, such as for library courses and events, through direct outreach and personal invitations. Shared reflections through conversations also provided authentic and substantive feedback from collaborators and participants. Through embedded approaches to outreach and programming, the library will continue to build and sustain relationships with campus partners, as well as consider how they can evolve to reflect student interests.

Through their collaborative projects and involvement on campus, the authors were able to build meaningful connections and networks of support that helped them find a sense of belonging on campus over time. For the student ambassador, their role in the library helped them build the confidence and skills to seek and develop meaningful connections on campus within various spaces. Furthermore, their partnership as librarian supervisor and student ambassador, along with the Library Student Ambassador team, has helped the authors feel more connected and supported in their roles at the university. As the Library Student Ambassador Program

evolves, the librarian will continue to seek and develop opportunities to work alongside library student assistants on outreach initiatives.

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Low Barrier, High Joy: Designing Youth Programs for Access, Engagement, and Belonging in Public Libraries

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Abstract

Public library youth programs are often evaluated through attendance counts and participation totals, yet these metrics can obscure the structural conditions that make programs accessible, welcoming, and sustaining for families with varied needs. This conceptual framework, grounded in practitioner experience, introduces Low Barrier, High Joy (LBHJ): a design approach that intentionally reduces participation friction while strengthening autonomy, competence, connection, and belonging. Drawing on research in informal learning, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Self-Determination Theory, and belonging, LBHJ reframes joy not as spectacle, but as an indicator of equitable design. The framework is illustrated through two practitioner mini-cases, a process-art program (Let’s Create) and a modular STEAM program (STEAM Fridays). The paper concludes with practical evaluation strategies that move beyond attendance metrics to document participation quality and sustained engagement.

Keywords: Youth Services, Public Libraries, Program Design, Informal Learning, Universal Design for Learning, Participation Barriers, Program Evaluation

Article Type: Conceptual Paper

Introduction

Public libraries often describe youth programming as accessible: programs are free, doors are open, families are invited. Yet access is more complicated than cost or entry.

Access is shaped by structure: whether participation requires arriving at a precise start time, whether materials feel limited, whether there is a single correct outcome, whether children must speak publicly to engage, and whether caregivers feel confident navigating the space. These elements --often invisible in planning documents -- influence who begins, who continues, and who returns.

Despite widespread commitment to access and inclusion, youth services discourse often treats accessibility as a question of representation, cost, or outreach rather than structural design. Programs are described as inclusive when they are free, when materials reflect diverse identities, or when marketing reaches broader audiences. These efforts are important, yet they do not necessarily address the microstructures that shape participation once families enter the room.

Attendance data, while necessary for reporting and funding justification, can further obfuscate this distinction. High turnout may signal visibility or community interest, but it does not reveal whether participants experienced autonomy, comfort, or sustained engagement, nor does it show who began but did not return.

As a result, youth programming can unintentionally reproduce friction even within well-intentioned inclusive environments. Rigid sequencing, visible scarcity of materials, public comparison of outcomes, or single-path instructions may narrow participation without being recognized as barriers. Low Barrier, High Joy emerges in response to this gap. It reframes inclusion not as invitation alone, but as structural design.

Low Barrier, High Joy (LBHJ) is a design framework for youth programming that reduces participation friction while increasing autonomy, competence, connection, and belonging. It argues that joy is not incidental to learning environments. Rather, joy emerges when structural barriers are intentionally reduced and participants retain control over how they engage.

This framework emerged from iterative adjustments in ongoing public library programs rather than from a single pilot initiative. The programs discussed in this paper were developed within a suburban, city-funded public library serving a diverse Silicon Valley community. The framework emerged through recurring youth and family programming in mixed-age, drop-in environments where participation patterns could be observed over time. While the specific activities described here reflect one public library context, the structural design principles underlying LBHJ are intended to be adaptable across varied library settings, staffing models, and community demographics.

This framework offers language for youth services librarians to examine how program structures shape participation beyond attendance alone. It is intended not as a prescriptive model, but as a reflective design lens that can support planning, observation, evaluation, and iterative adjustment within everyday programming practice.

Conceptual Framing

Public libraries function as informal learning environments where participation is voluntary and socially mediated. Research on informal

learning emphasizes that engagement in such spaces is most sustainable when it is interest-driven, socially supported, and low in evaluative pressure (Falk & Dierking, 2013; National Research Council, 2009). Unlike classrooms, public youth programs must accommodate wide developmental variability within the same physical space.

LBHJ aligns with principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018), which treat variability as the norm rather than the exception. By embedding multiple entry points and forms of engagement, programs can support diverse learners without isolating difference.

The framework is further grounded in Self-Determination Theory, which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as innate psychological needs necessary for optimal functioning and sustained intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within this perspective, joy is not spectacle; it emerges when environments support agency, effectiveness, and connection.

Belonging research further suggests that small relational cues can significantly influence whether individuals perceive a space as welcoming (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Greeting participants individually, normalizing experimentation, and reducing public evaluation are therefore structural signals rather than peripheral gestures.

Recent research in library and informal learning contexts further supports the importance of flexible, socially supported participation structures. Tawfik et al. (2023), in a systematic review of informal learning in United States libraries, identify learner agency, low-pressure engagement, and socially mediated exploration as recurring strengths of informal library environments. Similarly, Mitchell et al. (2020) describe public library STEAM learning as most effective when librarians act as “guides on the side” rather than directors of uniform outcomes. Research examining neurodiverse participation in informal STEM learning environments also emphasizes the importance of flexible

engagement structures, layered entry points, and reduced evaluative pressure (Jenson et al., 2024).

Together, these perspectives suggest that accessibility in informal learning environments is not solely a matter of physical access or representation. It is also shaped by how participation itself is structured. LBHJ builds upon this foundation by focusing specifically on participation friction within public library youth programming.

The Low Barrier, High Joy Framework

LBHJ is not a program type, but a way of designing programs. In my experience, participation often decreases when friction is high. Friction can take many forms: unclear instructions, tightly sequenced steps, visible scarcity of materials, public performance, or the sense that there is one correct way to engage. These elements are rarely intentional barriers, but they shape who feels comfortable beginning. Low Barrier programming reduces this friction in advance. It assumes variability. It anticipates hesitation. It embeds entry points rather than announcing them.

High Joy, in this context, is not spectacle or noise. It is visible in how participants move through the space. Children begin quickly. They adjust rather than abandon. Caregivers remain. Families return. The atmosphere is focused but unguarded.

The framework identifies five common domains of participation friction:

- Logistical: rigid timing or narrow entry windows
- Informational: instructions that must be heard, remembered, or interpreted correctly
- Physical and sensory: crowding, bottlenecks, inaccessible materials
- Cognitive: unclear starting points or overly sequenced tasks
- Social: public evaluation, comparison, or scarcity cues

Reducing these barriers does not lower expectations. It shifts responsibility from the participant to the design.

Although illustrated here through two specific programs, the LBHJ framework is not tied to a particular budget size, staffing model, or community demographic. The design principles - distributed entry, layered differentiation, reduced public risk, and relational welcome-- can be adapted across library contexts. The LBHJ framework's relevance lies not in a specific activity type, but in the structural questions it prompts.

To make the framework more transferable across library settings, the five domains of participation friction can also function as reflective planning prompts. Before a program, librarians might ask: What could make participation difficult to begin? Where might participants feel uncertain, rushed, watched, or unsuccessful? Which parts of the experience rely heavily on verbal instruction, public performance, or narrowly sequenced steps?

After a program, these same domains can support reflective evaluation. Patterns of hesitation, bottlenecks, abandoned attempts, or repeated staff intervention may indicate forms of structural friction rather than participant disengagement. Conversely, when children begin quickly, move independently between materials, modify activities confidently, or return across multiple sessions, those behaviors may indicate that the environment successfully supported autonomy, competence, connection, and belonging.

The framework is intentionally observational and flexible rather than prescriptive. It is designed to support iterative adjustment within everyday practice rather than standardized assessment. In this way, LBHJ functions less as a fixed program model and more as a structural lens for examining how participation is shaped within informal learning environments.

Table 1: Reflective Questions for Identifying Participation Friction

Friction Domain	Reflective Question	Possible Structural Adjustment	Observable Indicator
Logistical	Can participants join easily at different times?	Use rolling entry and repeated prompts rather than single-start instruction.	Families begin participation without waiting or disruption.
Informational	Do participants need to remember multiple verbal instructions?	Provide visual examples and brief written prompts.	Participants begin independently with minimal clarification.
Physical and Sensory	Are materials and movement pathways accessible?	Distribute supplies across stations and reduce crowding.	Participants navigate the environment comfortably and independently.
Cognitive	Does the activity imply a single correct outcome?	Provide open-ended pathways and optional levels of challenge.	Children experiment, adapt, and persist after mistakes.
Social	Could participants feel publicly evaluated or compared?	Normalize variation and reduce emphasis on correctness.	Participants engage without visible hesitation or withdrawal.

Mini-Case 1: Let's Create - Process Art and the Design of Sufficiency

Let's Create is a recurring drop-in process-art program designed for children and their caregivers. A visual sample and a collection of materials are set out as a starting point, but replication is not required. Participants are told they may use the materials to create anything they choose.

There is no formal start time. Families enter and are welcomed individually. Repeat participants are greeted by name when possible. New families are oriented briefly and without pressure. The sample functions as an invitation rather than a prescription. It answers the question "Where do I begin?" without dictating what the result should look like.

Materials are intentionally displayed in generous quantities. Many are upcycled or donated.

Nothing about the setup suggests rationing. When materials feel abundant, children experiment more freely and mistakes carry less weight. There is no single correct outcome. Staff language reinforces this by asking participants to describe what they are making rather than whether it matches the sample. Caregivers are not positioned as instructors but as co-participants. Children begin quickly. Shy participants engage without needing to speak publicly. Families return. Caregivers often comment that they are enjoying the experience alongside their children. By reducing instructional load, eliminating scarcity cues, and protecting participant dignity, Let's Create lowers participation friction. Joy emerges as sustained engagement rather than spectacle.

Over time, several observable participation patterns emerged consistently within the program. Children typically began creating within moments of arriving rather than waiting for direct instruction. Participants frequently modified projects midstream or incorporated unexpected materials without seeking permission. Caregivers often remained engaged alongside children rather than stepping back into supervisory roles alone. Return participation across sessions was common, and families regularly referenced previous creations or experiences when returning to the program space. These indicators suggested that reducing participation friction supported sustained engagement and participant confidence.

Mini-Case 2: STEAM Fridays - Themed Exploration and Layered Entry

STEAM Fridays is a recurring summer program organized around a weekly STEAM theme. Each session includes three to five stations that remain constant throughout the program window. Each station offers a clear starting action. A demonstration or visible model shows what happens there, but extended explanation is optional.

Differentiation is embedded rather than announced. Within a single station, a younger child may be captivated by visible reactions,

while an older child begins asking why it works. Some stations are straightforward; others invite deeper investigation.

Engagement is self-directed rather than publicly demonstrated. If a structure collapses or an experiment fails, it does so quietly. Children reset and try again. Environments that normalize error and reduce public exposure tend to increase experimentation and persistence (Edmondson, 2018).

Because stations remained available throughout the program window, participants could observe before engaging, revisit activities multiple times, or move between levels of complexity at their own pace. Younger children often engaged through sensory exploration or visible reactions, while older participants extended the experience through prediction, troubleshooting, or experimentation. Staff observations showed that participants were more willing to retry failed attempts when experimentation occurred within low-risk, self-directed environments rather than through public demonstration.

By distributing entry points and lowering public risk, STEAM Fridays reduces participation friction while maintaining intellectual depth.

Evaluating Low Barrier, High Joy

Public youth services increasingly operate within accountability systems that prioritize quantifiable outcomes. Attendance, completion rates, and standardized experiences are easier to report than belonging, autonomy, or dignity. These measures provide necessary data, yet when metrics become proxies for quality, participation volume can eclipse participation experience. A full room does not guarantee access, just as a completed craft does not guarantee agency. A successful demonstration does not guarantee that experimentation felt safe.

LBHJ supplements traditional metrics. It shifts evaluation from counting presence to observing participation. Instead of asking only how many attended, it asks how quickly participants began, how long they stayed, whether they modified or

iterated on their work, and whether they returned.

When friction is low, children begin quickly. They move independently between materials. They return to an activity after adjusting it. Caregivers remain. Families come back. In informal learning spaces, voluntary return may be more meaningful than single-event attendance (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Repeat participation signals that the environment felt accessible, not merely entertaining.

Evaluation is directed toward improving program structures rather than measuring participants. Patterns of hesitation, bottlenecks, or abandonment point to structural friction that can be redesigned. In this way, assessment becomes a tool for protecting dignity and expanding access rather than narrowing it.

Conclusion

LBHJ reframes youth programming as structural design work. Rather than centering activities alone, the framework centers the conditions under which participation becomes possible. Across process art and STEM exploration, the same pattern appears: when friction is reduced, agency increases. When agency increases, engagement deepens. Joy is not an added feature layered onto programming after access has been achieved. It is evidence that participation structures have been designed thoughtfully and equitably.

Many youth services librarians already practice elements of LBHJ intuitively. They notice when a child hesitates before joining, when a caregiver relaxes after being welcomed, or when families return because a program felt easy to enter and comfortable to navigate. Naming these patterns provides language for work that is often invisible within traditional program evaluation.

LBHJ is therefore intended not as a rigid formula, but as a reflective framework that can support planning, staff training, iterative redesign, and advocacy. It can help librarians identify where participation friction may exist within existing

programs and provide a shared vocabulary for discussing how structural choices influence autonomy, competence, connection, and belonging.

By identifying participation friction across multiple domains and articulating observable indicators, the framework offers practitioners a transferable lens for refining program design while preserving flexibility across varied library contexts. In environments increasingly shaped by metrics, efficiency, and standardization, protecting joy is not sentimental work. It is structural work.

