



Serving the Demands of Democracy

The critical role of libraries in ensuring the full
civic participation of a diverse population

Public libraries provide the wide-open door to information and knowledge to people of all ages, ethnicities, and economic status. Primarily funded by local communities taxing themselves, public libraries reflect a civic commitment to provide citizens with books, periodicals, and other media that enable them to be informed members of a democratic nation. Librarians work with diligence to serve the demands of democracy, to provide equitable access to information, and to contribute to the growth of strong communities.

However, truly equitable access is not easily achieved. As the U.S. population becomes more diverse, the challenge to maintain equal access for all becomes more complex every day:

- 56 million people in the U.S. have some sort of disability that must be accommodated;
- 18 percent of the U.S. speaks a language other than English in the home;
- 12 percent lives below the poverty level.

To meet these challenges, state library plans increasingly reflect a focus on collections that include foreign language materials, strategies to ensure digital inclusion, and outreach initiatives that provide information literacy and family literacy to bridge economic barriers. Without these services and resources, the long-standing goal of full democratic participation simply cannot be realized.

Equity

Implementation of the librarians' goal to provide equity of access has many aspects, including geographic (urban versus rural), usability for people with disabilities, linguistic diversity in materials for people with different languages, and overcoming economic barriers such as the digital divide. There are 34.6 million people in the U.S. whose earnings are below the official poverty rate (\$18,400 for a family of four). Poverty disproportionately affects people of color (24.1 percent African American; 21.8

percent Hispanic origin). The cost of books, periodicals, a functional computer, and online access to the Internet required to carry out basic job searches, study for the GED, or develop work skills are beyond the means of this large portion of the population.

Underemployment has grown as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act has placed strict limits on public assistance. These factors make public libraries a critical component in the effort of poor people to participate in workforce development. The Detroit Public Library Career and Employment Information Center staff helps job seekers map employment strategies, assists in resume development, provides 2,500 books on opportunities, assists in Internet job searches, holds seminars, and facilitates test preparation.

The need for continued hard work to ensure equity requires constant reinforcement and recommitment as library budgets have been cut during the current economic downturn. Ironically, libraries become more critical in times of high unemployment as people can afford fewer materials in their personal budgets. Just as libraries provided opportunity during the Depression of the 1930s, in this period of the greatest job loss since Hoover, libraries provide information for those seeking jobs.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, long-term unemployment has reached the highest level in 10 years, median household income is falling, and underemployment is in double digits. Public libraries can provide the resources needed to help workers find information about career development and education. Unlike formal assistance programs, the resources of public libraries can be accessed regardless of age, income, or education at any time there is a need.

The American Library Association (ALA) has a long history of working to provide equitable access to library services for all people in the United States. By the late 1920s, the ALA had begun to work toward a national plan

for library service to provide books to rural communities, and in 1936, the ALA urged people to get involved in state and national planning to achieve “equalizing of library opportunity.” The passage of the Library Services Act in 1956 supported state planning to reach rural citizens and moved librarians closer to the goal of equalization of access. The Library Services and Construction Act of 1966 expanded the federal role to include support for library construction, service to urban areas, outreach to the disadvantaged, and development of services to people with disabilities.

Along with systemic efforts to equalize library access by geography and community, the ALA has also supported demonstration projects that would provide equity to diverse groups, as well as programs and services that meet the needs of people of color, people needing materials in their native languages, and people with disabilities. The Diversity Fair held at the annual ALA conference brings together model programs in order to provide examples that may be replicated in other libraries. At the 2003 Diversity Fair, programs such as these illustrated the variety of efforts in U.S. libraries:

- Cultural Bonding at the Elmhurst branch of the Queens, N.Y., Public Library includes serving the large (41 percent) Asian-Pacific population with Lunar New Year celebrations, collection development in Asian languages including Filipino and Korean, and Indic music and dance concerts to promote cultural understanding.
- Celebrating Cesar Chavez at the Boulder, Colo., Public Library includes panel discussions, poetry readings, theater performances, and photography exhibits. Community partners worked together to honor the work of this civil rights activist who fought on behalf of farmworkers.
- Loaning Assistive Technology at the Lee County, Fla., Public Library includes examples of the library’s efforts to provide devices to assist those with low vision or in need of amplification to enable them to communicate and keep up with families and current events.

The opportunity for librarians to review workable solutions to the challenges of serving diverse communities provides ideas and models that may be reconfigured for local needs. Through the ongoing mechanism of the Diversity Fair, the innovative work of librarians throughout the U.S. can be replicated for home communities.

