Improving Lives by Building Social Capital: A New Way to Frame the Work of Law Libraries*

Ryan Metheny**

Social capital analysis could provide a valuable tool in advocating for law libraries’ new roles in today’s online environment. The author describes how social capital analysis could benefit law libraries and offers LA Law Library’s Business Series program as one example of how a law library can leverage existing resources to generate social capital and improve the lives of its patrons.

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** Managing Librarian, Legal Education, Los Angeles County Law Library; Lecturer in Law, University of Southern California Gould School of Law, Los Angeles, California.
Introduction: New and Expanded Roles for Law Libraries and Law Librarians

¶1 Law libraries are in the midst of profound changes. Budget struggles continue in many institutions, in no small part because we suffer from the erroneous perception that accessing legal information is now an activity that takes place exclusively online, disconnected from specific physical spaces or human intermediaries. As a result, the law library seems, to many, to no longer fill an obvious utilitarian role. While law librarians know that law libraries still provide vital access to legal information and resources, the assumption that “everything is online” will continue to dog the profession as we fight for resources in our institutional settings.

¶2 Meanwhile, law libraries and law librarians have taken on a variety of new and expanded roles in recent years, in part to justify the resources they use in the face of the “everything is online” attitude. Academic law libraries, for example, increasingly serve as spaces for individual and collaborative study, and academic law librarians step into expanded instructional and supportive roles in law schools.1 Likewise, law firm librarians perform a much wider variety of functions than they typically did in the past.2 Public law libraries, meanwhile, now serve the needs of the exploding population of self-represented litigants suffering the effects of a nationwide crisis in access to justice.3 Public law libraries do this through, among other efforts, an increased focus on self-help materials and reference services for nonlawyers, as well as the development and hosting of educational programs and legal clinics for the self-represented.4

¶3 These new and expanded roles address important institutional, business, and societal needs. However, they also represent a challenge for those who advocate on behalf of law libraries, and a separate but related challenge for scholars who conceptualize the function of law libraries. The new roles taken on by libraries are diverse and, frankly, somewhat divergent and inconsistent. This makes it difficult to succinctly describe them and advocate for why they are essential; it makes it equally difficult to conceptualize the overall function of the modern law library. Yet these new and expanded roles represent an increasing part of the justification for law library resources and funding, as well as an increasing demand on law libraries’ existing resources.


How Do We Conceptualize, Describe, and Advocate for Our New Roles?

The Problem of Place

§4 So how do we to conceptualize, describe, and advocate for law libraries’ new roles? What, if any, unifying concept links all of these efforts? What is it we do if we no longer simply act as caretakers of the place where legal information is stored and accessed? By answering these questions, we can not only better conceptualize our functions in a scholarly way, but we can also better justify the resources we need; we can better argue for law libraries’ continued places in academia, in law firms, as public institutions, and elsewhere. A unified conceptualization of our new roles can also serve as guidance as we develop additional new roles and niches for law librarians.

§5 Of course, the answers to these questions may differ for different types of law libraries. The roles we perform necessarily fill the needs of the specific institution, firm, or community that the law library serves. Law schools, law firms, the courts, and the general public have very different needs, and different law libraries are positioned differently to address them. Nevertheless, a single conceptualization for the profession should be possible.

§6 None of the answers put forth to these questions have been entirely satisfactory. The American Association of Law Libraries recently went through a rebranding effort to widen the umbrella of the organization and make advocacy to stakeholders more straightforward by recommending the adoption of the name “Association for Legal Information”5—an effort that AALL members roundly rejected.6 While the proposed name was certainly inclusive and might have helped some with advocacy, it appears to have failed as a description of law libraries’ work in the eyes of law librarians.

§7 One reason the rebranding effort failed likely is that members of the profession still value the law library as a place—a physical location where people interact and connect socially. Indeed, many of the new roles law libraries have taken on involve leveraging the often beautiful, well-located, and eminently useful physical libraries that are a legacy of our nondigital past. Whether serving as study space, a place to meet and collaborate, a location for classes and clinics, or all of these, law libraries and their patrons clearly benefit from the expanded uses of our library buildings. The AALL membership, perhaps seeing how our legacy spaces can still be used in innovative ways, may have recognized that to rhetorically unmoor ourselves from a specific physical place was unwise.

§8 However, a satisfactory theory of contemporary law librarianship that recognizes the value of the library as place has proved elusive. One such effort appears in descriptions of law libraries as a type of “third place.”7 The sociologist Ray Oldenburg popularized the term in his influential book The Great Good Place.8 Oldenburg argues that American life suffers from a lack of third places, after the first and

7. See, e.g., Danner, Kauffman & Palfrey, supra note 1, at 144–45, ¶¶ 9–10.
second places of home and work, respectively. These third places provide essential psychological and social support by serving as neutral and democratic places for playful conversation—emotional refuges, in other words, from the stresses of the other two primary places in our lives.\(^9\)