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Resilience as Resistance: Building a Sustainable Library Career during Political Polarization

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Abstract

The contemporary landscape for new librarians in the United States is characterized by a volatile intersection of systemic professional inequities and a hostile political climate. This paper examines the intersection of persistent gendered stereotypes, the significant lack of diversity within the field, and unrealistic expectations and standards, which can negatively impact the emotional and mental well-being of early-career librarians. Additionally, the current political climate in the United States has increased threats to intellectual freedom, library funding, and information access. This only exacerbates existing pressures while necessitating increased advocacy and resilience. Drawing upon existing literature and current events, this paper argues that well-established techniques for combating burnout, imposter syndrome, and other early career obstacles have become critical strategies for navigating the complexities of the present sociopolitical landscape. By setting goals, maintaining boundaries, prioritizing rest, and cultivating supportive communities, new librarians can foster resilience and sustain their engagement and activism while protecting their physical, emotional, and mental health.

Keywords: Early Career Librarians, Gender Stereotypes, Imposter Syndrome, Self-care, Political Activism

Article Type: Conceptual Paper

The path of a new librarian is often fraught, especially for anyone with a marginalized identity. Not only must they become accustomed to a new environment, new people, and new responsibilities, but they must also navigate a field marked by gendered expectations and systemic inequalities. Persistent stereotypes surrounding predominantly female professions, the dismissed demands of care work, and unrealistic expectations can fuel burnout, self-doubt, and stagnation (Gaines, 2014; Phillips et al., 2024; Vaughn, 2020). These challenges are significant for librarians navigating the early stages of their careers, especially for those at

the intersection of marginalized identities. Unfortunately, the current political landscape – marked by attacks on intellectual freedom, slashed funding, and backlash against any mention of diversity – only increases the challenges for all librarians.

Young librarians need practical strategies to build resilience, prioritize their well-being, and navigate the complexities of this profession and political climate. This is not only a matter of feeling better but of building internal resilience that can be leveraged into external action. New professionals are often advised to set achievable goals, rest, maintain boundaries, and build

supportive relationships (Armann-Keown, 2025; Phillips et al., 2024; Vaughn, 2020). In a time of change, confusion, and fear, we argue that these skills are essential for weathering the hostile, chaotic social and political storm. The arguments in this paper are grounded in literature applicable to our current conditions, as well as in our personal perspectives and experiences as young women in academic libraries. Our focus is to outline the challenges we see, and to provide small personal steps to preserve our mental health and well-being while fighting to make change. We apply literature designed to support women and workers in their professional lives to suggest strategies for new librarians in the United States today. The same competencies that build sustainable, healthy careers can also help librarians protect their mental and physical well-being amid an unpredictable and hostile political environment.

Librarians have long railed against the stereotypes that color our profession. Because librarians are predominantly female (Gaines, 2014), most stereotypes associated with the profession center on women. Librarians are often portrayed as dowdy spinsters or crazy-cat ladies who frequently wear cardigans and glasses on the tip of their noses. They are either cold and ruthless or meek and timid. They silence you with a shush, a glare, and a finger to their lips. These stereotypes create a negative image of librarians. Gaines (2014) argues that the profession's feminized status "is what leads to the persistence of its negative and demoralizing stereotypes" (p. 85). She classifies librarianship and other fields dominated by women, such as nursing, teaching, and social work, as "pink-collar" jobs. While these jobs typically require advanced degrees, they tend to be lower-paying and carry less social status, partly due to being categorized as care work (Gaines, 2014). Since nurturing, accommodation, and service are considered inherently feminine traits, care work and librarianship are also feminized.

Pagowsky and DeFrain (2014) further examine the feminized traits of librarianship by examining the differences between the traits of "cold" and "warm" in librarians. Cold is classified as a

traditional librarian and masculine stereotype, while warm is framed as more caring and an extension of mothering. This further aligns warmth with femininity. Due to this alignment, the expectation of warmth affects women across all feminized professions as a form of emotional labor (Pagowsky & DeFrain, 2014). However, while librarians push against the stereotype of librarians as cold, it is actually warmth that "hinders us in striving for status, respect, and greater collaborations on campus" (Pagowsky & DeFrain, 2014, p. 8). This sentiment is echoed by Gaines (2014) when she states, "female librarians also serve as warnings about the power of the library system, showing what happens when one becomes controlled by its rules. Women become less than themselves, losing their humanity, their empathy, their sexuality" (p. 87). As a counterreaction, many librarians try to avoid stereotypes to prove their humanity rather than be tied to them (Gaines, 2014).

Though stereotyping and misunderstandings surrounding the roles of librarians are limiting and should be dispelled, data suggest that the industry as a whole is still demographically homogeneous. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were over 133,700 librarians employed in the United States in 2023 (Librarians and Media Collections Specialists, 2024). The vast majority of those librarians are female. In a 2023 survey, 82.5% of librarians identified as women, a number that has remained relatively stagnant since the 90s (Library Professionals, 2024). Additional data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey, shows the racial demographics of librarians have changed very little between 2010 and 2022, with respondents who identified as white increasing slightly from 78.76% to 81.31% (Kendrick & Hulpert, 2023). Hispanic or Latino individuals account for 11% of responses, while Black or African Americans account for only 7% (Library Professionals, 2024). This means that white women are significantly overrepresented within the library profession. Librarians from marginalized backgrounds continue to face discrimination, as well as unique challenges due to the isolation of

working in such a homogeneous field (Ndumu, 2021). This is a challenge that has continued throughout the existence of libraries. To make a change, we need to “investigate what it is about ourselves and our profession that is preventing underrepresented people from being able to, or even wanting to, enter and stay” (Vinopal, 2017, para. 1). Librarians must strive to create an inclusive community for both professionals and patrons.

In contrast to the negative stereotypes surrounding librarianship, the public often proclaims the librarian a superhero. Fobazi Ettarh (2018) coined the term “vocational awe” defining it as “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique” (para. 3). While it is normal to feel pride and love for your career, that pride can hinder progress when you are blind to the faults of your profession. Libraries as institutions of knowledge and information are imperfect and have perpetuated harm against minorities through forced assimilation (Ettarh, 2018). While Ettarh’s definition focuses on how librarians feel, the same can be applied to the general public’s perception of our profession. There is a divide between the public who think librarians are pedophiles promoting porn, versus people who think librarians are heroes on the front lines of the war for democracy. Ettarh frames the library as a sanctuary and the librarian as a savior. She notes that after significant events, there is an outpouring of love for the libraries that open their doors and show support for their communities (Ettarh, 2018). This muddles the reality of systemic and institutionalized problems within librarianship that cannot be addressed without a balanced view of the benefits and challenges libraries and library workers face.

While libraries can be wonderful places, framing librarians as superheroes creates expectations that librarians cannot meet. These expectations often lead librarians to overwork themselves, whether from internal or external pressures (Burns & Green, 2019). Additionally, budget cuts

in libraries, an increasing issue across the country, can eliminate crucial positions, increase the workload for remaining staff members, and further exacerbate feelings of burnout and inadequacy (Shahzad et al., 2024). Many librarians feel that to be valued, they must dedicate an extraordinary amount of time to the profession, often at the cost of their mental health and well-being. Failure to meet those expectations can result in exhaustion, stress, self-doubt, and even imposter syndrome (IS), the internal belief that you are not as intelligent or competent as others believe and have fooled those around you (Clance & Imes, 1978). Signs of IS include maladaptive perfectionism, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors. People experiencing IS may also have impossibly high expectations for themselves, be overly critical of personal performance, procrastinate, and over-prepare (Hernandez & Lacarenza, 2023). IS frequently starts in library school due to a lack of support transitioning into the workforce after graduating, a lack of hands-on orientation in new positions, and the ambiguity of job descriptions and positions (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017). IS disproportionately affects those early in their careers, especially women and those who are part of a minority or marginalized group (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hernandez & Lacarenza, 2023). These challenges can compound on themselves, creating an environment where it is difficult for new librarians to thrive.

Layers of inaccurate stereotyping, role ambiguity, systemic sexism and racism, a lack of understanding or respect from those around you create significant challenges for new professionals (Jacobs et al., 2024; Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017; Vaughn et al., 2020). In the essay “It’s Not Imposter Syndrome: Resisting Self-Doubt as Normal For Library Workers,” Andrews (2020) challenges the tendency to pathologize self-doubt as an individual failing rather than examining systemic workplace issues. IS is seen “as a natural part of entering a profession, particularly for women” (Andrews, 2020, para. 1). She emphasizes the need to avoid tone policing and the instinct to recommend confidence as a simple remedy (Andrews, 2020). Writing that “advising

performance of confidence can function as a form of tone policing or shutting down concerns from a vulnerable party – particularly if the advisor has enough privilege to ignore existing power dynamics” (Andrews, 2020, para. 11). Librarians should release any guilt around the idea that self-doubt or IS are failures of character or issues that should be overcome by force of will.

People who experience IS tend to attribute their successes to external factors, while they blame their failures on internal flaws (Clance & Imes, 1978). Given the financial, temporal, and emotional limitations placed on librarians, unrealistic goals and expectations can lead to further doubt. Librarians who create a clear sense of purpose and a defined role and goals for themselves feel more positive about their professional skills (McGuinness, 2011). Lacey and Parlette-Stewart (2017) echo this, suggesting librarians “reflect when possible and think carefully about what success looks like to them. This can be done by looking at both short and long-term goals, to break things down into smaller, more achievable steps” (p. 6). Rather than building confidence, which can be inconsistent and hard to define, new professionals should build healthy workplace practices while acknowledging and honoring their honest emotions. Cultivating a strong sense of your underlying values helps librarians set realistic, tangible goals and enhances their awareness of the unique perspectives and skills they possess.

However, many librarians who have a strong set of values and realistic goals still struggle with feelings of IS, alongside over-commitment and burnout. New librarians, who are particularly vulnerable to IS, also tend to find it challenging to establish and maintain healthy professional boundaries (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017; Martinez & Forrey, 2019). The desire to prove oneself and the service-oriented nature associated with the field, particularly given its historical gender demographics, can lead to overextension (Andrews, 2020). New professionals often feel compelled to accept every opportunity and resist taking necessary

breaks (Andrews, 2020). This idea is echoed in Hogarth's 2017 article “Avoiding Burnout,” which explicitly links burnout to negative outcomes within emotionally demanding fields like librarianship, including “physical, emotional, and behavioral consequences, and to high turnover and loss of engagement” (p. 71). To combat this, Andrews and Hogarth agree that workers should emphasize the importance of setting work hours, declining excessive tasks, and utilizing benefits to protect well-being (Andrews, 2020; Hogarth, 2017). Resting intentionally allows you to be active and engaged with the people and activities that are most important to you.

Despite the well-documented importance of rest, feelings of guilt often impede librarians' ability to set boundaries and prioritize time away. Those who set boundaries and rest may find that their leisure and restoration are disturbed by guilt and other feelings of distress. Like IS and burnout, new librarians are especially vulnerable (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017; Martinez & Forrey, 2019). Baatz and Werzberger (2025) note the heightened psychological stress experienced during the initial year of professional work, making the cycle of overexertion and exhaustion a significant concern (p. 56). Gender also plays a significant role. Agrawal (2024) writes, “in a world that is often eager to extract the most from women's time, resting, relaxing, solitude, and even silence serve as a powerful resistance,” (p. 2). Because women are the majority of the workforce within libraries (Library Professionals, 2024), this is a professional and health issue that needs to be addressed. Workers, especially women, should shift their perception of productivity to see it as a societal construct rather than an inherent moral imperative (Agrawal, 2024). Librarians should position leisure as essential self-care within service-oriented professions, helping to alleviate guilt and enhance well-being (Gaines, 2014). Reframing rest as a form of resistance against the relentless demands often placed on individuals, particularly women, underscores that rest and self-care are necessities, not luxuries.

Librarians who cultivate their core values, enforce their boundaries, and prioritize their

health and well-being as humans are positioned to be resilient as they learn, make mistakes, and face personal and workplace challenges. Both as new professionals and people working in an ever-evolving field, continued education is essential. One of the best ways to continue growing and thriving is to engage in community building. This can take many forms, including networking, continued education, and formal and informal mentorship (Martinez & Forrey, 2019). Conferences, webinars, leadership groups, affinity groups, professional organizations, and even social media can all be great ways to develop your skills as a librarian and your library support network. This can be particularly helpful for librarians from marginalized backgrounds. The homogeneity and whiteness of librarianship create unique obstacles and isolation for librarians of color, especially as they can find themselves being the only non-white body in their workplace. Healy and Gaha (2021) outline clearly the challenges, including “discriminatory behavior from colleagues, patrons, and library administration that creates hostile work environments for professionals who are marginalized; the additional unpaid labor of diversity work often relegated to librarians of color; and the isolation these conditions create” (pp.113-114). While interviewing midcareer librarians of color about their choices to remain in the profession, authors Sterling, Fiedler, and Cheng (2025) found through their interviews of mid-career librarians of color that “there was general agreement that mentorship and community were the main factors for staying” (p.1). As Martinez and Forrey (2019) point out, while discussing community building as a solution for IS and other professional challenges, “by talking to others in similar positions, or to a mentor, that feeling of isolation is diminished. The individual is no longer the only one harboring these feelings and knows there are others to help carry the load” (Martinez & Forrey, 2019, p. 388).

Mentorship is a particularly effective form of community building to help both marginalized and new or young librarians navigate challenges. These mentorship programs need to focus on serving diverse librarians while acknowledging

the challenges of being a BIPOC librarian and a woman in the world of higher education. Endo (2020) advocates for equity-centric mentoring programs that “radically shift the focus on assimilating and integrating BIPOC faculty into White-dominated organizations into a model where assumed or real differences are embraced as strengths” (p. 172). Authors Vaughn, Taasobshirazi, and Johnson (2019) note that attempts to support women in higher education “should highlight women’s abilities and the effort they put into their successes, help build support systems and provide resources to nurture existing close relationships, and increase feelings of relatedness, competence, and autonomy,” (p. 791). People at all stages of their careers benefit from building community, but it is crucial for those just beginning (Martinez & Forrey, 2019). Mentor relationships can provide valuable insight, strong advocates, and emotional support, mitigating the effects of IS, self-doubt, and isolation (Endo, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2024; Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017). With the aid of a mentor or supervisor, a new librarian can find guidance and discuss their position and how it aligns with their values and future goals (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017). Additionally, “developing a supportive network with others who share experiences of IS can be very helpful... it is key to create an environment in which one feels safe and has the opportunity to be open about experiences” (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017, p. 6). Sharing your feelings and burdens can be a good way to ease your struggles and create authentic bonds with others.

