



Redesigning academic librarian roles for a post-crisis world: A role theory perspective on workload equity and occupational stress

Marco De Prosperis ^{*} 

University of Arkansas, 1 University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, 72701, USA

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ABSTRACT

Academic librarianship is characterized by overlapping role expectations that can become unsustainable when demands outpace resources. This conceptual article develops a role-architecture framework for workload redesign that integrates Role Theory (role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload) with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. The argument is grounded in a narrative, integrative review of research on librarian roles, burnout, and emotional labor, and in a synthesis of pandemic-era evidence from multiple contexts (e.g., Ithaca S + R surveys of 875 U.S. academic libraries, Canadian qualitative interviews with academic librarians ($n = 19$), and U.K. staff surveys (200+ responses)), alongside European case evidence. Pandemic disruptions are treated as a diagnostic of structural weaknesses in how librarian work is defined, resourced, and evaluated. The framework distinguishes four interlocking layers: core service, scholarly work (where applicable), institutional citizenship, and emotional labor, and identifies predictable fault lines between layers and between professional and non-work roles. Building on this diagnosis, the article proposes five design principles: clarifying role cores and boundaries; aligning evaluation with actual responsibilities (including digital transformation and emotional labor); engineering workload equity; embedding job resources into role design; and pre-planning crisis-mode role shifts. Implications are offered for library leaders and campus partners seeking to redesign roles sustainably beyond crisis periods.

Introduction

Academic librarianship has always been a multi-layered profession. In many institutions, librarians are simultaneously expected to provide high-touch services to students and faculty, act as instructional partners and research consultants, sustain complex digital and physical collections, contribute to institutional governance, and, where faculty or faculty-equivalent status exists, produce scholarship and engage in professional leadership (Rubin & Rubin, 2020). Appointment models vary widely across institutions, so scholarly expectations are salient in some libraries and minimal in others. This hybrid identity is often a source of pride and meaning. Yet when expectations proliferate faster than time, staffing, or institutional support, it becomes a structural risk factor for chronic occupational stress.

Concerns about burnout, time pressure, and “always-on” digital culture were visible in higher education well before 2020 (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Day et al., 2012). The pandemic did not create these pressures; it amplified and redistributed them. Campus closures, rapid pivots to online instruction, and evolving health protocols forced

academic libraries to reconfigure services at extraordinary speed. Studies document dramatic expansions in virtual reference, online instructional support, and digital access work, often without commensurate adjustments to workload expectations or staffing (Gmiterek, 2021; Hinchliffe & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020; McLay Paterson & Eva, 2022; Robinson et al., 2023). These expansions also intersected with longer-term trends in digital transformation and open access infrastructure (Faniel et al., 2024).

From a Role Theory perspective, this moment can be read as a natural experiment. The same underlying stressors, role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload, were present before COVID-19, but the crisis intensified them and made their consequences more visible (Biddle, 1986; Goode, 1960; Kahn et al., 1964). Role ambiguity grew as library strategies shifted from week to week; role conflict mounted as librarians balanced competing expectations from administrators, faculty, and students; and role overload became chronic as new digital and crisis-response tasks were layered onto already complete portfolios.

Existing work in academic librarianship has already used role theory and related concepts to understand professional identities and stress.

^{*} University of Arkansas Libraries (MULN 478), 365 North McIlroy Avenue, Fayetteville, AR, 72701, USA.

E-mail address: mdeprosp@uark.edu.

Shupe and Pung (2011) analyzed the changing psychological roles of academic librarians; Shupe et al. (2015) documented role-related stress among academic librarians; and Zai (2015) examined the tensions experienced by librarians who teach, using a role-theory framework. Research on emotional labor indicates that managing both personal and patron emotions is a key part of library work, often becoming a significant challenge when it goes unnoticed or lacks support (Matteson & Miller, 2012, 2013).

The pandemic highlighted these dynamics more clearly. Studies across fields show that disruptions affected people differently, with caregivers, particularly women, experiencing greater reductions in research time and increased stress (Myers et al., 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2020). For academic librarians, these pressures overlapped with already complex role expectations and emergent digital demands, producing a highly uneven pattern of role stress and burnout risks (Holm et al., 2022; McLay Paterson & Eva, 2022).

This article argues that post-crisis recovery in academic libraries should focus not only on restoring services but on redesigning roles. It develops a “role architecture” model that makes visible the layered nature of academic librarianship and uses post-pandemic stress patterns as a diagnostic for where that architecture fails. It then proposes design principles for creating more equitable and sustainable role structures. Although motivated by COVID-19, the framework is intended to support sustainable role redesign amid ongoing disruptions, including rapid digital change and emerging AI-enabled services.

This article makes four contributions:

- Introduces a role architecture lens that treats core service, scholarship, institutional citizenship, and emotional labor as coexisting role layers rather than a single job description.
- Integrates Role Theory with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to explain how ambiguity, conflict, and overload emerge structurally and can escalate into resource-loss spirals.
- Uses pandemic-era evidence as a diagnostic to identify fragilities in workload governance, boundary infrastructure, and equity-sensitive role distribution.
- Translates the diagnosis into practical role (re)design principles with explicit governance and evaluation levers aimed at workload equity and occupational well-being.

Three guiding questions shape the analysis:

1. How can Role Theory, JD-R, and COR be integrated into a role architecture model for academic librarianship?
2. How do post-pandemic stress patterns reveal weaknesses in that architecture, particularly in relation to workload equity and burnout?
3. What design principles can guide academic libraries, campuses, and professional bodies in (re)designing roles for a post-crisis world?

