

## Future and Value: The Library as Strategic Partner

Antje Mays  
*University of Kentucky Libraries*, antjemays@uky.edu

Author ORCID Identifier: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6672-1973>

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# Future and Value: The Library as Strategic Partner

*Antje Mays, Director of Collections, University of Kentucky Libraries, antjemays@uky.edu*

## Abstract

Broader economic trends spawn budget pressures for education and libraries, prompting a plethora of studies on the value and relevance of libraries. Numerous reports on economic decline in libraries and studies with mixed pronouncements on the value of libraries have led to a negative self-image within the library profession. Yet libraries' leadership in connecting learners to knowledge is at the heart of producing many of the key skills sorely needed in robust societies and economies. Librarianship has many untapped opportunities for positioning itself as a prominent strategic partner. This paper outlines current research on the economic and societal context for libraries and higher education and summarizes the interactive exchanges from the 2018 Charleston Conference Lively Session on libraries' future strategies (<https://sched.co/GB2z>). Through live polling and discussion, session participants described their libraries as moderately integrated in their overall campuses and broader communities, yet also moderately isolated. Among key challenges, participants highlighted funding, fundamental shifts in scholarly communication, and changes across the higher education landscape. Opportunities for library professionals' enhanced roles include data visualization and new services, deeper integration in the broader community and scholarly communication, and preservation of the historical record. Unassigned societal problems suited to library professionals include promoting credible information, combating dumbing-down, and expanding research assistance to nonprofits and local governments. Ways to champion the profession include deeper project collaborations with students, measuring value-added impact on programs, and jargon-free conversations with nonlibrarians. Participants' many open-ended observations included value-added, not bound by legacy, flexibility, leadership, digital and technology, and empathy.

## I. Economic Macrotrends: Postgrowth, Saturation, Stagnation Theories

**Winter is coming: economic macrotrends.** As the financial crash of 2008 has accelerated trends toward erosion of broad-based and shared prosperity (Douglass, 2010), several economists including Clark (2016) and Gordon (2016) posit that the U.S. economy has reached technological saturation and therefore entered a postgrowth stagnation phase. The high-impact types of technological transformations that brought major economic growth in the past have run their course; any technological transformations still to unfold will only benefit high-end niche markets. The authors see the broader economy as evolving into a medieval-style economy with very small-sized high-end sectors, with the large bulk of the economy evolving into low-end service sectors such as cooking and cleaning where technological transformation is irrelevant. Consequently, the lack of broad-based prosperity puts pressures on higher education budgets (Douglass, 2010). The evolving nature of work demands ever-higher levels of analytical skills (Carnevale et al., 2011, 2012; Fadel, 2012; Onsomu, Ngware, & Manda, 2010; Schwab, 2018). Yet higher education's budgetary pressures are furthering the financial barriers to the higher education and skill enhancements that learners need for full participation in the economy. As higher education funding shortages continuously drive

up tuition, levels of student indebtedness continue to rise (Kuczera & Field, 2013; Palley, 2012). Some studies show gaps in knowledge and job readiness among college graduates (Arum & Roksa, 2010; Cappelli, 2011; Hart Research Associates, 2010). Consequently, some in the education and training debate question the value of college degrees (Cappelli, 2015).



**Figure 1. Economic winter.**



**Figure 2. Libraries feel economic chill.**

**Economic winter: snowing on libraries.** These budgetary pressures on public funding and higher education are felt in the library world, as postrecession library support and budgets are locked in stagnation or decline (Horrigan, 2015, 2016; Rosa, 2018). Stakeholders' perceptions of libraries are outdated, prompting attempts to assess libraries' value and ROI with mismatched and incomplete measures (King & Tenopir, 2013). Negative prognoses and negative value judgments have contributed to fear, uncertainty, and dissatisfaction in the library profession (Wolff-Eisenberg, 2016).

