Legislative White Paper

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The Critical Role of Faculty Librarians in Illinois Higher Education: Strengthening Student Success, Faculty Research, and Institutional Excellence

Introduction

Higher education institutions rely on academic libraries not just as warehouses of books, but as dynamic centers of teaching, research, and student support. Central to this mission are **faculty librarians** – professional librarians who hold faculty status – who provide instruction, expert information services, and scholarly support integral to the academic enterprise. *Recent budget cuts and staffing reductions, however, threaten these roles.* In Illinois, the issue has come to the forefront with cases like Western Illinois University (WIU), which in 2024 announced the elimination of all nine of its faculty librarian positions to address a $22 million budget deficit after a 21% enrollment drop (insidehighered.com). This drastic cut followed years of attrition in which retiring or departing librarians were not replaced; between 2013 and 2024 WIU's library faculty shrank from 16 to 9 (insidehighered.com). The decision to remove faculty librarians has been met with alarm from educators and students. Leo Lo, president of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), warned that without librarians, student retention and recruitment could suffer (insidehighered.com). Indeed, WIU librarians and supporters caution that there is "no way on earth" the university can meet its information needs without professional librarians – losing them means "a dramatic loss of training, expertise and decades of experience" that will directly impair services to students and faculty (insidehighered.com). The WIU example underscores the urgency of recognizing and preserving the contributions of faculty librarians. This report advocates for their necessity in Illinois higher education, detailing the multifaceted roles faculty librarians play, the advantages conferred by faculty status, and policy steps to ensure academic libraries remain fully staffed and supported.

Defining the Roles of Academic Librarians

Faculty librarians in academia wear many hats. They are educators, information curators, research partners, technologists, liaisons, and administrative leaders all at once. The following ten roles outline the key domains in which academic librarians contribute to their institutions:

Instruction and Information Literacy

One of the foremost roles of academic librarians is teaching students (and often faculty) how to find, evaluate, and use information effectively. Librarians develop and deliver **information literacy** instruction sessions, workshops, and tutorials to build critical research skills. They often work directly with classes or provide one-on-one consultations to guide students through the research process. Librarians collaborate with faculty to integrate information literacy into the curriculum, tailoring instruction to course assignments and discipline-specific needs (careerexplorer.com). For example, a librarian might teach a freshman composition class how to formulate search strategies in scholarly databases or conduct a workshop for graduate students on managing citations. This instruction goes beyond library orientation; it encompasses digital literacy, critical thinking about information sources, and ethical use of information. Studies have shown that librarians are highly effective in this teaching role(information-literacy.blogspot.com).

Even more vital, information literacy skills are essential for a thriving democracy. Librarians play a vital role in guiding students through the complexities of the information landscape, helping them understand how information is created and shared, analyze the political and financial forces that shape it, and see themselves as both consumers and contributors to scholarly and public discourse. A functioning democracy requires an educated citizenry that can navigate these complexities. Instructional librarians are experts and pedagogical approaches to building these skills (Mercado & Northam).

Collection Development and Resource Management

Academic librarians serve as stewards of their institution's knowledge resources. In their **collection development** and management role, librarians curate the library's collections of books, journals, databases, and other media to align with the institution's academic programs and research priorities (careerexplorer.com). They assess faculty and student needs and analyze usage data to determine what resources to acquire or discontinue. This involves making informed decisions about purchasing new books and subscribing to journals or databases, as well as weeding outdated or irrelevant materials to keep collections relevant. Crucially, librarians also handle the business side of information resources – they negotiate license agreements and subscriptions with publishers and vendors to secure access to electronic journals, e-books, and other digital content in a cost-effective manner.

Research Support and Scholarly Communication

Beyond assisting in coursework, academic librarians are essential partners in the research enterprise of a university. In their research support role, librarians provide expert assistance to both students and faculty researchers at every stage of the research process. This can include helping to conduct literature reviews, performing advanced database searches, and guiding

researchers in the use of specialized scholarly tools. Liaison librarians are often assigned to specific academic departments, embedding themselves as information specialists within the disciplines. They work closely with faculty and graduate students, tailoring support to discipline-specific resources and research methodologies (blog.degruyter.com).

