



The Library Beyond the Library

**Recasting the Library Value
Proposition for Visibility and Impact**

Brian Lavoie and Rebecca Bryant

The Library Beyond the Library:

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Brian Lavoie

Senior Research Scientist

Rebecca Bryant

Senior Program Officer



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Please direct correspondence to:

OCLC Research
oclcresearch@oclc.org

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INTRODUCTION

An evolving value proposition

At an OCLC Research Library Partnership (RLP) Leadership roundtable, a participant from a North American research university shared a recent challenge. Despite a robust offering of open access and open scholarship services, their resources were largely invisible to potential campus users. This lack of visibility became even more apparent when the institution's Office of Research announced a new campus-wide open science initiative without drawing on the library's resources or support. The research office, as it turned out, was unaware of the library's open science services. This example reflects a common challenge facing many research libraries today: the disconnect between their evolving offerings and the campus community's perceptions of their role. Fortunately, this particular library's story has a happy ending: by addressing the communication gap, the library now collaborates closely with the research office to deliver much of the programming for the open science initiative.

This example also highlights broader questions about the library's position in the campus community. The library has been described as the heart of the campus, and books—or more broadly, collections—have traditionally provided its lifeblood. It is the recognized provider of information resources to the campus community, a role that is both well-understood and highly valued by institutional stakeholders. However, the campus community's needs are shifting. Reading habits are changing, print circulation is declining, and the library's role and impact may seem to some stakeholders less certain, as reflected in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article by historian Steven Mintz. He observed that, as collections move online and physical books are increasingly relocated to remote storage, “the library's purpose is now in question,” leading him to assert that “the university library is at a critical crossroads. . . . [L]ibraries must reinvent themselves and librarians must take on new, evolving roles to stay relevant.”¹

Yet the library's perceived role and value proposition has become increasingly complex and ambiguous to institutional stakeholders—including leaders working in research administration, cyberinfrastructure, institutional research, and campus communications—as collections lose their primacy.

In fact, research libraries are reinventing themselves, taking on vital new roles in supporting institutional research priorities by providing a wide spectrum of research support services. Yet the library's perceived role and value proposition has become increasingly complex and ambiguous to institutional stakeholders—including leaders working in research administration, cyberinfrastructure,

institutional research, and campus communications—as collections lose their primacy. Centuries-old associations between libraries and collections have entrenched narrow perceptions of library functions, while stakeholders with outdated perceptions often fail to recognize or appreciate significant new investments and offerings. This disconnect diminishes the library’s impact and influence within the parent institution, despite substantial contributions to institutional success.

Even as traditional, collections-centric perceptions persist, research libraries are significantly changing their positioning, operations, and value proposition within the institutional research enterprise. OCLC Research has observed this through a succession of research projects and discussions with many library leaders.² While experiences at different institutions vary in the details, there are two transformational themes that help to frame the evolution of research library roles and impact:

1. Increased library investments and expertise in research support.

The need for research support services for research data management, publishing, research analytics, and open research is growing. Many research libraries are making significant investments in acquiring the services, infrastructure, and expertise to support institutional needs in emerging areas across the research lifecycle, building on core library strengths with metadata, information literacy, and repository collections. These investments extend the library’s research support capacities well beyond traditional collection-based offerings.

2. Decoupling of the library value proposition from its traditional roots in collection stewardship.

The library’s institutional value, once clear under the collections-centric model, has become more complex and, at the same time, less apparent to institutional stakeholders, who may not recognize the library’s contribution in emerging areas of research support—especially when they maintain fixed ideas about what libraries do or should do. This can result in librarians finding it difficult to “get a seat at the table” in institutional discussions on topics such as data governance, research metrics, or open scholarship.

These shifts do not diminish the importance of library collections—creating and stewarding collections remains central to the library’s mission. However, as research libraries add new services and expertise in areas like data curation and research impact analysis, they are forging a new value proposition for the 21st century research library. This evolution presents a timely opportunity for research libraries to clarify and reinforce their continued relevance to the institutional research enterprise.

The Library Beyond the Library framework

The library expands its impact and influence by purposefully engaging with the broader institutional environment—or, in other words, by moving "beyond the library." More specifically, the library moves beyond the library when it:

- Aligns with institutional strategy
- Forges new partnerships with other institutional units
- Communicates its evolving value proposition to institutional stakeholders

"The library beyond the library" is an operational principle that increasingly shapes how a library fulfills its mission and demonstrates its institutional value. This report introduces the Library Beyond the Library framework, a structured approach that library leaders and their staff can adapt to help apply this principle within their own institutions. The framework identifies three primary approaches where the library extends its capacities to support the institutional research enterprise:

1. Strategic alignment

The library aligns new services, capacities, and expertise with institutional priorities that shape the institutional research enterprise. Increased research productivity, attracting and retaining talent, generating funding, and promoting interdisciplinary research are important priorities for many research universities. In some countries, national research assessment exercises, like the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework (REF), also shape institutional goals.³ Explicit alignment with institutional research priorities helps amplify the essential role of the library in shaping scholarship and research at its parent institution, but may also result in the library creating new capacities and expertise that go beyond traditionally perceived roles related to collection stewardship.

