Connecting Individuals with Social Services: The Academic Library's Role

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Abstract

As socioeconomically-disadvantaged people become a core user base for libraries, some libraries have collaborated with non-library workers to connect their user communities with beneficial social services, which ties in with librarianship's values of promoting social justice and providing for the common good. As public libraries earn attention and kudos for connecting their communities to social services, the question arises as to the role of the academic library in connecting our campus community with resources on services for societal needs. Working with existing campus and community organizations can create many positive networks for our library users, our institutions and our larger communities. Focusing on socioeconomic issues, this article will discuss the history of the trend to connect libraries and their user communities with social service providers and analysis from the perspective of librarianship and social service professionals. It will then will present a rationale for working within our academic communities in this way, and explore existing programs connecting academic library users with social services as well as present some low-barrier entry points for interested libraries. The potential exists for academic libraries to build strong collaborations that will boost retention and completion for students, as well as promote social justice and the common good. This article is based on presentations and papers delivered at IFLA RISS 2015, CAPAL 2016 and ALA 2016, some versions of which were previously published online.

Keywords

Cover Page Footnote

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As socioeconomically-disadvantaged people become a core user base for libraries, some libraries have collaborated with non-library workers to connect their user communities with beneficial social services, which ties in with librarianship's values of promoting social justice and providing for the common good. As public libraries earn attention and kudos for connecting their communities to social services, the question arises as to the role of the academic library in connecting our campus community with resources on services for societal needs. Working with existing campus and community organizations can create many positive networks for our library users, our institutions and our larger communities. Focusing on socioeconomic issues, this article will discuss the history of the trend to connect libraries and their user communities with social service providers and analysis from the perspective of librarianship and social service professionals. It will then will present a rationale for working within our academic communities in this way, and explore existing programs connecting academic library users with social services as well as present some low-barrier entry points for interested libraries. The potential exists for academic libraries to build strong collaborations that will boost retention and completion for students, as well as promote social justice and the common good. This article is based on presentations and papers delivered at IFLA RISS 2015, CAPAL 2016 and ALA 2016, some versions of which were previously published online.

Keywords: core values of librarianship, social justice, social work, social services, academic libraries

Introduction

Recent attention paid to "fake news" and alternative facts highlights the needs of citizens in the United States to easily ascertain and access factual information about current events, the effect of political actions on resources, and access to basic social services like health care. As a democratic and democratizing institution, libraries have a mission to connect the public with this information, as well as providing free and open access to the library for all citizens. As socioeconomically-disadvantaged individuals such as those who are homeless, suffering from food insecurity, lacking access to mental and physical health care, and so on become a core user base for libraries, some libraries have begun programs to connect their user communities with beneficial social services, which ties in with librarianship's values of promoting social justice

and providing for the common good. In the United States and Canada this has often been effectively accomplished through the hiring of social workers or public health workers within public libraries, which helps diffuse the challenge from library staff's usual workload.

As public libraries earn attention and kudos for connecting their communities to social services, the question arises as to the role of the academic library in connecting our campus community with resources on services for mental and physical health, food security, housing, child care and other societal needs. Our student populations are in just as much need for information on these resources, with statistics about homelessness and food security among our students rising dramatically in recent years. Collaborating with existing campus and community organiza-

tions, in a manner similar to the way public libraries have done, can create many positive networks for our library users, our institutions and our larger communities. This article will discuss the history of the trend to connect libraries and their user communities with social service providers along with how the values of librarianship and social service professionals guide us in this area. It will then will present a strong rationale for working within our academic communities in this way, and explore existing programs connecting academic library users with social service providers as well as offer some low-barrier entry points for interested libraries. The potential exists for academic libraries to build strong partnerships that will boost retention and completion for students, as well as work toward our professional values of social justice and the common good.

