

Defining Engagement for Academic Librarians

Erin L. Ellis and Jill K. Becker

The purpose of this article is to establish a distinct definition of engagement for academic librarians and describe how a definition supports a clearer understanding of what is expected of librarians with engagement responsibilities. In observing a growing use of the term “engagement” over the last two decades, the authors noted how the term is frequently conflated with “outreach” and is rarely used in any discernibly distinct manner. This article traces the development and use of the term engagement in academic libraries, proposes a definition to disambiguate the term from outreach, and articulates the work of engagement for academic librarians.

Introduction

For over two decades, the term “engagement” has proliferated across academic library literature, job descriptions, and librarian position titles. This term is also observed in library department and division names. It is difficult to discern, however, whether the use of the term engagement is intentional and if it is being used deliberately to indicate something unique and distinct from the frequently used term, “outreach,” which also lacks a clear definition (Diaz, 2019). The increased use and application of engagement, as well as its formal and casual appearances in the academic library literature over the last two decades, prompted the authors’ interest in discovering whether this term is well-defined, clearly understood, and distinguishable. After reviewing dozens of key articles and reports related to evolving roles and responsibilities within academic libraries, as well as monitoring years of job ads, it is clear that the use of the term engagement is often applied broadly as an interchangeable term with outreach, *not* distinct from it. Though the term has persisted and grown in use, it has remained largely undefined and indistinct from outreach as it applies to those who are tasked with engagement work; however, this was not the initial intent when engagement—as a concept in academic libraries—first started to appear in the literature.

Inspired by an article by Barker (2004) and a paper by Gibson and Dixon (2011), the authors contend that engagement is a term in academic libraries that needs to be defined and distinguishable from outreach, and that the intent in early uses of this term was, in fact, to establish such a distinction. Though there are many references to engagement across the professional literature, the way the term is used varies and is frequently indistinguishable from what most understand as outreach. There’s been a modest attempt at defining engagement for

* Erin L. Ellis is Associate Dean, Scholarly Communication at Indiana University Bloomington, email: elliser@iu.edu; Jill K. Becker is Head, Center for Undergraduate Initiatives & Engagement at University of Kansas, email: jkbbecker@ku.edu. ©2025 Erin L. Ellis and Jill K. Becker, Attribution-NonCommercial (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) CC BY-NC.

academic libraries and what the work of engagement is, but such literature is limited. The authors strive to establish a clear, distinct definition of engagement for academic librarians and to describe how a clear definition supports a shared understanding of what is expected of librarians with engagement responsibilities. The authors do not undertake an examination of the term outreach, as such analysis and definition was completed by Diaz in 2019. With a distinct definition, those with engagement as a part of their job title or responsibilities will have a clearly articulated conception of what engagement is, how it differs from outreach, and what the expectations are for each. Additionally, a distinct definition will provide a more meaningful frame for engagement that will aid in assessing and communicating the value of engagement work. A conflation of engagement and outreach hinders a library's—and a librarian's—ability to demonstrate the considerable contribution and value that libraries provide to their campus communities.

Literature Review

Engagement in Higher Education

As a term and concept, engagement is not new to higher education. Engagement is rooted in various theories within higher education and is well-defined, assessed, measured, and studied in a variety of ways. Two applications of the term will be readily familiar to those in academic libraries: student engagement and community engagement. Most definitions credit Astin's Student Involvement Theory (1984; 2014), which refers to the amount of energy a student puts toward their academic pursuits, as the origin for student engagement in higher education. Perhaps the most well-known researcher in student engagement is Kuh who founded the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) which measures student engagement and considers the interrelationship between time, effort, and resources invested in by both students and institutions that are linked to high impact practices (2001; 2009). Because student development theories have been firmly integrated in higher education, librarians with student engagement responsibilities have been able to rely on those theories' definitions to inform their practice. Thus, the authors consider student engagement to be an already well-defined concept, well-understood in its use and application, and distinct from other expressions of engagement within academic libraries.

Community engagement is another frequently found type of engagement within higher education. There are several definitions of community engagement that possess common elements across the higher education literature. The American Council on Education's Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.) describes community engagement as "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity." Jacob, et al. (2015), define community engagement as "sustainable networks, partnerships, communication media, and activities between HEIs [higher education institutes] and communities at local, national, regional, and international levels," (p. 1). The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions (2020) defines community engagement as a "way for institutions and communities to reconsider how they interact to address larger needs that transcend an individual institution or one community," (Teixeira & Shin, p. 206). Like student engagement librarians, librarians with responsibilities for community engagement have well-established definitions to apply to their practice.