2. Collaboration

Supporting researchers throughout the entire research lifecycle—from planning and grant proposal development, to publication, preservation, and impact tracking—requires expertise and capacities distributed across multiple campus units. No single unit "owns" research support, nor can it effectively address the technological complexity, resource needs, and diverse expertise required. This decentralization creates the need to coordinate seamless experiences that maximize service visibility and use. As a result, collaborative cross-unit partnerships have become a greater imperative.⁴

3. Storytelling

Communicating the library's evolving value proposition requires crafting compelling narratives for institutional stakeholders. Library value is communicated through data and stories that express the broad reach of library capacities throughout the research lifecycle, and libraries must extend their data collection and storytelling beyond traditional metrics like circulation counts and collection size. Combining quantitative data with qualitative insights—like user stories and case studies—creates compelling narratives that showcase the library's evolving value. Libraries must synthesize this complex evidence into persuasive stories that express the full scope of their value proposition.

Shaped by insights from interviews with library leaders and examples from the research library community,⁵ the Library Beyond the Library framework offers a tool to aid research library leaders in strategic planning aimed at elevating the library's visibility and impact within the institutional research mission. The framework elements prompt important strategic questions, such as:

1. What research support services and expertise could your library develop in response to institutional goals and priorities?
2. What partnership opportunities exist with other campus units to provide services in support of institutional research priorities, and how could your library work to structure them effectively for your campus community's needs?
3. How might your library communicate its increasingly complex and evolving research support roles and value to stakeholders? What are the key value propositions your library offers?

Engaging with the broader campus is not new for libraries, but today's environment—characterized by the transformational themes of increased library investment in research support and the subsequent evolution of the library's value proposition—amplifies the importance of doing so. The three framework elements of strategic alignment, collaboration, and storytelling provide valuable opportunities for research libraries to reinforce the deep and expanding value proposition they afford to their parent institutions.

The focus on research support in this report reflects an area of particular interest to research libraries, including those whose leaders participated in this project. However, the Library Beyond the Library framework can be applied to any library type or service area to evaluate current operations and how they can be adapted to deliver greater institutional and community impact. Figure 1 visualizes the Library Beyond the Library framework. The following sections explore each element with examples that illustrate their practical application to research libraries.



Figure 1. The Library Beyond the Library framework

Strategic alignment

Higher education institutions are facing a rapidly changing landscape, from shifting research and learning practices to budgetary constraints to new expectations. Research libraries can demonstrate their role as critical partners in their campus communities by aligning strategically with institutional priorities, particularly research-focused goals. The library leaders we consulted for this project unanimously emphasized the importance of aligning the library with institutional strategic goals, or risk losing relevance—and, ultimately, resources.

Through strategic alignment with the parent institution’s priorities, libraries extend their impact in new ways by anchoring internal priorities to broader institutional strategic goals. While this may reshape or supplant traditional priorities like collection building, it positions libraries as essential contributors to institutional success. Points of engagement and impact within the university’s research enterprise become new measures of library value, replacing traditional metrics like collection size.

Strategic alignment with the institution is an active and reciprocal process, not just merely reactive. Libraries maintain relevance by aligning their priorities with institutional goals while simultaneously influencing those goals through their expertise. By focusing on enduring values rather than specific activities like collection building, libraries can adapt to changing institutional demands and extend their role into new areas of strategic importance.

Libraries maintain relevance by aligning their priorities with institutional goals while simultaneously influencing those goals through their expertise.

The growing importance of strategic alignment

As universities evolve to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive and dynamic higher education landscape, research libraries must adapt by aligning their priorities more closely than ever with institutional strategic goals. Lorcan Dempsey and Constance Malpas observe that “[t]he most important long-term influence on the library is the requirement placed on it by changing patterns of research and learning. These changing patterns, in turn, are shaped by the focus of the parent university or college and the directions it is taking.”⁶

In a 2018 study, Malpas et al. noted that “libraries are not ends in themselves. They serve the communities and organizations of which they are a part—they serve the interests of their parent universities and colleges.”⁷ This study found that shifts in library service portfolios correlate with institutional efforts to optimize business models and strategic directions in higher education’s competitive landscape. Their survey of nearly 600 library directors found that a majority of respondents believe their resource allocation to service areas within five years “will bring library services even closer to the optimum institutional strategy fit,”⁸ suggesting a steady increase in alignment between institutional and library priorities. A 2022 Ithaka S+R report reinforced this finding, highlighting the need for research libraries to align with organizational strategy, particularly around research productivity and growth.⁹

Strategic alignment helps libraries sustain relevance among institutional stakeholders. One interview participant’s experience illustrates this urgency: “[Library leadership at my institution] has understood that ‘if you don’t make sure the library is relevant and at the absolute center of the institution over time, you will just drop off the agenda.’” The consequences of “dropping off the agenda” are clear: diminished budgets, staffing, influence, and impact.

