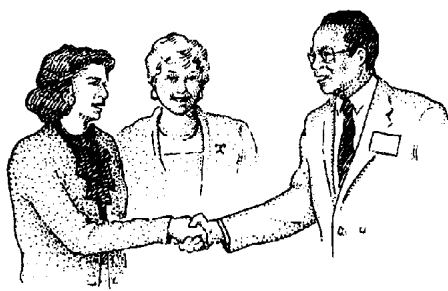


Knowing Your Community and Its Needs

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The public library's goals are to serve the educational, cultural, informational, and recreational needs and interests of its community. Although this may on the surface appear to be an easy job, it is often most challenging to the librarian. How does the librarian really get to know the community and how does the librarian keep in touch with the community in order to decide how its changing interests and needs can best be served? Even communities that have always been very stable may become transient, and even the needs and interests of the most stable community will change.

A community is a complex entity composed of many kinds of people with a wide variety of interests, different occupations and professions, a wide range of ages, many levels of schooling, and diverse backgrounds and origins. Some people have grown up in the community and know the community intimately while others are fairly new and just getting acquainted. Each community is unique. Even adjacent communities can be very different. They are controlled by different people with different points of view and different goals. The librarian is faced with how best to serve this diverse group of people. To interest many of them in libraries is a challenge, but to serve them well, often on a small budget, is even more of a challenge.

But knowledge of the community is at the heart of good public library service. A public library should re-

flect its community in the development of its collection, services, and programs. It may seem obvious, but the library in a community with a large blue collar population should have a different focus from one which serves an affluent professional community. Although the basic collection of any library may be similar, the rest of the collection should reflect a library staff's intimate knowledge of the community.

To be effective, the librarian must not only get to know the community well but must stay in touch with the community at all times. The library must change as the community changes. Many of these changes will be subtle and not immediately obvious to the casual observer. They may be changes in ideas and attitudes or changes in the physical surroundings, but they will all be changes important to the development of the library and its collection of materials. This publication will cover both getting to know the community and keeping in touch with the community in order to respond to new and changing interests and needs of its residents.

Researching the Community

Researching the community is both a formal and informal process. Some information can be systematically collected to provide background on the community while another block of information, less formal

and equally important to the life of the community, must be gathered in a more serendipitous manner.

Formal Research

Formal research means collecting the facts and figures on the community including both statistical information as well as the names of the people who hold the key offices in the community. Logically the place to start is with the census. Depending on what year it is, the census figures may be more or less useful. At the end of a decade just before a new census or when a new census has been taken but not released, the figures may not be as accurate as might be desired, particularly if the library is in a community which has obviously changed. Nonetheless the census figures are a useful starting place.

What can be learned from the census? The census breakdowns by sex, age and marital status will provide information about the number of men and women in the community, the range of ages in the community, indicating whether the community has a predominance of older or younger people, and the number of single people in relation to married ones. There may be a larger than usual number of single women in the community or there may be a large number of single heads of households. If these single heads of households are working full time, how to schedule programs for their children and when to schedule family programs will need to be considered.

The age breakdown is also important. Is this a young or old community? Are there many young families or do most families have older children who have left home? Is there a large number of retired people? The library will not want to unrealistically expand the children's collection if the community's population is an aging one. Or there may be signs of an increase in the number of young children, and the library will want to gear up for this. A population with many young children will be eager for preschool story hours while an aging population may be grateful for a shut-in service and a no-fine policy for senior citizens. Whether the community has largely single people or married couples should also influence service decisions. Each group may present different needs in terms of collection development and programming.

Educational data is provided by the census. The library may be situated in a highly educated community or it may be in a community that has predominantly high school graduates or is evenly split between the two. Educational considerations will influence the development of the library collection and may challenge a library with limited dollars. Do people ask for more sophisticated books and magazines? Do they read book reviews and request more demanding reading or

do they want the best sellers and other popular works? They may need material for educational programs in which they are enrolled if they do not have easy access to institutions of higher education which can supply those needs. Community residents may be studying for graduate degrees, trying to get their high school equivalency or enrolling in a two-year degree program.

