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## Politics and the positioning of academic libraries

John Cox 

Library, University of Galway, Galway, H91 REW4, Ireland

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### ABSTRACT

Political engagement for optimal positioning within their campus environment is vital for academic libraries, with consequences for recognition, influence, resourcing and prospects. There can, however, be a reluctance among library staff to participate in campus politics, sometimes through feelings of disdain and a sense that this conflicts with library values. Failure to embrace the political dimension of campus life carries high risk as politics is central to decision making, especially about resources whose scarcity generates intense competition among many powerful actors. The stakes are high and *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* recognized the importance of politics through a regular column a decade ago.

This article re-visits the politics of academic libraries at a time of uncertainty when the stakes of successful positioning have become even higher. It considers today's political environment on campus and how well or otherwise academic libraries are currently placed to engage with it as well as proposing ways in which they can maximize their chances of successful positioning. It concludes that political striving is both inevitable and prominent on campus, generating many political engagements for academic libraries which impact their positioning and to which they bring a mix of advantageous and disadvantageous factors. Positioning is both political and practical and academic library staff can develop the necessary skills, instincts and habits for success.

### Introduction

Between July 2013 and September 2018, *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* published a regular column by John Buschman titled "Politics of Academic Libraries" (Buschman, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018a, 2018b). From the outset Buschman promoted the taking of a political perspective by readers in relation to a range of situations, something which he summarized as "how to think politically" (Buschman, 2013b, p. 357). Throughout his columns he repeatedly emphasized the importance of library leadership, management and performance within the wider campus context in terms of perceptions of value for money and, in turn, future resourcing, urging library leaders to "Think for a moment like a Provost" (Buschman, 2013b, p. 358). There was limited coverage of how academic libraries actually engaged politically with other parties in the institution, a key focus of the current article, but Buschman was very clear about the importance of the political dimension for academic libraries.

Politics is a word regularly used but difficult to define precisely. There is often a tendency to focus this term narrowly on governments and the personalities within them but Susskind (2021) states that "politics, properly understood, is much bigger than that. It is about how we

live together in society, about all the different forces...that shape our collective lives" (p. 209). Buschman (2013b) concurred fully in his initial column, citing one of the elements of the definition offered by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, "the total complex of relations between people", and adding another from that source, "competition between competing interest groups or individuals for power and leadership" (Merriam-Webster, 2026). This foregrounding of competition within politics is highly relevant and is frequently instanced in the present study of the campus political environment in which academic libraries operate. Irwin (2021) reflects this when summarizing writings about the scope of organizational politics as including dimensions of "power, conflict, influence, negotiation, decision-making, and resource allocation" (p. 209).

The significance of politics within organizations is readily apparent. Bolman and Deal (2021) place it at the heart of decision making, while Susskind (2021) comments that "when we call something *political* we tend to also mean that it is very important" (p. 209). In the context of academic libraries, Buschman's 12 columns across more than five years emphasize the influence of the political dimension. Some time ago Veaner (1990) pointed out that "Librarians contemplating a career in administration require a clear understanding of the political realities of academic life" (p. 29). More recently Cox (2026) has recognized the

E-mail address: [john.cox@universityofgalway.ie](mailto:john.cox@universityofgalway.ie).

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impact of politics on the ability of academic library staff to get things done as well as the linkage between political engagement and the strategic positioning of the library.

Positioning is vital for academic libraries as it strongly impacts their recognition, resourcing and prospects (Cox, 2018). Ries and Trout (2001) in their classic book on positioning argue that it is about “what you do to the mind of the prospect. That is, you position the product in the mind of the prospect.” (p. 2). The perceptions, and sometimes misperceptions, of stakeholders affect how the library is seen on campus, with implications for funding, influence with institutional leadership and position in the organizational hierarchy. Shaping the views of different constituencies and individuals, especially decision makers, is critical to the library's fortunes and the key is to be seen as essential to the success of the institution (Penniman, 1997). Positioning is a highly political venture whose objective is “to situate the library compellingly in the eyes of its stakeholders so that it occupies an advantageous place in the institution with potential for further advancement” (Cox, 2026, p. 173).

There is, however, ample evidence that academic libraries have experienced longstanding difficulties with political engagement and positioning. Writing at the beginning of the 1990s, Atkins (1991) referred to a feeling among library directors of being isolated and left out of the political arena, while Veaner (1990) attributed the exclusion of libraries from vital academic issues as a sign of “how poorly librarians have played the game of campus politics” (p. 143). The situation today remains problematic, with more recent writings commenting that libraries often lack the political power possessed by other academic units (Fitzgerald et al., 2025) and can find themselves lower in the organizational hierarchy than before (Gwyer, 2018). These challenges provide a vital context for this article which focuses on how campus politics and their own political profile shape academic libraries' positioning within their parent institutions.

It seems timely to re-visit the politics of academic libraries, the theme of Buschman's columns which concluded in 2018. The political environment for academic libraries on and beyond the campus has shifted since Buschman wrote and the positioning stakes have only become higher. This article will review the literature on the political dimension and positioning of academic libraries. It will then consider today's political environment on campus and how well or otherwise academic libraries are currently placed to engage with it. The final section will propose ways in which they can maximize their chances of successful positioning within their parent institutions.