## II. Professions: Impact and Value Judgments

Perceptions of impact and value vary widely across professions. The financial industry serves as financial intermediary, providing the critical infrastructures for economic activity (United States Senate, 2017). Yet the importance of this role has historically not shielded the financial industry from blunders and poor judgment, with devastating consequences. The most recent instance of negative economic impact of poor judgment culminated in the 2008 financial crash. Exotic investment instruments were created as higher-yielding alternatives in a climate of low returns on savings. The securitized debts, built on adjustable-rate loans to borrowers with unverified incomes and unproven ability to repay, were packaged and marketed as high-return investment instruments but premised on faulty assumptions of safety. When these subprime loans inevitably

defaulted, the derivatives based on these loans weakened and their value collapsed and triggered a chain reaction: The value of the housing and other tangible assets financed by these subprime loans then fell sharply. The resulting reductions in property tax revenues for state and local governments then triggered steep budget cuts as well as furloughs and layoffs for public employees. The steady collapse of debt-based asset values also led to financial industry job losses. The job losses cascaded into other industries. As job losses spread further throughout the economy, more and more borrowers lost their homes and other loan-purchased assets, spurring further spread of income reductions and several major firms' bankruptcies. This cascade of financial collapses wrought widespread economic harm on a global scale (Bierman, 2010).

Yet after the crash and its aftermath, the financial industry did not declare itself unworthy of further existence. Instead, the profession sought to self-correct by instilling values and emphasizing ethics in business education (Sigurjonsson, Arnardottir, Vaiman, & Rikhardsson, 2015).

The library profession is highly trusted and widely known for creating positive impact. Proliferation of questionable information highlights the importance of trust and viable information: In a British survey of 2,000 adults conducted by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP, 2018), 66% of survey respondents agreed that it is harder than ever to find trustworthy information; 84% agreed that they trust information more when it is given by a professional; and 90% agreed that it is important to educate people on how to find trustworthy information. CILIP's survey respondents also ranked librarians highly among the most likely sources of trustworthy information (Figure 3).

In the United States, the State Library of Maine led a similar study. The 400 survey respondents ranked librarians near the top of most trusted professions, second only to nurses (Lockwood & Ritter, 2016) (Figure 4).

Several Pew Research Center studies corroborate these findings: Most Americans, in particular Millennials, value libraries for helping them find reliable and trustworthy information (Geiger, 2017). Libraries are respected as effective services providers—known for delivering what users need (Horrigan, 2015, 2016) and a natural ally in developing widely needed skills (OECD, 2012).