Strategic alignment in practice

Research libraries are actualizing this alignment, demonstrated through stated goals and new services. For example, the University of Manchester’s strategic plan, *Our Future*, prioritizes the development of an open and responsible

research environment. This priority is echoed in the Library's Imagine 2030 strategic program, as "the library's response and contribution to the University's Strategic Plan."¹⁰

Imagine 2030 outlines concrete library actions supporting Manchester's open research aspirations, including the creation of an Office of Open Research under library leadership. This office serves as "the focal point for Open Research activity at The University of Manchester, enabling the University to continue to operate at the leading edge of this global agenda."¹¹

The strategic plan emphasizes the library's essential role in institutional priorities: "The Library will play an integral role in the research lifecycle, partnering with researchers from development to research impact, and will also enable the University to deliver its mission on open research, media and the formation of legal systems." More broadly, it positions the library to "make a significant contribution to the reputation and status of The University of Manchester as one of the world's great libraries within one of the world's great universities."¹²

At Clemson University, the Libraries have established an open scholarship unit and expanded their services to digital humanities, scholarly communications, data management, and data visualization to support its parent institution's research goals. This new service bundle supports the university's ambitious vision to double research expenditures by 2035 as part of a broader goal to achieve membership in the Association of American Universities (AAU), a prestigious consortium of leading American research universities.¹³ The 2024-2027 Clemson Libraries strategic plan directly maps library objectives to these institutional priorities:

- Fuel groundbreaking research through strategic resource acquisition and enhanced access
- Empower a flourishing scholarly research ecosystem
- Gain prominence in data research services management and support.¹⁴

These examples demonstrate how two research libraries are developing services in close alignment with institutional goals, such as open research and research productivity.

Activities evolve, but the mission endures

As library expertise and services evolve, some library staff members may struggle to connect their expertise and responsibilities with institutional goals. Library leadership must help staff see how library skills translate into new service areas. Helen Williams, Metadata Manager of the London School of Economics and Political Science, connected her team's metadata management skills to institutional research productivity and impact priorities. Team members leveraged their skills in metadata creation for a wide diversity of institutional research outputs, managing persistent identifiers, and contributing to institutional reputation management.

Williams recognized the urgency: “if we just kept doing what we were doing, within a few years’ time we would not have a lot to do.”¹⁵ Her leadership in proactively seeking connections between team expertise and institutional priorities highlighted the transferability of core skills like metadata management to emerging areas of strategic interest—both to non-library stakeholders and internal staff.

Even as libraries apply their expertise to new activities, the core values of the library must remain a constant North Star driving its work. One interviewee emphasized that library identity must stem from its values rather than activities:

If you derive your identity from what you do (that is changing), then you have an identity problem. If you derive your identity from your values, then you can smoothly move into the future because this credibility, this worthiness is very valuable and . . . needed.

But if your identity is based on managing printed books, then you have an issue. . . . If that were your core business, we would be out of business now.”

By emphasizing their enduring role as information stewards, rather than specific activities that may decline in importance or become obsolete, libraries can adapt to changing institutional priorities, contribute relevant expertise, and maintain a resilient value proposition. This mission-driven approach ensures libraries remain relevant, even as technologies, services, skillsets, research and learning practices, and institutional expectations evolve. Interview participants shared examples of their core message, such as “We are the university’s content manager” and “We’re experts at managing information.” Concise, consistent messaging of this kind helps connect evolving library expertise and services to an overarching, steady library mission, even as that mission extends into new areas of institutional strategic interest.

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It should be noted that the unchanging aspect of the library’s role—its mission, its values—intersects with institutional priorities in another way. Strategic interaction can be more than top-down alignment. Libraries increasingly influence university strategy in areas like open science or research data management through roles on campus committees and working groups, as well as the creation of new services. Libraries become active agents in institutional strategic priorities by both shaping and advancing them.

Through strategic alignment, the library extends beyond the library in new ways by anchoring its internal priorities to broader institutional strategic goals. While this may reshape or supplant traditional priorities like collection building, it positions libraries as essential contributors to institutional success.

Collaboration

The partnerships that research libraries forge with other campus units to deliver services and expertise form the basis of the collaboration element of the Library Beyond the Library framework. Partnerships often coalesce around decentralized campus efforts to support the same institutional strategic priorities to which libraries are aligning, creating a powerful driver for cross-unit cooperation.

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The importance and scope of cross-campus partnerships for research libraries are growing. Sheila Corral observed a decade ago that:

Operational convergence (i.e., separate services/departments collaborating to coordinate their activities to improve conference and effectiveness) . . . is arguably more prevalent than ever, with libraries extending and deepening their collaborations and partnerships beyond IT and educational development colleagues to other professional services, such as research offices.¹⁶

Since the time of Corral's observation, the need to coordinate or partner with other units has been amplified by the emergence of new opportunities to support and advance the institutional research enterprise. As institutions expand research support services across the research lifecycle, service areas like research data management (RDM) often require expertise distributed across multiple campus units, requiring greater coordination among units that may not have previously worked together. A white paper resulting from a Canadian workshop on institutional RDM strategies acknowledged this interconnection between stakeholder groups and recommends:

To ensure the successful implementation of an institution's RDM strategy, all units providing RDM services and support—including (but not necessarily limited to) research offices, IT, and libraries—must coordinate, collaborate and communicate to provide effective, consistent support to researchers.¹⁷

Organizing research support capacities into a cohesive offering requires multiunit collaboration to maximize visibility and impact. Failing to collaborate risks a fragmented, potentially duplicative collection of services with low visibility and adoption, ultimately failing to meet researcher needs and address institutional research priorities.