## Literature review

The scope of the literature review is the positioning of academic libraries within the campus environment and how political engagement shapes this specifically and their interactions with others more generally. An initial search of the *Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts* database yielded a number of journal articles with a mix of practical and theoretical emphasis. These in turn led to sources offering insights into the level of library inclination towards politics, along with publications outlining the nature of political engagement in organizations and the types of skills which, if present or absent, affect the results obtained. The selection of sources particularly favored those describing the range of political situations in which academic libraries find themselves.

### *The influence of politics on academic libraries*

Developments in higher education exert a strong influence on academic libraries and their political engagement within their parent institutions (Budd, 2018; Cox, 2021). The dangers of merely appearing to be strategic are highlighted by Buschman (2017c) who notes that political substance, or more specifically supporting the institutional agenda in a clearly understood way, is what is actually measured on

campus and will achieve far more for libraries than what he terms “strategic” PR” (p. 267). Heery (1998) identifies a close connection between skillful political engagement in campus fora and winning library resources. Another study of academic libraries observes that better access to information and stronger support for their interests result from developing effective relationships (Irwin, 2021). The sense of politics as ubiquitous in the lives of academic libraries is evident in Bartlett's (2015) comment that “we are all politicians to some extent” (p. 1) when it comes to securing and allocating resources. This is further elaborated in an article titled “All Librarianship is Political: Educate Accordingly” which calls for more emphasis on politics in library and information science education (Jaeger & Sarin, 2016).

### *Political skills*

The skills required for successful political engagement by academic library staff receive considerable attention. Irwin (2021) surveyed a sample of academic librarians based at higher education institutions in the US in early 2020, realizing 260 valid responses. Participants were asked to rank their inclination to view situations through four organizational frames, including the political frame, devised by Bolman and Deal (2017) and to rate their proficiency in four characteristics of political skill identified by Ferris et al. (2007): social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability and apparent sincerity. Use of the political frame came a distant third behind the structural and human resource frames focused on efficiency and employees respectively. The highest mean scores in relation to the specific skills surveyed were for apparent sincerity and interpersonal influence, with social astuteness and networking ability lagging some way back.

While Irwin's focus was on political instincts and skills identified in the management literature, others have emphasized skills they consider important for academic library staff specifically. Communication, advocacy, negotiation, influencing, political sensitivity and knowledge of the wider organization emerged as key attributes linked to political skill in one analysis (Goulding et al., 2012). Writing from personal experience as an academic library director, Heery (1998) highlighted using meetings to advantage, being well informed about and engaging with the academic business of the institution and negotiating effectively based on an understanding of the political realities of the organization, including “who has support and who does not, who is influential and who can help” (p. 258). Another director foregrounded “Knowing who to work with, how to influence situations, when to act, and how to advance an agenda” (Cox, 2023b, p. 280), with relationship building also seen as a core skill. The building and acquisition of political capital was the focus of a study based on interviews with 12 directors (O'Bryan, 2018). Finally, case studies and some advice about securing influence featured in a collection intriguingly titled, “The Machiavellian Librarian: Winning Allies, Combating Budget Cuts, and Influencing Stakeholders” (Aho & Bennett, 2013).

### *Deficits in political skills and engagement*

Engaging with campus politics may not come naturally to academic library staff. Different authors have observed a reluctance towards political activity, often due to a sense of conflict between library values and “the often down-and-dirty, backstabbing world of fighting others for resources” (Bartlett, 2015, p. 2). Atkins (1991) commented on a feeling among academic librarians that politics was demeaning, something he perceived as contributing to a poor understanding of their operating environment and a failure to educate institutional leaders about the library due to too much focus on internal business. Veaner (1990), writing in the same era, noted a distaste and a moralistic view of politics with negative consequences, stating that “the most common fault in library administration is not being political enough” (p. 121).

Today's writings continue to cast doubt on the appetite and inclination towards political engagement. A lack both of enjoyment and of

time for participation in institutional governance is outlined in one article (Fitzgerald et al., 2025). As already noted, Irwin's survey found that the political frame was much less used by participants than other frames for viewing the organization; in fact, her review of other library studies identified the political frame as the one least deployed. The ability to function in a political environment ranked a distant fourth among ten ideal library director traits in another study (Kreitz, 2009). O'Bryan's (2018) study of the building of political capital by a group of academic library directors found that very few took an intentional approach towards this venture and many were unaware that they had established a bank of political capital. Returning to Irwin's (2021) findings in relation to the rating by participants in her survey of their capability in four specific political skills, she expresses concern that networking ability ranked lowest, given the importance attached to cultivating relationships and building alliances as drivers of political influence.

#### *Issues of political contention*

Whatever their inclinations, academic libraries find themselves involved in many areas of political engagement on their campuses. Some of these stem from changes in their value proposition and associated priorities in recent decades. Conservative academic forces can be resistant to library redefinition and reinvention. The relocation or withdrawal of printed collections has proved controversial, for example the proposal for an all-digital library at Vermont State College and Universities (Rea, 2023), contributing ultimately to the resignation of a university president (Jesse, 2023). Deselection of materials can generate emotional reactions too (Agee, 2017). Library advocacy for open scholarship or new models of scholarly communication often runs against a strong conservative tide (Blankstein, 2022). This is even more true if subscription cancellations are involved or even a temporary loss of access during negotiations with publishers (ACRL Research Planning Review Committee, 2020; Budd, 2018).

