

Academic Libraries as Hubs for Civic Engagement  
By  
Nancy Kranich  
For The Democracy Imperative, University of New Hampshire

***Introduction: Civic Engagement and Higher Education***

The desire of citizens to engage on the issues of the day contributed to the election of Barack Obama. Young people and old from all walks of life participated in the electoral process at a rate not seen in many years, if ever. And, on the first day of his new Presidency, Barack Obama declared, “Public engagement enhances the Government's effectiveness and improves the quality of its decisions,” as he signed a memorandum on Transparency and Open Government (2009). With renewed interest in citizen participation, how can college and university libraries seize this opportunity to nourish civil discourse and prepare future generations to lead in an increasingly complex and divided world?

Prior to the 2008 election, dialogue about possibilities declined as people fled the public square. At a 2006 National Issues Forum entitled “Democracy’s Challenge: Reclaiming the Public’s Role,” many expressed that there was something dreadfully off track in our democracy. They felt alienated from politics and community affairs and powerless to do much about them. They believed they had become consumers in democracy, rather than citizen proprietors--bystanders instead of active members with a sense of ownership in their democracy. Others saw themselves as local but not national participants—like citizens of city-states rather than of a national democracy. (Doble, 2006)

Forum participants expressed concern about the loss of public space where citizens meet informally to discuss community problems and political issues. They also felt that Americans focus far too much on their rights and too little on their responsibilities. They further argued that, politically, money talks, and that the system only responds to special interests—not the broad, public interest. In short, they saw the average citizen as unrepresented and voiceless. Yet, participants also felt that increased public engagement could rejuvenate hope and the public-mindedness that typifies this nation at its best. They concluded that they, after all, had a significant role to play, recognizing that democracy’s challenge is “our” problem and not “their” problem.

The movement to bring people back into the public square and to encourage broader participation in community life has sparked innovative initiatives, such as those that focus on young people through the revitalization of civic education in schools and colleges. Many colleges now actively promote public engagement as a critical part of their overall institutional mission—with faculty incorporating civic content into their curricula and encouraging students to participate in socially responsible extracurricular activities. Ever since the presidents of American colleges and universities challenged higher education to re-examine its public purposes and its commitments to the democratic ideal in 1999 (Campus Compact, 1999), programs have sprung up on campuses around the country to motivate young people toward lifelong participation in civic life. Eager to connect liberal learning more directly with service and civic responsibility, the Association of American Colleges and Universities and Campus Compact launched the Center for Liberal Education and Civic Engagement in 2003. Throughout the country, their efforts are encouraging students to learn new ways to talk together to foster positive

change on campus and beyond. Recognizing that a robust democracy and the public welfare depend on an engaged and informed citizenry, colleges and universities now endeavor to strengthen both the study and practice of civic engagement in a diverse democracy and interdependent world.

### *Academic Libraries as Venues for Campus Civic Engagement*

Practicing the arts of democracy can be infused across disciplines, and it can be built into nearly all structures on campus, such as student clubs and activities, athletic programs, cultural and intellectual events, residential life, and volunteer opportunities. There are *no* venues on campus that could not be practice grounds for democracy. (Thomas, 2007, p. 7).

One overlooked venue for civic engagement initiatives on campus is the academic library where efforts to promote civic literacy and ensure an informed citizenry fit well into democratic practice. Many academic libraries present thoughtful, engaging, and enlightening programs about problems facing democracy--programs that encourage more active citizenship. These libraries also help students learn how to identify, evaluate, and utilize information essential for the critical thinking necessary to make choices essential to a self-governing society. Beyond serving individuals, academic libraries also provide real and virtual spaces where faculty and students can gather together to solve pressing problems. In short, academic libraries can play a critical role in kindling civic spirit by providing not only information, but also expanded opportunities for dialogue and deliberation as a practice ground for democracy.