Incentives for library partnerships

Why choose partnership over autonomy? The reasons for adopting the collaborative approach vary widely across specific circumstances, but in our interviews with library leaders, several common factors emerged that incentivize library participation in cross-unit partnerships:

- **Improve outreach and visibility**—Libraries may lack visibility in emerging service areas, making stakeholder outreach and buy-in difficult.
- **Expand their pool of expertise**—Supporting scholars across the research lifecycle requires expertise that resides outside of libraries, such as proposal development, grants administration, and research integrity and compliance.
- **Stretch resources further**—Budget limitations often prevent libraries from funding comprehensive new services independently, even if they wanted to.
- **Scale operations and offerings**—Library-only offerings may not achieve a minimum efficient scale of operation, increasing costs and diluting impact.
- **Make service offerings more efficient**—Independent library services may compete with similar campus offerings, wasting resources and sub-optimally fulfilling institutional goals.¹⁸

Choosing collaboration with other campus units should be a strategic decision, and in some cases, it may, in fact, not be the right choice.¹⁹ But as our interviewees' experiences suggest, collaboration can help embed the library within institutional research support ecosystems, rather than risk becoming an isolated, potentially low-visibility service provider. Collaboration can also translate unique library expertise and capacities into recognized and valued "competitive advantages" for the library as they are deployed and create impact in cross-unit partnerships. All of this creates fertile ground to find opportunities for the library to establish itself as a valuable or even indispensable partner in fulfilling core institutional research strategy.

As libraries collaborate across campus, they build networks with colleagues in other units that grow as library staff cycle through projects.

Another benefit of cross-unit partnerships is the opportunity to build valuable personal relationships across the institution. As libraries collaborate across campus, they build networks with colleagues in other units that grow as library

staff cycle through projects. These networks become invaluable sources of shared expertise and intelligence, forming the foundation for future partnerships. One interviewee emphasized the importance of "the longstanding and almost instinctive cultivation of close personal and professional relationships as an entrée to building alliances and partnerships."

A foundational principle for cross-unit collaboration is that expertise is most valuable when it is visible and portable. As research libraries develop new research support services, library workers also deploy new specialized skills in areas such as GIS, data science, and research analytics. Evolving library expertise must be visible to library stakeholders and portable, so librarians can share it beyond internal library workflows. Highlighting expertise beyond traditional roles demonstrates library relevance, supports institutional priorities, and fosters cross-campus collaborations. This shifts perceptions of libraries from being book-centric to expertise-driven, which is itself a strong incentive for cross-unit partnerships.

From informal to formal partnerships

Cross-unit collaborations vary considerably in structure and intensity. Some take the form of informal, ad hoc efforts operating through handshake agreements between unit leaders. This may be especially true during the early stages of collaboration. For example, one library leader described how partnerships on their campus often begin with a loose "coalition of the willing" among campus units, prioritizing pilots and prototypes that demonstrate results before requesting financial support. Successful partnerships may transition to more formal arrangements once they prove valuable for all partners, and several of our interviewees also remarked upon how partnership structures can evolve over time.

The University of Waterloo's bibliometrics and research impact (BRI) program began informally when a single librarian developed resources to help faculty understand their research profiles and impact. As institutional focus on research productivity and impact intensified and multiple stakeholders expressed interest, the campus convened a working group that produced a white paper on bibliometrics outlining responsible use of research metrics at individual and institutional levels. The library appointed a BRI librarian who develops services for scholars and institutional units. The BRI librarian also coordinates an informal campus-wide community of practice and collaborates closely with the research office, institutional research, and other campus units to provide leadership, training, and support for practitioners using bibliographic tools across the institution. Through this semi-formal role, the library delivers valued services in support of institutional priorities while elevating its own visibility and expertise in a strategic area.²⁰

More formal partnership arrangements establish clear operational structures, often supported by a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that delineates responsibilities, accountability, cost-sharing, and administrative arrangements. For

example, Montana State University's Research Alliance co-locates research support units within the main library, including research development, cyberinfrastructure, and library research services. This centralized hub enhances researcher support, raises the visibility of all participating units, and positions the library as a key player in advancing institutional research goals. This space-sharing arrangement requires significant coordination and commitment from all partners and is therefore governed by an MOU that clearly articulates roles and responsibilities. The Research Alliance amplifies impact through shared resources and coordination and illustrates how formally structured partnerships can support and sustain the deep collaboration necessary to achieve this outcome.²¹

Purposeful, not reflexive partnerships

Libraries benefit most by prioritizing partnerships that align with institutional goals while addressing specific gaps in library capacity. Partnership for the sake of partnership is rarely an effective strategy. Cross-unit partnerships cost money and consume limited organizational capacity; therefore, entering a new partnership requires careful consideration and a willingness to decline opportunities if they don't align with current goals and circumstances. One interviewee emphasized that their library is "thoughtful" in selecting partners. In other words, a partnership should represent a strategic choice, rather than a reflexive response.

Cross-unit partnerships cost money and consume limited organizational capacity; therefore, entering a new partnership requires careful consideration and a willingness to decline opportunities if they don't align with current goals and circumstances.