Importantly, librarians are not just facilitators of research; they are active scholars in their own right. Many faculty librarians engage in original research and contribute to academic discourse in areas such as information literacy pedagogy, human-computer interactions, interface design, and universal design. They theorize and publish on best practices in teaching research skills, the effectiveness of digital tools in knowledge acquisition, and ways to enhance accessibility in information environments. Their scholarship extends to critical assessments of search algorithms, ethical concerns in artificial intelligence applications in libraries, and the evolving role of academic libraries in higher education. As a result, librarians do not merely support faculty research—they produce it, often shaping the very frameworks that define modern information practices.

In addition to conducting research, librarians contribute to **scholarly communication** initiatives on campus. They serve as consultants on publishing and the dissemination of research—advising faculty and graduate students on selecting appropriate journals, understanding publisher copyright agreements, and navigating the increasingly complex issues around open-access publishing. As experts in metadata, digital repositories, and copyright compliance, librarians play a key role in making academic work more accessible to a global audience. Their deep engagement in both research support and original scholarship highlights their essential role in the intellectual and academic life of a university.

Technology and Digital Scholarship

Modern academic libraries are technology hubs, and librarians are at the forefront of integrating technology into teaching and research. In their role supporting **technology and digital scholarship**, librarians manage an array of digital services and infrastructure. They implement and maintain the library's online systems – including the library website, catalog, discovery tools, and digital repositories – to ensure seamless access to information. Librarians stay current with emerging technologies and adopt tools that enhance information access and learning ([careerexplorer.com)](#). For example, they might introduce a new search platform that uses artificial intelligence to improve literature discovery, or deploy interactive tutorial software for information literacy instruction. Academic librarians have actively driven the digital transformation of libraries, not merely reacting to technological change but *leading* it ([blog.degruyter.com)](#). Librarians are also deeply involved in **digital scholarship** initiatives on campus. They help faculty and students employ new digital methodologies – for instance, text mining of large datasets, GIS mapping projects, or digital humanities programs. Specialized librarians in areas such as digital humanities serve as research partners on faculty projects, bringing expertise in digital tools and methods ([blog.degruyter.com)](#).

Administration and Leadership

Faculty librarians do not only operate behind the scenes – they are also leaders and administrators within their libraries and the wider institution. In their administrative role, librarians may manage departments or functional areas of the library (such as access services, technical services, digital initiatives, etc.), supervising staff & student workers and shaping policies. Beyond the library, they contribute to institutional governance. Librarians with faculty status typically serve on campus committees and in faculty governance bodies, bringing their perspective to institutional decision-making. In fact, ACRL standards emphasize that librarians should "participate in the enhancement of the institution's mission, curriculum, and governance," and that they be eligible for membership in faculty senate or equivalent governing bodies with the same level of representation as other faculty ([ala.org](ala.org)). In practice, this means librarians often sit alongside professors from other departments on committees dealing with academic standards, assessment, strategic planning, or technology. They also may be elected to faculty senate, where they can advocate for library funding, resources, and policies that support the academic mission. Faculty librarians, especially those in senior positions, frequently take on campus leadership roles beyond the library – for example, co-chairing accreditation self-study teams or leading initiatives on information technology integration. By having faculty rank, librarians are empowered to plan and advocate effectively: they can argue for resources on equal footing with academic departments and articulate how the library contributes to teaching and research excellence.

Assessment and Institutional Research

In an era of accountability and data-driven decision-making, academic librarians have embraced **assessment** to demonstrate and improve the library's impact on student learning and success. Librarians systematically gather data on library usage, instruction outcomes, and service quality – tracking metrics like gate counts, circulation of library materials, electronic resource usage, workshop attendance, and reference interactions. More importantly, they analyze and interpret this data to inform continuous improvement. For instance, librarians might survey students on how library instruction affected their confidence in research, or analyze citation patterns in student bibliographies to measure information literacy outcomes. Many libraries produce annual reports or dashboards aligning library performance with institutional goals (such as student retention or faculty research output). Librarians contribute to accreditation and program reviews by providing evidence of how library services support academic standards, thereby directly informing institutional assessment reports. Increasingly, academic librarians are also engaging in *institutional research* collaborations, using their expertise in information management to assist with broader campus data projects (blog.degruyter.com).

Advantages of Faculty Status for Librarians

Granting librarians faculty status (with appropriate ranks, privileges, and responsibilities) is not merely an honorific – it yields tangible benefits for the quality and governance of higher

education. When librarians are accorded the same academic standing as professors, the institution empowers them to fully contribute to its mission. The following are key advantages of having faculty librarians, each of which strengthens colleges and universities in critical ways:

Higher Quality Education and Student Success

Faculty librarians directly improve student learning outcomes. Research demonstrates that library instruction led by professional librarians boosts students' academic success – for example, students who receive course-integrated library instruction achieve higher grades and exhibit better information literacy skills than those who do not ([ala.org)](ala.org). Librarian-led instruction also correlates with higher student confidence in research and greater persistence in college ([ala.org)](ala.org). By embedding librarians in the teaching and learning process, institutions ensure that students develop strong research abilities, critical thinking, and lifelong learning habits, all of which contribute to overall student success and retention.

