

# Bowling Alone in the Library: Building Social Capital on Campus

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**Abstract:** In 2007 the authors read a paper at PCA/ACA exploring the library-as-place movement through the lens of sociologist Ray Oldenburg's third-place concept, and posited that the academic library can be redefined as a third-place for the campus and surrounding communities. Related to the third-place concept is *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, written by Harvard Professor of Public Policy, Robert Putnam. In this work Putnam provides extensive and compelling statistical evidence supporting his claim that social capital is critical in enabling communities to work together to address shared and individual goals. Putnam demonstrates that communities with high social capital are better educated, healthier, vote more, are more altruistic, and more prosperous than those with weaker social networks. In this thought-piece the authors revisit Oldenburg's third-place concept using Putnam's construct to explore how the academic library can conceptualize a methodology of establishing social capital on campus to convincingly advocate for their library and compete for diminishing campus resources.

## Introduction

Much of the literature on the library-as-place focuses on the redesign and reallocation of library space in response to shrinking print collections caused by the ever increasing growth of online information resources. Interpreting the library-as-place in physical terms is certainly a productive and important issue. Papers written from this standpoint focus on ways in which library administrators might keep library space from being appropriated by other institutions, units, or departments. Remedies for such encroachment or reallocation of space range from improved space management to space-sharing with non-library units. The Council on Library and Information Resources, in its influential paper, *Library as Place: Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space* (2005), focuses on the phenomenon in spatial terms when it states in the preface:

The publication is intended to stimulate thinking about the role of the library in the digital age, about the potential, and the imperative, for libraries to meet new needs, and about how these needs will influence the design of physical space. It is written for librarians and others involved in library planning as well as for those who invest in libraries, such as provosts, presidents, and business officers. (p. vii)

Dovetailing with this focus on space management and patrons' needs are analyses of the effects that changing library spaces have on people's behavior and well being. In this vein the library-as-place movement has also been defined by some librarians as a fundamentally social phenomenon. In 2007 we read a paper at the national Popular

Culture Association conference exploring the library-as-place movement through the lens of sociologist Ray Oldenburg's third-place concept. As we explained three years ago, Oldenburg identifies third-places as beer gardens, main streets, pubs, cafes, coffeehouses, and post offices, and suggests that these places promote social equality, facilitate community engagement, and provide a sense of wellbeing and belonging to individuals and communities.

In his book, *The Great Good Place* (1999), Oldenburg puts forward the premise that contemporary, industrialized society is isolated at home (which is the first place) and work (the second place). Third-places, he argues, offer a safe public space for people to meet and establish bonds. Using Oldenburg's model, we posited that the academic library can be redefined as a third-place for the campus and surrounding communities. We compared Oldenburg's description of contemporary society to the increasing social isolation caused by a reliance on internet communication and remote information access on the contemporary college campus. By providing descriptions of the community-friendly activities of our respective academic libraries, we noted how closely our libraries conform to Oldenburg's definition of third-place. The activities we spoke of included lecture series, gaming tournaments, impromptu social gatherings, and parties. We also noted that the recent redesign of our library spaces made for better social interaction, and included such things as removing walls and partitions to open up space, and installing comfy couches, group seating arrangements, and fine art.

In our 2007 paper we were adding to the language of the library-as-place movement by focusing on ways in which library administrators might help redefine the library proper as a third-place to strengthen its relevancy and usefulness in an increasingly digitized, socially-isolated campus environment. But while we used Oldenburg as a theoretical construct to advocate for the social potential of libraries, we realize that much of his evidence on the benefits of third-places is anecdotal. Consequently, we recognize that some might reject the library-as-third-place concept, because of this lack of measurable outcomes to support our argument. We perceive that our own libraries have become more comfortable and welcoming for students after we made changes to our library environment. But even noting students' positive comments to support this view, our evidence is anecdotal, just like Oldenburg's. With the exception of increased gate-counts, we have nothing in the way of convincing direct measures which would indicate that the library-as-third-place concept is worth pursuing.

## **Social Capital**

In his bestselling book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2001), Harvard Professor of Public Policy, Robert Putnam, popularizes the concept of social capital as the communal networks that facilitate collective activity. Like Oldenburg, Putnam describes contemporary America as a nation of isolated, disenfranchised people. Using bowling as an example, he highlights the fact that

at one time bowling leagues were popular, but in today's society people often bowl alone. But unlike Oldenburg, Putnam provides extensive and compelling quantitative and qualitative data supporting his claim that social capital is critical in enabling communities to work together to address shared and individual goals. Using data culled from sources like the *Roper Social and Political Trends*, and the *DDB Needham Life Style* surveys, Putnam demonstrates that communities with high community and civic engagement are better educated, healthier, vote more, are more altruistic, and more prosperous than those with weaker social networks. Putnam was initially criticized for neglecting to consider the role libraries play in his analysis. He later addressed this deficiency by examining how public libraries successfully generate social capital for the public good. But can the concept of developing social capital be applied to academic libraries? If it can, would Putnam's evidence help convince a campus administrator that the library-as-third-place is a viable concept?

