

Civic Engagement and Academic Libraries

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Obama Campaign

- 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 2008, Civic Disengagement

- 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)

Democracy's Challenge

- Forum participants expressed concern about the loss of public space where citizens meet informally to discuss community problems and political issues.
- 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.

Academic Libraries and Civic Engagement

- So what does this all mean for academic libraries?
- Democracy Imperative conference in New Hampshire
- Prepared a paper for the conference: [Academic Libraries as Hubs for Civic Engagement.](#)
- Found no mention of libraries in the extensive literature about college and university civic engagement and service learning efforts.

Practicing Democracy on Campus

“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.

Key Civic Role of Academic Libraries

- 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.

Hearing the Other Side

- 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.

Ways that Academic Libraries Can Participate in Civic Engagement

- Not that academic librarians don't want to participate in discussions about libraries and civic engagement—they are just unsure about their role and want to know what others are doing.
- Various attempts
- LPSS—great that holding this program
- NK survey, found interest among academic librarians—need ideas, skills, and opportunities

ACRL Efforts

- Academic librarians attending ACRL's luncheon during the ALA briefing day for National Library Legislative Day, May 1, 2007, were treated to a presentation by George L. Mehaffy, Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.
- Mehaffy spoke to academic librarians on, Developing Informed and Engaged Citizens: The Imperative for Higher Education.
- He spoke about his work on campuses through the American Democracy Project and why he sees academic libraries as, "citizenship centers...more relevant now than ever in history."
- Session held on academic library civic engagement and information literacy at the 2007 LOEX conference.

1) Library as Forum

- 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 (now called [Everyday Democracy](#)), [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.
- Partner with others on campus. Reach out to the broader community.
- 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.

2) Library Convening One Book/ One Campus Discussions

- Academic libraries may also engage their communities in civic dialogue by reading a single book across the campus.
- [Civically Engaged Reader](#), sponsored by the Great Books Foundation.

3) E-Government/E-Democracy Centers

- As federal government document depositories, academic libraries provide civic and government information on campus and beyond.
- 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.

E-Government Participation

- 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.

4) Civic Literacy

- ACRL information literacy guidelines state that 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 21st 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.
- But what kind of civic literacy skills must students learn in order to participate in a 21st 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).

Civic Literacy Defines

- [The Partnership for 21st 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.

Civic Literacy=Active Engagement

- 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)

5) 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..."
- But, she also acknowledges that engagement requires more of libraries than traditionally expected.

Academic Libraries and Service Learning

- Librarians can get more involved with service learning by partnering 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.

6) 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.
- Information and learning commons encourage students to come together around shared learning tasks.
- Centers that aim to facilitate collaborative learning using all forms of media and are “conceptually ‘owned’ by learners, rather than by librarians or teachers”.

Exchange of Ideas

- Opportunity to share ideas through multiple media in order to understand and solve everyday problems together.
- 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.

Agents of Democracy

- 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.

6) Partners in Public Service

- 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.
- [The Partners in Public Service Project](#) (PIPS) funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting provides a model.

Partnerships with the Academic Community

- 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—[American Democracy Project](#), 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.

Conclusion

- 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)

Learn More and Get Involved

- [Libraries Foster Civic Engagement Blog](#) (includes background and bibliography)
- Participate in the ALA Libraries Foster Civic Engagement Membership Initiative Group (MIG) (meeting times in ALA program book, on blog, and through listserv)
- Subscribe to ALA's Civic Engagement listserv--*deliberate*:
 1. Go to: <http://lists.ala.org/www>
 2. Click on “View All Lists”
 3. Scroll down to “deliberate@ala.org”
 4. Click on “Subscribe”
 5. Fill in your e-mail address in the box at the top of the screen
 6. Press “submit”

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