ENGINES FOR CHANGE
Libraries as drivers of engagement

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I've found that giving people some autonomy can inspire them to do things they never imagined."

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Note: this paper was adapted from a keynote address at entrelib: The Conference for Entrepreneurial Librarians, given on May 16, 2013 in Greensboro, North Carolina. The theme of the conference was Social Entrepreneurship in Action.[1]

In the months leading up to this conference I read extensively on the topic of social enterprise. Concepts like human rights, civic engagement, sustainability, health, medicine, transportation, and poverty are always front-and-center as huge issues. These are the big problems that many people and institutions are trying to tackle. I kept asking myself: I'm just one person, what could I possibly do to make a difference? Where does one even begin?

What am I trying to do?
Who am I trying to help?

SCOPE & SCALE

No matter what type of project I am working on I always start with scope and scale. *What am I trying to do? Who am I trying to help?* These are the most pivotal things you need to explore before anything gets off the ground.

Scope involves what you hope to accomplish. What's the focus? What's the intended outcome? What are the facts? What are the assumptions? What's your bias? What's the deliverable? What's the operations model? Why are you interested in doing this?

Scale defines the size-- the reach. Is this idea suitable for five, fifty, or five hundred people? Can it grow? Should it grow? Should it stay small? What does it cost? Is it one-time or is it ongoing?

Obviously, many other important aspects like funding, logistics, communication, and evaluation will impact decision-making, but those conversations should always come after scope and scale. First, you need to know what problem you are trying to solve and who you are engaging.

FOCUS

Many new ideas don't work, and failure is especially common in social enterprise. Why? Jeff Church from NIKA Water Company provides some insight: most of the time it's because people focus too much on their cause.[2] They are deeply motivated by creating a social benefit and they do not concentrate enough on the operations side of the endeavor. Personal passion outweighs business practices. Without a solid foundation, everything falls apart.

You might have great intentions but without effective execution and a supportive infrastructure it is nearly impossible to gain or sustain any momentum. Jeff Church advocates for a 90/10 rule: 90% of the time should focus on building the enterprise and only 10% should go to the social good. The emphasis, especially early on, should be getting things running smoothly.

This 90/10 allocation applies to libraries as well. Our profession endorses many ideals such as life-long learning, digital fluency, information literacy, open access, and the preservation of human knowledge. That's exciting and important but how do we do that? What are our business models, performance indicators, and intended outcomes? As we shape our future we need to focus on the nuts and bolts and not just the rhetoric. By adopting an entrepreneurial mindset we can make great strides toward actualizing our collective goals.

FOUR CORE CHARACTERISTICS

I've written and presented on innovation over the past few years. And I've used this conference as an opportunity to reflect on that a bit and challenge myself to pinpoint four core characteristics that define and foster this outlook.

The first one is **AWARENESS**. Being able to recognize opportunities is a skill. People who anticipate changes that are around the corner and who can identify potential problems are an asset. And the ability to activate – to communicate, design, develop, and implement solutions proves invaluable to any organization.

The Occupy Wall Street movement provides an interesting example. During Super Storm Sandy, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) closed its doors due to the dangerous weather conditions.[3] Meanwhile, the Occupy demonstrators were in position to help as things went bad. They took advantage of Amazon's gift registry to create a process whereby people could donate urgently needed items directly.[4] Citizens across the country could purchase specific tools, supplies, food, water, and other necessities. Occupy activists were present on the frontlines, and their awareness enabled them to react to problems as they emerged.

