The Active Librarian:

Community Outreach is the Future of Librarianship

LIBR 200-08

Professor Mark Stover

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Research Paper Prepared by:

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## Introduction – Getting Started

I knew before the semester began that I would have to write a research paper for LIBR 200, so I started thinking of possible research topics in August, before the fall session had even begun. This wasn't much help though, as this is my first semester in the program and at that time I knew very little about the profession; I still know very little about the profession, but throughout this semester I have been exposed to many issues and areas of interest within the Library and Information Science profession. In fact, I came up with a new research topic every week! This was exciting and motivating, but at the same time it was frustrating. I was excited because I was learning so much and it was interesting, and each new week only validated my decision to enter the program. I began to feel frustrated when I realized that time was running out and I needed to settle on one research topic—I couldn't write about everything! It wasn't until the class entered week seven, *Valuing the Information Professional*, that I realized what I needed to research and write about.

How do communities value their public libraries? How aware are people of the ways libraries are evolving? Why do most people I talk to not understand what librarians do? Are physical libraries as we know them at the end (or close to the end) of their days? If so, what will these new libraries look like? Along with these questions that surfaced for me during week seven were concerns about week five's topic – *The Status of Librarianship as a Profession*. For me, both of these weeks' discussions raised some great concerns about the future of libraries and the librarians that run them. My goal is to become a librarian, so it only makes sense that I would be concerned with how the profession is perceived by the public, how this perception will change, and how the library as physical space is changing. After evaluating these two areas of librarianship, I came up with my research paper: The Active Librarian: Community Outreach is

the Future of Librarianship. Rubin (2004) says that "librarianship is in the midst of a great change" (p. 437). I believe this statement to be very true, and through this research paper I aim to try and understand some of these changes and how communities throughout the county will adapt and change with their public libraries.

## You Need a Degree for That?

Not too long ago, my partner (who will be referred to as Ken) and I engaged in a conversation about libraries, librarians, and what the future holds for both. He still has to ask me "what exactly is it that you're studying?" whenever I bring up the subject. I respond by telling him I'm studying to be a Librarian, and I guess that's not enough of an explanation for someone like him who doesn't see the need or usefulness of libraries to begin with. Usually, his next question is, "you need a degree for that?" During our conversation, Ken discovered that most libraries now hold DVDs and music in their collections for people to check out. He had no idea that this was happening in libraries, but even with this new knowledge his perception of libraries did not change. Ken also only recently discovered that libraries offer free access to the Internet and wireless signals throughout the library. Admittedly, this alone would be enough to get Ken to step foot in a library, but the fact that his cell phone is also a portable modem that he can use anywhere to hook up to his laptop and have wireless capabilities, I highly doubt his library use will change, ever! Ken is a very intelligent man; he has a successful career, and appreciates fun activities and engages in them at every possible moment. He does not consider reading fun. I can honestly say that out of the six years I have known Ken, I have not seen him read a book once. The extent of his reading consists of car and motorcycle racing magazines. When he catches me snuggled up with a book he asks if I'm bored. Ken and I share two completely different views of

books, education, and libraries. Though he is a college graduate, he truly believes that education can only get a person so far in life—the idea of lifelong learning is not one he has adopted even though his mother and stepfather are both high school teachers. From Ken's point of view, libraries do best serving underprivileged communities and individuals who cannot afford a computer or access to the Internet. "Why would I need to go to the library?" This is the million dollar question. Why does anyone need to go to the library? What I explained to Ken is that for some, it may be a matter of need; for others it may be a matter of curiosity or want, and still for others it may be a matter of stimulation of the mind, body, and soul through lifelong learning and connecting with other humans and ideas. Hawkins, Morris, and Sumison (2001) rightly suggest that "the value of library benefits varies between users. Demand and use of libraries varies with age, location, education, wealth, interest and career" (p. 91). While Ken loves to learn new things, but not necessarily through traditional avenues, I also love to learn. This we have in common. However, while my views are more humanistic, his are more calculated and tangible and he holds to the assertion that libraries will be non-existent in years to come with digital preservation and electronic resources and communication taking over the traditional library that most librarians (and librarians to be) know and love.

