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The Role of Public Libraries in Community Building

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King County in Washington State is home to two large urban library systems, King County Library (KCLS) and Seattle Public Library (SPL). KCLS and SPL are effectively building community through their library service. Professionals in the fields of library and information science, public libraries, and community development discuss these successes and the ways that public libraries can build a strong community. Five facets of community building are explored: (1) how libraries serve as a conduit to access information and to learn, (2) how libraries encourage social inclusion and equity, (3) how libraries foster civic engagement, (4) how libraries create a bridge to resources and community involvement, and (5) how libraries promote economic vitality within the community.

KEYWORDS public libraries, community development, community building, library, access, equity, social inclusion, civic engagement, economic vitality

The public library is a democratic equalizer, open to all and providing access to information that helps people improve their individual, family, and community lives. In this Internet age, library staff, supporters, and advocates need to articulate both the earlier and newer roles their institutions play in their communities. Libraries today function as robust community centers, often providing services that people cannot get elsewhere.

Providing quality library service by itself, however, does not ensure the future of our libraries. While the need for better library marketing (A. Harrison, interview with the author, July 7, 2010; N. Pearl, interview with

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the author, summer 2010) is often articulated, it is not sufficient either. We need to move beyond retail-style marketing to the development of sophisticated and multifaceted communication programs that help our various publics see what it is that we do and how that helps them.

As Jennifer Giltrop, assistant director of library service at the Seattle Public Library points out: "We have a great understanding of what it means to be a library. The challenge is how we inform the public how we are meeting the challenge of serving the public" (J. Giltrop, interview with the author, July 9, 2010). Our users and nonusers alike, for the most part, still think of public libraries primarily as book repositories.

As a graduate student at the University of Washington's Information School and Evans School of Public Affairs, I grew increasingly interested in exploring and articulating the ways that public libraries build strong communities. I also wanted to examine what more libraries could do to better meet the needs of their current patrons and those people who have never used the library, in other words, to build relationships with user and possible support groups.

We need to point out such relationships because nearly all public libraries are government entities, and people need to recognize them as such. Libraries are funded by tax dollars and when taxes are cut, library services usually suffer. Many people do not make this connection. Some people do not recognize that they are paying for library service with their tax dollars and that the library is there to serve them. It is our job as librarians to help the public understand that the library is there for them and that our mission is to meet their needs. To do this effectively, we need to ask people what they need and want from their library and actually listen to what they have to say. Then, we should adjust our services to best meet these needs.

This article looks at the ways in which local libraries, within the 4,000 square miles that constitute King County, Washington, are meeting the needs of their communities while strengthening and adding vitality to their communities. One central effort of my research was to interview local professionals in the fields of public librarianship and community development. These interviews helped guide my research and opened my eyes to some of the unique challenges and opportunities facing the libraries of King County, Washington, where I resided and studied. My acknowledgments to all of those dozens of interviewees are cited in the preface to my thesis (Scott 2010).

COMMUNITIES AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Public libraries are not a new concept in the United States. Even before the time of Andrew Carnegie, libraries were part of the fabric of our society. When asked, most people will tell you they love the library; many

can recount a warm library story. This nostalgia translates into priorities when families or individuals are choosing new neighborhoods in which to live. Jennifer Giltrop explains that “just like schools, people are looking at which libraries are in the community when they move,” and where the closest branch is (interview with the author, July 9, 2010). Many businesses also want to be close to the public library because that is where the community gathers. Jill Jean, director of the Kitsap Regional Library System in Washington State, explains that “even realtors care about the libraries in their community because their clients, after asking about schools, ask about libraries” (interview with the author, July 19, 2010). Libraries are important to people and sit at the heart of many communities. The American Library Association (2008) explains it the following way: “Libraries are part of the American dream. They are a place for education and self-help. And because they offer free and open access to all, they bring opportunity to all.”

Many people feared that libraries would cease to be relevant with the advent and popularity of the Internet. Chrystie Hill, librarian at WebJunction and advocate, points out that, actually, “far from hurting America’s libraries, the Internet has actually helped to spur more people to use their local libraries” (Hill 2009a). According to a study by the American Library Association (2007), in the first decade of Internet adoption (1994–2004) public libraries experienced a 61 percent increase in visits.

Since Carnegie’s philanthropy made libraries a common feature of American community life a century ago, “libraries have well understood their role as community centers. Some Carnegie libraries originally had boxing rings and lecture halls” (Fulton and Jackson 2003). During the mid-century, librarians emphasized a different role—providing access to information. Librarian scholar-teacher, Taylor Willingham explains that “libraries saw themselves as providing an antidote to the social ills of the day. As the people’s university, creating good citizens through education and literacy instruction was a core purpose of the early library” (Willingham 2008). While providing information access is still an important function of the public library, the past twenty years have brought a shift back to the roots of libraries as community builders.

Part of the reason why libraries face financial problems today is that librarians have lost their way in communicating with and serving their publics. Hill explains that “books are our brand. People have this wonderful nostalgia and positivity that goes along with their idea of the library” (Hill 2009b). As great as this warm fuzzy feeling is, it is not enough to ensure the survival of libraries. What people value in their libraries ensures their future. Doing what we can to build strong communities through libraries will enable libraries to thrive in the future: “Physically and virtually, libraries reflect the belief that people, regardless of age, gender, race, income, skill or education, have the right to information and knowledge” (Jacobs 2010). Whether through books, events, programming, or simply providing space

for discussion, libraries play a critical role in expanding knowledge and engaging people in conversation with each other and encouraging them to be active in their communities.

Today, library use is as high as it has ever been. Journalist Susan Gilmore (2010) tells us that “in the past decade, visits to [Seattle] libraries increased nearly 57 percent, from 4.6 million in 2000 to 7.3 million last year.” Dri Ralph, the facilities design coordinator at the King County Library System (KCLS), explains that when measuring use “we look at the data, circulation, hours of computer use, people through the door, and traffic studies. It is a huge number of people in frankly modest sized buildings. This speaks to the need people have for libraries” (interview with the author, July 29, 2010). Matt Terry, former director of planning and community development for the City of Bellevue, further explains that changing demographics, which have been especially high in the City of Bellevue, have not changed the need people have for libraries. “Libraries are unique in the services they offer: they provide access to data and information that appeal to a broad segment of the community” (interview with the author, July 7, 2010). They are a free, welcoming, nonstigmatized place for people to be and to find information and answer one’s questions. Some researchers ask: “Where better to find the building blocks for citizenship, the educational and cultural materials, and the programs [that people seek and enjoy] than at the public library?” (Somerville 1995).

Defining Community

Definitions of *community* can be onerously detailed. For the purposes of this study, I define community in three ways: “communities of interest,” “spatial communities” (Linley and Usherwood 1998), and “communities of relationships” (Morse 2004). These three ways of looking at community seem most relevant to how public libraries interact with people. Willingham (2008) writes that “libraries are known for their ability to build communities of interest, hosting haiku writing workshops, leading book discussions, teaching computer courses, displaying work by local artists, and other programming that serve[s] issue oriented groups.” They are less known for their ability to build communities of relationships and spatial communities, but have the potential to do so in powerful ways.

Central Theme: Community Building

Because community building is the essential theme of this research, it, too, requires definition. Alexandra Harris, former capital program director at the Seattle Public Library, explains that “community development looks at economic issues, social issues, needs and resources. It tries to connect communities with resources whether street beautification or after school

programs. It can cross from physical improvements to social programs and economic development” (interview with the author, July 7, 2010). Wikipedia provides a somewhat broader definition.

Community building is a field of practices directed toward the creation or enhancement of community among individuals within a regional area (such as a neighborhood) or with a common interest . . . A wide variety of practices can be utilized for community building, ranging from simple events like potlucks and small book clubs, to larger-scale efforts such as mass festivals and building construction projects that involve local participants rather than outside contractors . . . Activists may see building community as a means to increase social justice, individual well-being and reduce negative impacts of otherwise disconnected individuals. (Wikipedia 2010)

In community building, libraries can help ameliorate some of today’s social ills, including isolation, a lack of well-being, a lack of access, and the inability to engage. Community building is receiving lots of emphasis just now from library leaders. Cheryl Napsha, director of the William P. Faust Public Library, Westland, Michigan, summarizes the current state of libraries when she says: “Books and materials are really secondary in a library. The most important aspect is the human interaction. The library experiences cannot be viewed as just an information transaction, but rather as an opportunity to touch and connect lives” (quoted in Hill 2009a). That emphasis is reflected in the annual themes selected by incoming presidents of the American Library Association. Of the past ten years, six themes have dealt with community building on some level.

