Maximizing Impact Through Collaboration at Chatham Community Library

A Case Study of a Joint-Use Library Partnership

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Introduction

Community college and public libraries both serve overlapping populations—including students, job seekers, adult learners, ESL learners, and low-income and underserved communities—playing vital roles in supporting and enriching their local communities. Libraries connect patrons and community members to critical information related to basic needs and also provide reference support, digital literacy training, and technology access. Public and community college libraries tend to operate independently from each other, but through collaborative partnerships they could enhance their impact and reach. In the first phase of the Maximizing Public-Academic Library Partnerships project funded by ECMC Foundation—a website analysis of basic needs resources and academic-public library partnerships—we found specific instances of resource sharing (e.g., technology hubs and spaces), joint programming for basic needs (e.g., literacy programs, resume building), and shared library collections.[1]

The second phase of this project explores the current landscape of existing academic-public library partnerships through a series of case studies involving public and community college libraries located within the same geographical region.[2] These case studies examine how partnerships are maintained, how materials, resources, and information are shared, and how collaborative efforts enhance support for both students and the broader community's basic needs.

This report highlights the first case study in a series of formal academic-public library partnerships, focusing on the joint-use library partnership between Central Carolina Community College (CCCC) and Chatham Community Library. CCCC provides library services at each campus in Chatham, Harnett, and Lee counties. However, the Pittsboro campus in Chatham County stands out as the only site featuring a joint-use facility—Chatham Community Library—which serves both college and community

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[1] Melissa Blankstein, "Supporting Public-Academic Library Partnerships," *Ithaka S+R*, March 2023, https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/supporting-public-academic-library-partnerships/.

[2] Melissa Blankstein and Elmira Jangjou, "Maximizing Public-Academic Library Partnerships: Seeking Case Study Partners," *Ithaka S+R*, April 2024, https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/maximizing-public-academic-library-partnerships/.

patrons. The libraries on the other two locations are dedicated solely to supporting student needs. By definition, a joint-use library refers to "two separate library service providers [that] use the same building to serve distinct clienteles."[3] What follows is an overview of the partnership's evolution and current services, challenges they have encountered, and potential opportunities for future development.

Key takeaways

- At the outset of the partnership, establish a formal agreement of mutual understanding to define roles and responsibilities. Set up a regular cadence for this agreement to be updated regularly and reviewed by legal counsel.

- Establish a joint-use committee with members from each library. Clearly define the committee's role in supporting shared governance and guiding key administrative decisions.

- Schedule both routine and as-needed meetings that involve individuals from across the partnership. Tailor these meetings to include staff most relevant to the topic under discussion, to ensure timely and informed responses to ongoing issues and emerging needs.

- Plan for differences between public and academic library systems—such as varying policies, hours, and platforms—by engaging in early, ongoing communication.

- Promote the joint use of the libraries by intentionally designing spaces to serve both students and community members, with visible representation of both institutions where all users can see themselves reflected.

- Develop library services and programming that respond to the diverse and evolving needs of users, taking into consideration

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[3] "LibGuides: Joint-Use Libraries: Home," American Library Association Resource Guides, 2025, https://libguides.ala.org/Jointuselibraries.

differences in age, background, and digital literacy, to ensure equitable and effective support.

- Expand and develop basic needs resources and services to engage patrons who live in rural and underserved areas, recognizing that transportation barriers and broadband access may limit in-person access and require more intentional, creative outreach strategies.

Methods

Interview protocol and thematic analysis

To acquire comprehensive insights into effective models and obstacles in establishing and maintaining the partnership between Central Carolina Community College (CCCC) and the Chatham Community Library, we conducted interviews with six library and non-library faculty and staff members from both institutions. These interviews explored participants' experiences with the joint-use library, their understanding of the partnership's goals, and current practices for sharing resources and information between partners. We also examined the library's external collaboration with community organizations and agencies—both aimed at supporting community members, including college students. We used snowball sampling to identify potential interviewees, with the library's branch manager providing contact information. Research team members conducted the interviews virtually via Webex and recorded the sessions with the interviewees' consent. Each interview session lasted approximately one hour. Subsequently, an external transcription service was used to generate a transcript of the interviews. Two analysts analyzed the interview transcripts, undertaking a comprehensive open-coding process to create a thematic codebook. They next conducted a thematic analysis using Dedoose to analyze interview transcripts and report case study findings. Additionally, the partnership's initial inter-institutional agreement was used to supplement the analysis.[4]

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[4] The joint-use library was undergoing a review and revision of the initial inter-institutional agreement while the case study was conducted.