Competition for resources constitutes a common campus battleground. This applies to space as much as to staffing and information resources. Buschman (2017b) outlines the political dimensions of library space, while Cox (2024) describes the elements of advocacy, stakeholder engagement, coalition development, cultivation of external politicians and risk taking involved in the quest to fund a library building transformation. The politics of managing and often being asked to share prime space on campus are discussed by Fister (2015b). Beyond resources, there may be jurisdictional competition in relation to newer areas of library activity such as open scholarship, digital literacy, research data management and digital scholarship whose delivery involves multiple parties across the campus (Pinfield et al., 2017; Verbaan & Cox, 2014). The positioning of library roles in relation to academic staff in these and other engagements can be impacted by whether or not library staff possess faculty status, something which varies per campus and has political connotations (Fleming-May & Douglass, 2014; Walters, 2016).

Political influences from beyond the campus engage academic libraries. Academic freedom is valued and defended both by faculty and library staff, as outlined by Danner and Bintliff (2007) who identify some specific political issues for libraries around privacy and confidentiality, limits on access to information and restricted collection development. Concerns about censorship and cultural erasure have also been raised (Jennings-Roche & Jaeger, 2025). Academic library staff have actively engaged with the critical librarianship movement (Drabinski, 2019) to promote diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) both generally and across a range of library practices. These include equal access to and recognition of different knowledge traditions in collections and reading lists, information literacy, cataloguing and classification (Appleton, 2020; Clarke, 2022; Crilly, 2024; Wilson, 2022). Neoliberalism and its consequences for higher education have also been challenged in academic libraries and questioned in relation both to their

values and to the true purpose of higher education (Fister, 2015c, 2015d; Nicholson, 2015).

#### *Positioning as a political engagement*

Positioning is an overarching political engagement for academic libraries in light of the importance and influence attaching to it, outlined earlier. Libraries, like other departments, seek to position themselves for political advantage in a competitive campus environment. In 2018 the *New Review of Academic Librarianship* published a special issue titled, "Positioning the Academic Library within the Institution: Structures and Challenges". Its editorial (Appleton, 2018) highlights "an internal market for resource, visibility and attention" (p. 209) within the institution, foregrounding the significance of library position and positioning. The remaining 18 contributions include a literature review and a collection of articles and case studies outlining ways in which academic libraries can position themselves better in their parent institutions.

Another edited collection on the social future of academic libraries focuses on shifting from a transactional to a relationship-based model with notable implications for positioning (Schlak et al., 2022). A recent book (Cox, 2026) sets the strategic positioning of academic libraries in the context firstly of its historical evolution and then today's global challenges and the local political environment on campus. The need to understand intimately both the campus operating environment and the library's ability to achieve successful positioning within it emerge as important. These themes are further explored in the next two sections of this article.

### **The political environment on campus**

#### *Institutional culture*

Tradition plays a large part in campus culture and the way in which things are typically done is long-established. Features include a high level of decentralization and departmental autonomy, meaning that not even the head of the organization exerts tight control over a range of independent actors whose support for the institutional agenda is not guaranteed but commonly needs to be encouraged and incentivized rather than mandated (Rouse, 2016). Barnett (2022) finds the university to be a somewhat fragmented entity with a wide variety of worldviews across the departments it comprises. From Rouse's (2016) perspective universities are complex adaptive systems, promoting a high degree of contestation and jockeying for position between different constituencies buttressed by the tradition of institutional support for academic freedom.

A very tight funding situation for most higher education institutions over a prolonged period has engendered intense competition for scarce resources. The campus space for positioning is a very busy and crowded one where even getting a message heard, much less understood, can be difficult (Cox, 2018). Other characteristics of the campus environment include strong tendencies towards conservatism, bureaucracy and minimization of risk (Barnett, 2022; Crow et al., 2018). Making things happen in this climate can be difficult and decisions are often reached only slowly.

#### *External influences*

The campus political environment has also been shaped by external developments, notably government intervention. While government policy varies across different countries (Clancy, 2021; Guri-Rosenblit, 2021) there has been an increasing emphasis on stronger regulation of higher education, holding institutions more accountable for their performance and encouraging more competition for funding from a widening range of sources beyond the public purse (Teixeira, 2021). The term marketization is often ascribed to this package of measures which is seen as representing neoliberalism. Its consequences within the

campus include not only the intensified internal competition for resources already mentioned but also a heightened focus on performance measurement and compliance with regulatory requirements (Clancy, 2021).

These imperatives have contributed to a sustained increase in the number and range of administrative staff in recent decades resulting in a transformation of campus labour (Alexander, 2020) in favour of new functions such as audit, marketing, fundraising, diversity monitoring and institutional research. Some have viewed this as a shift in campus power and influence away from academic staff and towards institutional leaders and administrators, creating tensions and issues of trust (Stromquist, 2021; van der Zwaan, 2017). Government intervention in some countries has created a more politicized campus environment through measures which include challenging the promotion of diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI), threatening academic freedom through a focus on identity politics and pitting populist viewpoints against traditional academic expertise (Andersson, 2018; Chronicle of Higher Education, 2026a, 2026b; Fukuyama, 2020). Lastly, ongoing uncertainty in global politics generates frequent shifts in institutional strategies and priorities as governments and their prevailing ideologies change, making for a destabilized atmosphere on campus.

