

REDEFINING THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY AS A CO-CURRICULAR PARTNER IN UNDERGRADUATE EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: For much of the twentieth century, the academic library occupied a paradoxical position within the university ecosystem. It was simultaneously revered as the symbolic heart of the institution and relegated to the functional periphery of its educational mission. Libraries were understood as repositories - magnificent, comprehensive, and essential, yet fundamentally passive. Their contribution to student learning was measured in gate counts, circulation statistics, and reference transactions, metrics that spoke to activity but said little about intellectual transformation. The prevailing assumption held that if the library acquired the right materials and offered competent assistance in locating them, its educational duty was fulfilled. The burden of transforming raw information into knowledge, and knowledge into wisdom, fell entirely upon the classroom instructor. This division of labour, however, has proven increasingly untenable in an educational landscape defined by information abundance, algorithmic mediation, and the urgent need for graduates who can navigate complexity with epistemological sophistication. This article advances a fundamental reorientation of the library's identity, arguing that the academic library must be understood not as a support service for the curriculum but as a co-curricular partner in the epistemological development of undergraduate learners. This reframing carries profound implications for library staffing, instructional design, assessment practices, and the very physical and virtual spaces libraries inhabit.

Keywords: epistemological development, co-curricular partnership, information literacy, academic libraries, undergraduate pedagogy, critical thinking

To appreciate the urgency of this redefinition, one must first grapple with the concept of epistemological development itself. Drawing upon the rich tradition of cognitive developmental psychology, particularly the work of William Perry and his successors, epistemological development refers to the progressive evolution in how learners conceive of knowledge, truth, and the criteria by which claims are evaluated. The entering undergraduate frequently inhabits a dualistic world, one in which knowledge consists of discrete, verifiable facts, and authority resides unequivocally in experts and texts. The instructor is seen as the conduit through which correct answers are transmitted, and the student's task is one of faithful reception and accurate reproduction. This position, while developmentally appropriate, is profoundly inadequate for the demands of advanced study and professional life. As students encounter the contested interpretations, methodological disagreements, and paradigm shifts that characterise genuine scholarly inquiry, they experience a disorienting transition. Knowledge becomes contextual, uncertain, and dependent upon the frameworks through which it is produced. The mature epistemic stance, which educators aspire to cultivate, involves a commitment to reasoned judgement within a landscape of provisionality, an ability to weigh evidence, acknowledge one's own situatedness, and engage constructively with perspectives that challenge one's own.

This developmental trajectory is not an automatic byproduct of time spent in lecture halls. It requires deliberate pedagogical intervention, and it is precisely here that the academic library has historically been underutilised. The classroom, constrained by contact hours and disciplinary content, often struggles to make space for the sustained, metacognitive reflection that epistemic growth

demands. Instructors face relentless pressure to cover foundational material, and the implicit epistemic assumptions of their disciplines frequently remain unexamined. Students are told to think critically, yet they are rarely given the structured opportunities to observe, practice, and receive feedback on what critical thinking actually entails across different domains. The library, by contrast, occupies a uniquely privileged position. It operates outside the credit-bearing curriculum, enjoys disciplinary neutrality, and possesses direct access to the very materials that embody epistemic diversity. These conditions render the library an ideal site for deliberate epistemological intervention, provided that librarians reconceive their professional identity accordingly.

The transition from a service orientation to a pedagogical partnership requires a fundamental shift in professional self-understanding. The traditional reference encounter, however well executed, positions the librarian as a mediator between the student and the information system. The interaction is typically brief, transaction-focused, and oriented toward the immediate satisfaction of a stated need. The student who asks for help finding five peer-reviewed sources for an argumentative essay receives that help, departs, and may never reflect upon why peer review matters, how the databases privilege certain forms of knowledge over others, or what constitutes a persuasive evidentiary base in that particular field. The partnership model, by contrast, transforms this encounter into an extended instructional dialogue. The librarian becomes a co-investigator into the student's epistemic assumptions, gently probing the criteria by which sources are evaluated, introducing alternative search strategies that reveal suppressed or marginalised perspectives, and inviting the student to articulate not merely what they have found but how they know what they know.

