Academic libraries as civic agents

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“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. Every venue on campus can be a practice ground for democracy.” (Thomas, 2010, p. 9).

One practice ground for democracy often overlooked is the academic library. In fact, until recently, academic libraries were “conspicuous by their absence in the engaged university” (Westley, 2006, p. 200). Although academic libraries are well recognized for their role informing scholarship, promoting access to a diversity of ideas, and serving as depositories for government, community and other useful information, many are just now beginning to move up the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (2014)—a widely recognized descriptor of levels and resources of public participation processes—from informing toward involving, collaborating and empowering future citizens in the issues of the day. Academic librarians are natural allies in the quest to create a more engaged citizenry given their liaison responsibilities across the curriculum with such campus “hubs” of democracy (Carcasson, 2008) as political science and education, journalism and social work, and communication and Cooperative Extension.

Like public libraries, academic libraries began transforming their civic engagement identities over the past decade, hosting deliberative dialogues, offering safe (and brave) spaces for public discourse, appointing civic engagement librarians, partnering with campus and
community organizations, participating in service learning, and collaborating across the curriculum to enhance civic literacy. In 2007, George Mehaffy, Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, told academic librarians about his work on campuses through the American Democracy Project, emphasizing that he saw academic libraries as, "citizenship centers…more relevant now than ever in history.” In 2009, Elizabeth Hollander, the late director of Campus Compact, encouraged academic librarians attending the American Library Association (ALA) annual conference to get involved with civic engagement. Up until that time, though, most of the dialogue about academic library participation in civic activities on their campuses was simply that—dialogue about possible roles, not actual experiences (Kranich, 2004; Kranich, 2010; Kranich, 2012; Leong, 2013).

Thomas Jefferson espoused the value of an informed citizenry to a health democracy. Two hundred years later, the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy (2009) urged that Americans need an informed and engaged populace if democracy is to thrive in the digital age. This means that libraries and universities must shift from an environment of “informing” to “involving,” because an involved—not just informed—citizenry is more likely to participate in democratic political processes (Lievrouw, 1994, 350). Jaeger and Burnett (2005) suggest redefining the role of information in society that relies on “libraries, as established guardians of diverse perspectives of information, …to protect and preserve information access and exchange [italics mine]… facilitating and fueling deliberative democracy” (p. 464). Following a series of highly polarizing elections, escalating amounts of fake news, and widening economic divides in the United States, librarians are rising to the occasion, identifying a new role that promotes not just informing but also fostering civic literacy and building “safe/brave” civic spaces that connect academe with community and global issues.
Traditional library services like reference assistance, collection development, organization of information, preservation and archiving are vital to civic engagement. Students and faculty are often unaware of local information and data resources and need help navigating through documents and other primary source materials essential to mapping the civic sphere. A simple research guide to the terrain—often produced in collaboration with campus partners--like the Rutgers University Libraries-Camden Civic Engagement LibGuide (Wilkinson, 2018) or the University of Texas-El Paso Library Center for Civic Engagement LibGuide (2018), offer a perfect starting point for anyone naming, framing, and deliberating about public issues. These LibGuides are easy-to-use tools deployed by thousands of libraries to curate knowledge, share information, and identify subject-specific resources that get students started in finding information about their local community. With tools like these, librarians teach how to find, evaluate, and use a bewildering amount of information essential to analyzing community issues and fostering civic literacy.

Academic libraries also provide comfortable, inviting, neutral, 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. The challenge for academic librarians 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. It is not that academic librarians do not want to participate in civic engagement initiatives, they are just unsure how. After all, few have learned the skills necessary to foster public deliberation in library and information science (MLIS) master’s programs (although at least five MLIS programs including Rutgers now offer community engagement courses). Recent efforts to deepen involvement by academic librarians--promoted by
a 2017/18 ALA (2018) training program--represent a turning point and provide tools specifically geared toward academic librarians, demonstrating how they can contribute to and learn about the civic work underway across their institutions.

At the nexus of multiple academic disciplines, academic libraries are well positioned to prepare future generations as leaders of an increasingly complex and divided world. Beyond safe space, academic librarians can contribute by naming, framing, convening and moderating deliberative forums that teach students how to make public choices together and demonstrate the value of the deliberative process as a curricular tool. Librarians can also teach the theory and scholarship behind public politics along with the methods of convening and moderating deliberative discussions. To amplify such efforts, they should work in concert with other civic initiatives already underway on campus. A number of examples including those undertaken at Rutgers University illuminate possibilities for academic library partnerships across campus and beyond.