#### *Perspectives of different constituencies*

The dynamics described so far in this section all impact the perspectives of academic and professional services staff and of students.

The experience of academic staff is much more pressurized in a climate of accountability and competition for reputation focused in particular on their productivity in terms of published outputs in high-impact journals (Ma, 2023). There is some resentment at the narrowness of this focus and the over-reliance by their parent institutions and others on metrics generated by external companies to measure research performance and decide on staff promotions (Stromquist, 2021). The academic reward system can result in tendencies among faculty to concentrate on their own interests and to engage less with service to the institution. Fitzpatrick (2019) calls this competitive individualism. Other sources of pressure are increased student numbers, a greater administrative workload, higher student expectations and evolving forms of teaching and learning since the COVID pandemic. Academic staff are also experiencing a reduction in their terms of employment over time, with 68% of faculty at US institutions in posts, often part-time, which were off the tenure track in 2021, significantly higher than the corresponding figure of 47% in 1987 (Colby, 2023), a situation paralleled in other countries too (Guri-Rosenblit, 2021; Locke, 2020). Academic freedom can seem compromised by lack of tenure and by the government challenges to it and to DEI instanced earlier.

The pressures just outlined, coupled with a sense that teaching is less valued by institutions than research (Macfarlane, 2011; van der Zwaan, 2017), contribute to a sense of faculty disgruntlement, diminished status and negativity towards institutional leadership teams and professional staff. As already noted, there is commonly a feeling that power has gravitated away from academic staff and that they are less involved than before in decision making for the institution at large (Stromquist, 2021). Professional services staff and institutional leaders can be viewed as representing managerialism and neoliberalism (Connell, 2019; DeRosa, 2023). Leaders also occupy a difficult situation, however, needing to act as the interface between their institution and often highly interventionist governments, identifying ways to respond to new requirements or to implement changed regulations while trying to advance their own strategic priorities.

Finding themselves caught in the middle between faculty and leadership is often challenging for professional services staff. Their relationship with academic staff is not straightforward either. On the one hand, they may feel undervalued by faculty, especially if designated as “non-academic” (Caldwell, 2024). On the other, this sense of separation and inequality has begun to dissolve through new partnerships with

academic staff in research administration, teaching and learning development and student support (Veles et al., 2023). The amount of change experienced has generated issues of identity, discussed later in this article for academic libraries as well, among professional services staff (Caldwell, 2022).

Students' perspectives have also shifted in recent times. The student body has changed greatly not only in terms of increased numbers, with far higher rates of participation globally than before (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022), but also in its composition and expectations. A more diverse student population is evident in a variety of aspects, including age, ethnic origin and socioeconomic class (Malpas et al., 2018). Many students experience significant challenges as they navigate higher education sometimes on a part-time basis, sometimes with disability and often with jobs or other responsibilities. These challenges have contributed to a rise in mental health issues for students, resulting in an expansion at higher education institutions of counseling and other services aiming to transition and support students through their academic programs (Pelletier, Robert, Arbino, et al., 2023).

Issues of affordability loom large for students and color their perceptions of higher education. Tuition and accommodation costs are high in many countries and often paid via loans, generating steep levels of student debt, calculated at \$1.81 trillion for the United States (Hanson, 2025). Escalating costs have helped to create a much more consumerist view among students, with a strong focus on future employability impacting their choice of institution and expectations of value for money during their studies. Heightened student expectations of institutions include excellent service quality, maximum flexibility of program delivery, internships, experiential learning and participation in staff-student partnerships (Cox, 2021; Pelletier, Robert, Muscanell, et al., 2023; Salisbury et al., 2020).

#### **How the library is politically situated**

The library position comprises a mix of advantageous and disadvantageous factors in relation to this challenging and competitive campus political environment.

#### *Advantages*

The centrality of academic libraries to the academic mission as well as physically and socially on campus brings a number of political benefits (Cox, 2023a). Library collections and services have traditionally been recognized as vital to teaching, learning and research. This intimate association with the facilitation of scholarship is a positive factor relative to a number of other departments which may be seen by faculty as distracting from core academic business through demands linked to regulatory compliance. The academic library serves all disciplines, thereby offering the opportunity to make multiple points of connection across the campus. This includes acting as an interdisciplinary connector, bringing together people with shared interests who might not otherwise meet (Fagan et al., 2022). Their high level of connectivity also affords library staff an excellent opportunity to observe at an early stage trends in user behaviors and preferences which they can share with others on campus.

The location of the main library building at or near the centre of most campuses, epitomized by the phrase “heart of the university” often ascribed to it, is a major asset. It offers a much-valued place of campus community, a welcoming space which is open to all and where people can not only learn but can linger, relax and exchange emotional support (Moran, 2020). This benefits the library and the institution equally at a time when creating a sense of belonging among students is understood as vital to their well-being and even more so since the COVID pandemic when the community role of the library building really showed itself to the full (ODonnell & Anderson, 2022). An enlightened library approach to sharing space and hosting other services adds to the importance of the library building. Space in the middle of the campus is coveted and

represents a political resource to be used wisely (Lewis, 2017).