Towards the end of our conversation I realized that Ken was set in his beliefs and the best I could possibly convince him of was to call librarians something other than librarians, "How about Knowledge Navigators?" I suggested. He did his little downturned lip, head-nod that he does and agreed that the title was fitting. While I understand that the days of valuing the traditional book are for the most part gone (except for the percent of the population who holds true to this tradition and pleasure past-time), I also understand that there are some in the profession, and in the general public, who refuse to acknowledge this fact. There has to be a

point of convergence. The differing views have to mesh in the middle somewhere: traditional meets modern. In order for libraries to evolve successfully, everyone has to be willing to learn new things and find a way to incorporate old views into today's.

## What about Value?

The reality of the economic value of public libraries is so much more than a numbers game. Sure one can create formulas and evaluate statistics to end up at some numerical or monetary value of libraries, but what about what people actually think and what they say about libraries and the services libraries provide? In their article *The Economic Value of Public Libraries,* Hawkins et al. (2001) outline three economic concepts associated with public libraries and how value can be determined by library administrators and the public alike. The first is Merit Goods. Merit goods are described as "goods or services to which society accepts that everyone should have access, regardless of their means" (p. 90). An example Hawkins et al. gives is healthcare because obviously our society accepts that everyone is entitled to access to healthcare. Where the public library is concerned with merit goods is in the fact that public libraries "maintain literacy, stimulate the imagination, and expand personal horizons" for all who are interested. Libraries also "inform and empower citizens, enable access to a common cultural heritage, and promote a sense of ownership of society" (p. 90). For the most part, at least with my experience, the majority of the public understands that library services are free and available for anyone to use. The library does not discriminate and this is a facet of the public library that should never change. As the needs of communities shift more towards gaining a better understanding of computers and developing computer literacy, libraries' services and focus must also shift. As a volunteer at my public library I see my community's needs shifting before my

eyes. I met a Mexican American couple just the other day who wanted to know how to "start from the beginning" with a computer. They asked me if they can just sit at a computer at the library and use it. I see this kind of need more and more, and because I see it more that means the library is doing a good job of promoting this service. One thing that can improve this situation is if librarians and library staff were more alert and active in the library with user support. For example, a Mexican American woman staring at a computer might not know that it is okay for her to use. In this case, an alert librarian would confront the patron and assist. As libraries' roles shift, librarians will have to become more intuitive to the needs and possible needs of library users.

The second economic concept that Hawkins et al. (2001) describe is External Benefit. This occurs "when a person or persons not directly involved in a transaction nevertheless receives benefit from it" (p. 90). An example of this would be someone researching and developing a business plan in the library in order to start their own small business in the community. If this business turned out to flourish into a successful flower shop, the community would then benefit by having quality flowers available in their community.  The library provided the resources for the patron to develop a business plan that in turn contributes to his community's economical condition. As libraries' roles shift, libraries will have to promote their external benefits to the communities that surround them.

The third economic concept that is presented by Hawkins et al. (2001) is Public Good. A public good is "one which, when consumed by one person, is still available for use by another" (p. 91). Library services are there for public use, and they are meant to be used over and over; they are meant to be all inclusive meaning "no one can be excluded from enjoying their benefits" (p. 91). Libraries will need to prove to the public that their services are necessary and relevant,

and librarians will need to be trained to provide individualized assistance to patrons in order to serve as a true public good. The mystique of the Librarian will have to be vanquished.

## Libraries Depend on Public Will

Libraries are vital resources to communities and they support individual growth and human connections; this is no secret. The future of libraries is uncertain and will remain to be uncertain if such a large percentage of the public remains in the dark about why libraries exist (or still exist). It is important for communities to come together with libraries to understand what changes are occurring and how community members can help. How do community members become aware of their library's struggle to stay open and current in the first place?

Friedenwald-Fisherman and Lee Dellinger (2006) outline a five-phase strategy that serves as a series of steps that promote awareness within the community in order to foster ongoing support for libraries. The phases are as follows: frame the problem; build awareness; share information; create personal conviction; and evaluate and reinforce. While all of these steps are important, the two that are most important and that must be carefully conveyed to the community are the phases of framing the problem and sharing information. Libraries have to clearly define the issue/s that threaten them so the community can understand how they can help. If library administrators can find a way to relate to the majority population with issues the library faces and make these issues the community's issues too, community members will be more willing to listen and play a part in creating and being part of the solution. Friedenwald-Fisherman and Lee Dellinger (2006) say that "in this phase, organizers clarify what needs to be addressed by conducting research to develop a clear knowledge base about the causes of the problem, the cultural context in which the problem exists, and the entities that can impact the problem" (p.