\(^9\) However, Oldenburg’s concept is an awkward fit for law libraries conceptually, and not especially useful in advocating for the new and varied roles law libraries continue to take on. Oldenburg describes eight essential features of a third place: it (1) is neutral; (2) is democratic, in the sense of being socioeconomically “leveling”; (3) has conversation as the main activity; (4) is accessible and accommodating; (5) features a cast of “regulars”; (6) has a low profile and is out of the way; (7) has a playful mood; and (8) serves as an emotional “home away from home.”\(^10\)

\(^10\) The typical law library satisfies perhaps three or, at most, four of these eight criteria. It is neutral, probably democratic in the sense Oldenburg uses the term, and hopefully accessible and accommodating; some law libraries also feature a cast of regulars. However, the criteria that law libraries do not meet for Oldenburg’s third place are rather important. Most notably, the law library’s primary function has never been to serve as a place of casual, lighthearted conversation—which is really the central role for Oldenburg’s third place, and the one without which the various psychological and social benefits he describes cannot be enjoyed.\(^11\)

\(^11\) Instead, the law library serves much more utilitarian functions: patrons go there to study, attend a class, and get help with legal problems or research issues. Whatever casual and playful conversation takes place at the law library serves only as a pleasant detour from patrons’ main activities: studying, attending class, and getting help. For example, law libraries’ increased usage by law students as a quiet study space suggests that for law students, at least, the library serves primarily as a second place (a location for work), and not a third (a location for relaxation and playful conversation). Further, to characterize law libraries as “hangouts,” however essential such places are, also seems to miss the mark for those looking to advocate in support of the essential work that law libraries do. If we were simply hangouts, we would be rather expensive ones given the cost of legal information!

\(^12\) Lastly, the third-place concept does not serve especially well as a guidepost for those innovating new functions for the law library and law librarians: the profession needs to innovate new roles that can be succinctly and convincingly sold to stakeholders; such roles will likely perform utilitarian functions. We are not primarily facilitators of a pleasant hangout, even though we hope patrons find our physical spaces pleasing.

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**Can Social Capital Analysis Provide the Framework Law Libraries Need?**

\(^9\) *Id.* at 3–19.

\(^10\) *Id.* at 20–42.

\(^11\) *Id.* For a discussion of the third place concept’s poor fit for general public libraries, see Karen E. Fisher et al., *Seattle Public Library as Place: Reconceptualizing Space, Community and Information at the Central Library*, in *The Library as Place: History, Community and Culture* 135, 137–39 (John E. Buschman & Gloria J. Leckie eds., 2006).
tion needs and get legal help. The sociologist Nan Lin, a leader in the field of social capital scholarship, defines social capital as the “resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and used by actors for actions.” Less technically, one could say social capital is simply a measurement of the total value of our social connections. Many of the new roles law libraries are taking on serve to increase this value for patrons.

¶14 Law libraries’ essential function is to provide access to legal information resources; and increasingly, they do so by providing social intermediaries to those resources. Otherwise, law librarians’ function could well be reduced to database management alone, as the “everything is online” naysayers might have it. These social intermediaries, however, come in increasingly myriad forms, including traditional reference services; expanded instructional responsibilities; instructional support; and development and coordination of classes, clinics, and other events to provide connections to information and resources. These law library undertakings would seem to create social capital as that concept is defined. So can social capital analysis provide the framework we need?

¶15 Social capital is an established concept in the social sciences, although one that has only relatively recently gained widespread use and acceptance. Robert Putnam popularized the term in his bestselling book *Bowling Alone*, and a wealth of recent scholarship has focused on the concept. Social capital research aims to uncover the ways in which the value inherent in our social fabric is created and how social capital can be increased. Scholars apply social capital analysis to subjects as diverse as organizational management, democratic participation, economic performance of nations, and the structure and characteristics of political institutions. Social capital analysis is also used, fairly extensively, in the study of general public (nonlaw) libraries and their effectiveness in improving the lives of their patrons and the well-being of their communities.

¶16 As argued in this article, the framework provided by the idea of social capital accurately describes most of the new roles our profession has taken on, lends itself to advocacy, and serves as a reliable guiding concept for law librarians as we

continue to innovate. It also complements the profession’s commitment to the library as place and the innovative ways in which law libraries leverage legacy spaces. Yet it is rarely applied to law libraries.

¶17 This seems an odd omission in law library scholarship. The few examples found do not fully use social capital analysis to conceptualize the range of roles law libraries now play. To take one example, social capital has been used to describe the value of the relationship between a reference librarian and a self-represented litigant (SRL) through the reference interaction—a valuable insight, but only one way in which law libraries create social capital. It has also been used to describe the essential role of the law itself in building and maintaining social capital, and how law libraries support this by facilitating access to the law—also an important point, but one that seems somewhat theoretical and distant from much of the innovative new work law libraries are undertaking.

¶18 Much closer to the mark, Mareth Wilson at the Sacramento County Public Law Library describes, albeit briefly, how public law libraries foster social capital among the bench, bar, and the SRL through a variety of programs that aid SRLs’ meaningful access to the courts and aid the courts in addressing the needs of SRLs. Unfortunately, Wilson alone has applied this social capital analysis to the new, nontraditional roles law libraries are adopting; no broad-ranging attempt has been made to advocate for social capital as the primary framework in which to view law libraries’ new work.

