

## Finding the Ties that Bind: Coalition Building in Loosely Coupled Academic Libraries

Lyena C. Chavez

### Abstract

Pressures are building for academic library leaders. Leaders face budget cuts, space re-purposing, staffing shortages, and expectations to meet evolving faculty and students' research needs. Leaders must not only manage library operations, but also successfully guide and lead within a sea of unpredictable, evolving institutional forces and activities. Loosely coupled organizational theory provides library leaders insights and guidance as they organize and plan. Leaders must recognize, understand, and leverage the strengths of these systems. It is up to them to bring together appropriate coalitions to foster collaborations and cohesions not only among library staff members, but across disciplinary communities within academia. By finding and securing these ties that bind in loosely coupled libraries, leaders can successfully further goals and foster innovation.

### Introduction

Academic libraries are not nearly as tightly organized as their annual reports or organizational charts may make them appear. Academic libraries are in many ways business units that operate in an increasingly competitive environment. Libraries serve their clients (faculty, students, and staff) through services, collections, and expertise that enhance these teaching and learning communities. Electronic resources continue to be purchased, and print materials are catalogued and housed in order to create collections that support the research and curricular needs of the campus community. Effective leaders advocate for staffing and resources in order for libraries to continue to innovate to meet the evolving needs of their users and parent institutions. Indeed, there are many successful entrepreneurial academic library leaders creating exciting strategies to realize their visions. But there is another side of academic libraries. Although libraries have organized themselves with hierarchical business models and have plenty of rules and formalized coordination, they are also central to the academic enterprise and remain a part of the complex "loosely coupled" structure of their parent colleges or universities.

## Literature Review

In response to the functionalism that dominated organizational theory during the past forty years, psychologist Karl Weick (1976), viewed some organizations, including schools, colleges, and universities, as loosely coupled systems. Weick uses the phrase “loose coupling” to convey that, “coupled events are responsive, but that each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness” (3). In other words, these systems contain individual elements that have high autonomy relative to the larger system, often creating a multiplicity of fragmented fiefdoms. Academic libraries, like higher education institutions that they serve, are complex adaptive systems that possess some decentralized elements.

Troy Swanson (2012) has identified libraries as loosely coupled systems and offers many examples. He notes that “libraries do not operate as monolithic hierarchies where top-down orders produce standardized actions” (26). This author acknowledges that it can be challenging to directly connect inputs to outputs in libraries. Although libraries metrics continue to focus on collections, expenditures, library use, and staffing, these metrics can be limiting. For example, when resources or library personnel are added, it may be hard to measure direct increases in services; increasing inputs may not necessarily increase outputs. There are also high degrees of variability in interactions with library users, since librarians customize resources and services to meet the individual needs of users. A library liaison may interact in different ways with different faculty in various disciplines depending on their library needs. Finally, library processes can be defined as more loose or tight. For example, library materials acquisitions or access services (circulation or interlibrary loan) usually require tight procedures while collection development procedures or library building use policies may be looser depending on the library. Green and Swanson (2012) view their library’s reference department as a loosely coupled system, with reference librarians’ unique and varied knowledge being at the center of the system. They encourage librarians to turn this “looseness” into an advantage through information sharing at the reference desk, from the classroom, and across the department.

In this highly influential article, Weick (1976) identifies ways for leaders to succeed when working within a loosely coupled system. Academic library leaders may intuitively recognize and already leverage some, if not all, of these strengths. Weick notes that units within this system have a great deal of autonomy to collaborate across the organization (1982). Library departments are fairly autonomous; both paraprofessionals and professionals who manage library units are experts in their areas of responsibility. Professional librarians, for example, specialize in instructional services, technical services, archives work, or scholarly

communications. Librarians indeed have a considerable degree of independence that enables them to work with different academic departments and schools at different levels across the institution. For example, through a library's liaison program, academic librarians continue to offer customized resources and services to faculty members in specific disciplines. Instruction librarians also have substantial autonomy to teach research/information literacy concepts and skills to students as they see fit both in the classroom and in the library.

Academic libraries aspire to be "good reservoirs for flexibility;" they quickly change or adapt and continue to do so to keep pace with changes in technology, in research, in teaching and learning in a diverse and unpredictable higher education landscape (Weick 1982, 2). Loosely coupled systems may have an increased sensitivity to their environment; thus libraries may understand the inner-workings of their parent institutions and be able to flourish through change. This also may bode well for academic librarians who continue to offer local knowledge of their institutions and possess genuine respect for different ways of knowing among academics.