The current administration has only amplified the challenges that librarians face. Libraries have faced a barrage of censorship, budget cuts, and overall threats to intellectual freedom. In just the first few months of 2025, thousands of government websites were scrubbed of information belonging to the American public due to mandates from the Trump Administration. Research articles about sexually transmitted disease treatment, overdose prevention training, and vaccine guidelines for pregnant people were among the information removed from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Information from the Census Bureau and information for veterans' care were also scrubbed (Singer, 2025). Furthermore, researchers were left in disarray as many pages that fall under the umbrella of DEI initiatives and "gender ideology" were targeted (Steenhuysen & Hesson, 2025; Stobbe & Schneider, 2025). In response, librarians launched efforts to archive government pages before they were tampered with in an attempt to preserve and protect vital research.

In recent months, the Supreme Court has refused to hear an appeal on a Texas book-banning law, a court case that began all the way back in 2022 (Vertuno, 2026). The activities of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in places like Minnesota have had massive impacts on people's ability to exercise their rights to free speech, with administration officials warning protesters about the might of the military and falsely claiming ICE agents have full immunity to commit crimes against American citizens (Aleaziz & Nehamas, 2026; Guilfoil, 2026). Journalists have been arrested at peaceful protests (Duster, 2026). The very presence of heavily armed ICE agents on the streets makes it difficult for children to attend school and people to access services they need, including public libraries. The Department of Homeland Security has also ordered many libraries to stop processing passport applications. The ALA estimates this could impact around 1400 libraries across the country (Haigh, 2026). Under this administration, librarians have to navigate the problems caused in both their personal and professional lives.

Given the attacks on libraries and our values, librarians must play a significant role in defending the rights of everyone who calls America home. In an interview with the PBS News Hour on April 1st, 2025, then ALA President Cindy Hohl stated, "It's so important that Americans continue to be able to have access to programs that enrich their lives." She continued, "the focus of programming in any public sector is to always be able to provide information to people that is credible and trusted" (Brown et al., 2025). To answer this calling,

strategies for resilience like cultivating core values, setting realistic goals, intentional rest, and community building transform from recommended self-care best practices to essential tools for survival. In the epilogue to her 1988 essay collection *A Burst of Light*, Audre Lorde wrote, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p. 124). The same skills that help us build resilience in our professional lives must now be called on to sustain us in our ever-overlapping professional, personal, and political lives. Israel (2025) notes that news overconsumption "can increase stress and decrease well-being. Ask yourself: How much news helps me stay engaged? How much makes me feel powerless? Try turning off your news notifications and setting designated times for checking the news" (para. 4). Actively deciding when to engage and when to rest allows people to be at their best (Andrews, 2020; Hogarth, 2017). When we are not resting, we should strive for reachable goals that align with our values, just as we do in our professional lives. Carpenter (2025) recommends setting intentions that are "not with vague hopes but with sharp, clear objectives that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Rewarding, Timely, Inclusive, and Equitable" (p. 74). While many of our current challenges feel like they were conjured with a single sweep of a pen, they cannot be solved the same way. Small steps and small successes can add up to make a big difference.

Scholarship within the library community echoes the themes of effective action and resistance, while avoiding a sense of hopelessness (Carpenter, 2025; Jaeger, 2025). In his article, "We Are Not Helpless," Paul Jaeger (2025) reassures, "for all the scariness of the current situation, cultural heritage professionals and their institutions have options for responding effectively" (p. 188). He recommends that we engage politically in all areas, build coalitions and alliances, and act proactively (Jaeger, 2025). Likewise, Carpenter (2025) advises librarians of best practices for community organizing and activism, including recommendations to "mobilize volunteers and community members to advocate for policies that

protect libraries and schools” (p. 82) and “train advocates in public speaking, digital organizing, and grassroots outreach to amplify their impact” (p. 82). In addition, both Jaeger (2025) and Carpenter (2025) point out the importance of sustained efforts. Carpenter (2025) highlights the need to “understand the importance of long-term effort, as real change can take years or even decades to achieve” (p.84). Messages like this are essential as we all try to build a strategy to move forward on the shifting dunes of this president’s policies. However, we must also advocate for a space to seriously discuss how librarians can fight for our values and communities without unnecessarily sacrificing our minds and bodies. Sustained action not only requires effective strategizing and power moves, but it also requires participants with the physical, mental, and emotional energy to keep pushing.

In just a year, we have already seen marked successes through our collective action. We must leverage professional networks, mentors, friends, and communities, both for the sake of effective change-making (Brown et al., 2025; Carpenter, 2025; Jaeger, 2025) and for the sake of our mental health (Israel, 2025; Jacobs et al., 2024; Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017; Martinez & Forrey, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2020). Amid the political attacks on libraries, we can see our community members taking action. Last year, the Federal Courts stopped the defunding of IMLS, a critical win for libraries across the nation (Federal Court Halts Dismantling, 2025). Despite this success, people in the library profession and in the community continued to advocate for libraries. With the aid of these advocates and library champions, Congress approved a \$1.4 million increase in funding for library programs (Varga, 2026). In 2025, a majority of elected school board positions shifted to support protecting the right and freedom to read, even flipping formerly pro-book-banning school boards (Metallo, 2026). The National Coalition Against Censorship recently partnered with the Brooklyn Public Library to train students from across the United States on advocacy surrounding book bans and censorship. The inaugural Teen Advocacy Institute focused on giving a voice to those most directly affected by book banning: the

students themselves (Price, 2025). We have also seen the documentary film “The Librarians” receive critical acclaim, centering the public librarians at the forefront of the fight against book banning and censorship (Clarke, 2025). The communities we serve and the people around us can be our greatest sources of strength and power.

Librarians who cultivate resilience and wellness in their professional lives are well-positioned to step into this new trial. The challenges facing new librarians, particularly those from marginalized groups and young women, are significant and deeply intertwined. The enduring stereotypes of a feminized profession contribute to systemic inequities, while the unrealistic expectations of librarians as infallible heroes can breed burnout and IS. Compounding these issues is the stark lack of diversity within the field and the current political climate. More research is needed into how the systemic issues that shape librarianship have informed and exacerbated the challenges of the present. Many of our issues are escalations and modernizations of the historical obstacles that have shaped our profession. It is essential as we move forward to include discussions about librarian well-being alongside political strategizing. As a small start, we should recognize that the same strategies recommended for building sustainable careers are now essential tools for navigating this turbulent landscape. By establishing core values and goals, setting boundaries, prioritizing rest, and fostering strong communities, librarians can weather the storm and contribute to a more equitable, resilient, and effective profession capable of safeguarding knowledge and serving diverse communities in an increasingly challenging world.

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Peer Consultation: How Academic Libraries Can Better Serve Their First-Generation Students

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Abstract

First-generation (FG) college students represent a growing population in North American higher education. Yet, many academic libraries continue to rely on traditional, transactional service models that conflict with these students' documented preference for relational, peer-based support. This conceptual paper synthesizes recent literature on FG students' information behaviors and institutional barriers to library use. Drawing on asset-based frameworks and Karen Fisher's theory of Information Grounds, the analysis reveals a critical paradox: FG students highly value library resources and spaces, yet often avoid formal service points because of relational barriers with authority figures. To address this gap, the paper proposes a Peer Research Conversation Program (PRCP), a library-based peer mentorship model that intentionally recruits successful FG students as consultants and operates in a dedicated, low-stakes space separate from the traditional reference desk. The proposal is supported by evidence-based justifications and aligned with the American Library Association's Code of Ethics and values of principlism. The paper also acknowledges practical limitations, including resource requirements and implementation challenges. By shifting from an authority-driven to a peer-mediated, asset-based model, academic libraries can better support FG students' academic success and sense of belonging.

Article Type: Conceptual Paper

Introduction

First-generation (FG) college students, broadly defined as those whose parents did not complete a four-year baccalaureate degree (U.S. Department of Education, 1998), represent a significant and growing demographic within North American higher education. Their success is critical to the instructional and community engagement missions of universities, yet they often navigate the academic landscape with a different set of social and cultural capital than their continuing-generation peers. For information professionals, understanding the distinct information behaviors of this population

is essential for developing effective and equitable services. Historically, institutional approaches have often been framed by a deficit perspective, focusing on what FG students supposedly lack rather than the unique strengths and strategies they possess. This paper challenges that framing.

This paper begins by synthesizing the scholarly discussion surrounding the information behavior of FG college students in North American higher education, with a particular focus on the shift from deficit-based to asset-based frameworks. It argues that the central challenge for academic libraries is not a lack of resources, but a

misalignment between traditional, transactional service models and the demonstrated preference of FG students for relational, peer-based, and informal help-seeking (Payne et al., 2023). Drawing on the theoretical lens of “Information Grounds” (Fisher, 2005), the analysis highlights how academic libraries can shift from a deficit to an asset-based approach (Graf, 2019). The paper concludes with an evidence-based and ethically grounded proposal for a peer-to-peer research mentorship program situated in an academic library at a large public research university.

Literature Review: Scope & Selection

Several parameters guided the selection of literature for this review. The key factor is including articles that represent both traditional deficit-oriented skill assessments and the more recent asset-focused experiential studies, which are essential to analyzing the central intellectual tension around the topic. Further, the selection prioritizes research that explores the social, affective, and identity-related perceptions of information behavior, aiming to provide a more holistic understanding than skills-based metrics alone. Another key parameter is the thematic alignment between the student and the institution. To be included, an article must either (a) focus on the identity, experiences, or behaviors of FG students, or (b) directly analyze an institutional context, like an academic library or mentoring program, through the specific lens of its relationship to this student population. This review also prioritizes peer-reviewed articles published primarily between 2018 and 2025 to ensure the analysis is contemporary and specific. In addition, a limited number of studies on general peer-mentoring programs in academic libraries are briefly referenced to situate the proposed service within existing institutional practice and to clarify its distinct contributions for FG students. These parameters ensure the selected literature represents both sides of the topic’s ongoing and most significant debate and presents them in the correct context. They also enable the literature presented here to go beyond broad discussions and build a body of evidence that directly guides the development of

culturally competent library services. Ultimately, these parameters led to the inclusion of sixteen sources in this literature review, emphasizing the diverse identities of FG students and the significant connections between these students and higher education institutions.

Literature: Synthesizing Evidence

Conceptualizing “First Generation”

The term “first-generation college student” is widely used, but its definition is complex; there is debate in the literature over its definition and application. The way a researcher or institution defines the term often reveals their underlying philosophy. The most widely used benchmark for defining FG students is the one established by the United States Department of Education’s Federal TRIO Programs, which classifies a student as FG if their parents have not completed a four-year baccalaureate degree (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). This objective, demographic definition provides a standardized measure for institutional and quantitative research. Because of this, many quantitative and institutional studies adopt a straightforward demographic definition – if they define it at all – classifying students whose parents do not hold a bachelor’s degree as FG for comparison and assessment purposes. Leary et al. (2023) ask students to self-identify as FG through a binary selection of “yes” versus “no” to the question “Are you a first-generation college student (neither parent completed a 4-yr college degree)?” (p. 160), relying on assumptions and treating FG status as an unexamined categorical variable. In addition, LeMire et al. (2025) identify their participant groups, but the methodology section does not articulate the specific criteria used to define FG, instead assuming the category as self-evident. A growing body of asset-based scholarship, however, argues that this binary label is insufficient and often misleading. Research by Bettencourt et al. (2022) challenges this approach by utilizing “meaning-making,” as a student’s personal identification with the label of FG and its meaning in their life is a more significant factor than the demographic fact itself (p. 275).

The complexities of FG identity are explored in numerous modern studies. Toutkoushian et al.'s (2018) research provides a comprehensive discussion on the challenges of defining the concept, incorporating eight definitions of the category and identifying significant differences among them. Bettencourt and Forrest (2025) reveal five identities and experiences that shape participants' FG status salience, breaking down further that FG is even secondary to their experiences as being, say, a racial and ethnic minority, having a sibling, or being a transfer student. Payne et al. (2023) further complicate the definition by demonstrating that the identity is not synonymous with a lack of ability – an implicit critique of the deficit approach as well. This need for a holistic view is further highlighted by research into non-academic factors, such as the unique mental health challenges faced by this population that they try to alleviate (Wang et al., 2022). Viewing FG as an identity rather than a category or check-box reveals a more complex and capable student, directly challenging the deficit-based frameworks that often support simplified demographic labels.

Key Information Behaviors

Building on the asset-based identity framework, the information behaviors of FG students are not random or deficient; instead, they are characterized by strategic, multi-layered help-seeking behavior. The literature shows a general preference for self-directed and informal peer networks over formal institutional channels. For example, Payne et al. (2023) found that students follow a distinct sequence: they first use online resources “to figure it out themselves,” then turn to informal sources like peers and Teaching Assistants (TAs), and only approach professors as a final resort (p. 799). This pattern reveals a general reluctance to engage with formal authority figures, creating a barrier that is only overcome when a formal resource is “deemed to be especially useful” (Payne et al., 2023, p. 799). The main challenge, then, is understanding what makes a formal resource “especially useful” enough to surpass this strategic reluctance.

The value of personal connection in information seeking is powerfully demonstrated by Ballin et al. (2025) in their study of mentorship provided by faculty who were themselves FG students. They found that FG students actively seek out these relationships because they foster a “sense of belonging” and provide crucial “emotional support, guidance, and social needs” (p. 18). This finding directly answers the question raised in Payne et al. (2023): a formal resource becomes “especially useful” the moment it becomes relational. The shared experience and trust built in a mentorship relationship are what motivate a student to bypass their usual preference for informal sources.

