Special Issue

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Investing in Civic Engagement and Public Libraries: A Roundtable Discussion with Paula Ellis, Deborah Jacobs, and Julia Stasch

CAROLYN J. LUKNMEYER
Public Libraries and the Future of Democracy

CHRIS COLEMAN, KIT HADLEY
Working Together to Close the Civic Engagement Gap: The Saint Paul Story

RASHAD YOUNG
More Than Just Books: The Role of Public Libraries in Building Community and Promoting Civic Engagement

SUSAN HILDRETH
Inspiring Libraries as Community Anchors
Special Issue: Public Libraries and Civic Engagement

Guest Editor’s Note
SUSAN BENTON

Essays
From Books to Community: The Changing Value of Public Libraries
PATRICK LOSINSKI
The new purpose statement of the Columbus Metropolitan Library is “To promote reading, share resources, and connect people.”

Investing in Civic Engagement and Public Libraries: A Roundtable Discussion with Paula Ellis, Deborah Jacobs, and Julia Stasch
Strategic leaders from three national foundations share their ideas about the relationship among philanthropies, public libraries, and the future of civic engagement.

Libraries and Civic Engagement: Finding Hope After Tragedy
GEORGE “SKIP” NOR
After the mass shootings on July 20, 2012, the term “civic engagement” has taken on new meaning in Aurora, Colorado. It means local groups and institutions—including the libraries—supporting the community’s effort to heal and move forward after a massive, tragic event.

Public Libraries and the Future of Democracy
CAROLYN J. LUKENSMeyer
With the public’s confidence in our democratic institutions at an all-time low, now is the perfect moment for libraries to take leadership as one of the great engines of democracy in our nation.

Working Together to Close the Civic Engagement Gap: The Saint Paul Story
CHRIS COLEMAN, KIT HADLEY
Saint Paul, Minnesota, prides itself on being the most civically engaged community in the United States. Now libraries are taking a leading role to ensure that all members of the community are welcomed into the local fabric of civic life.

PLACE Making: The Arlington Way
MARY HUGHES HYNES, DIANE KRUSH
Participation, leadership, and civic engagement are key ways that residents and businesses currently interact with each other and local government to improve Arlington. The PLACE initiative seeks to strengthen each of these components and systematically link them to expand civic conversations and decision making in the community.

Engaged Libraries Leading the Way
CHRISTINE BECKER
Programs that address key civic engagement indicators—voting, civic understanding, connections with public officials, services to immigrants, and easy access to reliable data and civic information—position the library as the place where democracy, civic engagement, public discourse, and community building happen.
Library Trustees as Community Connectors
K E I T H  S I M M O N S ,  K E N T  O L I V E R
Civic engagement means reminding others that we all have responsibilities to make our communities better. This model of civic engagement—the choice to be involved in community life and community action—affords the institution of the public library and public library trustees the opportunity to help shape their community's future.

The American Place at Hartford Public Library: Tackling Digital Citizenship
M A T T H E W  K .  P O L A N D ,  H O M A  N A F I C Y
The American Place helps new Americans realize their goals. The program was cited as a best practice in the 2008 federal report on programs at the forefront of the movement to help immigrants navigate the complexities of becoming fully acculturated in our society.

More Than Just Books: The Role of Public Libraries in Building Community and Promoting Civic Engagement
R A S H A D  Y O U N G
Across the country, libraries are contributing to the success of government and businesses and helping to create a sense of community. They are helping to build neighborhoods, facilitate civic and community engagement, and improve residents' lives. Above all, they foster loyalty and pride in the community.

YOUmedia Chicago: Connecting Youth Through Public Libraries
C H I C A G O  P U B L I C  L I B R A R Y ,  Y O U M E D I A  S T A F F
Teens come to YOUmedia for different reasons, and they may choose to engage in the space in different ways. Regardless of the reasons for coming, all teens have access to a space that promotes a wide variety of activity and experiences designed specifically for them.

YOUmedia Miami: Engaging Youth in Powerful New Ways
R A Y M O N D  S A N T I A G O
Based at the North Dade Regional Branch Library in Miami Gardens, YOUmedia Miami provides teens with a space where they can mix music, design video games, create films, read books, explore technology, or just hang out with the support of mentors, young adult librarians, and their peers.

Community Libraries: Let Us Praise the Last Great Civic Place
R A N D A L L  H .  R E I D
Libraries can become essential collaborative centers for civic engagement and adaptive community learning. Librarians, who suffer from many stereotypes, must create a new image of institutional innovator and assertive community educator for this transformation to succeed.

Promoting Civic Literacy and Community Building: Civic Engagement Matters at the Calgary Public Library
G E R R Y  M E E K
Public libraries offer an array of possibilities and provide the essential space needed for the community imagination to flourish and to grow. By purpose and design, they are transformational drivers and change agents that help both the individual and the community grow and discover who they are and what they aspire to be.

Inspiring Libraries as Community Anchors
S U S A N  H I L D R E T H
The Institute of Museum and Library Services inspires libraries to take on the important role of community convener by making a variety of investments in learning about what works, identifying challenges and information gaps, and determining and communicating best practices.