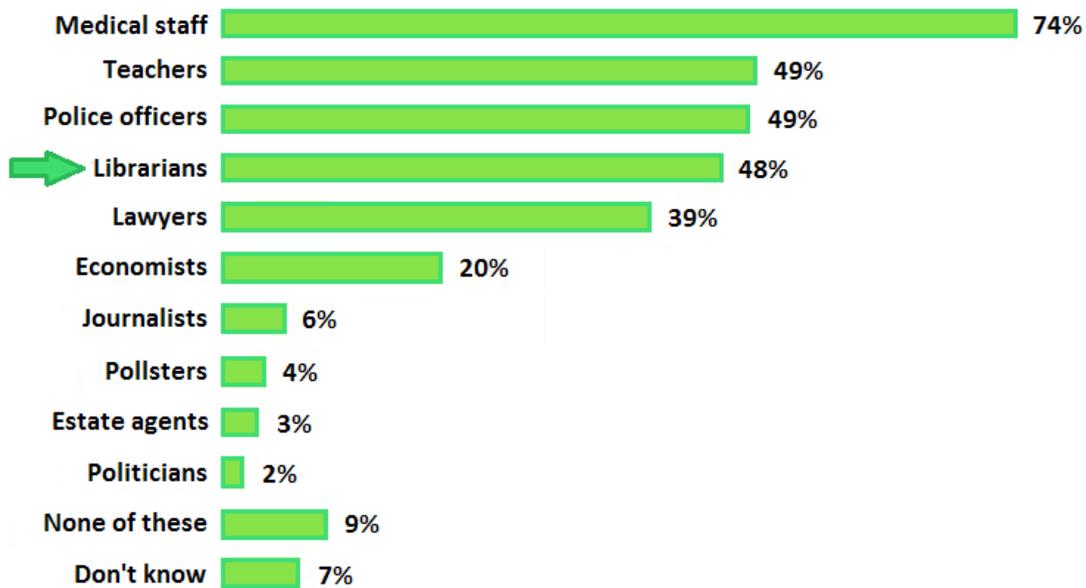


Figure 3. Librarians rank highly among most likely sources of trustworthy information (CILIP, 2018).

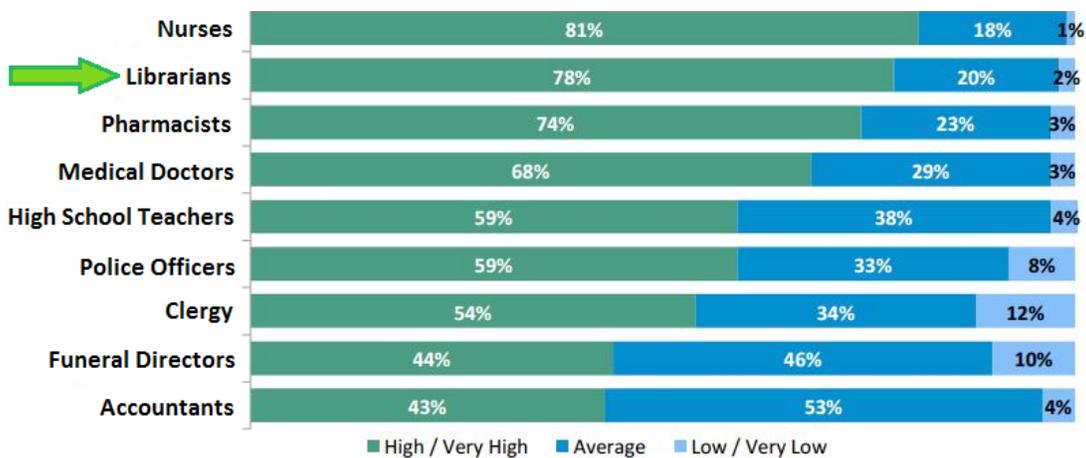


Figure 4. Librarians near top of most trusted professions (Lockwood & Ritter, 2016).

Yet despite these high levels of respect, the library profession is marred by a negative self-image and timid in recognizing its own value.

**A few positive library strategies:** How can library leaders promote a healthy sense of value in their organization and their constituencies? Business professors Kim and Mauborgne (2015) advise leaders to look to other industries for innovation inspiration and creative solutions to pressing problems. The business tradition of actively sharing expertise and efforts in the context of community service offers a blueprint for libraries. Soft advocacy extends beyond traditional library fundraising: Through expertise and partnering across campus and in the broader

community, library professionals build rapport and strengthen connections. Community engagement offers many opportunities to leverage expertise. Engaging with professionals in other industries further broadens the reach of library and information expertise. As a natural ally in skill development and economic development, librarians have a natural opening for reaching out and engaging with their local business communities (Onsomu et al., 2010).

### III. Charleston Conference Session: Interactive Live Poll Results

During the allotted time of 75 minutes, this Lively Session incorporated reflection exercises using the

cellphone-friendly Mentimeter live poll software. Owing to time constraints, no roll or attendance count was taken of the session participants. A total of nine questions were asked via live poll, with anonymous responses displaying on the presentation screen in real time: **Questions 1 and 2** covered the **basics** of session participants' organizations types and roles. **Questions 3 and 4** related to **library environments** and asked participants to rate their libraries' degrees of integration in and, respectively, isolation from their campuses and communities. **Questions 5 to 8** pertained to **the library and information profession's broader landscape of challenges and opportunities** and asked session participants' thoughts on the profession's key challenges and great opportunities, unassigned problems in society highly suitable for information professionals

### Part 1—Basics

The live polling began by gathering basic information about the participants to gauge the perspectives from which they saw challenges and opportunities for librarianship:

**Question 1: What type of organization are you with?** Most session participants were at university libraries, followed by 2–4-year college libraries (Figure 5).

