

Libraries as Partners in Community Engagement at Urban and Metropolitan Universities

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Institutional change is a way of life in higher education. Public universities are under increased scrutiny with the need to demonstrate relevance, cost efficiencies, and stronger student success/completion rates. Urban and metropolitan universities face these same expectations, in addition to additional challenges and opportunities for increased engagement/collaboration with external communities.

Correspondingly academic libraries must increasingly demonstrate their value to their campuses and communities. Libraries need to proactively model their services effectively to serve students, faculty, and community users. In an online information world, libraries deliver knowledge services for learning and research virtually 24/7 to homes, classrooms, and offices, while also providing inviting technology-rich campus “learning common” library spaces.

Despite today’s bring your own device (BYOD) mobile technology world, students and other campus constituents seek places such as the library where they can gather for study, research collaboration, and solitude with inviting architecture space, appropriate technology tools, and conveniences, such as café food and coffee. Libraries continue to provide an important “third place” for members of the campus community to meet and work together, while also taking their services outside the library walls to library users wherever they may be.

While providing research services and physical infrastructure for students and faculty, academic libraries at urban and metropolitan universities also collaborate with their external communities in an increasing ways. The urban university is in tune with the quality of life issues and applied research needs of the geographic area in which the university serves. Community engagement and civic learning have become essential for the success of the urban campus, and by extension, so have the community initiatives of urban academic libraries.

The academic library not only serves students and faculty, but also community patrons who live and work closely to the university within the same city and region. By definition, an urban campus has a dense population in near proximity to the campus. The economic challenges and quality of life needs of urban communities and their regions are real. Students attending the university reflect these needs, and these needs impact their chances for success at the university. Urban campus students are likely to remain in the same city or region after the graduate. It is important that part of a

student's education focuses on service learning and engagement activities pertaining to the challenges of urban life. Throughout their career, a college graduate will have the tools to make a difference in their neighborhood and community. This is one aspect of pursuing a career and making that living wage that they aspired to through their educational pursuits. An essential academic unit, the university library assists with research and information literacy goals, but it is also a support unit that serves to make the campus visible in the community, while also serving well its students and faculty.

This special issue of *Metropolitan Universities* provides numerous examples of community engagement that have been initiated by academic libraries in collaboration with their partners. Dole and Hill provide an overview of the services that CUMU member libraries provide to local community members. Rolloff provides an example of how an academic library service and new library building was conceived and built from the ground up, providing an academic library and public library co-existing on campus in the middle of the city. Liebst and Feinmark look at how a university and public library partner provided access to rich sources of local and regional history. Sandberg, Morris, and Sutherland provide examples of how libraries not only provide information resources, but also demographic data and electronic maps that effectively visualize community information and data. Smith examines how the library assists the campus in creating dual credit opportunities for urban high school students, providing a jumpstart on what it is like to experience college and the library's resources, hopefully increasing enrollment in college after high school. Cox describes how one library provides computer literacy skills to area homeless persons. Neujahr, Hillyer, and Cast-Brede discuss how libraries can assist with service learning, combining theory of the classroom and the library with experiential and reflective learning—all part of the same course. Chao et al. show how an academic library developed an international partnership that provided cross-cultural learning experiences for librarians.

In addition to the detailed examples of metropolitan academic library community engagement activities contained within this special issue, there is not space to include examples of other avenues for involvement. These additional areas include:

- Advocating for appropriate intellectual freedom, privacy, and transparency policies concerning information and publications (recorded knowledge)
- Partnering to provide data demographics and information to support community development and economic (re)development
- Helping patrons with career exploration, job-seeking, and resume creation
- Providing information literacy support for distance learning and dual credit courses offered in schools and the community
- Reaching nontraditional and multicultural populations with library services

- Partnering with campus efforts to support metropolitan or regional initiatives in improving sustainability, quality of life, and urban environmental health;
- Providing grant-seeking databases to help community patrons seek funding resources for their nonprofit organizations or small businesses
- Assisting the campus in creating relationships with K–12 schools and with seniors groups (through adult education and learning)
- Spearheading efforts to teach “digital literacy” and help erase “digital divides”
- Providing information resources for the reflection on service-learning and experiential learning courses

Because libraries are about the dissemination of information, supporting outside-of-class learning environments, and encouraging all aspects of scholarly research, there are myriads of ways an academic library can reinvent itself through the bringing together of student learners, faculty instructors/researchers, community partners, and scholarly information resources.

The American Library Association along with others have published a few books in the last decade or so about the topic of community engagement and outreach originated from librarians and libraries. These titles indicate a growing awareness of the role academic libraries can play in public and civic involvements. Here are some of those works:

- *Academic Library Outreach: Beyond the Campus Walls*, by Nancy Courtney (Libraries Unlimited, 2009).
- *Advocacy, Outreach, and the Nation’s Academic Libraries: A Call to Action*, by William C. Welburn (ACRL, 2010).
- *Atlas of New Librarianship*, by R. David Lankes (MIT Press, 2011).
- *From Outreach to Equity: Innovative Models of Library Policy and Practice*, by Robin Osbourne (ALA, 2004).
- *Libraries as Community Partners*, by Carol Smallwood (ALA, 2010).
- *Library as Place: History, Community, and Culture*, by John E. Buschman (Libraries Unlimited, 2007).
- *Library Services for Multicultural Patrons: Strategies to Encourage Library Use*, by Carol Smallwood (Scarecrow, 2013).

- *Outreach Services in Academic and Special Libraries*, by Paul Kelsey (Haworth, 2003).
- *A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building*, by Kathleen de la Paula McCook (ALA, 2000).
- *Public Engagement*, by Scott Walter (Association of Research Libraries, 2009).

This issue special of *Metropolitan Universities* provides examples of the creativity of librarians to serve the public good, within a fast changing swirling environment that is higher education these days. One common theme of the engagement examples described in this issue is that in order to provide these services, there is need for librarians to be proactive and take information services beyond the library walls (that is, to embed themselves in the community, classrooms, offices, and student hangouts). It is exciting that in these examples, the library space is also being re-created as informed by the experiences librarians are discovering within the community.

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