Over the last two decades, social scientists have proposed new models to invigorate a weakened democracy and to encourage more active citizen involvement with governance. Joining these scholars are a number of librarians who have underscored the

key role libraries play in building civil society. (Durrance, 2001; Kranich, 2001; McCabe, 2001; McCook, 2000; Molz & Dain, 1999; Schull, 2004). These writers urge librarians to reclaim their civic mission by helping constituents learn about complex public issues and practice deliberative democracy, and by providing safe spaces, or commons, where students can discuss issues in a non-confrontational, nonpartisan, deliberative manner. Creating civic space through a formal process of deliberation reinforces the academic library's essential position as the intellectual heart of the campus.

Academic librarians are eager to assume a role in developing the civic capacity of students so they can revitalize communities and strengthen democracy. A number of them have participated in the American Library Association's (ALA) Libraries Foster Civic Engagement Membership Initiative Group. Moreover, their professional publications have built a literature on the topic. (Kranich, 2004; Kranich, 2005; Kranich, Heanue, and Willingham, 2003; Kranich, Reid and Willingham, 2004) University libraries participate in the annual September Project—a project designed “to break the silence following September 11, and to invite all people into libraries to consider topics of patriotism, democracy, and citizenship.” (September Project, n.d.) Yet, though academic librarians have expressed interest in civic engagement, they are not always certain how to get involved (Kranich, 2008). This article offers a approaches to involving academic libraries in the civic activities on their campuses and beyond.

### *Academic Libraries as Civic Spaces*

While academic libraries are well recognized for their role in promoting access to a diversity of ideas and serving as depositories for government, community and other

useful information, many are well-positioned to extend that civic role by facilitating the exchange and sharing of those ideas. Why? Because these libraries provide comfortable, inviting, neutral, and safe spaces conducive to democratic discourse—spaces where citizens can work together to solve public problems. As Ray Oldenburg describes in *The Great Good Place* (1989), libraries are places essential to the political processes of democracy, places that reinforce the American notion of association. Today, libraries also offer a variety of virtual spaces where their users can interact using new technologies like social networking software.

Academic libraries sponsor talks and lectures in their newly renovated interactive auditoriums. For example, the Rutgers University Libraries recently hosted a leading expert on water resources who explored the intersection of water, gender, security, environment and human rights. Preceding the lecture, students presented poster sessions that represented different perspectives about the topic. Examples of exciting civic programs undertaken by academic libraries include events convened as part of the September Project like one held at the William Madison Randall Library at UNC Wilmington, which partnered with a local non-profit to demonstrate the transformative power of sustainable and appropriate technologies to alleviate poverty. (Doshi, 2008).

### **Academic Libraries as Public Forums**

Extending library programming into the realm of deliberation offers students and faculty a chance to learn together, frame issues of common concern, deliberate about choices for solving problems, deepen understanding about other's opinions, and connect across the spectrum of thought. As Diana Mutz has so well documented in *Hearing the*

*Other Side* (2006), too few opportunities exist today that expose Americans, including those attending college, to diverse views and engage them in authentic dialogue about pressing problems. The challenge for academic libraries is to go beyond the presentation of expert opinion through texts and presentations to a more interactive platform where students and faculty can work together to solve public problems.

Since the founding of the Kettering Foundation's National Issues Forums in the 1980's, libraries have hosted and some have even convened these and other types of forums like Study Circles, Choices, and Conversation Cafés so they can involve citizens in participatory democracy. Librarians can also teach the theory and scholarship behind public politics, as well as the methods of convening and moderating deliberative discussions. Another role librarians can assume is to guide the research and participatory action of students seeking to frame their own issues for deliberative forums. Following a model developed at Franklin Pierce College by Joni Doherty of the New England Center for Civic Life (Doherty, 2008), they can partner with faculty to help students use civic dialogue to address diversity, build community, learn techniques to deal with public issues, and develop civic leadership skills.

Librarians can convene and moderate deliberative forums as a standard 2-hour session or as a more thoughtful study circle, with one choice or viewpoint covered per week. Another approach offers short hour-long mini-forums at lunchtime with further discussion later in the classroom. Guest speakers or panels, websites, bibliographies, and/or online discussions, can supplement the forums. And academic librarians can create additional public space by holding forums elsewhere on campus, online, or at the local public library.