Institutional characteristics

Chatham Community Library was selected as a case study site due to its unique structure as the only joint-use facility of its kind in North Carolina, serving both the general public and the academic community. Located on the Pittsboro campus of Central Carolina Community College (CCCC) in Chatham County, North Carolina, the library serves dual roles: it functions as a public library for Chatham County residents and as an academic library for CCCC students, faculty, and staff. The facility houses over 50,000 items and includes study and meeting rooms, 40 public computers, and free wireless internet access. It also offers a variety of programming tailored to different age groups, including story time for children and computer literacy classes for adults. This joint-use library does not have a standalone website but is instead featured on both the Chatham County and CCCC websites.[5]

CCCC is a mid-sized public institution with three campuses located across Chatham, Harnett, and Lee counties. While all campuses have library services, only the Pittsboro campus hosts the joint-use Chatham Community Library; libraries at the other two campuses are solely academic in function. As of fall 2023, CCCC reported an undergraduate enrollment of 5,574 students, comprising 3,507 women and 2,067 men. The student body is predominantly part-time (74 percent) and reflects the following demographic composition: 50 percent White, 25 percent Hispanic, 16 percent Black or African American, 1 percent Asian, 4 percent identifying as two or more races, and 4 percent categorized as unknown. Enrollment figures for American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander, and non-US resident students each accounted for less than one percent of the total. Approximately 20 percent of students were 25 years of age or older. About 47 percent of students were enrolled exclusively in distance education, while 32 percent were engaged in some form of distance education. Moreover, the college employed 409 full-time staff members, including four full-time librarians.[6]

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[5] For more information visit: https://www.chathamcountync.gov/government/departments-programs-i-z/library/locations-hours/chatham-community-library and https://www.cccc.edu/support-success/library.

[6] Demographic information sourced from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall 2023 data, accessed April 15, 2025. These numbers do not account for the Chatham Community Library staff, as interviewees indicated that most

Sample characteristics

Six participants were interviewed and included in our analysis representing both library and non-library roles. Among them were public librarians, campus leadership directly involved in the partnership, an Early College program stakeholder, and one participant who had been involved during the early formation of the partnership but is no longer affiliated with Chatham Community Library. The remaining participants involved in the partnership joined the library at various points following its formal establishment. While the small sample size presents a limitation, the interviews offer valuable insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals directly or indirectly involved in the partnership.

Acknowledgements

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library staff are funded by Chatham County and are classified as county rather than college employees.

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Findings

Partnership structure and operation

The joint-use library partnership between Central Carolina Community College (CCCC) and Chatham Community Library is rooted in a shared vision to maximize resources and expand access to information for both college students and Chatham County's broader community. This section outlines key elements of the partnership's structure and operations, including the history of its development, the shared use of resources, the governance and management framework, the communication practices that support coordination between the partners, and its library users.

Formation and establishment

The partnership between CCCC and Chatham Community Library resulted in the creation of the only joint-use library in North Carolina, located on the college's campus. The library officially opened in 2010 and was designed to serve both the general public and the college community. Interview data suggest that the groundwork for the partnership began around 2008, starting with conversations about the limitations of both the existing public library and the college's small campus library. The initiative was driven by a shared recognition of the need for a larger and better facility that could expand access to library services and learning resources for community members, including students attending CCCC. There was early community investment in the partnership: the land on which the library now stands was donated by Mary Barber Holmes, and additional funding was raised through the efforts of the Friends of the Library group.

According to a few interviewees, the core objective of developing this partnership and joint-use facility was to maximize the use of shared resources and offer a higher standard of service. As a campus leader explained:

> The goal was to provide a large enough space for both the county and the town of Pittsboro and the college to use together. That was the goal, together, we could do so much more than we were going to do by ourselves. We have one of the best community college libraries now in the state because it is that joint endeavor between the county and the college. The goal was to provide the best service we could with the resources we had at the time. Then, to sustain or to maintain that service to both the students and the community members perpetually, and that's what we've done so far.

Shared resources

A central feature of the partnership is the extensive sharing of resources, which enables the operation of the joint-use library and supports its mission to serve both students and the broader community. Together, these shared resources exemplify the joint-use library's collaborative model—one that aims to maximize operational efficiency while expanding access to library services. These shared resources include space, staff, collections, and essential operational services such as maintenance, housekeeping, security, and utilities.

Physical space is one of the most prominent shared resources. The library building, which is a county facility, sits on the college's main Chatham campus. The library offers a wide range of spaces and services accessible to all patrons. As one librarian described:

> The building is just one floor, 25,000 square feet. We have a large meeting room that's about 1,400 square feet that holds up to about 100 people. A separate story time room, a small technical services area in the back. ... We have a staff kitchen, we have three public restrooms ... a little play area for babies and toddlers. Three service points, so reference desk, main circulation desk and a youth services desk.