The census provides information on ethnic groups in the community—Black, Hispanic, Asian-American, etc.—including the language spoken at home, citizenship, etc. These statistics are most useful to the library. They will provide information as to whether the community has large numbers of people who are recent immigrants or first generation Americans and if there are ethnic groups in the community who have different customs and traditions which may affect their ideas about libraries and how they use them. These statistics are not very reliable in some areas of the country due to the number of illegal aliens. Part of the collection and the services and programs should be geared to any sizable ethnic group in the community. There are many creative ways to deal with foreign-born groups. The library could set up English as a Second Language classes, acquire books in other languages, and develop special programs or information resources. When would these groups come to the library for a program? Will the women come only if they can bring their children? Maybe the library can help them break down some of the barriers to the rest of the community by inviting them to cooperate on a festival of dances, music, food, and crafts from their country.

Next, look at some of the housing figures available to get an idea of living patterns in the community. Are there apartments available or only single family housing? If the price range is not wide enough to encourage a diversity of people to move into the community, it can become very stagnant. Is housing too expensive for young couples and for the elderly? What is happening to them? If they are leaving the community, then the library may be serving a large group of middle-aged people. On the other hand, is this an expanding community with lots of new housing built during the past few years? Examine who these new residents are and whether they have become library users. Work with the local Welcome Wagon to be sure that these new residents are provided with information about the library including how to get a library card.

Finally look at the occupational information on the community. What kinds of jobs do people hold? Where do they work? Are two adults in the family working? Are there professional people, university faculty, people who work in the service professions, factory workers, etc.? A large number of people with a college education in the community may generate a demand for more sophisticated materials and services. If

the community has many blue collar workers, there may be a demand for more popular materials and more outreach may be required through their place of work or through their extra-curricular activities to get them acquainted with the library and its resources.

Census figures are usually not the only statistics available in the community so the librarian should look elsewhere for other sources. Sometimes a local or county government has done some surveys of its own or surveys may have been done by planning boards or by social service agencies. They may have asked different questions and might have gathered their data more recently. Most states do statistical compilations which may be useful. It's worth the time to see what's available. If the librarian is interested in exploring some particular aspect of the community such as housing patterns or employment, calls to those specific government agencies at the state, county, or municipal level can provide additional information or updated information. Offices on aging, for example, can often provide much better information on the over 55 age group than otherwise available. There are still other places to look for statistical data. Some local organizations have done their own surveys and published the results. Groups like the League of Women Voters and the American Association of University Women are good ones to try for information as well as the public schools and the Chamber of Commerce.

Statistical information must be analyzed, but the librarian can probably do it or find someone knowledgeable in the community to help. This useful information will help to start planning the best possible collection and services for the community. It can help to avoid obvious, expensive errors.

There is other community information to be collected and used. The librarian should do a survey of the kinds of publications which exist in the community. Has any group done a history of the community or put together recent facts and figures? The League of Women Voters often does this. Is there a daily or weekly newspaper? It may have interesting back files that can provide a perspective on what's been happening. Sometimes they do an annual news roundup which would give some convenient annual data. Many local organizations publish their own newsletters, and the library can get on their mailing lists. Does any department of local or county government publish a newsletter? How about less formal groups, such as a peace group, an environmental group, or a women's group, which are simply interested in some aspects of the community and publish information? Maybe a local business sends a newsletter to its clientele. Each of these is another source of information on the community.

The library should be on the mailing lists of as many of these organizations as possible. In addition to

subscribing to the newsletters, collect as complete a list as possible of local organizations, what they do, and who their officers are. It's important to complement and not duplicate local efforts, so you need to know as much as you can about what's going on and what local projects are underway. The library will also want to send press releases about library events to these newsletters. Work closely with local groups and combine forces with them. Local groups might like to sponsor joint programs with the library or put up an exhibit in the library. The possibilities are endless.