Another application of the term engagement in higher education pertains to the essential functions of the professoriate. In 1990, Ernest Boyer introduced a model of four types of scholarship: Scholarship of Discovery (i.e., research, expanding human knowledge), Scholarship of Integration (i.e., place discoveries in larger context/interdisciplinary connections), Scholarship of Sharing Knowledge (i.e., teaching), and Scholarship of Application (i.e., moving from theory to practice). Boyer went on to expand his definition to include the Scholarship of Engagement (1996). The Scholarship of Engagement in the academy has come to be a way to describe reciprocity and collaboration in scholarship that is interdisciplinary and intersects with broader communities (Barker, 2004, p. 124).

Barker (2004) describes a distinct set of practices that are observable within the Scholarship of Engagement but also explains that the interpretation of engaged scholarship is “conflicting, confusing, or redundant,” and that, as a phrase, it is “applied to overlapping concepts.” Barker further advocates for a rational, practical taxonomy for engaged scholarship and notes that the “taxonomic inconsistency” makes it difficult for scholars to explain their work in clear terms (p. 123). Barker’s article illustrates some of the problems related to the interpretation and application of the term engagement. As a similarly ambiguous interpretation and application of engagement has emerged for librarians, there is a similar need to define the term and develop a practical taxonomy. There are many other applications of the term engagement in higher education: user engagement, public engagement, civic engagement, social media engagement. Exploring these is beyond the scope of this article, but the many different uses further demonstrate the many different interpretations that exist across higher education and the value in having a clear definition in how it is applied in academic libraries.

Engagement in Academic Libraries

There are several resources in the academic library literature that are key to demonstrating the development, use, and proliferation of engagement and the intended or implied characteristics of the term. Engagement in academic libraries gained notice as an emergent concept more than 20 years ago. When perceptions of libraries as solely collections-centered support units and service providers started to shift, there was increasing interest—and arguably necessity—for libraries to be more active participants in the learning and research lifecycles. An early description of academic librarian engagement came in 2002 when Lougee described the evolving, emerging librarian role as “diffuse,” and that librarians were increasingly acting as “a diffuse agent within the scholarly community” (p. 4). Though the term “diffuse” didn’t stick, Lougee’s report presaged a multitude of additional reports and publications that built out a vision of more engaged roles and a view of academic librarian engagement work that extended beyond traditional liaison and outreach responsibilities.

In 2009, two key works were published that increased interest in the concept of engagement in academic libraries. One of those reports, from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) *SPEC Kit 312: Public Engagement*, surveyed ARL institutions to discover whether, and how, the traditional outreach model in academic libraries was evolving toward “public engagement.” In this context, engagement was described as programming and services that were provided to communities beyond a campus primary constituencies and that took “the professional expertise of the library to members of the public” (Walter & Goetsch, 2009, p. 12). Also in 2009, ARL published *Research Library Issues (RLI) 265, a Special Issue on Liaison Librarian Roles* (Hahn, 2009). One notable example from the special issue was a description of the University

of Minnesota's Position Description Framework. Minnesota's Framework sought to reimagine traditional liaison work, build more capacity and responsibility for new and emerging areas of librarian work, and mark a shift from a collections-centered to an engagement-centered model (Williams, 2009). It described a liaison librarian as more than a departmental contact with subject expertise. The liaison librarian role was redefined with expectations to be engaged "fundamentally in the lives of students, scholars, and citizens" and to "get in the flow of users" (Williams, 2009, p. 4). Building momentum for engagement in academic libraries, ACRL released the *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report* in 2010. The report was a call to action for librarians to actively engage with their campus communities in meaningful, measurable ways, to collect evidence and demonstrate what they enable, and to proactively and prominently take part in initiatives that are impactful. This report provided further evidence of the need for engaged librarians, but it did not attempt a clear and distinct definition of the term, nor did any of the other aforementioned works. Rather, these works used engagement as a concept to illustrate a necessary and distinct change in liaison and outreach activities, to emphasize greater expectations for campus collaborations, and to advocate for new types of positions that connect with constituencies in new ways.

In 2011, Gibson and Dixon contributed a paper to that year's ACRL Conference titled, *New Metrics of Engagement for Academic Libraries*. This paper posited that engagement in academic libraries should be measured, acknowledged that the term has "some fuzziness of meaning" in the literature, and proposed that "'engagement' transcends traditional 'outreach'" (p. 341). Gibson and Dixon's (2011) study attempted to identify emerging indicators of academic library engagement and possible means of measuring them. To do so, they drafted and tested a provisional definition of academic library engagement. What they discovered, and what we still see today, is that "[b]ecause of variable ideas about engagement, [and] its relation to traditional notions of outreach," there is little distinction between engagement and outreach and the expectations of engagement work are unclear (p. 344). Gibson and Dixon's study yielded a five-category metric construct intended to help academic libraries evaluate their degree of engagement (p. 345). For example, library administrators could look for indicators of engagement in their library's mission and strategic documents or determine whether resources are allocated and expended on efforts that increase the library's capacity to respond to "externally focused activities" and changing needs. In establishing indicators of academic library engagement, Gibson and Dixon suggested that these measures could be used to demonstrate a library's range of "collaborative, value-enhancing projects" (p. 347). Their paper concludes with a revised definition of academic library engagement that elaborates on the "how" and the "why" of what engagement is in this context:

Sustained, strategic positioning of the academic library, through new or redirected resources, to create collaborative relationships with identified parties in order to advance institutional, community, and societal goals; through a progression of activities ranging from one-time initiatives, to longer-term projects, to enduring partnerships; to solve institutional- and community-level problems, or to support broad efforts to address long-range societal issues, through a range of engaged activities to create new knowledge, new products and services through these strategic choices; and to effect qualitatively different roles for academic libraries themselves through influential, reciprocal, and value enhancing relationships of

mutual benefit to libraries and the varied constituents and publics with whom they collaborate (2011, p. 347).

A further, important addition to their revised definition is language that emphasizes the necessity of relationships that are reciprocal and mutually beneficial. The goal of their study, however, was to establish metrics, indicators, and characteristics by which an academic library could demonstrate their shift from a traditional, service mode to a partner-collaborator mode on their campuses. Their definition of engagement, therefore, was necessarily oriented toward the library organization as a whole, not toward a definition that describes the actions of engagement at the librarian or library worker level.

Gibson and Dixon's (2011) paper did, however, further prepare the way for distinguishing engagement from more traditional concepts of outreach at the individual-level and is the closest thing to a definition of librarian engagement that the authors found in the literature. Their paper noted the "varieties of engagement" referenced in the literature but explains that true engagement "creates a field of mutual energies ... around common purposes" (p. 341). Drawing on Boyer's *Scholarship of Engagement* (1996) and Barker's (2004) taxonomy of engaged scholarship, both of which describe reciprocity as being crucial for true engagement, Gibson and Dixon explained that mutual energies and common purposes result in mutual benefits that enhance the value of each party's contributions and outcomes. They also asserted that reciprocity is a crucial element for engagement to transcend traditional outreach.

In 2013, Jaguszewski and Williams prepared a report for ARL, *New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries*. In their introduction, Jaguszewski and Williams explained that "research libraries are now compelled to understand and support all processes of instruction and scholarship, which calls for an engagement model. An engaged liaison seeks to enhance scholar productivity, to empower learners, and to participate in the entire lifecycle of the research, teaching, and learning process" (p. 4). They then described an engagement model whereby librarians build strong, collaborative relationships, understand how scholars communicate, and actively monitor learning programs and goals. The traditional liaison model is described in juxtaposition as an insufficient model for emerging needs and is described as "librarians [using] their subject knowledge to select books and journals and teach guest lectures" (p. 4). Driving the need for these new engaged librarian roles, Jaguszewski and Williams described six trends. Present across all these trends, but specifically identified in Trend 5, is the need for collaboration: collaborative initiatives, services, and programs both within the library but, more critically, through partnerships across campus. They make clear that an engaged liaison or a team of engaged librarians can possess essential experience and expertise that advances research and learning initiatives (e.g., copyright) in partnership with campus faculty (p. 13). What is missing from their description of an engagement model and engaged liaisonship is the concept of reciprocity. The authors described several ways that librarians and libraries can work with students and faculty to "provide," "offer," and "support," but they did not comment on how engaged partnerships and collaborations also benefit the libraries or librarians or that there is reciprocity to the relationships.

In 2014, Bidney referred to Gibson and Dixon's 2011 paper and their proposed engagement definition for academic libraries. In her chapter, Bidney emphasized that mutual benefit is essential to engagement and articulated a distinction between outreach and engagement. Though the chapter falls short of defining engagement, Bidney asserted that an "outreach