In addition to public gathering spaces, the library includes individual study rooms available to CCCC students and other community members. The campus leader described how these spaces are particularly valued by

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community members engaged in remote work who may need private space for meetings or focused tasks. The campus's walking trails located by the library have also supported collaborative programming such as story walks for families with children and walking book clubs for adults. Several interviewees identified story walks as one of the library's most popular offerings. A campus leader praised their value, noting that the activity is "helping the mind and the body all at the same time."

While the existing space supports a range of activities, there is consensus amongst the interviewees that additional physical space is needed. As one interviewee mentioned, this is especially true given that the Research Triangle area (Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill) is growing: "My vision is that this library will continue to grow, that we'll need additional space at some point in time and that the community college here will flourish."

In addition, there is an opportunity to help meet the need for more library spaces like study spaces and conference rooms for students and community members alike—this might be especially important because a few interviewees mention that the library does not feel like a college library:

> The libraries have built environment, right? More available study space for students? As my student population grows, I'm pretty aware that they're using a lot of that space in a way that maybe then provides less space for the community to use the individual study rooms, right?

Library staff represent another key shared resource. The majority of funding for staff positions comes from the county's funds. CCCC, however, funds some full and part-time library positions—specifically the full-time reference and instruction librarian and the part-time reference assistant positions are reimbursed by the college—even though they are technically public library employees. Beyond cost-sharing, staff expertise is also a shared asset. The reference and instruction librarian, for example, not only manages core library services such as reference support, technology assistance, and computer classes, but also plays a significant role in supporting CCCC students through information literacy instruction and academic support services, including research assistance.

Collections—both physical and digital—can be accessed by most library users. Although each library partner contributes funding to separate parts of the collection, all materials are shelved together. Different library staff and librarians manage collection development across the joint-use library.

For example, the reference and instruction librarian oversees collection development for CCCC's materials and select areas of the public collection, including Reference, Local History & Genealogy, and North Carolina. Additionally, per one interviewee, responsibility for developing the adult and youth collections primarily falls to the branch manager and the youth services librarian, respectively.

Shared databases and digital platforms also enhance access to learning and research materials. As one interviewee highlighted, "Chatham County Public Libraries licenses and pays for all of Chatham Community Library's digital resources," which can be accessed on the library website. These resources are also available to anyone with a CCPL library card, including Chatham CCCC students. Separately, CCCC Libraries subscribe to additional digital resources that are exclusively available to college patrons via the CCCC website. Both CCPL and CCCC also benefit from access to a shared collection of online resources provided by NC LIVE, a statewide consortium that includes a range of academic databases. Importantly, while the collections are shared together, they operate with separate Integrated Library Systems (ILS).

In terms of **facility operations**, several services are integrated and shared between the college and the county. Maintenance and housekeeping for the library are provided by college staff, with reimbursement for these positions based on quarterly invoices submitted to Chatham County, whereas security is provided by the college's security guards. Lastly, because the library building is located on college-owned land, utilities such as electricity and water are integrated into the college's infrastructure. The college submits a quarterly invoice to the county for utility expenses, and the county reimburses the college to cover those costs.

Management and governance

The joint-use library operates under a formal partnership agreement that outlines the responsibilities of each institution, including operational details such as administrative authority, maintenance, and housekeeping. While this agreement has served as a foundational document since the library's establishment, one librarian noted that it likely did not undergo formal legal review at the time it was developed. At the time of this study, the agreement was undergoing legal review for revision, with the aim of addressing existing gaps and ensuring continued alignment between

partners. The agreement outlines four primary objectives of the partnership:

1. Support information needs as determined by the goals and objectives of each institution;

2. Develop collections, provide convenient access to them, and assist and instruct users in their use;

3. Extend accessibility to information resources through participation in area, state, and national library network;

4. Provide an environment conducive to study and research.

While these goals focus on information access and service delivery, it leaves room to further explore how the library might support patrons in more holistic ways—such as providing assistance related to basic needs (e.g., food, housing, mental health) or tailoring services to specific community groups (e.g., rural patrons, English-language learners, low-income patrons, etc.). This presents an area of opportunity for the partnership to expand its impact as student and community needs continue to evolve.

Each institution plays a distinct yet interconnected role in the governance, staffing, and operation of the library. According to the formal agreement, "the administrative authority and responsibility for the joint-use library is hereby vested in the Chatham County Public Library System." The director of this system serves as the director of the library, with a branch manager overseeing the day-to-day operations of the physical library. To carry out the partnership's mission, library staff report to the library director, with the library director reporting to the Chatham County Manager.