Informal Research

The informal research is more serendipitous and may require good detective skills. What is the community really like? Is it as it appears on the surface or are there layers more hidden? How does the library do this effectively?

Looking around the Community: First of all, wander around the community. See what businesses and industry are found there. Get to know the stores and shopping areas. If the community has more than one shopping area, visit them all. Do different groups of people use the different areas? There may be segregation by ethnic group, economic group, or educational group. Such segregation will have implications for the library and in particular the location of its services. It may mean that some people don't go near the library in the course of their daily activities. They may, as a result, never use the library's services.

What kinds of industries are in the community? What kinds of people do they employ and in what numbers? Do many local people work in town? Do these companies have libraries that their employees can use or will the public library be expected to supply work-related materials? Do many of the people in the community work elsewhere in the area? Do they have long commutes? What does that mean in terms of library hours and times for library programs? Many suburban libraries near large cities have large commuter populations. They must examine carefully how to serve this part of their clientele. Saturday and Sunday hours as well as evening hours are useful to this population with some programming at those times. There may also be a need for some kind of service at a train station in order to make it convenient for commuters to borrow books. Telephone reference service helps them get information they need when they don't have time to come to the library.

Look at the traffic patterns and public transportation. Do they present problems in getting to the library? Is the library accessible by public transportation? Does that transportation run in the evening and on weekends? Do people feel safe using it? Is there good park-

ing for people who drive? Is there a way to improve the parking situation? Are there highways running through the community which act as natural barriers to the community? The library's location and ease of access is crucial to its use. Do not assume that everyone has access to a car. Bus service to the library is important whether it be a city bus or some kind of service supported by the library. At the same time adequate parking is a must. It is very frustrating to library patrons to have to park blocks from the library. If parking is a problem, try to find some ways to ease the burden—an easily accessible book drop, a drive-up window, or an information kiosk in a shopping center.

Are there natural community gathering places where groups of people can be reached? Does this call for small circulating collections of books or some other kind of library service? What are the education centers—informal and formal—in the community for children and adults? How can the library relate to them? Can some kinds of cooperative arrangements be set up? Some communities have community centers, senior citizen centers, boys clubs and girls clubs or social halls for certain groups. It may be one way for the library to reach new audiences either through deposit collections or through on-site programming. Consider what possibilities exist that can help the library reach out and broaden its base.

What are the public schools like? Do they have libraries? Do they have adult education programs? Are the school libraries open after school or is the public library expected to service students after school hours. Are there both private and parochial schools? It's important to spend some time examining the schools. Their resources should dovetail with the public library's. See what they have and what access their clientele has. Maybe a better relationship can be developed which will help those that use both the school libraries and the public library. Perhaps a cooperative acquisitions program can be developed, or the libraries can share access to their holdings by hooking up a terminal at the school library.

Community Groups: What about the recreational and cultural aspects of the community? What do people do in their leisure time? Do they have a strong organizational base? Are the groups they form based on social needs, recreational needs, intellectual needs, or cultural interests? Are there theater groups, dance groups, a community orchestra, local choirs? Do sports play a large role in the community? How does this affect the time available for the young adults to use the library? Don't forget that leisure time groups have information needs too. They are active community residents and so try to serve them in the best possible way. As an example, the theater group may want copies of new plays to

read and will be interested in books on makeup, set design, set construction, and costume. They may also need rehearsal space from time to time. Maybe the library could work cooperatively with them: for example, in exchange for rehearsal space, the group might give a special performance at the library.

Take a more informal look at the ethnic groups in your community. Are there churches working with these groups? Do they have a social center in the community? Look for signs in other languages to gauge the activity of these groups. How do ethnic activities affect the library's collection, services, and programs? The library may first have to reach these groups in the places they naturally congregate as they may find the library overwhelming and without enough resources they can easily use.

Get to know the people in the community. Do some of the same people belong to several community groups? They are the doers and joiners. They control lots of people and influence people by virtue of the fact that they go to many meetings and are often an officer in more than one group. They are important people to get to know. These key people are a source of information on what's going on. Local government and school officials are also key people just by virtue of the positions they hold. So it is important to be on good terms with them and touch base with them from time to time.