relationship is a one-way relationship,” while the “engagement relationship is mutually beneficial: the library or librarian gains as much as the user who is being engaged” (p. 110). Also in 2014, Ithaka S+R released an issue brief, “Leveraging the Liaison Model: From Defining 21st Century Research Libraries to Implementing 21st Century Research Universities,” which continued to explore the liaison model and how liaisons could transition to a more engagement-centered model. The brief’s author, Kenney, explains that as an engagement model “raise[s] the bar about what we expect from liaisons, many are left feeling insufficiently equipped, wondering how to do it all, what to give up, and how best to achieve results. What seems most lacking is a sense of how to measure progress, how to use available time to the best advantage, how to develop priorities, and how to know we are on the right track,” (p. 11). In 2015, ARL surveyed their member libraries to “gather data about the evolving role of the library liaison and the shifting goals and strategies of liaison programs” (Miller & Pressley, p. 11). Their report, *SPEC Kit 349, Evolution of Library Liaisons*, describes a variety of liaison programs and liaison responsibilities, many of which illustrate the challenges that Kenney (2014) described. Respondents indicated that “measuring success ... is very challenging,” and that time constraints, difficulties in understanding and undertaking new liaison expectations, and “inconsistency within liaison programs” made it difficult to transition to a more engaged model (Miller & Pressley, 2015, p. 16-17). The Ithaka S+R brief and *SPEC Kit 349* illustrate some of the growing pains that libraries were experiencing as they attempted to shift to more engaged models, as well as the challenges that were occurring as libraries worked to apply and interpret engagement as a new type of work.

Schlak (2019) recognized the “library profession’s loose structuring of engagement” (p. 134) and explained that a clear definition of engagement would “assist library practitioners in conceiving of their work” (p. 133). He reviewed engagement frameworks from higher education literature and articles from library literature, but his analysis was confined to literature that directly or indirectly related to student engagement. Schlak was interested in a “more critical grounding in the compelling terms and discourses of engagement,” but only insofar as it will help to strengthen and better articulate the value of student engagement (p. 133).

As liaison programs were evolving to various degrees, new job titles that featured engagement started to emerge. In 2017, Geckle and Nelson described a job ad analysis that revealed problems with the use of certain terminology and the actual conceptualization of positions. They considered the problematic nature of a term that was proliferating in librarian position titles at the time, “metadata,” but their argument similarly applies to position titles that embed the term engagement. They described the inconsistency and confusion with job titles that used the term metadata as opposed to cataloging or cataloger. They asked, “Are cataloging librarians and metadata librarians the same, different, or just connected?” and advocated “for a precision in terms to clarify what a metadata librarian is expected to do” (Geckle & Nelson, 2019, p. 59). And though metadata was increasingly showing up in position titles, “the actual meaning of the term itself ha[d] remained elusive ... and the continuing ambiguity surrounding the question of exactly what the person ... is actually supposed to know for a particular job is clearly problematic” (Geckle & Nelson, 2019, p. 59). One can recognize similar questions and problems in considering the growing application of engagement and its interchangeability with outreach. Todorinova (2018) drew a related argument against the inclusion of words such as “experience” and “engagement” in position titles, determining that the use of such inconclusive terminology “means that these librarians are always having to explain their

role and even justify the need for its existence” (p. 213). This inability to describe the work of engagement can reasonably be linked to the lack of a clear and distinct definition of the term as it applies to academic librarians. Though the use of engagement was growing in position titles and descriptions, the uses were/are largely indistinguishable from the uses of the term outreach, applied more to be *de rigueur* rather than intentionally distinct.

The conflation of engagement and outreach continued to persist in the 2018 *ARL SPEC Kit 361: Outreach and Engagement*, a report of survey results from responding ARL institutions. Despite the inclusion of “engagement” in its title, the stated explanation for the survey was to “create a picture of library outreach” and “to paint a picture of how libraries are approaching outreach programs” (LeMire et al., 2018, p. 2). Engagement as a singular term, concept, or activity was not explored, either in its relation to or distinction from outreach, tacitly implying that outreach and engagement were indistinct. Interestingly, however, *SPEC Kit 361* survey respondents clearly struggled to define outreach and, given the wide variety of programs and services that they described, there was clearly uncertainty around what qualified as outreach, much less its potential distinction from engagement. The undefined concept of engagement gets swept up into equally undefined notions of outreach that are “broad, generic, and catch-all” (LeMire et al., 2018, p. 10). The report’s authors explain that this has significant implications, “contribut[ing] to a lack of systematic and assessment-driven approach[es],” that “[i]nstitutions [and individuals] could be more effective ... [with] a clear definition, meaningful and measurable,” and that a clear definition is likely to lead to more “intentional, strategic, and impactful” work (LeMire, et al., 2018, p. 10). Though they were referring specifically to the lack of a clear definition of outreach, the same is true for engagement.

Perhaps what has hindered a distinction between outreach and engagement is that outreach as a term, concept, and activity itself has also defied definition within academic librarianship, though many have ventured to provide one. In her 2019 article, “Outreach in academic librarianship: A concept analysis and definition,” Diaz describes the elusiveness of a clear definition of outreach. Through a concept analysis methodology, Diaz attempted to clarify the term outreach based on her broad synthesis of the outreach literature. Diaz did identify engagement, among other terms and phrases, as a concept related to outreach that was “often used interchangeably with the term” and she suggested that these should be examined further to ascertain their relationships to outreach (p. 190). Diaz proposed a working definition of outreach in academic librarianship applying the attributes she uncovered in her analysis, describing outreach as various methods of intervention that are targeted to an audience to advance library goals and often support institutional goals.