The notion of social capital is not new, but the term has only been framed recently (Bankston and Zhou 2002; Labonte 1999; Lazega and Pattison 2001; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Putnam 1995). The idea can be traced back to eighteenth and nineteenth century social theorists. John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville (Bankston and Zhou 2002; Brewer 2003; Lazega and Pattison 2001; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Putnam 1995), Karl Marx, Max Weber (Adam and Roncevic 2003) and others have contributed to the idea. Putnam and other contemporary theorists use the term to refer to the degree to which a society engages in voluntary collective activity. If people in a given culture socialize at clubs, belong to fraternal organizations, and engage in productive group behavior to solve common problems, then they have a high stock of social capital. If a culture does not enjoy these types of supportive mechanisms, then its social capital is considered low. The concept of social capital is interdisciplinary, but is especially embraced by sociologists and economists (Adam and Roncevic 2003). Increasing social capital has been used as a solution to social problems such as poverty and crime (Boix and Posner 1998). The literature on social capital is vast, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the theory in detail. But what we will do is review how the concept is allied to libraries so as to identify any useful, unifying ideas that librarians might use to: 1) Make an argument for increased community and civic engagement to their library's mission, and 2) Help librarians identify a need for further research.

### **Social Capital in Libraries**

It is not difficult for most librarians to correlate social capital theory to the third-place concept. Professionals working in libraries with strong community engagement see evidence of how social interaction and engagement enriches patrons' lives. But the research on social capital and libraries is still in its infancy. Few studies exist, and almost all focus on the public library sector. Most library and social science literature does not

describe how libraries create social capital but rather, how social capital impacts public libraries (Hillenbrand 2005).

At present we can draw some cautious, preliminary inferences from the limited number of studies available to us. Hillenbrand (2005) demonstrates in her analysis of library users at the Mount Barker Community Library in South Australia, that patrons come to this library for documentation and information, and that the social aspects of the library experience is perceived by them as a happy by-product. However, when examining management's perceptions at the same institution she found that library administration viewed the library mission as moving away from traditional library service and towards social engagement. This apparent disconnect could be the result of the public's continued perception of the library-as-warehouse cliché, or it could be an undetermined result of the study's design. Data from an extensive study entitled, *A Safe Place to Go: Libraries and Social Capital* (2000), suggests that public libraries facilitate equal access and a sense of equality within a community, which contributes to social capital.

Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen (2004) conducted surveys at a Chicago branch library and found that many users are well aware of how that library impacts quality of life issues. Patrons characterized their library as a community center, an information resource, and a safe meeting place. The branch library studied is situated between two communities, one affluent and one economically disadvantaged. What was discovered is that the branch library provides a "community anchor" for the two different communities. For a library to claim that it generates social capital, it must demonstrate that it has significantly improved peoples' lives. A respondent from this study gives a compelling indication that this is the case when she describes what she, coming from the economically disadvantaged part of town, feels about the branch library:

Putting this library here was more than just adding a building. It was about changing a perception. Before, I thought no one cared about people in Cabrini. And so we didn't care. Now I feel someone is watching, trying to make things better. So I am trying to better myself and my children. (Putnam, Feldstein, Cohen, 2004, pp. 37)

Owing to the dearth of empirical evidence, the need for further research is evident. Librarians are enthusiastic about the library-as-place movement, but we must make sure that in our enthusiasm we don't forget about the library user. Pors (2008) warns that librarians should take care not to "construct" the user from anecdotal and policy-driven viewpoints. He urges instead, that we search for more measurable outcomes of users' perceptions of library space.

## Social Capital in Academic Libraries

We believe that studying social capital in both public *and* university libraries would be a fruitful research agenda in the academy, and that such a plan of study can contribute to the library and social science literature. The studies mentioned in this paper are not the product of librarians but rather, social scientists. We believe that this is a strong indication that libraries are seen as important agents for social change by many people studying social capital and civic engagement. Moreover, we believe that such studies could be used by librarians to convincingly compete for diminishing campus resources, by demonstrating to campus administration that libraries can support educational, cultural, and economic improvement through social and civic engagement.

Besides a general call for research, we see additional ways in which academic librarians might become engaged in the phenomenon. In studying causal relationships between public libraries and social capital three strategic areas have been defined by researchers (Hillenbrand 2005, and Pors 2008): 1) Libraries can generate social capital by working with voluntary organizations in the community; 2) Libraries can develop open, universal spaces for people to meet and interact informally; 3) Libraries can provide universal information and communal services to stakeholders, thus creating a more democratic environment for all. We see these strategies as applicable to academic libraries embracing community engagement as part of their campus and library missions. It is our hope that more librarians will join with social scientists in studying the phenomenon of third-place as well as the concept of social capital in libraries. We hope that we have encouraged you to do so.

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