This demonstrated preference for informal, relational help-seeking can be explained by Karen Fisher's theory of “Information Grounds.” Fisher (2005) defines these as “behavioral settings” where people gather for a primary purpose, but where the social atmosphere facilitates a secondary, often serendipitous, exchange of information (p. 185). The informal networks of peers and TAs that students in Payne et al.'s (2023) study prefer are classic examples of information grounds; they are comfortable, low-stakes social spaces where students feel safe asking questions and sharing knowledge. Additionally, the mentor relationship described by Ballin et al. (2025) illustrates how a strong personal connection can create an information ground, transforming a potentially intimidating formal space like a professor's office into a trusted, supportive environment for information sharing. Ultimately, the literature shows that FG students are not merely seeking people over systems; they are strategically seeking out the safety and effectiveness of information grounds. This presents a direct challenge for traditionally formal and transactional institutions, such as academic libraries, to consider how they can foster such environments.

The Role of the Institution

The academic library presents a critical paradox for FG students. While evidence shows they value the library's physical spaces and resources

even more highly than their peers (Stocking et al., 2024), their demonstrated reluctance to engage with formal authority figures (Payne et al., 2023) creates a hidden barrier to accessing the library's most valuable asset: its human expertise. The institutional challenge, then, is not to prove the library's worth, but to bridge the gap between its high resource value and its high relational barrier by shifting from a transactional to a relational service model.

A closer examination of the evidence reveals the first half of this paradox: FG students don't just use the library; they value its foundational offerings with a distinct sense of importance. In their survey of student perceptions, Stocking et al. (2024) found that FG students "rated all library services highly in terms of importance and satisfaction" (p. 135). Notably, services related to the physical space were highly rated, highlighting the importance of the "library-as-a-place" for these students, while access and discovery services were also valued, confirming the library's essential role in providing low-cost or free resources (Stocking et al., 2024, p. 135). However, the most significant discovery is in the services where their opinions differed the most noticeably from those of their peers. According to the study, the difference was most statistically significant for services providing "student support," which FG students rated as far more important (Stocking et al., 2024, p. 135). This finding is crucial, as it shows FG students have an articulated need for the support the library offers, but there is a disconnect between this need and the methods available to fulfill it.

This disconnect becomes evident when examining the library's traditional approach to human interaction in the context of documented help-seeking behaviors among FG students. The reactive transactional nature of a formal reference desk sets the librarian as an institutional authority figure that students strategically avoid (Payne et al., 2023). This has led scholars to call for a reimagining of the library's role. Graf (2019), for instance, argues that to serve these students, librarians must shift their perspective, recognizing them as "people with stories to contribute, not only needs to be

met," and directly challenging the institutional "narrative about FG students' deficits" (p. 14).

Critically, Graf (2019) recommends a practical solution: librarians must "let go of the notion of themselves as the primary source of help" and instead embrace that students naturally "turn to peers" (p. 14). This leads to the direct recommendation of "creating opportunities for academically successful peer mentors" (Graf, 2019, p. 14). This shift toward a relational, peer-supported model is reflected in efforts to integrate the library into a broader campus-wide "Culture of First-Generation Student Success" (Pressimone Beckowski & Winfield, 2021). Ultimately, these scholarly recommendations are a direct application of the core principles of equitable, culturally competent service. As Cooke (2017) argues, effective instruction requires "relationship building," and librarians must "make additional efforts to build rapport with their communities and really learn about their information and instructional needs" (p. 62). The scholarly and professional mandate is clear: the institution must intentionally create new services that provide flexibility, diversify authority, normalize help-seeking, and build upon the trust and shared experience inherent in a peer-mentoring model. They also need to abandon a one-size-fits-all transactional method and instead focus on a user-centered and relational approach.

Broader Context: Peer-Mentoring Models in Academic Libraries

Peer-to-peer research assistance programs have been implemented in various academic libraries across North America and have demonstrated benefits for general student populations, including increased engagement, reduced anxiety at service points, and scalable support (O'Kelly et al., 2015; MacKinnon & Shepley, 2014). However, the majority of existing models are not explicitly designed around the documented help-seeking patterns, identity-based needs, or asset-based strengths of FG students. Collier (2017) notes that peer mentors are often perceived as more relatable, and thus more credible, than authority figures because

they share a common perspective with mentees – an advantage particularly relevant for FG students navigating unfamiliar institutional norms. The Peer Research Conversation Program proposed in this paper extends this body of work by intentionally recruiting successful FG students as consultants, grounding the service in asset-based frameworks and Information Grounds theory, and directly addressing the relational barriers identified in the FG-specific literature. By locating the service in a dedicated space separate from the traditional reference desk, the program creates a low-stakes, relational environment that aligns with FG students' demonstrated preferences.

Service Proposal

The literature review reveals a clear user need: FG students require information services that are relational, peer-mediated, and operate within trusted, low-stakes environments to overcome their reluctance to engage with formal institutional authorities. While they value the library's resources and support services, the traditional reference desk model creates a relational barrier that prevents them from fully accessing the library's human expertise. To address this identified gap, this proposal outlines the creation of a Peer Research Conversation Program (PRCP), situated within the academic library of a large public research university. This program moves beyond a transactional model of service to build a sustainable, asset-based support system that leverages the power of shared experience to foster information literacy and a sense of belonging for FG students.

The Proposed Service: Peer Research Conversation Program

The PRCP is a library-led initiative designed to provide research assistance through consultations with trained upper-level undergraduate students, with a specific focus on recruiting successful FG students as the consultants. The program's core function is to de-center the librarian as the sole authority and

create a more approachable, less intimidating entry point for research support.

Consultants would be hired and trained by librarians on core information literacy competencies, including database searching, source evaluation, citation practices, and research topic development. Critically, this training would also include modules on mentorship, active listening, and communication strategies for building rapport, explicitly preparing them to create the supportive relationships valued by their peers. The program would be located in a designated, comfortable, and highly visible area within the library, separate from the formal reference desk, to encourage drop-in use and informal interaction. This space would be intentionally designed to be welcoming, with flexible seating and collaborative technology, transforming it from a service point into an information ground. Services would be offered through both scheduled appointments and drop-in hours, providing flexibility to meet varying student needs.

The role of the PRCP is not to provide answers, but to guide fellow students through the research process, sharing strategies and normalizing the challenges inherent in academic work. By employing successful FG students, the program leverages their experiential knowledge of navigating the university, making them credible and empathetic sources of support. Librarians would transition from being the primary frontline service providers to being program coordinators, trainers, and expert resources for the peer consultants, allowing them to scale their impact and focus on higher-level support.

Evidence-Based Justification

The recommendation for the PRCP is a direct application of Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP), which calls for professional decisions to be grounded in the "best available evidence," including research findings, professional expertise, and user perspectives (Koufogiannakis, 2013, p. 7). The design of this service is made directly from the

body of evidence presented in the literature review.

First, the program directly addresses the primary information behavior identified by Payne et al. (2023), who found that FG students tend to turn to peers before approaching formal authority figures, like professors or librarians. By establishing a peer-to-peer model, the library aligns its service with students' existing help-seeking patterns rather than attempting to force them into an uncomfortable or counterintuitive institutional mold. The PRCP utilizes the informal, trusted network that students naturally seek out.

Second, the program is designed to create the relational connection that makes a formal resource "especially useful" (Payne et al., 2023, p. 799). The findings of Ballin et al. (2025) demonstrate that mentorship relationships with those of a shared identity provide essential "emotional support" and foster a "sense of belonging" (p. 18). The PRCP is rooted in this finding by making peer mentorship the central component of its service, transforming the interaction from a simple transaction into a supportive relationship. This model also follows the explicit recommendation of Graf (2019), who argues that librarians must empower students by "creating opportunities for academically successful peer mentors" (p. 14).

Third, the program is a practical application of Fisher's theory of "Information Grounds" (2005). The formal, transactional reference desk is not a natural information ground; it is a designated service point that can induce anxiety. The proposed PRCP space, by being physically separate, comfortable, and staffed by peers, is designed to become an authentic behavioral setting where students can gather for academic work and engage in the serendipitous, low-stakes exchange of information that Fisher (2005) describes.

Finally, this service directly resolves the paradox identified by Stocking et al. (2024). Their research shows that FG students place a significantly higher value on student support

services from the library (Stocking et al., 2024); however, other evidence suggests that they tend to avoid the primary channel for that support.

The PRCP establishes a new, more effective channel that bridges this gap, ensuring that the library's support resources are made accessible in a culturally competent and user-centered way.

Ethical Justification

Beyond its evidence-based foundation, the PRCP aligns with the professional values and ethical commitments of academic librarianship. The American Library Association's Code of Ethics (2021) provides an outline to guide ethical decision-making. Wilkinson's (2014) framework of principlism offers a structured approach to ethical reasoning by applying core professional duties to specific situations. The principles of competence and diligence, for example, encourage librarians to apply their professional knowledge thoughtfully and make sustained efforts to serve their communities effectively (Wilkinson, 2014). Developing the PRCP demonstrates this by drawing on research about user behavior to design a responsive, targeted intervention. It is also consistent with Article I of the Code of Ethics, which calls librarians to provide the highest level of service to all library users through equitable access (ALA, 2021). Instead of maintaining a service model that creates a barrier for some students, the library is proactively working to reduce those barriers and provide equitable access.

The program is also consistent with Wilkinson's (2014) principles of respect for autonomy and respect for community. It supports FG students by offering an option that aligns with their documented preference for peer-based support (Payne et al., 2023). At the same time, it recognizes FG students' informal networks as a cultural asset. By intentionally recruiting successful FG students as consultants, the program validates their lived experience and contributes to the strength and visibility of that community.

These commitments further align with Article IX of ALA's (2021) Code of Ethics, which affirms the

inherent dignity and rights of every person and calls on librarians to confront inequity and advance social justice through services and the allocation of resources and spaces. This principle also corresponds with Wilkinson's (2014) value of justice, which involves the "fair distribution of resources, services, and opportunities" (p. 13). The PRCP advances this principle by intentionally directing library resources – including staff expertise, wages, and space – toward a population that often faces systemic barriers to academic support.

Limitations and Considerations

While the proposed PRCP is grounded in evidence and aligned with professional values, several practical limitations should be considered. Establishing and sustaining such a program requires dedicated space, ongoing funding for peer consultant wages, librarian time for training and coordination, and a sufficient pool of academically successful FG students willing and able to serve as mentors. Not every institution will have the resources or conditions necessary to implement the model exactly as described. In addition, designing a service that feels both credible and approachable presents ongoing challenges. Terms such as "consultant," "mentor," and "conversation," for example, were chosen to balance formality with relationality, but the effectiveness of any label will depend on local campus culture and student perceptions.

Conclusion

This paper has synthesized a body of literature to demonstrate that FG college students possess distinct, asset-based information behaviors characterized by a strategic preference for relational, peer-mediated help-seeking. The evidence reveals a critical disconnect between these behaviors and the traditional, transactional service models common in academic libraries, creating a significant barrier to information access for a growing student population. The core problem is not the value of the library's resources, but the accessibility of its human expertise.

To address this challenge, this paper proposes the establishment of a Peer Research Conversation Program (PRCP) within the academic library of a large public research university. This service, grounded in the principles of evidence-based practice, is designed to align directly with the identified information behaviors of FG students. By leveraging the power of peer mentorship, the program seeks to create a trusted, supportive information ground that fosters research skills, normalizes the help-seeking process, and cultivates a sense of academic belonging. The PRCP also aligns with the professional values and ethical commitments of academic librarianship, as outlined in the American Library Association's Code of Ethics and aligned with the ethical framework of principlism. It is an act of professional competence and diligence, a demonstration of fidelity to the library's mission, and a necessary step toward achieving distributive justice for all students. By intentionally shifting from an institutional authority model to a user-centered relational one, academic libraries can move beyond simply serving diverse populations and begin to empower them, fulfilling their core mission to support equitable access to information and opportunity for each student.

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Navigating Misinformation: Information Behavior and Heuristic Decision-Making Among Generation Z Students in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Generation Z, the first generation to grow up fully immersed in digital technology, exhibits unique patterns of information behavior shaped by continual online engagement and social media use. This conceptual paper explores how heuristic decision-making affects American Generation Z students' evaluation of information in academic contexts. Drawing from current research in library and information science, the paper identifies four prevalent heuristics in Gen Z's information-seeking behavior: appeals to authority, form, popularity, and preconceived ideology. These heuristics, reinforced by the fast-paced and visually driven nature of digital environments, can both aid and hinder critical information evaluation. The paper examines how these behaviors intersect with issues of misinformation and the perception of credibility within academic libraries, where students may assume all resources are inherently reliable. In this context, librarians must design intentional, adaptive information literacy instruction that acknowledges students' digital habits while fostering deeper critical engagement with information. This analysis asks information professionals to treat Gen Z's digital habits as the cognitive foundation from which they build further information behavior, and to design adaptive information literacy instruction accordingly.

Keywords: Generation Z, information behavior, heuristic decision-making, misinformation, information literacy, academic libraries, digital natives, credibility assessment

Article Type: Conceptual Paper

Introduction

Colloquially known as Generation Z (Gen Z), Americans born between the mid-1990s and 2010s can be considered *digital natives*, a term coined to describe those who have grown up speaking the digital language of computers, the internet, and social media as their native tongue (Prensky, 2001), having grown up immersed in digital technology and culturally shaped by an environment saturated in social media, smartphones, and continual online connection

(Marty, 2022). This generation's intellectual development is characterized by their distinct digital habits showing a greater prioritization of social connectivity and the integration of online tools in everyday information searching behavior (Hu et al., 2022). With the understanding that modern undergraduates have been educated alongside this unprecedented access to information through the internet, their reliance on *heuristic decision-making* – the use of mental shortcuts to simplify complex judgements – and digital habits developed through social media

usage may affect their ability to evaluate resources critically.