History and Analysis of the Trend

In order to understand the relationship between social service outreach and librarianship, it will be helpful to first look at our profession's core values in concert with social workers' values and then examine how public libraries have used social service outreach to fulfil both professions' missions. Librarianship's defined core values, as enumerated by the American Library Association, include social responsibility, diversity, the public good, and democracy.[1] These tie in well with the mission of the American National Association of Social Workers, which is, in part, to "enhance human wellbeing and help meet basic human needs of all people with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.[2]" The International Federation of Social Work states that social work, in part, "engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.[3]" In addition, librarianship's professional goal to provide information alongside social work's professional mission to meet basic human needs connects well with Ar-

ticle 19 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights which guarantees the right "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers[4]", which is one of the core values of the International Federation of Library Associations.[5]

Public libraries have pioneered the connection of their communities to social services through several different techniques. Perhaps the most well-known approach is the San Jose Public Library's Social Workers in the Library (SWITL) program, which began in 2009. This program offers users of the San Jose Public Library a chance to meet with professional social workers through appointments made in advance. The meetings, focused on delivering basic information to library patrons in response to their needs, are promoted and facilitated by library staff but conducted by social work professionals. Soliciting and scheduling these professionals is coordinated by the nearby San Jose University's School of Social Work and often consists of their students and faculty. The appointments last 20 minutes and are conducted in two hour blocks on site at the library. A research article assessing the service's effectiveness found that those library patrons who used the service were highly satisfied, and that the library staff also appreciated the service and wanted to market it even more. In addition, both the library workers and social workers found that this program furthered the social justice and democratizing mission of both professions.[6]

The SWITL program at San Jose and its institution at several other public libraries in the U.S. and Canada reflect a transformation in our profession that better connects us with the social justice mission at its core. While librarianship initially concerned itself with the access to, storage of and protection of information resources, as information becomes more plentiful and accessible with the advent of the Internet librarianship has moved toward the promotion of libraries as

community centers connecting people with needed information. This can be seen in forward-looking writings such as R. David Lankes' *Atlas of New Librarianship*, which offers the suggestion that libraries can retain relevance and further their professional mission by facilitating conversation within their communities.[7] The idea that libraries provide open and equitable access to information, connected with our profession's core value of democracy, provides libraries a connection into social services since information about available services is very much a need for many library users.

As our profession moves more toward a facilitation of information rather than a warehouse of resources, we have also as a profession moved toward openness to serving individuals regardless of socioeconomic status. Once shunned from libraries in the United States and Canada, homeless library patrons are now seen by many libraries as a group to be reached out toward. Librarianships' professional literature and awards alongside community news reports celebrate libraries' efforts to address socioeconomic inequity in their cities and towns. As socioeconomic inequity grows worldwide[8] libraries can use, and have already begun to use, their value of democracy to provide equal access to resources and services to help promote social justice. They do this by connecting their user communities with information about and access to social welfare programs.

The SWITL program is just one example of how libraries make these connections via external professionals. This program is a valuable model since it uses professional social workers to actively provide access to information rather than library staff, and that specialized training the social workers have can best facilitate this connection as well as save library staff time for the tasks they are better trained to do. Some libraries have devoted funds from their institutions' budgets to support a professional social worker

position or have sought out grant funding to do so.

The first library with a social worker on staff was the San Francisco Public Library, which hired Leah Esguerra in 2009 in partnership with the city's Department of Public Health. The city and library jointly wanted to reduce complaints about homeless and drug addicted patrons in the public library, as well as further the social justice mission of both agencies. One of Esguerra's initiatives was to create a 'health and safety associate' team out of formerly-homeless individuals who underwent a 12-week vocational training through the library. After successfully completing the training, they are then hired for a 20-hour per week position interacting with homeless patrons to socialize them to library rules and norms, such as no bathing in the restrooms, and connecting them with needed resources, like places where they can bathe.[9] SFPL's program has led to the hiring of social workers in many libraries in California,[10] and beyond to other large cities such as Denver[11] and Washington, D.C.[12]

The Edmonton Public Library also has an outreach team headed by a social worker, based on the San Francisco Public Library's program. Their program began in 2011 at the downtown branch but spread in 2015 to four other branches. They focus on supporting and empowering at-risk Edmontonians, targeting "individuals who may not access existing social services but do access libraries because they are safe and welcoming spaces."[13] Working both within and outside the libraries, the outreach team is credited with a drop in disruptive activities within the library as well as supporting the library's social justice mission. EPL won the Gale/Library Journal Library of the Year in 2014 in large part to their program, which has provided over 6,000 interactions with at-risk individuals in Edmonton since its inception.[14]

