

CITY OF ARLINGTON

# The Expanding Role of Public Libraries as an Interdepartmental and Interagency Resource

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This paper briefly explores the role of the public library in the City of Arlington with regards to economic development, crime prevention and intervention, recreation, collaboration, and community engagement along with interagency examples of collaborative works.

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## Introduction

“We are no longer in the information age,” I once told a community group to whom I was speaking a few years ago. “Today, we are in the information overload age.” The expanded ability to acquire information quickly has revolutionized our expectations of how we do business. It has also introduced a myriad of unrealistic expectations of what is involved in doing research, allowed for a lack of quality control in the information gleaned, and decreased both efficiency and effectiveness for the sake of convenience. Fortunately, there are professionals who specialize in using information efficiently and effectively and most municipalities already have them on staff. In fact, the public library has seen an incredible resurgence in use all across the country, so it is important to understand the new role that public libraries play in this new information age.

To begin to understand the expanding role of public libraries, this paper will first discuss the current trends and challenges seen by information professionals and the relationship between information use and information seeking behaviors. Most of the examples cited in this paper are from personal observations and experiences. While quality research on literacy, economic impact, and other topics exists, there remains a great deal of research to be done regarding this topic. Highlights of the library’s role in economic development, crime prevention and intervention, quality of life programs with the parks and recreation department, collaboration, community engagement, and several interagency collaborations, will also be discussed.

### A New Service Role for the Public Library

Librarianship is a teaching profession. One of its missions is to teach people how to be better information seekers and to improve the quality of the information accessed by patrons. One of my

usual quips is that we work to keep something from the first ten hits of a Google search out of high school and college research papers. Our teaching mission is expanding greatly, in part because we are seeing educated adults and decision-makers using inaccurate information and unreliable resources. Just this year, I was in a training program conducted by the Department of Justice. During the lengthy and compelling presentation to a group of community leaders that included elected officials, school administrators, city management, law enforcement, service providers, and others, the presenter cited Wikipedia as a primary source for a critical element of the presentation. Wikipedia is a wonderful tool for first gleaning search terms and an overview of a topic. The citations section is often an additional benefit as a research tool. It is not, however, an authoritative resource. Wikipedia is an open source encyclopedia whereas anyone can make edits and additions to the information. The role of the public library in educating the public on how to be better information seekers is critical.

Information from many resources may appear authoritative. The following selection is a great example taken from Barbara Friedman's book, *Web Search Savvy: Strategies and Shortcuts from Online Resources*:

A college professor of mine began class each semester by regaling students with his long, colorful career in the news business. He recalled his work as a young correspondent during the Spanish-American War, and described what it was like to charge San Juan Hill at dawn as part of Teddy Roosevelt's Light Brigade. The professor went on, waxing nostalgic about his colleagues: Edward R. Murrow, Ernie Pyle, and Ernest Hemingway.

The professor's account was complete fiction, of course, intended to test his students' knowledge of history. True, he was a grizzled veteran, but could not possibly have been a correspondent in a war that began in 1898. The "Light Brigade"

was a British cavalry unit in the Crimean War some thirty years earlier; it was Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" who fought on San Juan Hill. Furthermore, the professor's supposed colleagues were known for their work as correspondents during World War II.

Nevertheless, many students took the professor at his word. Even those who suspected tomfoolery were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. And why not? Everything about him appeared credible. He was a prolific author and distinguished faculty member, a recognized authority on journalism history. Without the requisite knowledge of history, students were either too ignorant or intimidated to challenge his claims. (Friedman, 2005, p.155)

Properly evaluating information is just one requirement of good information seeking behavior, but having the expertise to research, compile information into a legible and useful format, and make sound decisions, is far too often left to the lay researcher to accomplish. Faced with the challenges of increasing demands for services, cities are learning to work smarter and more effectively utilizing scarce resources. This has led to librarians being routinely included in the decision making process and on interdepartmental teams to meet challenges by making better use of information, leveraging resources, establishing strategic partnerships and collaborations, and engaging the community and its stakeholders in new ways. This new inclusion has provided an opportunity for information professionals, already working in the organization providing necessary and essential services to the public, to expand their skills to meet these challenges head on, and it is producing great results.