The scope is primarily academic libraries within higher education institutions, with empirical examples drawn mainly from North America, Europe, and selected national contexts, including Poland, the United Kingdom, the Nordic countries, and Aotearoa New Zealand. The analysis focuses on professional staff whose roles encompass public service, instruction, digital scholarship, collections, and governance. While the examples are geographically and structurally specific, the conceptual framework is intended to be adaptable across contexts.

The article proceeds in four steps. First, it elaborates a “role architecture” model for academic librarianship, integrating Role Theory with the JD-R model and COR theory. Second, it uses post-pandemic evidence from multiple regions to diagnose where this architecture fails. Third, it proposes five design principles for role (re)design. Finally, it translates these principles into policy and leadership implications, arguing that the most enduring legacy of the pandemic should be structural, not merely rhetorical change.

Theoretical framework: role architecture in academic libraries

Role theory and occupational stress

Role Theory conceptualizes social life as organized around positions and roles, with associated expectations held by “role senders” and interpreted by “role occupants” (Biddle, 1986; Kahn et al., 1964). Expectations can include tasks, behavioral norms, and evaluative criteria. Stress arises when these expectations are unclear, incompatible, or excessive relative to available resources.

Three concepts are especially relevant:

- Role ambiguity: uncertainty about what is expected, how to prioritize tasks, or how performance will be assessed (Kahn et al., 1964).
- Role conflict: incompatible expectations, which may be:
- Intra-role (different stakeholders making conflicting demands within the same role).
- Inter-role (professional versus non-work roles competing for time and energy).
- Person-role (demands that clash with an individual's values, abilities, or circumstances).
- Role overload: expectations that exceed the time, energy, or other resources realistically available (Goode, 1960).

In academic librarianship, role senders are numerous: library administrators, department chairs, faculty collaborators, students, professional bodies, consortia, funders, and accreditation agencies. As a result, librarians often experience overlapping roles and sometimes contradictory signals about what constitutes “success.” For example, an instruction librarian may be asked to increase one-shot classes, embed deeply in specific programs, support new assessment initiatives, maintain high-volume reference work, and publish peer-reviewed research, all within a nominal 40-h workweek.

Role-theoretic analyses of academic librarianship have highlighted similar tensions. Shupe and Pung (2011) emphasized how evolving expectations around instruction and liaison work create conflicting role demands. Shupe et al. (2015) identified role ambiguity and role conflict as central drivers of stress among academic librarians. Zai (2015) analyzed the “librarian as teacher” role, noting the contradictions between traditional service identities and expectations of pedagogical expertise. Such work points to the need for more explicit attention to how roles themselves are constructed and negotiated.

Integrating JD-R and COR

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model extends Role Theory by distinguishing between job demands and job resources. Demands are aspects of work that require effort and carry physiological or psychological costs, such as workload, role conflict, and emotional labor. At the same time, resources are aspects that help achieve goals, reduce demands, or stimulate growth, such as autonomy, support, training, and technology (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). When demands are high and resources are low, burnout is likely; when resources are strong, they can buffer the impact of high demands.

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory adds a dynamic, resource-focused perspective. People strive to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources, time, energy, social support, and status. Stress occurs when resources are threatened, lost, or insufficiently replenished, and resource loss tends to beget further loss in spirals, whereas resource gains can initiate virtuous cycles (Hobfoll, 1989; Maslach, 1993). In COR terms, a librarian who consistently sacrifices lunch breaks, evenings, or vacation time to meet escalating demands may enter a resource-loss spiral that eventually manifests as burnout.

The JD-R and COR frameworks have been applied to various work contexts involving information and communication technologies (ICTs). Day et al. (2012) showed that ICT-related demands (e.g., constant email,

rapid-response expectations) can heighten strain when organizational support is weak, whereas ICT resources can mitigate adverse outcomes. [Ninaus et al. \(2021\)](#) developed an “ICT demands-resources” model and found that employees perceive ICTs as both resources and demands, with ICT demands contributing to burnout and work-family conflict.

When JD-R and COR are combined with Role Theory, a clear picture emerges: role ambiguity, conflict, and overload are not merely psychological states; they are structural mechanisms that increase job demands and accelerate resource loss. A librarian with unclear expectations and conflicting priorities will expend extra cognitive and emotional effort to decide what to do next, leaving less capacity for deep work or recovery. Conversely, clear roles and robust resources can shift the balance toward engagement rather than exhaustion.

A role architecture model for academic librarianship

To make these dynamics more concrete, this article proposes a role architecture model for academic librarianship composed of four partially overlapping layers:

Core service role

Direct support to students and faculty: reference, research consultations, information literacy instruction, collection development, metadata and discovery work, support for open access and data management, and related digital services.

Primary expectations: responsiveness, accuracy, professionalism, and user satisfaction.

Scholarly role

Research, publishing, presenting, grant writing, and sometimes teaching for-credit courses.

Primary expectations: sustained scholarly output and visible professional engagement, especially where librarians hold faculty status.

Institutional citizenship role

Governance and service beyond the library: committee work, accreditation support, campus initiatives, search committees, task forces, and association leadership.

Primary expectations: collegiality, reliability, “good citizenship” within the institution and profession.

Emotional labor role

Regulation of one's own emotions and the management of others' feelings in service interactions: calming anxious patrons, absorbing frustration, providing care during crises, mentoring colleagues, leading diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work, and supporting staff and students during institutional change. Primary expectations: patience, empathy, composure, “positivity,” even in the face of hostility or crisis ([Matteson & Miller, 2012, 2013](#)). Although often treated as intangible, emotional labor can be operationalized using validated scales (e.g., surface acting and deep acting) and locally meaningful indicators (e.g., frequency of high-intensity patron interactions, incident/debrief logs) ([Brotheridge & Lee, 2003](#); [Grandey, 2000](#)).

