



Shared Space, Shared Mission

How the King Library Expands Access and
Strengthens Community Impact

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Introduction

Academic and public libraries at times serve overlapping populations, including students, job seekers, adult learners, ESL learners, and low-income individuals, and play vital roles in supporting and enriching their local communities. Among their many services, libraries connect community members to critical information related to their basic needs while providing reference support, digital literacy training, and technology access. They are often viewed as trusted, inclusive spaces that foster learning, exploration, and community connection. While public and academic libraries often operate independently, collaborative partnerships between them have the potential to expand their reach, maximize resources, and enhance community impact.

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This report presents the third and final case study in a series examining formal partnerships between academic and public libraries. Each case study illustrates a range of different types of public and academic library partnerships, from small community-based initiatives to large-scale, long-term collaborations. The first case study focused on Chatham Community Library, a joint-use library established in 2010 on the campus of a mid-size community college in North Carolina.¹ The second examined a newly formed partnership in Illinois between Waubonsee Community College, Aurora Public Library District, and Messenger Public Library of North Aurora, providing digital literacy services to a broader community without sharing the same physical space.² This third case study turns to a longstanding joint-use library in California: the partnership between San

¹ Elmira Jangjou, Sage J. Love, and Melissa Blankstein, “Maximizing Impact Through Collaboration at Chatham Community Library: A Case Study of a Joint-Use Library Partnership,” *Ithaka S+R*, June 18, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.323040>.

² Elmira Jangjou, Sage J. Love, and Melissa Blankstein, “Public and Academic Libraries in Partnership: Advancing Digital Literacy in Illinois,” *Ithaka S+R*, July 24, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.323317>.

José State University (SJSU), a large public research university, and San José Public Library (SJPL).

Collaboration between SJSU and SJPL culminated in the establishment of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library (King Library).³ Located in downtown San José, the King Library opened in August 2003 as a shared facility that embodies the principles of the joint-use library model—defined as “two separate library service providers [that] use the same building to serve distinct clienteles.”⁴ This unique partnership unites the resources, staff, and missions of both a large urban university and a major city library system, offering insights into the opportunities and complexities of co-located service delivery. The case study explores how this partnership has evolved over time, including governance structures, service integration, communication practices, and lessons learned for institutions considering or currently managing similar joint-use facilities.

Key takeaways

- Ensure joint operating agreements are clear, consistently applied, and revisited regularly to avoid confusion about roles, responsibilities, and decision-making.
- Build a shared identity through consistent branding, coordinated outreach, and clear messaging that highlights the joint-use nature of the library to reduce confusion and improve engagement.
- Anticipate and proactively develop policies that address challenges from institutional differences, such as different budget cycles, leadership structures, and individual policies, through forward-looking, strategic coordination.
- Leverage shared spaces to support joint programming that meet both academic and community needs, while maintaining clear records of space allocation and streamlined approval processes for space usage to reduce confusion and ensure equitable access.

³ Throughout the interviews, participants used the terms King Library and MLK Library interchangeably to refer to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library.

⁴ “LibGuides: Joint-Use Libraries: Home,” American Library Association, 2025, <https://libguides.ala.org/Jointuselibraries>.

- Ground communication in personal relationships and informal daily interactions to foster trust and collaboration, while ensuring formal channels are maintained to bridge communication and institutional gaps.
- Prepare for structural changes and evolving community needs by institutionalizing practices such as staff onboarding, clear role definitions, and consistent referral processes to preserve continuity, mission alignment, and shared ownership of the partnership.
- Position the joint-use library as a basic needs referral hub and community anchor to connect patrons, including students, to holistic services with community partners.

Methods

Interview protocol and thematic analysis

To better understand the effective strategies and obstacles in establishing and maintaining the partnership between San José State University (SJSU) and San José Public Library (SJPL), we conducted interviews with 16 total library and non-library staff members from both institutions. The interviews examined participants' experiences with the joint-use library, their perceptions of the partnership's objectives, and how the two partners currently exchange resources and information. We also examined how the library collaborates with community organizations and agencies to provide support for both public community members and the SJSU community.

Interviews were conducted between January and March 2025. SJSU leadership signed up to participate in this case study through an open call for participants posted on the Ithaka S+R website, and both SJSU and SJPL library leaders provided contact information to identify potential interviewees, with additional participants added through snowball sampling throughout the case study. Interviews were conducted by research team members online through Webex, and sessions were recorded after we described how the interview data would be used and obtained consent from the participants. Each conversation was about an

hour in length. The recordings were then transcribed by an external professional transcription service. Two Ithaka S+R analysts reviewed the transcripts, employing an open-coding approach to develop a thematic codebook. Using Dedoose, they then conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts to generate case study findings. To protect their privacy and to ensure participants felt comfortable answering openly, all quotes highlighted and used in this report are anonymous, and we have removed any identifiable information.

Institutional characteristics

The King Library, located on the SJSU campus in the heart of downtown San José, California, the 12th largest city in the United States, was selected as a case study site because of its long-standing academic-public library partnership—over 20 years—with a public library. Located in Silicon Valley on a 154-acre downtown campus, the King Library is closely integrated with university and urban life. The facility holds around 1.5 million items in its vast collections, with SJPL hosting collections in 20 different languages. This joint-use library serves the San José community much like a public library while also functioning as an academic library for San José State University community including students, faculty, and staff. The joint-use library website has a user-friendly portal that provides relevant information and directs users to separate SJSU and SJPL websites.⁵

San José State University, established in 1857, is a dynamic urban public research university marked by its rich history, extensive academic offerings, integration within the Silicon Valley, and a vibrant campus life. The university offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees across 250 fields of study. At the King Library, the SJSU library manages several special library rooms and centers, such as the Beethoven Center and the Steinbeck Center. The university employs 72 full time staff members, including 27 faculty, 40 staff members, and five administrators and managers.⁶ As of 2023, SJSU reported an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 36,062 students, comprising 17,472 men and 18,590 women. Students predominantly attend full time (21,807 full-time

⁵ For more information, see the home page of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, <https://www.sjlibrary.org/>.