Loosely coupled systems are often fertile grounds for experimentation and exploration, as ideas can be tested and shared with little or no risk to the entire organization. Academic libraries are learning organizations that run numerous experiments, in hopes of fueling "local adaptations and creative solutions" (Weick 1982, 6). Academic libraries continue to be innovation incubators on campuses across the country. Small experiments related to emerging technologies such as loaning iPads, to larger ones, such as creating makerspaces or hosting digital repositories to showcase and preserve scholarly, creative output, are gaining attention and fostering innovation at numerous colleges and universities across the country.

Library leaders must also acknowledge and respond to distinct, complex challenges to working within loose systems since they are "more elusive, less tangible, harder to grasp, and hard to administer" (Weick 1982, 3). Librarianship is specialized – an archivist may not understand what a reference librarian does all day, though staff members still depend on each other for high performance and quality service. There is also constantly shifting perceptions and blurring boundaries regarding roles of library staff members, so systems may function less efficiently than tighter ones. Relationships between authority structures (library department heads, library director) and sub-units are loose. It may be difficult to share information and reach consensus on goals and how to achieve them given the weak linkages between units. Indeed, there is also the possibility of dysfunction residing alongside innovation within various areas. Finally, feedback loops may be nonexistent or weak, causing libraries to be slow to change or improve operations.

There are numerous examples of loose coupling between academic libraries and their parent institutions, making communication and collaboration outside of the library challenging for leaders. Governance structures in academic libraries are mixed and complex. In most cases, a library director reports to a chief academic officer, but in some instances directors report to the chief financial officer. While lines of authority may be clear, lines of communication may be misunderstood, or even unrecognized. Very often library leaders must acquire academic legitimacy since they may not be seen as valued contributors to the campus enterprise. Many library leaders do not enjoy faculty status or may not participate in faculty committees. Academic librarians who are closely identified with support services rather than academic affairs may be perceived as being tangential rather than central to the educational mission of the institution.

Loosely coupled relationships between faculty members and professional librarians are common. Chu (1997) did a case study examining loose coupling between library and faculty in efforts to select and acquire materials to support the curriculum (collection development). Due to what Chu terms as a “zero-sum game,” library collections become uneven and inadequate not only because of finite budgets, but also due to the loose-coupling between librarians and faculty members. Librarians and faculty share responsibilities for collection development, but there are ambiguous expectations and lack of understanding in regard to faculty and librarian roles and functions regarding this task. Chu rightly notes that, “In a successful collaboration among people from different sub-units of a loosely coupled system, there must be a common understanding of the purpose of collaboration” (147).

Weick (1982) argues that these loosely coupled systems are different and may not be conducive to traditional bureaucratic control and may be better served with a different type of management. Fister and Martin (2005) point to the academic library’s strong, collaborative culture and robust mission to serve, share and innovate on college campuses, but do not believe that hierarchical structures serve libraries well, noting that bureaucracies stifle creativity and do not facilitate teamwork. They believe that, in reality, library staff members, “simply ignore the hierarchy, find work-arounds, or create unofficial structures that work better – a marketplace of ideas that is more or less a functional black market” (5).

Lesniaski, MacPherson, Fister, and McKinzie (2001) argue persuasively that libraries should explore and develop alternative models of library management derived from the academic departmental model of shared governance. Lesniaski et al. offer case studies at Dickinson College, St. Olaf, and Gustavus Adolphus colleges. At Dickinson College Library, the first institution to formally institute collegial management and shared decision making, in lieu of

a single College Librarian, librarians elected a chair who served for a three year term as College Librarian. They also revamped a peer-reviewed evaluation for librarians. The reasons for reinventing the library structure include wanting to give all librarians an equal voice in decision-making and also encouraging a more holistic view of librarianship. All librarians assumed both technical and public services responsibilities in order to encourage well-rounded, holistic librarianship (235). Interestingly, this type of collegial management hasn't survived at any of these institutions, but the authors note that it did prove effective while it lasted (237). These authors maintain that having layers of hierarchy within academic libraries isn't effective in fast-paced environments and that good decisions are made by a "group of people working together with a shared knowledge base and shared sense of responsibility for the entire operation" (234).

Fister and Martin (2005) preface their article with Harlan Cleveland's ideas that the global information society brings us "the twilight of hierarchy" (1). Cleveland writes, "An information-rich environment is a sharing environment" and he asserts that as information becomes diffused, so does power (1). Indeed, libraries aspire to be laboratories for modeling democratic concepts, but the organizational structures currently in place do not reflect this. Fisher and Martin note that a collegial model of "peers working together, sharing expertise, balancing individual curiosity with a common goal of advancing knowledge" is exactly what libraries should be promoting and aligns with library's core values (5). A library's mission is to "sustain and enrich the ongoing conversation that creates new knowledge," but their own organizational structures do not facilitate courageous conversations among peers or protect the intellectual freedoms that librarians strongly defend in the "Library Bill of Rights" (5). Shared governance models should be further explored, as they are flexible structures that support communication both laterally and horizontally within libraries.