These layers are rarely explicitly acknowledged in job descriptions, yet they are real in terms of time and energy. Ambiguity, conflict, and overload tend to arise at specific fault lines:

- Between core service and scholarly roles, when service demands expand but expectations for research productivity remain unchanged.
- Between core service and institutional citizenship, committee and project work are added without rebalancing frontline responsibilities.
- Between all professional layers and non-work roles (a boundary between professional and personal domains rather than a fifth role

layer), when care responsibilities or health needs clash with inflexible scheduling and “ideal worker” norms.

- Within the emotional labor role, when the expectation to be endlessly patient and calm is not recognized in evaluation criteria or supported with training, peer support, or time for recovery.

From a JD-R perspective, the same structural features that create multi-layered roles also stack demands: more stakeholder groups, more initiatives, more channels (email, chat, learning management systems, virtual reference), and more emotional complexity. Job resources, autonomy, supportive leadership, robust technology, and flexible policies often lag. In COR terms, the result can be a resource loss spiral: as librarians use personal time and energy to keep up, recovery shrinks, making future demands harder to meet.

This role architecture model is intentionally simple. It does not attempt to capture every possible role nuance, but rather to provide a practical map that libraries can use to surface hidden expectations, negotiate trade-offs, and design roles more deliberately. [Fig. 1](#) summarizes the proposed pathways from role layers to stressors, mechanisms, outcomes, and redesign levers.

Note. Arrows indicate primary pathways discussed in the manuscript; the figure is intended as a heuristic for analysis and redesign rather than a comprehensive taxonomy of tasks.

Testable propositions

To make the model more empirically tractable, the following propositions translate the conceptual links into testable expectations:

1. When boundary infrastructure is weak (e.g., unclear after-hours norms, diffuse decision rights), ICT demands and telepressure increase, which is associated with higher role overload and reduced recovery ([Barber & Santuzzi, 2015](#); [Day et al., 2012](#); [Tedone, 2022](#)).
2. When evaluation criteria are misaligned with time allocations across role layers (e.g., scholarship expectations without protected time), role conflict increases, and burnout risk rises ([Bakker & Demerouti, 2007](#); [Kahn et al., 1964](#); [Shupe et al., 2015](#)).
3. During operational shocks, rapidly shifting priorities increase role ambiguity; clear communication and ICT support buffer the relationship between ambiguity and strain ([Day et al., 2012](#); [Hinchliffe & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020](#)).
4. When institutional citizenship and emotional labor demands are concentrated among particular groups, workload inequity increases, and COR loss spirals are more likely; rotation, recognition, and peer support buffer these effects ([Crenshaw, 1991](#); [Hobfoll, 1989](#); [Matteson & Miller, 2012](#)).

Conceptual approach and scope

This conceptual article develops a role architecture framework by synthesizing foundational Role Theory, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory alongside an illustrative (not systematic) scan of relevant literature. Sources were selected to (a) anchor the framework in established stress and role scholarship and (b) triangulate role stress patterns across multiple regions and library contexts during and after COVID-19. The evidence base is used to illuminate mechanisms and plausible pathways rather than to estimate prevalence or identify causal effects.

The analysis synthesizes:

- Classic contributions in Role Theory, JD-R, and COR.
- Empirical studies of academic librarians' work and stress, including research on role-related stress, emotional labor, and burnout in librarianship.
- COVID-era studies of academic and public libraries' operational changes and staff experiences.

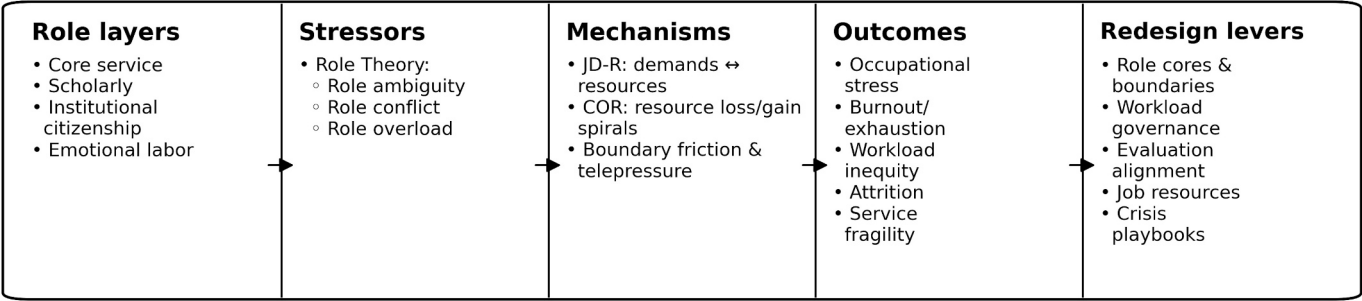


Fig. 1. Conceptual map from role layers to stressors, mechanisms, outcomes, and redesign levers.

- Selected policy and programmatic documents (e.g., national library employment programs) as examples of structural responses.

One study of public library staff is used as adjacent-sector evidence of frontline service reconfiguration and staff strain; inferences to academic library contexts are made cautiously and primarily at the level of mechanisms (e.g., boundary friction and emotional labor).

The literature reviewed is predominantly Anglophone, with some inclusion of European and Nordic contexts. As such, the conceptual framework is grounded in particular institutional arrangements (e.g., faculty-status librarians, collective bargaining contexts) but is presented in a way that can be adapted to other systems.