In 2020, Gibson returned to the topic of engagement and reflected on an effort launched in 2011 “to expand the conception of the liaison librarian role through the lens of ‘engagement’” at Ohio State University (OSU) Libraries (p. 12). The result of that effort was the Engaged Librarian Framework, which was intended to position liaisons “more broadly within the workflows of faculty and researchers” (Gibson, 2020, p. 14). A definition of engagement was written for this Framework: “Engagement is a deepened level of sustained, high-quality, mutually beneficial interaction in the liaison role with academic programs” (Gibson, 2020, p. 14). The concept of a sustained, mutual benefit is a thread that connects to Gibson and Dixon’s 2011 definition, but their concepts of collaboration, reciprocity, and strategy were not carried into the OSU Engaged Librarian Framework definition. The Framework definition is also narrowly scoped to apply only to subject librarians, which may explain why this definition

uses the somewhat ambiguous term “interaction” in lieu of terms like collaborations, partnerships, or relationships that imply a level of reciprocity. The Framework defined five activity clusters, including engagement/outreach; this clearly indicated OSU Libraries’ interpretation of the terms and the work associated with them, and implied that they are the same or similar enough, despite the establishment of a specific framework of engagement and a distinct definition of engagement to accompany it.

Beginning with Lougee in 2002, there is evidence of a decades-long trend that strongly indicates that academic libraries recognized a need to shift away from certain types of traditional work and instead needed to intentionally focus on new roles and practices, “to understand and support the *processes* of scholarship, rather than the *products*” (Williams, 2009, p. 3). These new roles and practices centered on the need for librarians to actively participate in the research and learning cycles and to perform a new type of work: engagement. In more recent years, as the term has grown in use, it has become apparent that without a distinct definition, academic librarians struggle to describe, perform, and assess the work of engagement. Engagement, as a term applied directly to the work of academic librarians, has remained undefined and not understood as a concept that stands distinctly on its own. Despite its use in numerous position titles (e.g., Research and Engagement Librarian, Learning and Engagement Librarian, Academic Engagement Librarian) and descriptions, and appearing in numerous publications, the work of an engagement librarian remains unclear.

A Proposed Definition of Engagement

If engagement can be defined and disentangled from outreach, perhaps both terms will realize the benefits of distinction. A definition that provides clarity and differentiation between outreach and engagement, and a definition that situates the practices and activities of engagement for librarians at the individual-level, will provide critically valuable clarity for those responsible for engagement activity and will improve the ability to articulate and assess the intent and outcomes of engagement. Our proposed definition is a modification of Gibson and Dixon’s (2011) organizational-level definition of academic library engagement: A *strategic*, formal *exchange* between committed parties that creates *reciprocal*, collaborative relationships and yields *mutual benefits* while *advancing* university, library, and department *goals*. This definition has five critical components that elucidates a clear differentiation from outreach and provides clarity on the expectations and actions of academic librarian engagement:

1. Strategic: that the action explicitly and intentionally aligns with a shared goal or goals; positions the librarian as a resource to meaningfully advance achievement of the goal or goals
2. Exchange: that each party contributes expertise and value beyond one’s existing individual capacity
3. Reciprocal: that each party equitably shares in the responsibility and commitment to the action
4. Mutually beneficial: that the result of each party’s contributions yields a beneficial individual or organizational outcome
5. Goal-advancing: that the action purposefully facilitates achievement of a shared goal or goals

Reciprocity and mutual benefit are especially distinct characteristics of engagement in our definition. These components are not intended to convey strict quid pro quo arrange-

ments. Our definition uses the concept of reciprocity to indicate that an engagement relationship is a shared effort that each party has a responsibility to; that is, no single party carries the exclusive, or the majority of, responsibility for the action(s). As Gibson and Dixon (2011) asserted, reciprocity is a crucial element for engagement to transcend traditional outreach. They also emphasized the importance of mutual benefits that can enhance the value of each party's contributions and outcomes. The concept of mutual benefit is used in our definition to indicate that, through each party's contributions, a helpful benefit is given or received by each party or is realized as a result of the parties' contributions. The authors acknowledge that these components of the definition may conflict with the typical service ethos in librarianship. We contend, though, that seeking and developing reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships is not in opposition to, nor negates, the value and importance of serving, helping, and supporting campus constituencies. We do, however, assert that engagement is distinct from those traditional modes of serving, helping, and supporting.