⁶ See the work chart here: https://library.sjsu.edu/lid.php?content_id=77430667.

undergraduate students), and the university includes 2,534 transfer students. SJSU reported that 34 percent of its students are Asian, 29 percent Hispanic, 16 percent White, 5 percent two or more races, 3 percent Black, and less than 1 percent are Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.⁷

SJPL, which consists of 24 facilities and locations, serves an ethnically and linguistically diverse population of nearly one million people and has more than 760,000 members, ranking it among the nation's busiest public library systems. As of 2024, SJPL employed 556 people, had issued 762,169 library cards, and hosted 15,448 events and programs. At the King Library, SJPL manages several unique services and centers, including the California Room, Citizenship Services, Early Education Services, Education and Literacy Services, Family Learning Centers, Adult Literacy and ESL, Career Services (SJPL Works), Teen HQ room, and Volunteer Services. SJPL also reports serving a diverse population: 33 percent Asian, 30 percent Latinx, 27 percent White, 2 percent Black, and 1 percent American Indian and Alaskan Native. Patrons' top spoken languages are English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Chinese.⁸

Sample characteristics

The 16 participants interviewed and included in our analysis represent both library and non-library roles. Out of these participants, 11 were affiliated with SJPL and included senior librarians, library leadership, and non-library staff members. The remaining five participants, representing library administration, operations, and resource management, were a part of SJSU's university library. Participants, who joined the library at various points before, during, and following its formal establishment, are involved in the partnership in varying capacities and roles. Given the uneven representation of library staff types interviewed, the findings may not fully reflect the diversity of viewpoints across each library type. Taken together, the interviews offer important insights into the lived experiences of those at the King Library.

⁷ For more information, see San Jose State University's institutional profile on the IPEDS website: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/institution-profile/122755#human-resources>.

⁸ See the San José State University FY 23/24 Fact Sheet: <https://www.sjpl.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/142/2025/02/FY-23-24-SJPL-Fact-Sheet-.pdf>.

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Partnership framework and operations

History, formation, and establishment

The partnership between San José State University (SJSU) and San José Public Library (SJPL) resulted in the creation of the first joint-use library in the US between a public library and four-year university.⁹ Following several years of planning and negotiation, including a Joint Ownership and Operations Agreement (JOOA), the landmark Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library opened its doors in August 2003. The physical building—constructed on state-owned land as part of the SJSU campus—is jointly operated, with two-thirds of the facility allocated to the university and one-third to the public library system.

The idea for the joint-use partnership originated from a casual breakfast meeting in the mid-1990s between the university president and the city's first female mayor. According to one interviewee, both leaders recognized the limitations of their existing libraries in an ever-expanding urban environment, especially the need for more physical space, and thought, "If we pool our resources and put it all together, maybe we can get this fabulous new library that will serve both organizations." They envisioned a shared facility that could serve both university students and the local community.

Initially, the partnership was highly integrated, offering unified service points, shared reference desks, and a combined online presence, including a shared Integrated Library System (ILS). However, a key shift occurred in 2017 when the California State University (CSU) system, of which SJSU is part, adopted a new ILS, leading to an operational divergence. While the two entities continue to share physical space, some services, policies, and workflows have since become more distinct. Several interviewees described the evolving relationship using marriage

⁹ For clarity, this report refers to the academic side of the King Library as SJSU Library and the public side as SJPL. It is important to note that SJPL generally represents the broader San José Public Library system, which encompasses 25 branches and facilities, including the King Library.

and neighbor related analogies, reflecting both its deep connection and transformation over time.

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Despite the ongoing changes in the partnership’s structure since its establishment, the shared mission remains foundationally the same. Several interviewees indicated that the primary goal of establishing this partnership and joint-use facility was to make the most of shared resources while delivering a higher quality of service in commitment to lifelong, community learning. As an interviewee explained: “The goal of it is to leverage the resources that each brings to the table in order to have a much more robust impact and make greater opportunities for our joint communities to share.”

Collaboration

The King Library aims to maximize and expand access to vital resources and services to meet the needs of its vast and diverse community. The library’s wide range of services illustrate how a collaborative relationship grounded in openness and mutual support can strengthen its offerings for all users. Importantly, through robust collaboration and the joint use of space, the partnership has created unique opportunities over time that meet the academic needs of students in tandem with the informational and social needs of the local community. One interviewee described the partnership’s collaboration:

It's about recognizing where we can be ... more coordinated and efficient in our service delivery models. And recognizing ... the expertise and the ways in which it is appropriate for there to be some sort of separation and distinction in terms of the way that we support the students in particular.

Interview data highlighted a few prominent areas where collaboration is strongest between SJPL and SJSU, including day-to-day operations, shared

programming and events, and the intentional use of spaces, like the new Digital Humanities Center. Several interviewees described how the recently established Joint Signage Committee, which works to improve navigation and signage across the nine-story building, is a good example of the importance of shared infrastructure and operational collaboration. Given the size of the library, clear signage helps visitors understand available services, locate events, and learn about available programming.

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Collaboration is especially active in shared programming, such as Local Lit, an annual event in December featuring local authors and sometimes SJSU faculty; Banned Books Week, with joint panels, displays, and presentations that are often cited as a strong example of partnership; and cultural celebrations like Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History Month, and Juneteenth, which are facilitated collaboratively. Joint efforts also extend to milestone events, such as the recent 20th Anniversary celebration. Together, these programs and events demonstrate an intentional effort to attract both the public and the SJSU community through culturally responsive and coordinated programming.