Approach and limitations

This paper is not a systematic review and does not aim for exhaustive coverage of pandemic-era library research. The evidence base is predominantly English-language and reflects the availability and visibility of published work at the time of writing; pandemic-related evidence and post-pandemic workplace arrangements also continue to evolve. Accordingly, the framework and diagnostic are intended to support conceptual clarification, hypothesis generation, and practical role redesign, not definitive prevalence estimates or causal claims.

The following section uses this framework to interpret post-pandemic stress patterns as a diagnostic of where current role architectures are fragile.

Post-pandemic stress patterns as a diagnostic

Rather than retelling the full story of COVID-19 in libraries, this section focuses on how patterns of role stress during the pandemic expose weaknesses in the underlying role architecture. The emphasis is on interpreting existing empirical findings through the lenses of Role Theory, JD-R, and COR, not on reanalyzing primary data.

Table 1 summarizes selected empirical sources informing the post-pandemic diagnostic.

Role ambiguity: shifting priorities and opaque evaluation

Across regions, librarians reported that the most destabilizing aspect of the early pandemic was not only increased workload, but uncertainty about priorities and evaluation. In the United States, Ithaka S + R's Academic Library Response to COVID-19 tracking updates indicate repeated shifts among closure, limited reopening, and hybrid operations, with service configurations changing from March to October 2020 (Hinchliffe & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020). Instruction librarians were asked to move information literacy and research workshops online, often with limited guidance about which courses to prioritize or how asynchronous instruction would be counted in workload. Subject librarians faced rapid acquisitions of e-books and streaming media for remote classes, often with limited clarity about budgets and long-term collection direction. In faculty-status contexts, uncertainty about how COVID-related work

Table 1
Selected empirical sources informing the post-pandemic diagnostic: Contexts, methods, sample/unit characteristics, and role-stress-relevant observations across academic and adjacent library settings.

Source	Context/setting	Method/data	Sample/unit	Role-stress-relevant observation
Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020)	U.S. academic libraries	Repeated survey rounds/tracking updates	875 libraries	Rapid pivots and shifting service models; uncertainty about priorities/evaluation; expanded virtual services.
McLay Paterson and Eva (2022)	Canadian academic librarians	Semi-structured interviews	n = 19	Boundary blurring ("always at work"), intensified service work, and uneven accommodations.
Gmiterek (2021)	Polish university libraries	Analysis of social networking services use during lockdown	18 libraries	Intensification of social media and online outreach, increasing ICT-related demands, and role ambiguity.
Robinson et al. (2023)	U.K. public library staff	Survey of staff experiences	200+ responses	Service reconfiguration and stress during the pandemic highlight the need for structured support and role clarity.
Shupe et al. (2015)	U.S. academic librarians	Survey of role stress and burnout correlates	n = 282	Role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload are associated with indicators of burnout, underscoring baseline structural risk.

Note. Sample/unit counts (n) are reported as provided by each source; units vary across studies (libraries, staff responses, or interview participants). Robinson et al. (2023) is a public-library study and is included as an indicator of frontline service reconfiguration and staff strain during pandemic closures; interpretations are made cautiously for academic-library contexts.

would be weighed in annual and promotion reviews added another layer of ambiguity.

Similar ambiguity surfaced in other national contexts, albeit through different operational channels. In Poland, for example, university libraries intensified use of social networking services during lockdown; in many cases, decisions about platforms, posting cadence, and responsibility assignment appear to have been made opportunistically rather than through established role definitions (Gmiterek, 2021). In the United Kingdom, a public library staff survey describes stress associated with rapid service reconfiguration under shifting national and local guidance (Robinson et al., 2023). At a global level, guidance compiled

by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2020) likewise highlights uncertainty regarding reopening criteria, access restrictions, and the balance between staff safety and service obligations.

Role ambiguity was not confined to the crisis peak. In later phases, librarians often remained unsure which “emergency” practices would become permanent expectations (e.g., expanded chat coverage, extensive asynchronous instruction, or additional research data support) and how these expanded service expectations would be reflected in workload models and performance reviews. From a role architecture perspective, the boundary between core service and institutional citizenship work often became blurred, while expectations for the scholarly layer were sometimes left rhetorically intact but practically undermined.

Role conflict: colliding expectations across roles and domains

Pandemic-era accounts also show predictable points of role conflict, especially where service expansion collided with scholarly, citizenship, and non-work roles. Qualitative interviews with Canadian academic librarians found many participants describing themselves as “always at work,” with work extending into nights and weekends even when formal schedules remained unchanged (McLay Paterson & Eva, 2022).

In role-architecture terms, conflict was most visible at three fault lines:

- Core service vs. scholarly roles: During pandemic surges, virtual reference, instructional redesign, and faculty support often crowded out scholarship time in faculty-status contexts, intensifying the long-noted tension between service and research expectations (Hinchliffe & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020; Shupe et al., 2015; Shupe & Pung, 2011).
- Institutional citizenship vs. core service: Crisis response added institution-wide demands (e.g., task forces, communications, continuity planning) on top of core library services, creating competing priorities and time conflicts (Hinchliffe & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020; Robinson et al., 2023).
- Professional vs. non-work roles: Librarians with caregiving responsibilities experienced acute collisions between remote work and at-home schooling or elder care. Evidence from other academic populations suggests that caregiving burdens during early COVID-19 were associated with declines in discretionary research time, with gendered patterns in those declines (Myers et al., 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2020). While these studies are not librarian-specific, they help interpret why librarians described heightened inter-role conflict under similar household constraints (McLay Paterson & Eva, 2022).

