



Bridging Boundaries: Libraries as Catalysts for Interdisciplinary Research

***Leadership, Partnership, Empowerment:
Libraries Advancing Success in Higher Education***

NJ Academic Libraries Conference

January, 9th 2026

Darren Sweeper

sweeperd@montclair.edu

Frame the moment:

- Academic libraries are at a crossroads
- Research problems today are larger, messier, and more complex than ever

Core question:

- *Are libraries content to remain support services, or are we ready to become active research partners?*

My Claim:

1. Libraries are uniquely positioned to act as **catalysts for interdisciplinary research**
2. This role is not aspirational, it's already happening

Roadmap for Presentation:

1. Why interdisciplinary research is unavoidable
2. Why libraries are central to this shift
3. Practical strategies and models
4. Challenges and solutions
5. Future directions and call to action

The Interdisciplinary Imperative

Why Interdisciplinarity Matters

- Traditional disciplines developed for specialization
- Today's problems don't respect disciplinary boundaries

Examples

- Public health → medicine + sociology + economics + psychology
- Climate change → science + engineering + policy + ethics
- Inequality → economics + sociology + political science + data science

Why Libraries Are Natural Catalysts

Unique positioning of libraries

- Libraries as:
 - Neutral, shared space across disciplines
 - One of the few truly cross-campus units
- Librarian skill sets:
 - Navigating diverse literatures
 - Understanding multiple methodologies
 - Translating disciplinary language
- Emphasize:
 - Librarians already do interdisciplinary work its just often invisibly

Persistent Barriers

Despite support, researchers struggle with:

- Disciplinary silos
- Different methods, vocabularies, and publishing norms
- Physical separation on campus
- Tenure and promotion pressures

Transition:

- *These barriers point directly to a role libraries can fill*

The Librarian as Research Consultant

- Librarians as:
 - Connectors
 - Translators
 - Facilitators
- Examples:
 - Assist Economists in finding qualitative data
 - Direct humanists in locating quantitative data
 - Guide climatologists in identifying and accessing relevant public health data
 - Recommend relevant literary theories to sociologists.

From Service to Partnership

- Key tension:
 - Libraries are still seen primarily as service providers
 - To truly support interdisciplinary research, we must rethink our role

Service model vs Partnership model

- Traditional model:
 - Reactive
 - Transactional
 - Short interactions
- Research partner model:
 - Proactive
 - Embedded
 - Long-term engagement
- Emphasize:
 - This is not abandoning service, it's expanding impact

What Research Partnership Looks Like

- Librarians involved in:
 - Early project design
 - Literature reviews across disciplines
 - Data management planning
 - Digital tools and workflows
- Normalize:
 - Attending , research presentations meetings across campus
 - Service on research related committees
 - Engagement in interdisciplinary teaching and instruction
 - Establish recognition as an interdisciplinary research expert

Why now?

- The explosion of information makes interdisciplinary research essential
- Growth of data-intensive and digital research
- Funder requirements for data management and open science
- Evidence shows:

Embedded librarians contribute to grants and publications

Institutional and Funding context

Universities responding:

- Interdisciplinary centers-<https://escience.washington.edu/>
- Joint faculty appointments-https://www.montclair.edu/profilepages/view_profile.php?username=johnsonki
- Cross-disciplinary degrees-<https://www.montclair.edu/academics/programs/ba-interdisciplinary-studies/>

Funders responding:

- NSF, NIH, and foundations explicitly prioritize interdisciplinary teams

Key point:

- Interdisciplinarity is no longer optional being it's incentivized

Collections & Discovery

- Move beyond discipline-based collection thinking
- Emphasize interdisciplinary journals and databases
- Support access to shared data repositories
- Highlight the library's role in making existing collections visible across fields
- Use interdisciplinary research guides to connect topics across disciplines

Spaces: Physical and Virtual

- Libraries as collaboration hubs for interdisciplinary work
- Supportive physical spaces such as data visualization labs and digital scholarship centers
- Flexible research spaces that adapt to different project needs
- Virtual spaces including online collaboration platforms and shared repositories
- Recognize that space design shapes collaboration and research behavior

Programming & Instruction

- Programming as a catalyst for interdisciplinary engagement
- Organize interdisciplinary research showcases and speaker series
- Facilitate cross-disciplinary methods workshops.
- Lead thematic reading groups addressing complex social issues
- Provide information literacy instruction focused on navigating unfamiliar literatures and research cultures.