2010—Libraries, the Heart of Communities

2009—Creating Connections

2008—Celebrating Community, Collaboration, and Culture

2007—Libraries Transform Communities

2004—Equity of Access

2001—Libraries, Cornerstones of Democracy

Despite the fact that librarians have been talking about community building for a long time, Hill (2009b) laments that “in many of those [discussions] they are talking to each other. We really need to get out beyond this world of our libraries and into the discourse.” Nancy Pearl—ALA Librarian of the Year for 2011, author of *Book Lust*, and one of this nation’s library reading advisors—emphasizes that “there is a disconnect between what we (librarians) know the library has to offer and what the public knows the library has to offer” (interview with the author, summer 2010). Fortunately, city planners and public officials are beginning to recognize the

role libraries are playing and can play in community building. Mayor Richard M. Daley of the City of Chicago told Urban Library Council members a few years ago that to “redevelop a neighborhood or community you need a fire station, library and grocery store” (B. Ptacek, interview with the author, August 4, 2010). Daley used libraries as a key element in his neighborhood redevelopment program.

Mayor Daley’s theme was echoed by an elected official in Newcastle, United Kingdom, who explained that the library “is certainly part of the cement in the social fabric. It’s a way that people come together, meet, interact, share common interests and expand those interests and go on . . . to other things . . . it’s part of the things that hold a community together” (Linley and Usherwood 1998). Despite such publicity for library community development work, many citizens do not recognize that libraries serve this vital civic role. Libraries need to find better and continuing ways to emphasize the community-building role with their constituencies.

One important means of such communication is through the location and “physicalness” of branch libraries. Hill (2009b) tells us that “community building happens in the physical spaces in which we live.” Researchers explain that in recent years, “libraries have repositioned themselves as place-based assets” (Fulton and Jackson 2003) welcoming people from all walks of life and providing space and opportunities for them to interact with each other, information, and new ideas that they may not otherwise know about. Professor Anne Goulding, at the Information School at Loughborough University in the United Kingdom, describes how this transformation has helped people in the community to engage and connect with each other.

The public library is being repositioned not just as a place to borrow or read books or even to access digital materials, but as a key resource and facility which can act as a venue for community events and as an access point connecting individuals with one another, connecting people with their local communities, and connecting communities with wider society. (Goulding 2009)

Many libraries are stepping up to the challenge of providing services that are relevant to the needs of their users and the people in their communities. Cecilia McGowan, coordinator of children’s services at the King County Library System, emphasizes that we can and “need to do a better job of reaching our communities” if we are to survive (interview with the author, June 17, 2010).

The library has great potential to meet many of the unmet needs within a community, but to do so, we really need to listen: listen to our users, listen to each other, and, especially, listen to people who are not using our libraries. Why don’t they see us as relevant? Listening will empower us to better understand what the unmet needs are and enable us to work

toward meeting them. Bill Ptacek, director of the King County Library System, stresses that “our job is to stay relevant in the lives of people we serve . . . we need to play to our strengths. We are locally connected and know what is going on in our community. We need to get out of the library and reach out to those we do not serve” (interview with the author, August 4, 2010). Then we can adjust our services to better serve the whole of our community. We can also reach people who might not otherwise think to come to a library, like young children, immigrants, refugees, or busy young professionals.

“The library is a critical stakeholder in the communities we serve” (Hill 2009a). and can help make those communities stronger and more vibrant. There are five areas in which libraries currently contribute to building thriving communities.

1. Libraries serve as a conduit to access information and to learn
2. Libraries encourage social inclusion and equity
3. Libraries foster civic engagement
4. Libraries create a bridge to resources and community involvement
5. Libraries promote economic vitality within the community

These five areas in which libraries build community are the focus of this article. In *PLQ* 30(4) I will present four studies of different sets of strategies that libraries have used to build communities and examine why they have been successful. That article also will make policy recommendations for strategies that libraries may employ to help build stronger communities around them.

Geographical Focus: King County, Washington

In conducting my research, I decided to focus on King County¹ in Washington State for two reasons.

1. King County is the county in which I currently live and, as such, focusing here allowed me more direct contact with professionals in the field than I would have had if I opted to focus elsewhere. This is important given my reliance on their professional expertise and experiences with their libraries to illustrate the effectiveness of community building through public libraries.
2. In exploring the role of public libraries in community building, King County presented many good examples of work currently being done. King County is home to two library systems, the King County Library System (KCLS) and the Seattle Public Library (SPL), each engaged in various forms of community building.

According to University of Washington researcher Michael Crandall, “both KCLS and SPL seem well aware of their communities and are responding effectively” (interview with the author, August 3, 2010).

The limitation of focusing on King County libraries is that both KCLS and SPL are large systems. Such large systems constitute about 15 percent of all public library systems in the United States but serve approximately 85 percent of all the nation’s citizens. Given that the 85 percent of the remaining libraries are small in size and usually equally small in budget, they “have different dynamics around community building and partnerships” (M. Crandall, interview with the author, August 3, 2010). One must be cautious in applying conclusions drawn from a study like this one that focuses on large urban library systems. Different counties and communities across the United States and around the globe have different needs that shape their public library service. Being responsive to those needs is critical to the work we do. Some communities, for example, have low literacy levels, and the library plays a pivotal role in educating the masses. King County library development has its own unique challenges and advantages, which I will explore. Some of the unique challenges and advantages facing the development of public library service in King County follow.

King County Demographics

King County is made up of 515 cities, towns, or other populated areas (WA HomeTownLocator 2010) including the City of Seattle, the largest metropolis in the area. The King County Library System has forty-eight branch libraries while the Seattle Public Library System, a separate system also within the county limits, has twenty-seven branches. These seventy-five branches serve a population of more than 1,900,000 (U.S Census Bureau 2010). Following are some unique characteristics of King County.

- King County is highly literate, with 92 percent of adults meeting basic standards in 2003 (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics n.d.). “In 2005, Seattle was ranked the most well-educated city in the country” (Washington State Department of Commerce 2010). This is both a blessing and a challenge for public libraries. The residents of King County take ownership of their library branches. They also have high expectations for the services provided.
- King County residents have a good track record of library support.
 - Gilmore (2010) finds that “two-thirds of Seattle residents have a library card and nearly 33 percent used their card in the past year. Nationally, 56 percent of Americans have library cards.”
 - The same is true for the King County system with two-thirds of all residents having a library card (B. Ptacek, interview with the author, August 4, 2010).

- King County is diverse.
 - The people of King County speak 118 different languages in their homes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007). This is in large part due to the fact that Seattle and south King County are huge resettlement locations (Turnbull 2010) both for refugees and migrants coming from other parts of the country.
 - Crandall explains that there is a “broad audience in King County. King County has broad demographics from upper class, fairly white populations, to very new immigrant populations to people who are out of work and unemployed in different sectors” (interview with the author, August 3, 2010).
- King County has high levels of philanthropy.
 - While this philanthropy provides support for public libraries and other literacy efforts, Deborah Jacobs, director of Global Libraries at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and former director of the Seattle Public Library, stresses that “you don’t have to have the two richest men in the world living in your community to have great library services” (interview with the author, July 28, 2010). She is referring to Bill Gates and Paul Allen.
 - Philanthropy and advocacy do not necessarily come from those with the most money. You never know who will be walking into your library. Every patron should be welcomed and treated with respect. It is our job to welcome that patron and engage them. Perhaps we can help them find some information, engage with others, or learn something new. This is our job, and when we do it well we create library supporters for life, regardless of whether they have large sums of money.

