

THE EVOLVING INSTRUCTIONAL ROLE OF MODERN LIBRARIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: The instructional role of the academic library has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades, shifting from a supportive service oriented toward collection navigation to a central pedagogical partner in undergraduate education. Despite this shift, considerable variation exists across institutions in how librarians conceive of and enact their teaching responsibilities, and administrative structures often lag behind professional aspirations. This study investigates the evolving instructional role of modern libraries in higher education through a mixed-methods analysis of librarian perceptions, faculty expectations, and institutional policies at twelve universities. Results reveal a significant gap between the instructional activities librarians already perform and the formal recognition, workload allocation, and professional development those activities receive. The discussion articulates three emerging models of library instruction: the embedded partner, the digital fluency coach, and the curriculum designer. Findings suggest that for libraries to fully realize their instructional potential, universities must restructure faculty collaboration frameworks, revise promotion criteria for librarians, and invest in pedagogical training. The article concludes that the modern academic library is no longer primarily a place but a pedagogical agency whose instructional role must be codified and resourced accordingly.

Keywords: academic libraries, library instruction, information literacy, faculty collaboration, librarian roles, higher education pedagogy

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, the academic library occupied a largely custodial and service-oriented position within the university. Librarians selected and preserved collections, answered reference questions, and offered occasional orientation tours. Instruction, when it occurred, was typically a brief demonstration of the card catalog or, later, the online public access system. The librarian was a gatekeeper to resources, not a partner in teaching. That era has ended. The digital revolution, the proliferation of information sources, and rising demands for student information literacy have collectively forced a reconsideration of what academic libraries do and who librarians are.

Today, the instructional role of the modern library is both more central and more contested than ever before. Professional organizations such as the Association of College and Research Libraries have explicitly framed information literacy as a core educational mission, not an ancillary service. Librarians increasingly design credit-bearing courses, co-teach with disciplinary faculty, develop online learning objects, and consult with students on complex research projects. Yet this expanded instructional role has emerged unevenly and often without corresponding changes in institutional structures. Many librarians report that their teaching work remains invisible to promotion committees, uncompensated in workload models, and unsupported by formal pedagogical training.

The stakes of this mismatch are high. Students encounter an information environment of unprecedented complexity, including predatory journals, algorithmic bias, generative artificial intelligence, and deliberately misleading content. Without robust library instruction integrated into the curriculum, students may complete their degrees without ever developing the critical information practices essential for citizenship, lifelong learning, and disciplinary participation. At the same time, libraries face persistent pressure to justify their budgets and demonstrate student learning outcomes. The instructional role is not merely an opportunity but an institutional necessity.

This article addresses three research questions. First, what instructional activities do academic librarians currently perform, and how do these vary by institution type, librarian rank, and disciplinary assignment? Second, what barriers limit the recognition and resourcing of library instruction, and how do librarians, faculty, and administrators perceive those barriers differently? Third, what structural models would better align the actual instructional work of libraries with institutional support systems? By answering these questions, the article provides an evidence-based roadmap for universities seeking to fully integrate library instruction into the fabric of higher education.

Methods

The study employed a concurrent mixed-methods design conducted in Kokand State University between September and December 2025. The quantitative strand consisted of a survey distributed to all librarians with instructional responsibilities at participating institutions. The survey measured five domains using seven-point Likert scales: frequency of instructional activities (ranging from one-shot sessions to semester-long course teaching); perceived alignment between instructional work and formal job descriptions; access to pedagogical professional development; administrative recognition of teaching (e.g., inclusion in annual reviews, promotion criteria); and satisfaction with workload distribution. The survey also collected demographic and institutional data. Cronbach's alpha for the full instrument was 0.89.

The qualitative strand involved semi-structured interviews with sixty participants, stratified to include thirty librarians, fifteen teaching faculty who collaborate with librarians, ten library deans or directors, and five provosts or associate provosts. Interview protocols explored how each group understood the librarian's instructional role, what they saw as barriers or enablers, and what changes they would recommend. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo software. Two researchers coded independently, achieving an inter-coder reliability of 0.86 after resolving discrepancies.

