Empowerment, Experimentation, Engagement: Embracing Partnership Models in Libraries

What relationship do we want learners to have with their library? This is an essential question for those of us who work as library faculty and staff in higher education. As the information landscape becomes increasingly diverse, complex, and digital, we need to consider the different roles that libraries are embracing. From makerspaces and digital scholarship centers to open-access initiatives, digital library projects, and literacy education, academic and research libraries are engaging with communities in ways like never before.

Just as the physical and virtual environments of libraries continue to evolve, so too does their service philosophy. Intellectual empowerment remains a sustaining value, but how we approach this mission is changing. Historically, libraries have been rooted in a transactional model, one in which library faculty and staff provide access to content and tools and offer assistance to library patrons. Although these responsibilities and our expertise in acquiring, navigating, and evaluating information remain in demand, we are also taking on more active roles as scholarly collaborators, co-teachers, co-PIs, and consultants. We are increasingly being sought out to provide the insights and infrastructure that can empower people to create, share, curate, and reflect on their learning. As a result, libraries are shifting from a transactional model to partnership models.

As this effort evolves, our attention moves beyond purchasing, licensing, and providing access to collections and encompasses a greater emphasis on content that students and faculty generate themselves. Libraries are repositioning themselves as laboratories for exploration, incubators for ideas, and essential collaborators across the teaching, learning, and research enterprises. Our own institution, Virginia Tech Libraries, offers a few examples of this transformation:

- **Digital and Information Literacies.** If, as the media literacy educator Renee Hobbs has stated, “literacy is the sharing of meaning through symbols,” what is the library’s role in promoting and empowering learners across the spectrum of digital and information literacies? As our society and culture increasingly use symbols as formal modes of communication, how should we shepherd the development of these literacies across our specific learning contexts? Over the past year, we have been working on the creation of a digital literacy framework that provides a structure for addressing these questions. The framework identifies a set of core competencies for a digitally literate citizen, as well as the values that learners should strive to personify through practice as they engage in both digital and physical contexts. One initiative that has emerged from our digital literacy efforts is the ePortfolios program. Libraries leading an e-portfolio initiative provide unique opportunities to explore the intersection between teaching digital and information literacies through both the pedagogical and the technological lens. While this is a new service area for libraries, it offers unprecedented opportunities for connecting higher-order learning to technology initiatives across campus units, while becoming deeply embedded in student success initiatives at the ground level. E-portfolio work also aligns nicely with typical library values such as openness, curation, preservation of student work, and the idea of library as platform.

- **High-Impact Practices (“HIP”) Librarians.** To encourage a high level of personal connection, we are piloting a liaison model that embeds library faculty within collaborative, interdisciplinary teams that are organized around the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) High-Impact Educational Practices. These librarians are exploring new liaison models based on partnerships in undergraduate research, service learning, first-year experiences, and our living-learning communities (LLCs). Their engagement ranges from leading a student showcase event at an experiential learning conference and developing a customized undergraduate advising system to assisting the Office of Undergraduate Research in designing and implementing the Undergraduate Research Excellence Program. As the relationship among library, campus, and student leaders has grown, so has the complexity and responsibility of the work. By allowing HIP librarians time and space to explore significant and often undefined collaborations, we are discovering that libraries are uniquely situated to provide infrastructure and insight for campus programs that are emerging or currently underserved. In this way, HIP librarians operate as community builders and campus partners within rapidly changing service models.
**Studies.** If, as the designer Chris Flink has claimed, “space is the ‘body language’ of an organization,” what do the library spaces say about the culture and priorities of the campus? How do they reflect and condition user experience? Over the past two years, we have created a network of studios—spaces that frame the library as a creative partner by encouraging both peer-driven collaboration and engagement with emerging technologies. These spaces range from media production to data visualization. Each studio has a distinct focus, yet all embrace a service-design approach to the creation of new learning environments in the library. That is, fostering service models in which students can build new skills, tackle real-world problems, and hone creativity is considered just as important as providing access to information collections or teaching digital literacy skills. In the 3D Design Studio, for example, we have seen veterinary medicine students who entered the studio as 3D printing novices go on, with our guidance, to create complex and innovative medical models. In our Fusion Studio, a space designed specifically for teams of undergraduate researchers, students are provided with workshops on interdisciplinary communication as part of their access to the studio so that they can more effectively engage in projects across multiple fields. The studios are themselves prototypes: iterative, adaptive, and flexible enough in their service models to meet the evolving needs of users. Their purpose is to nurture and amplify connections among students, technology, and ideas. The library, situated at the intersection of these three strands, is ideally suited to partner in such endeavors.

**Exhibits and Programs.** Our Course Exhibit Initiative (CEI) transforms course projects into interactive exhibits. These exhibits are true collaborations: students and faculty work alongside the CEI curator to conceptualize and, in many cases, build the exhibits. The exhibits allow students to **materialize** course assignments in powerful and unexpected ways, either by presenting their work within new contexts or by framing the assignments themselves. The process of creating an exhibit often provokes questions that are difficult to raise—or answer—with the traditional context of the classroom. A recent exhibit from an undergraduate English course, for example, featured special collections archival documents on 1960s spaceflight coupled with student poetry, mixed media, and critical reflections on the primary source materials. To design the exhibit, students had to consider their own work in relation to both the collections and the audience engaging with the exhibit. Similarly, the Active Learning Curation Program, which showcases innovative teaching methods at Virginia Tech, encourages our entire academic community to reflect on the processes of teaching and learning. Often digital in format and featuring observations and interviews with students and faculty, the exhibits consider the content of courses less than how students might steer their own learning via active learning pedagogies. Again, through these initiatives, the library is increasingly seen as a dynamic educational partner, a co-creator in learning as much as a repository, physical or virtual, of information.

These examples illustrate how we are reimagining the relationship that students and faculty form with their libraries. As colleges and universities are rethinking the role of libraries, we feel this is a critical time to experiment with new engagement models that empower—not just support—teaching and learning. How do we do this?

To start, we embrace the conflicting notion that although more content is being published and more interactions are occurring online, there is an ever-greater need for personalized, face-to-face consultation. We know that just because something is digital, that doesn’t mean it is intuitive. We strive to enable library users to ask for help and anticipate social, cultural, and technical challenges. Developing service models that focus on lowering the barriers to entry and reducing fear and anxiety is a top priority, as is also creating models that provide assistance to traditionally underfunded or structurally challenged groups.

Second, taking the long view, we invest in the student lifecycle. We adopt a holistic outlook, pinpointing key engagement opportunities across the curriculum and co-curricular endeavors. Libraries are well positioned to interact at an introductory level and to then scale with individuals and morph as their needs, capabilities, and aspirations grow.

So, to return to the question that started this article: What relationship do we want learners to have with their library? One that is grounded in dynamic, interdependent partnerships. One that propels ideas forward and posits the library not just as a place where learning happens but as an institution that transcends its walls. And hopefully a relationship in which all learners feel included in a community, backed by a support network that addresses their unique needs. In this way, as learners progress through their academic journey, the relationship grows from libraries providing transactional services to learners, to partnering with them, to transforming not only what they can do but also what we do as library faculty and staff.

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**Notes**


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