Role conflict was also shaped by institutional culture. In environments with explicit flexibility policies, workload adjustments, and clear messaging that health and caregiving needs were legitimate constraints, conflicts could be negotiated (e.g., by reducing meeting loads, shifting deadlines, or recalibrating expectations). In more rigid environments, librarians reported being expected to maintain pre-pandemic productivity while managing unprecedented non-work demands, thereby intensifying inter-role and person-role conflict.

An intersectional perspective adds further complexity to this view. According to Crenshaw's (1991) framework, role conflict during the pandemic can be understood as shaped by the intersection of professional expectations with caregiving duties, gender norms, marginalization, and, in specific contexts, insecure employment. In practical terms, librarians who were both caregivers and early-career faculty-status employees were often positioned at the nexus of high expectations and limited power to renegotiate them (McLay Paterson & Eva, 2022; Myers et al., 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2020).

Role overload: more tasks, same structures

Role overload, too much to do with too little time and too few people, predated COVID-19 in most academic libraries, driven by budget constraints, staffing freezes, and expanding digital portfolios.

The pandemic exacerbated overload in several ways:

- Service intensification: Virtual reference and online instructional support expanded at many institutions, and asynchronous content production multiplied, often becoming a routine expectation rather than an occasional add-on (Gmiterek, 2021; Hinchliffe & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020).
- Digital transformation projects: Libraries accelerated investments in open access discovery and related digital infrastructure, embedding complex new workflows into already full roles (Faniel et al., 2024).
- Compliance and reporting: Health and safety protocols, space-booking systems, and new metrics for online engagement created additional administrative work.

In JD-R terms, demands climbed while resources often lagged. A small number of national-level interventions illustrate what “structural resources” can look like during shocks. For example, the New Zealand Libraries Partnership Programme (NZLPP) was a time-limited initiative intended to retain and create library jobs in public libraries and support community recovery, alongside training and other service supports (National Library of New Zealand, 2022). At a broader labor-market level, the OECD's review of Nordic pandemic responses highlights the use of job-retention schemes and the involvement of social partners in enabling a swift response to pandemic disruption (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023). These sources do not directly measure academic librarians' workload, but they serve as exemplars of external policy capacity that can buffer organizations during crises.

Without redesign, overload became chronic. From a COR perspective, when library workers draw heavily on personal time, home equipment, and emotional energy to maintain continuity, recovery opportunities shrink, and resource-loss spirals can develop (Hobfoll, 1989). Over time, this pattern is associated with burnout, disengagement, and attrition (Maslach, 1993). Work on academic librarian burnout highlights similar dynamics, noting that intensifying demands and under-resourcing in collections, instruction, and digital services are recurring contributors to chronic exhaustion (Holm et al., 2022).

Moderating effects of institutional culture and labor protections

The same pandemic shock played out differently depending on institutional culture and labor protections:

- Where collective bargaining, unions, or strong staff councils exist, staff generally have more formal avenues to negotiate workload, safety protocols, and flexible work expectations (e.g., through bargaining or structured consultation). In the Nordic labor-market context, the OECD (2023) notes that social partners played a role in rapid decision-making and policy implementation during the pandemic, illustrating how institutionalized negotiation mechanisms can function as system-level resources.
- Qualitative interviews with Canadian academic librarians likewise show how institutional support and flexible policies shaped stress: positive experiences were associated with flexibility and ease of working from home, while negative experiences were linked to lack of support, disconnection, and boundary erosion (McLay Paterson & Eva, 2022).

These differences map closely onto Role Theory: supportive cultures and robust labor protections buffer role stress by enabling explicit role renegotiation. In contrast, less supportive or opaque cultures intensify

stress by constraining voice and flexibility. From a JD-R and COR perspective, transparent policies and credible negotiation mechanisms function as organizational resources that can blunt the impact of high demands and reduce the likelihood of resource-loss spirals.

In sum, pandemic-era stress patterns reveal a role architecture that is structurally overloaded, under-resourced, and highly sensitive to institutional culture. The following section turns from diagnosis to design.

From diagnosis to design: principles for role (re)design

Building on the foregoing analysis, this section proposes five interlocking principles for post-crisis role (re)design in academic libraries. Each principle targets specific role stressors and layers of the role architecture and is grounded in Role Theory, JD-R, and COR. Together, they aim to shift the system from a pattern of chronic overload and resource loss to one of sustainable challenge and resource replenishment.

The preceding diagnostic is descriptive: it interprets published evidence and pandemic-era accounts to identify how ambiguity, conflict, and overload arise from role architectures and resource conditions. The principles below are normative: they recommend design choices and governance mechanisms intended to reduce predictable role stressors, rebalance demands and resources, and improve workload equity.

Principle 1: clarify role cores and role boundaries

Design goal: Reduce role ambiguity and make role overload visible.

Conceptual rationale. When expectations are diffuse and ever-expanding, librarians have little basis for negotiating workload or setting priorities. Explicitly defining a role's "core" and "periphery" provides a reference point for decision-making and for collective governance of workload. It also makes visible which parts of the role architecture (service, scholarly, citizenship, and emotional labor) are most heavily loaded.

Practical strategies:

- Define role cores.

For each position, identify three to five core responsibilities that must be protected for the role to function, e.g., liaison responsibilities for specific departments, coordination of a key service, or leadership of a digital program. These go at the center of the role architecture (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Shupe et al., 2015).

- Differentiate flexible and optional tasks.

Flexible tasks are negotiable depending on capacity (e.g., committee assignments, special projects). Optional tasks are valuable but should be undertaken only when resources permit (e.g., pilot initiatives or additional outreach campaigns) (Buschman et al., 2023; University of Toronto Faculty Association & University of Toronto, 2023).