Looking beyond social work, the Pima County (Arizona) Library began a Library Nurse program in 2012 through grant funding. Nurses worked across several library branches in order to intervene in behavioral issues and crisis situations. They would walk around the library, wearing stethoscopes and offering blood pressure checks as a way to begin conversations with patrons about health concerns, including mental health concerns, and would refer patrons to outside resources and services as needed. In their first year, the nurses interacted with patrons 2000 times and the libraries involved saw a 20% decrease in emergency service calls due to health issues. The program was credited with providing a better awareness for both library staff and users on health issues.[15]

This is not to say that public libraries are necessarily always an enthusiastic force for connecting their communities with social services. Westbrook (2015) explores many concerns expressed within the profession about assisting patrons in crisis and deals with the frustrations and ethical concerns that arise, while providing a model of information services for assisting those in crisis.[16] However, the examples I have focused on in public libraries have centered around creating a partnership with social or health workers as the professionals guiding the library's interactions with community members, and this has contributed to their success.

What about Academia?

As of this writing there are no publicized programs similar to SWITL within any academic libraries. This could be for several reasons, the largest of which is that institutions of higher education often already provide outreach and awareness on social welfare issues through other outlets such as campus health centers or financial aid offices. A secondary reason is the slowness of academic libraries to adapt to the changing professional mission of fostering connections to information rather than providing

access to and preservation of information. A third reason is the desire of academic libraries, and higher education institutions in general, to focus on academic situations rather than the real world problems of their students.

Statistics on homelessness, poverty and health concerns among university student populations can be harder to find due to the confounding factors of transient living and young age,[17] but these conditions do in fact exist in our student populations. In cases of vocational or technical schools, or schools with a less-traditional student body due to age or socioeconomic status, they are undoubtedly a feature of many students' lives.[18] The growing destigmatization of these conditions, however, has led to increased publicity of students in precarious circumstances and broader discussion of these issues on higher education campuses. The *Chicago Tribune* covered in late February 2016 the story of Latia Crockett-Holder, a student at MacCormac College in Chicago who lives in a tent underneath a highway overpass. The University of Chicago's Chapin Hall research center is launching a study of young homeless individuals age 14-24, and hopes to come up with an estimate of how many of these young people are aspiring to attend university or are actively enrolled.[19] In the same week, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* profiled the struggles of Laura Cherne, a student attending nursing school at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis while raising a young child and supporting a disabled parent. The article outlined the difficulties she and other low-income university students face, where an unexpected student fee bill, car breakdown, or illness can derail an entire educational path, and asked institutions of higher education to consider what their role in supporting low-income students should be.[20] The trend continues as reported by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab's latest study, indicating that among community college students, two-thirds face food insecurity and 13 to 14 percent are homeless.[21]

One key reason beyond the social justice mission of libraries encourages us to consider connecting our users in higher education environments with social services, and that is student retention. The ability for students to remain enrolled in institutions of higher education is often tied to economic circumstances. Even beyond tuition concerns, the costs of living for students and their families may be difficult to surmount, or other societal issues like addiction or mental health may play a role in the ability to stay enrolled or succeed at university. This tie to retention can demonstrate how important it is for campuses in general, and perhaps libraries in particular, to connect students with needed social services. For libraries looking to gain relevance on campus, particularly for campuses without other outlets connecting students to information, this consideration of connection to social services can add value as a retention tool.

The key to identifying this forged connection as a retention tool involves a reconsideration of academic institutions to focus on what has been termed the 'whole student' rather than the student just as an academic actor. In the words of librarian Steven Bell, "[t]o combat the impact that life stress plays in student failure, whole student programs will combine previously disparate efforts to improve students' physical, social, emotional, academic, and financial health."[22] He points out that this approach will create engaged, healthy and well-prepared students who are ready to graduate in four years and must involve agencies spanning the entire campus and looking outward as well, and how libraries are already collaborating well across campus to capitalize on our unique connection to students across all disciplines in their search for information. Research backs up the whole student approach with regard to retention; for example, institutions with a 'warm' (i.e., structurally supportive) climate toward socioeconomic diversity see students with more academic motivation and a better self-concept as

students as opposed to those who focus strictly on academics.[23]