Stronger Research and Faculty Collaboration

When librarians hold faculty status, they become true partners with teaching faculty in scholarship and curriculum development. They can co-teach courses, lead research seminars, and collaborate as equals on research projects. Faculty librarians often serve as co-investigators or consultants on grants and research teams, bringing their information expertise to the table. Notably, faculty status enables librarians to even serve as primary investigators on grants in some cases ([aaup.org)](aaup.org), expanding an institution's research capacity. With librarians integrated into the faculty, professors have readily available colleagues who can enhance literature reviews, advise on data management, and keep them abreast of new information resources in their fields.

More Effective Institutional Governance

Faculty status grants librarians a voice in the governance of the institution, which leads to more well-informed decision-making. As voting members of the faculty, librarians sit on academic senate and committees, ensuring that library and information perspectives inform campus policies. ACRL guidelines advocate that librarians have the "same degree of representation as other faculty on all college or university governing bodies" ([ala.org)](ala.org). When this is achieved, decisions about curriculum, research priorities, technology adoption, and budgeting benefit from the insights of information professionals.

Cost-Effective Faculty Development and Teaching Support

Faculty librarians often function as internal consultants and educators for their teaching colleagues, a role that can save institutions money and improve instructional quality. With their deep knowledge of pedagogy and information resources, librarians provide faculty development in areas like effective assignment design, information literacy integration, and new educational technologies. For instance, librarians might host workshops for professors on how to incorporate library databases into class assignments or how to design research projects that scaffold

student skills. They might also help faculty members stay current on scholarly publishing trends or open access options that could benefit their teaching and research. A "teach the teachers" model has been proposed where librarians serve as faculty developers for information literacy across the curriculum ([information-literacy.blogspot.com)](information-literacy.blogspot.com). By utilizing librarians in this capacity, institutions capitalize on in-house expertise rather than relying solely on external training or trial-and-error by individual faculty. The result is a more skilled teaching faculty, especially in guiding student research, achieved in a cost-effective manner.

Stronger Student Retention and Engagement

A growing body of evidence links robust library services to improved student retention, particularly for undergraduates. Librarians contribute to student engagement by providing personalized support that helps students overcome academic challenges. When students build relationships with librarians – for example, through consultations or library workshops – they feel more connected to the institution and more confident in their ability to handle coursework. First-generation and at-risk students, in particular, often credit librarians with helping them acclimate academically ([insidehighered.com)](insidehighered.com). Libraries also serve as important social and learning spaces that increase student engagement – spaces that are more effectively activated when librarians are present to organize events, study sessions, and learning activities. In short, faculty librarians are an often underappreciated driver of retention: by fostering both academic skill development and a sense of support, they keep students engaged in their studies and connected to the institution.

Increased External Funding and Grant Success

Libraries and librarians can also be catalysts for attracting external funding to the university. Faculty status enables librarians to apply for research grants and funding opportunities, either independently or in collaboration with other faculty. Many librarians pursue grants from organizations like the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) or Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for library-specific initiatives (digital projects, preservation, community archives, etc.) that bring prestige and resources to campus. Additionally, librarians often partner on faculty grant proposals to add an information management or data expertise component. Because they can be listed as co-PIs or key personnel thanks to faculty status, they strengthen grant applications with their unique skill sets.

Institutional Stability and Faculty Retention

Recognizing librarians as faculty contributes to the overall stability of the academic workforce. When librarians are well-supported, other faculty benefit too: professors are less likely to feel burdened by tasks like curating course materials or troubleshooting research hurdles alone, which can improve their own job satisfaction and retention. In this way, faculty librarians are part of the ecosystem that keeps faculty workload manageable (through library-provided support) and the academic enterprise resilient. Additionally, faculty status (especially with tenure eligibility) helps attract and retain talented librarians, as it offers them a clear career path, job security, and parity with their faculty peers. This means an institution is more likely to build an

experienced, long-serving library faculty, reducing turnover. A stable library staff accumulates deep institutional knowledge and can adapt library services over time to evolving needs, which benefits the university immensely.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure that Illinois higher education institutions reap the full benefits of faculty librarians, strategic action is needed at the state and system level. The following policy recommendations aim to strengthen academic libraries amid budgetary challenges and align resources with the crucial roles outlined above:

Conduct a Statewide Study on the Role of Faculty Librarians

Illinois should initiate a comprehensive study examining academic library staffing across its public universities and colleges, with a focus on the presence or absence of faculty-status librarians and the impact on institutional performance. This study, perhaps led by the Illinois Board of Higher Education in partnership with the Illinois Library Association and academic library consortia (like CARLI), would gather data on librarian staffing levels, qualifications, and status at each institution, along with metrics on student outcomes (retention, graduation, information literacy assessments) and faculty research output. By comparing institutions, the state can identify best practices where faculty librarianship correlates with positive outcomes, as well as pinpoint libraries that are under-resourced. Crucially, the study should include input from students, faculty, and administrators about how library services (with or without faculty librarians) affect teaching, learning, and research. It can also draw on national benchmarks – for example, the fact that about half of academic libraries nationwide categorize their librarians as faculty ([aaup.org)](aaup.org) – to see where Illinois stands. The end goal of this research would be a report to policymakers quantifying the educational return on investment in professional library staff. Such evidence can build the case for supporting faculty librarian positions even in times of fiscal constraint. Moreover, a statewide perspective ensures that institutions like WIU are not looked at in isolation, but as part of a broader policy framework for excellence in higher education. This study could be a first step toward developing Illinois-specific standards or guidelines for academic library staffing (similar to ACRL standards) that governing boards and accreditors might adopt.

Targeted Funding to Support Academic Libraries and Librarian Positions

In tandem with studying the issue, the state should consider earmarking funds or incentives to bolster academic library services – particularly the hiring and retention of faculty librarians. One approach is to create a **targeted funding program** within the state higher education budget dedicated to libraries. For instance, the legislature could establish a grant fund that universities can apply to for hiring additional faculty librarians or for library initiatives that directly support

student success (such as information literacy programs or OER adoption projects spearheaded by librarians). Allocating even a modest amount statewide, distributed via competitive grants or formula funding, could encourage institutions to prioritize library staffing. Another approach is to tie some portion of performance-based funding for public universities to library indicators – for example, rewarding institutions that meet certain benchmarks in information literacy outcomes or that maintain an appropriate ratio of professional librarians to students. This would signal that the state views libraries as essential to academic performance. Targeted funds could also help address the inequities between institutions: research-intensive universities like the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign might have dozens of librarian faculty, while regional campuses may struggle to maintain a handful. State support could help level the playing field by subsidizing librarian positions at institutions that need them most. Additionally, the state can leverage federal funds and programs (such as LSTA grants via the State Library) to support academic library innovation in Illinois. Finally, funding support should not only focus on hiring but also on professional development for librarians – enabling them to stay current and bring back new ideas to their campuses. Investing in academic libraries yields high dividends: it directly enhances instructional quality, student achievement, and faculty productivity. As such, Illinois lawmakers and education officials should view funding for library faculty not as an expendable line item, but as a strategic investment in the state's human capital and academic competitiveness.

Educators without Classrooms, Researchers without Labs

Faculty librarians are fundamental to the academic vitality of colleges and universities. They are educators without classrooms, researchers without labs, and mentors available to all – working across disciplines to elevate the institution's teaching and research missions. The case of Western Illinois University's library cuts is a cautionary tale of what can happen when this invaluable human infrastructure is eroded: students lose guidance in navigating information, faculty lose research support, and the institution risks its academic standing. By contrast, empowering librarians as faculty strengthens the entire academic enterprise – from freshman orientation to faculty tenure. Illinois higher education policymakers must recognize that every dollar saved by trimming library staff is dwarfed by the costs in student success, faculty effectiveness, and institutional reputation.

The necessity of faculty librarians in higher education cannot be overstated. They are the connective tissue that links students to knowledge, faculty to resources, and the university to its scholarly heritage and future. Ensuring that Illinois colleges and universities have strong faculty library staff is not only a matter of preserving jobs; it is about safeguarding the academic integrity and effectiveness of higher education in the state. The urgency is real –

as budgets tighten, we must not allow short-term cuts to undermine long-term educational quality. By acting now to support and advocate for faculty librarians, Illinois can lead by example, showing the nation that academic excellence flourishes where libraries and librarians are fully empowered.