Similar to Bidney's (2014) distinction between an outreach relationship and an engagement relationship, we consider engagement as a reciprocal conversation *with* a person or group, and in contrast, outreach is a one-direction communication *to* a person or group. Though outreach is often a means or a path that leads to engagement, outreach can be characterized as transactional, periodic or one-time interactions, or periodic or one-way communications with no expectation of a response, though the intent or goal may be to elicit one. In contrast, engagement is characterized by reciprocity and collaboration, yielding benefits to the parties involved. Returning to Diaz's 2019 article for the purposes of additional contrast, consider Diaz's working definition of outreach:

Outreach is work carried out by library employees at institutions of higher education who design and implement a variety of methods of intervention to advance awareness, positive perceptions, and use of library services, spaces, collections, and issues (e.g. various literacies, scholarly communication, etc.). Implemented in and outside of the library, outreach efforts are typically implemented periodically throughout the year or as a single event. Methods are primarily targeted to current students and faculty, however, subsets of these groups, potential students, alumni, surrounding community members, and staff can be additional target audiences. In addition to library-centric goals, outreach methods are often designed to support shared institutional goals such as lifelong learning, cultural awareness, student engagement, and community engagement (2019, 191).

Here, outreach is described as interventions exclusively "carried out by library employees ...periodically throughout the year or as a single event" (p. 191). In contrast, our proposed definition of engagement describes reciprocal exchanges between parties that occur when a shared goal has been identified. In Diaz's definition, the intent of outreach is to "advance awareness, positive perceptions, and use of library services, spaces, collections, and issues" through means that are "often designed to support shared institutional goals" (p. 191). In contrast, the intent of engagement in our proposed definition is to establish a strategic collaboration that directly advances institutional goals and leverages the expertise and contributions of others. Though shared goals are an attribute of both definitions, the proposed definition of engagement implies a strategic collaboration that directly *advances* goals rather than raising awareness of how a library or librarians *support* institutional goals.

Differentiating between outreach and engagement is not to suggest that one or the other should be ignored or privileged over the other, however. We contend that, while engagement is different from outreach, outreach can serve as a path to, and instigate, engagement. Outreach through an annual newsletter or a new student orientation fair, for example, can prompt an unexpected response and lead to a conversation that results in engagement. Outreach can also be more intentional when specific information is shared and an invitation to respond is extended. For example, a librarian might let an instructor know that an electronic version of a course textbook is available and invite the instructor to learn more about how the library can make other course materials more affordable for students. This kind of intentional outreach can prompt an opportunity for engagement, but it requires effort and knowledge beyond what is typical for information sharing events or other one-way and transactional interactions. Returning to the proposed definition of engagement, engagement goes further than outreach because it requires an articulation of goals, outcomes, and agreement on contributions.

An academic librarian charged with engagement responsibilities should be ready to leverage opportunities, whether those are self-initiated or presented unexpectedly. As previously described, outreach can often lead to an opportunity for engagement. This can occur when the outreach is received as an invitation to align efforts and expertise toward achieving common goals. It can also occur when an academic librarian realizes the potential for such alignment during an outreach activity and acts on it. Opportunities for engagement may also be presented through means outside of outreach activities, for example, when a librarian is attending a campus meeting or listening to a research talk. In all these instances, an engagement librarian is continually listening for possibilities to align efforts and expertise toward achieving common goals. Resources exist to help librarians prepare for these opportunities, including several audit exercises that can illuminate shared goals between libraries and their larger institutions (Oakleaf, 2017). Conducting such audits in preparation for a conversation with a campus stakeholder can help librarians identify engagement opportunities. However the opportunities arise, a librarian charged with engagement must maintain awareness of the goals and priorities on their campus and within academic departments, and they must also have a thorough understanding of their individual and organizational goals (i.e., to engage strategically, with mutual benefit, and to advance shared goals). They must also possess a full understanding of their expertise, value, capacity, and clarity in how they can contribute (i.e., to engage in a reciprocal exchange).

Once an opportunity is known, the possibility of engagement can be raised with the other party. An initial communication may be in the form of outreach with an invitation to talk more about collaborating. Or it may be in the form of a direct communication that outlines the value of a collaboration. In either case, the librarian is prepared to communicate how a strategic, reciprocal exchange between the parties could advance shared or respective goals and realize mutual benefits. However, this isn't engagement yet. Though these communications can often be an invitation to establish a collaborative relationship and are a frequent first step toward engagement, whether it becomes an engagement relationship depends on the response from the other party. These communications differ from a typical one-way, outreach communication because 1. it is a specific, intentional offer to collaborate and advance goals and 2. there is an expectation of a response. When the other party replies with interest in the offer, the two parties can begin to establish the details of their strategic exchange, how each will reciprocate in the collaboration, and determine the mutual benefits in working toward their goal.