Electronic access to information is also increasingly a barrier to equity. Eighty-six percent of households earning \$75,000 or more per year have Internet access compared to 12.7 percent of households earning less than \$15,000 per year. White (46.1 percent) and Asian American/Pacific Islanders (56.8 percent) have Internet access at levels approximately double those of African-American (23.5 percent) and Hispanic (23.6 percent) households. For those on the other side of the digital divide, libraries ensure the public’s right to a free and open information society.

Librarians, foundations, corporations, and

government have come together to tackle the many issues relating to digital access from many vantage points. These include a focus on the need for broadband for rural communities, providing computer and Internet access, and ensuring that users have instruction in the use of new technology. The 1996 Library Services and Technology Act was implemented with special attention to digital-divide issues. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation donations—40,000 computers in U.S. public libraries between 1997–2003—targeted the nation’s poorest communities. These initiatives, along with Universal Service (E-rate), provided high-speed Internet access in schools and public libraries. The Clinton-Gore next generation Internet initiatives profoundly affected the context of online access in libraries as librarians across the nation integrated these resources into daily library service. Their work has been continued through reauthorization of the Museums and Library Services Act of 2003, which advances the role of libraries to connect people to knowledge and ideas in this new era.

For the 47 million U.S. residents who speak a language other than English at home, public libraries provide resources to assist in learning English as a second language and access to materials in native languages. The largest single language, Spanish, is spoken by over 28 million. The challenges in serving this population are great; many come from countries where public library services do not exist, they may not be literate in their spoken language,

How Libraries Serve Diverse Communities

Public libraries throughout the United States work collaboratively with their local communities to develop programs that meet local needs. The programs highlighted below are representative of the kinds of programs local public libraries have developed to ensure equity of access to materials.

Hmong, Somali, and Spanish Outreach

The multi-lingual library outreach program Library Links! is a bridge between the Minneapolis Public Library and new communities. Bilingual Outreach Liaisons also work with public schools, develop languages collections and participate in community events. www.mplib.org/librarylinks.asp

Adaptive Technology

People with print disabilities and seniors find a variety of adaptive technologies at the Cleveland Public Library. These include JAWS for Windows (screen-reading), Zoom-Text Xtra (screen magnifier), Braille translators, and accessible workstations. Many public libraries are adding these adaptive technologies and all public libraries facilitate use of the services provided by the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, including talking books and devices for using them.

www.cpl.org/Locations.asp?FormMode=LBPH_Tech

Homework Centers

There are 31 Homework Centers at branches of the Los Angeles County Public Library. Each Homework Center has enhanced educational resources for students, computers, and homework help. The libraries also provide early childhood pre-literacy programs developed in collaboration with Head Start.

www.colapublib.org/children/parents/hmwork.html

Learning Centers

Adult learners working on the GED or needing basic reading assistance can use the Brooklyn Public Library Learning Centers and their Learn to Read @ the Library program. Volunteer tutors or technology-assisted learning provides part-time, flexible support that is convenient for working adults.

www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/libraryservices/literacy.htm

Bookmobile Service for the Homebound and Incarcerated

Homebound Delivery upon request to nine townships and 46 Jackson County, Ind., communities over each two-week period; also serving Jackson County Juvenile Detention Center and Jail. www.japl.lib.in.us/Bookmobile

library signage and forms may be only in English, and few librarians are of Latino heritage. The Tucson-Pima Public Library represents a model of service in serving a Spanish-speaking population with a Spanish language Web site and services such as dial-a-story and children's services that are bilingual.

Overarching all efforts to ensure equity are the challenges faced by the 56 million people with disabilities. These include the needs of people who are blind or suffer vision problems, the hearing impaired, people with mobility needs, people with mental illness, and the homebound.

Here again, libraries have been innovative. The Library Services for People with Disabilities Policy states that, "Libraries play a catalytic role in the lives of people with disabilities by facilitating their full participation in society." Implementation of this policy is apparent at the Seattle Public Library (SPL). The LEAP (Library Equal Access Program) at SPL provides a wide range of services including sign-language interpreters for library programs, information and referral to area services for people with disabilities, adaptive equipment, newspapers for the blind, and collections on topics that relate to disabilities.

As librarians strive to ensure "equity of access," the key initiative of the 2003-2004 ALA president, Dr. Carla D. Hayden, director of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Md., underscores this goal:

At a time when our public is challenged on multiple fronts, we need to recommit ourselves to the ideal of providing equal access to everyone, anywhere, anytime, and in any format. We need

Library Organizations that Promote Equity

Organizations in the Librarians of Color coalition affiliated with the American Library Association:

American Indian Library Association (AILA)

www.nativeculture.com/lisamitten/aila.html

Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA)

www.apalaweb.org

Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA)

www.bcala.org

Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA)

www.cala-web.org

Special ALA units and roundtables also active in equity issues:

Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies.

