

## Community Outreach

Ideally, as a public institution, the library is free and open to all, everyone feels welcome there, and access to information is equitable. Unfortunately, that isn't the reality for everyone in our communities. There is often a disconnect between how libraries *believe* the community views the library and how people in the community – particularly those who are marginalized – *actually* view the library and the perceived value (or lack thereof) that it provides for them. It is not sufficient to stay comfortably tucked away in the library dreaming up ways to get people in the doors, or to be content believing that the current, regularly-returning library users are representative of the larger community. In order for libraries to accurately assess how community members view the library and its offerings and to determine if the library is meeting the needs of the community it serves, libraries need to go out into their communities and talk to people. Meet them where they are. Reach *out*.

Wikipedia (2021) defines outreach as “the activity of providing services to any population that might not otherwise have access to those services. A key component of outreach is that the group providing it is not stationary, but mobile; in other words, it involves meeting someone in need of an outreach service at the location where they are.” The second part of that definition is critical – the group providing the outreach (in our case, the library) must meet the people needing services *where they are*, not wait for people to come to the library to be served. In their *Children and Libraries* article, “ECRR Outside the Library: Providing Meaningful Family-Focused Community Outreach,” Campana et al. (2018) ask two crucial questions of librarians:

Do you want to reach and support ALL families in your community, especially those who are underserved, but feel like you are not reaching them through your in-house programs and services?

Have you tried moving your programs and services out to community locations to reach these families where they are?

When it comes to community outreach, the traditional service planning model used by libraries – while it generally meets the needs of traditional users – falls short of meeting the needs of members of the community who are marginalized or socially excluded.

As stated in *Information Services Today* (Hirsh, 2018), “information organizations have always been disseminators of information,” but they can no longer be content with this type of one-way communication. The traditional library service planning model, which utilizes “internally created approaches to library service planning, targeting traditional library users ... does not work well when developing services for socially excluded community members” (Williment, 2009). Libraries strengthen their communities, and the library itself, by including marginalized community members in every step of the process – going out into their communities, creating connections, understanding needs, and building collaborative relationships.

For library staff, who are comfortable inside the walls of the library and have been trained in organizing and finding information, the thought of having to leave the confines of the library and meet the underserved community members on their own turf, can feel a bit daunting. For some (perhaps most), community outreach may be a huge step out of their comfort zones. Thankfully, there are resources available to educate and train library staff how to successfully implement community outreach initiatives.

In his article, “It Takes a Community to Create a Library,” Kenneth Williment provides guidance for initiating a community-led library service planning model, which is “flexible and can be applied in all library settings and to all program and service development. . . . and is effective with both socially-excluded community members and traditional library users” (Williment, 2009). The key is in relationship-building, which must be a focus from the beginning and continue throughout the process. Individuals must be respectfully approached in a space that feels safe and comfortable to them in order to begin building mutual respect and trust. Marginalized community members are involved in every step of the process, which involves community assessment, needs identification, service planning, delivery, and ongoing evaluation (Williment, 2009).

Similarly, Campana et al. (2018) observed libraries with successful community partnerships and found four common phases of library outreach: 1) they engage with communities and their needs, 2) they cultivate partnerships, 3) they provide innovative and unusual programs out in the community, and 4) they reflect on the programs to determine the effectiveness of their work. They ascertain that:

The process of creating a web of partners allows the library to establish itself as a community anchor, committed to providing a strong layer of support that encourages learning for ALL children and their families in and outside of library wall (p. 36).

This work is likely to have a powerful impact on the whole community.

While exploring the ALA’s website for information on advocacy, I came across the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) initiative, which “seeks to strengthen libraries’ role as core community leaders and change-agents. The initiative addresses a critical need within the library field by developing and distributing new tools, resources and support for librarians to

engage with their communities in new ways.” One of the tools provided by the LTC initiative is the “Turning Outward” approach, which was developed alongside the nonprofit Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, made possible by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Turning Outward emphasizes shifting from an internal, library-focused orientation to an external, community-focused orientation. “The Turning Outward approach involves asking the right questions to find out what your community really wants, and bringing together the right teams to help make those dreams a reality” (*Libraries Transforming Communities*, 2017). The resources provided for Turning Outward are very thorough and consider all aspects of planning and executing effective community conversations. The resources and training materials take users through a 90-day (and beyond) plan to help libraries “turn outward.”