45). I think about this statement and wonder if Ken would be affected by this sort of outreach from the library. Perhaps if there were children involved, and he felt that the library's problems were also their problems, then he might have a different outlook. If he felt his children's literacy and social development were jeopardized, then maybe he would feel obligated to help.

During phase two, Friedenwald-Fisherman and Lee Dellinger (2006) suggest that "outreach moves from raising awareness to providing information about how change can occur and what needs to be done" (p. 46). It is important for organizers to "focus on providing specific information about how to impact change through personal, community, and institutional actions" (Friedenwald-Fisherman and Lee Dellinger, 2006, p. 46). Libraries need to do all they can to reach out to their communities. The future success of libraries depends on how well administrators and organizers reach out to the Kens of the world. There has to be some connection that hasn't been made yet with those people who feel the library is of no benefit to them, and that connection is what libraries should tap into. What stands out in the statement about is the phrase "specific information." If the public is given specific information about what problems their library is facing, and specific information about how the general public can help, then communication lines would be more open and more community members would be informed and more willing to contribute. Understanding is the key, because when we don't understand we tend to shy away and act as though certain problems in life are not ours (when in fact those problems are probably linked to us in some way). Perhaps the library's computer training program is suffering due to lack of volunteers. This is a specific problem that requires a specific solution: more volunteers are needed. The library can advertise this need by making the public aware of how these under supported programs affect the community directly. A lack in computer docents means less people in the community are receiving basic computer instruction

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at no cost. A lack in computer docents means families who need help creating email accounts to communicate with friends and family (and who would usually turn to the library for this support) would have to go without. The community needs to understand how their public library's problems are the communities' problems too.

## Public Libraries as Community Centers

By just taking a look around, and actually stepping inside public libraries as they are today, one will discover the fundamental structure that libraries are known for has been transformed. Anderson (1994) says that "of all the buildings which make up the town, the library is one which all may use – from the smallest child to the oldest senior citizen." Yes, all of us may use the library, but all of us do not. The trouble that libraries are having is communicating to communities that the library is not just a place to read or do research, but that it is indeed a place to participate in "community improvement" (Anderson, 1994), self-improvement, and life-long learning. The library as community center "focuses residents on one place for [gathering] information and [engaging in] civic activity" (Anderson, 1994). Through conversation I have engaged in with family and friends (like the one I described above with Ken), I have discovered that there are many people who still hold a traditional view of the library, and librarians. They are not aware of the new ways in which libraries are reorganizing their programming to better serve their communities. For example, I know of many families with children who would greatly benefit from their public library's summer reading program, but they are unaware that a program like that exists. As stated in *The Library as Community Center*, "when a community has a library, it somehow seems as if the community has reached legitimacy, is solid, sure" (Anderson, 1994). This legitimacy and sureness is most seen during times of economic hard times. When

people are out of work, the library community center can provide them with guidance and career development, help with job applications and job searches, provide support and assurance when times are unsure, and be a place of community support, inspiration, and good health (physical and mental).

It is true that "some residents closely identify with their library and are quite loyal to it. This is particularly true in smaller communities" (Anderson, 1994). The goal for library community centers is to identify with all of its community residents. The library community center can be used as a place for centralized community planning, as voting headquarters, and employment recruitment. The physical space of libraries as we know them is coming to an end, and libraries will do well to develop closer relationships with their communities as a whole. Anderson states that "through its community involvement and reflection, the library and its staff are often a part of the community group which is making decisions on the direction of the city. Librarians serve on planning task forces, participate in various networks, and serve on committees which address community needs" (1994). This is the future of libraries. No longer will they be mysterious houses of knowledge; they will be familiar community centers where teens and young adults will learn about personal responsibility, civic responsibility, familial responsibility, and all the while developing an appreciation for acquiring knowledge and knowing how to access and obtain information that is vital to their everyday existence. Not only will future library community centers be structured for community gathering and learning, but they will also be a "neutral place . . . a place where divergent ideas and people with differing lifestyles, education, and economic levels can gather" (Anderson, 1994). The library community center will be a safe haven and a "respite or a place of reason in the abstract" (Anderson, 1994). I envision future library community centers as busy places and with programs for every interest,

but also with many staff members and community members gathered at any one time. To me, library community centers will be a family's final stop before they arrive at home for the evening.

