

# **Seven Major Trends Facing Public Libraries**

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This paper is based on research from multiple sources. Our research culminates into a synthesis of seven major future trends in US public library service:

- Change in the composition of library collections
- Support of economic and community development
- Educational hub for all ages
- Technology advances for the public and staff
- Community hub
- Library staffing
- Advocacy and the demonstration of the library's value

We found only limited research on the penetration of these trends within the library community. Typically, larger libraries are the leaders in adopting these trends. Each section of this document describes a trend and the implications for a library to consider if it implements activities to address the trend. These sections are followed by a bibliography of the resources consulted in preparing this document

One source quoted extensively is the Public Library Directors Survey (Directors Survey) in Iowa and Colorado conducted in the spring of 2013 in preparation for a presentation at an international conference. The survey asked for major changes in public libraries in the last ten years and for expected changes in the next 10 years.

### **1. Change in the composition of library collections**

Library collections are changing dramatically in several ways. One of the most prominent changes is the addition of e-books, which provide legal and practical challenges for libraries. The right of first sale is the rights of an item's buyer to sell, exchange, donate, or discard the item. However, the right of first sale does not apply to e-books. Thus, publishers lease the format to a library (or to an individual) and the publisher determines what happens to that format in the future, not the buyer. Typically, libraries buy a certain number of books and share them until the book wears out and if needed, the library purchases additional books. Major publishers, seemingly threatened by the concept of a public library loaning books that never wear out, refuse to sell to libraries or limit the number of circulations before the library must purchase another e-book.

While there is no doubt about the demand for e-books, there has been only a slight decrease in the demand for printed books. Research by the Pew Foundation shows that while people who read printed books do not necessarily read e-books, conversely people who read e-books also read print books and magazines. Therefore, while e-books use is increasing, the demand for printed books is not decreasing. The increasing demand for e-books is similar to the increasing demand for CDs and DVDs of music and film. Furthermore, print reference collections are becoming obsolete, as more reference information is available through online resources.

Another growing trend is the role of the library as publisher. Libraries have always supported authors and researchers by providing resources. With the advent of self-publishing tools, the step between providing research material and publishing, and distributing these products has narrowed. One respondent to the Directors' Survey said, *"The library as publisher is about the move from consumers of content to creators...We need to be players in that venue - CAPABLE of managing new streams of content. But it's only a short hop to the realization that if you can do that, you can BE a publisher. Then things get interesting."*

Digitization of local resources continues to grow with libraries now taking the lead in digitizing their community's history, local artists' work, and other resources found in local documents, research, and creation. A new movement pushes the library into a leadership role in publishing by soliciting memories and documents from the community to produce a more comprehensive and personal history. A library could take the lead in helping community members create a community "Wikipedia" focusing on gathering information about local history, events, and services.

Finally, collections are moving beyond print and electronic resources to non-traditional circulating resources. A recent TV Show reported that the Sherman Park Branch of the Chicago Public Library checks out fishing poles for kids to fish in local park lakes; Anne Arbor, MI Public Library checks out telescopes and steel drums; the Skokie Public Library checks out flip cams and head cams for uses to film extreme sports; and the Gross Point Public Library has a collection of 285 tools for loan. Public libraries in Basalt, CO, Pima County, AZ, San Jose, CA, and Richmond, VA, among others offer a community seed bank where community members borrow seeds in the spring to plant a garden and return new seeds in the fall to share the following spring. Probably the most interesting is a story on National Public Radio that the Providence, RI Public Library checks out what they call Human Books, people in the community with expertise or unique experiences who agree to be a resource.

### Implications

What are the implications of these changes for library planning? First, the change in the composition of the collections calls for a redesign of the library space. The demise of reference

collections frees up space that libraries can use for other purposes. Some libraries convert this space to additional meeting rooms. Others add space for increased electronic resources, including space for listening and viewing. The Denver Public Library converted one floor of their five-story building into a media department with stations for listening to music and viewing DVDs individually or in a group setting. More technology also requires more electrical outlets and spaces for devices that users bring to the library (this is explored more under the technology trend).