Libraries Serving Special Populations Section (people with vision, mobility, hearing, and developmental differences; people who are elderly; people in prisons and health care facilities).

www.ala.org/lsspsTemplate.cfm?Section=LSSPS

Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table.

lonestar.utsa.edu/jbarnett/emie.html

Office for Diversity. Spectrum Initiative, scholarship program.

www.ala.org/diversity

Office for Literacy and Outreach Services. Subcommittee on

Service to the Poor and Homeless. www.ala.org/olos

Social Responsibilities Round Table. Coretta Scott King Award

Task Force. www.libr.org/SRRT

Social Responsibilities Round Table. Hunger, Homelessness and

Poverty Task Force. www.libr.org/HHP

REFORMA. National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking.

www.reforma.org

to pay particular attention to those groups who are already underserved, such as residents of rural and urban America, senior citizens and the disabled. By finally embracing equity of access we will be affirming our core values, recognizing realities, and assuring our future.

Democracy

The role of the U.S. public library as a support to the democratic process has been well chronicled in *Libraries & Democracy: The Cornerstones of Liberty*, edited by Nancy Kranich. The availability of books and free access to information in every community provides the resources for understanding the complexities of democratic governance—but ensuring that these materials are open to all citizens has been a parallel struggle.

Beyond providing access to information, libraries also enable students and the general public to seek and use information critically. The exploitation of information to fashion arguments and examine options is a fundamental requirement in the analysis of the democratic process. With access to vast amounts of information through the use of technology, information literacy has increasingly been an important focus of librarians working to activate and support the use of materials in service to democracy. Frances Jacobson Harris, associate professor at the University of Illinois, outlines the need for schools to employ certified media specialists skilled in the use of information technologies to help students see information literacy as a tool of strategy.

Meaningful discussions about democracy also take place at public libraries, supported by a convergence of resources as libraries partner with other agencies to serve the democratic process. Choices for the 21st Century: Defining our Role in a Changing World, an initiative designed to engage communities in dialogue concerning U.S. foreign policy, was held in U.S. public libraries prior to the 2000 elections with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The state library of Connecticut ensures universal access to core materials including key documents related to the founding of democracy for its residents. By forging connections such as these, libraries ensure that all people have access to materials that enable them to discuss and explore democracy.

These ideals are also precious to school libraries, for educated youth are the future of democracy. As Henry A. Giroux recently noted, "People need to be educated for democracy and educational leadership not only by expanding their capacities to think critically, but also for assuming public responsibility through active participation in the very process of governing and engaging important social problems." The existence of a library in schools is one of the few factors whose contribution to academic achievement has been documented empirically, and it is a contribution that cannot be explained away by other powerful influences on student performance. Children with access to a library collection that contains materials on all sides of issues not only have an opportunity to participate in the democratic process, but also are likely to perform better in academic subjects.

But democracy is a hollow concept if people are not allowed to read freely without fear of reprisal. Challenges to free reading by agricultural and business interests during the Great Depression of the 1930s were the crucible that forged librarians' passion for freedom to read, and led to the emergence of the ALA as central to U.S. librarians' commitment to the ideals of First Amendment freedoms. *The Grapes of Wrath* was banned from some public libraries because community members felt Steinbeck's so-

cial commentary was “vile propaganda.” In response to this censorship, librarians adopted the *Library’s Bill of Rights* in 1948.

In its ongoing affirmation of the values librarianship holds central, the ALA has approved the mandate that libraries preserve democratic society by making available the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions, and ideas. To this end, amidst the attacks on intellectual freedom during the McCarthy era, librarians adopted the *Freedom to Read Statement* in 1953, which begins with the words, “Freedom to read is essential to our democracy.”

Today, librarians seek to protect readers from intrusions allowed by the USA Patriot Act. The ALA’s resolution on the USA Patriot Act notes, “The ALA opposes any use of governmental power to suppress the free and open exchange of knowledge and information or to intimidate individuals exercising free inquiry... ALA considers that sections of the USA Patriot Act are a present danger to the constitutional rights and privacy rights of library users.” Most state library associations have also passed resolutions regarding the threat of the USA Patriot Act to the democratic process. Librarians stand together across the United States as defenders of the people’s right to know.