Their values are a source of political advantage for academic libraries. They include intellectual freedom, academic integrity, equity of access, collaboration, user-centred service and public good (American Library Association, 2024; Association of College and Research Libraries, 2018). Such values are in tune with campus sentiment towards academic freedom and rigorous scholarly standards. In addition, they enable a clear and well-supported stance relative to negative influences in the wider world such as polarization, fake news and anti-DEI measures. Most of all, these values promote generosity and equity, generating trust in academic libraries at a time when many people have lost confidence in the authority of traditional institutions, including universities (Fukuyama, 2020). Trusted status constitutes a huge political asset in terms of building relationships and support across the campus, something which underpins the ability to take forward an agenda and to get things done.

High levels of trust invested in it in turn advance the status of the academic library as a collaborator, convenor and partner across many ventures, including the first-year student experience, services for users with disabilities, research information management and institutional research (Bryant et al., 2017; Fister, 2015a). It has been said that “Cooperation is part of the professional DNA of academic libraries” (Neal, 2015, p. 317), helping to ensure that the library is well connected and embedded across teaching and research. This applies to the library not only as a partner but sometimes as a leader too in areas such as digital literacy and open scholarship or where the library director is at the head of wider campus functions, for example student-facing services or digital scholarship (Gwyer, 2018; Schonfeld, 2016).

Longevity is advantageous for academic libraries. They have been an established part of universities since the 13th century and are an accepted and expected presence on campus. Ries and Trout (2001) emphasize the benefits of being the first provider in any space, able to leverage recognition, resilience, experience and precedent. Its longevity adds to the sense of the library as a valued and respected campus citizen, trustworthy and continuing to attract support “as a bedrock principle of academic seriousness” (Anderson, 2011, p. 290) and the “quintessence of our collegiality” (Moran, 2020). The combination of advantageous factors just described offers academic libraries opportunities to earn substantial goodwill and political capital.

### Disadvantages

A conservative mentality is common in academic libraries and can stunt their potential. It is characterized by a preference for gradual change, logical progression and standardization, sometimes at the expense of agility and innovation (Gorman, 1992; Jantz, 2017a). Conservatism may manifest itself in hesitancy towards opportunities, for instance artificial intelligence (AI) (Huang et al., 2023), caused in part by a reluctance to create new capacity by discontinuing traditional less productive activities or unviable services (Jantz, 2017b; Martin & Sheehan, 2018). More damaging still as a feature of their conservative mindset is a tendency for library staff to focus on internal business and to hang back from maximum engagement with the wider campus, resulting in a loss of the political influence to which strong relationships are so vital (Cox, 2023b). Library directors in one survey estimated that 49% of their time went on administration and leadership of the library, three times the proportion of time, 16%, estimated for campus engagement beyond the library (Hulbert, 2023).

The tendency towards internal focus has likely contributed to an unwanted perception in some quarters that the library is not doing enough to advance the institutional agenda. A senior participant in one study observed that “For the most part librarians don't bring problems; nor do they bring solutions.” (Baker and Alden, 2017). Another report recorded that “many university leader interviewees felt this prioritization of the university over the library was not really the case under current or recent library leadership” (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 17). These

perceptions are politically damaging in themselves and can in turn feed stakeholder inattention and indifference towards the library as an entity which is “not a problem” (Baker and Alden, 2017) or only “somewhat involved” (Murray & Ireland, 2018) with campus priorities. Consequences may include underestimation of the library contribution and the diversion of credit to others. A distancing of the library from the centre of political power is also evident, with only four of 88 UK library directors surveyed in 2017 and ten of 662 in a US survey in 2019 reporting to the head of the institution (Frederick & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020; Gwyer, 2018).

Their economic struggles are both a cause and a symptom of the difficulties academic libraries face regarding political influence. The essence of their economic situation is that they are typically forced to confront rising costs and new demands with static budgets which represent about 2% of institutional expenditure, roughly half of the share for which they accounted in the 1980s (Rauf, 2017). Competition from other departments for scarce resources is undoubtedly a factor in this reduction (Jantz, 2017b). The end result is a struggle to keep up with demand and a reduction in the competitiveness of academic libraries, something which is highly disadvantageous in the intensely competitive political environment on campus described earlier. It is also unhelpful that the contemporary value proposition of academic libraries is less solid and easy to demonstrate than in the print-only era when collections and buildings dominated.

The change in value proposition is linked also to a blurring of the library identity. Many services are co-delivered with other parties or mediated by technology, library buildings may resemble other learning spaces on campus or may host a range of other service providers, the list of library involvements in learning and research can be lengthy and difficult to summarize coherently, while the mix of traditional and newer activities can create a brand crisis epitomized by the range of metaphors, 26 in one listing, used to describe the library (Cox, 2023b; Salisbury & Peseta, 2018; Wales, 2018; S. Walters & Jackson, 2013). Stakeholder confusion about the role and identity of academic libraries is a potential consequence (Baker and Alden, 2017; Freedman, 2014). Heseltine (2020) has rightly identified a need to communicate clarity of purpose.

