

Interviews with Library Directors Suggest That Political Capital is Linked to Reputation

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[See table of contents](#)

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To understand how library directors use political capital to overcome challenges and reach goals in their libraries. The author defines political capital as social power that is amassed through reputation and alliance building. This social power can be used to influence decisions and change at an organizational level.

Design – Narrative interview.

Setting – A large state university system in the Northeastern United States of America. The

system includes a network of 64 independent campuses serving different communities with a total population of 460,000 undergraduate and 420,000 graduate students.

Subjects – 12 library directors from within a single state university system.

Methods – The author conducted in-depth narrative interviews with participants focusing on critical incidents throughout their careers and recent events. The author used restorying, reorganizing the data into chronological order before coding, and thematic analysis, using a software program to code the data and then

revisit all the data with finalized codes to make any adjustments.

Main Results – Several themes emerged in the interview data including interactions with administration, methods for building political capital, applying and using political capital, and building reputation. Within the interactions with administration theme, the author observed a strong connection in the hierarchy of the institution. Directors expected a high level of engagement and support from their direct reports and felt that providing this type of work to University administration would provide a return on investment for the library in terms of budget and support for new efforts or HR challenges. The theme of administrative turnover emerged as a possible barrier to establishing this relationship. In terms of building political capital, most participants did not set out to do this purposefully but instead sought to develop a reputation as a "team player" willing to participate in campus-wide initiatives and who would return positive outcomes. Participants expressed that it was difficult to know how much political capital they had acquired until they attempted to use it towards a goal. Eight of the participants provided narratives that included applying and using political capital, with two reporting that their political capital diminished after they had applied it towards a goal. Other participants suggested that applying political capital increased their store when it was spent toward accomplishing higher-profile goals. The importance of communication was clear in the building reputation theme, several participants indicated that their communication skills helped establish a reputation for competence and credibility in interactions both up and down the chain of command. Communication was a key factor in developing relationships across the institution, particularly with high-level administrators, and developing relationships was another area of importance for participants.

Two of the participants indicated that they had used political capital in specific areas and for smaller, day-to-day changes. Eight participants used their political capital for

bigger initiatives, such as budget, human resources, and library space.

Conclusion – While a few of the directors explicitly linked their activities to political capital and felt that applying their political capital increased their standing with stakeholders, most participants did not generally link the development of political capital to individual events. Instead, they suggested that generally establishing reputation and trust through excellent communication and relationship building would help them achieve success toward their goals.

Commentary

Positioning the academic library in the political structure of the university is an area of interest in recent research. While this article focuses on the individual political capital of library directors, Adam Murray and Ashley Ireland (2018) surveyed university provosts with a similar focus on effective communication as a strategy for accomplishing goals in the library. A preprint in the *New Review of Academic Librarianship* by John Cox (2018) also explores communicating value within the university, with a focus on framing library work through university goals. While these articles take different perspectives from the topic article, all three describe securing power through relationship building and effective value communication between university and library administration.

When examining the article through the Glynn critical appraisal tool (2006), population is an area of interest. The author used purposive sampling within a limited community of library directors in one state university system. That system encompasses a wide spectrum of academic libraries, from community colleges to large research universities, and information about which type of library the participant directors represented was withheld to protect confidentiality. There is almost certainly a difference in administrative structures and strategy between large university centers represented in the system and much smaller, specialized colleges. The author described a

split between participants who spoke explicitly about political capital and were intentional about acquiring and using it while others indicated they did not view this process as a political action. This split particularly could have benefitted from some exploration of the administrative structures that these directors were experiencing. The author suggests that random sampling should be done in future studies of this topic, but comparing the way library directors perceive political capital between different academic libraries of different types, sizes, and funding structures also represents a gap in the literature. Participant information was controlled to protect the confidentiality of the sample, but it would have been illuminating to show some connection to participant demographics, since compelling arguments have been made by researchers such as Barbara Arneil (2006) that our understanding of political and social capital frequently leaves out diverse perspectives.

This research is relevant to academic libraries redefining their role within the university, but it is unclear whether this line of research can be generalized. The political structures of academic libraries are defined by individual factors like budget, hierarchical structure, and institution size. This is an important area of investigation, and it is clear from this research

that it is an area of interest for some library directors, but further studies are needed before we fully understand the role of political capital in the landscape of academic libraries.

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