Virginia Tech Libraries exemplify this approach by intentionally prioritizing partnerships that emphasize collaboration toward shared goals, with mutual respect for each partner's expertise and commitments. For example, the library partners with Faculty Affairs and the Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness to develop and maintain the campus-wide scholarly activities and research information management system (RIMS), aggregating content from multiple data sources. Each unit has its own responsibilities that contribute to the mutual goal of collecting data and providing appropriate access to analysis and insights about scholarly and teaching activities.²²

Strategic selectivity is essential. Each collaboration opportunity is a deliberate strategic choice rather than an automatic response. The specific criteria for determining the outcome of that choice will vary with institutional context, but the Virginia Tech example, supported by perspectives shared by our interviewees, suggests that a good place to start is to prioritize opportunities in which each partner contributes distinct expertise toward common goals. Partner responsibilities should be clearly defined and allocated.

Social interoperability is an essential skillset for librarians to leverage to establish and sustain successful collaborations. Social interoperability is the ability to foster productive collaboration and mutual understanding with colleagues in other units. Relationships between library and institutional leadership help align library priorities with institutional strategy, while cross-unit peer networks provide foundations for collaborations and partnerships. Regular engagement with stakeholders ensures the library stays attuned to institutional needs and effectively communicates its value. The OCLC Research report *Social Interoperability in Research Support*²³ explores the network of institutional units adjacent to the library in the provision of major categories of research support services and offers strategies and tactics for establishing and maintaining successful cross-unit relationships.

The collaboration element of the Library Beyond the Library framework demonstrates how libraries move beyond the library to combine their expertise, services, and other capacities with those of other units to address institutional needs and priorities. As libraries transition from the traditional collections-focused model, these multi-unit partnerships become increasingly important for integrating library expertise and other capacities into the research lifecycle at the point of need, amplifying their visibility and adoption, and ultimately, highlighting the library's continued indispensability to the institutional research enterprise.

Storytelling

None of the innovations in services and operations that libraries are making can be impactful if the library's role is invisible to its stakeholders, including library users, partners, and institutional decision-makers. This is why the narratives that the library tells about itself are a critical component of the Library Beyond the Library framework. For libraries, narrative and storytelling are more than communication—they shape institutional understanding of the library's value proposition.

Rewriting the narrative from outdated to future-focused

Research libraries must demonstrate their impact on institutional priorities and stakeholder needs through evidence of engagement and impact. This requires showcasing how libraries support the institution's research mission and how librarianship is evolving to strengthen that support. Emerging approaches include emphasizing library expertise, data-driven storytelling, and investing in professional communications capacity.

Campus stakeholders often fail to recognize how libraries can contribute to emerging institutional research priorities. Traditionally, the library's story has been of a physical, centrally located repository at the heart of campus where faculty and students access print collections.²⁴ The persistence of this collections-centric

narrative risks positioning the library as an isolated, static campus entity. One library leader cautioned that this outdated narrative of libraries allows stakeholders to “sometimes dismiss [the library] altogether, like you’re irrelevant.” An interview participant in a previous OCLC Research study similarly expressed frustration that significant library research support offerings are overlooked when stakeholders don’t understand the depth and complexity of library services and expertise:

“Because so often, librarians are forgotten. Our expertise is completely forgotten, and we’re the last people [to be considered]. So faculty are shocked when they realize, ‘oh, you can help me with my data? Oh, you can help me think through this . . . publishing considerations, whatever it might be.’”²⁵

Instead, as libraries allocate more resources toward research support services and other institutional priorities, it is vital that they develop a strategy for communicating a new narrative to stakeholders that describes the full scope of evolving library contributions in compelling, accessible ways. One library leader we spoke with repeatedly urged libraries to “rewrite the narrative” and present themselves as “interdisciplinary, intellectual hubs that offer dynamic spaces for exploration and collaboration.” This requires libraries to change both their messaging and their evidence.

Interview participants emphasized the importance of raising awareness about library expertise beyond traditional collection stewardship activities. Library expertise in managing information and data is needed everywhere on campus, helping recalibrate stakeholders’ perceptions of how the library can provide value. Another interviewee echoed this point, adding that library expertise is distinct and should be combined more frequently with the expertise of other units. One interview participant encouraged libraries to “emphasize the expertise,” showcasing capacities that move stakeholder perceptions beyond book-centric views.

Libraries can emphasize the value of their expertise by regularly sharing evidence with key stakeholders; several interviewees described active relationship management activities, where they meet regularly with college deans to discuss current contributions and identify future opportunities. One person described offering each dean an overview of library support for their college, using data and visualizations to support their narrative.

Data-driven storytelling

Narratives about library value are strengthened when supported by compelling evidence. One interview participant described using proxy log data to quantify resource usage across the university community, tracking numbers for both the resources accessed and users engaged. Other libraries have developed local systems to track service interactions and workshop participation. New metrics should highlight how services advance institutional goals, support partnerships,

and measure engagement. Many metrics will capture engagement—through workshops, class instruction, and consultations—as a key aspect of library impact. While many libraries now track these metrics, little standardization exists across institutions or in reporting to statistics aggregators like the Association of Research Libraries.

New metrics should highlight how services advance institutional goals, support partnerships, and measure engagement.