Lastly, the Digital Humanities Center emerged as a significant example of recurring collaboration across SJPL and SJSU Library. The DHC was initiated through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and SJPL was asked to provide a support letter indicating that they would support through joint programs. The space was allocated through a joint agreement, as required by the JOOA. Frequently described as a hub for shared programming, events, and interdisciplinary projects—particularly around AI and emerging technologies—the Digital Humanities Center exemplifies the strength of joint efforts that can serve students, faculty, and the broader community. Many interviewees indicated a strong desire to expand collaborative programming between SJPL and SJSU beyond this center.

In a similar vein, an interviewee expressed that the center may contribute to more shared programming since “there’s definitely a lot more opportunities ... to bring programs in that space.”

Library users

The King Library serves a wide and diverse group of library users, including SJSU faculty, staff, and students, as well as community members of the surrounding San José area—from children to older adults to job seekers to individuals seeking traditional reference support. Users vary widely in terms of age, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic background, literacy levels, and information needs, reflecting the unique demands of its dual role as both a public and academic library institution in a shared, urban setting.

Students primarily seek academic support—such as assistance with research, information literacy, database use, and access to technology. Students facing housing and food insecurity, or career readiness concerns, reflecting pressures of the high cost of living in the San José-Santa Clara metropolitan area, are often connected to university-based services. Community members from the city often come for a wide range of services, from children’s story time to automotive repair resources, and, most critically, support for housing and mental health needs. Library staff regularly assist unhoused individuals and maintain a robust list of local resources and services to meet these needs.

“Really, what the partnership represents is just increased value for those that walk into this building...”

Several interviewees across both SJPL and SJSU Library highlighted the benefits that the joint-use library brings to both students and the greater San José community by serving a diverse range of needs and information goals. As one interviewee noted, “public library users can get a university library card” affording them access to even more physical collections and information on-site. As members of the community, students can access public library cards, programs, and events. In addition to these tangible benefits, a public librarian shared:

Really, what the partnership represents is just increased value for those that walk into this building, because now they have access to the academic collection and the students have easy access to public library collections, services like technology, our staff, resources that we provide to just the overall community, as well as access to the services that SJSU provides directly to its students.

Importantly, the interviewees highlighted the partnership's strong commitment to inclusive and responsive service across both the academic and public library partners. This commitment is embedded not only in formal programming—such as events for Black History Month, Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month, and Black Maternal Health Week—but in everyday practices, like installing student-requested displays on immigration and transgender rights. Both institutions prioritize broad access and representation, focusing on meeting the needs of a wide range of community members such as international, undocumented, and LGBTQ+ individuals.

While the joint-use model at the King Library expands access and enriches the library experience for a wide range of users, engagement within the shared library space presents nuanced challenges tied to the expectations of its user groups. Whereas SJPL spaces and services are broadly accessible to the public, including the SJSU community, SJSU library services and spaces are primarily designed for and delivered to their students, faculty, and staff members. Interviewees, for instance, mentioned a recurring theme from student feedback: the desire for dedicated, student-only spaces, reflecting concerns about safety and access during joint operating hours. Student feedback has highlighted that the joint-use library does not always feel like a university library to students: “It is not unusual to hear from students desiring a student only area, and SJSU only area.” One academic librarian described it as a “tension that’s always there,” and highlighted that the partners are “always trying to figure out how to best ride that line between delineating certain areas for this [student] population only versus making it open to all.” Additionally, SJPL receives comments from San José community members expressing concern about the separate nature of these library spaces and limited access to all services.

Basic needs services and resources

Partnership basic needs services

The King Library provides a number of services that are “beyond [its] books and collections.” The library serves a significant unhoused population and provides a range of support through SJPL’s partnerships with local nonprofits through its Holistic Library Initiative. This includes collaborations with HomeFirst,¹⁰ People Assisting the Homeless (PATH),¹¹ Loaves and Fishes,¹² and Dignity on Wheels.¹³ Some external partnership services, such as mobile showers and food distribution, are difficult to offer at the King Library due to its downtown location and are typically provided by other SJPL branches. The library maintains an annual contract with PATH, “a non-profit service provider that helps with supportive housing and permanent housing placement for our homeless residents and patrons.” PATH staff are stationed in designated study rooms on the third floor. These staff members, including an employment specialist, hold drop-in hours at the King Library and provide assistance with supportive housing placement and career development opportunities, such as “job fair[s] where there’s a very low barrier to entry for people who need work immediately.” The library also provides free legal support through partnerships with lawyers.

In addition to the SJPL’s Holistic Library Initiative to support unhoused users, the partnership with the SJSU School of Social Work provides the King Library with student interns who assist with resource referrals, supervised by a dedicated public library staff member.¹⁴ This staff

¹⁰ For more information, visit the HomeFirst website: <https://www.homefirstscc.org/>.

¹¹ The agreement with PATH was terminated by the City in September 2025. For more information about this resource, visit the PATH website: <https://epath.org/regions/santa-clara/>.

¹² For more information, visit the Loaves & Fishes website: <https://www.loavesfishes.org/>.

¹³ For more information, visit the WeHOPE’s Mobile Homeless Services website: <https://wehope.org/mobilehomelessservices>.