FEMA center closes in New York, DNAinfo.com, 2012
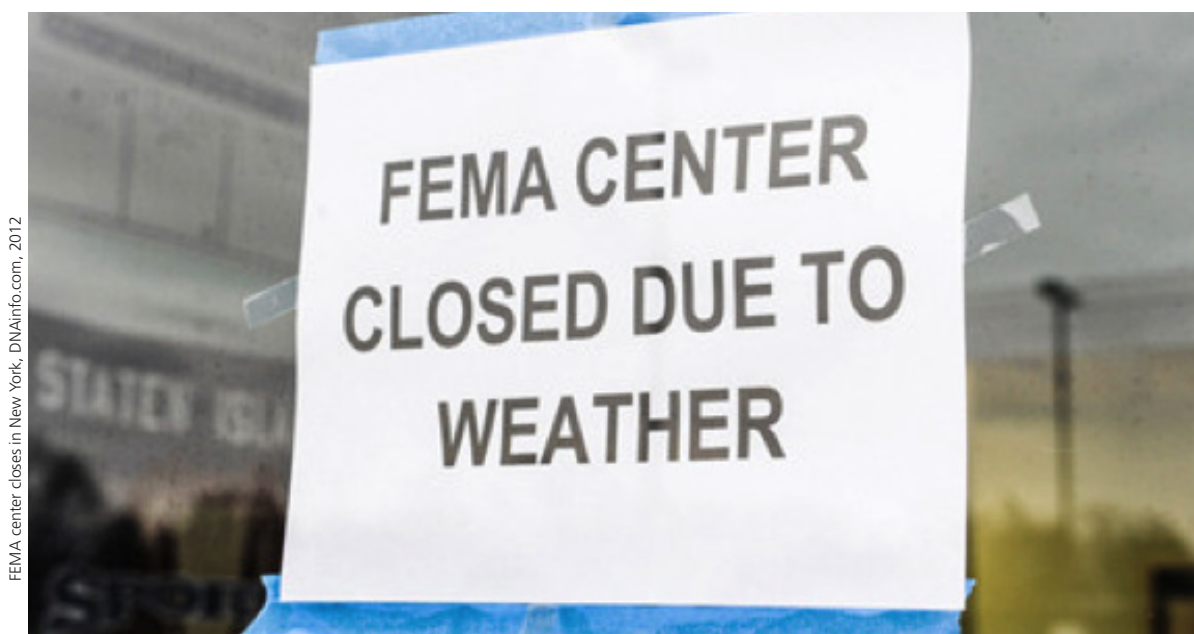
The next characteristic is **SYNTHESIS**. This is the ability to mix and match ideas in new and novel ways. The founders of Apple are a perfect case study.[5] They did not invent computers or graphical interfaces-- they assembled the existing parts in a new manner. Apple didn't invent tablets, MP3 players, watches, cameras, or smart phones, but they fused components together to create something different. The ability to import concepts and rearrange existing pieces for new purposes can be transformative.

Another important characteristic is **EMPATHY**. Understanding a situation from someone else's perspective and then changing your behavior (or practices and policies) can lead to breakthroughs.

The Feeds project in Africa serves as a great example.[6] This initiative aims to assist farmers who are raising chickens by providing them with feed seeds. They discovered, however, that the bags were too large and too heavy, requiring special handling and storage. The organizers responded by offering smaller quantities at more frequent intervals, enabling farmers to order and use only what is necessary for the current season.

The program was successful but introduced a new problem: feathers. As more chickens were cultivated, their feathers polluted some villages. The non-profit helped them address this problem; they don't view their mission narrowly as selling seeds, but rather, as helping farmers succeed. To do this they must first understand problems on a local and personal level and adapt accordingly.

The last characteristic is **INTERCONNECTIVITY**. This term implies a sense of embeddedness — being plugged into a community and serving as a participant rather than just a service provider. The objective is to make things better by connecting people to each other and enabling them to share and collaborate.

An organization called Self-Help operates on the interconnected principle.[7] This organization offers home loans to low-income families. They noticed that many of their potential clients were already stuck in bad contracts. The group developed educational campaigns to address the problem of predatory lenders by building alliances with over seventy partners including banks, churches, and government offices. Their resulting network cooperated to change financial policies in North Carolina, and they assisted other states with enacting similar practices.

Clearly, many attributes must comprise the innovator's mindset. These four are ones I regard as especially important because they get us thinking more about the people we support and partner with. *How can I help faculty teach more successfully? How can I help the Writing Center reach more people? How can I help student organizations meet their goals?* This forms the core of entrepreneurial thinking. We start by considering what people need and then develop a means of empowering them.

Anticipate opportunities for change.
Mix and match ideas in new ways.
Understand other peoples' perspectives.
Participate in your community.