Access to Civic Engagement Scholarship

Librarians have traditionally made information, including local resources, available through campus libraries. With increased involvement in the civic sphere, they are finding new ways to leverage their resources to prepare students, faculty and staff for service learning experiences, and to provide physical and online spaces for planning and sharing projects as well as programs (Gruber, 2017a; Gruber, 2017b). A University of Kansas community engagement librarian who curates the Campus Compact Knowledge Hub: “The Role of Libraries in Engagement Work” (Goodwin Thiel, n.d.) has recorded a webinar (Gruber and Thiel, 2017) that showcases creative ways to increase access to the research of engaged campus and community scholars and to expand the tent and build bridges across different civic engagement
constituencies on campus. These approaches help students, faculty and staff gain a more realistic understanding of a local community and develop cultural competence; assist service learning programs with the capture, collection, sharing, archiving and preservation of a record of their activities through campus institutional repositories; and create relevant community-focused materials including video documentaries using the library’s computer labs and maker spaces.

At Rutgers University Libraries, we worked with the public libraries near our campuses in Camden, Newark, and New Brunswick on an American Library Association/National Endowment for the Humanities grant using the PBS series: “Latino Americans: 500 Years of History.” Through that project, we connected the academy with the community by creating a LibGuide (Kranich, 2016); identified scholars to interpret the six PBS videos shown at participating libraries; and collected reports, archival materials and newsletters available through the Rutgers New Jersey collection and institutional repository--RUCore. Previous to that collaboration, the library had limited success collecting materials about the century-old experience of Latinos in the state. This effort allowed us to build relationships between and among the Latino and research communities, while documenting the rich history and scholarship in this arena. The initiative opened the door to deeper community engagement efforts, and linked scholars to both the public and academic libraries in new and meaningful ways.

**Strengthening Civic Literacy**

Academic librarians have long led their campuses in teaching information literacy skills based on standards and frameworks developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2016). To date, these efforts have focused primarily on college and career, but as librarians increase their role in civic engagement, they can benefit students by emphasizing a third “c”--citizenship. As learners confront fake news, clicktivism and slacktivism, librarians are
well positioned to seize this teachable moment to enhance civic literacy—“the knowledge and ability of citizens to make sense of their world and to act as competent citizens” (Milner, 2002, p. 3). According to the recently adopted core curriculum C3 Framework for Social Studies, “Active and responsible citizens are able to identify and analyze public problems, deliberate with other people about how to define and address issues, take constructive action together, reflect on their actions, create and sustain groups, and influence institutions both large and small” (National Council for Social Studies, n.d., 19). To help students become civic actors instilled with a sense of civic agency (Boyte, 2007), academic librarians can incorporate such civic literacy skills into their training strategies. At the David & Lorraine Cheng Library on the campus of William Paterson University in New Jersey, librarians are doing just that through their Civic Literacy Initiative in partnership with the office of Campus Activities and Student Leadership (CASL). That Library offers students an academic learning component to complement service learning opportunities on campus, piloting programs with the student Model UN and Political Science Club. Participants in the program earn credit towards their Civic Engagement Badges (Marks, 2018).

Naming, Framing and Moderating Deliberative Forums

Academic librarians can provide valuable support for naming, framing and moderating deliberative forums on campus and beyond. A number of them have participated in deliberative dialogue for years. For example, librarians at Ripon College in Wisconsin, McDaniel College in Maryland, and Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire joined faculty, clubs, and the student radio station to promote campus deliberative forums. Kansas State University Libraries’ association with the school’s Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy resulted in the naming, framing and convening of deliberative forums around broadband deployment in a
number of statewide settings, including public libraries. The Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library worked with the University of Texas, the Texas State Humanities Council and the Texas Library Association to help Texans deliberate about the achievement gap. In Georgia, the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library teamed up with the Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies at the University of Georgia to train students to conduct forums at public libraries and other locations around the state. At Oklahoma State University, the Edmon Low Library worked with the Stillwater Public Library, public schools, and Oklahoma State University Extension to offer National Issues Forums (NIF) through a local organization called Stillwater Speaks. And at the Illinois State University Library, librarians joined the AASCU campus American Democracy Project, participating in voter registration, service learning, and candidate debates and conducting research and naming, framing, and moderating forums at the public library on the Illinois budget.

For nearly a decade, the ALA Center for Civic Life—established in partnership with the Kettering Foundation—has trained librarians in dialogue and deliberation techniques, and has named and framed issues of common concern to librarians; one, “Who Should I Trust to Protect My Privacy?” (American Library Association, n.d.), was convened at the Rutgers University Libraries in New Brunswick as part of the observance of Banned Books Week. In 2017 and 2018, the ALA Libraries Transform Communities: Models for Change (2018) initiative included a webinar and in-person training program on moderating NIF deliberative forums specifically targeted at academic librarians. Following the training, librarians from Rutgers University sponsored a series entitled: Newark Talks the Talk: Introduction to Deliberative Forums for the Rutgers University-Newark (RU-N) and city of Newark communities. They convened three sessions using NIF materials, one of which incorporated a training module for participants. The
series was co-sponsored by the RU-N Collaboratory for Pedagogy, Professional Development and Publicly-Engaged Scholarship, graduate students across disciplines, and Newark community leaders.