¹⁴ For more information about the Holistic Library Initiative visit: <https://www.sjpl.org/social-work/>

member explained that the initiative's goal is to "try to be in places where we know vulnerable folks are going to be, specifically, people experiencing homelessness." They added, "homelessness is a symptom of a lot of different issues. So, we kind of operate as resource navigators." The library staff build relationships with patrons who visit the library regularly, including "folks living in their car in the parking lot" or using the library for shelter from extreme weather. They also set up information tables and drop-in hours. Although students rarely use the library's social work services, a few interviewees stressed that housing insecurity affects both the public and student populations. As one public library interviewee noted:

We're in the downtown area, you have a lot of different types of people that come into this building, including unhoused people. Sometimes the perception is the unhoused community is really just from the public side. ... It has come up in news reports about how unhoused students utilize the library as well because they're studying, they need a safe place. ... I think for me, a collaboration like this building [is] really representing something more than what it is.

The library previously maintained 24-hour operating hours, five days a week, for the SJSU community, while the public library side continued to operate under its standard schedule. This extended access was partly implemented to support students experiencing housing insecurity. Currently, the library remains open until midnight but no longer offers overnight hours. An academic library interviewee explained:

There were instances where students were reported living in their cars in the parking garage or kind of trying to stay inside buildings on campus overnight because maybe they couldn't afford to get home for the night or the rest of the week. So, we did have a 24/5 initiative, and part of that was to help students that needed a place to study overnight or until very late in the morning. Unfortunately, after COVID the funding for that wasn't fully reimplemented.

The King Library also supports patrons' well-being and mental health by connecting them to free health clinics and community health services, with attention to the particular needs of its patrons. For instance, they connect "formerly incarcerated or recently released individuals" to health services to "do preventative health screenings like blood pressure tests."

Moreover, some library programming includes Black Maternal Health Week events, queer studies programs, and peer behavioral health support for a wide-range of different communities. To help the library staff better support their patrons, the library offers staff training for de-escalation and effective referral. An academic library staff member described their approach after stressful crisis situations:

We try to let the staff member decompress and then offer them things that they could have done a little earlier to diffuse the situation, which is usually either referring earlier or behavioral modifications to accommodate folks. And then just giving them like “where could I have referred them to” so they could have got what they needed. So, a lot of it is that information and support.

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The King Library offers extensive digital access services, including free internet, device charging, and technology loans (e.g., laptops for students). Initiatives such as the NorthStar program teach seniors basic technology skills, while the Digital Empowerment Initiative advances broadband connectivity, device access, and digital skill building. AI education is also included among the library's technology support services.

Parenting classes, offered primarily for public library patrons, are provided by the public library alongside childcare support. An additional form of support for families is providing resource lists. According to a public librarian, “we do have a list of resources for families if they were experiencing food instability and being able to guide them that way.” These lists function as referrals to a broad network of partner organizations and services available to all library users, including both public and university communities. The SJPL website also showcases these resources.¹⁵

¹⁵ For more information visit: <https://www.sjpl.org/parents/>.

SJSU basic needs services

The majority of interviewees noted that the university operates its own basic needs services specifically for its students, and that students rarely seek such support directly from the library. The university's SJSU Cares initiative offers a range of resources, including a campus food pantry, CalFresh application assistance, and housing support.¹⁶ An academic library interviewee observed that campus basic needs services have expanded and improved since the COVID-19 pandemic. In practice, library staff refer students in need to these university-based resources. According to one interviewee, information about these services is disseminated across campus, including within the library, through flyers, social media, and other communication channels.

While the basic needs services offered by SJPL are generally available to all patrons, including students, interviewees noted that students are usually encouraged to use SJSU resources. A public librarian reflected that “there is an expectation that schools should really be able to intervene or provide a little bit more guidance there.” In practice, however, the library staff also often refers students to the public resources available to the broader community. Another interviewee explained, “I don’t think ... they don’t seek support from the social worker in the library but just are much more aware of ... and more likely to access other services.” A staff member affiliated with the public library’s social work initiative confirmed that housing insecurity is a concern in the area and that some students experiencing housing instability spend considerable time at the library. However, this interviewee emphasized that the university provides “more easily accessible resources” for its students:

I’m kind of like your best bet is getting involved with SJSU Cares, or going to the food pantry, getting involved with the health center. I always encourage that because the public system is a lot more burdened. There’s more need at large.

¹⁶ For more information visit: <https://www.sjsu.edu/sjsucares/>

Management and governance

This joint-use library operates under a formal partnership agreement that outlines the responsibilities of each institution, including resource sharing, allocation of space, maintenance policies, and collections. The Joint Ownership and Operating Agreement (JOOA), a public-facing document that can be found on the King Library's website, was written in November 1998 and went into effect in August 2003.¹⁷

In practice, the governance of the King Library is shaped not only by the JOOA but by a multi-layered set of agreement documents and operational policies. The 1998 JOOA establishes the legal foundation for the joint-use model, including co-ownership of the building as tenants-in-common, the allocation of space between the City and the University, shared and separate responsibilities for operations, and the overall governance structure. A 2003 Amendment refines several elements of the original agreement, most notably clarifying maintenance and utility processes, outlining financial and audit requirements through the Library Trust Account, and updating space allocations. In addition to these two legal documents, the King Library website hosts a publicly accessible compilation of policies and procedures that operationalize aspects of the JOOA, such as facilities policies, building guidelines, and tenant agreements. These website-based documents include dates of adoption, effectiveness, and revision, reflecting ongoing efforts to maintain alignment with current practices. Together, these documents form a broader governance environment supporting the day-to-day management of the joint-use library.

Folded into the JOOA is a comprehensive list of relevant policies and procedures regarding tenant agreements. For example, a tenant agreement on meeting rooms establishes the different ways in which study and work rooms can be reserved in the King Library, as well as at other SJPL branches. The policy also provides contact information for public library users and for the SJSU community. This is especially important because, per the King Library website outlining the policies, even though “a policy is needed to establish mutual guidelines for

¹⁷ To learn more about the agreement, see the following link:
<https://sjlibrary.org/policies-procedures/tenant-agreements>.

creating tenant agreements” each library is responsible for its own tenant contracts.