THE RECOMBINATION OF KNOWLEDGE

One of the inspirations for this conference theme was the book *Social Entrepreneurship: What Everyone Needs to Know* by David Bornstein and Susan Davis.[8] Personally, I think every conference should have a common reading. This book is enlightening, and two quotes in particular really resonated with me.

> *"In a society oriented around specialization, where knowledge is fragmented, entrepreneurs play critical integrating roles."*

I like this, but let's change one word:

> *In a society oriented around specialization, where knowledge is fragmented, <u>librarians</u> play critical integrating roles.*

This reads like a mission statement. We're operating in a world that is increasingly digital, increasingly mobile and global, and increasingly complex. Our professional existence is based upon helping people discover and integrate diverse streams of information and data. Bornstein was writing about entrepreneurs, but he could just as easily be describing us.

In a highly specialized, personalized, and fragmented society, there is a critical need for people who can bring things together: diverse ideas, tools, content, and expertise. As librarians we are positioned to do this—if we embrace the challenge. We can facilitate the remixing of scholarly conversations, outputs, artifacts, and information streams to generate new knowledge. We can transform teaching practices, invent new pedagogies, accelerate research workflows, and redefine learning.

Some of the most valuable attributes that we have to offer are neutrality and openness. We make room for many perspectives and many possibilities. We are holistic and can interweave multiple points of view in order to explore and tackle important questions and problems.

Here is another quote from the book:

> *"Innovation and change demand the recombination of knowledge... new recipes, not just more cooking."* [9]

We don't need more business as usual. If you sincerely want to make changes, you have to think and act differently. Moving outside of our comfort zone is a necessary part of the process. Metrics and benchmarks based on what libraries once were will not help us grow in a different direction. It is only through the introduction of new services, spaces, collections, and literacies that we can truly redefine libraries.

Librarianship is no longer a calling; it is a call to action. What matters most is what we enable people to do. A non-profit like Feeds focuses not on the quantity of seeds that it sells, but instead on the quality of life in small African villages. What matters most is the lens through which you view the library's mission and the resulting actions that you take to improve people's lives.

Outreach undertakings enable everyone to practice entrepreneurship.

BECOMING AN ENGINE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

I could easily fill these pages with different frameworks, strategies, and philosophies.[10] But I would rather share my personal experience and offer some context. I honestly believe that libraries and librarians can be engines for change—instigators, incubators, and accomplices for social engagement and societal improvement. Note that this isn't a radical notion. Our predecessors were committed to the betterment of civilization.[11] Today is our chance to continue their effort.

So what is an entrepreneur? To me, it's not someone who starts a business. It's someone who turns an idea into a project, and then builds that into a program that has meaningful impact. Outreach efforts provide us the opportunity to explore and experiment outside of our traditional work roles. We can implement projects that don't require a lot of time or money, yet which greatly expand and humanize our organizations. Outreach undertakings enable everyone to practice entrepreneurship, whether it takes the form of a social cause, a creative expression, or an academic output. This channel allows us to imprint our users' with positive associations of the library and what it stands for. Reframing outreach as a way to engage our communities, rather than a means of promoting library services, is liberating and opens new possibilities and partnerships.

The most essential revelation for me, the thing that drives what I do and how I do it, was shifting from push to pull. Instead of fixating on pushing out all the great collections and services that my library has to offer, I listen. I pull in an understanding of the community, what it needs, and what it wants to do. And then I try to help. Sometimes that involves our collections and services, but oftentimes it involves other elements, things that are not typically associated with libraries.

When I worked at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) I had firsthand experience with this. The campus is located on the Pacific Ocean. From the top floor of the library you can see sailboats and surfers.

Because of its location, sustainability and environmental themes are significant and compelling. Conservation is taken very seriously. But even a scenic campus has to cope with rowdy parties. One year more than 12,000 students converged for the annual Floatopia beach party festivities, and it was messy.[12] UCSB students also have a tradition of epic Halloween parties in which over 50,000 people congregate in the small coastal town.[13]

These and similar gatherings present many challenges: safety, alcohol, theft, assault, and property damage. They also generate a lot of litter. It is estimated that Halloween at UCSB alone generates over 7,000 pounds of garbage. In the days leading up to this holiday I noticed a call for volunteers. Over 200 people pitched in to help with the cleanup effort.