This partnership must extend beyond the one-shot library session, which has long been the workhorse of academic library instruction yet remains severely constrained in its developmental impact. A single fifty-minute session, no matter how skilfully designed, cannot fundamentally alter a student's epistemological framework. It can introduce concepts, but it cannot sustain the ongoing, iterative practice that epistemic growth requires. The co-curricular model demands instead a continuous relationship, one in which librarians are embedded within the broader educational experience of students across their undergraduate careers. This might manifest as a sequenced information literacy curriculum that progresses from foundational skills in the first year to advanced scholarly communication practices in the capstone. It might involve librarians collaborating with faculty to redesign major assignments, ensuring that research tasks are structured to surface epistemic tensions rather than merely requiring the mechanical application of search techniques. It might even extend to librarians participating in first-year orientation programmes, living-learning communities, and senior thesis advisement, not as guest speakers but as regular participants in the educational dialogue.

A co-curricular approach to epistemological development demands intentional structuring. It cannot rely upon serendipity or the goodwill of individual librarians, but must be systematically designed and integrated into the rhythms of undergraduate life. One promising framework involves the concept of epistemic scaffolding, the deliberate provision of support structures that enable learners to accomplish tasks beyond their current independent capacity, with these structures gradually withdrawn as competence increases. In the library context, this scaffolding might take the form of structured research consultations that follow a developmental arc. The first-year student receives extensive guidance in formulating research questions and navigating basic discovery tools. The second-year student, now familiar with the mechanics, is challenged to compare sources from different disciplinary traditions and articulate the assumptions underlying each. The third-year student engages in systematic literature reviews, identifying gaps, contradictions, and areas of active scholarly debate. The fourth-year student participates in scholarly publication processes, whether

through undergraduate journals, conference presentations, or collaborative research with faculty, experiencing firsthand the provisional and contested nature of knowledge production.

This scaffolding must be supported by assessment practices that attend to epistemological outcomes. Traditional library assessment, focused on satisfaction surveys or the number of sources cited in student bibliographies, captures nothing of epistemic growth. The co-curricular library must instead employ qualitative and mixed-methods approaches that trace changes in student reasoning over time. Reflective journals, in which students document their research processes and articulate the evolution of their understanding, offer rich data about epistemic assumptions. Think-aloud protocols, in which students narrate their decision-making during online searches, reveal implicit beliefs about authority and relevance. Longitudinal portfolios, tracking student work across multiple semesters, can demonstrate shifts from dualistic to contextual reasoning. These assessment instruments not only provide evidence of library impact but also serve as pedagogical tools in their own right, encouraging the metacognitive habits upon which epistemic maturity depends.

The co-curricular vision also carries significant implications for the library’s material and digital infrastructure. Physical spaces must be designed to facilitate the kinds of dialogic, collaborative, and reflective encounters that epistemic development requires. Silent study areas retain their importance for deep concentration, yet they must be complemented by flexible spaces that support small-group deliberation, peer tutoring, and extended consultation. The library cannot afford to be a museum of books; it must be a workshop of ideas. This workshop metaphor extends to the digital realm, where the library’s website, discovery platforms, and learning management integrations must be designed with pedagogical intentionality. The default search interface, which often privileges convenience over critical engagement, may inadvertently reinforce dualistic assumptions by presenting results as a flat, undifferentiated list. A more epistemically responsible design might surface the provenance of sources, highlight methodological differences, and invite users to reflect upon the search strategies they have employed. Artificial intelligence tools, increasingly integrated into academic workflows, present both a challenge and an opportunity. The co-curricular library must teach students not only to use these tools effectively but to interrogate their epistemic limitations, understanding how training data, algorithmic bias, and probabilistic outputs shape the information they receive.

Furthermore, the library’s collections themselves become pedagogical instruments in this redefined framework. Special collections and archives, often perceived as relevant only to advanced researchers, offer extraordinary opportunities for undergraduate epistemic development. The encounter with a primary source, the manuscript, the incunable, or the archival document confronts students with materiality and mediation in ways that digital surrogates cannot replicate. Students who handle a sixteenth-century botanical illustration or a twentieth-century activist pamphlet are forced to reckon with the situatedness of knowledge, the social and material conditions of its production, and the interpretive labour required to make meaning from the past. These experiences cultivate an epistemic humility that is increasingly rare in an age of instantaneous information access. The library’s role as curator of the cultural record thus becomes not merely preservationist but profoundly pedagogical, inviting students into the work of historical and critical interpretation.