Gen Z's tendency to rely upon digital platforms for news, research, and socialization may encourage this heuristic information evaluation pattern, and academic information may similarly be interpreted through surface-level judgments, such as presentation or authority (Dalal et al., 2025). These patterns have been observed among Gen Z students across a variety of national contexts (Kolawole et al., 2025) and are especially pronounced among American undergraduates navigating academic research environments for the first time (Dalal et al., 2025). This learned information behavior could make them vulnerable to *misinformation*—inaccurate information presented as accurate—even within trusted academic environments (Yesmin, 2023). Credibility through the eyes of this cohort will be informed by their digital experiences prior to receiving academic information literacy instruction, and thus these interventions should be tailored to fit within the context of the modern student's pre-developed digital habits. Academic libraries must play a proactive role in information literacy education, guiding students beyond surface-level evaluations and toward a deeper engagement with information, no matter the context.

This paper examines how heuristic decision-making shapes the information behavior of American Gen Z undergraduates in academic library contexts, with particular attention to four heuristics prevalent in this population: appeals to authority, form, popularity, and preconceived ideology. By situating these patterns within the broader landscape of digital media use, social media influence, and misinformation in academic libraries, this analysis emphasizes the importance of developing information literacy instruction that is genuinely responsive to the cognitive realities of a generation formed by their digital experiences, with implications that extend to the increasingly digital cohorts who will follow them into higher education institutions.

Heuristic Decision-Making in Information Evaluation

Heuristic decision-making refers to the cognitive shortcuts that individuals employ to simplify complex decision-making processes (McGeough & Rudick, 2018). With the overwhelming quantity of information made accessible in the digital age, heuristic decision-making plays a crucial role in how Gen Z undergraduates evaluate resources. Heuristic strategies allow individuals to quickly navigate information with the lowest possible mental investment, and undergraduate students of the information age often employ these strategies to minimize the efforts needed to evaluate resources (Marty, 2022; Schwieder, 2016).

Certain heuristics have been identified as more prevalent in the digital native generation than others: the appeal to authority, the appeal to form, the appeal to popularity, and the appeal to preconceived ideology (McGeough & Rudick, 2018). Students often rely on these simple mental shortcuts to make quick credibility judgments without deeply analyzing the content of the information provided. These cognitive shortcuts may lead students to equate credibility with surface-level indicators, such as professional formatting or recognizable sources, which can limit their ability to critically engage with information (Dalal et al., 2025; Schwieder, 2016).

These four main heuristics in information-searching behavior among Gen Z undergraduate students may be best described as motivated by the “principle of least effort,” an assumption in information science that individuals typically choose the easiest way to accomplish any given task (Musgrove et al., 2018; Schwieder, 2016). Quick heuristic decision-making found in Gen Z undergraduates' research behaviors implies that students tend to prioritize speed and convenience over critical engagement with information, turning to tools like Google and selecting from the top results without fully evaluating the quality or credibility of sources (Dalal et al., 2025; Marty, 2022; McGeough & Rudick, 2018;).

Appeal to authority can sometimes be a reliable metric in which a user determines credibility, being that the highest authorities in a field are often experts that can provide accurate information (Musgrove et al., 2018). However, some students may find authority in aspects of the presentation or location of that information, rather than in the nature of the source itself. One undergraduate student interviewed in a McGeough & Rudick (2018) study on heuristic patterns in information decision-making justified their source selection by telling the researchers: “It was at the library; therefore, it must be credible [. . .].” While the student later acknowledged that their reliance on the academic library as sources of authority may not have been well-founded, they still used the source in question without further scrutiny. This ambiguity in the difference between who produced the information and how the information was accessed presents a difficult challenge for academic libraries to navigate. Even more complex challenges emerge when considering the impact of the use of an appeal-to-authority heuristic as generative artificial intelligence tools increasingly produce content without any human intervention, even further undermining students’ ability to apply their learned authority-based heuristics (Sebastian, 2025).

Further heuristic behaviors inspired by digital environments, such as the appeal to form, can be less reliable in critical evaluations of academic research. The appeal to form has manifested in a variety of ways throughout the development of accessible information, such as the inherent trust that the public placed upon print newspaper publishers as a “form” of reliable information in the early twentieth century. A digital native has experienced many forms and formats of content by the time they begin academic research, and studies consistently show that a well-developed, high-quality user interface may signal higher credibility to student evaluators than the actual quality of the information it presents (Dalal et al., 2025; Sarkar, 2023; Yesmin, 2023). This indicates that the aesthetic appeal of information has become a

credibility metric that students use to validate resources – one that disadvantages the many educational and scientific institutions constrained by limited resources for graphic design and web development.

The appeal to popularity has also been thoroughly ingrained in modern students through their digital experiences. Popularity is a valuable commodity in social media, and it is not distributed based upon credibility. The “viral” nature of algorithmically boosted digital content will expose users to the most popular content available (Sarkar, 2023), and the validity of the information shared is not a relevant factor in that popularity. Studies report, however, that the public’s judgement of credibility is itself shaped by popularity, since well-known and widely circulated resources tend to receive higher credibility ratings regardless of their actual credibility (Blockside & Primeau, 2023).

Another heuristic commonly found in Gen Z’s undergraduate population is the appeal to preconceived ideology. This heuristic in academic settings is not novel to modern students and is the most difficult to untangle from the intentional research process due to the inherent cognitive bias that all humans bring to information evaluation (Atman Uslu & Yildiz Durak, 2022; Leeder, 2019). Users are more likely to value a resource that aligns with their preconceived beliefs, and this tendency is compounded in the modern information environment by the sheer volume of electronic resources available to confirm virtually any position (Schwieder, 2016). Dalal et al. (2025) note that even students who self-report high confidence in their source evaluation abilities frequently demonstrate difficulty distinguishing between authoritative sources and those that simply align with their existing knowledge or assumptions, stressing how deeply ideological heuristics can resist formal instruction.

Influence of Social Media and Digital Environments

The transfer of heuristic-based searching from digital environments to academic settings can provide insights in Gen Z's engagement with academic information. With social media and digital spaces encouraging the truncation of information through short-form content, "clickbait" article headings, and the algorithmic weight of biased content, developing minds learning how to filter and value information in this context can be especially vulnerable to developing poor information-seeking strategies (Colón-Aguirre & Fleming-May, 2012; Leeder, 2019). A modern student's familiarity with quick, low-effort searches in digital media platforms informs their academic information behaviors, making them more likely to use heuristics even in situations that would normally demand a higher level of scrutiny (Atman Uslu & Yildiz Durak, 2022; Schwieder, 2016).

Social media networks were not always designed to feed users the most user-friendly information possible, and other generations, as well as the eldest Gen Zs, will likely remember the rapid user interface development of social networking websites throughout the last twenty years. Miltner and Gerrard (2022) offer a useful perspective here, observing that early platforms like Myspace encouraged users to learn and apply HTML and CSS to customize their profiles, a feature that is now remembered nostalgically as an era in which young people developed genuine technological skills through platform engagement. In its earliest development, digital systems required a meaningful degree of learning to navigate and understand. At some point in the early twenty-first century, human-computer interaction design began shifting toward creating the most intuitive user interfaces possible, with the lowest degree of learning required for the highest degree of usability. This established doctrine in web design and programming gave rise to the current tailor-made algorithms in social media, allowing users to experience relevant content with little-to-no information search behavior in mass quantities (Sarkar, 2023).

This fast-paced, high-volume nature of modern digital environments has shaped the way that

Gen Z interacts with information. Some studies have found that modern undergraduate students may be more skeptical of claims without substantive sources or evidentiary value, suggesting a higher level of scrutiny than previous generations, likely due to their exposure to and suspicion of online sponsored posts or propagandistic content (Blocksidge & Primeau, 2022; Breakstone et al., 2022; Yesmin, 2023). Others argue that constant exposure to online content during students' cognitive development may lead to difficulties distinguishing between credible and non-credible sources when consuming information in digital spaces by relying too heavily on heuristic biases (Breakstone et al., 2022; Leeder, 2019; Yesmin, 2023).

Even with this wide spectrum of findings relating to Gen Z's ability to critically evaluate content online, one consensus is that this generation experiences high rates of information overload (Atman Uslu & Yildiz Durak, 2022; Breakstone et al., 2022). Students have reported being easily overwhelmed by the vast array of information available online, and even the most critical students report using heuristic strategies to mitigate their *internet anxiety* (Hsiao et al., 2017; Marty, 2022; Schwieder, 2016). Findings suggest that undergraduates who self-report higher rates of anxiety about navigating online environments tend to be less effective in developing a critical approach to information-seeking (Hsiao et al., 2017). When students are anxious or overwhelmed, they tend to rely more heavily on appeals to authority and appeals to familiarity as cognitive shortcuts, potentially leading to the spread and acceptance of misinformation (Leeder, 2019; Schwieder, 2016).

Misinformation in Academic Libraries

While academic libraries have long been championed as trusted hubs of credible and reliable information, it is not feasible to maintain collections of exclusively accurate information. Modern libraries face significant challenges in identifying, managing, and excluding content of questionable quality, especially under demand-driven collection development policies that often

lack the oversight of a trained librarian (De Paor & Heravi, 2020). Libraries are not immune to misinformation, and these challenges are compounded by students placing inherent trust in library-hosted resources (McGeough & Rudick, 2018).

Because libraries are built upon a foundational pillar of providing equitable access to all information, these institutions inevitably include information that is factually inaccurate or harmful (Eva & Shea, 2017). Collection development strategies used by librarians emphasize “selection, not censorship,” meaning that library professionals may have the power to select materials for their collection, but they often may not consider the factual content, bias, or informational quality of the material as a qualifying factor in that selection process (De Paor & Heravi, 2020; Yesmin, 2023). The censorship of any material does not align with the values of librarianship, and this is the avenue in which misinformation can find its way into academic library catalogs.

Educational Interventions and Critical Information Literacy

Information literacy education has long been identified as the most effective way to combat misinformation (Atman Uslu & Yildiz Durak, 2022; Breakstone et al., 2022; De Paor & Heravi, 2020; Eva & Shea, 2017; Leeder, 2019; McGeough & Rudick, 2018). Many academic libraries are improving their marketing of information literacy programming to combat misinformation using eye-catching posters, simple infographics, social media posts, and even credit-bearing courses. These tools allow academic libraries in the twenty-first century to capture the attention of Gen Z undergraduate students while delivering intentional instruction designed to teach students how to identify and navigate misinformation across all contexts (Eva & Shea, 2017). Research consistently shows that embedding information literacy programming into the digital spaces that Gen Z already inhabits produces a more meaningful engagement than traditional stand-alone library

instruction sessions (Dalal et al., 2025; Kolawole et al., 2025).

Information literacy programming encourages students to engage in deeper critical thinking, which has been shown to reduce students' reliance on heuristic-based searching (Atman Uslu & Yildiz Durak, 2022; Schwieder, 2016). However, the effectiveness of such programming depends on whether it accounts for the specific heuristic patterns that Gen Z students bring into academic settings. Many information literacy frameworks assume a traditional, ideal information-seeking process in which a student poses a question, searches deliberately, evaluates sources methodically, and arrives at a well-reasoned conclusion. For a generation whose relationship with information was formed through social media feeds, algorithmic recommendations, peer validation, and AI chatbots, that ideal model may not reflect how this generation actually encounters and processes information in practice (Sebastian, 2025). Conventional approaches to information literacy instruction tend to prioritize retrieval efficiency and efficacy, which leaves the social and emotional dimensions of information behavior largely unaddressed. Instruction that does not account for why students reach for cognitive shortcuts in the first place is unlikely to meaningfully reduce their reliance on them.

Certain lessons related to metaliteracy, the integration of information literacy into all areas of information behavior, have become standard within the library science discipline. According to the Association of College & Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* (2016), “Metaliteracy demands behavioral, affective, cognitive, and metacognitive engagement with the information ecosystem.” This framework encourages libraries to position information literacy concepts in programming as an active behavior for students to engage in all areas of information retrieval, including in digital environments. The Frameworks' explicit inclusion of affective and metacognitive dimensions is especially significant in the context of Gen Z instruction, as it creates space within formal library pedagogy to

address the emotional experience of information overload and internet anxiety, conditions that are directly implicated in students' increased reliance to heuristic shortcuts (Hsiao et al., Schwieder, 2016).

As generative artificial intelligence tools become increasingly embedded in students' research and information-seeking behaviors, information literacy instruction faces a new and urgent challenge. AI-generated content disrupts the conventional heuristics that students have developed for evaluated sources because it produces information without an identifiable human author, a traceable institutional affiliation, or a verifiable publication record (Sebastian, 2025). Students who have learned to value the perceived authority of a source are particularly vulnerable to accepting AI-generated content uncritically, especially when presented through a polished and intuitive interface that activates the appeal-to-form heuristic simultaneously. Information literacy programming that does not explicitly address the epistemological challenges posed by generative AI risks leaving students underprepared for the information landscape they already inhabit (Kolawole et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Academic librarians are in a unique position to observe and respond directly to this digital native user population as the cohort enters higher education institutions, and this provides opportunities to tailor information literacy instruction to this population's strengths and weaknesses (Latham, 2022; McGeough & Rudick, 2018). Analysis shows that the digital generation of undergraduate students have learned information behavior strategies through social media and digital environments that both assist in academic research and hinder their ability to identify reliable source material, while also experiencing high levels of information overload and internet anxiety (Blocksidge & Primeau, 2023; Given, 2002; Hsiao et al., 2017). Their everyday information behavior, informed by rapid, algorithmically tailored social media content and the principle of least effort, now influences their academic behavior - - from

relying upon quick Google, AI, or Wikipedia searches to trusting that "if the library has it, [then] it must be credible," (Colón-Aguirre & Fleming-May, 2012; Given, 2002; McGeough & Rudick, 2018).