This got me thinking:

UCSB Campus, www.ucsb.edu

Beach Blanket Babylon, Floatopia, photo © Meredith Ennis, 2009

What could I do? How might the library engage?

Could we amplify the call to action and get more volunteers? Could we showcase the effort of those who helped clean?

In fact, we did both of these things. It felt good, but did it have an impact? The issue was littering, not the cleanup. We needed a way to contextualize the problem. The following year I worked with a student group on a guerilla art project outside the library. They hung bottles from trees and stacked garbage (artfully) along the pathways. Students had to pass through it to enter or exit the main building. The objective was to force people to confront the consequences of their actions from the night before. This sparked more conversation than a traditional exhibit, newspaper article, or lecture ever could have.

Floatopia trash, photo © Eric Ford, 2009

The garbage display helped us gain some cachet. Our involvement in making a statement earned us some positive attention. It also enabled us to ask some different questions, such as: how do we make it easier for people not to litter?

The UCSB Library was able to build on this theme through a common book program. We selected *Moby Duck*, which examines the problem of pollution in the oceans.[14] Through lectures, films, readings, exhibits, and small discussion groups the campus explored a variety of environmental issues from different disciplines and different points of view. Within those early conversations the subject of mega-parties came up, and we were able to connect people across the community who had not been connected before.

This program provided us an opportunity to partner with students, faculty, alumni, and others directly involved with environmental matters. In fact, one student organization donated money. Not only were there conversations and exhibits, but it involved a beach cleanup as well. This exemplifies the theme of understanding things

that are relevant in a community and then finding a way to get involved and improve the situation.

While I was out on the West Coast, the University of California System was going through a rough time.[15] Administrators struggled with the aftermath of the recession. Employees were furloughed. Tuition was raised 33%. Students protested. Faculty hosted sit-ins. It was difficult and distracting for everyone.

Students at a different university held a protest in their library, and the administration ended up closing the building.[16] I was worried that this might catch on as an Occupy The Library type of movement. As a member of the admin team, I had to prep for this possibility. And I wondered: *could I prevent it from happening here?*

I started attending the protests. I listened and tried to understand the motivation of the demonstrators. What was driving this? Who was leading it?

What I learned was interesting. Many different people got involved for many different reasons. One especially committed group was undocumented students. They could not qualify for federal loans or other forms of financial aid, so tuition increases impacted them greatly.[17]

I got to know some of these students and found out that they were daily users of the library. They would not even consider disrupting the building because for them it represented a sanctuary. It was a place where they could concentrate on schoolwork but also socialize. It was too important of an asset.

I was invited to a protest-planning meeting and was amazed at the effort. Students from different walks of life came together for a common purpose. I witnessed them writing speeches and mentoring each other during rehearsals. I saw students singing together as they painted protest signs and outlined different scenarios that could happen. It was amazing to see this community forming and bonding before my eyes.

The activities on my campus were calm compared to others. Students at one school were pepper sprayed.[18] This action was shocking. Many people were angry, upset, and saddened. There was a somber mood. A handful of the students I met turned to me looking for answers.

Police pepper spraying UC Davis students, photo © Louise Macabitas, 2011

This experience was transcendent for me. I went in with the motive of *protecting the library*, but drew something more meaningful from it. I felt like I was redefining what outreach meant. During this time, these students didn't need me in a traditional librarian role, but approached me instead as a member of their community who could listen and maybe help them.

Once again, our common book program provided a conduit for conversation. We selected *Enrique's Journey*, which chronicles Central American children crossing into the United States in search of their parents. Some student organizations got behind this and hosted their own events and activities parallel to what we were doing. Similar to *Moby Duck*, we took a topic that was especially relevant on our campus and found a way for people to connect with it -- and each other -- by exploring different viewpoints. This is one of the most important things that any library can do for its community.

A few of the undocumented students opened up to me about similar journeys that they experienced. These were emotional conversations that seemed to be cathartic for them. This contact led to deeper engagement. One of these

students served on our student advisory board. A handful of them participated in focus groups and ethnographic interviews. Another hosted an art exhibit in the library.