Although the JOOA is intended to define how the two library partners operate together, SJSU-level or SJPL-level policies, distinct from King Library or JOOA policies, may conflict or fail to account for the terms of the agreement. Over time, these differences and ambiguities between the two institutions’ policies and rules have created confusion regarding service delivery, programming, and facility improvements. Questions around roles and responsibilities also complicate communication and approval processes. For example, one academic library staff member described the complex process for approving event tabling, a process governed by SJSU campus rules rather than King Library policy: “That all has to be negotiated. Oftentimes that’s the middle management level where we’re negotiating these kinds of real operational policies.” Approval challenges intensify when there is disparate understanding of the JOOA. A public library leader recounted repeated efforts due to COVID-19 restrictions and different vaccination requirements, to prevent restrictions on public access: “There was an effort a few years ago to close the upper floors from the public. And then, to close meeting rooms from the public.” To resolve such disputes, this leader noted that they frequently have to return to the agreement for clarification and compliance.

Interviewees also noted that the length and complexity of the JOOA can make it difficult for staff across both library systems to be fully aware of all its provisions. In fast-moving situations, staff may not always consult the agreement, which can lead to misunderstanding in decision-making for both libraries. One public library staff member reflected: “It’s sometimes difficult to know who’s doing what in SJSU.”

Staff turnover means that some current employees are unfamiliar with the JOOA and decision-making hierarchies. As one interviewee admitted, “There are many people that have no idea we have a JOOA; that there’s a legal document that actually tells us how to operate the building.” Moreover, changes in the leadership and shifting institutional priorities have compounded these issues. As a result, almost any changes to the library structure or programming require navigating a complex level of bureaucracy and negotiation. For example, the JOOA outlines guidelines for maintaining facilities such as furniture and walls, requiring staff to contact the SJSU Facilities and Purchasing Coordinator to discuss any requests. One interviewee summarized: “Negotiation” is needed for

almost every decision and “that’s a big added layer of work. It’s really hard to get through, but it’s often worth it.”

Some feedback mechanisms also have proven to be essential for managing and improving different aspects of the partnership over time. For example, both partners track program attendance, circulation counts, and community satisfaction through surveys and cultivate data-driven dashboards. However, several interviewees mentioned that the partnership itself does not have any shared metrics that would track “strategic goals that would measure across both departments or both entities.” This signals room for the development of shared metrics centered around the partnership itself, informing decision-making capacities.

Roles and responsibilities

Across the partnership, staff and leadership roles span from frontline service and program delivery to behind-the-scenes functions like collections, systems, and operations. While some positions engage directly with patrons through circulation, programming, and customer service, others focus on areas like administrative oversight, technical services, and resource management that require minimal public interaction. Several positions are mirrored across the partnership, with a counterpart role on the academic library side and another on the public library side to support joint operations. For example, SJSU library and SJPL both have library directors at the administrative level that correspond with each other.

Due to the large staff capacities and responsibilities of both libraries, complicated leadership structures can add further complexity. Each library operates under different leadership structures, which can limit transparency and slow down decision-making. As one interviewee explained, “They each have their top people ... mak[ing] decisions. Sometimes, the programming stuff [doesn’t] get an equal shot at what they would like to see in the library.” Another suggested that “it would have been helpful if that hierarchy was better articulated” in the agreement for decision-making purposes. A third noted the challenge of “matching the two leadership structures,” explaining,

I actually end up meeting with a number of different people ... they're at different levels of leadership, so their decision-making ability is varying. So, part of the difficulty is: am I meeting with the right person to make this final decision?

Communication norms and patterns

Communication at the King Library plays an important role in the day-to-day operations of the partnership, and relies on a joint commitment to mutual understanding and trust between both libraries. Communication is highly informal, and deeply rooted in long-standing personal working relationships. Most communication occurs directly between individuals via email, Zoom, or even in-person—walking over to a colleague's office for an informal conversation or to ask a question is a common practice. This informal practice of communication, in part, is facilitated by the intentional physical design of the shared building, where staff from both institutions with similar responsibilities are often located in close proximity on the same floor, or even next door to each other. As one interviewee mentioned, “[T]hat was actually intended way back when we laid out the building when we moved in in 2003. They wanted to put groups together that did the same work for either institution.” An academic librarian also shared:

I try to make a point of sharing information that I think may be relevant to the city with my counterpart. Either by email, or when we have our bi-weekly meetings. And text, we have a very informal relationship, and sometimes a text is just as fast as just sending a formal email.

With respect to trust, one interviewee noted, “a lot of the communication stems from the development and maintenance of long-term personal working relationships.” The majority of the interviewees across both public and academic library sides of the partnership frequently highlighted their strong working relationships.

Beyond this largely informal structure, there are several formalized channels to ensure broader coordination and communication. These include regular administrative meetings, such as “Dean and Director” check-ins, the use of a King Library listserv, and a newsletter distributed

to both public and academic staff. Several interviewees noted that some of these structured methods—like regularly scheduled stand-up meetings—have become less frequent over time. In their absence, communication gaps occasionally emerge, particularly between administrative and non-administrative levels or when university directives don’t fully reach the public library staff. Nonetheless, strong interpersonal relationships help to bridge miscommunication.

Ultimately, the partnership’s communication thrives on a shared commitment to collaboration and mutual understanding.

Ultimately, the partnership’s communication thrives on a shared commitment to collaboration and mutual understanding. As one interviewee noted, “I feel that a successful partnership means communication is always on the top just because it’s your way to be able to discuss different things.” Another interviewee emphasized the value of relational work: “Without those productive relationships, with mutual respect, then nothing is ever going to get done.” From informal hallway chats to biweekly meetings to large-scale project collaborations, open and adaptable communication remains the foundation of this unique and evolving library partnership.

