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The Library in 2020

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Abstract

A thought piece on the library envisioned for 2020 sparks reflection and conversation on how library schools, librarians and library organizations might prepare for this possible coming reality. Broader considerations are needed regarding collaboration, community, crossroads, service and flexibility.

Keywords: Future of libraries; 2020; Library as place

Introduction

In February 2014, the thought piece below was written in order to spark conversations on the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) that will be needed by future members of the library profession. As you read the scenario, consider what library and information professionals will need to know or be able to do, and how they will acquire that knowledge or those skills. What does this mean for how future members of our library staff are trained? What will we need to do to infuse current staff members with these knowledge, skills and abilities?

Scenario

The years leading up to 2020 have seen libraries driving conversations about the role of learning outside of formal education environments, about new ways of providing information, and about new models of what it means to be a library. Developments around science, technology, engineering, arts and math (STEAM) have impacted the library and its services. Libraries of all types have embraced opportunities to be part of STEAM initiatives, and have looked for opportunities to be leaders in developing related innovative learning programs.

In 2020, the library is seen and used as a crossroads in the community, no matter if that community is a town, a college campus, or an organization. They have positioned themselves at the intersection of community, technology and learning. The community is comfortable with the library’s physical and virtual space, and is able to use that space for its activities. People come to the library’s space to seek information, to get help with technology, to work on individual or group projects, to create new things, and to relax.

In order to create the library at the intersection of community, technology and learning, every library has assessed the needs of its community in order to develop services and programs that fit with its current and future requirements. Libraries have collaborated with non-profit organizations and for-profit businesses when doing so provides a better level of service for its community members. Collaboration has allowed the library to survive and thrive even when there have been cuts in external aid.

As community space, the focus on “makerspaces” from 10 years ago has morphed into creating spaces for the community to do what it needs. These initiatives are part of the STEAM activities that libraries have heralded. This has meant creating more flexible space in the library, and partnering with other organizations on space needs when appropriate. Overall, the library space is more flexible with new modes of furniture design and walls easily reconfigurable. Staff transformed older buildings and spaces so that they meet the current space requirements. This has not been easy, but partnering with “makers” in the community, as well as businesses, has helped with this effort.

The biggest transformation has been in terms of the stacks. The stacks have been totally reimagined to be a combination of digital and physical.
While they take up less space in the library, they are used more because they are a gateway rather than an end-point. Recognizing the importance of both the physical and the virtual space, libraries have been a catalyst for envisioning and implementing how the physical and virtual can be more seamlessly intertwined.

Space in the library is available for community programming and as a gathering space. As part of its role as a crossroads, community members see the library, in terms of available services, as a third place that is a combination of a coffee shop, post office and government office. In this regard, some community services, such as government departments, provide office hours in the library or hold public events. This environment is very conducive for telecommuters and entrepreneurs who are able to use the library as an extension of their offices. In fact, there is space available for reserve by telecommuters and entrepreneurs. Space and other aspects of the library have been impacted both by the library reacting to changes in its community and anticipating emerging trends in demographics, technologies, education, and more.

The library serves a community that is more complex. More cultures and ethnic groups are represented among the community members that use the library. More languages are spoken in the library. In response, the library staff is culturally and ethnically diverse, and speaks many of the languages of its community members. Materials in the library and online are available in many different languages or can be automatically translated.

The library’s online presence is integrated into other web services, so that it is easier for the community to access and use it. The library’s online presence is an extension of every staff member. In addition, the library’s online presence is integrated into the library building itself. Because of this and the needs of the community, all staff are technology versatilists.

In order for the staff to be flexible in how it gets work done and meets the needs of the community, the organizational structure of the library is not hierarchical but rather “flat.” A staff member is not hired into a specific role, but instead joins a team where everyone has the ability to step in wherever needed. Libraries with a larger number of staff members may be divided into work teams for ease of communication and coordination, but their ability to interchange roles and responsibilities remains. The head of the library acts as a coordinator between the staff, the community, and the library’s partners.

Conclusion

The formative ideas of the library of 2020 include collaboration, community, crossroads, service and flexibility. Moving toward this 2020 vision will require rethinking, repositioning and retooling.