Competition from other departments on campus has already been mentioned in relation to the distribution of resources. Boundaries have become more porous, and it has been noted that others could deliver services provided by the academic library (Lewis, 2016; Pinfield et al., 2017). There is a mix of collaboration and competition with the IT department, research office and teaching and learning development unit. Beyond the campus, commercial entities with massive financial resources, including technology giants and publishers, have captured business in areas such as discovery, access, data storage and research information management, raising further questions for academic libraries in terms of service ownership and competitiveness.

### Achieving optimal political positioning

Factoring in its mix of advantages and disadvantages, how can the academic library give itself the best chance of positioning for success in a highly political and complex campus environment? This section identifies a framework comprising eight approaches for consideration. It is recognized that there are many different types of academic library, while each library has its own local circumstances and priorities. On that basis every library should decide according to the specifics of its own situation on the degree of emphasis it considers appropriate to give to each of strategies outlined.

The framework of proposed strategies which follows has emerged from a combination of practical experience and previous research into the positioning of academic libraries. More than 15 years as a university library director proved instructive in engaging in depth with the political process on campus and identifying ways of becoming more effective in terms of both the journey and the destination. Prior research and

publication involved exposure to a wide range of literature in the areas of management, higher education and academic libraries. This generated some recurrent themes regarding advice offered and positive outcomes, in turn helping to identify some practical strategies applicable to academic libraries.

#### *Embrace political engagement*

Politics often gets a bad name. [Bolman and Deal \(2021\)](#) comment that politics and politicians are widely despised and that the idea of “playing politics” in an organization attracts disapprobation from many people. They are, however, quick to point out that “A jaundiced view of politics constitutes a serious threat to individual and organizational effectiveness” (p. 185) as politics is so important to decision making, especially about the allocation of resources. [Veaner \(1990\)](#), while highly critical of academic library distaste towards political engagement, views the wish to exercise power as a positive and important attribute, urging readers to embrace political knowledge and political alliances as the basic strategy for obtaining resources. In his view, resources go to those who combine rational arguments with playing the best politics.

The sense that political engagement is an essential part of campus life underpins [Heery's \(1998\)](#) observation that “The best advice that can be given to academic librarians is, perhaps, simply to enjoy the political life. Far from viewing it as an irksome duty, they should see it as a stimulating, rewarding and important part of being a librarian.” (p. 257). Importantly, his advice applies to all staff who represent the library in campus fora, not just the director and leadership team. Overcoming any reluctance towards campus politics is vital. Embracing, whatever about enjoying, the cut and thrust of political engagement, offers better prospects for favorable academic library positioning.

#### *Position the library assertively*

Positioning requires an assertive approach to achieve a positive outcome; passivity carries high risk, especially in a highly competitive environment. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines positioning as “The action of putting a person or thing in a certain position, esp. an effective or advantageous position; (also) the fact of being in a certain position or location” ([Oxford University Press, 2022](#)). The latter part of this definition is reflected in the inclusion in its entry for position as “The place in which a person, thing, etc., is located or has been put; situation, site, station”. The message conveyed is that if a position is not asserted, one will be assigned as stakeholder perceptions are formed. As [Dunford \(2019\)](#) puts it, people “will invent a position for you, one that potentially hides your key strengths and misrepresents your value” (p. 11). As noted earlier, the stakes for academic libraries are high as positioning impacts resourcing, recognition, influence and prospects. Positioning cannot be left to chance and calls for a high level of activity and assertiveness.

Active positioning requires attention to five components identified in the management and marketing literature: clarity of identity, distinctiveness from competitors, understanding of target audiences, effective communications and aligned resources ([J. Barney, 1991](#); [J. B. Barney, 1995](#); [Dunford, 2019](#); [Hooley et al., 2020](#); [Ries & Trout, 2001](#)). It involves emphasizing strengths and influencing stakeholders towards positive views of the library, thereby combating the indifference or misperceptions outlined earlier as a significant source of political disadvantage. Actions may include asserting service leadership, claiming credit where due, proactively inserting the library into campus initiatives and promoting library assets such as transformed learning space or unique collections which offer competitive advantage to the institution ([Cox, 2018](#)).

#### *Understand the environment*

Looking outwards is key to an intimate understanding of the operating environment which shapes the position and strategic positioning of

academic libraries. Four areas stand out for active monitoring: the global political, economic, social and technological environment; developments in higher education, especially government policy; the dynamics of the parent institution; and the perspectives and behaviors of individual constituencies, notably trends in the lives of faculty and students. It may be desirable to revise the balance of effort and resources, primarily how time is spent and how staff are deployed ([Schonfeld, 2016](#)), in order to leverage fully the campus observer role mentioned earlier as a political advantage available to library staff. Using the intelligence gathered through environmental scanning effectively is also important and may involve some sharpening of analytical skills in light of deficits identified by [Budd \(2018\)](#), notably linear thinking and failure to make connections between related developments.

Building a deep understanding of the political climate of the parent institution is particularly important and [Budd \(2018\)](#) notes that “There is no substitute for the effort it takes to understand the workings of the college or university” (p. 215). This incorporates a range of dimensions including a full appreciation of governance structures, where and how decisions are made, which parties wield influence and who are the likely allies, rivals and blockers. The campus political environment is rarely stable and there is a need to track the institution's pressure points, opportunities and organizational dynamics on an ongoing basis. A valuable tool in this regard is the political frame, described next.