Deliberative forums offer academic librarians new opportunities to form alliances and partnerships on campus and beyond. By establishing a steering committee of influential faculty, administrators, and community leaders, librarians can strengthen outreach and expand participation. They can also enlist academic departments, administrators, development officers, Friends groups, alumni, and trustees for fundraising and promotion. Involvement by community members, non-profit organizations, businesses, school and public libraries, local government and schools can result in welcome occasions for citizens to join a local college in promoting civic engagement.

Librarians at Ripon College in Wisconsin, McDaniel College in Maryland, and Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire have blazed the way by joining with faculty, clubs, and the student radio station to promote campus forums. Kansas State University Libraries' association with the school's Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy has resulted in forums conducted throughout the state in a number of settings, including public libraries. The Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library has worked with the University of Texas, the Texas State Humanities Council and the Texas Library Association to help Texans deliberate about issues of common concern. And in Georgia, the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library has teamed up with the Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies at the University of Georgia whose librarians train students to conduct forums at public libraries and other locations around the state.

Academic libraries may also engage their communities in civic dialogue by reading a single book across the campus. Similar to the One Book/One Community reading clubs launched by the Seattle Public Library, this idea has caught fire in cities from Rochester, New York, to Greensboro, North Carolina, and is beginning to take hold

on campuses as well. For example, the University of North Carolina recommends that entering freshmen read a select list of books for discussion once they arrive on campus and the University of Chicago assigns common readings, then convenes to discuss impressions and ideas. Other institutions offer students shared reading experiences through the Civically Engaged Reader (Project on Civic Reflection, n.d.), a diverse collection of short provocative articles designed to inspire contemplation about the central questions of civic life. According to Elizabeth Hollander (n.d.), former executive director of Campus Compact, “We all know that reflection is a key component of effective service and civic engagement. This... compendium of writing from diverse times and voices is guaranteed to stimulate lively conversation and hard thinking." Such collective, reflective reading experiences are ideal tools for academic librarians to engage their campus communities in an enriching, provocative exchange of ideas.

### ***Academic Libraries as Civic Information Centers***

Many academic libraries serve as federal government document depositories, which provide civic and government information to both the campus and the community. Thanks to new technologies, these libraries now also offer public access to numerous government databases, web sites, and services. As the source of e-government, academic libraries are delivering services ranging from assistance with filling out job applications and filing unemployment claims, to registering to vote and interacting with government agencies and officials. Academic libraries can transform their roles from citizen access to becoming “hubs” for improved access to and input into government information and services, thereby transforming governance and renewing democracy in the 21st century.

By promoting interactivity through social networking, e-mail, and other tools, librarians can create more open and transparent public institutions and empower citizens to connect directly with each other, legislators, and government agencies. In conjunction with President Obama's initiative to promote greater civic participation in governance, academic libraries can reinvent their role from access agents into civic entrepreneurs, facilitating interaction between the academic community and government officials in order to shape public policy and deepen the national discourse.

### *Academic Libraries as Enablers of Civic Literacy*

To say that information literacy is crucial to effective citizenship is simply to say it is central to the practice of democracy. Any society committed to individual freedom and democratic government must ensure the free flow of information to all its citizens in order to protect personal liberties and to guard its future. (ALA, 1989).

Children and adults alike must learn a broad range of 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy skills if they are to become smart seekers, recipients, and creators of content, as well as effective citizens. Reflecting the growing concern for such skill development as early as 1989, a special ALA presidential committee issued a report stating that, "to be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information." (ALA, 1989). Since that time, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has developed standards, showcased best practices, and promoted the development of partnerships to enhance 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy on campus. ACRL's 2000 standards state

By ensuring that individuals have the intellectual abilities of reasoning and critical thinking, and by helping them construct a framework for learning how to learn, colleges and universities provide the foundation for continued growth throughout

their careers, as well as in their roles as informed citizens and members of communities.” (ACRL 2000).

Teaching students how to find, evaluate and use information effectively is an essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skill embraced by today’s academic libraries. Some, however, recognize that they must go further to help students learn the civic literacy skills they need to tackle the problems facing their communities. (Marcoux, 2001; Milner, 2002; Parsons and Litman, 1996). But what kind of civic literacy skills must students learn in order to participate in a 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy? Milner defines civic literacy as “the knowledge and ability of citizens to make sense of their world and to act as competent citizens.” (Milner, 2002, p. 3). The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (n.d.) considers civic literacy,

- Participating effectively in civic life through knowing how to stay informed and understanding governmental processes;
- Exercising the rights and obligations of citizenship at local, state, national and global levels; and
- Understanding the local and global implications of civic decisions.