A key communication challenge stems from differences in institutional structures, tools, and processes, such as separate marketing teams and incompatible institutional systems, which can lead to redundancies and delays in shared work. For example, each library maintains its own media and marketing team, requiring parallel communication efforts for events and press inquiries, including coordinating with the university president’s office or the city manager’s office, when necessary. While this duplication can create complexity, staff still aim to coordinate effectively through a lens of mutual respect and consistent efforts to keep one another informed.

Additionally, another challenge lies in the incompatibility of institutional systems and review processes, particularly in areas like IT and marketing. The university uses Google and the city uses Microsoft, which makes collaboration on shared documents cumbersome and tedious. Formerly shared systems like intranet tools and event calendars have since been

discontinued due to institutional shifts and funding structures, creating unforeseen silos that reduce transparency and coordination.

Shared resources

A defining feature of the King Library partnership is the shared use of resources between the public and academic libraries. This joint-use model requires coordinated approaches to space, operations, staffing, collections, outreach, and funding. While shared resources create efficiencies and opportunities for collaboration, they also present operational and relational challenges. This section summarizes the primary areas of resource sharing as described by interviewees, highlighting both the benefits and complexities.

Space is one of the most visible and significant shared resources at the King Library. The eight floors of the building, as well as the lower level, are open to the public without entry restrictions, though separate library cards are required to borrow materials from each library. Interviewees also described the facility as “a very large beautiful library building in the center of downtown,” with shared amenities such as printing, Wi-Fi, meeting and conference rooms, and the Digital Humanities Center. The first floor functions as a central service point for all library users; per one interviewee, “the university doesn’t have a reference desk anymore. It’s all virtual.” The third floor houses the SJPL’s reference desk, adult collections, and adult services, alongside the California Room, which contains local and state history archives. Throughout the building there are co-mingled workspaces where SJPL and SJSU staff share office areas. This “physical closeness” has fostered collaboration and informal knowledge sharing.

Although the shared space offers significant benefits by creating opportunities for collaboration and expanding services to both community members and students, it also can introduce some challenges. Navigating a large, multi-use building and determining which floor of the library to approach for specific services can be challenging for library users. Moreover, some confusion persists regarding space allocation among library staff. Several interviewees noted limited documentation clarifying which areas are designated for each library, with some assuming that the

top floors, though open to the public, are intended for only academic use. Such discrepancies have led to friction, particularly when SJPL visitors occupy study rooms specifically reserved by students. The King Library website outlining the policies developed under the JOOA also specifies that “the reservation holder should be prepared to show proof of the reservation, e.g., the confirmation email they received.” Perspectives on the shared space differ as well: some see the arrangement as being “good neighbors,” while others, especially from the public library, feel more like “tenants” of the university. This perception persists even though the JOOA establishes that the university and the city “shall each own and hold the Library Building as tenants-in-common,” which underscores a gap between the formal ownership structure and how some staff experience the day-to-day dynamics of the shared facility. As one public library staff member expressed:

That’s one of those things that I feel like I always have to ask permission now, if we do anything in this building, versus it’s a shared building. It makes it seem more like we’re just the tenants and we’re not operating this building, but the whole idea is that we paid for it too; the city did. I think that gets lost because of the fact that we’re on campus. So, it’s trying to navigate through that.

Since “the biggest shared asset is the space in the building,” it is maintained through shared **facilities, maintenance, housekeeping, and security services**. Several interviewees noted that SJSU is “in charge of the facilities and maintenance of this building,” which can pose coordination challenges for SJPL when arranging related services. Per the agreement, security is entirely provided by SJSU Police Department, which one public library interviewee described as “a really strong security service model.” An academic library interviewee stated that security is necessary to protect all library patrons, given the building’s public access, adding that “it’s to protect the library patrons as a whole.” Moreover, while city security officers “work very closely with the university security officers,” city security “do not patrol the King building” directly. According to the Behavior in the Library section of the JOOA outlined on the King Library website, visitors who violate library guidelines “may be suspended from using the library,” and staff are authorized to “call local law enforcement to provide assistance in enforcing this policy.”¹⁸

¹⁸ To access the list of behaviors violating the King Library guidelines visit: <https://sjlibrary.org/policies-procedures/behavior-library>.

Staffing is another central area of shared resources, enabling public and academic librarians to exchange expertise. As one public library staff member shared, “I’ve learned a lot from my university colleagues. ... I think it’s made us a better public library.” Staff across the King Library occasionally assist one another’s users, with public library staff helping SJSU affiliates navigate library services and academic library staff providing support to community members.

Circulation and access service desks are staffed jointly; however, the in-person reference desk has been staffed exclusively by SJPL. SJSU Library made an evidence-driven decision to discontinue in-person reference service and move to a fully virtual reference model. SJSU Library now provides reference support via chat, email, and by-appointment consultations, with QR codes used as one of several pathways to access online help. This shift, which was made within the university’s decision-making structure rather than through joint agreement, has resulted in SJPL assuming a large share of in-person reference service. Further, given changes in the workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic, each library has different policies about hybrid work or work-from-home. On the academic side, there is more flexibility to work a hybrid schedule than on the public library side, which has, in turn, shaped the distribution of in-person service responsibilities within the building.