The increase in electronic resources requires additional employee support for users to train in the use of new technology. Once a library's IT department provided all the technological support necessary for a library; today all public service employees must have basic technological knowledge and more advanced expertise with a variety of products

The change in collections also results in changes in the library budget requiring increased expenditures for both content and hardware to support the content. ALA reports that 31% of libraries with e-book collections buy and circulate e-book readers. Some libraries (Anythink Library in Brighton, CO, for example) converted from the Dewey classification system to a bookstore arrangement to be more accessible to their users.

## **2. Support economic and community development**

Opinions about the economy are mixed. Some economists assert that the economy is improving; others describe the high rate of unemployment. The continuing high rate of employment creates a continued need for libraries to help people find jobs; help employers find part-time workers; and help creative people develop innovations or new businesses.

Another trend in libraries is increasing partnerships with community organizations and businesses. Christine Hamilton Pennell in her work "Public Libraries and Community Economic Development" reports that 97.5% of all US firms have fewer than 20 employees and generate 60-80% of all new jobs in the US in the last decade. Libraries are well positioned to provide this support because of the resources they offer. Hamilton-Pennell calls supporting local businesses "economic gardening" as developed by the city of Littleton, CO. This "gardening" includes services such as helping with business plans, getting businesses, and finding marketing information. The Denver Public Library offers the "Personal Librarian" service, allowing businesses to make an appointment with reference libraries to find information about starting a business or to access information about resources to support business planning. The Skokie Public Library created a three room Business Center with a 50-person presentation room, comfortable chairs, and resources designed specifically for businesses. In recent years, libraries have also helped job seekers, offering resume writing, interview skills, and English language classes.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded the “Edge Initiative,” administered by the Urban Library Council that seeks to help community libraries form partnerships with local businesses and government. This Initiative will “enable library leaders to make informed decisions about the programs and services that will contribute to achieving community priorities, and demonstrate the value and impact of the library in meeting the changing needs of its constituents. Edge includes “benchmarks for libraries to guide decisions about services.”

Another aspect of community development is what is called “embedded librarians” or public library staff assigned to a community or government agency. Their role is to fully participate in discussions to the extent allowed; become appointed to a board or committee; identify issues that the organization or agency is addressing; and assist in addressing those issues. Often issues that seem far removed from traditional library service (need for water resources, teen drug use, business development, promoting tourism) can be rich themes for library research into regional or national studies or programs to inform local decisions. Collection building, programing, and new services are all ways a library participates in community building. A librarian who responded in the Library Director’s Survey described this trend as, *“This is about the application of reference and research skills not just on the individual level, but community-wide. We help our communities discover what the deep question is, then how to answer it. And we do have to leave the building to do that. We have to be conveners, facilitators, and civic leaders. Although we demonstrate our value thereby, we’re not the point. This is community-centered librarianship: making our environment better by helping people get ready for tomorrow.”*

A new movement in libraries called “Maker Space,” defined by Sanchez as having two main characteristics: 1) physical and human resources dedicated to patron creation and 2) library supplied resources for the purpose of creation such as computers, cameras, tools, etc. While touted as “new,” libraries have offered craft projects for young children for decades. However, the concept of “Maker Spaces” takes this traditional program to a new level. Libraries installed media labs (editing equipment, green screens) and other technologies (3-d printers, sewing machines, and computer software) aimed typically at teenagers. Shirley Amore, Director of the Denver Public Library, commented that the library had always had a problem attracting teenage boys until they installed their media lab. Now the lab is so crowded during its limited open hours that the library is discussing how to expand the lab’s space and hours.

In *Something Like America*, Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson interviewed people who have lost their jobs, sometimes their houses, and have multiple bills. In a recent *New Yorker* magazine, George Packer sums up Maharidge and Williamson conclusions by saying, “In the new depression, Maharidge and Williamson find that Americans are growing tomatoes in condo

courtyards, raising chickens in back yards, and trying to start businesses out of living rooms. They know they're on their own." Libraries can help people meet these basic needs.

### Implications

One implication for this trend is for libraries to increase their visibility in the community to business organizations and to the people who need help. These groups might have not thought about the library as a partner to meet their needs.

Another major implication is the change in the role of library employees. As state and county offices close service outlets, people use the library for help to apply for jobs or benefits online. While libraries have always provided information that helps people solve personal problems, this expanded social service role requires different knowledge (how social service in the state works) and skills (more staff need to be familiar with technology and databases). These users also require more intense customer services skills.