Methodology

In conducting research I reviewed literature in community building, public librarianship, and other related fields. In addition, I interviewed local professionals in these fields. I was looking to answer the following questions:

1. What does it mean to build community?
2. What role do public libraries currently play in community building?
3. What can public libraries do to play a stronger role in community building?
4. What are some good examples of public libraries that are working to build community, and what is it about these libraries and/or projects that make them successful in this way?

Through personal interviews conducted in the summer and autumn of 2010, I consulted twenty-five professionals in the fields of public

librarianship and community development. In seventeen of the interviews, taking place in the summer of 2010, we discussed the above questions. As mentioned earlier, all these persons are identified in my thesis (Scott 2010), including their positions at the time of my interviews with them.

From the first seventeen interviews and my additional research, I generated the ideas for four studies that looked at different strategies that public libraries use to build community. The results of those studies and information from the remaining eight interviews will be reported in *PLQ* 30(4).

THEMES IN LIBRARY COMMUNITY BUILDING

Libraries that do a good job of building strong communities are tuned in to their users and the characteristics of their communities, are connected with other organizations that serve those users, and are flexible in their program and service delivery, adjusting these to meet changing needs.

As outlined in the first section of this article, I found five overarching ways that public libraries are currently building thriving communities. I will discuss each area, providing evidence and supporting examples to help illustrate the concept. I hope that through reading this article, librarians will better be able to articulate what they are already doing to serve their communities. We must continually remind the public why the library is so critical to their well-being and the strength of their community. Additionally, I hope this article will provide new ideas about how public libraries can serve their changing communities.

THROUGH EDUCATION, THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVES AS A CONDUIT TO ACCESS INFORMATION AND ACQUIRE KNOWLEDGE

Nearly all people want to learn. Libraries play an important role in providing the opportunity and resources for people to acquire such learning. Through education, people experience a greater understanding of the world, increased confidence and ability, and they open doors to new opportunities. When people think about libraries, they like to see that the library is helping people in their community to learn and succeed in their endeavors. In fact, a study funded by the Gates Foundation found that “the catalyst that energizes adults to actually vote in favor of financial support for libraries is not library use, something most of us have always believed, but rather the library’s ability to help people achieve their potential” (Levine 2009). Libraries contribute to an educated population, which benefits all people in a community through economic vitality and opportunity. “There is lots of research that shows that a well-educated work force attracts economic

vitality because people want to work in an area that is well educated” (Harris, interview with the author, July 7, 2010). Mary Somerville (1995), former president of the American Library Association (1996–1997) and former director of Florida’s Miami-Dade Public Library, highlights the critical role libraries play in acculturating new immigrants and citizens to an area, pointing out that education and acculturation make for good citizens. Libraries are essential to the citizenship process as well as the right to know.

The Library Promotes Understanding by Broadening Awareness of the World

Seeing the library as an educator of individual patrons is only one part of a much bigger picture. Many public libraries are working to broaden their community’s cultural understanding and awareness of the world through programming, displays, and discussions. An example of these efforts is the Hall Library in Chicago where “large displays, publicized debates, and the use of space for community groups point . . . to education as a community endeavor” (Burt 2009). Somerville discusses the library’s role in cultural awareness.

A gulf of cultural differences can divide communities in the same way that oceans have traditionally separated continents. As has been true historically, the public library can serve as neutral ground to help dissolve the sense of separation . . . Offering programs and exhibits that celebrate other cultures will not only attract new immigrant users [to the library] but will facilitate acceptance and understanding by the rest of the community. A program on Argentinean tango, or Haitian storytelling, for example, will entertain both citizens and new immigrants. (Somerville 1995)

Audunson (2005) articulates how playing this role can increase tolerance: “To the extent we succeed in establishing arenas where people belonging to different cultures can meet and communicate, tolerance will probably grow.” And, people leave such events with a “redefined sense of what the library is: no longer just a storehouse of content, but a place where like minds can rally around that content” (Levine 2009).

Jill Jean points out that although programming can bring together like-minded people, it also has the powerful effect of “making people feel a little uncomfortable, by really allowing all aspects of an issue to be explored” (interview with the author, July 19, 2010). In the Kitsap Regional Library System, such programming has included a play about September 11 and a series of peace speakers in a heavily military community. Jean explains that because library programming can be perceived as controversial, it is our job as librarians and library employees to explain the reasons for presenting such programs. Audunson (2005) emphasizes that “the cement of democracy

is tolerance. Tolerance presupposes that we are exposed to other values, interests and preferences than our own, and that we re-conciliate ourselves with their existence and accept them as legitimate.”

The Library Supports School Success

Public libraries play an important role in providing educational support for students. “Younger adults, especially in large metropolitan areas, are not registering the same high levels of degree attainment as their predecessors” (The Brookings Institution 2010). The public library provides a safe, neutral place where youth can go to study and learn. In addition, neighborhood branch locations offer convenient locations in a familiar community environment.

Most libraries also offer homework help where youth can connect with caring adults who want to help them excel. Author Francois Matarasso (1998) writes about how “helping children to do their homework can only have a positive effect on their schoolwork and by extension their educational attainment.” In addition to helping with homework, libraries provide access to online resources that have become essential to success in school in a society where not everyone has Internet access at home. An Oakland, California, high school principal told a University of Washington researcher that “100 percent of our graduates are accepted to college . . . We work with largely disadvantaged and at-risk youth, and they don’t have computers at home, so they come here to the library. They get support here. The librarians help them attain the online and print materials they need” (Becker et al. 2010).

Some libraries have moved beyond their buildings to provide neighborhood support for formal education. Cecilia McGowan notes three programs the KCLS has exported into its community to support children’s education.

- *Angle Lake Festival*: The library provides free school supplies to children as part of this community event. This festival reaches an underserved community that may have trouble obtaining educational materials without the library’s support. This program has grown every year the library has organized it.
- *Summer busing to the library*: McGowan notes, “We bus children from summer school once a week to the public library for forty-five minutes.” During this time, the librarians welcome the kids, sign them up for library cards, and kids can check out materials. “Ninety percent of these kids have never been to a public library before, and the great part is that we then see the children coming back with their families.” This program helps children and families realize that even though school is closed for the summer, the public library is still working to help educate children.
- *Brothers and Sisters collaboration*: The organization Brothers and Sisters received funding to provide training to older siblings in junior high and high school who are taking care of younger siblings. “It is great for teen

caregivers to know about early literacy, to know how to talk to and help their younger siblings, so the library got involved” (McGowan, interview with the author, June 17, 2010).

Direct Education within the Library

In addition to the supportive role that libraries play for formal schooling, they also provide direct education through formal instruction, for free, to many groups that at best are offered in only a few other venues.² Four areas of programming are especially dedicated to direct education.

1. Children’s programming
2. Early childhood and adult literacy
3. English as a second language
4. Computer classes and digital literacy

An exploration of these four areas demonstrates the value of direct education, provided free of charge to attendees at the public library.

CHILDREN’S PROGRAMMING

Through a variety of programs, “libraries develop the reading ability of young children, including English language skills in children whose parents’ first language is not English” (Linley and Usherwood 1998). “Having small children at home was related to frequent library use. Use increased with the number of minor children in the house” (Marchant 1994). In an effort to foster their children’s education, mothers (or caregivers) bring their children to the library. “Sometimes the librarian is the child’s first teacher with storytelling” (J. Jean, interview with the author, July 19, 2010). “While they are there, [parents] often get books for themselves,” which promotes access and education for the adult as well as the child (Marchant 1994). Early or emergent literacy is the constellation of learning activities here. Story time is usually part of that. Engaging or educating parents is a second goal. Circulation of books is a third reason for programs. Educating and training care providers in early literacy skills is often a fourth aspect. Libraries achieve these goals through a variety of programs, including:

- *Story time*: Where parents come to the library with their children, engage with books and reading, and connect with other families in the community. Story time is not just for the children, because it incorporates early literacy training for parents with young children who are not yet in school.
- *Books for babies program*: Where board books are taken to public health offices. Visiting nurses then take the books out to families in need. The

library provides the books in seven languages; books include a bookmark with information on early literacy.