#### *Apply the political frame*

[Bolman and Deal \(2021\)](#) have devised four frames (structural, human resource, political and symbolic) for viewing organizations. They take as their premise for the political frame that conflict is inevitable and normal, as is the exercise of power, but that it is possible for managers to learn to understand and manage political dynamics. Their political frame “proposes that interdependence, divergent interests, scarcity, and power relations inevitably spawn political activity” (p. 190). They see limited resources as being at the centre of power struggles among coalitions of members who need each other and must work towards favorable decisions or outcomes “through an ongoing process of negotiation and bargaining” (p. 193).

In this reading conflict is an everyday and not necessarily unhealthy part of collective life in an organization. On that basis it would seem advantageous for academic library staff to make extensive use of the political frame as a prism for viewing different situations on their campuses. However, as noted earlier, [Irwin \(2021\)](#) in her review of the literature found that the political frame attracted the lowest use of the four frames among library leaders and, although coming third in her own survey it lagged well behind the structural and human resource frames. She urges academic library staff to use all frames collectively but to make more frequent and intentional use of the political frame, especially when resources are scarce and interests are diverse. This advice makes good sense in the highly political campus environment outlined earlier in the current article.

#### *Cultivate political skills*

The work of [Bolman and Deal \(2021\)](#) comes into play once more in this section which encourages the cultivation of the four skills they have identified in relation to the political frame in a chapter titled, “The Manager as Politician”. These skills are briefly highlighted for further consideration: agenda-setting, mapping the political terrain, networking and building coalitions and bargaining and negotiating.

- Agenda-setting combines vision with the strategy for achieving it while factoring in the interests and concerns of key stakeholders.
- Mapping the political terrain includes identifying influencers, potential allies and likely counterstrategies to be faced.

- Networking and building coalitions are focused on developing relationships to build a power base of supporters while maintaining links with opponents and maximizing informal as well as formal channels.
- Bargaining and negotiating should be executed in an ethical manner, building on the knowledge and contacts developed through practicing the other skills mentioned.

Ferris et al. (2007) complement Bolman and Deal by identifying four dimensions of political skill: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability and apparent sincerity. These incorporate astute observation of others, adaptation of own behavior to influence desired responses, development of networks and coalitions and generating confidence through evident integrity and sincerity of motives. Irwin (2021) emphasizes networking ability as a particular area of development for academic library staff with the potential to deliver increased resources and opportunities for mentoring.

*Build political capital*

Academic libraries have opportunities to leverage advantages noted earlier such as centrality, collaboration, trusted status and commitment to service excellence in order to build influence and political capital with decision makers. They can do so by working across boundaries, maximizing partnerships to forge alliances, participating effectively in the work of committees and taking the initiative by offering to help with institutional projects and problems (Davies, 2020).

A study of the acquisition and use of political capital, based on interviews with 12 library directors in the State University of New York (SUNY) system, is instructive (O'Bryan, 2018). It foregrounds acquisition via credibility, reputation, being a team player, making valued contributions at institutional level and developing political connections across multiple constituencies. The use of the resultant political capital is reported in terms of positive impact on budgets, building projects and staffing levels. Investing in relationships through deeper and more intentional engagement with library communities, repeatedly promoted by contributors of chapters to a collection about the social future of academic libraries (Schlak et al., 2022), builds political as well as social capital and leverages the connector opportunities available to academic library staff.

*Ensure that institutional priorities are library priorities*

The best way to counter perceptions by stakeholders of limited library contribution to the institutional agenda is through active and impactful engagement with the priorities of the parent institution. Academic libraries are well placed to contribute strongly through their physical and social centrality on campus, broad remit, inclination towards partnership and interaction across all disciplines. There is ample scope for their engagement to extend beyond alignment and collaboration to leadership in areas of importance for the institution in which the library is well positioned to offer valued expertise (Pinfield et al., 2017). These include developing AI literacy for effective and ethical deployment, cultivating a sense of belonging on campus for students, increasing research impact and exposure and designing supportive learning spaces.

Academic library strategic plans afford an opportunity to showcase commitment to institutional priorities. This is exemplified in the North Carolina State University Libraries strategy for 2022–2027 (North Carolina State University Libraries, 2022) which emphasizes the advancement of the University's reputation in both Goal 6, "Be recognized as the leading university for innovative partnerships, entrepreneurial thinking and applied problem-solving" and Goal 7, "Elevate the national and global reputation and visibility of NC State". Also noteworthy is the inclusion of "Growing student enrolment" among the priorities in the strategic plan for 2024–2026 of the University of Western Australia

*Library (2024).*

*Communicate political messages*

Shaping stakeholder perceptions is a core part of positioning strategy. Anderson (2011) comments that perception matters more than reality in terms of how users view the value of the library. However, stakeholder misperceptions have emerged earlier as a consequential political disadvantage for academic libraries. Effective communications are vital to influencing perceptions and some of the messages to be conveyed carry political significance.