Hierarchical systems of governance still remain in academic libraries. There are high levels of autonomy and independence between units and diffused decision making. But considering loosely coupled elements, how much power do academic library leaders truly possess in these systems? Hirschhorn (1994) notes that, "central authority is derived as much from the members versus the member elements receiving delegated authority from above" (1). It appears then that common understandings leading to greater cohesions and stronger collaborations in these systems will help team members at all levels work together to achieve goals. But how does a leader achieve this? How can leaders tame the fragmentation in order to lead the library towards important objectives?

Weick views the leader's voice and vision as the "glue" that binds together this interdependent, splintered system (1982, 3). He suggests that administrators articulate a

direction with “eloquence, persistence, and detail” (4). Leaders can offer a clear guiding vision and strategy but then offer team members the opportunity to determine the “hows” or execution to encourage flexibility, diversity, and innovation. Leaders must continue to build and reaffirm a sense of direction and coherence among units. Weick cites normative isomorphism, socialization at work, as a binding agent in these systems; leaders should be aware of the backgrounds of team members and take note of issues on which people agree (3). Since channels are unpredictable in these systems, Weick argues that leaders need “symbol management” to tie the system together (3). He clarifies the difference between symbols and goals- symbols explain the rationales behind projects and initiatives. He stresses that in loosely coupled systems, people strive to be part of “identifiable, worthwhile units” and are more interested in questions relating to “what and whys” rather than “whens and how wells” (4). Bolman and Gallos also recognize that symbols play an important role in higher education and offer specific ways that leaders can bring meaning and vision to their institutions through symbolic leadership (117-126). They suggest leaders leverage the power in ritual and ceremony in order to serve the institution. Library leaders should use Bolman and Gallos’ symbolic frame which uses narratives to mobilize and inspire.

Hirschhorn (1994) offers more sound advice for coalition building in loosely structured systems. He suggests that leaders design and implement forums and deliberations (“meeting systems”) that bring together appropriate people around relevant issues (3). He notes that “informal discussions, which were once uncoupled from each other, are then stitched together over time” (4). He also suggests experimenting by creating different groups; libraries should continue to create ad hoc groups, staff groups, workshops, or focus groups depending on needs.

Finally, Hirschhorn encourages leaders to “operate at the seams between units, fostering their collaboration” looking for areas where there is potential for authentic and strong synergies (5). Weick (1982) similarly urges leaders to leave their offices and initiate conversations to “remind people of central visions and to assist them in applying them to their own activities” (4). Academic library leaders, for example, can help instruction librarians clarify their personal teaching philosophies, which ultimately strengthens the library’s instructional mission.

Hirschhorn (1994) understands that the typical call of more leadership and strategic planning is important, but may prove inadequate in these complex, multifaceted loosely coupled

systems. His message resonates with library leaders; he suggests that leaders strive to both protect and guide the system:

To *protect* the system, the executive keeps the system within its safety zone and manages its contradictions; to *guide* the system the executive develops strategic themes, builds a planning infrastructure and works at the “seams” between units, giving a boost to emerging synergistic combinations. (2)

Protecting reframes leadership as not necessarily an act of directing, but rather as “insuring (the system) remains upright” (2). Leaders must keep the organization within its *zone of safety*, monitoring the system and protecting it from crisis (2). As libraries experience transformational change, leaders must consider roles and values that must be protected and preserved, while continuing to provide mechanisms for discussion and debate for the academic library’s growing number of clients and stakeholders. Certainly library leaders recognize and appreciate this role, as they work tirelessly to ensure that their libraries respond effectively to the broad needs and demands of their users, while protecting the values, traditions, and practices of academic libraries.

Library leaders can engage in storytelling, perhaps related to the library’s vision or strategic directions, to inspire and guide people within these systems. Hirschhorn encourages leaders to leverage the power of stories and develop a series of scenerios that depict how the system may inadvertently be pushed beyond this safety zone, thus creating a sense of urgency. Stories are impactful as they “weave political, substantive and economic factors together, exploring some relationships of the system to its wider environment” (3). Bolman and Gallos also suggest that symbolic leaders construct clear and compelling narratives that “remind constituents where they’ve been, where they’re going, and why” (125).

Finally, Hirschhorn encourages leaders to “choose the right seams” (5). Leaders should work strategically to find the specific seams or ties where strong synergies are latent, if not already appearing. But leaders need to be mindful of which ties they select. If they choose incorrectly “people will participate in collaborative projects she/he sponsors but only ritualistically” (5). Simply put, although it might not be visible, there is potential power in these loosely coupled academic libraries. It is up to library leaders to activate and strengthen these connections among library staff to create powerful synergies to advance library initiatives. Certainly library leaders should keep their organizations focused and fiscally sound but rather than controlling libraries, academic leaders should guide and protect them. Leaders must search tirelessly and quickly, finding and strengthening the ties that bind in order to boost

cooperation and collaborations among staff members within libraries. Instead of adhering to rigid hierarchies, leaders must “work at the seams” – organizing and forming coalitions throughout the organization to produce networks that can mobilize to meet the academic library’s ever evolving needs quickly (Hirschhorn, 1994, 6).