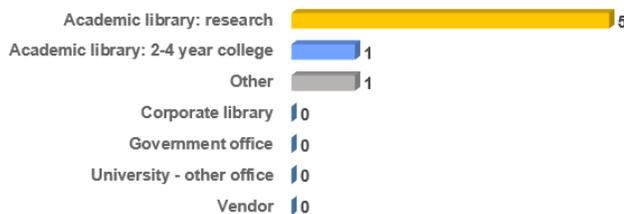


Figure 5. Live Poll Question 1: What type of organization are you with?

Choices	Votes	%
Academic library: research	5	71%
Academic library: 2–4 year college	1	14%
Other	1	14%
Corporate library	0	0%
Government office	0	0%
University—other office	0	0%
Vendor	0	0%
Total responses	7	100%

to take on, and actions that library professionals can take to be effective ambassadors for the profession. **Question 9** closed the live poll with a completely **free-form and open-ended** request for participants' **concluding thoughts**.

The open-ended answers were captured with open-ended quote boxes and a word cloud. The session's brisk pace limited the amount of time for respondents to type the answers on their phones. This resulted in a small number of hurried abbreviations. The images capturing the poll responses show the responses verbatim as entered. For clarity in displaying the raw data tables of poll responses, the few abbreviations were replaced by their full words, and the poll responses to each open-ended question are listed alphabetically.

**Question 2: What is your role?** Administrators were the most represented among the participants, followed by librarians (Figure 6).

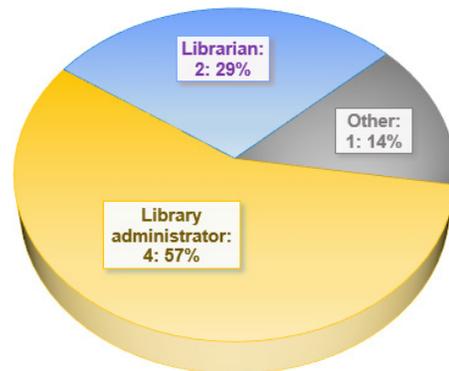


Figure 6. Live Poll Question 2: What is your role?

Choices	Votes	%
Library administrator	4	57%
Librarian	2	29%
Other	1	14%
Professor / teacher	0	0%
University administrator	0	0%
Researcher	0	0%
Vendor	0	0%
Total responses	7	100%

## Part 2—Library Environments: Integration vs. Isolation

Participants' poll entries revealed few extremes in perceptions of integration in the campuses and parent organizations or broader communities or isolation therefrom.

**Question 3: How integrated is your library in your broader organization and community?** This question was answered on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = "not at all" and 5 = "yes, very much so." Ratings for library integration in the campus and broader community

averaged slightly below mid-point, but not without variation in individual respondents' perceptions. The most marked divergence occurred in individual perceptions of being valued and supported by their administrators and stakeholders (Figure 7).