In the traditional role, librarians have used various techniques to connect the information seeker with the appropriate information resource. The librarian's job is to facilitate that connection by getting the right resource in the right format to the right person at the right time and at the lowest cost. The

right format may be a print resource, a journal, a database, or other digital information resource such as an eBook or the Internet; however, more often these days the right resource is often an individual, agency, or service organization in the community. By being engaged in the community, participating in interagency and interdepartmental initiatives, librarians are more available to apply our skills and connect resources in highly effective ways.

Often the most challenging part of getting an answer to a question is formulating the right question, so when a patron walks in to a public library with a question, librarians conduct a reference interview. A patron may initially ask for our books on accounting but end up needing an IRS tax form, a small business startup guide, or a citation for a paper they are writing in a university accounting class. Through the reference interview, librarians ask a series of questions to guide the patron first to formulate the right question. Librarians need to understand the purpose of the question, how the answer will be used, what is the audience of the answer, and in what formats will it be presented. They also will determine how quickly the information is needed, what resources the patron has already explored, how well the patron understands the topic overall, etc. Only then can the librarian begin to connect the information seeker with the information resource. In the process, the librarian trains the patron to be a better information seeker by talking the patron through the process so that the patron understands why certain resources are being used and how to use them effectively. Public librarians are applying these essential skills in interdepartmental and interagency roles and are educating both individuals and agencies to be more effective information seekers and users as well as to formulate the right questions. This translates into improved capacity, increased cost savings, and better decision making by other city departments and agencies.

To have a better understanding of how these skills are applied, the library's role in economic development is a great place to begin. As researchers in a University of Kansas study conducted in 2000

state in their first recommendation, “Public Libraries could and should play a larger role in local economic development, especially in providing resources for existing business and for potential business startups.” (Glass, et al., 2000 p.ii)

## The Public Library in Economic Development

My awareness of the role of public libraries in economic development began when I was an undergraduate student teaching English as a Second Language for Berlitz International. I had the opportunity to work with business leaders from around the world expanding on their often previously mastered understanding of English grammar and developing their skills with more colloquial expressions in common business settings. Getting to know these executives gave me opportunities to learn about their business expansion and relocation strategies such as moving operations overseas, determining where to enter in to a market, open an office, build a new central distribution center, or otherwise invest in a community. We used these discussions as an exercise in practicing business terminology, buzzwords, and colloquial expressions. They routinely cited common considerations including good schools, low crime, strong workforce, and a solid technology infrastructure. What intrigued me was how often the public library was mentioned as a critical evaluative aspect of studying a community. As one executive from Mitsui in Japan explained to me, if he wanted to know what a community valued he could often tell by visiting the public library. Along with the quality of local schools and universities, the library was seen as an equally important indicator of the capacity of an area and the quality of the workforce serving as an education bridge between schools and universities providing equitable access to quality information resources for everyone.

This experience occurred long before I had decided to become a librarian, but understanding the important role that libraries played in this capacity has since become an important part of my professional mission. Years later as a new Library Director serving a largely rural county and a growing local community, I spoke with local business leaders as a part of my community assessment to determine where strategically to focus library and information services. It was clear that a well-prepared workforce was a challenge and that a significant gap existed between the available work pool and the needs of developing local businesses.