While overseeing all library operations, the director receives input from the Joint-Use Committee, which includes representatives from the college and Chatham Community Library. The committee meets twice a year to review operational issues or concerns. However, it functions in an advisory capacity and does not hold governing authority.

Communication between partners

Communication between the college and Chatham Community Library plays a critical role in maintaining functionality and responsiveness. According to interviewees directly involved in the partnership, emailing and direct one-on-one communication are the most frequently used

modes of interaction. The relatively small size of both the college and library staff at the Pittsboro campus facilitates these informal, direct exchanges. The librarian most directly engaged with the college described their ongoing participation in college staff meetings and noted frequent interactions with faculty members, further strengthening cross-institutional ties and daily operational coordination.

Communication between the college and the joint-use library is also facilitated by the provost of the college through multiple channels, including email, providing regular, important college updates related to programs, facilities issues, and major announcements, ensuring that both sides remain informed and connected. While discussing the importance of communication practices, a campus leader emphasized the value of intentional and inclusive communication and stated that they "keep each other informed" and "maintain communication by making sure the people who need to be on email or in a meeting are there."

In addition to regular digital communication, a campus leader reported participating in Friends of the Chatham Community Library board meetings,[7] as well as holding routine and ad hoc meetings with library leadership. These meetings provide an opportunity to address a range of operational and strategic matters, from large-scale planning to immediate concerns. As noted, "routine" meetings are scheduled for ongoing or major issues, while "as-needed" meetings allow for a more flexible response to emergent needs. Facility-related communication is also structured by designating specific individuals as points of contact. These include the library branch manager, the college facilities manager, and the campus provost, who collectively respond to maintenance and facility concerns as they arise.

In spite of some challenges involving miscommunication, which will be covered later in this report, several interviewees highlighted the positive working relationships that underpin communication between the college and library staff. One librarian remarked, "We have a really good relationship with [the campus leader]. He's always been very open to any concerns we might have." Another reflected on improvements in communication over time, stating, "I will tell you, communication's gotten better over the last several years."

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[7] For more information visit: https://friendsccl.org/.

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Library users

Chatham Community Library serves a wide and diverse group of users, including CCCC faculty, staff, and students, as well as members of the surrounding Pittsboro community. According to interview data, users vary widely in terms of age, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and literacy levels, reflecting the broader demographics of the region. One librarian noted that the area's demographics are evolving due to new housing developments and proximity to the Research Triangle Park.

Recognizing the diverse needs of its users, the library strives to provide services that address a broad spectrum of needs. In terms of user composition, families with children and older adults make up a significant portion of daily library users. Families are often drawn by the Youth Services Department's programming, while older adults are commonly attracted to the computer classes the library offers. College students represent a smaller share of patrons, with student visits declining further during the summer months when academic activities are reduced.

The library also serves high school students enrolled in CCCC's Early College program. Librarians reported that supporting these students often involves helping them navigate the transition to postsecondary education. In addition, the college's student population comprises a mix of "non-traditional" and "traditional-aged" students, many of whom come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and receive financial aid. One interviewee summed up the benefits of the partnership for users from a full life cycle perspective:

> Once again, [you want it] to be seamless. That the kid that came in for story time will ultimately come back when they're going to college because they've been going there all their life. To go to a different section to get the books they need for their course work.

This same interviewee also described how this particular partnership might expand the notion of who a patron is and what their information needs are:

> I think the goal is going to be that you're creating a product that serves the patron and the patron is a broadened definition of a patron. It's not just a student that's enrolled in classes, but it's a community patron that lives in the community, has their family, works there, that kind of stuff.

Federal and state support

While this public-academic library partnership has leveraged some state and federal funding to maintain and enhance library services, there remains a significant need for targeted funding and policy support to expand basic needs services, especially those aimed at college students. This suggests an opportunity for deeper alignment between library programming, institutional student support services, and external funding strategies to better meet the needs of this predominantly rural community.

Some interviewees mentioned receiving funding from multiple sources, including support from the State Library of North Carolina, Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grants, and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). These funding sources have supported or are expected to support initiatives such as story walks for families with children, digital literacy programs targeting remote and underserved areas, and deep cleaning of the library building facility. One librarian described efforts to use grant funding to reach rural, broadband-limited areas through creative programming: "We try to support the community needs by spending grant money to put story walks in areas that are not densely populated and have little or no broadband and in an unincorporated area." This interviewee added, even with some financial support, the scale of need far exceeds current funding: "We have a lot of big ideas, but of course it costs money. We're always looking for grant opportunities."