¶19 The educational programs, legal clinics, and other events that many public law libraries organize and host are particularly ripe for a social capital analysis. These events help to increase the value of social networks formed by law library patrons. Social capital also can be used to analyze, advocate for, and design future programming along the same lines as the work that public law libraries do now. This article uses one example of public law library programming, LA Law Library’s Business Series, to show how a social capital analysis can effectively conceptualize and describe a new role taken on by a public law library, and how it can guide future program development. By doing so, I hope to expand the application of a little-used but eminently useful concept to how we talk about public law libraries and law libraries generally.

Social Capital: Background, Differing Theories, and the Important Role for Law Libraries

¶20 Social capital comes in two basic forms. The first, “bonding” social capital, refers to the close, often familial, connections that link similar people. These types of connections are also referred to as “strong ties.” The second, “bridging” social capital, refers to the more casual relationships that connect individuals to colleagues, acquaintances, and others outside the immediate circle of family and close

friends. These types of connections are also known as “weak ties.”\textsuperscript{22} Most social capital research concerns bridging social capital, which allows individuals to expand their horizons and access resources that otherwise would be unavailable to them through their “strong ties” alone.

\textsuperscript{21} In the aggregate, bridging connections make for more cohesive, healthier, and productive communities and societies.\textsuperscript{23} Among the positive effects associated with high levels of bridging social capital are well-performing democratic institutions,\textsuperscript{24} optimism and tolerance,\textsuperscript{25} economic growth,\textsuperscript{26} and democratic stability.\textsuperscript{27} Troublingly, however, social capital in the United States has declined over the last several decades.\textsuperscript{28} This decline is intertwined with—and sometimes measured by—a decline in “generalized trust,” or the extent to which members of a society feel they can trust the average stranger. Without such trust, the social structures needed to access capital (resources) do not form, or do not form as easily, resulting in a less healthy and productive population.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{22} Central to social capital research, then, is the question of how exactly social capital is generated—and thus, perhaps, how to reverse the trend of declining social capital. Interestingly, the scholarly consensus on this question seems to be moving toward a view that implicates an important role for law libraries.

\textsuperscript{23} Initially, Putnam and others saw civic or voluntary associations as the key to understanding how weak ties develop in communities.\textsuperscript{30} According to this theory, social capital arises organically from communities through years of interaction and association within the structures of civil society—clubs, private organizations, charities, and the like. However, this approach to social capital research has fallen into disfavor in recent years, as scholars have been unable to show that participation in voluntary associations actually increases trust and cooperation on a larger scale, rather than solely in those particular settings, among those particular actors.\textsuperscript{31} This theory of social capital generation also suffers from a tautological problem: social capital generates because the civic organizations that embody it form and grow—without an explanation of the mechanisms by which one actually causes the other.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{24} More recently, scholars have shown that rather than voluntary associations, effective “on-the-ground” government institutions may both predict the presence of social capital and plausibly explain its generation.\textsuperscript{33} These “on-the-ground”

\textsuperscript{22} Putnam, supra note 13, at 22–23.
\textsuperscript{23} Id. at 20–21, 287–349; see also Mark S. Granovetter, The Strength of Weak Ties, 78 Am. J. Soc. 1360 (1973).
\textsuperscript{27} Ronald Inglehart, Trust, Well-Being and Democracy, in Democracy and Trust 88, 88–120 (Mark E. Warren ed., 1999).
\textsuperscript{28} See, e.g., Putnam, supra note 13, at 31–147.
\textsuperscript{29} See, e.g., id. at 134–47.
\textsuperscript{31} Rothstein & Stolle, supra note 17, at 442–43.
\textsuperscript{32} Id.
\textsuperscript{33} Id. at 443–44.
institutions include nonpolitical or “order” institutions—such as the police, the courts, the civil service, and public schools—with which everyday citizens regularly interact. According to this theory, by providing impartial and fair services, checking bad actors, ensuring that contractual relationships are honored, maintaining safety and order, and setting an example of fairness and impartiality, on-the-ground government institutions build an environment in which social capital can grow and thrive. In fact, empirical research has shown a strong association between trust in order institutions and the generalized trust that builds social capital.\footnote{Id. at 444–57.}

¶25 This latter theory has special significance to public libraries—including public law libraries—since such institutions are very much “on the ground,” serving members of the public directly and in person through reference services, community events, and classes, and by providing a safe and neutral place to obtain information and assistance with a variety of problems. In fact, recent scholarship has included general public libraries as a clear example of an “on-the-ground” institution for purposes of building social capital.\footnote{See, e.g., Robert D. Putnam & Lewis M. Feldstein, Better Together: Restoring the American Community 34–54 (2003); Johnson, Preliminary Investigation, supra note 18; Johnson, Analysis of Interactions, supra note 18; Varheim, supra note 18; Varheim et al., supra note 18.} Although this scholarship has not referenced public law libraries specifically, it seems quite likely that the law library serves, if anything, an even greater “on-the-ground” role than the general public library.