Expanded community involvement can also have implications for staff salaries and working hours. Embedded librarians must have flexible hours to attend meetings outside of the library and library hours. These librarians may also have more responsibilities. Finally, these new services might require a review of library policies, collections, and space regarding use of facilities by business, time limits at computers, the types of equipment purchased, the use of space, and staff training.

### **3. Educational hub for all ages**

A respondent to the Directors' Survey commented, *"We OWN ages 0-5, but could and should step this up a notch. I recently read the 20-year study (published in 2010) by the University of Las Vegas: the greatest predictor of life span, health, educational attainment, income, and likelihood of avoiding incarceration is the number of books in the home before you turn five. (The higher the book count, the better you do.)"*

The Pew Research Foundation (Parents) found that mothers with children are among the biggest supporters of libraries. The study found that 58% of parents with children under six read to their children daily and another 26% read to them multiple times a week. A very high percent (84%) want their children to have access to libraries because libraries, "help inculcate their children's love of reading and books; and another 81% say libraries are important because they provide "information and resources not available at home." Parents of young children are an obvious marketing target population for libraries to continue to target.

Public libraries have always offered a place and resources for students doing homework. Now, more databases are available with resources useful to students. A creative youth services

librarian can take advantage of databases, some free, to encourage young people to use library services.

In addition to children and teen services, the numbers of college students, adult learners, and business people engaged in online learning are increasing. Education providers know that offering courses and webinars online expands their market. Learners find that online learning is cost efficient saving money in time and travel. Students can earn undergraduate and graduate degrees and full certification programs with no or limited travel to campus. Public libraries can support online learning by establishing telecommunication-learning sites. Libraries can also help students learn how to learn on line and use the technology that makes learning successful.

### Implications

To respond to this trend as with others, libraries may need to reconfigure space. In the past, public librarians eschewed the role of teacher, leaving that to school librarians. Currently, the role of teacher, particularly in teaching early literacy skills, has become more prominent and children's librarian may need special training. This trend also demands closer cooperation with schools and colleges and potentially businesses as well.

#### **4. Technology advances for the public and staff**

Advances in technology are divided between those innovations that employees can use to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of library service and those that users adapt and want the library to provide and manage. Often the line between these two merges as in online learning. Advances in technology not only help the library user receive information, such advances also allow the library to be more efficient in serving users and their employees.

The constant increased demand for increased bandwidth and more computers affects all libraries. When asked how much bandwidth they thought they would need, a librarian in a focus group in Missouri said, "More than we ever have." ALA research shows that 41.7% of libraries report their connection speeds are insufficient and that 65.4% report they have too few public access computers to meet demand. New technology known as "super Wi-Fi" or "white space" that allows public libraries to project Wi-Fi to a broad geographic area may help both libraries and communities expand their broadband options.

Libraries are continually automating library functions such as sorting of returns (usually situated so that the public can watch in fascination); self-check out (first voluntary and then mandatory), expansion of RFID, scheduling, time clocks, o payment of fines and fees, and enhanced collection searching, integration of media in catalogs (including both library user published resources and digitized resources). It is impossible to predict what the next major technical innovation is, but the library must continue evaluating new technologies for potential adoption.

It is safe to predict that the public will continue to demand more from the library in technology and will not use the library if the library does not respond. Libraries see an increase in demand for assistance in learning new technology, particularly after gift holidays, and help in navigating current and emerging social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest. Technologies also offer a way for the library to communicate with users in new ways, such as receiving and answering reference questions via text, using Facebook to publicize the library, and to communicate about other matters using library specific apps.

The Pew Study on Digital Life found that, “The availability of free computers and internet access now rivals book lending and reference expertise as vital services of libraries.” Pew also found that 80% say that borrowing books and reference is “very important” and 77% say that “free access to computers and the internet” is also “very important”. Another approximately 60% say it would be “very important” to them for the library to adopt new technology services such as online research services, library apps, “petting zoos” to learn about using new technology, GPS-type navigation systems to help locate materials INSIDE [author’s emphasis] the library, “Redbox”-style delivery of library materials, and “Amazon”-style recommendations.

### Implications

As with other trends, this trend has implications for use of space with room needed for the use of personal laptops and electrical outlets in which to connect them. Technology skills can no longer reside only in the IT department. All public service employees must have at least a minimal understanding of how the library’s technology works and many must know how a user’s technology works.

