Chapter 26
Community Outreach

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ABSTRACT

As social institutions, libraries respond to the needs, pressures, and impacts of society. Community outreach is the development and promotion of services offered by information settings. Such services extend beyond physical collections and involve the development and provision of customized events in response to or in anticipation of community needs. Library outreach has its historical roots in the late 19th century public library movement that coincided with the progressive era, when library services were conveyed directly to community members' homes and places of employment. Contemporary expressions of community outreach include engagement of faculty and students with communities of need, academic preparation of new professionals to serve communities of need, crisis informatics, and digital equity. Efforts are challenged by sustainability, impacts or returns on investments, personal and professional motivations, and the emergence of expected and unexpected community needs.

INTRODUCTION

Community outreach is the extension of library services outside of the physical library. In public libraries, this calls on the library to connect with actual and potential library users. Once primarily associated with serving disadvantaged potential library users, community outreach now refers to any activities libraries develop that deliver services to new constituencies. Community outreach covers the following process: identifying targeted communities, assessing a need, considering responses to this need, prioritizing options, targeting a response to the need, developing the initiative, marketing the response, delivering the program, and conducting continuous and end-of-service evaluation. Of those actions, the process of marketing has received the most attention over recent years. The concept of marketing or 'selling' the library and its services has been interpreted as a form of advocacy; not only do libraries inform the public about an individual service, but individual librarians are called on to advocate for their work setting and for the professional at large. The American Library Association (ALA) now considers "Advocacy for Libraries and the Profession" as one of its eight key action areas (American Library Association, 2013). ALA has developed tools for library workers, grouped in a section of its website called "AdvocacyU."

BACKGROUND

As Heim (now, McCook) pointed out, outreach is much more than opening the doors of an institution; it extends across a spectrum of activities and actions in what Heim referred to as the Stimulation Continuum (Heim, 1984). Outreach involves reaching out to the underserved, and even intervening during times of need.

Early outreach services were designed with education in mind. Early public libraries in the mid to late nineteenth century were founded to further the education of an American public that had little access to other forms of schooling. Libraries, including state library agencies, coordinated broad educational efforts under offices of library extension.

These efforts were followed by programs designed to acclimate new citizens. During that time the Immigrant Publication Society issued small pamphlets to assist librarians in responding to the needs of Jews from Eastern Europe, Russian Jews, and Poles (Carr, 1919). These publications were issued with support from the ALA Committee on Work with the Foreign Born. This committee existed for thirty years, from 1918 to 1948. Over time, these library efforts have been scrutinized more closely and considered by some to be expressions of acculturation.

Heim noted that after 1950, outreach services returned to the educational motif, focusing on adults' learning needs. And since the 1950s, public libraries provided both general educational services and targeted services for specific clientele. ALA reflected this interest by establishing the Office of Library Service to the Disadvantaged (OLSD) in 1970. In the 1980s, targeted services addressed the needs of latchkey children, business people, and the homeless. The OLSD was renamed the Office of Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS). OLOS's mission describes the communities often associated with community outreach:

OLOS focuses attention on services that are inclusive of traditionally underserved populations, including new and non-readers, people geographically isolated, people with disabilities, rural and urban poor people, and people generally discriminated against based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, language, and social class. (American Library Association, Office of Literacy and Outreach Services, 2013)

OLOS's involvement with outreach currently includes planning and delivering nationally visible professional events. This includes the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Sunrise Breakfast Celebration held during each ALA Midwinter meeting, the National Bookmobile day which is celebrated during National Library Week, and events scheduled for the ALA Annual Conference, including the Diversity and Outreach Fair and the Jean Coleman Library Outreach Lecture. In addition, the OLOS website maintains 'toolkits' to assist library workers in their outreach missions. These toolkits include practical advice on serving audiences including the homeless, older adults, and tribal libraries.

For Heim, outreach necessitates creating a climate that supports many activities (Heim, 1982). In 2004, Osborne grouped cases of outreach into six classes: services outside library walls, outreach inside the library, outreach using information technology, technical services, advocacy, and staff development (Osborne, 2004). In her 2010 book entitled *Librarians as Community Partners: An Outreach Handbook*, Smallwood organized 66 examples of library outreach into ten broad categories (Smallwood, 2010). Some categories illustrate that outreach can be designed for specific clientele such as seniors, youth, culturally and ethnically diverse patron groups, and individuals residing in correctional care facilities. Approaches may include classroom outreach, book festivals, or special collections. Outreach can also be

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