Urban Agenda (n.d.), an international civic education program housed at Wayne State University, describes the elements of civic literacy to include citizen thought as developed through opinions and knowledge and citizen action that depends upon deliberation and participation. The organization goes on to describe the requisites for democratic participation ranging from evaluation, dialogue and persuasion, to organizing, planning and institutionalizing action.

What is significant about these different approaches to civic literacy is that they all encompass active engagement with the civic life of communities. For academic

librarians, this active engagement component challenges them to develop tools for students to learn not only how to find and evaluate civic engagement resources, but also how to apply skills for participating in civic discourse, both in person and online. After attending a session on information literacy for civic engagement at the LOEX conference in 2007, one librarian concluded, “Promoting civic engagement, whether through researching documents for deliberative polling or providing hosting space for town hall meetings, is a promising means of promoting libraries and fostering information literacy in patron constituencies.” (Hood, 2007)

### *Academic Libraries and Service Learning*

Service learning, or co-curricular campus activities, provides opportunities for librarians to work closely with faculty who are experimenting with various models of public scholarship. Given that close to one-third of all students now participate in service learning activities (Campus Compact, 2007), this growing national service learning movement offers substantial possibilities for academic library involvement. Nonetheless, Lynn Westley (2008) found academic library contributions to service learning “few and far between...” She laments that “academic librarians are conspicuous by their absence within the literature of their discipline and the engagement literature.” But, she also acknowledges that engagement requires more of libraries than traditionally expected. In fact, creating citizen scholars, states Toni Murdock (2006), President of Antioch University in Seattle,

means far more than volunteering to serve in a soup kitchen and presenting a classroom report on that experience...Connecting studies with problem-solving service in the community deepens, complicates and challenges students’ learning. It turns them into knowledge producers, not just knowledge consumers. They

become citizen scholars who renew our democratic society and actively engage in shaping this nation's future.

Along with others eager for deeper involvement with service learning (Herther, 2008; Riddle, 2003), Westley encourages librarians to partner with faculty and students working on community-based projects, thereby deepening learning experiences and demonstrating the synergy between information literacy and engaged learning. When academic librarians explore future directions, they inevitably expand and broaden their roles on campus.

Library involvement with civic ventures need not be limited to real world projects. Rather, they can extend into virtual worlds, taking advantage of online venues as a means of serving the community and contributing to student learning, particularly those studying at a distance. One such effort, recently financed by the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Partnership Foundation (n.d.) in conjunction with the University of Texas School of Information, seeks to find the most innovative way for students to serve the community online in the virtual world *Second Life*. The Carter Academic Service Entrepreneur (CASE) grant program intends to demonstrate that community service can become a new horizon for online virtual worlds. Examples of virtual world service learning projects include a college math major's avatar tutoring high school student avatars in algebra, and a political science majors' avatars coaching high school student avatars on their student council campaigns. Through *Second Life*, librarians answer reference questions, provide tours, and teach avatars how to use research and technological tools—often in a more compelling manner than other formats. Among possibilities, *Second Life* offers creative opportunities for librarians to extend their efforts into virtual civic engagement endeavors.

### *Academic Libraries as Civic Partners*

Efforts to encourage more active citizenship abound in schools, museums, archives, public broadcasting, the news media, universities, and civic institutions. Working collaboratively, these efforts can increase a community's social capital--the glue that bonds people together and builds bridges to a pluralistic and vibrant civil society. The challenge for academic libraries is to extend their reach into a realm where they increase social capital by expanding public participation in democracy. To accomplish such goals, campus libraries need not work alone; they should forge civic partnerships with those individuals, organizations and institutions already committed to strengthening participation in democracy, both on campus and beyond.

Nationally, college and university librarians can participate in efforts to stimulate civic engagement by working with such organizations as the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the American Association of University Professors, Campus Compact, and the Democracy Imperative. Academic libraries can also join the September Project in order to bring people together in libraries for talks, roundtables, public forums, and performances in towns and cities across the country each fall on September 11th.