The work of engagement for academic librarians is different and distinct from other types of services and support provided by libraries. Not every interaction, intervention, or event will or should result in engagement. For example, helping a student search a database is a discrete interaction that meets the student's need and supports the library and librarian's goal to support student research and creativity. Although this interaction wouldn't fit our proposed definition of engagement (it would fit student engagement theory definitions, however), it does achieve other professional and organizational objectives, as do a wide variety of additional librarian services and support.

Engagement in Action

An example of what engagement looks like in action might be beneficial. Consider an effort that many academic libraries allocate resources toward: the development of open educational resources (OER). Many academic libraries are working to reduce textbook costs by providing funding for instructors to develop and use OER. In this example, an engagement librarian would implement a communication strategy to build awareness of the high cost of textbooks and other course materials that create barriers to student success. Included in this communication strategy would be the announcement of a funding opportunity for instructors to create OER for their courses. Interested instructors would be invited to an information session to learn more. At this point, the librarian would be participating in outreach, not engagement. The information session would consist of a presentation by librarians to share details about the funding and support that is available to develop OER. Following the presentation, librarians would meet with interested instructors in small groups to discuss the specifics of their course needs. This would still be outreach; however, it is in these small group conversations that engagement can be instigated.

It is during this initial conversation that shared goals and the value of a collaboration would potentially be discovered. The librarian's goal would be clear—to encourage the development and use of OER to reduce barriers to student success—as shared in the information session. In conversation, an instructor may share their shock at the cost of their course materials and that they are interested in reducing the cost of course materials for students. At this point, engagement between the two parties would clearly be strategic in that the potential of OER aligns with a shared goal. The librarian is positioned to advance the shared goal. Further into the conversation, the librarian would introduce the instructor to the Open Textbook Library so they can begin to find existing resources in their subject area. This would be a formal exchange of expertise beyond the existing capacity of each individual, as the librarian is an expert in identifying existing, open resources and the instructor is an expert in their discipline and best positioned to make the decision as to whether the existing resources meet their needs, or if they should develop something new. The instructor could skim the textbook options and note the potential to adapt an existing OER. The librarian would be exchanging their knowledge of existing OER, open publishing platforms, and licensing with the instructor's subject area expertise and the knowledge needed to create or adapt existing resources. As a result of this conversation, the instructor could apply for funding to adapt an OER for their course.

After the instructor's application for OER funding was approved, the parties would enter a reciprocal engagement relationship. As Gibson and Dixon (2011) asserted—and as a critical component of our proposed definition—reciprocity is required for engagement to transcend outreach. Here, each party would determine how they would equitably share in

the responsibility and the action required to adapt and implement the OER. In this example, the parties could draft and sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that outlines the responsibilities of each party and begin their work. The instructor could begin to adapt an existing OER to meet their course needs and the librarian would provide guidance, training, and support. Upon completion, the OER would be implemented in the course. The outcome of this engagement relationship would be mutually beneficial as both parties would be meeting an institutional goal for student success, contributing to the educational mission of the university, and benefitting professionally from the experience.

Conclusion

This paper sought to define the term engagement and articulate the critical components of engagement work that clearly distinguish it from outreach. The proposed definition shifts Gibson and Dixon's (2011) definition to center the work of librarians as opposed to the library organization. The proposed definition also builds upon the engagement model described by Jaguszewski and Williams (2013) in terms such as collaboration, and the monitoring of programs and goals; however, the proposed definition strengthens their concept through the addition of reciprocity and the identification of outcomes that are mutually beneficial. Diaz (2019) identified engagement as a concept that was related to outreach and recommended it be examined more thoroughly to determine if it was in fact different from outreach. While Diaz (2019) applied a concept analysis methodology in her paper, we conducted a thorough examination of the literature to analyze the term engagement in academic libraries. Our analysis found that like outreach, the term engagement lacks a consistent definition in the library literature. The many attempts to articulate engagement in the responsibilities and roles of librarians and in organizational transitions to engagement models have led the authors to a new definition. Our proposed definition will clarify expectations for librarians with engagement responsibilities and urge librarians and libraries to draw clear distinctions between engagement and outreach. In addition, this proposed definition provides a framework for engagement that will aid in the assessment of engagement work and communicate the value of academic librarians' contributions to their campus communities.