**Lessons Learned, Challenges and Opportunities**

It will take a collective effort within the library and across the campus to cultivate deep and meaningful democratic practices for a new generation of citizens. Anyone engaged in the civic sphere likely agrees that the hardest part is not learning to use new tools but convincing others to subscribe to deliberative-type practices. Over the last decade, academic librarians have sponsored deliberative forums. More recently, a larger cohort participated in dialogue and deliberation training programs. When this group returned to their own campuses, they also learned the need for intensive relationship building first--a lesson enunciated to Rutgers--Newark librarians following the 2018 training after they scheduled a series of three NIF forums, only to find themselves lacking much of an audience for the sessions. And, similar to the experiences of other academic librarians, their involvement with this work remains episodic, dependent upon individual champions rather than an organization-wide effort. For Rutgers and other academic librarians around the country, sustaining and expanding these efforts is difficult at best. Although many are eager to work more closely with rather than for campus colleagues involved with community building, they rarely feel a vital part of the endeavor. To illustrate, Rutgers-New Brunswick librarians discovered that service learning and civic engagement activists on their campuses were actively working closely with the local public library, but they never involved campus librarians with this opportunity to deepen relationships. Somehow, such gaps must narrow if academic librarians are to contribute as civic agents in meaningful and relevant ways.
The larger challenge calls for academic libraries to transform to an engaged model of civic engagement. Moving up the IAP2 spectrum (2014) of public engagement beyond informing toward involving, collaborating and empowering future citizens--while an appealing trajectory for many academic librarians--may not sync with the priorities of administrators during a period of budgetary retrenchment. Although notable efforts to deepen the civic work of academic librarians abound, conversion of the nation’s 5000 academic libraries into civic agents remains in its infancy. A survey of the civic mindedness of academic librarians by Barry and her colleagues (2017) found that only those already demonstrating an interest in or experience with community-related service were significantly more civic-minded. And, as Dzur (2009) points out, democratic civic-minded professionals--or “positive deviants”--may succeed in influencing their colleagues but cannot single handedly turn their professions outward toward their communities. In short, academic librarians face hurdles convincing their own as well as faculty colleagues that they should become essential contributors to deliberative dialogue endeavors on campus and beyond.

**Recommendations**

College and university librarians have begun to stimulate civic engagement by working with their professional associations as well as higher education and civic organizations including the Association of American Colleges and Universities Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) initiative, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)—American Democracy Project (ADP), the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), Campus Compact, the National Issues Forums Institute, and the National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD). Librarians attend and present at ADP and NCDD national conferences and now have a library group that meets at Campus Compact
network meetings. College and university librarians also link up with civic actors at state and campus level meetings of these organizations, opening up closer collaboration opportunities.

On campus, librarians, faculty, and community organizations can join forces through service learning courses, learning communities, political and civic institutes, and numerous other campus hubs (Carcasson, 2008). These partnerships can start simply by offering space for activities, as when the libraries at Rutgers hosted a voter registration table in the library. In response, students told library staff “that they did not know how registration worked and were glad we were there to help.” Librarians benefit from building partnerships with campus and community groups already working together and looking for the added value that librarians offer. They can also enlist academic departments, administrators, development officers, Friends groups, alumni, and trustees. Within the community, they can begin with a common starting point by connecting with their colleagues in public and school libraries, serving as a welcome bridge between town and gown as they work together to promote and deepen their role in civic engagement.

With colleges initiating exciting new programs to enhance participation, librarians have an unprecedented opportunity to collaborate with their campus colleagues to strengthen the ability of tomorrow’s leaders to practice civic engagement and participation. By sponsoring and promoting deliberative forums and participating in service learning initiatives, librarians can foster student learning and faculty research while expanding linkages between campus and community.

Now is the time for academic libraries to assume their rightful role in creating a new generation of informed citizens capable of acting to address complex, urgent social problems. By committing themselves to joining the civic mission of higher education, academic librarians will become leaders and catalysts for preparing students to participate actively in a flourishing
21st century democracy. As John Dewey framed the issue in 1916, “democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife” (p. 22).

References


Biographical Statement

Nancy Kranich teaches community engagement, information policy and intellectual freedom at the Rutgers University School of Communication and Information and works on special projects with the Rutgers University Libraries-New Brunswick. A past president of the American Library Association (ALA), Kranich founded ALA’s Center for Civic Life and the Libraries Foster Community Engagement Membership Initiative Group. Trained as a public innovator with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, she also serves on the board of the Kettering Foundation’s National Issues Forums Institute and is a delegate to the U.S.-Russia Dartmouth Conference—a citizen-to-citizen diplomacy dialogue. Kranich holds an MPA from New York University’s Wagner School of Public Service, and an MA in Library Science and a BA in Anthropology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.