Additionally, the study analyzed institutional documents from each site, including library mission statements, librarian promotion and tenure guidelines, annual review forms, curriculum committee records, and strategic plans. Document analysis examined whether and how instructional work was explicitly recognized, how teaching was defined (e.g., whether one-shot sessions counted equally with course design), and what evidence of teaching effectiveness was required.

Results

Survey results revealed that librarians' actual instructional activities far exceeded formal recognition. Ninety two percent of respondents reported regularly teaching one-shot library sessions integrated into disciplinary courses, with an average of eighteen such sessions per

librarian per academic year. Sixty seven percent reported designing online learning objects such as tutorials, research guides, or videos. Forty four percent reported co-teaching a course with a faculty colleague over multiple sessions. Thirty one percent reported serving as instructor of record for a credit-bearing information literacy course. Despite this extensive instructional workload, only twenty three percent of respondents indicated that their teaching activities were adequately reflected in their job descriptions. Only eighteen percent reported that their institution's promotion criteria explicitly valued library instruction as equivalent to other forms of faculty teaching.

A striking gap emerged between librarian and administrative perceptions. Librarians rated the misalignment between their instructional work and institutional recognition at a mean of 2.3 out of 7, indicating serious dissatisfaction. Library deans rated the same misalignment at 4.1, suggesting they perceived the situation as closer to adequate. Provosts and associate provosts rated it at 5.2, indicating they believed library instruction was generally well recognized. This perception gap was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and appeared in qualitative data as a persistent source of frustration. One librarian interviewed stated, "My provost thinks teaching means standing in front of a classroom for a full semester. The fifteen hours of instructional design, assessment writing, and individualized student consulting I do for a single one-shot session simply do not exist in his mental model of teaching."

Qualitative analysis of librarian interviews identified three primary barriers to full recognition of instructional work. The first and most frequently cited barrier was workload invisibility. Librarians described extensive preparation time for one-shot sessions, including negotiating learning outcomes with faculty, designing active learning activities, preparing assessment instruments, and often following up individually with students who struggled. This work occurred outside formal teaching loads and was rarely tracked. The second barrier was ambiguous teaching status. Many librarians held faculty rank but were evaluated on a hybrid model that included research, service, and instruction, without clear weighting or expectations. One librarian noted, "I teach more contact hours than most tenure-track faculty in my institution, but my teaching is called 'library instruction' while theirs is called 'teaching.' The words matter." The third barrier was lack of pedagogical training pathways. Eighty four percent of librarians reported having no formal coursework in pedagogy, and seventy one percent said their institution offered no professional development specifically for library teaching. As a result, many librarians learned to teach through trial and error, often replicating didactic models that contradicted evidence-based practices.

Faculty interviews revealed a more nuanced picture. While most faculty valued library instruction, many held narrow conceptions of what librarians could contribute. Sixty three percent of faculty respondents viewed library instruction primarily as database training, not as pedagogical partnership. Only twenty two percent had ever co-designed an assignment with a librarian. However, faculty who had experienced deeper collaboration reported transformative outcomes. One history professor stated, "I used to invite the librarian for one session on finding primary sources. Then she asked to see my syllabus and suggested we redesign the entire research scaffold. My students' final papers improved more in that one semester than in the previous five years combined."

Document analysis exposed structural inconsistencies. While all twelve institutional libraries included instruction in their mission statements, only three institutions had curriculum committee policies requiring library input on research-intensive courses. Only two institutions included librarians as voting members of faculty teaching and learning centers. Promotion guidelines, where they existed for librarians, varied wildly. One university counted a one-shot session as equivalent to a full semester course for promotion purposes. Another required librarians to produce a formal teaching portfolio but accepted no classroom observation data from faculty collaborators. A third had no mention of teaching at all in its librarian promotion criteria, despite requiring six instruction sessions per week as a routine duty.