**General Public Libraries as Generators of Social Capital, and How Law Libraries Fit**

¶26 The scholarship on general public libraries strongly supports the hypothesis that public law libraries generate social capital. First, from an eagle-eyed view, a positive correlation exists between library spending among democratic societies and measurements of social capital, when controlling for other factors.\footnote{Varheim et al., supra note 18, at 889–90.} Surprisingly, public library spending was found to be one of the most significant factors in predicting a nation’s overall levels of social capital.\footnote{Id.} At a more micro level, public library patrons in one U.S. city exhibited higher levels of social capital in terms of community involvement and social trust than a random sample of city residents.\footnote{Johnson, Preliminary Investigation, supra note 18, at 151–52.} In another U.S. city, residents of neighborhoods with more frequently used public libraries enjoyed higher levels of social capital overall.\footnote{Japzon et al., supra note 18, at 74–81.}

¶27 While these findings show a correlation between public libraries and social capital, and strongly suggest the possibility that public libraries contribute to higher levels of social capital, they do not suggest the mechanisms by which public libraries might actually generate social capital. However, two such mechanisms have been documented, if not conclusively proven.

¶28 First, public libraries typically engage in a number of outreach activities that aim to introduce library resources and bring into the fold disadvantaged or marginalized groups, such as recent immigrants.\footnote{Varheim et al., supra note 18, at 887–89.} By introducing library resources to these groups, and bringing both these groups and nondisadvantaged demo-
graphic groups together to share and interact in the same safe, neutral space, generalized trust is probably increased in a given community.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{29} While Varheim focuses on how such outreach programming increases generalized trust, such programming increases social capital in a more literal, utilitarian way as well. By connecting individuals within these disadvantaged groups with members of other groups possessing higher levels of social capital, connections are formed that can materially improve lives. Such “weak ties” probably serve to connect individuals to needed resources they otherwise could not access through their immediate circle of “strong ties.” For example, a member of a lower-income community could learn how to access a government benefit such as the Earned Income Tax Credit or could learn about employment or job training opportunities. The connection to a librarian or a class or a workshop instructor who provides access to this information quite literally increases the social capital available to the public library patron.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{30} Second, public libraries may increase generalized trust through the daily, supportive interactions that take place between staff and patrons. These interactions take the form not only of traditional reference service, which connects a patron to needed information and resources, but also include informal, friendly interactions that provide social support, reduce isolation, and provide a positive place for neighborhood residents to gather.\textsuperscript{43} Supportive interactions like these likely increase overall levels of generalized trust, and thus social capital, in a given community.\textsuperscript{44} In addition, individual reference interactions literally build social capital by providing meaningful access to information through the medium of the relationship between patron and reference librarian.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{31} Based on this scholarship, I suggest that public law libraries can and do increase social capital in their communities. By extension, other types of law libraries probably have a similar effect in the communities, institutions, and firms they serve. Law libraries serve many of the same roles as general public libraries, in terms of providing a safe environment and impartial service, and through the organization of outreach activities such as community events, classes, and workshops.

\textsuperscript{32} Public law libraries, however, potentially do much more to increase social capital than their general public library peers. That is because, in addition to the functions shared with general public libraries, law libraries also support other important on-the-ground institutions such as the courts and other government agencies, by aiding access to justice.\textsuperscript{46} These access-to-justice services include reference and collection development aimed at the SRL, classes to train the SRL to represent herself more effectively, and legal clinics to provide direct service to SRLs in conjunction with legal aid and attorney volunteers.\textsuperscript{47} These services, which help to level the playing field for those who cannot afford an attorney, in turn help to ensure the fair administration of the law and the vindication of legal rights—which is the backbone of order in any society.\textsuperscript{48} Indeed, the fair and impartial administration of the law is a fundamental role of the “order institutions” noted by scholars.

\textsuperscript{41} Id.
\textsuperscript{42} Johnson, Analysis of Interactions, supra note 18, at 56–60.
\textsuperscript{43} Id.
\textsuperscript{44} Pettinato, supra note 19, at 701–05, \textsuperscript{¶¶} 18–30.
\textsuperscript{45} Am. Ass’n of Law Libraries, supra note 4, at 21–32.
\textsuperscript{46} Wilson, supra note 21.
\textsuperscript{47} Wise & Schauer, supra note 20.
the perceived proper functioning of which are associated with high levels of social capital throughout the world.48

¶33 Going beyond the legal system per se, the information and knowledge provided by law libraries also give community members the tools needed to interact with those in positions of power, whether it be the police, a landlord, a mortgage lender, or an employer. Law libraries provide a safe and neutral space to learn about one’s legal rights and how to vindicate them, a single place where one can access print and electronic resources specifically aimed at the nonlawyer, trained reference librarians to help one find and use those resources, classes to learn about one’s rights from an instructor, and clinics at which to get help from an attorney. These resources doubtlessly create increased value in the social fabric of the communities where they are available (and thus generate social capital).