The library also appears to face some limitations in providing direct support for student basic needs. As one librarian noted: "We don't get a lot of direct support that's specific to college students since we operate as a county department." Similarly, a non-library staff member reflected on the college's challenges in supporting students' basic needs, especially in comparison to other institutions:

> I think there's definitely room to grow there, for sure. I've worked at a couple of community colleges in North Carolina, and I would say that we have less basic needs services than some of those other schools. Maybe partially because we're more spread out. Maybe because we're more rural. Yeah. When I worked at [another community college in NC], any student can drop in without applying or registering or anything and pick up food in the middle of the day... We don't really have anything like that. Although we do have a tiny emergency food pantry here [on the CCCC campus] in Pittsboro, you'd have to be pretty motivated or get referred to come across it. It's a closet behind three doors.

Interview data indicate that the joint-use library serves a diverse community and is generally perceived by interviewees as a welcoming and inclusive space. While both CCCC and Chatham Community Library are engaged in separate efforts to support various community needs—there is currently no formal collaboration between the two institutions specifically focused on accessibility and belonging initiatives. One interviewee described how the library supports access to a wide range of perspectives by offering resources such as films and media on topics that may not be readily available elsewhere.

Library services and collaboration

The Central Carolina Community College (CCCC) and Chatham Community Library partnership aims to maximize resources and expand access to vital resources to better serve their community, including college students. This case study highlights the library's wide range of services and demonstrates how maintaining a strong, collaborative relationship built on mutual openness and support can enhance community impact. Story walks and voter registration events are the most prominent examples of active collaboration between the public and academic sides of the library. Through this partnership, community members—including CCCC students—benefit from access to both public and academic collections. While developing shared programming initially involved navigating institutional differences, interviewees noted progress in learning "how to work together with different policies for each side," and emphasized a strong foundation of "reciprocal support" and "mutual respect."

While the partnership facilitates several shared services—particularly related to academic support and public programming—alignment in addressing basic needs remains limited, with each institution providing distinct resources. Interviewees noted the library's collaboration with external partners, particularly in referring patrons to additional community resources when appropriate. Moreover, past collaborations between Chatham Community Library and the college's business and career centers to serve community members highlight the potential for future partnerships with other campus units and departments. Reflecting on the broader value of the joint-use library, a campus leader emphasized its alignment with the mission of the college:

Certainly the programming that we provide the students is very helpful through the library. The amount of resources they have from the joint venture is really great …. It's individual growth, community growth, and, and workforce development, things like that. The fact that these people are able to come to our college campus and have this resource and we provide that sort of meeting space and communal space in conjunction with the county. We're doing public good for the general public as well as our students. It aligns with the spirit of what community colleges are here for.

Basic needs support

A central focus of this study was to examine the types of basic needs resources offered through library partnerships. At Chatham Community Library, these include essential basic needs resources related to technology access and health programming. One key offering is providing basic computer skills classes—focused on how to use a computer and navigate applications such as Microsoft Office—which are "well attended," especially by "the older population." The library has also supported digital literacy in rural and broadband-limited communities by leveraging grant funding. In addition to installing story walks in these areas as described above, the library plans to expand Chatham County's digital literacy initiatives further with the help of a grant-funded digital navigator.

In addition to technology services, the library offers health-related initiatives such as distributing free menstrual hygiene products, organizing diaper drives, programming centered on Alzheimer's Disease, as well as creating suicide prevention and awareness displays. In order to provide programming centered on community issues, the library maintains connections with various county departments and local organizations, such as Love Chatham Organization, Department of Social Services, Aging Services, and a local food bank located nearby. One public librarian shared that the library collects food donations for the food bank and refers patrons in need to this resource. This interviewee also shared their perspective on why the library does not currently offer other food resources at the library, pointing to existing campus-based services that may meet those needs:

We don't offer any food because on the campus of CCCC, there's a farm, and there is also a natural chef cafe. There's a culinary program there. I don't know if they offer students anything in terms of

emergency needs, I know they have a food pantry that they started at one point.

On the college side, basic needs resources include a student food pantry, childcare services, an emergency fund, and limited transportation assistance. Interviewees noted the absence of housing support and on-campus mental health services, although college staff do facilitate referrals to external mental health providers. While the joint-use library does not have social workers on staff, some employees refer patrons to needed resources when appropriate. Although no formal collaboration exists between the library and the college in addressing basic needs, some informal coordination occurs—particularly in response to behavioral or emotional concerns among students. A campus leader described how library staff may initiate outreach in such situations:

> There's no formal collaboration, but when they've seen students who seem to be in distress in the library, they contact me or my security... We'll coordinate some support of those students... Nothing formal. A lot of support of people, it's just kind of happens as needed.