Such an ambitious redefinition will inevitably encounter resistance, both from within the library profession and from the broader institution. Many librarians, trained in traditional practices and accustomed to a service identity, may feel threatened by the expectation of pedagogical expertise. The partnership model demands competencies that extend beyond library science, encompassing educational psychology, curriculum design, and assessment methodology. It also requires a comfort with uncertainty and improvisation that may conflict with the procedural orientation of traditional

library work. Addressing this challenge necessitates a transformation in graduate library education, professional development programmes, and hiring practices. The Master of Library and Information Science curriculum must incorporate substantial coursework in pedagogy, learning theory, and instructional design, treating these not as elective specialisations but as core competencies. Professional organisations must champion the teacher-librarian identity, providing ongoing training and communities of practice that sustain this professional self-conception.

The institutional resistance may prove equally formidable. Faculty members, accustomed to autonomy in their classrooms and protective of disciplinary boundaries, may view librarian involvement in curriculum and assessment as an encroachment. University administrators, focused on measurable outcomes and fiscal accountability, may struggle to appreciate the developmental goals that cannot be captured in retention statistics alone. Overcoming these barriers requires strategic relationship building, clear communication of the library’s pedagogical value, and a willingness to demonstrate impact through rigorous, evidence-based advocacy. Librarians must learn the languages of the academy, speaking persuasively to faculty about student learning outcomes and to administrators about return on educational investment. They must identify faculty allies who champion the library’s role and collaborate in pilot projects that generate compelling evidence of effectiveness. They must also recognise that co-curricular partnership does not imply competition with the classroom but rather complementarity. The library enriches and extends what happens in the course, it does not replace it. This complementary relationship, once understood and valued, positions the library as an indispensable partner in the university’s educational mission rather than an ancillary expense.

Ultimately, the redefinition of the library as a co-curricular partner in epistemological development rests upon an ethical foundation. The contemporary information environment, saturated with disinformation, polarised discourses, and algorithmic manipulation, poses existential threats to democratic societies. Universities bear a profound responsibility to produce graduates who can discern the difference between evidence and assertion, who can entertain perspectives they do not share, and who can participate in public reasoning with intellectual integrity. The academic library, as the institutional embodiment of the scholarly values that underpin this reasoning, cannot remain neutral or passive in this endeavour. To do so would be to abdicate its most fundamental purpose. The library must actively cultivate the epistemic virtues that sustain free inquiry and democratic deliberation. It must teach students not merely to find information but to evaluate its provenance, to recognise their own biases and the biases embedded in knowledge systems, and to engage in the difficult, ongoing work of constructing meaning in a world of competing claims.

This ethical imperative extends to the library’s treatment of all learners, recognising that epistemological development is not uniform across demographic groups. Students from historically marginalised backgrounds, first-generation college students, and adult learners bring diverse epistemic resources and face distinctive challenges. The co-curricular library must be attentive to these differences, offering multiple pathways to epistemic growth and validating the diverse ways of knowing that students bring to their education. This is not a concession to relativism but a recognition that epistemic maturity involves understanding the situatedness of all knowledge, including one’s own. The library that embraces this inclusive vision becomes not only a more effective educational partner but also a more just one, contributing to the democratisation of higher education that universities profess to champion.

In conclusion, the academic library’s future relevance depends upon its willingness to embrace the co-curricular partnership model. The traditional repository role, however honourable, no longer suffices in an era of ubiquitous digital access and complex information challenges. By positioning

itself as a deliberate, structured, and sustained partner in undergraduate epistemological development, the library secures its place at the centre of the educational enterprise. It becomes not a cost centre to be optimised but a pedagogical asset to be cultivated. It transforms from a place where students find information to a space where they learn to think, and in doing so, it fulfils its most enduring promise to the university and to society. The path forward is demanding, requiring professional reinvention, institutional advocacy, and an unwavering commitment to student growth. Yet for the librarian who embraces this vision, there is no more meaningful or urgent work. The cultivation of epistemic maturity is the highest calling of the academic profession, and the library, reconceived as a co-curricular partner, is uniquely positioned to answer that call.

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