Community

Public libraries fill an important community-building role in towns and counties across the United States. The *Encyclopedia of Community* lists three primary functions of public libraries that contribute to this role:

- Lifelong learning for local residents;
- Preserving cultural heritage;
- Provision of a commons as part of the public sphere.

Lifelong Learning: Public libraries provide a full range of opportunity for lifelong learning. Programs include Born to Read for babies, toddlers, and parents; family literacy; storytelling and enrichment for elementary-school children; and encouragement of reading by high-school students through Teen Read Week. Public libraries, often called “the people’s university,” not only develop collections for educational and recreational reading, they sponsor national programs such as “Research Revolution,” focused on science in our daily lives; “Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln’s Journey to Emancipation;” and the “Let’s Talk About it!” reading and discussion series.

Preserving Cultural Heritage: Long-standing public library collaboration with museums, archives, historical societies, and genealogy societies has been strengthened by the federal Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS). Dr. Robert S. Martin, director of IMLS, has suggested that libraries can create public value by forming effective partnerships whenever we find an intersection of mission, goals, and activities. Innovative connections of libraries and museums to Head Start programs to activate interest in local history, environmental issues, or anthropology are a new approach to encourage the preservation of local cultural heritage. The library-museum partnership programs are now underway with federal funds, which will enable community-based projects to reach a broader grassroots audience.

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Provision of a Public Commons: The public library provides a place where community members can meet to discuss issues of local or broader concern. This role is fostered by the library’s provision of material for decision-making and study. At a local level, people in a community affected by environmental brownfields might meet at the public library to discuss strategies to find funds for remediation using library maps, online information, and government documents. Broader concerns might be addressed when a National Endowment for the Humanities traveling exhibit on George Washington comes to the public library, and discussions about the foundations of democracy are fostered by library staff.

In their exploration of civic renewal, “Branch Libraries: The Heartbeat of the Community,” Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein report on Chicago Public Library neighborhood branch libraries as active, responsive components of local communities and as agents of change. A library card is a point of entry for new immigrants and a first step to participation in public life. Throughout the United States, public libraries provide opportunities for people to receive English as a second language education, adult basic-literacy tutoring, and personalized help in book selection. For people with disabilities, libraries provide books on tape or low-vision devices.

The Future of Libraries

Librarians have worked with diligence over the last decade to maintain their traditional role in supporting lifelong learning, preservation of cultural heritage, and provision of a community commons while incorporating new technologies. At the center of this effort is a determined focus on equalizing access by developing services for special populations—people of color, people with disabilities, and people in economic need. The librarians’ goal is to ensure that all who reside in the United States have access to the resources they need—both print and digital—to participate in the democratic process and to develop their capabilities to the fullest. <

RESOURCES

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American Library Association. Resolutions and resources regarding the USA Patriot Act. www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=issues_and_Advocacy

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Clinton-Gore Administration Record to Help Close the Digital Divide. Web site. clinton4.nara.gov/WH/new/html/Tue_Oct_3_134626_2000.html

Detroit Public Library. Career & Employment Information Center. Web site. www.detroit.lib.mi.us/ceic/ceic_home_info.htm

Digital Divide Network. Web site. www.digitaldividenetwork.org/content/sections/index.cfm

Economic Policy Institute. Web site. www.epinet.org

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Building Forward

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"The kids absolutely pour in to study after three o'clock," says Buckley. "Altogether, throughout the building, we have 584 spots where people can sit and very few are open on a busy day." A recent library science graduate of Simmons College, Buckley has only been at Cerritos Library for a few months. He describes it, aptly, as living in a dream.

It's important for communities contemplating library upgrades to know that it's all right to dream big in planning for the future. "It has to be an emotional journey in terms of the planning," advises Waynn Pearson, "and while it's always understandable that you need to work within a framework budget and other restraints, if you don't let your imagination soar, if you're stifled from dealing with information, it limits you tremendously."

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Cerritos Library is proof that libraries, if you build them right, are very much a part of the future. "The Zeitgeist of the future is convergence' has been a real mantra of ours," Pearson says. "It's not just bringing the book and the digital world together, it's bringing human experiences in proximity with library services. It's the whole enchilada, bringing everything together.

"What we discovered is that people are creating their own experiences when it comes to our library," Pearson concludes. "They take one of the leatherbound classics that they promised themselves they would always read, and they go over and snuggle up in a wingback chair next to the fireplace and read a chapter or two each time they come into the library, and in the process they finally get through that classic they'd wanted to read. There's something about holding a leatherbound classic with its gilt pages and sitting there in this incredible library of your dreams and reading the stories that are unfolding." <

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