Student-focused academic support services

The joint-use library also plays a significant role in supporting CCCC students academically. These services include bibliographic instruction, research support, classroom presentations, library tours, laptop and calculator lending, and online instructional support in collaboration with librarians from the main campus. One librarian emphasized the importance of tailoring library services to meet the diverse needs of students, particularly those who are new to higher education and need help with navigating the system:

> There's a whole lot of diversity here. I think that's an ongoing thing to try and make sure they have the technical resources they need and make sure that we're supporting them with the educational and informational resources they need to be successful... A lot of the students I work with at the reference desk, they're new to the community college. They're new to a higher level of education beyond the public school system.

Additionally, there is ongoing collaboration between the library and CCCC's Early College program. An interviewee affiliated with the program emphasized the library's important role in supporting Early College

students and described the library staff as kind and welcoming. This individual serves as the primary point of contact for student-related matters and makes efforts to remain responsive to library staff "if they have any student behavioral problems." The interviewee also shared that they regularly refer students to the library and are familiar with its services. Collaborative efforts between the library and the Early College, before the COVID-19 pandemic, included securing funding for workshops and additional programming. The Early College has also invited the reference and instruction librarian to visit classes and introduce students to available library resources.

In addition to past and ongoing collaborations, three interviewees identified a strong need for more student-specific programming, workshops, and events:

> On the college side of things, not just like the library, the college itself also lacks things and programs for students when they are not actively in class. The majority of programming [at Chatham Community Library] is geared towards older adults and children and youth.

Navigating challenges

The partnership between CCCC and Chatham Community Library has also faced ongoing challenges navigating the joint-use model. Interviewees' consistently described challenges related to building operations and management, funding and capacity, communication and information gaps, building accessibility, and patron engagement.

Building operations and management

The management of building operations, which includes resources like security, housekeeping, and maintenance, can be considerably difficult in a joint-use library setting where the physical space is shared by both library types. Most notably, interviewees noted how challenging it is for the partnership to manage security, as the Chatham Community Library itself does not have its own separate security team. Instead, CCCC provides the library's security needs—which can lead to difficulties in managing different schedules when, for instance, the college is closed while the community library remains open.

As the college and the library operate on different calendars and schedules, interviewees noted that when the college is closed, the public library is left to operate without security. While one interviewee pointed out that security issues have yet to become a serious problem, it is a challenge that nonetheless remains on the partnership's radar. Nearly each interviewee highlighted the difficulty in security management due to differences in schedules. One interviewee shared that they have been working on solutions to prevent this issue from becoming a glaring one:

> We make sure that we get each other's schedules well in advance. We know what our college calendar is going to be a year out. We tell them, and then I have reminders in my calendar to tell them again closer to the time because we'll close down for two weeks during winter break. We make sure that they know that and vice versa.

The Chatham Community Library and college participated in a co-exercise that focused on the various ways in which they can keep one another safe. As one interviewee shared, this activity included Narcan and Automated External Defibrillator (AED) training.

Similar to the security challenges, the joint-use library facility does not have its own custodial staff or facilities maintenance. Rather, the college covers these responsibilities as determined in the partnership's formal agreement. Given the library's large footprint—it's in a 24,000 square feet building—it requires consistent cleaning and maintenance. When the library needs a full, deep cleaning, this becomes extremely costly for the library.

Additionally, maintenance is also provided by the college and, due to differences in calendars and schedules, this can also be difficult to manage. For instance, the Chatham Community Library does not have access to the building's energy management system or thermostat to reset the air conditioning or to change the temperature in the building as needed. As one interviewee highlighted, this can cause damage when a natural disaster occurs: "When Hurricane Matthew hit, the AC went out. We didn't have any air conditioning for five days. It was extremely humid and tropical and I started worrying about the physical collections."

Funding and capacity

Challenges around funding—such as budget constraints and minimal funding support—are closely interconnected with issues relevant to staff

capacity—like staff workload, availability, and/or skill sets. Interviewees mentioned that both funding restraints and limited staff capacity impacted many other components of the partnership, especially the robust joint programming and ongoing outreach efforts. While funding is a major challenge for library types across the nation, access to ample funding can be particularly difficult for joint-use library partnerships. CCCC, like many community colleges, receives funding from the state as well as locally from Chatham County. One interviewee described how the college receives more funding from the county than they do from the state. When feasible, the library is always looking for grant opportunities that might benefit the partnership's needs, objectives, and aims.