¶34 In addition to the important utilitarian functions these resources serve, they also help to increase the sense among the general population, as a matter of subjective experience, that the law is administered fairly and impartially—merely by the fact that they are being made available to those who otherwise cannot afford legal assistance. The availability of such resources at law libraries creates a sense that the order institutions of our society operate impartially and effectively by helping those who would otherwise remain at a hopeless disadvantage in litigation or other legal matters. It is, after all, the belief in well-functioning order institutions that leads to higher levels of generalized trust and the creation of social capital.49 Thus, it is quite likely that law libraries can, and do—to the extent possible, given current resources—serve a central role in the creation of social capital.

Mechanisms for Law Libraries to Generate Social Capital

¶35 This scholarship builds to the conclusion, then, that law libraries can and do build social capital. But through what mechanisms? Each of the following mechanisms describes and conceptualizes many of the recently developed, nontraditional roles taken on by law libraries and law librarians. Each also provides a relatively straightforward way in which law librarians can succinctly advocate on behalf of new and expanded roles. Finally, these mechanisms provide guideposts by which we can continue to innovate new functions and programs.

¶36 Law libraries can generate social capital in the following ways:

1. **Law libraries provide impartial and fair access to the law.** By providing a place where patrons can receive impartial and fair service with their law-related issues, regardless of income, race, creed, or any other characteristic, law libraries serve as effective “order institutions” themselves, while also aiding the functioning of other order institutions, thereby creating social capital through the increase of generalized social trust.

2. **Law libraries create a space for positive interactions.** Like general libraries, law libraries provide safe, neutral places where positive, supportive interactions can take place between staff and patrons, which increases generalized trust and social capital.

48. Rothstein & Stolle, supra note 17.
49. Id. at 445–46.
3. **Law libraries perform outreach to underserved populations.** Educational programming, clinics, self-help workshops, and other services aimed at assisting marginalized and disadvantaged populations help to “bring into the fold,” and increase the generalized trust felt among, members of these groups. These services also bring these patrons together to build connections with members of other diverse groups, thereby increasing their “weak ties” and the social capital available to them.

4. **Law libraries provide social connections to resources.** Perhaps most important, law library services help to increase the social capital available to their patrons through the connections these services provide. Law library services do this by connecting patrons to reference librarians who can aid in access to the law; class instructors who can help explain the law; private attorneys and legal aid providers who can provide direct legal assistance; other resources, such as governmental or nonprofit organizations or campus student services that can assist with nonlegal needs; and other patrons who are similarly situated, so that they can share connections with each other.

\[37\] Of course, social capital generation per se should not be the overriding concern when innovating new law library functions. Instead, the modern law library should help generate social capital in a way that connects to law libraries’ missions to provide legal information resources and legal help in their communities and institutional settings. The profession should avoid sending the message that scarce law library resources and staff can be used for any generally beneficial undertaking. Practical concerns intervene as well. A new role may be too far outside the expertise of a given library’s staff, too ill-suited to the library space, or simply too expensive or difficult to take on for one reason or another; in that case, it should be declined. However, where a new or expanded role can build social capital in a way that aids access to the law, and especially where that role leverages existing resources like the physical library space and the expertise of law librarians, these mechanisms serve well both as guideposts and as descriptors.

\[38\] By using these mechanisms for generating social capital as guideposts in developing new or expanded roles, law librarians should garner results that benefit their patrons in tangible and explicable ways. This in turn enables law librarians to advocate effectively for the work they and their institutions do, and the resources law libraries need when “everything is online.”

**LA Law Library’s Business Series: An Example of Social Capital–Focused Programming**

\[39\] One example of how a public law library might apply the four guideposts above is found in the Los Angeles County Law Library (LA Law Library). Its Business Series has successfully increased social capital and assisted the law library in advocating for the resources it needs to remain a vital institution within the larger community.
Concept and Development: A New Way to Generate Social Capital

§40 In the summer of 2015, LA Law Library began holding a series of classes and workshops focused on the legal issues faced by small business owners and entrepreneurs. The Business Series was part of the library’s three-year Strategic Plan (2013–2016), which contained a goal to reach out to nonlawyer professionals, including businesspeople, by creating legal education programming aimed at their specific legal information needs. This goal was seen as a means to serve a part of the community that had been underserved by the library up to that time.

§41 Traditionally, LA Law Library has served the needs of two groups: legal professionals and SRLs—with increasing emphasis on the latter in recent years as access to justice has become a crisis in American society. However, LA Law Library had developed few services for other professionals, including businesspeople, who also had important legal information needs.

§42 As a first step to developing programing to serve this new patron group, in 2014 LA Law Library staff began exploring existing resources for small businesses and entrepreneurs in the Los Angeles area to see how the law library might complement what was already available. They found that none of the somewhat dizzying array of training and assistance available to small businesspeople—through non-profits and city, county, state, and federal agencies—focused specifically on legal concerns in a comprehensive or in-depth way. Moreover, the available resources were somewhat disconnected, with relatively little integration in terms of each agency and nonprofit providing comprehensive information about or referrals to the many other organizations. The Los Angeles area also lacked regularized, comprehensive programming where small businesses could receive training on a predictable schedule in a single location.