Heuristic decision-making informs information behavior in all individuals because the human brain relies upon using these shortcuts to manage the energy demands of everyday information processing (Schwieder, 2016). The way that individuals develop heuristics is dependent upon previous information interactions, and Gen Z is the first generation to have developed while learning heuristics primarily from modern digital spaces (Hu et al., 2022; Marty, 2022). These online environments are engineered to require the least amount of information search behavior and learning possible, prioritizing volume and engagement over accuracy and depth (Prensky, 2001; Sarkar, 2023). The four heuristics examined in this paper – appeals to authority, form, popularity, and preconceived ideology – are predictable outcomes of the information environments in which this generation's cognitive habits were formed, and should not be treated as the moral or academic failures of individual students. Librarians must engage in intentional instruction with these digital practices and experiences in mind.

That task has grown more complex with the widespread proliferation of generative artificial intelligence tools, which introduces a new category of credibility challenge that sits outside the logic of every conventional source-evaluation heuristic that students have learned to apply (Sebastian, 2025). A generation already inclined to shortcut authority judgements and trust polished interfaces now encounters information that is simultaneously authorless and optimized for engagement. Information literacy instruction that does not explicitly address this issue is preparing students for an information environment that no longer exists.

By remaining mindful of both the challenges and possibilities for students with constant information stimulation, academic libraries can

be prepared to tailor critical information literacy programming to young minds that are always searching for more. While these students bring with them an innate curiosity and a desire to engage with information, they often struggle with the overwhelming volume of content and the cognitive shortcuts they have developed to manage it. Libraries can play a pivotal role in shaping a generation of informed, thoughtful young people by leveraging students' natural affinity for information and channeling it into practices that prioritize credibility over convenience. This necessitates the design of intentional, adaptive instruction that both acknowledges these novel information behaviors and fosters critical thinking and evaluative skills. In doing so, librarians and information professionals can take these challenges as an opportunity to redefine the role of academic libraries as essential partners in navigating the complexities of the modern age of digital information.

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Reflections on the Adoption and Integration of AI Tools in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

As universities expand artificial intelligence (AI) initiatives and library vendors add AI-enabled features to research platforms, academic libraries are increasingly asked to evaluate, explain, troubleshoot, and support tools they may not have selected or fully shaped. AI integration into databases raises important questions about how library workers can evaluate and support these tools with care, accountability, and professional judgment when vendor documentation, campus governance, pricing models, and long-term support structures are still developing.

This conceptual paper examines vendor-embedded AI in academic library contexts from the perspective of early-career librarians and argues that academic libraries are well positioned to assess vendor-embedded AI because library workers already evaluate resources intended to support their campus communities. However, libraries risk being placed in passive roles when vendors or campus initiatives define the timeline, purpose, and value of AI tools before library-centered evaluation has occurred. Rather than positioning academic libraries as either enthusiastic adopters or resisters of AI, this paper encourages a critically engaged middle position.

Article Type: Conceptual Paper

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer a concept the academic community encounters by choice. Higher education often discusses AI at a broad or aspirational level through strategic planning, workforce preparation, and classroom experimentation. As a result, students, faculty, administrators, and staff increasingly use AI services or tools through their everyday work, institutional conversations, required training, and new policies with expectations to use or support emerging tools. However, if a university acquires an emerging AI product for campus-wide use, providing access is only one part of implementation. What may begin as a university

strategic priority or a common tool or feature for users becomes implementation and maintenance work for the employees expected to put it into practice. Information technology staff set up and manage technical infrastructure, security, access, and system integration, but further successful implementation still requires respective collaboration across campus when it comes to research needs and whether its use meets academic standards. Within that shared implementation structure, academic libraries then take on responsibilities that connect the technology to research, instruction, and user support. Library workers will feel the pressure, if not already, to evaluate research-related features, explain the tool to users, incorporate it into instruction and services, troubleshoot

information-related concerns, and assess how it aligns with institutional and professional expectations. Ultimately, academic libraries inherit responsibility even when they were not involved in selecting the tool or establishing the broader campus strategy. But because campus-wide AI adoption requires shared responsibility across the institution, we argue that academic libraries should not settle for forms of participation that begin only after vendors or campus leaders have already defined a tool's purpose, value, timeline, and support expectations. Rubrics, demonstrations, and short trials can help libraries evaluate a product, but they remain reactive when libraries cannot question its underlying assumptions, request changes, clarify responsibilities, or influence whether and how it will be adopted. Drawing on reflections about vendor evaluation, market sustainability, open-source artificial intelligence, and staff capacity, this paper examines how libraries can move from reviewing finished products to shaping the conditions under which artificial intelligence tools are selected, implemented, and sustained.

Academic Libraries within Institutional AI Adoption

As the global expansion of AI technologies accelerated after the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022, higher education institutions across the United States experienced growing expectations to create or expand AI-related courses, certifications, and curricular initiatives. Recent national analyses indicate that completions of AI degrees and certificates grew nearly tenfold between 2016 and 2023, alongside the rapid expansion of generative AI course enrollments and non-degree credential programs (Validated Insights Inc., 2025). This shift reflects an industry growth trajectory driven by labor market demand for AI skills and competencies. Alongside this curricular expansion, institutions moved quickly to establish institutional policies and operational responses to AI adoption. One analysis of U.S. universities found that many institutions had already developed formal institutional responses to AI between late 2022 and 2023,

demonstrating how quickly campuses began responding to the larger AI market and its pressures (McDonald et al., 2025).

In the California State University (CSU) system, the momentum of incorporating AI tools on campus became visible through a system-wide initiative announced in 2025. The initiative promised hands-on experience and opportunity to use AI tools, training, and workforce development opportunities across the system and frames AI integration as part of a broader institutional priority (California State University, 2025). The CSU is an example that shows how quickly institutional momentum can move from broad strategic language into local implementation work. Yet as institutions race to adopt and integrate AI, questions of infrastructure, documentation, evaluation, and long-term readiness remain underexamined. For example, a new artificial intelligence feature may appear in a database, a discovery platform may introduce a research assistant, or a vendor demonstration may present a tool as the next stage of search. It is within this gap that academic libraries find themselves both positioned and pressured to respond.

Libraries should avoid being pulled into passive or reactive AI adoption. Libraries should not simply be on the receiving end of AI tools after vendors or campuses have already shaped the purpose, timeline, and support expectations. Instead, libraries should be part of the conversation earlier so they can ask questions, name concerns, define expectations, and help determine whether a tool is worth the investment. Libraries should also be cautious about overinvesting in AI products before direction, documentation, value, and long-term sustainability are clear. The discussion of open-source AI offers an inspiration point because it shows why definitions, transparency, and shared principles matter before tools become normalized. Together, the examples in this paper point toward a middle position that allows academic libraries to question AI tools carefully without refusing the possibility that some tools may become useful.

Another AI Rubric is Too Passive to be a “Solution”

Rubrics are popular in libraries for many reasons, and as the AI field has flooded the library's technology market, it is natural that critically minded librarians have turned to rubrics to evaluate AI products. Academic libraries are often positioned to assess these tools because librarians already have expertise in acquisitions, information literacy, research support, and the critical evaluation of information systems (Nogueira et al., 2025). Rubrics allow reviewers to test new tools quickly and consistently, clarify thinking about data privacy, bias, accessibility, and impact, and communicate the reasoning behind decisions to administrators and governing bodies. These tools appear in a wide range of contexts, including institutional library guides, instructional initiatives, professional organizations, and industry-facing evaluation models (Caico et al., 2024; Mackie & Aspenlieder, 2024).

For example, Caico et al. (2024) provide questions drawn from the ACRL Framework to help librarians decide whether an AI tool is appropriate for their work. Their questions emphasize context, use, ethics, authority, and reflection rather than simple adoption. Mackie and Aspenlieder's (2024) rubric for evaluating AI tools offers fundamental criteria that can help reviewers organize evaluation around issues such as purpose, privacy, accessibility, equity, and tool limitations. In practice, frameworks like these give libraries a shared vocabulary for evaluation and make it easier to communicate why a tool raises concern beyond whether the tool appears useful in a demonstration.

Rubrics that are published, widely shared, and revised by the field can become important tools for institutions that are understaffed, underfunded, and underprepared, yet simultaneously asked to take on the workload of these evaluations. They also help define a shared system of beliefs about what is important and what concerns librarians and library organizations should hold vendors accountable

for. More broadly, well-defined evaluation criteria can support comparison, identify areas for improvement, and make organizational claims about responsible AI more open to scrutiny (Alaga et al., 2024). However, rubrics are not tools of infinite value. There is always a temptation to create just one more rubric to clarify one more point, but this can lead to an overproliferation of rubrics. Continued reinvention can lead to diminishing returns as professional effort becomes stuck at rubric writing instead of moving toward the next steps. This sense of stagnation is due to the limits of what these tools can meaningfully capture about AI systems. Rubrics function on several key assumptions: that evaluators have accurate information, that product features are stable and well documented, and that test environments represent actual use (Alaga et al., 2024). In practice, librarians are often asked to evaluate vendor documentation that may be too vague to qualify as genuine technical specifications, may only partially explain how systems function once deployed, or may be tied to carefully constructed demo environments designed to present idealized results. Because of these factors, rubrics risk shifting effort toward scoring claims instead of digging deeper into the realities of how these tools function in live library environments.

We risk a compounded persistent lack of transparency from vendors themselves. Features can change after rollout without clear communication, sales representatives may be unable to answer technical questions, and privacy claims may read as aspirational rather than operational. When vendors are secretive about how tools function or deflect questions about their design, data, limitations, or vulnerabilities, libraries may be unable to distinguish legitimate technical constraints from a lack of meaningful disclosure (Nogueira et al., 2025). Promises can exceed technical reality and be replaced by vague language where specificity should be. A scoring framework cannot tell a library what happens to user data once it enters a vendor system, or what will change as these models evolve after implementation unless vendors surface that information. When the information needed to

evaluate a tool is unavailable or obscured, the rubric becomes a document of good intentions rather than a meaningful accountability mechanism.

Issues with scope present an equally significant challenge. Rubrics can only evaluate one item at a time, not the whole ecosystem, and libraries risk losing sight of the broader landscape. Libraries are not adopting tools in isolation; they are bringing tools into complex environments shaped by existing platforms, licensing structures, instruction workflows, access expectations, and user needs. Focusing on one product at a time and assigning scores to various attributes can obscure several important considerations: ongoing professional accountability to users even when systems are externally controlled, the invisible labor involved in ensuring products are maintained and updated, and the broader shift in the field as the accumulation of these products creates structural changes in library environments. Rubrics can answer for a library, “Is this tool acceptable?” but they cannot fully answer, “What is this pattern of tool adoption doing to our work and our responsibilities over time?”

AI Innovation or another AI Chatbot?

In our experience attending vendor demonstrations, AI-enabled library products are often presented as innovative without a clear explanation of how they differ from widely available platforms such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, or Claude. Vendors may describe new research assistants in broad terms while providing limited evidence of distinct functionality or improved outcomes. For academic libraries, this creates a specific evaluation problem: how can libraries determine whether a vendor AI research assistant meaningfully improves research, discovery, or learning when it appears to replicate general chatbot behavior?

In vendor demonstrations and rollout initiatives, libraries may be encouraged to evaluate AI-enabled features while those products and their governance expectations are still evolving. This positions library staff as early evaluators

responsible for identifying limitations, troubleshooting workflows, and communicating concerns back to vendors. For example, Ex Libris introduced Primo Research Assistant as an optional AI-enabled feature available within Primo environments (Clarivate, 2024). Libraries using Primo must then determine whether and how the tool aligns with local instructional, privacy, accessibility, and service expectations. Even when these features are optional, their integration into widely used library systems can create institutional pressure to assess, explain, and potentially support tools whose long-term functionality and implications are still developing.

In an educational space already competing with other high-priced resources, vendors need to clearly explain the value coming from model fine-tuning, retrieval design, metadata structuring, content coverage, citation verification, or workflow integration. Marketing claims that AI will transform research are insufficient when vendors do not explain how AI is being used, why it adds value, or whether that value is proportionate to the tool’s financial and less visible costs (Nogueira et al., 2025). Too often, the explanation stops at buzzwords, and AI becomes a label rather than a measurable improvement. Academic libraries should be cautious when vendor-embedded AI features are presented as innovative and ready to use without clear explanation of the testing environment, testing duration, sample size, privacy practices, data retention, source content, accuracy limits, accessibility, user support, and post-launch maintenance.

The result is a familiar pattern: heavy marketing language, limited technical clarity, and an expectation that librarians will fill the gaps for users. Libraries are on the receiving end of pressure from vendors operating under their own market pressures. A genuinely collaborative relationship, where both vendors and libraries function as partners, would be more likely to create products that suit library needs. If vendors want libraries to pilot, purchase, enable, or support these tools, then vendors should also be prepared to explain why their tools are meaningfully better than freely available chatbot

platforms and how their products align with the library's role in supporting research, teaching, and access.

The Risks of an AI Bubble

The rapid expansion of commercial and industry investment in AI following the release of ChatGPT prompted concerns that investment may be outpacing sustainable returns (Storm, 2025). Much like the dotcom bubble of 2000, observers of AI technologies do not generally believe the technology itself will fail or disappear, but rather that current enthusiasm has outpaced sustainable returns (Potrykus, 2024).

Understanding how this market dynamic influences pricing, functionality, and adoption of decisions is becoming an essential part of AI evaluation. For libraries that have moved quickly to adopt AI-driven tools and services, the bubble dynamic introduces a distinct set of vulnerabilities. Institutions that have built workflows or allocated budget lines around specific commercial AI products may find themselves at risk in the case of pricing shifts or the quiet discontinuation of features. Over-reliance on tools whose long-term viability is tied to speculative investment rather than stable returns also mirrors the kind of infrastructural fragility that the dotcom era made visible too late for many organizations. There is also a reputational dimension: libraries that position themselves as early adopters of AI solutions may face difficult questions from their communities if those solutions prove unsustainable. This is not an argument against adoption, but rather for strengthening evaluative literacy that encourages greater industry transparency, promotes values-driven decision-making, and supports more sustainable practices across library and academic communities. Libraries can strengthen their evaluative literacy by looking beyond whether a tool appears useful and instead by examining the technical and governance choices that shape how emerging AI operates within their campus. Long-standing open-source communities provide a useful comparison because they have extensive experience debating how technologies should be defined, documented, maintained, and held accountable.