Prior to 2017, all users had access to the full King Library’s **collections** through a single integrated library system (ILS). When the ILS was separated that year, access shifted but was not eliminated. Public library community members retained borrowing privileges from university collections and SJSU community members continued accessing public library materials and programs. However, this access now requires two library cards. Anyone with a valid California address and identification may obtain an SJPL library card with in-person verification. Conversely, community members who are not affiliated with SJSU may apply for an SJSU library card, which grants borrowing access to the university’s physical collections but does not include electronic resources without remote access, in accordance with licensing restrictions. An academic library leader shared how they get positive feedback from people who “appreciate being able to check out university books if it’s a community researcher, or a student is able to check out different business databases.” While most physical materials are available on-site, some electronic resources remain restricted to specific users due to licensing agreements. Maintaining two separate ILSes has led to divergent

collection policies, budgets, and workflows. A few interviewees discussed recent efforts to re-establish some level of ILS integration. As a public library staff member explained:

I think having the ability to provide easy access to our collection [is] another thing that we're hoping that we can eventually provide. I know the university's cataloging system has a way to access or point the students to our collection. But for us [SJPL], we haven't really found that federated search capability that allows both of our catalogs to be searched at one time rather than you go to their catalog, you go to our catalog.

Outreach and promotion are handled separately by each side's marketing and communications teams, with occasional cross-promotion. For instance, SJPL marketing and promotions team has an active and large reach across the city and broader San José region, whereas coordination mostly occurs for joint events and programs. Both sides use flyers and distribute information in shared spaces such as the "free-for-all area" or community bulletin board, but these efforts are not formally coordinated. SJSU Library's outreach strategies include social media campaigns, mass emails, affinity group visits, and participation in campus events. According to an SJSU interviewee, "our librarians go to different events on the city side to try to promote what [the] library can provide and is." SJPL staff, in turn, participate in SJSU Library's resource fair to highlight public library services. Additionally, SJPL's social worker provides outreach that focuses on connecting with community resource centers, such as shelters, and participating in local events. This interviewee described some of their outreach efforts:

We're having more contact with more and more people year over year because I've grown my team. So, it used to just be me and now it's me and the interns. And also, I'm a part of what's called the Service Provider Network, which is all the different supportive social service type programming that people do. So, I've gotten all of the Family Learning Center coordinators on it, and they are posting their ESL classes, the citizenship health classes, all of the stuff that's super relevant for highly vulnerable folks. I'm always mapping and looking for opportunities to reach more people.

Some staff noted challenges collaborating on promotional initiatives such as library tours. For example, one SJPL interviewee described challenges

in promoting the Docent program, noting that SJSU Library already offers its own tours for SJSU students during orientation. The joint-use nature of the facility is not always clearly reflected in the signage and the library website, which may limit awareness of available services. Several interviewees suggested more coordinated marketing, including joint social media strategies and shared event calendars to enhance visibility. Since there are only two separate social media accounts—one for SJSU Library and one for SJPL—without a dedicated account for the joint-use King Library, a public librarian suggested, “It'd be really rad if they could do just the MLK Library [social media account]. ... Or maybe they share a little bit more, so there's some cross promotion that way.” They added, “Maybe we could tag each other back.” These efforts could increase user engagement and library visits, and provide visitors with unique opportunities to learn and take advantage of the resources available to them. A few interviewees identified opportunities to better promote basic needs services, with one public library staff member noting:

Those resources exist outside the library, and they're in a student services center or somewhere else. But I haven't personally seen a lot of information within our spaces about how and where students can access those resources more effectively.

Another shared resource between SJPL and the SJSU library is **funding**. Although each library maintains its own institutional budget processes and secures the majority of its funding independently, both JOOA and the subsequent 2003 amendment establish shared financial mechanisms specifically for the King Library. These mechanisms include the Library Trust Account and an annual Cost Share Agreement implemented by SJPL to support designated joint costs. Some interviewees nonetheless described the partnership as not having a recurring, jointly controlled funding stream in practice, which reflects a gap between formal structures and day-to-day awareness of how shared funds are allocated and accessed.

Funding for the King Library and its programs largely comes from the state of California, given its position within the California State University (CSU) system. Despite the King Library having benefited from state support—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic—most of this funding is not recurring and tends to come from “one-time allocations or specific grants and partnerships.” In addition, certain SJPL programs, like workforce development for young adults, are currently funded through the California

State Volunteers Office, and scholarships like Smart Horizons are supported by the California State Library. SJPL also received funding during the pandemic from the American Rescue plan, which was used at the time to “purchase and distribute thousands of hotspots.”

Importantly, certain costs, such as renovations and joint projects, are shared across both funding streams. They also share costs for some resources such as microfilm machines and interactive chat systems, which can be cost-effective in some instances. As an interviewee highlighted, “when we have it shared, we don’t have to pay the full price. We’re paying half and half.”

SJSU Library and SJPL operate on different budget cycles, and having separate funding allocations and timelines can create challenges such as delays in reimbursing shared services. These issues become even more pronounced when institutional priorities differ or when each side faces separate budget cuts. According to an academic library interviewee, “every time we get in a budget crunch, we both need to cut but we’re cutting in separate ways.” Another academic library interviewee provided an example of a budget cycle challenge:

When the city prepares their budget for the upcoming year... and if the university is not aware of potential initiatives that we [SJSU Library] would like to implement, suddenly, “Oh, this sounds like a great idea, but it has to be a cost-share because of the nature of the initiative.” And the City Library, most likely, unless they have a little bit of extra money, would say, “Well, no, it wasn’t in the budget for this year, you have to wait until the next cycle.” But the problem is, we need to use the money right now because otherwise we’re gonna lose it at the end of the fiscal year.

Key recommendations

At the end of their interview, participants were asked to provide some advice to other institutions considering or currently establishing similar partnerships. To that end, participants outlined several strategies and while their perspectives varied depending on their roles and experiences, common threads emerged around four areas: governance structures, mission and values alignment, communication and staff training, and outreach and promotion. Collectively, these suggestions represent interviewees' insights for strengthening joint-use models broadly and reflect a nuanced understanding of what it takes to build and sustain an effective joint-use library.