The use of some technology in library operations will result in a change in employee positions. If a machine is now sorting books and the library offers self-check-out, what is the function of the circulation desk staff? Should there be a library greeter who welcomes people and helps those who cannot master self-check-out? Will current staff have to learn new skills?

Costs will also increase, as libraries must keep current with technology, offer expanded bandwidth, and purchase software and hardware to meet user demand.

## **5. Community Hub**

Another major trend is a refocus on the library as a community hub. A new term to describe this is “The Third Place,” which describes a public place after home and school or work. One of the Directors’ Survey respondents commented: *“Library as place. This is about building an environment that encourages and rewards exploration and discovery. And it is also a place where people connect with each other. We are wired to learn, and wired for each other.”*

This role typically includes unique and diverse programming for all ages limited only by the creativity of library staff. In Florida, we saw badminton lessons on the library lawn, and a lecture and demonstration by a traveling Cirque de Soleil acrobat. In Colorado, libraries offer a community garden and morning yoga classes. In other states, libraries offer art exhibits, parenting classes, divorce clinics, a venue for public nurse immunizations, passport services with more accessibility (and reportedly friendlier staff) than the local post office.

Baby boomers are turning 66 this year. They still represent a major bulge in the US population. They do not view themselves as “old.” This generation represents a great opportunity for public libraries. Baby boomers are healthy; they have time on their hands; they have grandkids to bring to the library; they can serve as volunteers; attend adult education programs; and they can be great advocates for the library.

Part of being a “Third Place” is offering a gathering place for individuals, community groups, businesses, and study groups. One respondent on the Directors’ Survey respondent called the library a “safe place for kids to hang out.” Another said, *“Libraries are gathering places for people and workspaces for telecommuters, free lancers and tutors who either miss the social atmosphere of office life or need a public place to connect.”*

Research conducted by Pew Research (Younger Americans) reported that 60% of library users under 30 are more likely to use the library as a “hangout” to “study, sit, and read, or watch or listen to media” compared with only 45% of those over 30. A majority of people of all ages want libraries to have a “more comfortable spaces for reading, working, and relaxing.”

Library collections are also changing to fulfill the role of “Third Place” such as the collections on non-traditional items mentioned above (see Collections). The Iowa City Library and Memphis Public Library collect works of local musicians and make them available for permanent download to library users. Gaming groups attract particularly teenage boys. Political organizations organize town meetings or election debates.

### Implications

There are many implications if a library adopts the role of becoming a “Third Space.” Meeting places can be noisy and often include food or drink where people settle in and feel comfortable (think of a local coffee shop) and can require a change in library policy and practices. Staff members may have to adopt a more relaxed customer service attitude.

The libraries with the most success in becoming a community hub have full-time programming managers who assess the needs of the library community and work with community resources to plan, implement, and evaluate programs. Emphasizing programming may require a procedure guide covering all steps needed to ensure success.

Becoming a Third Space, as with almost all of these trends, also requires a review of the library's building configuration. This role may also require a new marketing campaign to promote a new image.

## **6. Library Staffing**

All of these trends mean changes in library staffing and new skills, particularly if administrators revise some positions. Overall, the role of employees is changing in all types of libraries. Currently, approximately 70% of library employees do not have an MLS. Not long ago, only MLS librarians answered reference questions or cataloged; now many library support staff perform these functions. Support staff typically perform copy cataloging at the library. Local IT staff frequently have technical expertise but not an MLS. This suggests that the percentage of support staff may be increasing in proportion to MLS staff. In fact, 52% of public library directors do not have an MLS degree, primarily in states with no requirements that directors have MLS degrees or in small or rural libraries.

As mentioned in the technology section, changes such as automatic sorting machines and self-check eliminate some jobs. New services need new job skills. Helping people access e-government and fill out benefit forms requires knowledge of state benefit programs and social service skills. Early literacy programs require a higher level of teaching early childhood development. Serving business adequately may need advance business research and business planning skills. Becoming a community hub may benefit from staff with facilitation skills. All of this implies the need for a different kind and more extensive training.

### Implication

Some of these implications are beyond the control of a single library or library system. Professional library educators may need to rethink the curriculum including more focus on leadership and advocacy. Training for support staff needs to be more systematic and comprehensive, giving support staff the "big picture" of how libraries work and the self-confidence to offer suggestions and participate in library service planning.