By subdividing these data by academic unit, libraries can create a compelling message for academic deans about the value delivered to their faculty. As one interviewee noted, demonstrating that library expertise is embedded within university-wide activities—particularly projects that yield significant research funding—provides concrete evidence of the library’s institutional importance. This approach supplements traditional metrics, like circulation, collection size, and gate counts, which risk reinforcing outdated narratives of the library as a repository, particularly in an era of declining circulation. One library leader we spoke with reinforced this by noting, “Nobody cares how many volumes we have.”

The University of Pennsylvania Libraries demonstrates support for research and learning in its *2023 Selected Facts* report. Using a custom business intelligence tool developed with Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) support,²⁶ the University Libraries quantifies library engagements across workshops, class instruction, class visits, and consultations, integrating this with data from several additional sources, such as gate counts, interlibrary loan transactions, COUNTER data, EZProxy log data, and discovery tool use. In total, they report nearly 44 million service events in 2023, quantifying every library interaction. The report metrics illustrate “our evolving engagements and the need for research libraries generally to design new metrics that capture and inform the growing intersection of library service with the academic enterprise.” Crucially, the University Libraries’ narrative directly connects library services to research productivity, competitiveness, and institutional prestige.²⁷

Investing in professional communications capacity

As the library value proposition becomes more complex, intentional communication strategies become essential for ensuring stakeholders understand library contributions. Libraries may benefit from increased investments in professional communications capacity to deliver focused, consistent messaging to internal stakeholders. One interview participant observed that research libraries are experiencing a “silent revolution” of increased investment in professional communications staff—a strategic shift driven by the growing complexity of the library message.

Professional campus communicators can craft rich stories about library impact for both internal and external audiences, as seen in the 2022 University of Waterloo annual report. This publication offers a set of “impact stories,” such as “Cutting through the noise: Librarians can help with systematic literature reviews,” that demonstrate how librarians support complex research challenges. These narratives, enhanced by archival images from the library’s GIS collection, illustrate the library’s role in supporting students, research, and the broader community.²⁸

The stories element of the Library Beyond the Library framework describes how libraries can extend the library beyond the library by actively shaping perceptions of the library’s value proposition among institutional stakeholders. This contrasts sharply with a passive approach that allows nonlibrary entities to form their own narratives, based on outdated perceptions. The stakes are high. Narratives are not just good stories—they also drive perceptions, decision-making, and influence. Relentless articulation of the library’s evolving value is necessary to ensure that it is clearly understood by campus stakeholders.

The stories element of the Library Beyond the Library framework describes how libraries can extend the library beyond the library by actively shaping perceptions of the library’s value proposition among institutional stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The Library Beyond the Library framework offers research libraries a strategic roadmap to respond to changes in higher education and library practice. Through strategic alignment with institutional priorities, purposeful collaboration with campus partners, and intentional and data-driven storytelling, libraries can demonstrate their continued relevance and impact within the institutional research enterprise as they extend beyond traditional collections-focused services while hewing closely to their core mission of organizing and managing information.

One conclusion drawn from our process of developing the LBL framework is that *agility* is the watchword of the future. Libraries operate in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments²⁹ that demand agility. As institutional priorities, technologies, and user needs evolve, libraries must continuously assess and recalibrate their services, reducing some services while expanding others. To create flexible operational configurations to meet evolving needs, libraries may need to leverage new campus partnerships and formalize existing ones. Agility also extends to storytelling: as library services and expertise evolve, its value proposition will change, requiring fresh narratives.

There are costs to moving the library beyond the library—change requires investment. But as our conversations with library leaders highlighted, there are also costs from standing still. Libraries that fail to align with institutional priorities risk diminished relevance, impact, and influence within the university, potentially affecting future staffing and budgets. Those that establish research support services in isolation from other campus units risk operating at suboptimal scale with limited user reach, undermining both efficiency and effectiveness. Perhaps most critically, failing to rewrite the narrative of the evolving library value proposition allows others to shape the library's story instead, often reverting to outdated, collections-centric perceptions that diminish recognition of contemporary library contributions.

Research libraries have an extraordinary opportunity to reshape operational practices and configurations to meet the needs of the institutional research mission, as well as redefine institutional perceptions of library value and roles. The path forward requires libraries to anchor their identity in mission rather than activities, adapt nimbly to institutional priorities, and maintain organizational agility in volatile environments. The Library Beyond the Library framework provides a strategic foundation for libraries to ensure their continued centrality to the research enterprise, enabling libraries to demonstrate that they are not merely repositories of the past but dynamic partners in shaping the future of scholarship and research.

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- Saskia Scheltjens, Rijksmuseum
- Jon Shaw, Vanderbilt University

We extend particular thanks to Saskia Scheltjens whose leadership at the Rijksmuseum helped inspire this work. Her conviction that “the library needed to be more than a library,” led her to embed the library within the Rijksmuseum research services department, creating what she described as a “fundamental hybrid reality.”¹

We also particularly thank Doralyn Rossman, Jason Clarke, and Kenning Arlitsch (former dean) from Montana State University. The vision and implementation of a multi-unit Research Alliance housed within the MSU library also significantly informed our work.²

Our investigation benefited greatly from many informal conversations with library leaders within the OCLC Research Library Partnership (RLP). Participants in the RLP Research Support Leadership Roundtable discussed topics like cross-campus collaboration, evolving library organizational structures, and open research, which provided insights that informed our developing library beyond the library concept.

