

Rural libraries: The lifeblood of small towns in Mississippi

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Published: August 7, 2011

<http://msbusiness.com/2011/08/rural-libraries-the-lifeblood-of-small-towns-in-mississippi/>

Recently I had the opportunity to visit eight libraries in rural towns in Mississippi during the course of one week. These libraries ranged from a two-room facility smaller than some master bedrooms to a full-service, modern library that offered a full range of activities for the community. Below are 10 things that I learned about rural libraries during that week.

1. Each small town library is unique. Whether it is architecture, hours of operation, types of patrons or personality of the staff, no two libraries are the same. Sometimes this uniqueness is driven by its diversity of patrons. For example, more libraries in rural areas are seeing an increase in the number of limited English-speaking patrons. This is primarily a result of an imported labor force of workers, especially agricultural workers. These new patrons are interested in learning to speak English, and view the library as the best place to do that. In other libraries patrons were more interested in arts and cultural events held at the library. It all depended on the community.

2. Patrons are flocking to their local libraries to use the Internet. Whether for homework or genealogy research, social media or even job hunting, the use of library computers has exploded. People who have not visited a library in a while will be surprised to see numerous computers in use by patrons. Some libraries even have rooms dedicated solely to computer use. Many of the patrons of small town libraries lack computer skills and rely on the librarian to assist them in their searches for jobs, social services or research.

3. Job seekers are using the library to find employment, build resumes and even learn job skills. In areas of high unemployment some libraries are even bringing in outside programs to their community rooms. Many state library associations have formed partnerships with their state workforce development agencies to assist job hunters.

4. There are after-school issues and opportunities. In some libraries, after-school time is inspiring. Students come in ready to do homework and research. Libraries have programs available geared specially at those students when they arrive. These programs include lectures, games, educational activities, etc. But in some communities libraries are used as day care centers. Parents are known to drop off children of almost all ages at the local library, and may or may not pick them up by closing time. The librarian is forced to become a social worker in such cases.

5. Libraries are becoming more involved in their communities. This involvement goes beyond mere providing a community room. Library volunteers are going out to nursing homes, day care centers and even jails to offer all types of reading and learning programs.

6. Community rooms are being used by the community. In rural communities the two "community" places are churches and libraries. Churches and libraries offer their fellowship and parish halls for civic club meetings and other gatherings of a community nature. The library community room, in particular, gets a lot of use. One library community room in a small town is even the scene for local wedding receptions.

7. The personality of the librarian is important. For example, the Friends of the Library group in one library that I visited increased its membership from less than 10 to over 60. When I inquired as to why, I was told that it was all about the personality of the librarian. I found this to be true in most libraries that I visited. Some librarians were children-centered, others seemed to like providing community data and others were involved in adult-oriented activities. The library reflected these interests.

8. Elected officials and other funders do not have library cards. Libraries rely on funding from many sources, not the least of which is often the small town or county in which they are located. I inquired about how many elected officials had library cards and learned that there were not many. Librarians will need to learn to better engage their funders in the local library. In towns where the mayor was involved in the local library, the mayors were really involved. One mayor told me that if the local library in his small town went away that he would also have to go away.

9. Technology will have dramatic change on libraries. In 1996, only 28 percent of libraries offered Internet access. Today almost every library offers this service. Indeed, every single library I visited offered Internet access. Some had only just a few computers available, but every librarian told me that at some periods during the day there is a waiting line to use computers. The technology issue for small town libraries is huge. Consider the implications of e-books, e-readers and online services in general.

10. Libraries are safe places. By that I mean that libraries are places where nobody asks why a patron checks out a certain book or needs a certain service. Many patrons told me that there was a feeling of acceptance and comfort that they did not find in other places.

Gone are the days when a person went to the local library to do nothing more than check out a book and return it or renew it later. Small town libraries have become a provider of numerous services to their communities. Their future will be one of expanding those services even more. The communities that support those services will be more vibrant, educated and engaged.

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