- Create written workload documents or memoranda of understanding (MOUs).

MOUs can list core, flexible, and optional responsibilities, along with approximate time allocations across the four role layers (service, scholarly, citizenship, and emotional labor). They provide a shared map that can be revisited when new initiatives arise or when personal circumstances change (University of Toronto Faculty Association & University of Toronto, 2023).

- Use role reviews at transition points.

Role descriptions should be revisited at hiring, after significant organizational changes (e.g., a new learning management system or

repository platform), after prolonged crises, and at key career milestones. Reviews should ask: Which new tasks have been added? Which older ones can be retired (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Shupe & Pung, 2011)?

- Effects on JD-R and COR.

Reducing ambiguity decreases cognitive and emotional demands. Clarifying cores can legitimize saying "no" or "not now" to peripheral requests, supporting resource conservation. Written documents provide librarians and supervisors with a tool to negotiate realistic expectations and can serve as a buffer resource when demands escalate.

Principle 2: align evaluation with actual roles

Design goal: Reduce person-role conflict and psychological strain by matching formal evaluation criteria with the work people actually do.

Conceptual rationale. Person-role conflict arises when expectations embedded in evaluation systems conflict with work realities or with an individual's constraints (Goode, 1960). Misalignments are common in academic libraries: promotion criteria may emphasize solo research output and traditional publication formats, even as librarians are rewarded informally for team-based service innovation, digital transformation work, and emotional labor.

Practical strategies:

- Audit evaluation and promotion criteria (McCormick et al., 2022; Mereaglia et al., 2021).

Review tenure, promotion, and annual review guidelines to ensure they recognize:

- Digital transformation work (e.g., building online guides, redesigning instruction, implementing open science infrastructure) (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Mereaglia et al., 2021).
- Collaborative and project-based work (e.g., co-authored scholarship, cross-unit initiatives) (Klein & Falk-Krzesinski, 2017; Mereaglia et al., 2021).
- Emotional labor and community care (e.g., mentoring, DEI leadership, crisis support) (Matteson & Miller, 2012; Vong et al., 2023).

- Embed crisis work and adaptability.

Explicitly credit contributions made during emergencies, rapid service pivots, design of contingency workflows, extensive remote teaching support, in evaluation narratives and criteria (McCormick et al., 2022; San Francisco State University, 2022).

- Diversify what "counts" as scholarship and service.

Value practice-based outputs (toolkits, policy documents, open educational resources, assessment reports) alongside traditional publications where appropriate (Boyer, 1990; Mereaglia et al., 2021).

- Align expectations across ranks and appointment types.

Avoid holding contingent, part-time, or non-tenure staff to implicit standards designed for full-time, tenure-eligible positions. Clarify what professional development, scholarship, and leadership are expected at each career stage and employment category (McCormick et al., 2022; University of Toronto Faculty Association & University of Toronto, 2023).

- Effects on JD-R and COR.

When evaluation systems recognize the full range of contributions,

emotional labor and crisis work become legitimate, rewarded parts of the role rather than invisible add-ons, reducing person-role conflict. Recognizing collaborative and practice-based outputs can turn some demands into perceived resources (e.g., project work that simultaneously advances promotion goals), supporting resource gains rather than losses.

Principle 3: engineer workload equity into roles

Design goal: Address role overload and inequity not just on a case-by-case basis, but structurally.

Conceptual rationale. Overload is often inequitably distributed: librarians with certain identities, skills, or reputations attract disproportionate demands. Those perceived as exceptionally reliable, digitally fluent, or committed to DEI work can become “go-to” people, taking on both formal and informal tasks. Without data, inequities remain anecdotal and challenging to address.

Practical strategies:

- Conduct routine workload-equity audits.

Track distribution of teaching, reference, committees, leadership roles, and crisis-related tasks. Use simple metrics (e.g., number of courses supported, hours on chat, number of committees chaired) as a starting point (Buschman et al., 2023; Winterman & Asher, 2021).

- Disaggregate workload data.

Analyze patterns by rank and appointment type. Where institutions already collect demographic information for equity monitoring, use aggregated, de-identified analyses (with voluntary self-identification and in consultation with HR/legal) to examine whether workload systems generate disparate burdens by gender, race/ethnicity, or caregiving status. Importantly, protected attributes should not be used to assign roles; they should be used only to audit equity and guide structural corrections (Crenshaw, 1991; Yildirim & Aycan, 2008).

- Rotate high-intensity duties.

For particularly demanding roles, frontline public service during crises, evening/weekend shifts, large-scale assessment projects, build rotation and backup coverage into the design, rather than leaving them to a small group of “heroes.” (Babcock et al., 2017; Guarino & Borden, 2017).

- Pair new initiatives with de-implementation.

Adopt a “stop-doing” rule: for each major new program or service that is expected to be ongoing, identify lower-value work that can be reduced or sunset (Buschman et al., 2023).

- Integrate equity criteria into decision-making.

For example, avoid concentrating major uncredited work (task forces, pilots, DEI service, crisis support) in a small set of “go-to” people (often early-career staff or those perceived as especially reliable or digitally fluent). When forming committees or project teams, consider both expertise and cumulative workload, and rotate opportunities and burdens over time (Babcock et al., 2017; Vong et al., 2023).

- Effects on JD-R and COR.

More even distribution of demands reduces chronic overload for specific individuals and groups. Transparent data and rotation mechanisms can improve perceptions of fairness, which is itself a resource in COR terms (supporting trust and engagement).