Our strategy for improved services included speaking to every service agency, education institution, and business that would hear us as part of both our needs assessment and marketing strategy. I became an active member of the Chamber of Commerce and was voted volunteer of the year by the local community. I submitted articles to the paper to highlight our expanded small business collection, databases, and services. We taught workshops on how to use our databases and applications for small business. While we offered GED courses, we had a fledgling adult literacy program and a weak collection of business materials. Recruiting additional volunteers, providing training, reallocating funds in the collection to build up our business resources, and expanding partnerships with local organizations were critical. The library worked diligently to ensure we were playing an active role in attracting new businesses and enhancing the workforce for existing businesses. Grant writing for local non-profits, connecting local businesses with local service agencies, networking, providing tutoring for adults as well as youth, and bringing in volunteers on a regular basis from S.C.O.R.E. (Service Corps of Retired Executives) to offer free consulting services to small businesses.

Recognizing that we needed a holistic approach to improving the workforce, we included youth as a part of that equation. Working with the school district and local homeschoolers, we created after school programs to give young people opportunities to serve, to encourage their academic achievements, and involve them in the community. Mentoring opportunities, participation on the Youth Library Board of Directors, working with the library's Foundation, Best Friends of the Library, and the Library Board, were all structured to teach youth organizational skills, financial skills, and how business plans are created and implemented.

The Library became an integral part of the community. By collaborating and strategically aligning with local businesses, many were better able to find and retain employees reducing their costs and improving their services. Business owners were encouraged to send their employees to the library to enroll in GED, literacy, and other programs as well as to volunteer. For many, employee retention improved further reducing costs to the business, and the library saw a dramatic increase in volunteerism from local businesses several of whom became corporate sponsors contributing to the library with both their time and financial support. The programming grew, as did the improved relationship with local businesses, and with that growth came improved utilization of public library services. Through use of our print resources, electronic databases and market research, resume assistance and computer classes for employees, and referrals to other agencies and organizations such as S.C.O.R.E., we can save organizations time and money. Public libraries understand the importance of investing time and resources to study the local economic climate and to communicate with local businesses to ensure that needed services are being provided.

At the Arlington Public Library, our current workforce literacy program evolved from an expansion of services to the parents of children in one of our afterschool tutoring programs. This tutoring program provides free weekly tutoring for students in first through third grade using volunteer

tutors. We quickly realized that oftentimes Mom and Dad did not have the necessary skills needed to work with their children on their homework. Many had language barriers, education barriers, and undiagnosed learning disabilities. In order to help parents work with their children, and be their child's first and foremost teachers, we developed the Arlington Reads program. The library received a grant and hired a literacy coordinator. Using AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers, along with more than 150 regular volunteers, the program has expanded the adult literacy component into its workforce literacy initiative bridging the education gap through programming, instruction, tutoring, and resource sharing. We have spoken to many area businesses about the program and literacy staff has collaborated with them to provide free literacy programs in hotels and hospitals that emphasize topics important to that business. With many businesses struggling with limited resources, the goal is to reduce their costs, assist with their employee development, and connect them with needed services. Businesses that encourage their employees to participate in library programming typically see a significant reduction in turnover. Some businesses even offer paid time for their employees to participate in library programming.

Public libraries also recognize that working with non-profit organizations is essential to the well being of the community's workforce through the social services that non-profit organizations provide. To that end, the library offers a Funding Information Center database for non-profit organizations researching funding opportunities as well as training and expertise to use this resource.

By taking the time to look at the world from the perspective of the business community, by treating the challenges as questions that need answers, librarians and public libraries are poised to provide information services that will enhance their ability to be successful. Moreover, public libraries offer services at no additional charge and funding public libraries provides an incredible return on investment. In various studies conducted, such as one conducted by Florida State University on the economic impact of public libraries, public libraries were shown to provide a 150% to nearly 500%

return on investment for every dollar spent on the library (McClure, Fraser, Nelson, & Robbins, 2000). Few investors would pass up that investment opportunity.

