Seven Strategies to Turn Academic Libraries into Social Organisations

Sheila Corrall,
former Professor of Library & Information Science,
University of Pittsburgh, USA

The service model for academic libraries has changed, but there is more work to do. This is not about the digital shift dominating the conversation in higher ed. It is about the important social shift happening in tandem, part of the larger turn towards participatory culture in the network society where, as socialist Manuel Castells defined, “the key social structures and activities are organised around electronically processed information networks”[1].

Libraries have supported institutional initiatives in widening access, public engagement, academic entrepreneurship, lifewide learning[2] and student wellbeing. They have become campus champions for open research and decolonising the curriculum. But to secure their future on campus they must switch from a transactional to a relational model of librarianship.

New ways of working need new tools for thinking. The new book I co-edited with Tim Schlak and Paul Bracke, *The Social Future of Academic Libraries: New Perspectives on Communities, Networks and Engagement*, uses state-of-the-art surveys, conceptual introductions and real-world cases to show how intellectual capital concepts and social network theory can supply the strategic framework needed for organisational transformation in academic libraries[3].

Here are seven thought starters gleaned from our research.

1. **Revisit your guiding principles and explain your commitment to values-based practice**

Most library values have an enduring quality. Some like access and integrity have acquired stronger resonance in the changing scholarly landscape. Others have ongoing relevance, but are being expressed differently to reflect current concerns: adding sustainability to stewardship; extending diversity, equity and inclusion to promote belonging; and complementing access with agency. A key move in recent statements is the shift towards agentic and communal values, such as community, participation, collaboration and partnership. Consider how to present your values. The University of Arizona Libraries website does this effectively with a nice graphic highlighting five core values, linked to a poster explaining what they mean[4].
2. **Put partnership front and centre in your vision, mission and strategy**

Outward-facing university libraries (like those at the universities of Lancaster[5], Leeds[6] and Manchester[7]) have made a public commitment to partnership in multi-layered strategic statements setting out their vision, mission, priorities and plans. Phrases such as ‘horizontal and vertical collaboration’, ‘collaborating across silos’, ‘cross-sectoral partnerships’, ‘deeper partnership’, ‘connected connectors’, ‘collaborative spirit’ and ‘cultural shift’ signal their intentions to forge partnerships and their commitment to community.

3. **Evaluate your service style and assess your progress towards democratic professionalism**

Participative managers, transformational leaders, student-centred teachers, engaging liaisons and embedded librarians are shifting the style of academic librarianship towards a democratic relational model of task-sharing, knowledge-sharing and power-sharing. Crowdsourcing, datalabs and decolonisation demonstrate librarians can partner successfully with citizens, researchers and students. But for the social shift to become embedded, the whole library must accept collaboration as the norm for everything from strategy making and service design, to backroom activities and frontline services. Transactions are necessary for library use and self-service saves time, but people often want more than a brief encounter, especially first-timers feeling anxious or alienated in a large scholarly institution.

4. **Assign roles and responsibilities for developing and managing your library relationships**

Librarians have so many internal, external, local, regional, national and international alliances, associations, coalitions, consortia, federations and other networks that they are finding it hard to track all their resource-sharing, service-sharing and system-sharing partnerships. Understanding the breadth and depth of sharing relationships is crucial for managing sustainability. Partnership managers and teams in institutions typically provide central coordination of external linkages, but libraries also have multiple internal connections on campus with partnership potential. Social network theory tells us people acting as liaisons between different groups are vital for building bridges and brokering relationships by sharing and synthesising interests, problems, practices and ideas. Collaborative libraries are extending their liaison programmes beyond academic departments to campus units that provide academic skills, careers advice, disability support, international activities, residential life or student well-being in addition to teaching centres and research offices.

5. **Organise your space, content and people with collaborative working in mind**

Libraries are repurposing physical and digital spaces to facilitate interdisciplinary and multiprofessional research and learning. Some librarians have co-designed community archives and content portals to support institutional partnerships, knowledge exchange and citizen scholarship. The big issue, however, is in positioning information professionals as essential partners in academic activities. The traditional model distributes subject-based teams focused on areas such as the arts, social sciences, health or engineering and physical sciences, across campus to embed resources in courses and projects.
Alternative arrangements consolidate technical expertise in groups of functional specialists covering areas like data management, digital humanities, open access and research impact or instructional design and learning technology. While these functional structures have increased the visibility of library competence and strengthened connections with central services, the enduring relationships of subject liaisons can create shared value by connecting functional specialists with academic colleagues and mediating disciplinary practices in research projects. Structures and cultures that combine, blend and remix subject and technical know-how at points of need in the scholarly lifecycle, can empower librarians to advance from legitimate peripheral participants to trusted project partners.

6. Redesign your systems, processes and workflows to support a social future

We found three critical areas where improved frameworks, tools or methods could assist the transition from transactional to relational working: library assessment, knowledge management and team collaboration. Reframing the whole library as a relational service makes assessing relationships the priority. Library leaders are debating how to evaluate and reward the invisible work of relationship building. Evaluation frameworks based on social capital concepts can offer a nuanced appraisal. For example, Virginia Tech Libraries used social network analysis to investigate the intensity, multiplexity and reciprocity of student relationships in different studio spaces. Others are using customer relationship management tools or library engagement platforms to document interactions with faculty, share knowledge within subject teams and uncover opportunities for deeper connections. Exchanging knowledge across library teams and with other professional services is necessary to join up and integrate interventions involving subject and functional specialists.

7. Acknowledge relationship building as a threshold competence for the whole library

Collaborative relationships demand more than ‘soft’ personal and social skills. A culture of collaboration requires shared understanding that working with others has evolved from service and consultancy to teamwork and partnership, within and beyond libraries. People need to know how connections and continuous interactions build the trust necessary for durable networks. The capacity to develop relationships is a prerequisite for turning academic libraries into network organisations with a social purpose. Motivating staff to invest in connections requires a shared vision of a relational service model.

Academic libraries are relationship-based institutions, morphing into social organisations that are connected to networks and groups on and off campus as collective collectors and connected connectors. Collaboration is the go-to work mode for onsite and online activities, but the shift from service to partnership demands holistic change to align organisational culture and capability with strategy, structure and systems.

References

2. Lifewide Education. https://www.lifewideeducation.uk/