- *Fiestas*: Where Spanish-speaking families come together to learn early literacy skills taught by community volunteers. “Bilingual or Spanish-only speaking folks are getting training [from the library] to go out into the community to teach early literacy skills in Spanish” (C. McGowan, interview with the author, June 17, 2010).
- *Raising a reader*: Where children are exposed to books and parents and caregivers are trained in interactive read-aloud strategies to help engage their children in reading. This program connects families with their local public library while teaching the parents early literacy skills to use at home.

LITERACY

In communities with low literacy levels, “the public library [can] . . . be an appropriate and non-stigmatized environment for specific initiatives in literacy” (Linley and Usherwood 1998) from classes to workshops and speaker series to events. Although libraries sometimes overlook programming for adults, when made aware of events, adults are just as interested in attending and participating in library programming as are children. The Redmond, Washington, library piloted an adult summer reading program in 2010. When promoting summer reading at the schools, librarians mentioned the adult program too. “They had a great turn out . . . Adults enjoy reading, winning prizes and sharing reviews” (J. Weisman, interview with the author, July 29, 2010). As indicated with the adult summer reading program, a lot of library adult outreach starts with the schools. The librarians are already there, and “the kids want to do summer reading [and other programs] which brings literacy into the home. Kids then bring their parents back [to the library] with them” (D. Ralph, interview with the author, July 29, 2010).

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

For non-English or English as a second language (ESL) patrons, “multilingual collections are a must. Language collections should reflect the community. An immigrant conversant in English may still prefer to read in the language of birth . . . Either the literacy program [at your library] needs to be multilingual, or the library needs to provide links with literacy programs in other languages” (Somerville 1995). “Libraries have become leaders in building English capacity, the most important factor in immigrants’ chances for success, through both early/family literacy (Raising a Reader and Fiesta-like programs) and adult English instruction (programs like Talk Time where ESL patrons can practice English together)” (Oder 2008). Providing direct educational opportunities for ESL patrons to learn English brings them to

the library where they then become aware of other library adult activities along with events in their communities in which they might be interested.

Somerville points out that historically, libraries have played an important role in acculturating and educating recent immigrants. She comments:

Immigrants needed carefully selected titles that would help them master the English language, to learn the fundamentals of citizenship, and to enjoy the classics in their own language. Since they tended to settle in neighborhoods where others of their countrymen had located, branch libraries often served one predominant ethnic group, and books in the language became part of the branch book collection. (1995)

The Seattle Public Libraries' "magnet branches" reflect this idea. In 2007 SPL began offering "concentrated collections in Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, Korean and Japanese in neighborhood branches where large numbers of patrons spoke and read those languages. Circulation and demographic data helped determine which branches would be most accessible to patrons expected to use these world language collections" (Addison 2007). A similar model is used at the KCLS and by Queens Borough Public Library in New York.

COMPUTER CLASSES AND DIGITAL LITERACY

Computer skills and access to the Internet are crucial to working, living, and communicating in American society. In Seattle, "one fifth of residents rely on the public library system's 1,000 computers as their sole source of Internet access" (Beason 2010). A similar need exists throughout King County and is even greater in less populated areas of the country. In response to this need, many King County libraries provide computer-based services.

Today, library services commonly include, but are not limited to: job training and continuing education, resume writing, career counseling, and basic information literacy training, including digital literacy . . . Many libraries report that patrons filling out job applications are often first-time computer users and need basic skills to be able to complete the application. ("ALA to FCC" 2009)

Performing basic functions like applying for a job, a process now frequently online, requires new skills. Willingham (2008) writes: "The library world has responded heroically to the burgeoning use of technology, making computers readily available to populations that would otherwise be left behind in these digital days." Providing classes in basic computer and more advanced computer skills are critical in ensuring a patron access to the information that the library is attempting to provide. Another important use

of computers at public libraries is to further one's education. Becker et al. writes:

More than 32 million visitors reported using the library computers for a variety of educational activities: doing their homework, searching for and applying to GED and graduate programs, completing online courses and tests, and even applying for financial aid . . . More than half of library patrons who used library computers to seek financial aid received funding. (2010)

This use of library technology allowed patrons to pursue further education. Computer use at the public library spans the age ranges. Cindy Harrison, former branch library manager at Bainbridge Island, spoke about the need to have computer classes for seniors at her library: "Demand was there because people wanted to be able to communicate with their grandkids and they needed to understand how to use email" (interview with the author, July 7, 2010). As technology continues to evolve, the library serves as a reliable place for patrons to come and learn new skills and how to use the new technology, which enables them to keep learning and pursuing their interests.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES ENCOURAGE SOCIAL INCLUSION AND EQUITY

Simply having a place to go that is neither home nor work enables people to relax and interact with others in informal ways. People who have places away from their home and work are more likely to form social friendships. "The quality of a person's social contact is widely accepted by psychologists as being one of the most important factors in well-being . . . At any age, people with the fewest social connections are up to three times as likely to die as those with the most" (Matarasso 1998). People need places where they can go to develop these informal relationships and build connections with others from their community.

Public Libraries as Third Places

"Third places are neither home nor work—the 'first two' places—but venues like coffee shops, bookstores and cafes in which we find less formal acquaintances. These comprise 'the heart of community's social vitality' where people go for good company and lively conversation" (Florida 2003). Public libraries function as third places. They provide a place where people can come together and meet informally. "Libraries, easily caricatured as solitary places which discourage human contact, are not always credited with the contribution they make to socialization" (Matarasso 1998). Authors of the

U.S. Impact Study conclude that libraries are open to all people, with no requirements for admission, and “as communities become more distributed and less based on geographic proximity, the library is helping those who might not otherwise have access, to participate in an active way in our society” (Becker et al. 2010). The library has become an ideal third place where people can go to be with others.

The library needs to be recognized for the role it plays in providing an inclusive third space. Watson notes:

The Library as third place goes beyond gratuitous social space, defies categorization, and becomes an essential part of the twenty first century learning infrastructure that is not merely “for good company and lively conversation” but enables contacts and links to unexpected encounter and chance conversation. (2010)

These encounters and conversations are often the groundwork on which friendships and understanding are built. Willingham (2008) is a public engagement and change management consultant who has researched the role of public libraries as civic agents. She explains that it is important for people to engage each other for three reasons:

- As people get to know each other, they establish relationships that build public confidence to tackle future problems.
- Civic work groups, such as the Lions, Rotary, religious organizations, or library groups, help solve community problems. People become involved in these groups through informal connections.
- Involvement teaches people how to work with others, thereby strengthening what people in Chicago called “civic muscle,” which enhances a community’s ability to create the political will to deal with its future problems.

More evidence comes from Wayne Disher, a branch manager in San Jose, California, who describes the shift from library as a scholarly place to library as “neighborhood living room or front porch—a place where everybody in the community can gather and connect with each other” (Jordan 2003). In becoming a neighborhood living room, the public library has opened itself as a space for diverse experiences. Some of these experiences may be negative. Staff, for example, may encounter issues related to homelessness, unsupervised children, and inconsiderate behavior. The benefits of being open to all and an inclusive space for the community far outweigh these challenges.

The third-place role of the public library can be seen in communities across the county. In the small town of Salado, Texas, “libraries are the afternoon gathering place, just like the local coffee shop is the morning

place to congregate” (Willingham 2008). A UK library observer reports that “a lot of people come through the doors, they don’t actually borrow books, the issues aren’t very high, but an awful lot of people come in, read the newspapers, have a cup of coffee, maybe look at some of the books . . . but it’s very much a social place where they do come and meet each other” (Linley and Usherwood 1998).

Public libraries play a special role in reducing social isolation. They are perceived as safe, clean, and convenient, making them a natural place to congregate. Reducing social isolation is especially relevant among the elderly who may have limited socialization options. One staff member explains that “a lot of them, especially the elderly ladies, will come in and only take two books, or even one, and they’ll come back two days later because they like the trip out” (Linley and Usherwood 1998). One woman patron spoke of her preference for going to the library over using the housebound reader’s service for which she qualified. She said, “I like to go for the change; my books and not only that, we see one another on the bus, what we don’t see for a fortnight, and have a little bit [of] talk and the girls [i.e., library staff] there are very good and have a little bit of a natter. . . . I would miss it if I didn’t go to the library” (Linley and Usherwood 1998).