## Police Department – Prevention, Access, and Information

Public library and police department collaborations are one of the most overlooked and yet most critical connections to be made for the benefit of a community. In the City of Arlington, I have heard our police chief remind the public that it is no coincidence that some 80% of the prison population is functionally illiterate. In fact, according to a report by A.P. Newman on prisoner literacy, by 12th-grade standards 75% of inmates are illiterate (Newman, 1993). In a 2003 study to follow up, the Department of Education conducted a National Assessment of Adult Literacy that found that no significant change had occurred in the ten years since the previous study (NAAL, 2003). These statistics are quite disturbing, and in part, it is for this reason that through our literacy initiative, the library will soon be working with area agencies on a prisoner re-entry initiative. Public library services bridge the gap in education by providing improved opportunities for access to information and resources, increasing connectivity especially to the disadvantaged, reducing illiteracy, and providing safe places through many programs, projects, and facilities.

An example of safe places, programming, and connectivity takes place at the Northeast Branch Library. The library is located across the street from a large junior high school. By 4:10pm each day, young people not involved in after school programs are expected to be off campus. Students may ride the bus free if they live outside of a two-mile radius or are involved in after school programming. The charge is \$2 per day if they live within that radius and are not involved in programs. According to many young people and their parents, this daily charge is cost prohibitive for many. Many do not feel safe walking home. The result is that a large number of the students need to find a safe place to go to wait to

for rides home. For almost a year, it was common for the library to have 130 or more young people in and around the 10,000 square foot facility. Vandalism, fights, noise, etc. were a common occurrence, and there were not enough staff to effectively monitor all areas of the building let alone assist other patrons with their needs. The library hired a security guard, and police provided regular close patrols of the facility. There was a lack of accessible and low cost after school programs for these young people, and a solution was needed quickly.

One afternoon, I went out to a table crowded with young people and sat down with them to visit. We talked about the behavior, about school, and about issues that concerned them. I invited them to visit with me in the meeting room the next afternoon and asked them to invite some of their friends. The next afternoon, twenty-three students met with me to talk about their needs and the needs of the library. The students explained not having a place to go after school, not wanting to walk home, about the need for homework help, and about their feelings on adults and a perceived lack of concern for youth. Next, we talked about what the library could offer them and brainstormed ideas for working together. We held a special staff meeting soon after, and the entire library staff agreed that they all wanted to help and be involved in creating a positive place for the teens. What resulted was a highly successful after school program called the Teen Zone. The meeting room became theirs from 4pm to 7pm Monday through Friday. We hired a part-time staff member, a teacher at a local high school, to help facilitate the program. We received a grant to buy the students desktop and laptop computers, flat screen televisions, video games, and trendy furniture. Our goal was to give them their own space and raise the attraction factor so high that they did not want to lose their library privileges. To access the Teen Zone, students enroll, have a photo ID made, and read and sign an agreement to the rules. The public Internet computers in the main part of the library became accessible only to patrons

18 and over from 3pm to 7pm giving adult patrons access to the public computers in the main reading room and encouraging the teens wanting computers to join the Teen Zone program.

What resulted was a dramatic reduction in calls for service from the Police Department and a reduction in criminal trespasses issued. The library was able to discontinue use of security guard services. Relationships and mentoring opportunities grew between staff and the students and student leaders began to emerge. Local businesses noted a stark contrast to the challenges they were facing at their locations, and they readily agreed to help us promote the program to students who frequented their establishments. We began to see families bringing their young children back to the library in the evenings. We connected with parents of the students to help them with challenges they were facing and identified students who had dropped out of school or who were at risk and were able to work with them. We established positive relationships with the school and community, and a decrease in juvenile crime resulted. The library invited the Boys & Girls Club to bring in programming, worked with Parks and Recreation, the school district, and others to identify additional opportunities. I developed a strong relationship with the school district's dropout prevention specialist and working together helped students who had dropped out of school get back in school. We built relationships with parents and were able to connect many of them to area agencies, continuing education opportunities, and needed services. We had many meetings with the police department to develop strategies to improve safety and developed a sustainable partnership working together in the community. We utilized principles of the Five Promises, which are caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education, and opportunities to help others, and applied them in this program with very positive results. (America's Promise Alliance).