Learn what the important groups are in the community. It won't necessarily be the same from community to community. In one place it might be the Kiwanis or Lions Club, in another the League of Women Voters, and in another it may be certain church groups or the historical society. Groups say much about the community, its priorities, and what its people view as the way to spend their leisure time. They will provide clues as to how to develop the collection, services, and programs. Plan programs complementary to an organization's programs but that do not duplicate. Notify interested organizations of programs, materials, and services that might interest them so they can inform their members. The library may even develop some information sheets on certain services and collections of interest to large segments of the community.

Last but not least is the grapevine. Tune in to it in as casual but systematic a manner as possible. Find out who to talk to. After the rest of the research this will become more obvious. The grapevine is essential when explosive community issues are being discussed. Don't miss a chance to talk to those people who know a lot about community politics. They're always happy to talk about what's going on. So keep talking and listening. Don't hide in the office any more than necessary or if it is necessary to spend a good deal of time in the of-

face, encourage community resource people to stop in and say hello when they are in the library.

Getting Acquainted

For someone who is not a longtime resident of the community, getting acquainted is a time consuming job. But even a long-term resident can benefit from getting reacquainted. We all live our lives in certain narrow ways, so it's important to go out of one's way to meet new groups and new people. This also, of course, serves as a way of promoting the library as groups are visited and the library and its services are discussed. It's important to sit in on at least one meeting of as many groups in the community as possible. The librarian may want to develop different agendas for different groups in order to make the visits more focused. Tell the Historical Society about sources for genealogical research. Tell the American Association of University Women about resources the library has for their study groups. Tell the Kiwanis and Lions Club about the library's business collection and services. If some groups are of personal interest, join and participate on a regular basis. This is an excellent way to get to know local people, but not everyone wants to do this. No one can take on many groups that require extensive amounts of time on a regular basis.

Letters can be sent to a number of groups every year to remind them about the library and its services. Offer to come speak to them about library services, do book reviews, or perhaps put together a short program on a topic of interest to them. Many groups have a hard time finding free programs and welcome a library program. Try to be creative so the group will want another library program. If they think they will have the same dry, canned speech, they'll only be polite once. Show a film on quilting and talk about books on quilting to a church women's group, talk about business reference resources at the Chamber of Commerce, or talk to high school teachers about new library resources which correlate with their areas of study. Take book exhibits to meetings. People love a chance to look at new books. Decide in advance how to handle requests to borrow the books. If the librarian agrees to lend books after the meeting, there is the risk that they will never be returned. On the other hand, it may encourage a nonuser to come to the library and thus become familiar with the library.

Local retail businesses are an interesting challenge for the library. They need to be served since their taxes support the library, but many of them seldom use the library since they are small and usually employees cannot leave the stores. It's probably best to try to visit local stores and introduce the library to them. Take

registration cards, so the staff can sign up for a library card. Figure out what the library might have which would interest this local business—sources of supplies, ideas for window displays, marketing information, etc. Encourage people to make requests by phone if they can't leave the store. Ask them for feedback as to how the library can serve them better. Try inviting them to a reception on a Sunday afternoon or maybe a breakfast meeting to tell them more about the library.

Local government is an important part of the community. Employees often use the library poorly or may spend a great deal of time making phone calls to gather information that is readily available at the library. Try to get an appointment with the mayor or governing official to talk about the library's collection and services. Find out what the community's problems are and then look for resources that you might be able to loan to local officials. Make them feel that the library is easy to use and that they can get information quickly. Consider sending them an information update sheet on new library resources from time to time.

The local schools can be a challenging group to reach. They are overwhelmed with their own problems, and it's often difficult to get their attention. Try to meet their administration. Often the school librarian will make the introductions. In any case, try to develop a working relationship with the school librarians. Remember it's the public library that usually has to bend since schools tend to be less flexible. It's important to try to get an idea of the school curricula and how well the school libraries meet the students' and teachers' needs. Can the library work together with the schools to develop complementary but not duplicate resources? Can the public library borrow materials and equipment from the schools in the summer when the schools are closed?