Not surprisingly, budget constraints and limited funding in turn constrain programming and events and other resources like reference staff. When specifically asked about areas in which there is potential for growth or expansion regarding the partnership, several interviewees expressed concerns around limited funding opportunities as it relates to workload and just general staff capacity in the library. One interviewee said:

> Considering some of these challenges, I think we have potential for growth in our joint programming. Unfortunately, the college is, because of the funding from the state, we've been restrained on what we could do and the resources that we can [offer]—just for extra programming beyond what we currently do.

In a similar vein, another interviewee described:

> There's always opportunities to try and do more outreach and develop more programming and resources for these students and related to the partnership. I think, to a certain degree, it's constrained by staffing and various budgetary [limitations].

Although five out of six interviewees highlighted the need for more adequate funding to help grow the number of staff, and therefore, capacity for what kinds of programming might be offered, no interviewees described what kinds of programming or outreach efforts that they would specifically like to see. However, one provided an example to further illustrate the interconnectedness between funding challenges and staff capacity: technical support. The interviewee discussed the need for more technical assistance than is currently offered—such as support with computers, access to digital resources, and technology instruction and troubleshooting. However, this would require "more time, more bodies,

and more money." In essence, it is a juggling act for an already limited staff working at capacity to meet all the demands that their student community needs.

Communication and information gaps

Effective communication is essential for ensuring the library's functionality. This is especially prudent for a joint-use library because, as one interviewee shared, the primary challenge in communication entails "coordinating multiple systems." In general, the communication issues experienced by the partnership intertwine with other resource limitations, promotional efforts, and joint programming challenges. As highlighted by the interviewees, these communication challenges are not only present in day-to-day interactions and operations, they also impact the relationship between the college and the joint-use library.

Several interviewees mentioned how having two separate Integrated Library Systems (ILS) creates additional layers of complexity, requiring ongoing communication to coordinate changes between the two systems. While a more integrated approach is currently underway, having two separate ILSes can lead to confusion, duplication of processes, and cataloging problems. As one interviewee put it, "we're duplicating cataloging for a single item because it gets cataloged on the college library side, then they send the material here. We catalog it in our system in a totally separate ILS." This duplication requires an extra step to ensure both community and public libraries are aware of which materials are available or checked out, often necessitating direct communication between the two.

Confusion also arises when a student is registered for a public library card. Because each library operates using a different ILS, the public library has to inform the college library of each registration. This duplication process can cause miscommunication, and according to several interviewees, there is an opportunity to "do it a little more directly and a little more easily" by way of one ILS.

With respect to joint programming, several interviewees described their limited ability to connect and communicate more regularly with CCCC faculty, especially for marketing programming and events. Further, the lack of communication between the library and faculty sometimes results in duplication of events and programming. As one interviewee added, "sometimes we find out from one another that we're doing similar things."

According to one librarian some information about the college—events, programs, and updates—is not necessarily shared with those who are not employees of the college:

> I think because we're not direct employees, I do think that sometimes we miss out on some of the information that's being shared through the employee channels of communication.

Patron engagement

Lastly, patron engagement presents another notable challenge for this joint-use library. Interviewees mentioned several challenges including low programming and event attendance, and digital engagement and outreach.

Attendance for programming and events presents a twofold challenge for the library. One, most of the programming and events happening at this library are specifically designed for older adults and children. As one interviewee expressed, "there's not really much programming or anything that would speak to community college students directly." Relatedly, this same interviewee mentioned how this gap in student programming can make it difficult to engage the student community because the library does not "feel" like an academic library. Second, program or event topics may not be appealing to students or community members, making it challenging to determine what kind of programming will draw attendees. One interviewee shared that while other library locations and branches hosted successful financial literacy workshops with an external party or outside agency, it was a flop at the Chatham Community Library: "No patrons signed up."

Further, digital engagement and outreach are essential for any library seeking to connect with its broader community. For the Chatham Community Library, this involves engaging with both students and the general public alike. However, as one interviewee highlighted, patron engagement can be a challenge when there is a disparity in access to

technology and digital literacy. That is, it can be challenging to effectively connect with the very people the library aims to reach:

> I really feel like there's a diversity of technical access and technical expertise, so you can't always rely on people reading an email or seeing a Facebook post or reading the website or any of that. Some people do and some people don't. We try and have publicity here in the

library so that people might see what's going on here in the library, but I think that is a bit of a challenge because we do have such a diversity of technical access, I would say in the area. Of course, the people you want to reach for some of these things are the very people who do not have those technical resources. I think that's an ongoing challenge.