In the first 30 days of the Turning Outward process, there are several assessments for the library team to utilize in determining where they are in their understanding of what it means to “turn outward” toward the community, and discovering aspirations and intentionality. The team will learn about “Engagement Paths” and the “3As of Public Life.” There is even an assessment for users to determine what and who rejuvenates them, so they will be aware of ways of sustaining themselves throughout the community outreach process, as it takes a lot of personal commitment and energy.

During the next 30 days, “ask exercises” and community conversations begin. The ask exercises are a starting point for learning about the community’s aspirations and a way for the library team to gain confidence in engaging people – even those they don’t know – in conversation. This exercise doesn’t require much planning or take very much time. The following questions are posed in the ask exercise:

1. What kind of community do you want to live in?

2. Why is that important to you?
3. How is that different from how you see things now?
4. What are some of the things that need to happen to create that kind of change?

Community conversations, on the other hand, take more time to plan and execute; however, they help the team “engage others, find partners and develop strategies that strengthen the library’s relevance and significance in the community” (*Turning Outward Resources for Libraries*, 2014). There are webinars and a community conversation workbook to enhance this aspect of Turning Outward.

60-90 days into the approach, the team shares what it has learned and evaluates its progress. Regularly scheduled conversations take place to discuss what’s being learned and to maintain a “turned-outward mindset.” At this stage, the focus is on what is being learned and how that information will be used to create change, not on planning itself. There are more assessments and webinars to facilitate this stage, and the team works toward reaching the “Sweet Spot,” where action will be taken “on issues the community cares about in a way that builds the conditions for change in [the] community at the same time” (*Turning Outward Resources for Libraries*, 2014).

At 90 days and beyond, the team moves from aspirations to action, taking what’s been learned from community conversations and translating that knowledge into action that will effect positive and lasting change. There are tools to work on making Turning Outward stick with staff, making meaning of data, tracking progress, applying public knowledge to library programs, building a Turned-Outward team organizational culture, and Turning Outward strategic planning (*Turning Outward Resources for Libraries*, 2014). The LTC Turning Outward page also

provides a link to case studies, where users can see how other libraries have instituted the Turning Outward approach.

In order to continue being relevant and significant within the communities they serve, today's libraries need to reach out *into* those communities. With the resources mentioned here, libraries have the background information and necessary tools to advocate for implementing community outreach and meeting the underserved in our communities where they are.

## Resources

American Library Association. (2017, January 18). *Libraries Transforming Communities:*

*Turning Outward*. [Text]. <http://www.ala.org/tools/librariestransform/libraries-transforming-communities/turning-outward>

American Library Association. (2014, January 13). *Turning Outward resources for libraries.*

<http://www.ala.org/tools/librariestransform/libraries-transforming-communities/resources-for-library-professionals>

Campana, K., Mills, J. E., & Martin, M. H. (2018). ECRR outside the library: Providing meaningful family-focused community outreach. *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children*, 16(2), 35–36. <https://doi-org.pearl.stkate.edu/10.5860/cal.16.2.35>

Enis, M. (2020). Broward County Library. *Library Journal*, 145(10), 26.

Hirsh, S. (Ed.). (2018). *Information Services Today: An Introduction, Second Edition* (Second). Roman & Littlefield.

Outreach. (2021). In *Wikipedia*.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Outreach&oldid=1023286334>

Public Library Advocacy. *Turning the Page: Using the Curriculum*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 20,

2021, from <https://www.publiclibraryadvocacy.org/using-the-curriculum/>

Williment, K. (2009). It takes a community to create a library. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library & Information Practice & Research*, 4(1), 1–11.