What OpenSource AI Reveals about Vendor AI

Open-source communities offer academic libraries a model of critical engagement as AI features are introduced into databases, discovery systems, and research platforms. At the Southern California Linux Expo (SCaLE), an annual Linux, open-source, and free software conference held in the Los Angeles area, AI is discussed within a community that has long examined how technical terms, standards, and responsibilities should be defined, documented, and sustained rather than simply assumed. Stefano Maffulli, former Executive Director of the Open Source Initiative (OSI) and a frequent speaker at SCaLE, advanced this discussion by examining how AI complicates established definitions of open-source software. In traditional open-source software, openness generally means that people could inspect, modify, and redistribute the source code. He states that an AI model is shaped not only by its code but also by its training data, parameter weights, hardware configuration, and deployment choices (Maffulli, 2023). For libraries, nuanced or inconsistent disclosure about these AI elements can create risk. The term “open” may imply transparency while still leaving libraries without enough clear information to understand how the system was developed, how it operates, or what limitations may affect its use. When vendor language remains open to interpretation, libraries may be left responsible for explaining and supporting claims they cannot confidently verify.

However, understandably, academic libraries cannot inspect proprietary AI systems in the same way that open-source communities can inspect source code, nor should librarians be expected to independently verify every technical component. They can, however, apply the same expectation that important claims should be clearly defined, supported by evidence, and documented. Libraries can ask vendors to explain terms such as “transparent,” “trusted,” “responsible,” and “research-ready” in accessible language; provide documentation appropriate for institutional review; identify known limitations;

explain how product changes will be communicated; and clarify what technical support and accountability will remain with the vendor after implementation. Libraries can also ask vendors to clarify what technical support and accountability will remain with them after implementation. Practical questions might include: What information will remain available after the product launches? Where will stable documentation be maintained if product pages, announcements, or support links change? What evidence supports the vendor's claims? Who governs the tool's use, and what protections exist for users? When vendors cannot provide sufficient answers, libraries can document those gaps and consider them when deciding whether they are prepared to adopt and support the product.

Therefore, Maffulli's concern about the instability of "open source" as a term in AI has relevance for vendor-embedded AI in academic libraries. In traditional open-source communities, shared principles generally preceded the licenses created to protect them; the ethos came before the product. In the current AI environment, workflow and announcements from vendors often appears reversed. Products are being released, licensed, and commercialized while expectations for openness, accountability, and responsibility are still developing. Academic libraries experience this reversal when AI features are added to existing platforms, new licensing terms are introduced, and products are marketed before the field has reached a shared understanding of what responsible vendor-supported AI should require.

When capital and competition move faster than shared norms and governance structures, adoption can become market-driven rather than principle-driven. Institutions may feel pressured to move quickly because innovation is framed as urgency. For academic libraries, pressure is significant. Libraries are not simply consumers of technology; they are stewards of access, explanation, and long-term resource decisions. If foundational expectations for openness and accountability are still being established, academic libraries should approach adoption

cautiously by participating actively in evaluation before making long-term commitments. For example, libraries can convene relevant stakeholders to assess a demonstration together, document concerns and desired changes, and ask the vendor to return with clearer information or a revised product before the library proceeds. An iterative process allows libraries to build AI literacy, define local principles, evaluate vendor claims, and assess potential impacts while there is still an opportunity to influence implementation.

The Most Valuable AI Investment May Not Be a Product for the Library

Libraries are in a unique position in the adoption and administration of AI technology. Professional experience in vendor evaluation, licensing negotiation, information literacy, and critical assessment of information systems collectively functions as an applied form of evaluative expertise that is deeply relevant to vendor-embedded AI tools. The continual repetition of concerns and conversations about AI can be tiring, and that fatigue can make it harder to build thoughtful evaluation practices. But moving slowly is not the same thing as refusing to move, and carefulness is not resistance to innovation. It is recognition that professional accountability requires clearer norms than the current market pace allows.

While the industry's appetite for endless AI expansion seems infinite, library budgets are not. The value proposition for any AI product must be genuinely convincing. If a discovery platform or database already under subscription introduces a chatbot feature, it is worth evaluating whether the library needs another chatbot before moving on to evaluating the tool's specific strengths and limitations. Taking a broader view that accounts for the entire technology ecosystem rather than evaluating each tool in isolation allows libraries to identify gaps and redundancies in a way that a single vendor demo cannot.

Libraries can also facilitate broader conversations by developing more awareness of open-source alternatives, highlighting

infrastructure implications, and pushing for greater transparency in pricing models, data privacy, and post-launch support. This does not mean every library must build its own AI tool or reject vendor products entirely. The more sustainable investment may be in the people, policies, and practices that allow libraries to evaluate AI with clarity. Staff training, shared guidelines, local expertise, decision documentation, and sustainable support structures give libraries a stronger position in campus and vendor conversations before money, staff time, and user trust are committed to another tool.

The same professional skills that lead library professionals to approach vendors with critical inquiry and thoughtful receptiveness also help libraries recognize where AI may offer meaningful value. Current evidence suggests that AI is often effective when applied to structured tasks that transform, extract, or organize existing information rather than generate new knowledge. For instance, Demers (2025) demonstrated the use of LLMs and semantic technologies to extract structured data from published literature for systematic reviews. Emerging agentic AI tools likewise have the potential to interact across platforms, reducing repetitive manual entry that increases the likelihood of human error and supporting more integrated workflows. Although these applications remain in an early stage of development, they are being explored for tasks such as scheduling automation and collection weeding (Oladokun, 2026). Libraries can use their purchasing power and evaluative expertise to encourage vendors to develop AI tools that address clearly identified research and library needs and demonstrate their value through specific, assessable, and accountable criteria (Alaga et al., 2024).

The most valuable investment a library can make in AI right now may not be a product at all. Staff training, dedicated expertise, and institutional capacity to experiment with and create local solutions will outlast many outsourced alternatives. Librarians and library workers who understand how these systems work as a more

lasting resource are than vendor tools controlled by external financial pressures. An in-between stance means refusing passive roles while remaining open to responsible experimentation. It means defining what the library needs, what the library expects, and what the library is willing to support before vendors, and campus pressures define those responsibilities for us.

Conclusion

Academic libraries contribute knowledge of research practices, source evaluation, information literacy, scholarly resources, and user needs after a tool becomes technically available. Our responsibility is not only to complete another rubric or watch another product demonstration or to be part of the AI conversation after the vendor has already shaped the feature, the timeline, or the terms of use. Our responsibility is to define what AI can meaningfully do for our users, whose research needs, access barriers, information practices, and support questions libraries evaluate every day. Therefore, Academic libraries should resist being positioned as passive recipients when it comes to opting into AI tools or features. Before endorsing, licensing, activating, or supporting AI-enabled features, libraries should ask what information our communities need, what problems the tool actually solves, what evidence supports vendor claims, and what conditions must be met for the tool to align with library values, user needs, and long-term resource responsibilities then demo until there is enough measurable return of investment.

AI directly affects core academic values that center originality, authorship, evidence, and the human voice. Students and faculty are already interacting with generative systems that raise new questions about intellectual labor, plagiarism, and the boundaries of research. In response, academic libraries will likely continue to participate in AI-enabled services that support campuswide strategic initiatives tied to student success, workforce development, and creative development. Participation, however, should not mean passive acceptance. Even when campus priorities or vendor roadmaps move ahead first,

libraries still need to respond with critical evaluation, measurable outcomes, and clear expectations for what these tools should do for users.

The most sustainable path is not simply to buy another AI product. Libraries need the capacity to decide how AI should be used, supported, explained, and revisited. That means defining local values, setting boundaries of use, clarifying privacy expectations, disclosing where AI is present, and naming who is accountable for updating guidance as tools change. It also means investing in staff training and shared confidence so that AI responsibility does not fall only on the few people who already understand the systems, licenses, platforms, or vendor relationships.

When capital and competition move faster than shared norms, adoption becomes market-driven rather than principle-driven. For academic libraries, this pressure is significant because libraries are not simply consumers of technology. Libraries are stewards of access, privacy, explanation, and long-term resource decisions. If vendors are already mapping out AI features for the platforms that libraries rely on, libraries should be more direct as teams, cohorts, or as part of professional communities about how the user wants to use AI responsibly.

Remaining critically in-between offers a more sustainable path. In a system like the CSU, a proactive approach could include shared vendor-evaluation guidelines, campus representation, required training, and local policies that clarify how AI tools should be assessed and supported. At the campus level, libraries should advocate for dedicated expertise, actionable training, and a living AI roadmap before investing heavily in AI products. Libraries need to push back when AI adoption focuses only on purchasing tools rather than building the knowledge, staffing, and evaluation practices needed to support those tools responsibly.

Optimism does not have to mean blind adoption. Libraries can acknowledge that many tools are still unpolished while remaining curious about how the technology may responsibly develop. A

hopeful and critical approach requires asking whether a tool genuinely advances the library's mission, whether its infrastructure aligns with library values, and whether the library is prepared to support the tool over time. Most importantly, an in-between stance affirms that libraries are not passive recipients of AI integration. The most sustainable approach is for academic libraries to participate actively as the field unfolds, integrating AI in ways that reflect library priorities, institutional values, and long-term accountability.

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Hiring in Academic Libraries: A Thematic Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Hiring practices in academic libraries play a significant role in shaping access to the profession. While progress has been made, literature reveals ongoing tensions between commitments to equity and the structures that govern recruitment and evaluation. This review synthesizes scholarship on academic librarian hiring, with attention to how experience requirements and evaluative norms can affect early-career, non-traditional, and underrepresented candidates. Across the literature, prior academic library experience emerges as the strongest predictor of job attainment, even for entry-level positions. Research expectations at the point of hire, particularly for tenure-track positions, can disadvantage candidates without early access to scholarly opportunities. Studies also highlight the emotional labor brought on by the academic job search, as well as the role of subjective criteria such as “fit,” in reinforcing barriers to hiring. Collectively, this body of research points to a tendency in hiring practices to prioritize familiarity with academic norms and institutional culture over transferable skills and potential for growth. This review argues that academic libraries should continue working toward more transparent and intentional hiring practices that reflect the profession’s commitment to equity. The literature base for this review was compiled in collaboration with a colleague, and the author acknowledges the absence of an independently conducted search protocol as a limitation.

Keywords: Academic libraries, hiring practices, equity in hiring, academic librarianship, experience requirements, entry-level librarians, emotional labor

Article Type: Case study

Introduction

When I interviewed for my current position, it was my first encounter with academic hiring. I quickly noticed my unfamiliarity with academic culture, faculty expectations, and scholarly language—and realized that starting a career in academic librarianship would feel like reading a book with the first few chapters missing. My background was mostly in non-library work, with a brief time in a public-facing library role. I was a non-traditional student and came into academic librarianship without prior academic library

experience or the preprofessional work history that many job postings may assume. Although I secured a position soon after completing my MLIS degree, the process of job-seeking was marked by uncertainty, self-doubt, and a sense of disconnect between my professional experience, personal background, and what I believed an “ideal” academic librarian candidate should be. These feelings were not unique, nor were they simply my own personal insecurities. Navigating the interview process and my first year in an academic library sparked an interest in the hiring process of this field, particularly research that examines who is considered

qualified, how readiness is assessed, and which candidates are advantaged or left out.

This literature review synthesizes scholarship on academic librarian hiring, with attention to early-career, non-traditional, and underrepresented candidates. For this review, the term “non-traditional” refers to candidates who came to academic librarianship from outside the field, without prior academic library experience, or via career paths that differ from the linear, academically oriented routes that hiring norms tend to favor. Rather than offering job search advice, this review focuses on how hiring structures, expectations, and evaluative norms shape access to academic librarianship and contribute to ongoing inequities.

The author acknowledges a limitation of this review: the literature base was compiled by a colleague, with additional sources suggested by anonymous peer reviewers, rather than through an independently conducted systematic search. While this provided a broad foundation, it means the review cannot claim to be comprehensive or fully reproducible. Future work in this area would benefit from a documented search protocol.

Experience, Preparedness, and the “Ideal Candidate”

A consistent theme in the literature is the central role of prior academic library experience in determining hiring outcomes, even for entry-level positions. Cunningham and Ruffin (2015) identify a disconnect between library and information science (LIS) education and employer expectations, finding that candidates with professional experience are more likely to secure academic library positions than those whose preparation consisted primarily of their studies. This creates a circular barrier in which experience is required to get experience, limiting access for new graduates and those coming from other areas of librarianship.

Empirical studies reinforce this pattern. Eckard et al. (2014) and Reed et al. (2015) found that prior academic library work, professional engagement, and early application timing were the strongest

predictors of job search success, while GPA, coursework, and technical skills played a minor role. Additional studies echo these findings, showing that pre-professional academic library employment, internships, and early entry into the academic job market are associated with successful outcomes (Iglesias et al., 2023; Iglesias, Mahama, & Gard, 2024).

Conversely, experience gained in public, school, or special libraries may be seen as less relevant or even detrimental when pursuing academic positions. Iglesias et al. (2023) and Iglesias, Mahama, and Gard (2024) both find negative associations between non-academic library experience and academic job attainment, suggesting that academic librarianship is often treated as a separate and restricted career track. This dynamic gives advantage to linear, academically oriented backgrounds and marginalizes candidates with transferable skills that were developed elsewhere.

Research Expectations and the Early-Career and Non-traditional Candidates

Closely tied to experience expectations is the assumption that candidates for tenure-track academic librarian positions already have a defined research agenda at the time of hire. While some literature does not explicitly highlight this expectation, Eckard et al. (2014) argue that it is embedded in hiring criteria that reward prior publishing, conference participation, and research activity.

For early-career and non-traditional candidates, this expectation may function as a barrier rather than a measure of potential. Candidates who have not yet had the opportunity to engage in research-intensive roles may be evaluated against standards more appropriate for mid-career scholars. This assumption[JS1.1][AB1.2] risks mistaking prior access to opportunity for innate ability, especially when institutional support for research development varies widely (Cunningham & Ruffin, 2015).

