

Creativity: A Toolkit for Academic Libraries, by Nancy Falciani-White

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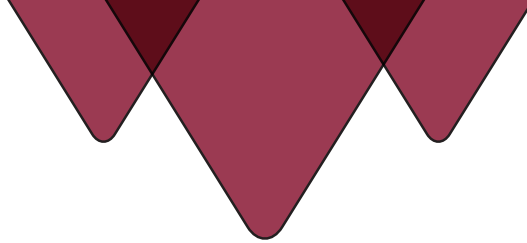
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Book Review: *Creativity: A Toolkit for Academic Libraries*

Falciani-White, Nancy. (2021). *Creativity: A Toolkit for Academic Libraries*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 162pp, \$54.00.

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In *Creativity: A Toolkit for Academic Libraries*, author Nancy Falciani-White defines creativity as “the ability to produce a product or idea that is both new and appropriate in a given context” (145). Focusing on the creativity of academic libraries and those working in them, rather than the students, staff, and faculty we serve, this book brings together concepts from psychology, business, research, entrepreneurship, and design to better understand a term that is at once overused and hard to define, due in part to the broad range of assumptions and misconceptions that surround it. Falciani-White, currently Director of the McGraw-Page Library at Randolph Macon College, draws inspiration and examples from over 20 years of experience working at small liberal arts institutions and from completing her own graduate and doctoral research to make a case for embracing creativity in academic libraries.

Falciani-White draws her definition of creativity from an article in *Annual Review of Psychology*, but it could as easily have been from the Canadian Intellectual Property Office (2021), as those of us familiar with the criteria for a patentable invention as novel, useful, and inventive may recognize. This positions creativity in a productive realm as closely linked to entrepreneurship, innovation, and design as to fine artistic expression. This link is not new; creativity has been embraced by business and management schools in recent years, producing degrees and specializations in entrepreneurship, design thinking, and innovation, and reframing creativity as a tool to fashion solutions to problems. In Chapter 2, Falciani-White traces back through Drucker’s 1985 description of innovation to Osborn’s coinage of creative problem solving in 1953 and Rowe’s contemporary design thinking approach all the way back to Edison’s light bulb. While seeking to disambiguate terms often treated



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as interchangeable, the author's broader argument seems to be that the distinction between these realms is moot: creativity can be applied to any discipline or context.

The first half of the book works to establish a broader understanding of creativity before applying it to the context of academic librarianship in the second part. Part one begins in the domain of psychology, where much of the research around creativity has centred over the past 70 years. Falciani-White outlines "the four Ps" of modern creativity research in that discipline: the creative personality, process, product, and press or environment (5-6). She then lines up and knocks down common myths and misunderstandings, such as Runco's "art bias"—the assumption that creativity is limited to music, painting, or writing—and the adjacent idea that creativity is an inherent trait only held by a certain group of people (11-12). This effort to address any resistance toward creativity as un-serious or outside academic life that her reader might harbour is a major focus of the first half of the book.

One chapter where this effort is most evident outlines the parallels of various creative and research processes. Falciani-White, who has published a model of faculty research practices, broadens out here to make the argument that "research should be considered a type of creative work" (54), a gauntlet thrown down into a world in which creative approaches are at odds with dominant scientific methods or research frameworks. Falciani-White claims there is a disconnect between perceptions of research and creativity that stifle the latter, and that this is "symptomatic of a broader misunderstanding [of] . . . the ways that they overlap" (46-47). It is unclear who holds the view that "the ways in which research is discussed and supported often fail to treat it as the creative work that it is" (47), but the bibliography for that chapter cites no fewer than 10 titles that explore research and creativity. This alignment between research and creativity models has applications in instruction and research support that may be of use to many readers.

In libraries, as in the business world, there is always a problem to be solved. Falciani-White's core argument is that academic librarians at all levels, and particularly those in leadership positions, would do well to embrace and encourage creativity as a tool to address challenges and improve ways of working at the individual as well as at the organizational level. She uses findings from her survey of over 300 majority American academic librarians and staff to identify both examples of creativity in academic libraries as well as barriers to it. In the next chapter, her literature review provides specific examples of creativity in collection development, instruction, leadership, marketing and outreach, public services, technical services, and other areas of the profession. Some readers may be surprised to find that much of what we do every day can be considered creative work; others may not be. While her survey sample may well have suffered from selection bias as she herself admits,

it nevertheless reveals the obstacles to creative approaches to our work. Lack of time and resources—the top two barriers identified in the survey—are symptoms of a broader resistance to change, which suggests that the ideal audience for this book is the library leadership who can shift institutional culture through strategic planning, budgeting, innovation grants, and other means of support.

Toolkit suggests a practical, hands-on approach, but *introduction* may have been a better choice for the title, as the author doesn't dive deeply into any one concept or framework, rather skimming the surface of a range of concepts and ideas. Even the concepts core to creative problem-solving, such as divergent thinking, are covered but briefly; those new to these processes or looking for step-by-step instruction will need to supplement with the references provided. Chapters 7 and 8 come closest to supplying the ingredients of a toolkit, outlining strategies for individual and organizational creativity and the role of leaders in fostering creativity in their libraries.

The strength of this work is in the potential to spark or renew interest in creativity in an academic library context, where workload, budgets, and other constraints have often forced us to put aside anything deemed inessential. By linking it to problem solving, Falciani-White concludes that creativity is not frivolous but rather “vital at all levels of the academic library if that library expects to adapt to the current challenges facing higher education” (145). While we may not always use the term itself, academic librarians are not generally opposed to creativity. We simply call it by its other names, as her survey respondents describe: “thinking of new and different ways to do things,” “imagination in solving problems,” “innovative ideas” (75). Where academic librarians are stymied in these practices is in the structures and systems that can prevent creative environments from flourishing and there is much in this volume to support those who wish to reverse that trend.

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