One of the lessons learned in this experience was the important role that public libraries can play in gang prevention and intervention. Many of our young people were either being pressured to join

gangs or were involved in gangs. Recognizing that a great deal of information was needed, the library chose to become actively involved in interagency, interdepartmental, and community endeavors to learn more and to provide research assistance to help the projects move quickly. We quickly learned that intervention is an expensive and resource consuming endeavor, so our primary focus has been targeted at prevention and finding best practices to address needs with given resources. With youth engagement in mind, I was asked to join the Arlington Independent School District's Gang Task Force to help recommendations for programming and a strategy for addressing the issues based on best practices.

I had previously chaired a Building Connections project at a junior high in East Arlington for more than a year and was working to understand better the challenges the schools were facing and what resources the library could bring to bear to assist them. A friend and retired Arlington police officer was hired by the school district as their gang specialist and chaired the task force. Our task was to evaluate and recommend a direction for the school district to address the needs of its 63,000 students. The resulting conclusion was a recommendation for another initiative that I had an opportunity to be involved in during the initial development phase called Our Community, Our Kids. This is a joint project among area cities, school districts, and service providers to address youth gang involvement throughout the community, and today I serve on the gang awareness committee in that program. I also served on the Federal Weed & Seed grant initiative and continue to serve on the Prevention, Intervention, and Treatment committee. I am a director on the board of the Arlington Alliance for Youth as well. A great deal of knowledge and resources have been shared, and we are beginning to apply what we have learned together in some very tangible and grassroots efforts.

Having the ability as an information professional to gather resources quickly to address urgent needs is very rewarding. Recently, I created a book discussion group for teens that deals with heavy

topics using principles of Bibliotherapy to discuss issues through the eyes of the characters in the story where we also bring in counselors and subject experts to meet with the kids. The program is called Legit Lit: Reading with a Purpose. This project resulted from countless conversations with students and service providers on the challenges faced by young people in dealing with issues such as bullying, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and other issues. Finding a way to express their concerns is a challenge, so the ability to use fictional characters as a basis for conversation on these issues teaches them to read critically, improves their reading comprehension, and empowers them to discuss ideas in a safe environment. It increases their vocabulary and in turn increases their ability to communicate and reason through challenging issues. It is reading with a purpose, and it provides young people an opportunity for leadership with the ability to discuss books with their peers. In this case, the challenges that were brought to our attention by students and service providers demonstrated an information need. Not long ago, one of the police department's victim assistance counselors called on me on to visit with a local youth minister to discuss challenges faced by young people in his program, about 90 of them, and to find resources to help address those challenges. This request was no different than any other request for information, and the skills needed to help in this case are skills that every professional librarian possesses.

## Parks and Recreation – Collaborative Programming

Not everything that the public library offers to other departments and agencies is a heavy topic. One of the most fun relationships is with the Parks and Recreation Department. Healthy living and a well-rounded lifestyle includes fresh air, physical activity, good nutrition, and literacy. By aligning common goals and leveraging existing resources creatively, we have done some extraordinary things. We developed a Passport Arlington initiative to encourage our community to explore the resources and

facilities offered to them, to have their passports stamped, and to earn incentives along the way. This project will soon be expanded to include QR codes on library facilities, promotional materials, and at parks. Collaboratively, we worked together to develop content for a walking tour of the Caelum Moor outdoor sculpture garden near the Rangers Ballpark. That project led to me working with UT Arlington graduate computer science students to develop a smartphone component utilizing location aware technology to deliver the content so that when in front of a particular sculpture the information on that sculpture would be highlighted. To expand on that project, another team of students is developing an application so that librarians can check out materials using their phones anywhere in the community.