Communicating the library's role, value and contributions to the institution is a priority, foregrounding not only its actual successes but also what it can potentially offer in addition. It makes sense to frame messages in active language and with a focus on outcomes the library enables users to achieve relative to institutional priorities such as reputation, student success and research productivity (Cox, 2018; Oakleaf, 2010). Clarity of identity and distinctiveness from the competition were among the five positioning components identified earlier. Both are politically important and their communication to stakeholders merits emphasis. The values of academic libraries are at the core of their identity while points of distinctiveness include their longevity, trusted status and fostering of social and scholarly community. Academic library values also convey a principled and, in most cases, strongly appreciated stance to the rest of the campus amid global political instability, promoting the defence of intellectual freedom, equality, balanced judgement and truth.

Table 1 summarizes the scope of each strategy and provides an example of it in action.

**Table 1**  
Summary of political positioning strategies.

Strategy	Scope	Example of practical action
<b>Embrace political engagement</b>	Recognition of political process as integral to ongoing library work and future prospects	Consciously build political dimension into strategic dialogue, planning and execution
<b>Position the library assertively</b>	Intentional claiming of a distinctive library position relative to others	Actively differentiate the library by promoting unique values, assets and actions
<b>Understand the environment</b>	Intimacy with organizational dynamics, decision making, influencers and perspectives	Monitor, analyze and connect global, higher education and library developments
<b>Apply the political frame</b>	Viewing situations and actors from a political perspective, including power, influence and competition	Factor the interests of other constituencies and the negotiation of conflict into library initiatives
<b>Cultivate political skills</b>	Developing and practicing skills for successful political engagement on campus	Observe and reflect on how skills such as networking and negotiation are deployed for political influence
<b>Build political capital</b>	Accumulation of political credit with influential parties for later advantageous use	Take a generous, collegiate and proactive approach to supporting others and generating mutual goodwill
<b>Ensure that institutional priorities are library priorities</b>	Putting the wider institutional agenda first in whatever the library does	Understand current and evolving priorities for the institution and overtly link library strategy to them
<b>Communicate political messages</b>	Ensuring that stakeholders accurately understand the role and contribution of the library	Continuously communicate what the library achieves and can achieve in areas vital to the institution

## Conclusion

When it comes to politics and positioning academic libraries face four realities. The first of these is that politics is ubiquitous, normal and influential. This holds even more true on the campuses of higher education institutions where the struggle for limited resources takes place amid a distinctive culture of decentralization and local autonomy. Multiple agendas are in play and each of the main constituencies engages from a variety of perspectives, including academic skepticism, student consumerism and administrator regulation. Political striving is both inevitable and prominent in such an environment. The second reality is closely linked. Academic libraries, whether they like it or not, regularly find themselves at the centre of many highly charged political engagements. These include evolving their traditional value proposition into new areas, promoting change in scholarly communication, asserting service jurisdiction, fighting for resources and taking a stance relative to political issues in the wider world.

Political engagement is intimate to the work of positioning the academic library advantageously on campus. This leads on to the next reality which is that positioning is a high-stakes political venture. If an academic library gets it wrong there is potential for negative consequences in terms of resourcing, status and the ability to advance the library's strategy. In contrast, successful positioning can yield wider influence, informed and accurate perceptions of the library's role, recognition of its contribution, appreciation of its value to the institution, stronger competitiveness in the campus struggle for resourcing and more control of destiny. The final reality is that the academic library plays has a mixed and sometimes contradictory experience in the campus positioning arena. It has a vital role in creating a sense of campus community but is subject to leadership indifference and underestimation; it is seen as intimate to scholarship, yet its spending power has reduced; it is a longstanding campus citizen and trusted partner but does not reap a matching level of recognition or political clout. Many of its difficulties are deep-rooted and some may be the result of insufficient attention to politics and positioning in the past.

Academic libraries and their parent institutions find themselves at a critical juncture, with uncertainty at unprecedented levels and a sense that everything is up for grabs as change sweeps through global politics, higher education, technology and society. This calls for an ongoing library effort in relation to political positioning, characterized by an outward focus aiming to understand, analyze, ask questions, study the behavior of others, engage with the big issues of the day for the institution, build relationships and communicate the achievements and mission-critical role of the library. Taking the initiative and playing to established strengths emerge as important aspects of positioning, as does operating with the political skill, guile and intuition needed to read situations as they evolve and adapt accordingly. This is all compatible with acting ethically and deploying the library's trusted status, values and reputation for operating with integrity as valuable political assets.

A highly practical approach geared towards maximizing strengths to overcome disadvantages underpins the eight strategies outlined in the previous section of this article: embrace political engagement; position the library assertively; understand the environment; apply the political frame; cultivate political skills; build political capital; ensure that institutional priorities are library priorities; and communicate political messages. These are intended to help the library to navigate a range of political situations in a complex campus environment. The necessary skills, instincts and habits can be developed and a toolkit containing further resources, techniques and questions to ask is included in a guide to strategic positioning for academic libraries (Cox, 2026). A denial of, or disdain for, politics would be a huge positioning mistake. It is better to engage positively and assertively and Buschman (2013b) was right in promoting a political mindset as politics is vital, decisive and all-pervasive. The campus environment is challenging but successful political engagement will advance academic library positioning and repay effort.

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