The role of socialization, delivered by the spaces at public libraries, is also relevant for people who do not talk to the other patrons or staff. Whether because of convenience or because they like being around other people “out in public,” people are visiting their libraries. Susan Hildreth, director at the Institute of Museum and Library Services and former director at the Seattle Public Library, describes how “a lot of people use the library computers even though they have computers at home, and they use the library even though they buy books on Amazon” (interview with the author, July 9, 2010). Becker and her colleagues (2010) note: “The most commonly reported use [of library computers] was social connection, which included connecting with family and friends, finding support for an issue or problem, as well as leisure activities such as watching videos, pursuing hobbies, or maintaining blogs and personal websites.”

Even in communities where the library is not the only place to meet and gather, “libraries are still such a vital part of community space” (J. Jean, interview with the author, July 19, 2010), attracting people who just want to hang out and be around others. Willingham (2008) amplifies this social use.

Libraries can be the place where communities gather to find and tell their story, where people form relationships and come to care for each other. In doing so, libraries can build community by creating relationships that help people see how their interests are intertwined and why they should care about a child across town without health care, or a youth at risk of dropping out, or a single mother whose food stamps do not last through the month. It also helps people stop demonizing the other, often the first step towards talking and listening and acting together.

Library Programs Decrease Social Isolation and Promote Community Involvement

Programs at the local library also help increase community understanding because “they often draw their membership from across the local community and can build bonds between individuals” (Goulding 2009). Matarasso (1998) notes that library programs can open doors for people, “encouraging them to take up other activities, with benefits to their selves and the wider community. . . . The health benefits of social activity have been increasingly recognized. . . . Being involved made people feel better [and helped some] to overcome depression through the projects that [they] had been involved in.”

Some examples include local history groups, increasing information available about the local community; children’s story time, leading to cultural events within the community; and involvement in friends of the library groups, raising money and hosting events to directly support the library. Harrison explains the connective power of her friends of the library group on Bainbridge Island.

Friends of the library is a community-growing organization because it provides so many types of volunteer jobs (sorting books, cashiering at book sales, collection donations and doing online price checking, etc.) . . . It is well run and people relate to that . . . The donations are marvelous, partly because people know they will be used well and the library will get the value out of the sales. (interview with the author, July 7, 2010)

Matarasso (1998) notes how programs like the library friends “make a significant, sometimes critical, contribution to people’s lives by helping them to participate in the lives of their communities, by making them feel valued and respected, and by providing a free and satisfying source of activity.” Harris emphasizes that “through programs like literacy and speaker series, libraries can be real avenues to connect with communities that might otherwise be isolated” (interview with the author, July 7, 2010). The power of programming at the library is especially relevant for people living in poverty, because “poverty isolates people from social contacts, from sharing in the common experience of the majority of the population, and from effective membership of the community” (Matarasso 1998). “Being able to borrow items like fiction books, CDs and DVDs allow[s] . . . those on very low incomes to join in activities that others in society take for granted. Such provisions can help people feel just a little less marginalized” (Linley and Usherwood 1998).

Connections are made daily at library events. On Bainbridge Island, Cindy Harrison explains the value of having book groups at her local branch library: “There are scores of book groups on the island, but most of them are in personal homes, and it is hard for newcomers to get involved” (interview

with the author, July 7, 2010). Hosting these groups at the library expedites involvement and socialization for new community members. Harrison also describes a young mom's knitting book group and a Spanish-language book group. Through the simple task of hosting book groups, the library is able to bring together members of the community with similar interests and provide them a safe place to interact and build relationships.

Free to All, Libraries Are Unrestricted Territory

"Libraries have always known they are community assets," says former Los Angeles public library director Susan Kent. "There are very few public places that are welcoming to everybody" (Fulton and Jackson 2003). Matarasso (1998) goes a step further: "The principle of unquestioned inclusivity is kept alive today by the library . . . In a society which has become increasingly selective, and where public facilities are no longer automatically accessible, this is of truly vital importance." In addition to being an open door that welcomes all people, libraries promote social inclusion and equity through the services they provide. Anne Goulding sees these same values shaping both in-library programming and outreach:

Free at the point of delivery, libraries provide lifelong learning opportunities, access to information, books and resources in many community languages and different formats, services to the housebound, residential homes, prisons and hospitals, all delivered through the skills of trained staff. (2006)

Jacobs (2010) says that internationally, "public libraries are the *only* institutions or places that promote the value of equitable access." That is especially true for computer access. Authors of the *U.S. Impact Study* emphasize that if not for "libraries, millions of Americans would not have reliable Internet access in a digital age when a connection is often needed to complete school assignments, apply for jobs, or secure government services" (Becker et al. 2010). Without the library, many people would have difficulty completing these basic daily functions that are essential for life in America.

Equitable access often creates a sense of community ownership. Jacobs (2010) says that a wide variety of "people feel like it is our library, my library, not the library." Meegan and Mitchell (2001) concur: "For certain groups—the elderly, ethnic minorities, the unemployed, women and children—the neighborhood (and the neighborhood library) has heightened importance." Matarasso (1998) says such involvement "in library activities and the increased confidence which results could lead to greater empowerment." The library has the potential to increase equity and promote a socially inclusive society by providing opportunities for people, particularly those who lack other avenues, to learn new things, access resources, and connect with others in their community and beyond.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES FOSTER CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BY PROVIDING SPACE AND INFORMATION

Public libraries have the ability and capacity to promote civic engagement. Goulding (2009) notes: “Voluntary and community activity is fundamental to the development of a democratic, socially inclusive society . . . [And] third sector organizations [like the public library] enable individuals to contribute to public life and develop their communities.” Willingham (2008) is more specific. Libraries, she says, engage “the public in civic discourse, weaving organizations and resources together, bridging divisions, and developing the capacity for their communities to solve problems.”

Audunson (2005) writes that “without arenas and a public space where a discourse can take place across social and cultural borders, one cannot reach decisions based on democratic deliberation.” Without democratic deliberation, we are not living in a truly democratic society. Thus, public space that facilitates this type of deliberation, as the public library does, is essential to our way of life.

Willingham (2008) lays out the rationale from a research study for why libraries need to use their resources to build community engagement.

Doble Research Associates found that participants [in public forums] lament the decline in community engagement, but feel powerless to make changes. Those who participated expressed feeling alienated from politics and community affairs. They knew something is off track in our democracy, but were unable to identify what steps might be taken to deal with our public problems. Too often citizens are cast as consumers or spectators rather than citizen-proprietors. Forum participants talked about a loss of public space where citizens meet informally and talk about whatever is on their mind, including community problems and political issues.

Public libraries both provide space for people to come together and share ideas and facilitate these conversations through programming and by promoting an understanding of diverse ideas. Libraries serve as “public neighborhood spaces [that] have the capacity to function as places where citizens can confront one another and engage conflict directly” (Schaller and Modan 2005). Jean, speaking about a new program she directs at the Kitsap Regional Library System, notes:

Community Conversations is a program where we bring people together around a topic . . . The one we had lately is the whole movement to the local production of food. The only thing controversial about that is that downtown Bremerton won't allow chickens within the city limits. Because city officials were present there will be a vote to allow chickens within the city limits. (interview with the author, July 19, 2010)

Goulding (2009) summarizes the changes that libraries may need to make to carry out this kind of programming.

Libraries can do more to engage people. By using the power of their everyday work with readers to reach out and involve local people in decision making about the future of local public services . . . Library-led readers' groups and other reader development activities were highlighted as examples of popular grass-roots activities that could be built on to encourage feedback, consultation and shared decision making . . . Public libraries [should] cease to be mere suppliers of reading material and turn their attention to helping people engage with a wide range of literature.

So significant is community engagement in the life of the modern library that it has led to changing space requirements in library buildings. Fulton and Jackson (2003) state: "A decade ago, many libraries were converting their meeting rooms into storage areas to house expanding collections. Now they are reopening these meeting rooms and making them available to the public." Jennifer Weisman, project manager at KCLS, points out that in the construction of new libraries in King County, "with all the square footage we are adding, we are trying to add space for the patrons. When we go out and do community studies, we are looking at what programs will meet the needs of the people using the library" (interview with the author, July 29, 2010). According to Weisman, the need for discussion of diverse community issues turns out to be one issue that patrons care about.