Keeping in Touch

After making the initial contacts, keep in touch. This may actually be more difficult. The library may not get invited back to many groups—sometimes for legitimate reasons. At best, though, the stage is set for some follow-up with the initial contacts of key people in town. Perhaps the librarian promised to get some information to them or at least promised to keep looking for information of interest to them. Maybe the librarian agreed to put together a proposal for a cooperative program. In any case, there should be some reasons to follow up. Sometimes as the librarian reads community newsletters, some new ideas for services will develop.

Keeping in touch has many dimensions. But here are a few simple ways to keep on top of what's going on:

1. Read the local newspapers and newsletters to keep up-to-date.
2. Drop in on some local meetings of interest to the library. Do so on a rotation basis since it's hard to cover everything. Of particular interest might be local government meetings and hearings, school board meetings, and public meetings of very active local organizations. Hearing the announcements made at some meetings can be extremely valuable.
3. Contact community groups once a year to update information on their officers and learn about their plans for the coming year. Offer them programs and exhibits.
4. Keep track of local politics. Know what's happening and what's on the horizon.
5. Talk to library regulars. They'll tell you a good deal about what's going on.
6. Read the minutes of local government meetings and school board meetings if you can. Try to convince these boards to let the library have a copy of the minutes on file.
7. Look for all opportunities to cosponsor programs with local groups. It'll double the audience, help with advertising the program, and build good relations with the local groups.
8. Offer the library's exhibit space to local groups.
9. Use the staff's connections and let them represent the library at meetings they attend.

Sometimes communities don't communicate well among themselves, and the library can act as the catalyst for helping to alleviate the situation. Maybe there are many scheduling conflicts in the community with no one to resolve them. The library could set up a community calendar where groups could list their programs and check to see that they are not scheduling their programs in conflict with other similar groups. Such scheduling will also provide good information to the library on community activities. Persistence may be needed for a while to get the information from the groups, but in the long term, they probably will find it so useful they'll want to participate.

Libraries can also bring together groups working on similar projects separately. This can be done, for example, by planning a panel discussion and inviting representatives of various groups to participate. Or another approach might be to have an information fair on the topic and invite local groups to participate. Sometimes everyone is so busy that no one gets an overview. Bringing groups together can further the library's contact with them while giving them a chance to do some of their own networking.

Using the Planning Process

One way to assess how the library is doing and plan for its future development is to use the Public Library Development Project's *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries* (ALA, 1987) as well as its *Output Measures for Public Libraries* (ALA, 1987). These two manuals have streamlined the planning and measurement process so it can be implemented by even a small library. Much of the initial data collection is similar to that discussed earlier in this pamphlet. It also calls for data collection on the use of the library. Various surveys are recommended to ascertain what people are using in the library and if they are getting the information and materials wanted when they visit the library. Once all this information is collected and tabulated, the library advisory group can begin assessing the library and developing new directions for it if needed. This pamphlet is not meant to provide in-depth information on the planning process and the manuals developed by the Public Library Development Project are recommended for this process.

Summary

Enjoy getting to know the community. It's really lots of fun and makes your position so much more rewarding. The library can never reach out enough and get to know too many people. Once this process is started, it will keep going by itself and won't seem at all difficult.

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Small Libraries Publications Series

The problems and challenges of operating small libraries are not a great deal different from those of large libraries. The administrator of the large library, though, normally has both more experience in various areas and more specialized help. The administrator of the small library, whether holding a library degree or not, is often thrown regularly and sometimes precipitately into "first-time" situations. This series is an attempt to provide some direction, reassurance, and practical help.

The series is directed primarily at librarians serving communities of 10,000 to 15,000 people, usually as administrators of independent libraries, although it is hoped that branch librarians and librarians serving larger communities may also find the pamphlets useful. Other Small Libraries Publications currently published by the American Library Association include:

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