Informal conversations with other library leaders also shaped our work, and we wish to particularly thank:

- Virginia (Ginny) Pannabecker
- Anne Rauh, Syracuse University
- Evan Simpson, Northeastern University

As always, this report could never have been published without the talents of OCLC's communications professionals. We'd like to especially acknowledge Erica Melko's indefatigable editorial work over the course of multiple drafts and revisions.

1. <https://hangingtogether.org/reinventing-collaboration/>
2. <https://hangingtogether.org/social-interoperability-at-montana-state-university/>

APPENDIX: PROJECT METHODS

To conduct research for this project, we engaged in interviews, desk research, and direct conversations with library leaders through roundtable discussions.

To test and refine our ideas for the library beyond the library framework, we conducted semi-structured interviews with ten library leaders from ten research libraries in nine interviews (one interview had two participants). Interviews took place in late 2024 and early 2025. Each 60-minute interview was conducted via videoconferencing technology with at least two researchers present. Before each interview, participants received the interview protocol and general information about the project. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for exclusive use by research team members.

We selected interview participants based on their roles as library leaders at research libraries, primarily at research universities, and for their diverse perspectives across several national environments. The researchers prioritized leaders working at OCLC Research Library Partnership institutions.

This report quotes these interviews throughout, but while we identify participants in the Acknowledgments section, we do not attribute specific comments to individuals and use nongendered pronouns when referring to interview participants in the report.

Research Library Partnership (RLP) leadership roundtable discussions provided us with insights from a broader group of library leaders. The RLP convenes partner institutions on topics of interest in a traditional roundtable format, providing an opportunity for information sharing, benchmarking, and peer learning. In 2024 and 2025, we led three roundtable discussions on topics related to cross-campus collaboration in research support, evolving library structures to scale research support services, and open research as a strategic priority.

These discussions were synthesized into blog summaries and shared with the broader library community during the project and provided documented examples of emerging priorities, services, and partnerships in research libraries. Library leaders from 55 separate institutions in five countries participated in these discussions; most participants were affiliated with university research libraries.

To complement these insights from library leaders, we supplemented our findings with desk research by closely examining the annual reports of nine RLP research libraries in the US, Canada, and the UK. We limited our examination to annual reports from 2023 and after, for both currency and to reduce post-pandemic focus. Document availability largely determined our selection.

We examined how annual reports described the library's value through both statistics and narrative, with particular attention to emphasized metrics (i.e., circulation, collection size, workshop attendance, and research consultations). We also observed how many libraries emphasized alignment between library services and campus strategic priorities.

We synthesized findings across these data sources, comparing themes that emerged from interview transcripts with insights documented from roundtable discussions and patterns observed in annual reports. This multi-source approach enabled us to distinguish between individual institutional experiences and broader trends affecting the research library community, helping us identify the three components of the Library beyond the Library framework.

This work builds upon previous OCLC Research efforts that have examined the evolving scholarly record, library collaboration, and growth in research support service provision.

NOTES

1. Steven Mintz, "The Evolving University Library," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 28, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/2024/10/28/whats-gained-whats-lost-evolving-university-library>.
2. See, for example, OCLC Research studies of library efforts to acquire research data management capacity or social interoperability in research support services:

OCLC Research. n.d. "The Realities of Research Data Management." Accessed February 16, 2026. <https://www.oclc.org/research/publications/2017/oclcresearch-research-data-management.html>.

Bryant, Rebecca, Annette Dortmund, and Brian Lavoie. 2020. *Social Interoperability in Research Support: Cross-Campus Partnerships and the University Research Enterprise*. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research. <https://doi.org/10.25333/wyrd-n586>.
3. In some countries, national research assessment exercises, like the UK's Research Excellence Framework, also shape institutional priorities.
4. Bryant, Rebecca, Annette Dortmund, and Brian Lavoie. 2020. *Social Interoperability in Research Support: Cross-Campus Partnerships and the University Research Enterprise*. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research. <https://doi.org/10.25333/wyrd-n586>.
5. See the Appendix for a brief description of the methods used to create the framework.
6. Dempsey, Lorcan, and Constance Malpas. 2018. "Academic Library Futures in a Diversified University System." In *Higher Education in the Era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, edited by Nancy Gleason. Palgrave Macmillan, 67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0194-0>.
7. Malpas, Constance, Roger Schonfeld, Rona Stein, Lorcan Dempsey, and Deanna Marcum. 2018. *University Futures, Library Futures: Aligning Library Strategies with Institutional Directions*, 9. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research. <https://doi.org/10.25333/WS5K-DD86>.
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13. Clemson University. n.d. *Clemson Elevate: Our Bold Strategy for Clemson*, 15. Accessed February 16, 2026. <https://media.clemson.edu/ows/web/pdfs/clemson-elevate-strategic-plan.pdf>.
14. Clemson University Libraries. 2025. *Strategic Plan '24-27*, 7. Accessed February 16, 2026. <https://media.clemson.edu/ows/web/pdfs/clemson-elevate-strategic-plan.pdf>.
15. Bryant, Rebecca. "Futureproofing library teams," *Hanging Together, the OCLC Research blog*, 19 November 2024. <https://hangingtogether.org/futureproofing-library-teams/>.
16. Corral, Sheila. 2014. "Designing Libraries for Research Collaboration in the Network World: An Exploratory Study, 37" *LIBER Quarterly* 24 (1): 17–48, 37. <https://doi.org/10.18352/lq.9525>.
17. Abel, Jennifer et al. 2025. *Building an Inter-Institutional and Cross-Functional Research Data Management Community: From Strategy to Implementation. Report and Recommendations from the 2023 Workshop at the University of Waterloo*, 5, 30. <https://hdl.handle.net/10012/21683>.
18. In a study of research information management in the United States, we found that most institutions in our study had multiple RIM systems, leading to duplication of effort and diluted impact.