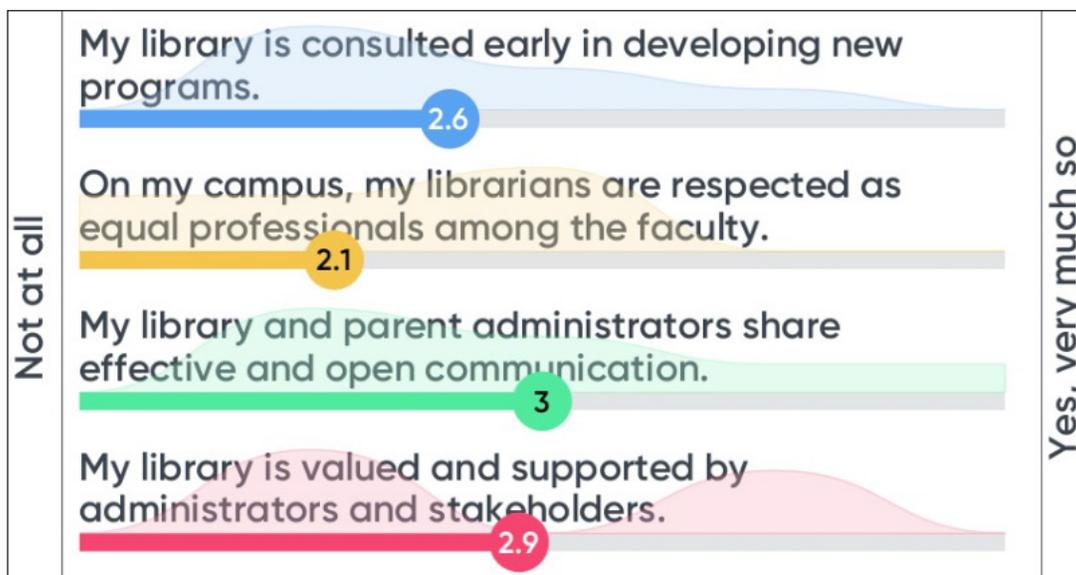


Figure 7. Live Poll Question 3: How integrated is your library in your broader organization and community?

Choices entered by 7 respondents	Choices 1–5 scale*					Weighted average
	1	2	3	4	5	
My library is consulted early in developing new programs.	0	4	2	1	0	2.57
On my campus, my librarians are respected as equal professionals among the faculty.	2	2	3	0	0	2.14
My library and parent administrators share effective and open communication.	0	3	2	1	1	3.00
My library is valued and supported by administrators and stakeholders.	0	4	0	3	0	2.86
Total number of responses for each scale value:	2	13	7	5	1	

\*Scale: 1 = not at all; 5 = yes, very much so

**Question 4: How isolated is your library from the organization and broader community?** This question was answered on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = "not at all" and 5 = "yes, very much so." Participants' isolation ratings for their libraries averaged slightly below

midpoint, but not without divergence in individual perceptions. Participants' responses were especially split on the degree of underappreciation for their libraries' information services (Figure 8).