With the establishment of a distinct definition of engagement for academic librarians, the authors envision several opportunities for advancing engagement work. As the proposed definition sets clear expectations for what engagement is (and what it is not), it can be applied to activities such as onboarding, annual reviews, and professional development. The proposed definition can help with the design of formal engagement plans that are distinctly different from outreach plans, and push librarians to intentionally align their work with stakeholders through the identification of shared goals. Finally, the products of engagement work are mutually beneficial, thus allowing academic libraries to clearly articulate their contributions to their larger institutions. We envision that librarians may use this definition in their future research endeavors through "engagement in action" case studies that describe and assess work that fits within the proposed definition.

References

- American Council on Education's Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. (n.d.). *The elective classification for community engagement*. <https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/elective-classifications/community-engagement/>
- Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). (2010). *Value of academic libraries: A comprehensive research review and report*. Researched by Megan Oakleaf. Association of College and Research Libraries.

- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 297–308.
- Astin, A. W. (2014). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. In *College Student Development and Academic Life*, pp. 251–262. Routledge.
- Barker, D. (2004). The scholarship of engagement: A taxonomy of five emerging practices. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 9(2), 123–137.
- Bidney, M. (2014). The library as platform: Assessing outreach and engagement in the library of the future. In D. C. Mack & G. W. White (Eds.), *Assessing liaison librarians: Documenting impact for positive change*. Association of College and Research Libraries.
- Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Boyer, E. L. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 49(7), 18–33.
- Boyer, E. L. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Public Service and Outreach*, 1(1), 11–20.
- Diaz, S. A. (2019). Outreach in academic librarianship: A concept analysis and definition. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 45(3), 184–194.
- Geckle, B. J., & Nelson, D. N. (2017). Classifying librarians: Cataloger, taxonomist, metadatician? *The Serials Librarian*, 72(1-4), 57–64.
- Gibson, C. (2020). The engaged librarian framework at The Ohio State University Libraries. *Against the Grain*, 32(4), 12–16.
- Gibson, C. & Dixon, C. (2011). New metrics for academic library engagement. In D. M. Mueller (Ed.), *In Declaration of Interdependence: Proceedings of the Association of College and Research Libraries*.
- Hahn, K. (2009). Special issue on liaison librarian roles. *Research Library Issues: A Bimonthly Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC*, no. 265.
- Jacob, W. J., Sutin, S. E., Weidman, J. C., Yeager, J. I. (2015). Community engagement in higher education. In W. J. Jacob, S. E. Sutin, J. C. Weidman, & J. L. Yeager (Eds.), *Community Engagement in Higher Education*. Pittsburgh Studies In Comparative and International Education. SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-007-9_1
- Jaguszewski, J., & Williams, K. (2013). *New roles for new times: Transforming liaison roles in research libraries*. Association of Research Libraries. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/169867>
- Kenney, A. R. (2014). Leveraging the liaison model: From defining 21st century research libraries to implementing 21st century research universities. *Ithaka S+ R*, 11.
- Kuh G. D. (2001). Assessing what really matters to student learning inside the national survey of student engagement. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 33(3), 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091380109601795>
- Kuh, G. D. (2001). The national survey of student engagement: Conceptual framework and overview of psychometric properties. <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/iuswrrest/api/core/bitstreams/b18931f6-43cb-4f42-8fcb-fee6c76325f/content>
- Kuh, G.D. (2009). What student affairs professionals need to know about student engagement. *Journal of College Student Development* 50(6), 683–706. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0099>.
- LeMire, S., Graves, S. J., Farrell, S. L., Mastel, K. L. (2018). *SPEC kit 361: Outreach and engagement*. Association of Research Libraries. <https://publications.arl.org/Outreach-Engagement-SPEC-Kit-361/>
- Lougee, W. P. (2002). *Diffuse libraries: Emergent roles for the research library in the digital age. Perspectives on the evolving library*. Council on Library and Information Resources.
- Miller, R. K. & Pressley, L. (2015). *SPEC kit 349: Evolution of library liaisons*. Association of Research Libraries. <https://publications.arl.org/Evolution-Library-Liaisons-SPEC-Kit-349/>
- Oakleaf, M. (2017). *Academic library value: The impact starter kit*. ALA Editions.
- Schlak, T. (2018). Academic libraries and engagement: A critical contextualization of the library discourse on engagement. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 44, 133–139.
- Teixeira, P. N. & Shin, J. C. (2020). *The international encyclopedia of higher education systems and institutions*. Springer Dordrecht. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8905-9>
- Todorinova, L. (2018). A mixed-method study of undergraduate and first year librarian positions in academic libraries in the United States. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 44(2), 207–215.
- Walter, S. & Goetsch, L. (2009). *SPEC kit 312: Public engagement*. Association of Research Libraries. <https://publications.arl.org/Public-Engagement-SPEC-Kit-312/1>
- Williams, K. (2009). A framework for articulating new library roles. *Research Library Issues: A Bimonthly Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC*, no. 265, 308.