Bryant, Rebecca, Jan Fransen, Pablo de Castro, Brenna Helmstutler, and David Scherer. 2021. *Research Information Management in the United States: Part 1—Findings and Recommendations*, 5. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research. <https://doi.org/10.25333/8hgy-s428>.

19. OCLC has conducted significant research into library collaboration: OCLC Research. n.d. "Library Collaboration Research." <https://www.oclc.org/research/areas/library-collaboration-research.html>.

One report specifically addresses collaboration as a strategic choice:

Lavoie, Brian. 2022. *Library Collaboration as a Strategic Choice: Evaluating Options for Acquiring Capacity*. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research. <https://doi.org/10.25333/mt16-0c57>.

20. University of Waterloo. n.d. "Bibliometric and research impact services." Accessed May 27, 2025. <https://uwaterloo.ca/library/services/bibliometric-and-research-impact-services>.

University of Waterloo Working Group on Bibliometrics, et al. 2016. *White Paper: Measuring research outputs through bibliometrics*." University of Waterloo. <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/items/1fd6ca33-3c73-4ad3-a0b2-da2c230ddadc>.

Namachchivaya, Beth Sandore. "Research library services on the BRI continuum: The University of Waterloo story." *Hanging Together, the OCLC Research blog*, 29 August 2022. <https://hangingtogether.org/research-library-services-on-the-bri-continuum-the-university-of-waterloo-story/>.

21. Bryant, Rebecca. "Lessons learned from implementing a research support hub in the library." *Hanging Together, the OCLC Research blog*, 31 March 2025. <https://hangingtogether.org/lessons-learned-from-implementing-a-research-support-hub-in-the-library/>.

22. Virginia Pannabecker, email message to Rebecca Bryant, December 13, 2024.

Further details about this effort are provided in: Bryant, Rebecca, et al. 2021. *Research Information Management in the United States: Part 2—Case Studies*, 28–36. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research. <https://doi.org/10.25333/qv1f-9e57>.

23. A detailed guide to strategies and tactics for building social interoperability is provided in: Bryant, Rebecca, Annette Dortmund, and Brian Lavoie. 2020. *Social Interoperability in Research Support: Cross-Campus Partnerships and the University Research Enterprise*. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research. <https://doi.org/10.25333/wyrd-n586>.

24. More generally, libraries of all descriptions have been yoked to the narrative that they are repositories of books—a narrative that has persisted even in the face of dramatic changes in the scope of library services. See, for example:

De Rosa, Cathy, Joanne Cantrell, Matthew Carlson, Peggy Gallagher, Janet Hawk, and Charlotte Sturtz. 2011. *Perceptions of Libraries, 2010: Context and Community*, 38–39. Dublin, Ohio: OCLC. https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/reports/2010perceptions/2010perceptions_all_singlepage.pdf.

A similar state of affairs exists for public libraries, whose services have evolved beyond books to include community health, job search support, maker spaces, and more, yet many segments of their communities may still view them primarily as a source of books and other information resources.

25. Bryant, Dortmund, and Lavoie. *Social Interoperability*, 12 (See note 4).
26. Zucca, Joe. 2013. "Business Intelligence Infrastructure for Academic Libraries." *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 8 (2): 172–182, 176–179. <https://doi.org/10.18438/B83G75>.
27. University of Pennsylvania Libraries. 2023. *Penn Libraries Selected Facts 2023*, 2, 5. https://metridoc.library.upenn.edu/PENN_LIBRARIES_FACTS_2023.pdf.
28. University of Waterloo. 2022. *2022 Library Annual Report*. Accessed May 28, 2025. <https://publications.uwaterloo.ca/library-annual-report-2022/>.
29. We've observed that VUCA—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—is a term growing in popularity with business leaders to refer to the increasing inability to make sense of a complex world. One of our interview participants used the term in the context of change management within their library, and we appreciate it as a sensemaking tool. Good resources to learn more about the term include:

Bennett, Nate and G James Lemoine. 2014. "What VUCA really means for you." *Harvard Business Review*, Jan-Feb 2014. <https://hbr.org/2014/01/what-vuca-really-means-for-you>.

Kraaijenbrink, Jeroen. 2018. "What does VUCA really mean?" *Forbes*, December 19. Last modified April 14, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeroenkraaijenbrink/2018/12/19/what-does-vuca-really-mean/>.

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6565 Kilgour Place
Dublin, Ohio 43017-3395

T: 1-800-848-5878

T: +1-614-764-6000

F: +1-614-764-6096

www.oclc.org/research

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