Libraries should also consider how to hire employees who reflect the ethnic population of the feel welcome. People of color, particularly immigrants, report they want to see faces like their own when visit a library. Front line staff with minimal language training can make ethnic groups feel more comfortable.

A new concept in churches is called "radical hospitality" which strives to make people feel welcome when they arrive. The concept of library "greeters" at the front door is one-way libraries are striving to welcome all users. One Public Library Director's Survey respondent put it this way, "Librarians are less in the role of hushing people and more in the role of coaching,

education, and helping.” Finally, one survey respondent suggested that libraries, “require library staff to engage in lifelong learning as a performance expectation” so that they keep their skills constantly current.

## **7. Advocacy and demonstration of the library’s value**

The final trend is a renewed emphasis on demonstrating the library’s value to the community. Certainly, advocacy is not a new trend; ALA and state libraries have been encouraging advocacy for years and teaching advocacy skills. Many of the activities described above describe the library as becoming more meaningful to a broader community and embedding itself in helping to solve community problems.

One respondent to the Directors’ Survey put it this way: *“The library as community hub is critical in showing relevance and value. The role is critical in the future, so is focused greatly on raising the profile of libraries in their own communities. This means educating the civic leaders and general public about how the library fits into and is integral in the municipal framework in all communities: urban and rural, large and small.”*

To demonstrate this value, several states have conducted Return on Investment studies showing the dollar return TO the community of every dollar invested BY the community in the library. For example, a 2011 study in Ohio showed that county residents derived \$2.86 for every \$1.00 in the library’s budget.

A bigger issue is how to determine the value of these new, innovative, and intangible library services. Emily Clasper as quoted by Greenwalt puts it this way: *“Services are evolving, and they’re having a hard time showing their success to those who control the purse strings, which includes the general public. So I’m getting panicked phone calls from library staff members who intuitively know that their library is successful in serving their community, who see firsthand the growth they’re experiencing, and are frustrated because the numbers they’ve relied on for so long just don’t show that.”* She goes on to say *“Libraries I work with...have no methods in place for gathering quantitative data about the non-circulation – related services they provide, even though these are the services seeing the most growth and investment. We need ways to gather meaningful statistics regarding library programming, online services, user engagement, and facilities use, just to name a few.”*

The Public Library Association is starting a new project, with help from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to capture not just the numbers that reflect increased library use (number of people who attend programs), but also the real impact of those programs or of having access to technology. R. Toby Greenwalt says on PLA Online, *“In the age of multiple screens and BYOD (Bring Your Own Device), the raw counts of public PC use are only telling us part of the story. We could use patterns in our WI-FI traffic to identify much more about everything from which*

*devices people prefer to when we can anticipate a spike in broadband usage. The BYOD crowd also introduces the “Starbucks effect” in our buildings where patrons camp out at open tables or study rooms for long periods of time. We’ve always talked the library as a third space – why aren’t we supporting this argument with better data.”*

*Finally, one respondent in the Directors’ Survey said, “Libraries are great at collecting other people’s stories, and miserable at gathering and disseminating our own. By our own, I don’t mean stories centered on us. I mean stories about how people used libraries to navigate powerful transitions in their lives.”*

Libraries continue to be asked to compete for dwindling resources. Too many libraries are discovering, despite their new services to new and non-traditional library users, that the library’s budget is being cut.

### Implications

Libraries need to devise their own ways to measure impact as well as monitoring and participating in national efforts undertaken by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Public Library Association. Measuring impact requires developing closer connections with users than usual; for example, library staff must collect names and contact information to follow-up to the impact of new services. Evaluations conducted immediately following training are typically quite positive but do not demonstrate the value of the training to the recipient in terms of accomplishing personal goals.

Another implication can be identifying and training library advocates, preferably not library staff. The Colorado Library Association’s BHAG project identified four themes about Colorado public libraries: Libraries change lives; libraries build community; libraries mean business; and libraries are a smart investment. Each of these is supported by a slide show, a training tutorial, and personal stories about each of these themes. Colorado Libraries recruit non-library presenters to speak at meetings of various community organizations.

Another implication is the need for branding and marketing the library and developing the ability to use the data and stories that are collected to demonstrate the library’s ultimate value to the community.