

The Creative Collaboration Craze: Best (or Worst) Practices for Innovation in Academic Libraries

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Librarians. Are we old-fashioned or cutting edge? Rust-bucket fossils or a rocket-fueled future? Whatever you think of academic librarians today, one thing is clear: we're insecure. Doctors, lawyers, and teachers seldom need to justify or explain their work. People know what they do. Doctors heal, lawyers interpret law, teachers teach. Librarians, by contrast, face an identity crisis. This professional muddle, like a puddle you step in with your boot, may be hard to see clearly, and I am not sure that I do. But a key question settles at the bottom: Now that information is easy to find, where do libraries and librarians fit in? The answer, I suggest, has two parts: (1) we need creativity and innovation to reinvent, invigorate, clarify, and cement our identity and value; and (2) we need collaboration to reach out—to faculty, to other educators, to administrators, to students, to the public, and to one another—to create, promote, develop, and earn support for what we do. In short, following the business example, academic libraries nowadays pursue a joint passion for creativity and collaboration. Research in psychology, however, suggests creativity and collaboration are often poor playmates. I argue that this hearkening after creative collaboration is prompted by the same professional self-doubt it was intended to solve—a fear of irrelevance that may be clouding our awareness of what patrons truly value in libraries and tripping up genuine attempts at innovation. Using research from psychology, this lecture will reflect on the profession's innate insecurity in the context of business workflow, creativity, innovation, and collaboration.