Existing Efforts in Academic Libraries and Steps a Library Could Take

As of this writing, there are few publicized and organized programs in academic libraries to directly connect students with social services in ways similar to public libraries. Some librarians have begun to forge these connections individually. Published in *C&RL News* in 2015 was a piece by an academic librarian calling for 'microactivism' by her peers and colleagues. One of the components of this microactivism was for academic libraries to begin serving as a connection to community resources on homelessness, hunger, and other socioeconomic issues for our users in need, as well as speaking up in instruction sessions and campus committee meetings to address issues of systematic oppression.[24]

When discussing the issue of academic libraries supporting students who are struggling and connecting them with resources, a common example of wellness programs during finals week is often brought up. While at first this example seems superficial and naïve, things such as therapy dog visits,[25] yoga, hot beverages and board games[26] do increase student comfort with the library and are associated with less tension for students during stressful times in the term. Those libraries that have joined forces with other campus agencies to connect users with health information[27] or financial literacy[28] report better connections with other campus entities, but these programs are rare in the literature and are mostly reported as case studies rather than in any thorough examination of efficacy or results.

Many libraries and library workers have assisted users on an individual and furtive level to deal with issues of food and housing security, addiction and mental health resources, and the like, but bringing these efforts out into the open, approaching them in an organized manner,

working with other campus entities and seeing this work as a normal part of an academic library's mission will only better embed us into our campus communities as a valued resource and help show our value with regard to student retention and completion. One existing method is for a library to issue a statement in support of social justice initiatives, as MIT Libraries did in late 2016[29] and University of Arizona Library reaffirmed[30], for example, however, these existing statements tend to focus more on the equity/diversity/inclusion side of social justice rather than the connection to social services.

It can be daunting for academic libraries to explore ways to facilitate a connection between users and social services for a variety of reasons — the diverse and challenging range of issues our users face, our lack of expertise, our historical distance from these situations in academia, and the more mundane problems of time and money. However, making these connections possible can ultimately be rewarding as a part of our social justice mission to provide equitable access to necessary and useful information to our users. It can also serve to better connect us with campus resources and make libraries a more valuable partner in retention efforts. In addition, many libraries fostering these connections reported an improvement in social situations within the library. Some actionable steps are provided below.

An initial and low cost step is providing pamphlets, brochures, forms and the like to connect users with social service information. Installing a self-serve rack or table makes this information available and accessible. Many agencies will provide these resources to libraries in an effort to reach clients. Again, this is often already done on an informal or case-by-case basis, but a more organized and integrated approach makes a difference in ensuring materials are consistently available, presented attractively, and known about by all members of a library's staff.

A partnership program based on SWITL or a similar joint effort with professional social workers or students in training to become professional social workers can provide a higher level of connection with social resources for libraries but at a low cost. Facilitating these connections through a social worker or student in training also helps allay library workers' fears of stepping outside their own comfort zone. SWITL makes their intake forms and other materials available to libraries who are interested in starting a similar service. Many of us in an academic environment are lucky enough to have a school of social work, counseling program, or something similar to draw from in this endeavor.

Focusing on an element of social services to connect with can make the task seem more doable. Many academic libraries have done this through stress-less programs with campus wellness entities, which deals with the most immediate problems of academic stress that library workers see in their students. Again, partnership with other campus agencies can make this feel like an easier job, and provides the side benefit of forging closer campus connections and partnerships as well as demonstrating the value of the academic library to more stakeholders.

As the role of libraries changes outside of academia to foster community and connection, so too it ought to change within our academic institutions. Academic libraries serve, like public libraries, as safe places in academia that do not belong to any one discipline or type of student (or even to students alone, as faculty, staff and possibly also local residents use the academic library), but where community members may come if they want to learn about any topic. Serving to educate our users about resources they may need to help surmount social issues they face can help build connections between ourselves and campus entities like health care providers, counselors, financial aid advisors, and retention coordinators. Ultimately, this sort of

work humanizes what we do in libraries and allows us to connect with the library patron as a whole person rather than merely a scholar.

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