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Beyond Shared Spaces: Preserving the Educational Mission of Academic Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries have long been a key element in higher education, serving not only as repositories of books and research, but as hubs where students develop critical thinking, information literacy, and lifelong learning skills. However, recent structural changes—such as combining library spaces with Academic Learning Centers’ tutoring services, or other department offices—have introduced confusion for students about where to go for help. This blending of roles sidelines librarians, whose expertise in research and information literacy is an essential asset for college students. Education is more than graduating and obtaining a good job—it is about becoming thoughtful, independent, informed citizens. This paper examines the changes in the library’s role, the marginalization of librarians, and why institutions must recognize librarians as central to fulfilling the true purpose of education.

THE ROLE OF SHARED SPACES AND INSTITUTIONAL CONFUSION

When libraries are physically or administratively merged with such as tutoring or innovation centers, boundaries blur. Students walking into what was once “the library” building may encounter multiple services run by other departments. In such environments, the identity of the space (and who “runs” it) becomes ambiguous. Students may be told to go to tutors for many tasks that previously would have been handled (or better handled) by librarians, such as research for writing, evaluating sources, citing correctly, and developing information-seeking strategies.

WHAT IS EDUCATION?

At many colleges and in many students’ minds, education is often framed narrowly: complete the degree, qualify for employment. While the job aspect is vital, this vision falls short. Education’s purpose is far deeper and more extensive:

First, it involves intellectual growth—learning how to ask good questions, to seek evidence, to analyze and to understand multiple perspectives.

Second, it involves ethical reasoning, knowing how to use information properly, to respect intellectual property and avoid plagiarism, and weigh responsible and ethical use of information (Association of College & Research Libraries [ACRL], 2016).

Third, it involves lifelong learning and adaptability—given how fast information and technology change, students must learn how to learn, how to find and evaluate new information, not just repeat what was taught.

Fourth, it includes civic engagement and social responsibility—education should prepare people to participate in society in informed ways, understand the difference between credible sources and misinformation, and contribute thoughtfully.

Research also shows that students' ability to achieve these goals can be limited by issues such as *library anxiety* and lack of confidence in their research abilities, underscoring the importance of librarian support in fostering critical thinking (Kwon, 2008).

Librarians are uniquely positioned to help achieve all of these dimensions of education. Their training includes expertise in information literacy, research methodologies, source evaluation, metadata, digital resources, and ethical issues around information use.

Scholarly Support: Librarians and Libraries in Student Learning

The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education emphasizes that students must understand concepts such as “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual” and “Research as Inquiry” to become independent learners (ACRL, 2016). Recent studies have continued to affirm the importance of these frames. For example, Gross, Julien, & Latham (2022) found that community college librarians regard the frames “authority is constructed” and “contextual and information has value” as especially helpful in helping students think more deeply about the nature of sources and authority, especially in digital contexts. Similarly, Wilcoxon (2025) discusses the implementation of critical information literacy in legal education, showing how the “research as inquiry” frame aids students in understanding how legal arguments are constructed, sources evaluated, and context considered.

Meanwhile, The Standards for Libraries in Higher Education (ACRL, 2018) explicitly assert that academic libraries contribute directly to student recruitment, retention, and graduation, and that instruction by librarians promotes academic integrity and continuous improvement. A review of the literature further confirms that academic libraries make measurable contributions to student success and learning outcomes, strengthening the case for librarians as essential educational partners (Blummer & Kenton, 2018). More recently, *Understanding Library Impacts* (2025) provides updated protocols for evaluating how libraries contribute to institutional effectiveness.

The Marginalization of Librarians and Its Consequences

Given these findings, institutional choices that diminish the librarian's role are deeply problematic. When students are directed first to tutors for research or writing tasks, they may miss out on the librarian's specialized knowledge in information literacy—how to find and

evaluate sources, how to navigate academic databases, how to understand the nature of scholarship. Librarians teach critical intellectual skills that go beyond passing one assignment or course. If their role is reduced to managing books or merely facilitating study space, these educational outcomes suffer.

Over time, this shift risks promoting short-term educational goals (passing classes, completing assignments) over long-term intellectual development (independent thinking, research readiness, adaptability in professional and civic life).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure that the library remains directly aligned with the broader mission of education, colleges should:

1. Clarify roles and signage so students know that librarians provide specialized research help.
2. Highlight librarian-led services such as reference consultations and workshops.
3. Integrate librarians into curriculum design to embed information literacy into course learning outcomes.
4. Increase operational transparency when spaces are shared with other departments.
5. Assess and publicize library contributions to student learning outcomes to strengthen institutional recognition. As Oakleaf (2017) notes, documenting the library impact on student success is critical for demonstrating value to stakeholders and maintaining institutional support.

CONCLUSION

In considering the library's place within shared academic environments, it becomes clear that its role extends far beyond managing physical space. Libraries must remain aligned with the broader mission of education—not only supporting measurable goals such as graduation and employment but also fostering intellectual growth, ethical reasoning, and lifelong learning. While academic success and career readiness are important, education should also nurture curiosity, critical thinking, information awareness, and responsible citizenship. Librarians are uniquely equipped to guide students in these areas, and their expertise must be recognized and valued. By affirming librarians' central role, institutions can ensure that libraries continue to preserve and advance the full educational mission.

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About the author

Jane Jiang is the Director of Libraries at UCNJ, Union College of Union County, NJ, with over 25 years of experience in academic and public libraries. She holds master's degrees in Education Technology and Library & Information Science. In addition to her library leadership, Ms. Jiang is a writer, poet, and translator, with several original works and seven published translations.