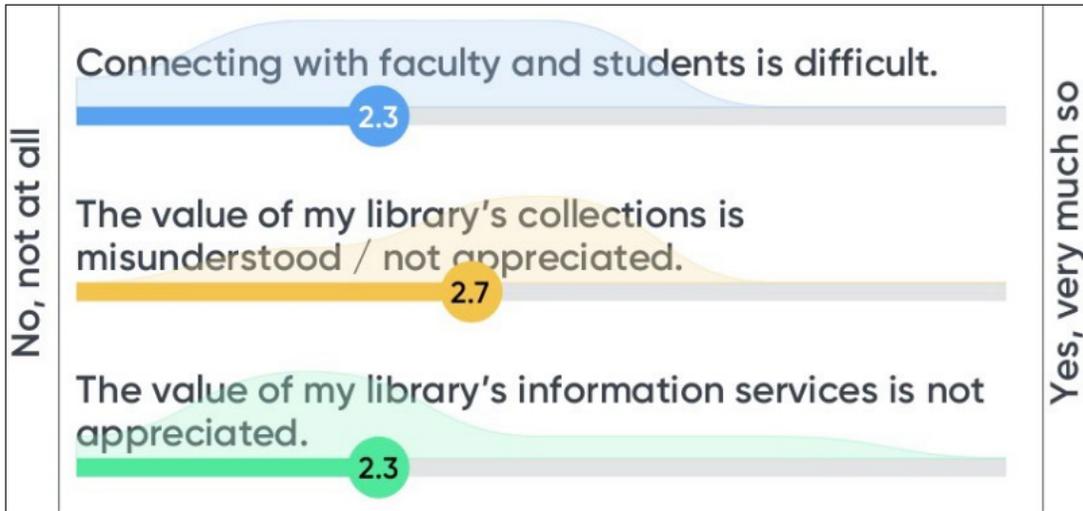


Figure 8. Question 4: How isolated is your library from the organization and broader community?

Choices entered by 7 respondents	Choices 1–5 scale*					Weighted average
	1	2	3	4	5	
Connecting with faculty and students is difficult.	1	3	3	0	0	2.29
The value of my library's collections is misunderstood / not appreciated.	0	2	5	0	0	2.71
The value of my library's information services is not appreciated.	1	4	1	1	0	2.29
Total number of responses for each scale value:	2	9	9	1	0	

\*Scale: 1 = not at all; 5 = yes, very much so

### Part 3—Information Professions: Challenges and Opportunities

Budget constraints topped the list of challenges, followed by shifts in higher education and in models for publishing and access rights. Shifts in scholarly communication, new services, promoting credible information, and connecting more broadly factored strongly among opportunities and unassigned societal problems for librarians to address.

**Question 5: What key challenges do you see for library / information professionals?** Budgets and funding topped the most-cited key challenges, followed by open access and scholarly communication (Figure 9).

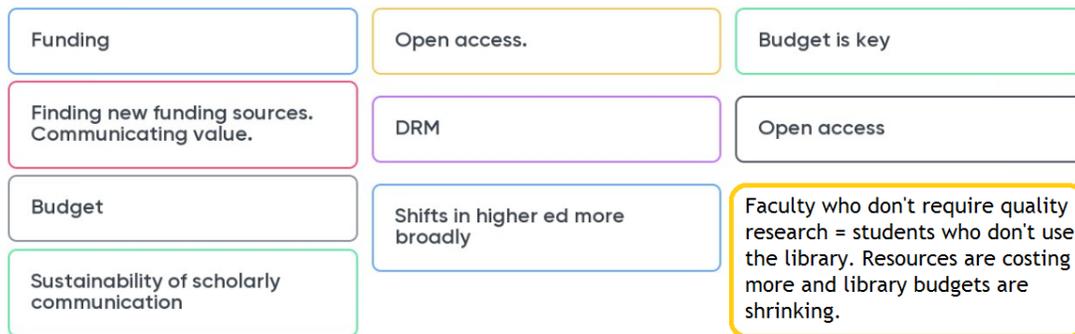
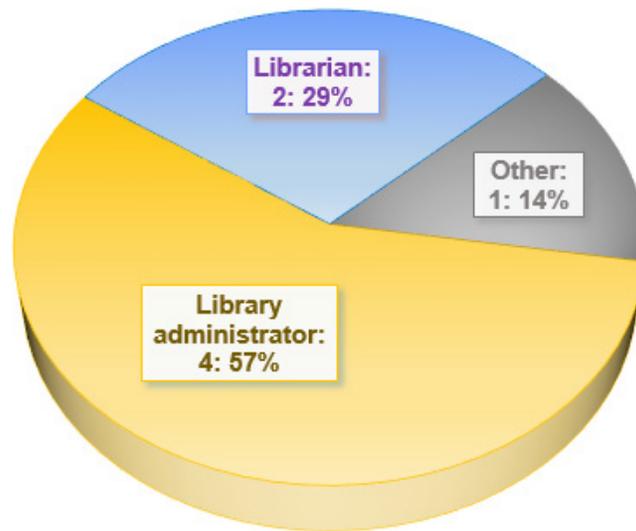


Figure 9. Question 5: What key challenges do you see for library / information professionals?