§43 LA Law Library staff thus saw an important niche going unfilled. Small-business owners and entrepreneurs who could not afford to hire legal professionals, or who did not wish to or could not afford to study business law through formal education, did not have access to comprehensive or in-depth legal information and training. Nor did they have easy means to get comprehensive information, in one place, about the many resources available through local organizations. In other words, many current and prospective business owners lacked the social capital necessary to get their businesses off the ground: their strong ties were insufficient, and the means to create the weak ties necessary to provide these opportunities were scarce in Los Angeles.

§44 The law library, therefore, could create a program to (1) provide connections to the information and resources small business owners needed; (2) reach out to the underserved groups most in need of these connections; (3) innovate a new way to provide impartial and fair access to the law; and (4) bring a new patron group into the supportive and positive environment of the library. All four ends were textbook ways for a library to create social capital. They were also, simply, the right thing to do from a social justice perspective. The law library could provide a service that helped the disadvantaged, evening the playing field in favor of those whose “strong ties” did not already provide them with the tools needed to succeed.

§45 In the meantime, the law library itself, it was hoped, would create a visible and demonstrable new way in which it would continue to serve in a time when
many assume that “everything is online.” Moreover, it would have done so in support of a group—small business owners and entrepreneurs—of great political importance since they constitute a major driver of job creation and the local economy. Municipal government, under new mayor Eric Garcetti, was placing increased emphasis on serving small businesses by creating the Mayor’s Office of Economic Development, which was working to integrate and aid access to resources for small business owners. The county government was moving in a similar direction, combining previously separate agencies into a unified Department of Consumer and Business Affairs (DCBA) and creating a Small Business Liaison Program. The federal government, meanwhile, continued to focus on small business development through the local office of the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the White House was developing its “Startup in a Day” partnership with local governments, including the City of Los Angeles, to make cutting through the red tape of licensing and permitting easier for new businesses. LA Law Library, it was hoped, could garner some of the same political goodwill by doing its part to help small businesses.

Execution of the Idea: Leveraging the Law Library’s Own Social Capital

While the law library appeared well positioned to develop an educational program on legal topics for small business owners and entrepreneurs along these lines, executing the idea proved challenging. Fortunately, LA Law Library was able to leverage existing connections and relationships to a surprising extent in its creation of the program. The social capital of the library itself, one might say, proved to be extremely valuable.

First, the law library had a rich network of connections to potential attorney speakers through its Minimum Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) program and through its Members Program, a fee-enhanced service for legal professionals with approximately 300 attorney participants. Thus, it had a deep reserve on which to draw for speakers on the various topics that the series might cover. Librarians guessed—correctly, it turned out—that recruitment for the program would not be an issue, as attorneys who represent businesses would themselves be taking advantage of a potentially great business development opportunity in the form of the connections they might make with business owners interested in legal issues.

One particularly valuable early connection from the library’s MCLE program, for instance, came in the form of a former undersecretary of commerce with the Clinton administration, who had gone on to a long career as in-house counsel at companies large and small, and was now a sole practitioner who had visited the library for several different MCLE events. He had chatted with staff on a few occasions and was interested in speaking opportunities. This connection allowed the coordinating librarian to pick the brain of someone with deep experience in the business world, which then resulted in the development of a draft list of twelve topics the series might cover, helping to conceptualize the structure and sequence of the classes to be included.

Second, the law library was able to draw from connections made by virtue of other programming and partnerships it had developed in recent years. The law library had previously hosted programs and workshops by other county agencies, which resulted in connections to personnel in the newly designated DCBA and its Small Business Liaison program. Similarly, the library had served as the venue recently for Export U., a training series on exporting for small business developed
by TradeConnect, the outreach arm of the L.A. Ports; and it had hosted programs in partnership with the Small Business Clinic at the University of Southern California (USC) Gould School of Law. Each of these connections led to speakers for particular sessions in the series and to library partners who would help to promote the series and increase attendance.

¶50 Other connections necessary to make the series a success developed organically through a process of leveraging the networks of the library’s existing connections. Perhaps the most important connection developed this way was to a local bank, Pacific Western Bank, that came to serve as the financial sponsor of the series, in partnership with the Friends of the Los Angeles County Law Library, the library’s supporting 501(c)(3) charitable organization. The existing connection was to a financial advisor who had attended a program at the library; he happened to have a connection to the vice president at Pacific Western Bank who oversaw the bank’s community outreach efforts, and kindly referred staff and the Friends of the Los Angeles County Law Library to her. She was excited by the concept of the series, and the bank agreed to serve as the sponsor and provide a speaker on small business financing. The sponsorship allowed the library to offer the series at no charge to attendees, helping tremendously with promotion and attendance.

¶51 Many important new connections were also made through the old-fashioned means of cold-calling and approaching new contacts with no prior relationship or introduction. Fortunately, two of these connections, who would become vital partners in the series, were themselves starting new programs and were very open to collaboration and the development of joint programming. The first connection came about when library staff were surveying existing programs for small business and attended an event put on at the Los Angeles Public Library’s main downtown branch by the Mayor’s Office of Economic Development. The program coordinator from the Mayor’s Office was intrigued by the possibility of legally oriented programming through the law library, and went on to help guide the development of the series, eventually lending the mayor’s logo to the series and assisting with promotion.