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of developing a **comprehensive “solid” agreement** that clearly defines responsibilities, policies, and the distribution of power between institutions. As one interviewee noted, “Every procedure and policy [has] to be put into writing and adopted by both sides so that they could point to it and say, ‘See. This is how we’re gonna do it together.’” Such agreements can include specific documentation around space and resource use, service expectations, and shared initiatives. The agreement should also include plans for how to mitigate differences between the two systems, including operational differences such as hours and budget cycles. To ensure long-term “financial health and stability,” an interviewee recommended establishing a joint account or shared funding mechanism to cover costs associated with shared usage. This approach encourages mutual investment and shared accountability.

Maintaining “good records, and good documentation on processes and policies” was cited as critical for supporting long-term consistency, particularly as staff or leadership change over time. One interviewee recommended establishing a dedicated role or coordinator to specifically manage the relationship, support continuity, and align management structures between the institutions: “Having somebody that could bring everybody together and help navigate through things would be ideal.” Additionally, clarifying and codifying the decision-making process, such as which roles are involved and how decisions are made, can help prevent confusion and ensure transparency. According to an interviewee:

I think if you can align on the different management, middle management, and department heads; if you can do some alignment of who will hold each other responsible or who will partner together on those levels, it would be really, really helpful.

Another key recommendation emphasized by several interviewees is the importance of **aligning institutional missions and values**. While differences are inevitable, maintaining a strong shared understanding of the partnership's overarching goals helps guide decision-making and navigate any challenges. One interviewee noted the importance of “be[ing] committed to the bigger goal,” acknowledging the difficulties of collaboration while remaining focused on the long-term community impact:

There's a million ways in which it can fall apart but the bigger goal is always there. And, I think, it's always, always, always, always worth it. [The King Library] really is a special place. ... And a lot of community [is] happening, you know? It's very exciting.

Participants recommended that institutions develop a joint mission that reflects a shared commitment to serving both public and academic communities. This includes a clearly defined understanding of who constitutes the “community” being served and how each institution contributes to that mission. As a SJPL staff member highlighted, “There's a natural benefit to the community when partnerships like these are well established.” A well-developed formal agreement should reflect this shared purpose and be used to reinforce the long-term vision for the partnership.

Clear, continuous communication and **intentional staff training** were identified as central to the success of joint-use library models. Many interviewees noted that effective cross-institutional communication requires regular meetings, ongoing dialogue, flexibility, and a willingness to compromise. As one interviewee reflected, “positive communication is important” and emphasized the value of “being able to seamlessly build that communication so that everyone knows, ‘Yes, you do this thing. We do this thing. These are the things we do together.’” Another interviewee described the importance of communication in effective collaborations:

Going into it with your eyes open and know[ing] it's not going to be easy; when planning it, realize you may have different priorities because you have either different upper organizations, funding sources, or clientele, or all of the above. So, be open and realize that you're possibly very different organizations, and that's going to cause tension, but you need to be prepared to compromise. If you can compromise and communicate, then you should be able to forge a partnership and provide some services that will benefit people eventually. It's not gonna be easy. Everything might take a little bit more work, but the benefits are real.

“If you can compromise and communicate, then you should be able to forge a partnership and provide some services that will benefit people eventually... Everything might take a little bit more work, but the benefits are real.”

Several interviewees recommended adopting a structured training model to onboard new staff and familiarize them with the policies, roles, and expectations governing the shared space. Staff should also receive ongoing support in learning the differences between the two institutions' services and how to guide patrons accordingly. Moreover, it's important, as interviewees noted, to regularly solicit and document staff input, especially from those directly engaging with patrons, with feedback mechanisms and regular reporting practices encouraged as part of their agreement. Interviewees also recommended implementing formal change management strategies to help both institutions adapt to staff turnover, evolving services, or policy shifts: “They all need to go through a change management process that brings everybody back to that joint mission.” Staff should have a clear understanding of the joint-use agreement and the division of responsibilities between partners.

Finally, a few recommendations focused on **effective outreach and promotion** and how these efforts should reflect the joint nature of the library without diminishing the identity of either partner. A unified branding style that highlights the collaborative structure can help raise awareness while preserving institutional distinctions. As users may not always understand the dual-institution model, it is important to ensure they know where to seek help and which services can be accessed with their library

cards. Library staff also advised regularly coordinating promotional efforts between the public and academic library teams, streamlining calendars, and aligning messaging. This coordination can help mitigate confusion and ensure both student and community patrons are equally informed about available resources and services.

Conclusion

This case study of the joint-use King Library, an established partnership of more than 20 years between San José State University (SJSU) and San José Public Library (SJPL), demonstrates the potential of joint-use models to expand access, strengthen community connection, and maximize shared resources. The findings reveal that effective joint-use library partnerships depend on clear, consistently revisited agreements and a strong shared identity built through coordinated outreach, marketing, and branding. They thrive when institutions proactively address differences, intentionally use shared spaces for programming, and foster both informal and formal communication to build trust. Shared use of space, facilities and maintenance, staffing, and collections, along with collaboration with the university campus and external community organizations, illustrates the library's commitment to meet the needs of the SJSU community and the city of San José alike.

When asked about what advice interviewees would give to libraries that might be interested in this kind of partnership, participants of this case study highlighted some areas for consideration. They emphasized the importance not only of having governance structures in place but of ensuring that those structures are clearly articulated, consistently followed, and are easily understandable. Further, aligning missions and values helps both institutions stay focused on long-term goals, while structured staff training, feedback loops, and dedicated coordination roles support consistency across leadership changes. Outreach and branding strategies also remain crucial to ensure patrons understand the joint-use model and can fully access available resources. Together, these efforts can strengthen the partnerships' sustainability and enhance its impact on both students and the broader community.