Beyond the programmatic aspects something else was happening. A number of students began visiting my office and asking for leadership advice. This included functional things such as running meetings or interpreting campus policies, but also matters such as crowd funding, presenting at conferences, and talking with the press. These students were looking for guidance and I became a mentor.

Just before this conference I checked in on one of them and saw that she was speaking at a city council meeting. In fact, she helped organize thirty people who attended the meeting to share opinions about a discriminatory matter. This student has sustained her passion and grown into an effective civic organizer. What she needed was encouragement and the chance to build her confidence and find her voice and identity. I felt proud of her --not because she cited library sources properly or earned good grades, but because she challenged herself and found meaningful ways to engage with a society that views her as an outsider.

We found a way for people to connect with each other by exploring different viewpoints. This is one of the most important things that any library can do for its community.

A TRANSFORMATIVE SHIFT

While these activities had a personal impact on me they also transformed the way people viewed the library. It expanded us beyond collections, study space, and reference assistance, connecting us more vitally to the campus experience.

We reached a point where seemingly every other week someone wanted to partner with us. Many of these requests involved a social cause. Student organizations started viewing the library as an engagement center with an intellectual aura. What these students wanted more than anything else was a chance to express themselves to each other. Since the library was always packed, we provided that opportunity.

Through our efforts we became more than just a popular location, and were valued as partners, advisors, and collaborators. When planning exhibits or events, students did not simply want a passive transfer of information. We always considered: *how do we make this interactive and participatory?*

We also hosted book drives, food drives and other charitable encounters. We worked with voter registration and a number of local civic groups. We undertook some more complex projects with Take Back The Night, the Resource Center for Sexual & Gender Diversity, the Office of Judicial Affairs, and several other socially-minded groups on campus. By demonstrating our support and taking an interest in issues of importance to them, we were able to expand the way the library was perceived.

These efforts changed the way that others on campus viewed us as well. We started getting more press from the university's communications unit (as well as the student newspaper and city paper). Student Affairs and Instructional Development reached out to us with propositions. In short, we raised our profile across campus. Now more than ever, people wanted to work with us. This led to a handful of new opportunities like free flu shots, meditation sessions, and a coffee cart.

> Student organizations started viewing the library as an engagement center with an intellectual aura.

We also started working with student government. One example: they wanted to develop a "book bank" for textbooks.[19] We met with them several times to talk about logistics, legal concerns, inventory control, record keeping, cataloging, privacy, and related practices. They viewed us as consultants who could help them achieve their goal.

Campus units perceived us differently too. Facilities and a campus-wide sustainability group approached us about recycling. A study found that a significant number of people were throwing recyclable materials into trashcans. Students said they wanted to recycle but that those bins were often too far out of the way. We ended up adding one hundred more recycling bins throughout the building—basically one next to every trashcan.[20] More students opted to recycle since we made it easier for them. A similarly successful effort was later deployed across campus.

We worked with faculty in new ways too. One example that stands out was a professor who taught Basque Studies. We collaborated on an elaborate exhibit that supported a conference she hosted.[21] It was also used as instructional material for several courses. I was able to brainstorm with this instructor on different engagement possibilities. We talked about teaching and learning in an immersive environment, resulting in further conversations across campus around pedagogical practices.

We also engaged with the town community in new ways, hosting events for local authors and continued education workshops for lawyers. One of the programs that stood out for me, though, was working with a local Peace Corps group on an exhibit that featured artifacts, photos, and fabrics from around the world.[22] This project was connected with the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps and supported efforts on campus and around town. In addition to the exhibit, we also hosted weekly conversations with people who had had Peace Corps experiences. This partnership placed the library into the community spotlight. But all we did was enable community members to share their stories, memories, and materials with each other.

Hopefully these examples illustrate what an engagement program can do. My approach wasn't to promote a particular position, agenda, or cause, but rather, it was a driven by a desire to learn more about the people around me. I view libraries as engines for their communities: organizations that can propel ideas, actions, and change. While connecting people with information is a core function, we can do so much more. Libraries can support social causes, as well as cultural, creative, civic, and scholarly endeavors. *How do we help people do what they want to do?*

I keep coming back to the primal idea of libraries serving as intellectual gathering spaces. Safe zones in which people can share and stretch their thoughts and ideas. Incubators where people write books or write code or write text messages. Environments where people feel inspired and included. When we shift our attention to supporting the enthusiasm of our communities and serving as a platform for their expression, we empower people to do amazing things.