Choosing the right seams means not only finding and securing the strong connections within and throughout the library (internal organizational constituents), but also building the right coalitions that will tie the library – its resources, services, and expertise- to different external campus constituencies throughout the college or university. Higher education systems are seen as sieves for sorting and stratifying populations and temples for the legitimation of official knowledge (Stevens, Armstrong, Arum, 2008). Knowledge creating (research) and dissemination (teaching) are the main ways by which legitimacy is created and sustained in higher education. Although academic libraries contribute to research and teaching in many ways, libraries may not be recognized as central units in higher education’s “temples” and library staff members’ expertise may not be known or well-utilized. Therefore, library leaders must boost cooperation and collaborations beyond the library by reaching across disciplinary boundaries and connecting the library to various scholarly communities.

## Conclusion

Academic library leaders should recognize and leverage the positive aspects of these complex loosely coupled systems, capable of unleashing creativity and achievement. Libraries that offer flexible and creative services can be remarkably adaptive and resilient, especially during periods of institutional change. Academic libraries can serve as ideal hubs of innovation because they can be internally nimble even when institutions or departments suffer from institutional inertia. Libraries offer deep expertise, resources, and services that directly contribute to knowledge creation and dissemination on campus, but often the library is not recognized or is weakly linked to other units in higher education. Therefore, library leaders must strengthen ties between both internal and external constituents of the library. Leaders can empower library staff at all levels by actively building coalitions, coherence, and finding the right seams. It is finding and securing these important “ties that bind” that will ultimately enable academic libraries to thrive rather than just survive.

**Lyena C. Chavez** (chavezl@merrimack.edu) is Head of Instruction and Outreach, McQuade Library at Merrimack College

**Published:** November 2018

## **Bibliography**

- Bolman, Lee G., and Joan V. Gallos. 2011. *Reframing Academic Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Chu, Felix. 1997. "Librarian-Faculty Relations in Collection Development." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 23(1): 15-20. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0099-1333\(97\)90067-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0099-1333(97)90067-7).
- Fister, Barbara, and Kathie Martin. 2005. "Embracing the Challenge of Change through Collegial Decision-Making." In *Currents and Convergence: Navigating the Rivers of Change: Proceedings of the Twelfth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, April 7-10, 1-7*. Chicago: ACRL. <https://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrl/events/fisteretal05.pdf>.
- Gilmore, Thomas, Larry Hirschhorn, and Michael Kelly. 1999. "Challenges of Leading and Planning in Higher Education." *CFAR: Philadelphia and Cambridge, US*. [http://www.cfar.com/sites/default/files/resources/Leading\\_Planning\\_Ed.pdf](http://www.cfar.com/sites/default/files/resources/Leading_Planning_Ed.pdf).
- Green, Jeremy and Troy Swanson. 2011. "Tightening the System: Reference as a Loosely Coupled System." *Journal of Library Administration* 51(4): 375-388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2011.556960>.
- Hirschhorn, Larry. 1994. "Leading and Planning in Loosely Coupled Systems." *Philadelphia: Center for Applied Research*. [http://www.cfar.com/sites/default/files/resources/Leading\\_Planning\\_LCS.pdf](http://www.cfar.com/sites/default/files/resources/Leading_Planning_LCS.pdf).
- Lesniaski, David, Kris Huber MacPherson, Barbara Fister, and Steve McKinzie. 2001. "Collegial Leadership in Academic Libraries." In *Crossing the Divide: Proceedings of the Tenth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, 2001*, ed. Hugh Thompson, 233-39. Chicago: ACRL. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/pdf/lesniaski.pdf>.
- Stevens Mitchell L., Elizabeth A. Armstrong, and Richard Arum. 2008. "Sieve, Incubator, Temple, Hub: Empirical and Theoretical Advances in the Sociology of Higher Education." 34: 127-51. *The Annual Review of Sociology*.
- Swanson, Troy. 2012. "Social Media in Loosely-Coupled Systems." In *Managing Social Media in Libraries: Finding Collaboration, Coordination, and Focus*, 27-42. Oxford: Chandos Publishing.
- Weick, Karl. 1976. "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21(1): 1-19.

Weick, Karl. 1982. "Administering Education in Loosely Coupled Schools." *The Phi Delta Kappan* 63(10): 673-676.