#### 10 responses from 5 respondents

1. Funding.
2. Open access.
3. Budget is key.
4. Finding new funding sources.  
Communicating value.
5. DRM.
6. Open access.
7. Budget.
8. Shifts in higher education more broadly.
9. Faculty who don't require quality research = students who don't use the library.  
Resources are costing more and library budgets are shrinking.
10. Sustainability of scholarly communication.

**Question 6: What great opportunities do you see for library / information professionals?** The main themes centered on stronger community integration and adopting nontraditional services to help preserve history and strengthen society’s information-evaluation skills (Figure 10).



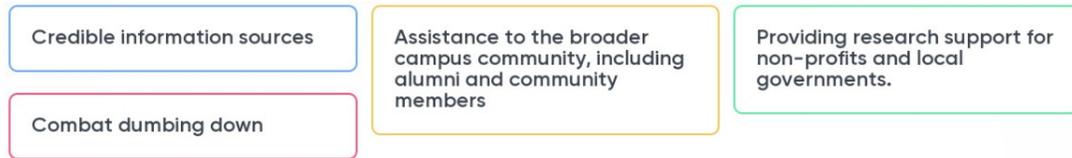
**Figure 10. Live Poll Question 6: What great opportunities do you see for library / information professionals?**

**7 responses from 5 respondents**

1. Moving into nontraditional areas and services.
2. Potential for greater integration with research and scholarly communications life cycles.
3. Credible source of reliable information in light of all the fake news.
4. Data visualization services / moving into other service areas.
5. Better integration to community.
6. Preserving social media networks for the historical record—beyond Web archiving, preserving nodes and pathways.
7. Preserving social media networks for the historical record—beyond Web archiving, preserving nodes and pathways. (This response was captured twice during the live-polling session, but the above live-poll image was edited by de-duping this entry.)

**Question 7: Society's unassigned problems: What needs are library professionals strongly suited to address?** Core themes focused on credible

information and education in society, and service outreach to broader communities with unmet information and research needs (Figure 11).



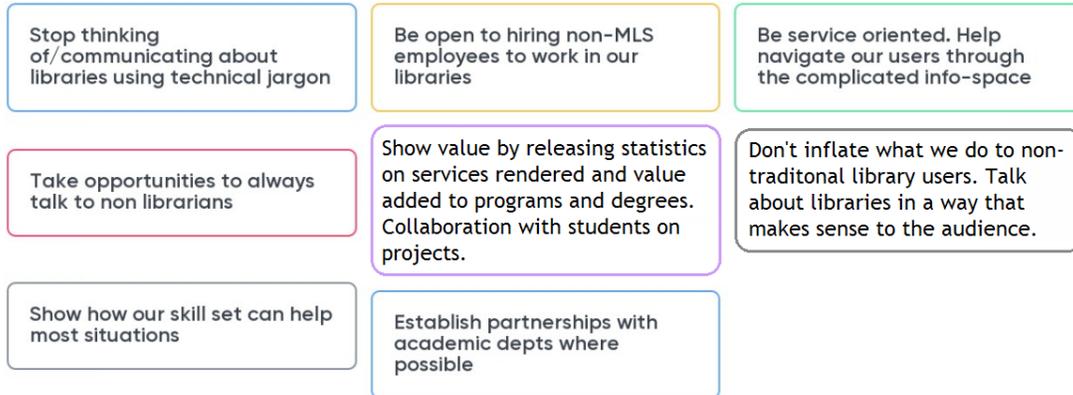
**Figure 11. Live Poll Question 7: Society's unassigned problems: What needs are library professionals strongly suited to address?**

#### **4 responses from 4 respondents**

1. Credible information sources.
2. Assistance to the broader campus community, including alumni and community members.
3. Providing research support for nonprofits and local governments.
4. Combat dumbing down.