*Almaden Public Library and Community Center*
*San Jose, CA*

Attending the California Library Association Annual Conference in November was a wonderful first experience for me. I learned a great deal about the future of the profession and how many libraries are already evolving and preparing for the continuing change that is inevitable for them. I was able to participate in a tour of the Almaden Public Library and Community Center. This tour allowed me to see firsthand what future libraries will look like (or should look like in my opinion). The Almaden Library was my first exposure to a library/community center and I was quite impressed at what was achieved. This library is one of the first joint use facilities in the San Francisco Bay Area. It is a 65,000 square foot building and accommodates a gymnasium, fitness facilities, community and activity space, meeting rooms, offices, coffee shop, and a full service library.

Just by walking through the building it is evident that Almaden is very popular with members of the community with an average of 4,000 users per day. From the commentary our tour guide provided, I learned that because community members pride themselves on the condition and appearance of their community, they played an important part in designing the library/community center. The public will of the surrounding community is very strong. The building was bustling with people of all ages.

**Figure 1: Almaden Library & Community Center front entrance**



Library users were engaged with librarians and library services, and young school aged kids were engaging with each other through computers and books. Senior citizens were preparing for an exercise class in one of the main fitness facilities. There were multiple customer service desks clearly marked. There was definitely not a lack of usage by the community. I went back to the library to visit a second time when I left the conference on Monday afternoon. What I noticed during this second visit was that the Almaden Library was used by many in the community as a routine place: the library was a real and permanent fixture in the daily lives of many community members. Parents leave work and stop at Almaden to pick up information on community events or browse for the next book they want to read. Children and teens are at Almaden after school either in study groups or with their families spending quality time. The community members are using Almaden to enrich their lives and bring learning into the core of their existence.

The Almaden model is the future for libraries. With an offering of programs for all interests and all ages, the success of the model is a bright reality. Working together, communities and libraries will form partnerships that will benefit everyone.

**Make the Connection**

Now and in the future, libraries have no choice but to "build and mobilize a strong network of supporters" (Barber and Wallace, 2008, p. 53). This means Friends' networks will have to be strengthened, local businesses will have to be utilized for advertising, city Chamber of Commerce will have to be looked at as a major resource for community outreach, and libraries and librarians will have to reach out to their communities more than they ever have.  Librarians' number one duty is to teach people. We teach people how to find information, how to use information and information technology, where to find information, and how to decipher what information is good and appropriate. "The impact of technology on library staff cannot be overestimated. 'Our world is revolutionized' . . . 'We provide so much more service than before we had computers'" (Barber and Wallace, 2008, 53). More and more, people will turn to the library to learn how to use computers and to learn the most efficient way to find information; the library is where people go to learn these skills for free.

In their article, Barber and Wallace conducted a public survey during site visits to various libraries. They wanted to know what the public thinks about library services and how connected libraries are to their communities. At some libraries, Barber and Wallace witnessed lines of people waiting to get in. Once they were in, "most people headed straight to the computers" (Barber and Wallace, 2008, 54). Many even told the interviewers that "computers are the primary reason they come to the library" (p. 54). It was very evident to Barber and Wallace that the public valued access to computers that libraries provide. Through their interviews, Barber and Wallace (2008) discovered that "not everyone wants a computer at home," (p. 54) and the public values the quiet atmosphere that is sometimes not available at home.

Connecting with the people and their needs is paramount for libraries today. Finding out

what those needs are is the first step; maintaining the services and programming for users is the second; monitoring those services and the development of new and improved programming is the third step. If people feel that their needs are not being met by their library then they will go elsewhere and that is just a fact of life. Libraries are in competition with other organizations, and this competition will only continue to grow.