¶52 The second new connection came by way of the local SBA office, which referred the coordinating librarian for the series to a new arm of the L.A. Area Chamber of Commerce focused on fostering tech startups, called Bixel Exchange. This group, engaged in a similar effort to develop training and programming for new businesses, proved a valuable partner. It referred the library to well-qualified speakers on a number of more business-oriented—as opposed to purely legal—topics, while also eventually helping with cross-promotion.

¶53 By leveraging these connections to help develop program topics, recruit qualified speakers, obtain sponsorship, and promote the series, the library put together an initial twelve-part iteration of the series, which commenced in June 2015. The library held classes on the following topics in this sequence:

- Intersection of Law and Business: Series Kickoff
- Make It Official: Get Your Business Licensed
- How to Form a Corporation or LLC
- From Seed Money to Serious Investment: Raising Money for Your Business
- Planning for Success: Budgets and Long-Term Financial Planning
• Know Before You Sign on the Dotted Line: Reading and Negotiating Business Contracts
• Debt and Business Reorganization: Leaders, Failure and Rebuilding
• Nuts and Bolts of Exporting
• Legal Do’s and Don'ts for Employers
• Government Contracts in Plain Language
• Protecting Your “Intangible” Assets: Confidential Information and Trade Secrets
• Making the Next Step: How to Grow Your Company

¶54 Each class in the series gave attendees a chance to peruse pamphlets and materials from nonprofits and state agencies that assisted small businesses. Handouts included an LA Law Library resource list for small business owners, with a focus on titles contained in the library’s self-help collection. Most of these organizations also provided in-person representatives who prior to class described the assistance available through their organizations. The following organizations provided representatives and/or materials:

• Federal SBA
• Los Angeles County DCBA
• Mayor’s Office of Economic Development
• L.A. BusinessSource centers (which provide advisory assistance to small business)
• Bixel Exchange and the L.A. Area Chamber of Commerce
• L.A. Ports’ TradeConnect
• City Office of Finance and the State Board of Equalization (which administer business licensing and taxes at the local and state levels)
• Kiva Zip and Opportunity Fund (two nonprofits focused on microlending to small business owners)
• Los Angeles Public Library

Most of these partnering organizations, as part of their participation, also helped to promote the series through their e-mail lists and social media. This aided the library in reaching a new audience it had only just started to serve and with whom it had little prior contact. With the help of this promotion, as well as a considerable amount of in-house promotion through the library’s e-mail list, social media, and print flyers distributed through several community outlets, the first iteration of the series achieved solid success. Each session enjoyed high attendance, with most receiving nearly one hundred pre-registrations, and many filling the library’s classroom space to capacity (fifty-four seats, plus standing room). The law library, suddenly, was on the map for the small business community and the many organizations that serve it.

¶55 Since then, the law library has held the series twice annually, with slight modifications to its content and sequence. Attendance remains strong; each spring and fall the library welcomes a new group of new and prospective small business owners and entrepreneurs. The law library continues its partnerships with all of the original participating organizations, maintaining a valuable set of relationships that, prior to the series, either were not as strong or did not exist at all. In April
2016, LA Law Library received an official commendation from Mayor Garcetti in recognition of its contributions to the community.

Social Capital Benefits of the Business Series

¶56 LA Law Library set out to create a program that would increase access to legal information while generating social capital in the four ways stated above (see “Mechanisms for Law Libraries to Generate Social Capital”). While an empirical study to demonstrate the extent to which social capital was generated is beyond the scope of this article, the nature of the connections and resources provided through the series, the number of people reached, and the feedback received from attendees and partners on the series all strongly support the case that LA Law Library did innovate an effective means of generating social capital in its community.

¶57 First, the series continued the law library’s long-standing tradition, as an “on-the-ground” institution, of providing fair and impartial service. The series provided access to legal information, in the form of educational programming, to a new patron group, business owners and entrepreneurs, in an entirely neutral way. Classes were offered at no charge, and anyone could register. Instructors and staff provided information to all attendees equally, and everyone received the same assistance. Library staff knew based on registration data that an extremely diverse group was likely, and therefore instructors were told to expect a broad range of attendees: from established and successful businesspeople, to those just starting out, to those with additional challenges such as possible mental health issues.

¶58 By providing the benefits of the series to everyone equally, and advertising the series widely through the library’s own promotion and that of its partners, the law library likely helped to create generalized trust through the appearance, and reality, of fair and impartial service by a government institution, thus generating social capital. This conclusion finds support in the comments left by attendees on each class session’s evaluation form. A common refrain was that attendees were glad to have access to the type of instruction given (“so glad the library is putting this on”; the class “help[ed] demystify” the business world; “excellent information”; “glad that you guys offer these classes to the public”).

¶59 Second, the series brought a new group of patrons into the safe and supportive space of the law library. Attendees became accustomed, over the course of the twelve-part series, to seeing one another, library staff, and some of the representatives from partnering organizations who were present during multiple sessions. Positive and supportive relationships with attendees were developed. Over time, some attendees frequently contacted the coordinating librarian with questions not just about the series and future classes, but also about general topics such as going back to school, how to find an attorney, or where to find other types of assistance.