Meeting rooms at the public library serve patrons of all ages. Jordan (2003) emphasizes that "one of [libraries'] most sought after assets is the free meeting space that they provide," which is used by "the local chamber of commerce, neighborhood associations and other civic groups." Levine (2009) writes about how using the space to "[provide] opportunities for youth to play videogames together in a safe, noncommercialized space gives kids a place outside of school where they can come together, meet new people, and learn to resolve their differences without resorting to violence or requiring adult intervention."

Diverse Book Discussions with a Community Purpose

Nancy Pearl lauds the transformative power of book groups: "You can discuss difficult issues in the context of a book group. This makes it easier to explore difficult questions as a patron." She thinks that "the best way to build community is through discussion groups." This was an important motivation for starting *If All Seattle Read the Same Book*, now known as *Seattle Reads*, a program that encourages all residents in the city to read and discuss with each other the same book. This program has been successful in engaging discussion and has been adopted in more than 200 cities across the country (N. Pearl, interview with the author, summer 2010).

From its inception in 1998 (Addison 2010), Seattle Reads had the goal of encouraging people to examine life issues through discussion with their friends and neighbors. Pearl states, “I wanted people to read books that made them think about important issues, like what it means to be human, how does it feel to have a child die, and those sorts of questions are easier to talk and think about if they’re discussed in the context of a book” (interview with the author, summer 2010). Chris Higashi, who now runs the program, notes, “we try to choose a great book for discussion, which is one that is well written, if fiction, a book with three dimensional characters who are dealing with life issues that readers can identify with and a book that raises sufficient discussion among lots of disparate readers” (interview with the author, September 17, 2010). Not only does reading the same book get communities talking to each other, but it also helps them see the ways in which libraries can and do add value to their lives. Jean discusses the benefits of such a program: “To bring a community together through the reading of one title . . . opens doors. It is a wonderful way to coalesce people around what the library has to offer” (interview with the author, July 19, 2010). Book discussion, according to Schaller and Modan (2005), is a “process of community building that simultaneously elicits discomfort and debate supporting the construction of an inclusive notion of citizenship because they unmask our fallibility as a society and make salient our own complicity in reproducing the system of economic, social and political inequity.” This exploration, by allowing patrons to consume content socially, promotes understanding. Fans of book groups recognize this value, “but people who don’t much like to talk about books may not realize how rewarding it can be to participate in a community event centered around content that they are passionate about” (Levine 2009).

Library cultural events or events put on by outside organizations can have the same kind of impact. Through such events the library facilitates discussion among its patrons. Oder (2008), for example, reported how library programs “encourage[d] civic engagement by hosting talks and films that address the immigrant experience, and provide [a] place for immigrant and cultural groups to meet.”

The overall goal is the same. Hildreth states that “civic engagement is about the individuals learning or networking with each other through the neutral ground of the library” (interview with the author, July 9, 2010). Gary E. Strong, then Queens Library Director, stressed that “so much of what we’re trying to do is create neighborhood dialogue” (Jordan 2003). Willingham (2008) suggests that such programming expands the library’s civic footprint:

A number of libraries are establishing their relevance and creating public value by reclaiming and expanding their civic mission: They are pursuing an active role in community building—directly engaging in partnerships with others to solve community problems. They are helping constituents learn about complex public issues and practice deliberative democracy,

and are listening deeply to the concerns of members of their community and developing strategies to help them work together on divisive issues.

Through Programs and Technology, Libraries Connect People, Providing Them Opportunities to Build Community

UK researchers Meegan and Mitchell (2001) argue that: “The most powerful resources in turning around neighborhoods should be the community itself. Community involvement can take many forms: formal volunteering; helping a neighbor; [or] taking part in a community organization.” Goulding (2009) explains that “for many people, involvement in community self-help and mutual support activity will be the form [in which] . . . much community engagement takes place rather than through formal decision making bodies and processes.”

People want to connect with others and feel that they are participating in their world. Library programs and technology enable them to do so. In one study looking at computer use in libraries “respondents of all ages reported that library technologies helped them connect with family (locally and around the globe), keep up with current events, and identify volunteer opportunities” (Becker et al. 2010). People also use library computers or the library’s Internet connection to manage clubs or nonprofits, run their own small businesses, and participate in politics by learning about candidates or issues.

Library programs have presented patrons with the opportunity to interact with people they might otherwise never meet. Matarasso (1998) writes that “several people [in one survey] spoke of how they had come to value exchange and communication with others more highly . . . as a result of being involved in groups at their library.” For others, participation allowed them to blossom “in confidence and engagement in the group,” possibly instilling skills that benefit them outside the library and in their community.

The power of such connections comes from people’s understanding and acceptance of one another. Chrystie Hill (2009b) explains that “it’s not about the books, it is about the human interaction, that connection we can make for people when we connect them with information” and with each other. A particularly salient example came in the form of a gaming tournament in Colorado. The gaming program brought in new users and enabled young users to engage civically. Levine (2009) notes that “the Pew/MacArthur study found that playing videogames together can offer opportunities for positive civic experiences for youth and can foster connections to the community.” Hixon (2009), quoted in Levine (2009), explains the library involvement in the gaming process this way:

We encourage the veteran players to help out the newbies . . . and we make sure that they know we don’t like it when they are being jerks

to each other. It's establishing this constructive, positive atmosphere that makes gaming events such a powerful part of a library's services . . . Kids are encouraged to help each other. That's the foundation of civic engagement.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES CREATE A BRIDGE TO RESOURCES AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT BY EMPOWERING THE PUBLIC

Public libraries have the ability to connect people in their community with resources and other organizations that can help them achieve their potential. Watson (2010) stresses that “for libraries, in both the education and public sectors, the vision and purpose must switch from resource provision to being about people and making a real contribution to the learning landscape.” To make a real contribution, librarians must understand what information people seek and know how to help them find this information. The first part involves an ability to communicate with the patron about their information needs. The second requires an understanding of the resources available in a community, including knowledge of the work of other organizations and the ability to bridge and connect the patron with the right information. “The bridge can be whatever the community needs, and that will be different depending on where you are in the county” (J. Giltrop, interview with the author, July 9, 2010). For example, in a world increasingly defined by technology, “the public library is one of the widest bridges to the Internet and computers, not only for those who cannot afford their own connection but also for those who find the library an easier, faster, friendlier, or more effective way to use these tools” (Becker et al. 2010) The bridges libraries can provide are limitless. Some that will be discussed further are:

- Libraries provide information and resources for community groups
- Libraries assist small businesses
- Libraries help during times of unemployment
- Libraries help parents educate their children at home
- Libraries provide access to health information, government services, nonprofit organizations, and information in general
- Libraries connect immigrants and refugees with resources and assist in acculturation

The authors of the *U.S. Impact Study* note some of the ways in which libraries create bridges:

Librarians have begun serving as informal job coaches, college counselors, test monitors, and technology trainers for the growing number of patrons navigating government aid, the job market and all levels of

education . . . They now offer beginning and advanced computer classes, host job training seminars, and provide countless patrons one-on-one computer training. (Becker et al. 2010)

By embracing their changing role, librarians continue to provide supportive and relevant service to their patrons. This new role is fluid. Sometimes the librarian needs to provide training. Other times he or she can connect people with resources, each other, or information. Staff at the Somerset Library in the UK emphasized the importance of the library as an information source for newcomers to an area: “New people, people who move into the village, they’re always pleased to find a library here, and . . . they want information on the village, local history, bus timetables etc.” (Linley and Usherwood 1998).

Libraries Provide Information and Resources for Community Groups

Many community groups take advantage of the free meeting spaces provided at the public libraries. Groups that opt to use the library to host their own events have immediate access to “resources, so if they are discussing something and want to learn more, they can do so” (J. Giltrop, interview with the author, July 9, 2010). For example, Ptacek explained that a community group meets at the Skyway Library in King County “and a librarian is there to help them with land use questions.”