## Masters of Change

While at the CLA Conference I attended a workshop called *Leaders in Libraries: Masters of Change* presented by David Bendekovic. Bendekovic (2008) discussed what great libraries are doing to lead the way for future libraries to create change within their programming. Bendekovic also discussed how libraries can improve their image and inform the public of the ways libraries are changing in our current time. What I found interesting in this workshop was that Bendekovic emphasized the point that you do not need a title to be a leader. He proposed that being a leader is a choice we make, not a certain position we hold. So, libraries need to just step out and lead the way for their communities; become the reason communities thrive. All through the history of libraries they have been known to influence people and change peoples lives. When did that change? This is where libraries need to head back to.

One library created Library Champions. The Louisville Free Public Library issued yard signs to each of its 30,254 Summer Reading Champions. These children were able to display the signs in their front yards for their entire community to see. Some children even received congratulation cards from their neighbors. The signs were a way to reward the children for their reading achievements and also a way to promote the library's summer reading program. Some community members didn't even know the program existed until they learned where the children

got the signs from. The signs were a positive reinforcement for the children and strengthened the

children's bond with the library and their commitment to learning.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXDLwDVN73Q

Another library, the Princeton Public Library, decided to keep the library open and come

together "as a community" to watch the 2004 presidential election results. More than 350 people

gathered to watch the election unfold on big screens along with commentary from a Princeton

University political professor. Now this event is a tradition. I can only imagine what the 2008

election night turnout was like. The library serves refreshments and snacks while the community

has a safe place to learn about and watch the election with their friends, family, and fellow

community residents.

The Clark County Public Library has found an innovative way to use tablet PCs in their

library to improve patron services, save time, and save money. Librarians use tablet PCs while

they roam the library. This allows librarians to manage library inventory, be a roaming reference

librarian, create an impromptu anywhere circulation station, act as a bookmobile, and to use in

meetings and presentations.  The idea of having a roaming librarian is great. Library users will

feel as though their librarian is more available and accessible. Librarians will reach out to more

community members. Libraries will take on a whole new dynamic and redefine customer

service.

Monroe County Public Library has its community member "tuning into the library." By

creating a local library channel, this library has created another way people can connect with the

library, with neighbors, with local government, and even with the world. The library channel

increases access to library services, encourages reading and the use of the library, exposes

community members to services they might not have know existed, telecasts local events,

speakers, and forums of interest to the community.

Another way libraries can be Masters of Change is to partner with local businesses to promote library services and programming. If businesses advertise to their customers that they support the local library by offering discounts to customers who show their library card at purchase, awareness will be spread and community members will tell each other about the discount and relationship with the library. Restaurants, grocery stores, car washes, salons, shopping malls, and movie theaters can all play a major role in spreading library services awareness.

## What it all Means, Maybe

One thing I've held onto this semester is that I have developed more questions than answers. I have accepted this as okay. I think it is important to explore and understand those questions, and if I happen to stumble across an answer then that is just a feel-good bonus. In our last class lecture Professor Stover posed some predictions about some critical issues for the future of libraries:

1. Community outreach will become a major part of every librarian's job, especially in public libraries.

2. Library buildings will become more welcoming to visitors through coffee shops, gaming, community activities, and spaces for collaborative learning.

3. Librarians will position themselves (and will successfully market themselves) as knowledge navigators.

I agree with these three predictions and feel that active librarians will do all three. Active

public librarians will create more effective outreach programs within their communities that promote the value and necessity of library services. Technology is definitely taking over in the library world, so librarians have no choice but to embrace it and incorporate it into their everyday routines. Librarians will focus their service more towards teaching the skills needed to use technology and navigate the Internet and library services. Librarians will have to get their faces out in the public. They will need to show the public what we look like, how our faces have changed, and what our new agenda is. For the Ken's of the community, I think unless something changes in their own life, like getting married and having kids, then there might always be a missing link there and librarians may never be able to connect. But I have hope that some force will pull Ken and others who think like him to the library. Maybe he will develop some need to serve his community in the future – maybe not – the library will be there nonetheless. Maybe it will take having children to make him understand the importance of libraries and literacy. Maybe if he were not as well off as he is he would have an appreciation and understanding of librarians and the services they provide. Maybe then he would actually use the library.

I do believe community center libraries are the future. There is so much potential here for librarians to reach community members in need. The Almaden model serves as an extraordinary success and something for libraries all over the country to strive for.

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