¶60 The attendees also benefited from the opportunity to ask questions after each session, which was by design— instructors were told to expect to field questions for at least thirty minutes after the formal presentation. Additionally, attendees were given instructors’ contact information, thus creating the possibility of a lasting connection. Evaluation forms support the conclusion that attendees found great value in having access to the instructors (“very compassionate attorney”; glad to have “interaction [and] Q&A”; consistent 5 out of 5 ratings for most instructors).
The opportunity for the attendees to connect with one another was another valuable benefit, with one attendee even remarking in her class evaluation form that she “did not expect it to be such a great networking opportunity.” By bringing new patrons into the safe and positive space of the library, the series likely helped create generalized trust, and thus social capital.

Third, the series constituted, in part, an outreach effort to disadvantaged groups, one that brought owners of new, small, and struggling businesses into contact with well-qualified instructors who not only have considerable knowledge of law and business, but also possess connections to additional resources that these businesspeople could leverage to improve their prospects. For example, two attendees at the class on business finance were in the early stages of creating an online application that would provide three-dimensional mapping of the city. By connecting with the speaker, who was also an advisor at Bixel Exchange and himself an experienced tech entrepreneur, this tech startup was able to gain a mentor and go on to create a prototype of its app. More generally, the series brought into the library a group of patrons who may not have otherwise had access to sophisticated legal and business training, nor to the instructors who provide such training.

Last, and perhaps most important, the series provided social connections to resources. Class members had opportunities to connect with well-qualified and well-connected speakers from one or more organizations that provide many different types of assistance. Attendees noted and appreciated the connections to resources that were provided (“helpful to hear about resources, such as the Small Business Clinic and LA Law Library, since these topics are so complex”).

Examples that illustrate how attendees connected to valuable resources are plentiful: an aspiring restaurateur received information about crowdfunding, which eventually enabled her to open her restaurant in downtown Los Angeles; a pair of attendees in the early stages of creating an app for sharing apparel (“Airbnb for clothes”) connected to an instructor who is an experienced CPA specializing in tech startups; a caterer connected with a representative of the SBA to learn about small business loan options; and several attendees connected, through the instructor, to the Small Business Clinic at USC Gould School of Law for assistance with incorporating or forming a limited liability company. The list could go on; it constitutes only some of those connections the coordinating librarian observed and noted. Clearly, the series created many social connections that directly benefited patrons and increased the social capital available to them.

Benefits for the Law Library

As mentioned, the L.A. Mayor’s Office has recognized LA Law Library for its work on the Business Series. The library received the support of several local nonprofits and government agencies that helped to make the Business Series a success. The multifaceted promotion done for the series by both the library and its partners helped to inform a new audience about resources available at the law library. All of this helped bring attention to the work the law library does and garnered positive press for what had been a somewhat forgotten institution in Los Angeles. One might say that the law library, by helping generate social capital for its patrons through the Business Series, also helped increase the value of its own institutional connections. A visible generator of social capital such as the Business Series
thus makes it easier for the law library to advocate on its own behalf. For example, the Business Series is now mentioned prominently in the library’s annual report to the County Board of Supervisors. Social capital–focused development of new programs and roles at law libraries can positively affect advocacy efforts and meet head-on the dreaded question, “But isn’t everything online?”

Possible Applications to Nonpublic Law Libraries

¶66 Perhaps not every type of new role taken on by law libraries and law librarians in recent years is appropriate for a social capital analysis. Certainly, this type of analysis fits many of the efforts of public law libraries very well. However, social capital generation can and should be applied quite broadly. For example, the efforts of some academic law libraries to assist in academic support programs for underachieving students could be viewed through a social capital lens: library staff are reaching out to disadvantaged patrons—minority groups are overrepresented in academic support programs—by bringing these patrons into the fold and connecting them with resources they may not have known were available. Training programs for first-year associates coordinated and taught by firm librarians might be viewed similarly. Many of the orientation activities for first-year law students likewise could be viewed as providing important social capital for those in a new environment with few, if any, existing connections. A social capital analysis provides tools likely to be useful in most institutional settings and for most types of new undertakings by law libraries.

Conclusion and Opportunities for Future Study

¶67 Social capital remains an underutilized framework in law librarianship. It provides a useful set of tools for conceptualizing, describing, and articulating the value of much of the new and innovative work that law libraries do, and can do, particularly the work that involves use of legacy library spaces. Public law libraries lend themselves especially well to social capital analysis, as they are peculiarly well positioned as institutions to undertake programming aimed at social capital generation. Every type of law library, however, could benefit from the use of social capital concepts and language. It is, after all, worth learning how to talk about the value of real social connections during these times when “everything is online.”

¶68 Opportunities abound for the future application of social capital analysis to the work of law libraries. Empirical research especially is needed to support the reasonable presumption that law libraries can and do create social capital. Further inquiry is also needed into how specifically law libraries benefit from social capital analysis in advocating for continued—or even expanded—resources. Such inquiry would be especially valuable from law library professionals who are experienced advocates to institutional stakeholders.