**Question 8: Soft advocacy: What can library professionals do to be effective ambassadors for the profession?** Core themes centered on partnerships, service orientation, reaching out beyond the library

profession, and clearly articulating libraries' core strengths in easy-to-understand laymen's terms (Figure 12).



**Figure 12. Live Poll Question 8: Soft advocacy: What can library professionals do to be effective ambassadors for the profession?**

**8 responses from 5 respondents**

1. Be open to hiring non-MLS employees to work in our libraries.
2. Be service oriented. Help navigate our users through the complicated info-space.
3. Don't inflate what we do to nontraditional library users. Talk about libraries in a way that makes sense to the audience.
4. Establish partnerships with academic departments where possible.
5. Show how our skill set can help most situations.
6. Show value by releasing statistics on services rendered and value added to programs and degrees. Collaboration with students on projects.
7. Stop thinking of/communicating about libraries using technical jargon.
8. Take opportunities to always talk to nonlibrarians.

## Part 4—Closing Thoughts: Free-Form and Open-Ended

This last section was designed to give participants an unscripted chance to sound off on any topics related to library challenges and strategies.

**Question 9: Your closing thoughts: free-form and open-ended.** As this word cloud shows, no particular words predominated. Organizing themes are external shifts, funding needs, core values and mission,

user and service orientation, as well as stronger advocacy, broader outreach, and gleaning new ideas from other industries (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Live Poll Question 9: Your closing thoughts: free-form and open-ended.

### 27 responses from 6 respondents

1. Academic freedom
2. Adaptable
3. Adaptive services
4. Advocacy for new funding
5. Analyze
6. Be flexible
7. Be helpful
8. Be responsive
9. Collaborate with others
10. Corporate university
11. Crises
12. Demonstrate value
13. Digital services
14. Disability outreach
15. Empathy
16. Greater marketing
17. Leadership
18. Meet patrons
19. Neoliberalism
20. Not bound by legacy
21. Observe other industries
22. Publishing
23. Service outside
24. Technology services
25. Think creatively
26. Users where they are
27. Value-added

## IV. Conclusions

Key takeaways from the interactive conference session's live poll responses center on several core themes.

**External challenges impacting libraries:** (1) Broader shifts in higher education have economic and operational implications for libraries, impacting budgets and library services to support new programs and distance education. (2) Budgets continue to tighten, eroding purchasing power, while the volume of scholarship continues to expand and library materials costs continue to rise. (3) Digital rights management (DRM) continues to present incompatibilities with real-world workflows and researchers' needs. (4) The rise and expansion of open access, open educational resources, shifts in scholarly communication, and growing data services needs create uncertainty yet also create new areas of library engagement and leadership in these resources' life cycles.

**Internal challenges impacting libraries:** Organizational culture drives the degree to which libraries are integrated in their campuses and parent organizations. Moderate degrees of integration and isolation leave room for cementing closer strategic links. (1) Being consulted later rather than earlier in the life cycle of new program development raises catch-up challenges for library collections and related services.

(2) Valuing library collections and information services, as well as campus emphasis on cultivating students' library research skills, are key contributors to academic success. (3) Equal footing with other campus areas' faculty is key for meaningful campus connections.

**Unassigned problems, new opportunities:** Several burgeoning yet not fully addressed areas are particularly well matched to librarians' skill sets. (1) Preserving social media networks is a persistent gap in preserving the broader historical record. (2) Librarians' skill sets of curation, analyzing, organizing, describing, and making materials systematically findable are assets for deeper integration in data services and scholarly communication life cycles. (3) Widespread information needs lend themselves to information support for alumni and community members, as well as research support for nonprofits and local governments. Moreover, the proliferation of fake information and its uncritical acceptance by growing numbers of people presents growing opportunities to teach critical evaluation skills and help users discern credible information sources.

**Branching out:** As librarians' engagements extend outward into broader communities, the core values of service orientation, empathy, collaboration, and partnerships endure.

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