I was driven by a desire to learn more about the people around me.

TRANSFERENCE

I firmly believe that outreach is a transferable skill; it bends, blends, and bleeds into everything else we do. It is valuable for everyone in the organization to participate in an outreach project of some manner at least once a year, whether that involves planning or cleanup, working at an orientation booth, hosting an exhibit, partnering with a professor on an activity, or mentoring a student organization. The specific context doesn't matter— what does matter is that the act itself of volunteering creates a personal investment and deeper connection to the community.

The impact of these actions is greater than the actual amount of time you put in; it affects your mood and performance. I view outreach endeavors as perception shifters and relationship builders. They provide people with a chance for personal growth and experimentation. Most importantly, this participation invites people to invest in their institution beyond typical daily duties. While outreach projects can definitely feel stressful, frustrating, and exhausting, the act of volunteering is an act of love; helping others fulfill their needs can be therapeutic.

When I speak with library leaders I emphasize this theme because I believe outreach projects can change organizational culture. It can do a lot of good to bring people together and let them work on something that is achievable and directly impacts users.

An example: an interdepartmental group of library employees approached me about putting together an interactive sticky note exhibit. I provided them with a small amount of funding for supplies, some space in a high-traffic area, and, most importantly, permission to be creative. They had fun planning, designing, building, and maintaining an art project while they were on the clock. Students loved it and engaged with it instantly. The team was very satisfied.

The value, though, wasn't in the exhibit itself. The real outcome was the bonding experience they shared. They took it very seriously, and I witnessed a carryover into other parts of their work; it boosted their morale. The opportunity to own an idea and the freedom to implement it was empowering.

Outreach projects bring employees together. They break down departmental silos or other barriers. They provide a forum for people to develop leadership, teambuilding, and expression. These projects enable us to apply entrepreneurialism as we find ways to engage our communities. I also feel these types of projects can be reinvigorating by sparking creativity and personal growth.

Interactive Art Installation, UCSB Library

Outreach projects break down barriers and provide a forum for people to develop leadership, teambuilding, and expression.

CONCLUSION: BONSAI AMBITIONS

I'll close with some more inspiration from David Bornstein. In *Social Entrepreneurship* he mentions that Bonsai trees are a diminutive size because of the pots we place them in. If we planted the same seeds outside in the grass, they would grow to a more mature height. The container impacts size and shape. The same principle applies to our ideas and ambitions. Confining them to a small space will ensure that they will remain small; but if we nurture them and move them into a larger vessel, they can grow immensely.

I view employees and professional relationships in much the same way. I try not to pigeonhole people, but rather, seek to understand their capacity and desire to grow. Of course, our time and resources are finite; we cannot be everything to everyone. Sometimes boundaries are necessary to help us define roles and clarify expectations. But every so often it is worthwhile to reexamine our boundaries to see if they need to be recast. I've found that giving people some autonomy can inspire them to do things they never imagined --things I never imagined, either.

The same philosophy can be applied to libraries. Our organizations are only limited by the limits we impose. I've seen small libraries with tiny budgets do amazing work that no one else is doing. We are the ones who shape and define what we are by what we do. If we allow others to place us into a constricted container, then that's all we will ever be. But if we conceive of libraries as boundless partners deeply rooted within their communities, then we can thrive with redwood-sized ambitions.

What's the shape of your container?
Is it time to make a change?

Special thanks to Don Lubach, Associate Dean of Students and Director of First-Year & Graduate Student Initiatives at UC Santa Barbara. He opened my eyes to new ways of seeing the student experience.

Thanks also to the librarians and staff at the UC Santa Barbara Library for taking risks with me and teaching me to care for the community together.

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[13] http://www.examiner.com/article/50-000-party-animals-crash-isla-vista-halloween-bash
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[14] http://guides.library.ucsb.edu/ucsbreads2012

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March 4th Rally, UCSB 2010, photo © Ricardo Ortega