Challenges and How to Address Them

Reality check:

- No library can do everything
- Limited staffing and expertise
- Demonstrating value
- Organizational and cultural barriers

Solutions:

- Strategic prioritization
- Life-Long Learning
- Professional development
- Building external librarian networks

Researcher awareness

- Many faculty don't know what libraries can do

Outreach strategies:

- Attend research center meetings
- Partner with research offices
- Make successes visible

Looking Forward & Conclusion

Future trends

Artificial Intelligence:

- Integration of cross-disciplinary knowledge to enable new outcomes

Research Teams:

- Increasing need for coordinated research teams and information flow

Community-engaged research:

- Gray literature, policy context, public communication, think tanks, non profit organizations

Global research:

- International and multilingual information expertise

Conclusion & Call to Action

- Core message:
 - Libraries are not peripheral to interdisciplinary research they are central
- Emphasize alignment with conference theme:
 - Leadership through initiative
 - Partnership through collaboration
 - Empowerment through access and expertise
- Closing thought:
 - *Disciplinary boundaries are bridges, not walls, librarians and libraries are uniquely positioned to help scholars cross them*

Questions and Discussion

References

- Brooks, B. (2022). Building information literacy through interdisciplinary research. *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies*, 40(1), 9-25.
- Daniel, K. L., McConnell, M., Schuchardt, A., & Pepper, M. E. (2022). Challenges facing interdisciplinary researchers: Findings from a professional development workshop. *PLOS ONE*, 17(4), e0267234.
- Gullbekk, E., Bøyum, I., & Byström, K. (2015). Interdisciplinarity and information literacy: Librarians' competencies in emerging settings of higher education. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 52(1), 1-4.
- Nolen, D. S., Kathuria, S., & Peacock, E. (2021). Quantifying interdisciplinarity: Subject librarians as research collaborators. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 47(5), 102419.
- Wang, G., Noorhidawati, A., Yanti Idaya, A. M. K., & Yuan, Y. (2025). Navigating data visualization: Service landscapes and librarian roles in academic libraries. *The Electronic Library*, 43(2), 194-210.

Resources for Interdisciplinary Research

[PubMed](#)

PubMed is a free resource that supports the search and retrieval of biomedical and life sciences literature, aiming to improve health both globally and personally.

[MDPI](#)

MDPI has supported academic communities since 1996. Based in Basel, Switzerland, MDPI has the mission to foster open scientific exchange in all forms, across all disciplines.

[RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences](#)

RSF is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal that publishes original empirical social science research, promoting cross-disciplinary collaboration on timely public issues.

[PLOS One](#)

PLOS ONE is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal that publishes rigorous, interdisciplinary research across all areas of science and medicine.

[Sage Open](#)

SAGE Open is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal publishing original research and reviews across the social and behavioral sciences and the humanities.

[Google Scholar](#)

Google Scholar is an effective tool for interdisciplinary research, providing access to scholarly literature across multiple fields

[Digital Commons Network](#)

The Digital Commons Network is an interdisciplinary research tool that provides free, full-text access to scholarly work from hundreds of universities and colleges worldwide.

[Open Science Journal](#)

Open Science Journal (OSJ) is a multidisciplinary, open-access journal that publishes scientifically rigorous research across all scientific fields, regardless of novelty.

[ACCESS: Interdisciplinary Journals of Student Research and Scholarship](#)

ACCESS: Interdisciplinary Journals of Student Research and Scholarship is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal that highlights exceptional undergraduate and graduate research across disciplines at the University of Washington Tacoma.

[Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy](#)

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal focused on the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy.

[NJAdapt](#)

NJ ADAPT is a collection of data visualization and mapping tools developed by Rutgers University that helps planners, decision-makers, businesses, and residents understand and prepare for the impacts of climate change in New Jersey.

[FRED/Federal Reserve Economic Data](#)

FRED, short for Federal Reserve Economic Data, is an online database that provides hundreds of thousands of economic time series from national and international public and private sources.

[data.census.gov](#)

data.census.gov is the U.S. Census Bureau's central platform for accessing data and digital content, designed to streamline discovery and help users spend less time searching and more time using data