Principle 4: build job resources into role design

Design goal: Enhance job resources (autonomy, support, training, technology) to buffer high demands and support growth.

Conceptual rationale. High demands are not inherently harmful if matched with strong resources; indeed, challenging work can be energizing. The problem arises when librarians face high demands with insufficient autonomy, support, or tools (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Day et al., 2012; Ninaus et al., 2021). Job resources can be designed into roles rather than left to chance.

Practical strategies:

- Protect time for deep work.

Create “research days” or regular blocks of meeting-free time for scholarship, complex project work, or strategic planning. Shield these blocks from routine service or administrative tasks whenever possible (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Rogelberg et al., 2006).

- Strengthen supervisory and peer support.

Train supervisors to recognize early signs of burnout and role strain. Institutionalize peer mentoring, communities of practice, and debriefing spaces, especially for emotionally demanding frontline roles (Matteson & Miller, 2012, 2013).

- Invest in technology and infrastructure.

Ensure that remote work setups (hardware, secure access, bandwidth) meet basic ergonomic and productivity needs. Streamline platforms to reduce “tool sprawl,” which can itself be a demand (Day et al., 2012; Ninaus et al., 2021).

- Normalize boundary protections.

Adopt policies on expected response times, after-hours email, and meeting scheduling across time zones. Encourage leaders to model disconnecting during non-work hours and using leave (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Tedone, 2022).

- Support job crafting within clear role cores.

Within agreed-upon constraints, enable librarians to tailor aspects of their roles to better align with their strengths and interests, for example, by trading some committee work for deeper involvement in pedagogy, digital scholarship, or community engagement. Job crafting, when aligned with organizational needs, can enhance engagement and well-being (Zhang & Parker, 2019).

- Effects on JD-R and COR.

Improved resources increase capacity to meet demands without depleting core personal reserves. Boundary protections and deep work time create opportunities for recovery and skill-building, counteracting resource-loss spirals. Thoughtful job crafting, anchored in clear role cores, allows individuals to build resource “reserves” by aligning work with strengths and values.

Principle 5: plan for crisis-mode role shifts

Design goal: Make crisis-time role changes explicit, equitable, and repeatable.

Conceptual rationale. COVID-19 demonstrated that libraries can adapt quickly, but much of that adaptation was improvised and depended on individual heroics. From a Role Theory perspective, crisis response should not rely solely on ad hoc over-performance by a subset

of staff; it should be embedded in pre-planned role-shift scenarios. Otherwise, crisis demands are likely to exacerbate existing inequities and accelerate burnout.

Practical strategies:

- Develop role-shift playbooks.

Map how roles will change under different scenarios (campus closure, partial reopening, major system failure). Identify which services will be prioritized, which paused, and how responsibilities will be redistributed across the core service, scholarly, citizenship, and emotional labor layers (Jardine & Musun-Miller, 2022).

- Cross-train staff.

Ensure that critical functions (e.g., virtual reference, authentication, and data backups) are staffed by multiple trained staff across units. Integrate cross-training into everyday operations so that it is not perceived as an additional burden during a crisis (Johnson, 1996).

- Pre-negotiate crisis policies.

Work with unions, staff councils, or human-resources offices to agree in advance on accommodations, workload adjustments, and evaluation adaptations during emergencies. Align these with institutional policies on remote work, health and safety, and caregiving support (OECD, 2023; San Francisco State University, 2022; University of Toronto Faculty Association & University of Toronto, 2023).

- Include equity checks in crisis planning.

Assess whether proposed role shifts inadvertently concentrate burdens on staff with less institutional power or less flexibility (e.g., early-career staff, those with substantial non-work constraints such as caregiving). Use transparent, role-based criteria and invite voluntary input about constraints; where demographic data are used, rely on aggregated, de-identified analyses and consult HR/legal. Adjust plans accordingly (Myers et al., 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2020; Yildirim & Aycan, 2008).

- Document and review after each crisis.

Conduct structured debriefs to refine playbooks, update role architectures, and close feedback loops. Integrate lessons learned into strategic planning rather than treating crisis adaptations as temporary anomalies (Jardine & Musun-Miller, 2022; Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013).

- Effects on JD-R and COR.

Clear plans reduce ambiguity and fear during crises, even when demands are high. Cross-training and pre-negotiated accommodations distribute demands more evenly and protect vulnerable staff from acute overload. Debriefs generate learning gains, adding to organizational resources and supporting more resilient role architectures.

Implications for policy and leadership

Realigning role architecture requires changes at multiple levels: within libraries, across campuses, and within professional bodies and consortia. Leadership is central at each level.

Library-level policies

At the library level, leaders can:

- Institutionalize role-mapping and workload documents.

Require that every position has a current role architecture document that specifies cores, flexible components, and typical time allocations. Incorporate these into annual review processes and strategic planning.

- Embed equity audits in strategic planning.

Routinely review workload distribution and representation in high-visibility roles (task forces, leadership positions) when setting strategic priorities. Make the findings on workload equity visible to staff and explain how they inform decisions.

- Recognize emotional and community-care work.

Incorporate explicit categories in annual reviews for mentoring, DEI work, community engagement, and crisis support, backed by qualitative narratives and, where feasible, workload adjustments. Holm et al. (2022) synthesize recurring high-risk patterns (e.g., chronic understaffing, unclear expectations, service escalation, and undervalued emotional labor) and identify interventions aligned with role architecture redesign (e.g., workload assessment, more explicit role definitions, supportive supervision, and boundary norms).

- Support flexible and hybrid work.