Libraries Assist Small Businesses

Jennifer Giltrop (2010) explains that the library “can play the role of a silent business partner. It is here for everyone. It is there through cycles of life for when people need it more. The benefit of that is that the library is a trusted resource whether you are using it or not.” While relevant to small business owners, the silent-partner analogy extends beyond business. The public library is there for people of all walks of life to help them find and access whatever information they need when they need it.

Libraries Help during Times of Unemployment

Since the economic downturn that began in December 2007, the United States has seen rising unemployment. The rate in April 2011 was 9 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Department of Labor 2011). The rate was 9.1 percent in Washington State for the month of April 2011 (U.S. Department of Labor n.d.). Organizations throughout the country are responding to increased unemployment, and libraries are no exception. Researchers have found that “in today’s economy, libraries across the nation are experiencing a constant demand for services related to job seeking and

other employment issues” (“ALA to FCC” 2009). The library, with its free access to resources, is a desirable, nonstigmatized place to conduct a job search. One focus group participant in the United Kingdom pointed out that “with someone older they might not necessarily want to go into the job center all the time, whereas you can freely go into a library . . . there’s no stigma. Nobody knows what you’re doing” (Linley and Usherwood 1998).

Many patrons find the library, with computer access, to be an easier place to conduct their job search than the alternatives. Authors of the *U.S. Impact Study* note one user’s experience: “If you’re just out there filling out applications and walking around, you get so tired and you give up . . . But in the library, you can do what would take you a week to do in one day” (Becker, et al., 2010).

Additionally, libraries “have lots of resources to help people navigate career changes or skill building” (S. Hildreth, interview with the author, July 9, 2010). Researchers Linley and Usherwood (1998) explain that library staff help job seekers both “in the application by providing books on CV’s and so on, or directing them to people within the town who specialize in producing a CV.” Also, some libraries have software that allows patrons to use a résumé template to create their résumé.

Libraries Help Parents Care for and Educate Their Children

It can be scary and difficult for parents who are new to a community to find the resources they need to care for and look after their children. One mother expresses her appreciation for the public library this way: Having just moved into the area, by making one phone call, to the library, she had located all the necessary care for her young child. To her library she says, “many thanks for a useful and worthwhile service, enabling people stumbling in the dark to find the light at the end of the tunnel” (Matarasso 1998).

Educating one’s child at home can be challenging without additional support and resources. One woman who was home schooling her children “made it clear that this option would not have been feasible without the resources of the library” (Linley and Usherwood 1998).

Libraries Provide Access to Health Information, Government Services, Nonprofit Organizations, and Information in General

The library is the place to go to get help finding information on filling out forms. The American Library Association notes that “many libraries report the complexity of official websites and the forms required for government services are often so complex that many patrons cannot successfully complete an application” (“ALA to FCC” 2009). This is one of the reasons that SPL has partnered with the United Way of King County and AARP to provide tax preparation assistance. At library locations throughout Seattle, trained

volunteers assist patrons who have difficulty filling out personal tax returns on their own. Oder (2008) explains that “libraries have become key conduits to other local agencies and support institutions, including workforce and business development, health, and school engagement.” The authors of the *U.S. Impact Study* have found that “for more than 26 million users, libraries serve as the neighborhood-based extension of government agencies, linking users to government officials, programs and services” (Becker et al. 2010).

Libraries Connect Immigrants and Refugees with Resources and Assist in Acculturation

In the past the library was seen as the people’s university. Pearl explains that “immigrants could go to the library to better themselves, learn English, learn about being a citizen, etc. . . . Immigrants would come to the library wanting to know what it was like to be an American” (interview with the author, summer 2010). Librarians continue to play this ever-important role today with “lower-income, nonwhite and non-English speakers . . . more likely than others to use the [Seattle Public] library more than five times a month” (Gilmore 2010). With immigration continuing to fuel growth in our country, public libraries cannot ignore the vital role they play in connecting non-English speakers with resources, information, and help with acculturation.

A study by The Brookings Institution (2010) found that in the United States, non-whites “are projected to reach majority status by 2042 . . . Large metropolitan areas [like Seattle] will get there first . . . In 2008, these areas contained 68% of the nation’s multi-racial population.” Researchers find that “in many cities, libraries have become ports of entry to new immigrants, providing them with a variety of services” (Fulton and Jackson 2003) from ESL classes to information on citizenship, community resources, permanent affordable housing, and much more. Wei Cai, branch library manager at SPL, cautions that “many people come from countries that do not have public libraries and thus, they do not understand what they are for” (interview with the author, October 22, 2010). It is our job as librarians to reach out to these community members and help them access the resources and information with which we can connect them.

Jo Anderson Cavinta, the diversity program coordinator at KCLS, points out that “there is especially a need for [library services for] refugees who get 3–6 months to ‘settle,’ which is not enough time.” She said, “I would like to see more new immigrants see the library as a way to connect with their communities. However, language barriers continue to be a huge issue” (interview with the author, June 23, 2010). Additionally, people with negative experiences of libraries, such as some of those coming from communist countries,³ are not going to seek them out for help once arriving in America.

Former ALA president Mary Somerville discusses the idea of the “right to know,” which we embrace in America:

The right to know includes the right to obtain information for the citizenship process. Otherwise that process is not truly democratic. It is in the long-term interests of the community and country to achieve the Jeffersonian ideal of an enlightened citizenry. Without the exposure to U.S. history, laws, and customs, it will be difficult for new immigrants to survive and thrive, to attain U.S. citizenship. (1995)

Without materials and information in their native languages and ESL classes and materials, non-English speakers are unable to learn about U.S. history, laws, and customs. Valerie Wonder, the ESL and literacy program coordinator at SPL, encourages libraries to provide materials in local languages, to offer services (classes and programming), and to employ staff that speak different languages (interview with the author, July 19, 2010). Public libraries that make efforts to work with minority and immigrant groups not only help these groups acculturate but also promote “a sense of inclusivity with the service and the city” (Matarasso 1998). This welcoming environment keeps people coming back to the library, even after they have mastered English or gained citizenship. Somerville discusses some added benefits of reaching new patrons:

New immigrants who learn to love libraries today may vote for them tomorrow, a second reason for reaching out to serve them. They or their progeny may become community and national leaders, as well as benefactors. Congressman Romano Mazzoli from Louisville, KY, an enthusiastic library supporter, often recalls that his Italian immigrant father received an education at the local public library. (1995)

An inclusive society benefits all people, resulting in safer and happier neighborhoods. All of the examples discussed here illustrate ways in which the public library can provide access to resources and community involvement by empowering the public. Serving as this bridge is a vital role for the public library, a role that librarians can perform much better when they reach out to community organizations and form working partnerships with them.

Partnerships Allow Us to Do More with Less

Libraries are not alone in the provision of access to resources within the community. Working together with government agencies, health centers, and nonprofits enables the library to do more with fewer resources.

In Laredo, Texas, the public library was able to host a children's health fair because of "relationships with other community organizations and contributions from UT HSC (The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio)" (Ren, Cogdill, and Potemkin 2009). In 2008 the residents of Laredo and Webb County, many of which were Hispanic, experienced very real health disparities. Access to health services was a significant concern and "the prevalence of preventable diseases such as diabetes [was] higher than in many other Texas communities and the United States as a whole" (Ren, Cogdill, and Potemkin 2009). With a grant funded by the National Network of Libraries of Medicine, and many partners, the health fair was made possible. The University of Texas Health Science Center, the City of Laredo's Parks and Leisure Department, the Health Department, Laredo's PBS station, KLRN, Laredo's Children's Museum, and Laredo's Fire Department all contributed to the fair, working together with the library to make it happen.