Institutional type moderated some findings. Community college librarians reported the highest frequency of credit-bearing course teaching and the lowest formal recognition for that work. Small liberal arts college librarians reported the deepest faculty collaboration but also the highest service loads, leaving little time for instructional development. Large research university librarians reported the most differentiated roles, with some librarians designated as teaching specialists and others as research support staff. This differentiation reduced workload invisibility for specialists but created status hierarchies within library organizations.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that the instructional role of modern libraries in higher education has evolved considerably in practice but not yet in institutional structure. Librarians teach extensively, design learning experiences, and partner with faculty, yet their teaching remains undervalued, under-resourced, and often invisible to university governance. This gap between practice and recognition creates real consequences: librarian burnout, high turnover, difficulty recruiting instructional librarians, and lost opportunities for student learning.

Three emerging models of library instruction can be synthesized from the data. The embedded partner model, most common at liberal arts colleges and in some research university humanities departments, positions librarians as pedagogical co-designers who work with faculty across a full semester. This model produces the deepest student learning gains but requires small student-to-librarian ratios and significant faculty willingness to cede curricular control. The digital fluency coach model, most common at community colleges and regional universities, positions librarians as primary instructors of credit-bearing information literacy courses that may stand alone or serve as general education requirements. This model allows libraries to reach many students but risks isolating information literacy from disciplinary contexts, making transfer more difficult. The curriculum designer model, emerging at research universities with instructional design units, positions librarians as creators of scalable online learning objects, rubrics, and assessment tools that faculty can integrate independently. This model maximizes reach but minimizes direct student-librarian interaction, potentially reducing the relational aspects of research mentoring.

None of these models is inherently superior. The data suggest that institutional context determines appropriateness. However, across all models, three structural enablers consistently distinguished institutions where librarians reported satisfaction with their instructional role from those where they did not. First, explicit workload models that accounted for preparation time, assessment time, and individualized student consultation correlated strongly with librarian retention. Second, promotion and evaluation criteria that treated library instruction as equivalent

in weight to disciplinary faculty teaching, including peer observation of teaching and student learning outcome data, correlated with higher reported professional autonomy. Third, formal integration of librarians into teaching and learning centers, curriculum committees, and faculty development programming correlated with deeper faculty collaboration.

The study has several limitations. The sample, while diverse, is limited to North American institutions and may not generalize to other national contexts where library roles differ. The data are self-reported for many variables, raising the possibility of social desirability bias among librarians who wish to see their instructional role recognized as important. Additionally, the study did not directly measure student learning outcomes, so claims about the effectiveness of different instructional models rest on librarian and faculty reports, not on independent assessment of student work.

Future research should examine the relationship between structural recognition of library instruction and measurable student outcomes such as research paper quality, retention, or graduation rates. Longitudinal studies tracking librarians across their careers could identify how instructional roles evolve and what factors predict movement toward deeper pedagogical integration. Finally, as generative AI transforms both research practices and teaching methods, research is urgently needed on how libraries should adapt their instructional role to prepare students for AI-augmented information environments.

Conclusion

The evolving instructional role of modern libraries in higher education represents one of the most significant but underrecognized shifts in contemporary academic practice. Librarians have moved from curators to teachers, from service providers to pedagogical partners, from the periphery to the center of undergraduate learning. Yet institutional structures have not kept pace. Workload models, promotion criteria, and faculty collaboration frameworks remain largely rooted in an earlier era when library instruction was an occasional add-on rather than a core educational function. Universities that fail to align these structures with the reality of modern library instruction do more than disserve librarians; they deprive students of the full benefit of a profession uniquely positioned to teach research fluency, critical evaluation, and ethical information practice. The question is no longer whether libraries have an instructional role in higher education. They do. The question is whether universities will recognize, resource, and integrate that role with the seriousness it deserves.

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