The library's location and the population it serves present further challenges—it's difficult to connect with patrons in rural and underserved areas. As one interviewee pointed out, unlike urban areas where community members may treat the library like a third space, for rural communities, the opposite is true: "People have to drive to get to the library, right? It's a rural county. There is some public transportation. It's very expensive and you have to reserve it in advance, right? The library is not just a place where people kind of come to be." The challenge, of course, is not just in digital engagement but figuring out how to connect with a community that might not be able to physically make it into the library.

Key recommendations

Interviewees offered several recommendations for institutions interested in developing or enhancing joint-use library partnerships. While their perspectives varied depending on their roles and experiences, common threads emerged around long-term vision, strategic planning, flexibility, and community-centered values. Collectively, these suggestions reflect a nuanced understanding of what it takes to build and sustain an effective joint-use library.

Several interviewees stressed the need to approach the partnership both intentionally and seriously, recognizing that success requires **long-term commitment and active investment** from all stakeholders. This includes not only launching the partnership but also prioritizing its continuity over time. One librarian emphasized the importance of identifying and "maximiz[ing] the opportunities that may come up as a result of the relationship." The campus leader also suggested,

> If you have this idea that, 'Oh, we can just dissolve the partnership in a couple of years if it doesn't work out.' You're not as invested in making

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things work out. You're not invested in coming together to resolve an issue together.

Another recurring theme was the necessity of **strategic planning** from the earliest stages of developing the partnership, with one interviewee specifically advising that the formal agreement should be reviewed by legal counsel to ensure clarity and accountability. Another interviewee recommended that institutions should pay close attention to the details of the partnership's governance and operations prior to launch, acknowledging the complexities of combining two distinct systems. Additionally, one participant, who was involved in the early stages of developing the partnership, spoke to the importance of strategic timing and having the right individuals engaged early in the process—people who can identify mutual benefits and navigate institutional cultures. The interviewee added,

> If there is the concern that they could do better on their own, I think that might be the anxiety, and you have to kind of prove that it's better combined. You can cover more ground or throw a wider net, however you want to say it, together. ... They've got to be able to prove to each side that they're better together as opposed to separate.

In addition to having a strategic plan and a formal agreement, several interviewees viewed **flexibility and openness to change** as essential characteristics for all stakeholders involved in joint-use partnerships. Some of these recommendations included being patient in the face of early challenges, remaining open to ongoing adjustments, and letting go of territorial mindsets in favor of a shared commitment to community service. For instance, a librarian highlighted,

> I think remaining open minded about the partnership and realizing that everything is probably not going to start off going absolutely smoothly and there will be things that you'll need to work through. Just to keep an open mind about it and realize that there are going to be benefits on both sides and also some challenges.

The **community-centered mission** of the partnership emerged as a critical mindset for sustaining a partnership that effectively serves a diverse group of patrons. Some interviewees highlighted the importance of programming that addresses the needs of all patrons, including students, families, homeschool students, and underrepresented communities. A key aspect of this approach is ensuring that the joint-use nature of the library

is clearly communicated and reflected in both its physical space and service offerings. For instance, a campus leader recommended physical integration of the library building with other college spaces to strengthen its connection to the broader campus environment. Similarly, another non-librarian interviewee reflected on the importance of a joint-use library's intentional design and messaging:

> If I was doing it, I would want to think about ways to make it feel more like an academic library while still keeping the community stuff. Maybe that's the built environment, like multiple spaces within a building. Or maybe that looks like intention and funding put into programming that serves the needs of both the groups. Or maybe that looks like marketing and PR that makes it clear that that's the case.

Conclusion

This case study of the joint-use Chatham Community Library, established as a result of the partnership between Central Carolina Community College and Chatham County, highlights the potential of public and academic library partnership models to expand access to resources, foster cross-institutional collaboration, and serve the evolving needs of both students and community members. The findings reveal that a foundation of mutual respect and shared goals, a shared formal agreement, and intentional communication and coordination have played a vital role in sustaining the partnership over time. Shared use of space, facilities, staffing, and collections has enabled efficient service delivery, while areas such as joint programming and digital literacy initiatives illustrate how the library continues to adapt in response to demographic and technological shifts.

The case study findings also underscore opportunities for further growth. These include improving patron engagement, enhancing both general and student-specific joint programming, strengthening communication between partners, increasing collaboration around basic needs services, and identifying sustainable funding sources. The experiences of individuals involved in this joint-use library offer actionable lessons for other communities exploring similar models. As the library looks to the future, its continued ability to evolve collaboratively will be key to

deepening its impact. These findings will be integrated with insights from two additional case studies on public—academic library partnerships to inform a broader set of strategies that can support institutions in expanding their collaborative capacity and addressing community needs more effectively.