We regularly work together in community engagement events delivering quality information to residents to connect them with recreational, enlightening, and cultural opportunities. The newest collaboration is with The Fishing Librarian in which reading and the outdoors are combined through education and advocacy in this pseudo-celebrity alter ego. See <http://www.TheFishingLibrarian.com> for more information. Through conservation and education programs, we work together with the Water Utilities Department at library facilities providing an educational experience through landscaping projects at the library that highlight Smartscape designs, native plants, and information both inside and outside the library about ways to conserve water and grow beautiful gardens. A healthier and happier community is the goal.

## Community Engagement and Interagency Collaboration

Community engagement is critical to the delivery of municipal services, and successful interagency collaborations are the hallmark of an effective local government. Ongoing projects with the Arlington Independent School District are routinely initiated by the public library. Library card campaigns, open house events, summer reading clubs, after school programming, providing resources

for early childhood development, storytimes, and participation in community projects alongside one another fosters more than just networking opportunities. It builds relationships, and those relationships lead to effective interagency cooperation. By serving the same populations and working together to share a common message, productive, quality, and sustainable outcomes will result. We have worked with the local community college and university alike to ensure that we engage their students and faculty, provide opportunities for service learning, and develop meaningful programs for local residents and guests alike.

I was recently a guest lecturer in a graduate computer science and engineering class discussing ongoing projects within the city to act on new technologies to increase connectivity and discussed the relationships between end users and designers. This has led to several of the graduate students working on projects within the City giving them opportunities to learn, to grow, and to gain valuable field experience locally. It has also provided the City opportunities to try new service delivery techniques, build relationships with the university and its students, and educated the City so that we are better-informed consumers once piloted projects are completed with student designers and for when the development moves to an implementation phase. It has saved time and money and created good will and better friendships in the community. This emphasizes a vital role that librarians and the public library should play in facilitating those connections, because lifelong learning will always be a sustaining motivator in the services libraries provide.

Interagency collaborations with the library have also included the health industry and improving health literacy. Working with Life Through Literacy, a local non-profit agency, our Arlington Reads program worked with expectant mothers with the goal of reducing infant mortality. Many people struggle with reading prescription labels, with reading comprehension, and with complicated medical forms to fill out. We collaborate with Planetree, which provides free health information research

services at no charge to patrons. The public library offers space to Cook Children's Hospital and their promotion of the CHIP insurance program for children offering a welcoming space to meet with parents that has no stigma attached to it. JPS is a regular partner in service delivery with the library. Santa Fe Adolescent Services, who provide drug and alcohol counseling, ACH Services that, operates emergency youth shelters, street outreach to homeless and runaway teens, the Safe Place program, and other counseling services are regular collaborators with the library. The United Way, local churches, are all regular collaborators with the library, too. No other department in the City maintains and sustains as many collaborative relationships as the Library, and that is being recognized more and more as we continue to work towards more effective and efficient delivery models, breaking down silos, and leveraging resources to the benefit of all concerned.

## Conclusion

From a librarian's standpoint, the success of these and other collaborations utilizing the library as an interdepartmental and interagency resource is simply a reference question that needed to be answered. It is a matter of combining loves, talents, and goals and constantly reinventing the way we connect with the people that we serve to seek opportunities to work together. Much like what occurs at the reference desk traditionally, librarians bring people and compatible resources together. As previously mentioned, our job is to connect people with quality information resources at the right time, in the right format, to the right person, and that the lowest cost. The right format might be a book, a database, a periodical, or it might be someone in the community or an agency in the community. Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, discusses the hedgehog concept. We also discussed this in our CPM coursework. The hedgehog knows one great thing and does it very well. This is an excellent idea. (Collins, 2001). By finding what it is that you, or your organization, are best at doing you are far more

likely to remain focused and to be successful, but the key is not only finding that one thing but in translating that one thing into other services to the benefit of everyone. The expanding role of the public library as both an interagency and interdepartmental resource will continue to grow and along with it the overall success of municipal government and the effectiveness of its community leaders working together to make their community better.

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