Use evidence from pandemic operations to design sustainable hybrid models that balance user needs with staff well-being. At the policy level, OECD analyses of Nordic pandemic responses emphasize social dialogue and labor protections that supported swift adjustments to working conditions, and initiatives such as the New Zealand Libraries Partnership Programme (NZLPP) illustrate time-limited workforce investments to retain library jobs and sustain services during recovery (National Library of New Zealand, 2022; OECD, 2023). Clarify which tasks can be done remotely, under what conditions, and how remote work is reflected in evaluations.

- Align scheduling with redesigned roles.

When implementing new reference or instruction scheduling models (e.g., hybrid or asynchronous services), use the role architecture and workload equity data to avoid overloading particular groups (Dong & Mabry, 2024).

Campus-level policies

Libraries cannot fix role architecture alone. Campus-level actors, provosts, academic-personnel offices, human resources, and unions, play crucial roles by:

- Revising tenure and promotion guidelines.

Where librarians hold faculty status, criteria should clearly credit work on digital transformation, collaborative scholarship, and crisis contributions. Campuses can use role-architecture maps to reinterpret the “research,” “service,” and “teaching” categories in ways that better fit contemporary librarianship.

- Codifying caregiver support and flexible work.

Pandemic-era evidence of uneven impacts on caregivers (Myers et al., 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2020) supports policies such as formal dependent-care leave, longer-term adjustments to expectations, and flexible scheduling options beyond crisis windows. These policies should apply to librarians as well as other academic staff.

- Aligning IT and library strategies.

Many role stressors originate in fragmented digital ecosystems and unclear expectations about “always available” support. Joint planning among libraries, IT, and teaching and learning centers can reduce conflicting demands and ensure that digital transformations are appropriately resourced.

- Incorporating equity commitments into workload policies.

Campus-wide equity, diversity, and inclusion strategies should explicitly address workload distribution, recognizing that DEI work, mentoring, and community engagement are often concentrated among staff from marginalized groups.

Sector-level guidance

Professional associations, consortia, and national bodies can:

- Issue role and workload guidelines.

Develop normative statements on sustainable librarian workloads, drawing parallels to what some medical and education bodies have done around burnout. These statements can build on emerging collective work, such as *Academic Librarian Burnout: Causes and Responses*, and the growing literature on librarians' emotional labor.

- Collect and disseminate benchmarks.

Support cross-institutional studies of workload, hybrid-work practices, and role-design interventions to create evidence-based benchmarks rather than relying on local, ad hoc norms. Sector-level surveys and case-study collections can help libraries identify where their role architectures deviate.

- Advocate for funding structures that support resilience.

Initiatives such as the New Zealand Libraries Partnership Programme (NZLPP), a time-limited program designed to retain and create library jobs in public libraries and support community recovery, illustrate how targeted investments can protect both staff capacity and services during shocks ([National Library of New Zealand, 2022](#)). Associations can advocate for such investments and help document their impacts.

Leadership matters across all these levels. Transparent, empathetic leaders who use data, invite staff voice, and treat role (re)design as a shared project are better positioned to translate the principles above into lived practice. In contrast, leaders who frame stress as an individual resilience problem rather than a structural design issue risk perpetuating the conditions that lead to burnout.

Conclusion

The pandemic is no longer an acute emergency on most campuses, but its lessons for academic librarianship remain urgent. COVID-19 exposed how fragile existing role architectures were: the same underlying patterns of role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload that had long characterized the profession suddenly intensified, intersecting with unequal caregiving burdens, digital inequities, and divergent institutional responses.

Viewing this experience through Role Theory, supplemented by JD-R and COR, highlights a central insight: occupational stress in academic libraries is not simply a matter of individual coping; it is structurally produced by how roles are defined, layered, resourced, and evaluated. When librarians are expected to inhabit multiple roles simultaneously, service provider, scholar, institutional citizen, affective anchor, without clear boundaries, adequate resources, or equitable workload

distribution, chronic strain is the predictable outcome.

This article makes three main conceptual contributions. First, it articulates a role architecture model for academic librarianship that distinguishes four interlocking layers: core service, scholarly, institutional citizenship, and emotional labor, and highlights predictable fault lines both between these layers and at the boundary between professional roles and non-work roles. Second, it uses post-pandemic stress patterns as a diagnostic lens, showing how pandemic-era experiences reveal structural weaknesses in role design, particularly in digital transformation and caregiving. Third, it develops five design principles, clarifying cores and boundaries, aligning evaluation with actual roles, engineering workload equity, building resources into role design, and planning for crisis-mode shifts, that offer a concrete roadmap for structural reform.

Future empirical work is needed to test and refine these proposals. Potential avenues include:

- Longitudinal studies of libraries that implement workload audits and role MOUs, examining impacts on burnout, retention, and service quality.
- Comparative research on hybrid-work models and their effects on role stress and performance.
- Qualitative investigations of how librarians experience role reforms in different institutional and national contexts, with attention to intersectionality and power.

The analysis here has limitations. It draws primarily on Anglophone and European literature and may not fully capture the realities of academic librarianship in the Global South or in systems with very different governance structures. It is conceptual rather than empirical, relying on synthesis and interpretation rather than new data collection. These limitations underscore the importance of locally grounded research and of adapting the role-architecture framework to diverse institutional contexts.

Ultimately, the goal is not to reduce the complexity of academic librarianship, but to make role trade-offs explicit and manageable. Role architecture provides a structured approach to aligning expectations, evaluation, and resources, so that sustainability and equity are built into the work system rather than relying on individual self-sacrifice.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marco De Prosperis: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly (an AI-assisted tool) for grammar, spelling, and style edits. AI tools were not used to generate or analyze research data. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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