The authors of the *U.S. Impact Study* encourage organizations to seek partnerships with the public library because of the library's effectiveness in reaching people and connecting them with resources. For example, "business and government agencies should engage libraries in economic and workforce development strategies as libraries are a very effective way to reach job seekers and connect them to employment services" (Becker et al. 2010). By partnering with public libraries, these agencies will be able to reach more people and better realize their missions.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES PROMOTE ECONOMIC VITALITY IN THE COMMUNITY

In the late 1980s Washington State experienced rapid population growth and, as a consequence, urban sprawl. In 1990 the Washington Legislature passed the Growth Management Act (GMA), which set guidelines for city planning and development (Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington 2009). The goal of the GMA, which is still in effect, is "to avoid urban sprawl . . . In every community you have a growth area where your growth is supposed to be focused" (D. Ralph, interview with the author, July 29, 2010). Focusing growth to a geographic area and consolidating development in this way was a new concept to many cities. City planners sought ways to attract people to these new, densely developed areas. Providing multiple services in close proximity to one another, from housing to banking and from shopping to relaxing, proved an effective way to bring people together. Thus was the birth of joint development and mixed-use partnerships.

City developers and planners see libraries as a great way to attract people to these newly developed areas where all of their service needs can be met. People like libraries. They want to spend time in them and will go out of their way to get to the library. Consequently, libraries built in

conjunction with other development efforts serve to attract people to that area. Once people are there, they are likely to stay and use some of the other services. The library plays a “role in supporting the economic vitality of local town and village centers, by acting as a magnet which encourage[s] people to use local shops and services, rather than traveling further afield” (Linley and Usherwood 1998). This relationship is mutually beneficial. Ralph explains that library developers “really like the idea of our patrons being able to do multiple things at our sites, such as pay a utility bill, or go to the farmers market. We want to promote cross use and be wise stewards of the land as we can” (interview with the author, July 29, 2010).

Public Libraries Often Support Redevelopment Efforts

Redevelopment efforts can be challenging for cities. Public libraries serve to facilitate such efforts by attracting developers and business owners to the project. Jordan (2003) describes how the incorporation of a library in a Chicago community has helped revitalize the area:

Chicago’s Near North Branch has served as a catalyst for public—and private—sector investment in the long-blighted area around the Cabrini-Green housing project. The library’s opening in 1997 has been followed by construction of a new high school, police station, park, several thousand mixed-income housing units and a shopping center that includes a large supermarket and a Starbucks. A diverse mix of people from both Cabrini-Green and the affluent Lakeshore area nearby can be found in the checkout lines of both the library and the stores.

Ptacek explains that “a lot of cities use their main library as a catalyst for the redevelopment of the downtown area” (interview with the author, August 4, 2010). In 2008 Burien, Washington, attempted to achieve such redevelopment by siting their new library and City Hall in the downtown core. In Seattle the new Central Library, which opened in 2004, quickly served this role. A 2005 study found that “by functioning as a highly effective information gateway, public space and tourist destination, Seattle’s Central Library has become a significant contributor to Seattle’s economy, a catalyst for downtown revitalization and development and a new icon for the City” (Berk and Associates 2005). Fulton and Jackson (2003) explain that “downtown libraries rank with retail and entertainment complexes as redevelopment anchors in cities like San Francisco, Nashville, and Memphis.”

On a smaller scale, libraries serve this role in malls across America. In its new home in a mall, the Glendale Branch of the Indianapolis Marion County Public Library “found a place where the whole community gathered, including many who hadn’t been library patrons in the past” (Blankinship

2005). Mall libraries have proven hugely successful on library measures. The Huber Heights branch of the Dayton Metro Library “circulates more books than anywhere else in the system” (Blankinship 2005). People “saw the library as a destination stop” says Stephen Bridge, assistant manager of the Glendale Branch, as quoted in Blankinship (2005). “Patrons have to pass many stores to get there, and the window-shopping often leads to dollars-and-cents transactions.” Blankinship (2005) accentuates that it is unclear “which partner—the library or the mall—is benefiting most from the increased traffic they seem to bring to one another.” Ron Sher, the redeveloper of the Crossroads shopping center in Bellevue, Washington, points out that “the library is a great draw because it brings people in, but it does it in a great way for society” (interview with the author, September 2, 2010). It is not just about increasing foot traffic and bringing more money to the shopping center. It is also about providing positive ways for people to spend their time and, through doing so, build a community. Public libraries can be assets to community redevelopment efforts, but they do not do so purely for altruistic reasons. When working on such a partnership, the library too has specific needs and goals it is trying to achieve.

Siting a Library Involves Negotiation and Balancing Library Needs with Public and City Needs

With the GMA, libraries have changed how they make decisions about where to build new libraries. Ptacek explains that “we used to build libraries as stand-alone, with maximized parking and reduced influence on those around us. Now our focus is on being part of creating great places and partnering with those around us to work together” (interview with the author, August 4, 2010). In Kitsap County, policy makers are looking at a levy that will help them develop community in Silverdale, Washington, through the construction of a civic campus containing a library. Currently, Silverdale has a lot of paved area and limited green space. It is not a destination for families. Jean explains that in approaching the library, “the county said, we will provide you with the land if you will put a library there . . . It is our goal to have a library as part of the campus.” Despite great interest in the library as part of this project, the final siting involved compromise. Jean explains that, “the location has not always been where it is now. We had to state very strongly our position and what we wanted out of the project” (interview with the author, July 19, 2010).

While seeing libraries as catalysts in redevelopment, some city planners do not understand what it is that makes libraries so successful. Sher articulated the needs well when he said:

You can change things by placing a library, but you can only change them so much. If you put the library in the wrong place, it will fail, but if you put it in what used to be the wrong place, with the right

support, it can help shift things in the right direction. You just need to make sure that the right partners come in. (interview with the author, September 2, 2010)

To achieve this successful partnership process, the KCLS has developed a process for siting their libraries—the Site Selection Policy—which looks at specific criteria when selecting a new site. Library staff work together to ensure that the new library will meet the needs of the community by “first conducting community studies and ensuring that it will be visible, accessible and sustainable” (The King County Library 2009). Ralph further explains:

Our mission is to provide the best library service to the most people. Whereas a city planner might look at us and say, hey look how many people they bring in and try to put us in a struggling downtown area or with mixed housing. But we can't bring in those numbers if we are in the wrong space. (interview with the author, July 29, 2010)

Thus, a partnership must be formed between the city and the library where needs are discussed early, balance is sought, and where support and development efforts coalesce to ensure the success of joint projects. Weisman points out that despite these challenges “we have a long history of doing partnerships, whether parks, city halls, etc.” (interview with the author, July 29, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Libraries across the country have faced difficult economic times in the past three years and many expect these hard times to continue for at least the next year and perhaps longer. While some people see this as disappointing and heartbreaking, others see it as an opportunity. We as library professionals have a great opportunity to think about what service means, the service we are currently providing to our communities, its relevance, and our ability to be the best public libraries we can be. While journalists explain that “there is a great need to nurture relationships with a public already frustrated by cuts to operating hours at branches and changes in services” (Beason 2010) we also need to expand our focus. In the long term, advocacy and greater support from the community may mean protection from cuts to library budgets. However, today such cuts are a reality and we must adapt.

Libraries across the country are embracing change and stepping up to meet the shifting needs of their communities. KCLS and SPL are the primary examples in this article, yet they are not alone in their efforts to build community. Through education, access, equity, inclusion, engagement, and simply by existing, public libraries are strengthening the communities in

which we live. Unfortunately, many of our users and nonusers alike, for the most part, still think of public libraries primarily as book repositories. Understanding our role in community building and being able to articulate this role is essential to the work we do.

Equally as important is our ability to listen to and meet the needs of our communities. The public library must adjust to meet current and future challenges. This article explores current aspects of library community building. These aspects will evolve and change with time. Only by listening to our users and nonusers alike, and responding to their needs, will libraries remain relevant.

The second half of this article will appear in *PLQ* 30(4). It will consist of four studies that look at four different strategies that public libraries currently use to build community.

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NOTES

1. In addition, I occasionally reference the Kitsap Regional Library system, a neighboring urban library system that provides useful examples.

2. Other venues serving these needs include, but are not limited to, The Boys and Girls Club, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, The Head Start Program, and international centers for immigrants and religious institutions.

3. Some Communist countries used public libraries to keep track of people and what they were reading. For this reason, many new immigrants associate libraries with the government trying to keep track of them.

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