Allowing space for research agendas to develop after hire—when they can be shaped by

institutional priorities, mentoring, and professional growth—may broaden access to academic librarianship while still meeting faculty research and organizational needs. However, this possibility remains underexplored in the literature and would benefit from further attention.

Emotional Labor and the Job Search Experience

The academic library job search imposes significant emotional labor on candidates. Burns and Fargo (2019) identify anxiety, stress, frustration, and exhaustion as defining features of early-career librarians' experiences. Their findings highlight the tension between optimistic narratives promoted by LIS programs and professional organizations and the realities of a competitive and uncertain job market.

Candidate-focused studies of the interview process further illustrate these emotional demands. Houk and Nielsen (2023a) document how on-site interviews can be the most stressful aspects of the process, particularly unstructured social components such as mealtimes. Candidates reported feeling pressure to perform professionalism, confidence, and cultural fluency, even when those expectations are not clearly stated. Arch and Gilman (2021) similarly argue that informal and social elements of interviews give advantages to candidates familiar with dominant cultural norms and disadvantage those from underrepresented backgrounds. Rather than assessing job-related competencies, these interactions often reward candidates who can perform expected academic identities.

This literature suggests that hiring processes evaluate not only technical competence, but also emotional regulation and social performance. For candidates unfamiliar with academic norms or faculty culture, this emotional burden may be especially pronounced.

Hiring Practices, Structural Barriers, and “Fit”

A growing body of research critiques the hiring practices themselves, particularly reliance on subjective criteria such as “fit.” In the context of academic library hiring, “fit” is often used by search committees to describe how well a candidate aligns with the perceived culture, values, or norms of an organization, yet it is rarely defined in job postings or evaluation rubrics. Gasper and Brown (2015) examined how one hiring group revised their hiring practice to better evaluate fit, arguing that hiring for fit does not necessarily hinder diversity. Cunningham et al. (2019), however, observe that organizational fit “allows for libraries to stay within their comfort zones and replicate the status quo” (p. 17), favoring candidates whose identities and professional background align with the dominant institutional norms.

Research on hiring committees echoes these concerns. Houk and Nielsen (2023b) find that a lack of intentionality in interview design and evaluation allows undefined notions of fit to introduce bias and inconsistency. Lopez (2022) further critiques recruitment practices that assume candidates' familiarity with academic culture and frames these assumptions as signs of broader institutional dysfunction.

Barriers also emerge earlier in the process, through job postings and application requirements. Hernandez (2023) writes that vague qualifications, extensive documentation requirements, and lack of salary transparency discourage candidates from applying, and disproportionately affect BIPOC applicants. These decisions shape applicant pools before interviews even occur. Manwiller et al. (2024) extend this analysis through a Universal Design framework, arguing that job postings can themselves function as barriers for candidates with disabilities when they include unnecessary qualifications, difficult-to-navigate formatting, or omit critical information such as salary ranges, benefits, and health care options. Together, these bodies of work suggest that decisions made at the earliest stages of the hiring process can shape who feels welcome to apply.

Inequities in Access, Identity, and Career Pathways

Several studies examine how identity and access influence hiring outcomes. Iglesias and Gard (2023) identify gender-based differences in job attainment timelines, with cisgender men obtaining academic librarian positions more quickly than cisgender women. While the authors note the need for further research, these findings align with broader literature on gendered leadership norms within librarianship. Despite librarianship being a field predominantly composed of women, women are not proportionally represented in leadership positions (Olin & Millet, 2015). This suggests that gender-based hiring advantages may affect not only who is hired, but how quickly and at what level candidates enter academic library careers.

Iglesias et al. (2024) and Cunningham and Ruffin (2015) show that academic librarianship is not equally accessible from all professional backgrounds. Candidates who begin their careers outside academic libraries may face compounded disadvantages, even when they have relevant and transferable skills and experience (Iglesias et al., 2023). This reinforces the perception of academic librarianship as a closed system rather than a profession open to newcomers.

Research extends these concerns to other marginalized populations. Adolpho et al. (2024) explore the experiences of trans and gender diverse people navigating library hiring, identifying barriers related to disclosure, identity documentation, and hostile workplace cultures. Betz (2022) and Manwiller et al. (2024) document the challenges faced by candidates with disabilities, including inaccessible application processes, lack of accommodation transparency, and bias during interviews. Together, these studies show that barriers to academic library hiring are not uniform and are shaped by the intersection of multiple identities and circumstances.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional disruptions to academic library hiring, including

hiring freezes, shifts to virtual interview formats, and increased uncertainty for early-career candidates (Quinn, 2023; Fletcher et al., 2025). While some of these changes may have reduced barriers—such as reducing costs associated with in-person interviews by introducing hybrid or virtual interviews—others created new forms of inequity, such as disadvantaging candidates without reliable access to technology. Additionally, the pandemic appeared to strengthen the tendency to hire candidates with already-established ties to the local region (Quinn, 2023).

Conclusion

The literature on hiring in academic libraries reveals a profession shaped by limited definitions of experience, preparedness, and professional legitimacy. While individual candidates may succeed despite these constraints, the cumulative effect of current hiring practices favors those with early access to academic environments, institutional knowledge, and professional networks. Addressing these issues requires academic libraries to re-examine and they recruit, evaluate, and develop new faculty.

For early-career and non-traditional candidates, expectations surrounding experience, research readiness, and cultural fit may function as barriers rather than indicators of potential or transferable skills. Greater transparency and intentionality in hiring practices could expand access to academic librarianship while strengthening the profession by adding new perspectives to the candidate pool. Kung et al. (2020) offer a starting point, with actionable recommendations that include clarifying program goals, building in ways to assess program success, diversifying recruitment plans, and creating pathways for mid- to late-career librarians. Incorporating these frameworks into practice could be a meaningful step toward aligning hiring processes with professional commitments to equity and inclusion.

Future research could examine how hiring expectations are constructed within academic

libraries. Empirical work is particularly needed on research expectations at the point of hire for tenure-track librarians. While prior studies document the importance of experience and professional engagement, few examine how research productivity is evaluated for early-career candidates or how search committees distinguish between demonstrated potential and prior access to opportunity. Comparative studies across institutions could reveal how variations in mentoring, workload allocation, and research support shape both hiring decisions and long-term success.

Additionally, mixed-methods research could help clarify how hiring practices influence retention, professional development, and career paths over time. Following early-career librarians, especially those that are non-traditional, from application through post-hire development could help determine whether current hiring criteria accurately predict job performance, research engagement, or institutional fit. Practitioner-led research that centers the perspectives of candidates and search committee members from marginalized backgrounds could support the development of more equitable and transparent hiring models. This work would extend the existing literature and provide actionable recommendations for academic libraries to better align recruitment practices with their commitments to equity and inclusion.

Despite the barriers outlined in this review, the literature also reflects meaningful progress toward more inclusive hiring practices in academic libraries, evidenced in part by the fact that this body of literature now exists. Efforts to standardize job postings, increase salary transparency, and develop structured interview protocols are concrete steps toward reducing the influence of subjective evaluation like “fit” (Hernandez, 2023; Houk & Nielson, 2023b). Broader professional conversations about equity and diversity in librarianship, reflected in initiatives from the American Library Association and the Association of College and Research Libraries, have contributed to growing awareness of how hiring practices shape the profession. Understanding this path matters:

recognizing where progress has been made, and under what conditions that progress occurred, can inform how future changes are designed for lasting impact.

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Book Reviews

Billey, A., Nelson, E., & Uhl, R. (Eds.). (2024). Inclusive cataloging: Histories, context, and reparative approaches. ALA Editions.

Inclusive Cataloging: Histories, Context, and Reparative Approaches reexamines cataloging, which has often been perceived as a technical and impersonal activity since the advent of Machine-Readable-Cataloging (MARC), as a practice rooted in social and historical contexts that reflects human thought and values. For this reviewer, who has ten years of experience as a school librarian in Japan and is currently enrolled in an ALA-accredited MLIS program in the United States, this book provides an opportunity to reconsider the significance of cataloging from a transnational perspective. While this reviewer previously understood "creative cataloging" in Japan as the inclusive and flexible application of existing classifications to meet student-centered needs, studying in the United States and engaging with this volume highlighted both the structural depth and social justice implications of such efforts.

The book comprises twenty-eight chapters, divided into two sections. The first section, "History and Theory," explores pioneering practices by BIPOC (Black, indigenous, and People of Color) librarians, accessibility, the relationship between language and power, gendered information, and the theoretical and historical foundations of inclusive cataloging. Together, these chapters provide a comprehensive discussion of the principles and societal significance of inclusive cataloging. The second section, "Case Studies", presents nineteen examples from public, academic, and research libraries, illustrating concrete applications such as revising Library of Congress

Subject Headings (LCSH) headings and other controlled vocabularies. By combining theoretical discussion with practical examples, the book allows readers to understand how inclusive cataloging is implemented in real-world contexts.

The urgency of vocabulary revision becomes particularly apparent when contrasted with this reviewer's experience in Japan. Because Japan has historically viewed itself as a homogeneous nation, differences in race or sexual orientation have rarely become central political issues. Consequently, specific terminology is seldom recognized as a site of rights claims that directly affect the dignity or even the survival of marginalized groups. Living as an outsider in the United States, this reviewer was able to confront the tangible implications of terms such as "illegal aliens" in LCSH and trace their transformation from discriminatory language to socially redefined headings. In this way, the practices described in the book emerge from contexts where language is intimately connected to social and political realities, offering profound insights into the power of cataloging to influence society.

The book also addresses structural challenges, noting that automation and established systems such as MARC can perpetuate historical biases. Because descriptive systems can never be entirely value- neutral, catalogers are called to act as agents actively responding to social injustice. In alignment with the American Library Association's (ALA) DEI policies (American Library Association [ALA], n.d.), the book acknowledges the practical disruptions and ongoing revisions inherent in updating vocabulary, yet it also clearly demonstrating the potential of inclusive cataloging to reshape society through language.

Ultimately, this volume is a highly insightful book that reveals social injustices embedded in American society through the lens of cataloging. For an international librarian, engaging in efforts to change social realities through bibliographic work offered a renewed understanding of the claim that libraries are not neutral. This book is recommended not only for those with an interest in cataloging but also for anyone committed to social justice, as it provides a clear account of how choices in vocabulary and classification constitute ethical engagement with society.

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*Reviewed by Aya Nakata, Graduate Student,
Texas Woman's University.*

Aikin, J. (2025). *The Library of Congress: From Jefferson's Vision to the Digital Age*. Georgetown University Press.

The Library of Congress: From Jefferson's Vision to the Digital Age develops a narrative surrounding one of the largest and most influential cultural institutions in the field of Library Science. This 10-chapter volume documents the Library of Congress' (LC) humble beginnings as a resource for Congress during the establishment of Washington D.C. to its leading role in librarianship worldwide. In short, well-organized sections, this volume serves as the ultimate reference source for the history of the field of librarianship through an American political lens. Librarians from all disciplines can find the relevant history behind many of the decisions still shaping the field to this day.

Despite the original five-thousand-dollar appropriation to purchase books for Congress, overtime, the scope of Library's responsibilities grew (p. 3). In extending privileges to Supreme

Court justices (p. 10) and other members of the government, the LC's services took on a new role: supplying the nation with information. In his tenure as Librarian of Congress, Ainsworth Rand Spofford pushed for his vision of a "national library" (p. 43) to promote democracy and learning throughout the nation. In the following years, Spofford and the following Librarians of Congress worked to achieve just that. By instituting the Copyright Act as well as offering additional services, the LC stretched its constituency beyond Congress to the American public and the library community. Under the leadership of Herbert Putnam, the LC began selling catalog cards, acting as one of the first institutions to offer cataloging services to smaller libraries. Putnam pioneered the idea that the LC, and by extension all libraries, should be a "provider of services rather than merely a storehouse for books" (p. 69).

In providing the history of the Library of Congress, readers also experience the history of our nation through the lens of librarianship. In the early years, the collection was greatly affected by the burning of Washington D.C. during the War of 1812 (p. 13) and funding shortages in times of economic hardship. At many of the nation's most tragic and unstable moments, the LC provided information and research to help the nation. For instance, during World War I, military authorities often requested information on gases and explosives as part of their war efforts (p. 83). Even after the Kennedy assassination, Jackie Kennedy asked for information about Lincoln's funeral causing LC staff to work around the clock pouring through Lincoln's personal papers to answer her questions.

Not without its controversies, this history does not shy away from addressing the library's professional and academic issues over the years, many of which reflect the challenges librarians still face. Concerns about the controversial topics in library collections are , with the initial purchase of still a persistent issue, but during its acquisition, Jefferson's personal library was criticized by Federalists in their time as an "effort to bankrupt the Treasury, beggar the people, and disgrace the nation" because

Jefferson's collection promoted "atheism, immorality, [and] effete intellectualism". The controversial decision to honor the poetry of Ezra Pound with the Bollingen Prize in 1948 highlighted the issues of endorsement of materials by the library. Even the appointment of non-librarian Archibald MacLeish to the position of Librarian of Congress demonstrates the questioning of the library field itself. The book also confronts the Library's issues in its hiring diversity in the 1970s while highlighting the contributions of early staff members such as John Francis Nicholas Wilkinson, the first Black employee at the LC. (p. 170, p. 61). Beginning in 1857, Wilkinson worked his way to Assistant Librarian of the Law Library, opening doors for a more diverse staff including the hiring of the first female staff member, Bessie A. Dwyer in 1893 (p. 62).

In examining the evolving visions and goals of the LC, Aikin truly argues for the ongoing need for a diverse and comprehensive national information repository in order to serve our nation in a productive way. In an age of anti-intellectualism and library defunding, Aikin's work offers a retrospective on library history full of progress and development, often centered around individuals who work hard to make their voices heard, making it an inspiring read for librarians in various disciplines. This book is truly a love letter to the library, the people who have made our field what it is, and the progress we still have to make.

*Kathryn Milschewki, Graduate Student,
University of Wisconsin Milwaukee.*