Building a broad base of support serves to spread the workload and prevent burnout of committed volunteers. Libraries should recruit steering committee members who can strengthen partnerships through their professional or civic involvement -- individuals such as school administrators and teachers, faculty with subject or experience building civil society, and leaders of local civic organizations. One other partner to

consider is the media. Journalists are deeply concerned with civic involvement and they can add significant benefits by covering activities and highlighting a positive image of libraries undertaking these endeavors.

A project initiated several years ago by Pennsylvania State University offers a good example. Following a conference on the importance of collaboration between public broadcasters and other public service organizations, the University launched the Partners in Public Service (PIPS) initiative to demonstrate how collaborative projects between public broadcasting stations, libraries, museums and educational institutions could enhance services to the eight participating communities. Penn State's Pattee Library joined forces with WPSU and the Palmer Museum on campus to demonstrate how these institutional partnerships could add value to their community (Penn State, 2002). Considered a vision for a "community as a learning campus," the Institute for Museum and Library Services incorporated the PIPS idea into 21 Century Learning Initiative to promote numerous collaborative civic projects around the country.

### ***Academic Libraries as Learning Communities***

On campuses around the country, integrated digital learning centers are creating environments where traditional boundaries blur and many constituent activities flow across old unit divisions. Libraries have established these centers in conjunction with academic colleagues who run information technology services. Some of these spaces are called information commons, where librarians and information technology staff bring together disparate information resources. Others are referred to as learning commons, where students come together around shared learning tasks. What distinguishes these

centers from the more traditional computer labs located in many university libraries and academic computer facilities is that they aim not to encourage the mastery of information, but to facilitate collaborative learning using all forms of media (Brown and Duguid, 1998; Lyman, 1999; and Lippincott, 2002), and are “conceptually ‘owned’ by learners, rather than by librarians or teachers” (Bennett, 2003).

Indeed, this repositioning of libraries as learning communities fits the theory and practice of community inquiry conceived a century ago by John Dewey (1916). Dewey believed that people need the opportunity to share ideas through multiple media in order to understand and solve everyday problems together. To this formulation, academic libraries bring their role as boundary spanners. Whether face-to-face or virtual, learning communities bring people with mutual interests together to exchange information and learn about and solve problems of common concern.

## **Conclusion**

“We believe that our institutions serve not only as agents of this democracy, but also as its architects – providing bridges between the aims and aspirations of individuals and the public work of the larger world. To that end, we commit our institutions to wide-ranging examinations of our civic and democratic purposes through curricula and extracurricular activities, socially engaged scholarship, civic partnerships, and community-based learning and research.” (Kellogg, 2000).

Academic libraries should embrace a charge comparable to the mission adopted by land-grant universities as agents of democracy. With renewed interest in promoting civic literacy and engagement around the country, academic librarians are poised to grasp this cause, build civic space, and transcend their traditional role. At the nexus of

academic disciplines, the library can share in the preparation of leaders for an increasingly complex and divided world.

As John Dewey (1916, p. 22) wrote, “democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife.” If academic libraries are to fulfill their civic mission in the information age, they must find active ways to engage faculty and students in order to encourage their involvement in democratic discourse and community renewal. Working closely with a diverse array of partners, academic libraries can foster a new generation committed to civic engagement, citizen participation, and community problem solving. To do so, colleges and universities must embrace their libraries as civic agents that can foster civic learning, engagement, and research and span boundaries between campus and community.

Now is the time for academic libraries to take up the role of preparing a new generation of informed, engaged citizens capable of addressing complex social problems. By committing themselves to joining the civic mission of higher education, academic librarians will become partners and catalysts for renewing liberal education that prepares students to build civic capacity so vital to a flourishing democracy. For, as Robert Putnam has stated parsimoniously, “Citizenship is not a spectator sport.” (2000, p. 342)

*Nancy Kranich teaches in the School of Communication and Information and works as a librarian at Rutgers University. She is a past president of the American Library*

*Association with a theme of libraries and democracy, and a Director of the National  
Issues Forums Institute.*

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