Interview with Shirley Amore, City Librarian for the Denver Public Library

Scaling Up Civic Leadership: Combining Individual-Level Change and Culture Change
D O U G  E A S T E R L I N G
Improving a community's ability to solve problems requires more than skilled individuals. It also requires highly functioning organizations, supportive institutions, and a conducive community culture.
Inspiring Libraries as Community Anchors

BY SUSAN HILDMRETH

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is the federal agency that is primarily responsible for federal funding to libraries and museums. But we do much more than that. The mission of IMLS is to inspire libraries and museums to advance innovation, lifelong learning, and cultural and civic engagement. We provide leadership through research, policy development, and grant making. One of IMLS’s primary activities is to identify the ways in which libraries and museums benefit their communities and provide support to maximize that benefit. Among the most important roles libraries play is that of community anchor. Making the most of libraries’ unique ability to strengthen civic life, understand and respond to community needs, and knit community members together through common experiences and shared interests is essential for the continued success of the library institution and the communities libraries serve.

Investments in Libraries as Community Anchors

For the purposes of this article, I want to focus on the role of the library in civic engagement and how that investment can position the library as a community anchor.

I have always been interested in the library as a community convener, but my excitement about this topic was heightened when I attended the Urban Libraries Council 2011 Partners for Success conference in Miami, Florida. The clear message of that meeting was that libraries should—and, in many cases, do—seize the opportunity that civic engagement provides for building strong communities. But despite their initiative, libraries are not seen as active in the field of civic engagement. This is what the conference report said on the topic:

Public libraries are trusted and tested resources that aren’t going away. They have deep hometown roots and broad assets that contribute to community building. And, many libraries have already invested in programs that support civic engagement goals that contribute to stronger communities.

Yet, their stature as civic engagement leaders is far from confirmed. While libraries are often referred to as democracy’s best promise, they are rarely seen as community and civic engagement leaders—even though they are right there in plain sight. (p. 5)
How can IMLS inspire libraries to take on this important role? We can do so by making a variety of investments in learning about what works, identifying challenges and information gaps, and determining and communicating best practices. We have funded a number of exciting projects centered on civic engagement through our competitive funding programs and our Grants to States program. Information about all these projects is available on the IMLS Web site (www.imls.gov), and I include some recent examples here.

**Hartford Public Library**

In 2010, the Hartford (Connecticut) Public Library received an IMLS National Leadership Grant to demonstrate a partnership approach to civic engagement for immigrant communities. The library is partnering with Catholic Charities Migration and Refugee Resettlement Services, the City of Hartford’s Office of Human Relations, Everyday Democracy, and the University of Connecticut’s School of Social Work to promote immigrant civic engagement. Focusing on legal permanent residents within Hartford’s immigrant community, the library and its partners trained a core group of volunteer immigrants who help other newly arrived immigrants in tasks such as accessing community services. To further encourage civic participation, the city and the library established a broadly represented library-based Advisory Council on Inclusivity. With the library as the catalyst, this integration model transcends the existing naturalization process to give immigrants a real sense of belonging in America, helping to make them active community participants and civic-minded individuals. The library’s Web site provides information that offers other libraries guidance on establishing similar programs in their communities.

**Carroll County Public Library**

In response to a statewide initiative in Maryland in 2010 that asked libraries to think about leveraging their assets to help solve community challenges, the Carroll County Public Library planned a number of community conversations that informed the library’s strategic plan. The idea was to convene conversations focused on community—not library—challenges and needs. Discussions included education, economic development, public safety, human services, and government. Participants from stakeholder groups and the general public began by describing their ideal community and then identified ways the library could help the community achieve that future. The library made a point of listening and translating what they heard into a library capacity context. The conversations generated a great deal of community interest, and many participants asked the library to consider hosting similar meetings in the future.

**California State Library**

IMLS provides federal funds directly to the states in its Grants to States program. Much significant work is carried out with those federal funds at the state level. In 2010, the California State Library supported “Making a Difference,” a program in which three California libraries—Riverside County, Salinas, and Yolo County—developed their capacity to facilitate civic dialogue in their communities and promote themselves as “community living rooms.” Following staff training, a total of fifty-two library-hosted activities reached nine hundred community members, engaging participants in topics ranging from the roles and responsibilities of individuals in the community to race, politics, and culture. As a result, the participating libraries developed twenty community partnerships and were increasingly perceived as hubs for civic engagement. “Making a Difference—Civic Engagement at the Public Library,” in the July/August 2012 issue of *Public Libraries*, provides a detailed report of this program at the Riverside County Library.

**Libraries at the Center of Civic Engagement Efforts**

Civic engagement provides a potentially powerful role for libraries in the twenty-first century, and our success in integrating this role into the library suite of services is critical. In order to move the field forward as quickly as possible, IMLS is investing in several programs that will provide opportunities for enhanced awareness, training, and knowledge of libraries and their role in civic engagement. We are developing a partnership with the Local Initiatives Support Cooperation (LISC), the largest national community development organization. Primarily known for work in public housing, LISC recognizes the importance of arts, culture, and education in the ongoing work of community revitalization. IMLS and LISC will partner to demonstrate
ways to create and sustain cooperative relationships between and among libraries, museums, and community leaders engaged in comprehensive community change initiatives.

Through its *Building Sustainable Communities* initiative, LISC has supported the creation of community partnerships in 107 neighborhoods in twenty-eight cities and additional rural areas. These partnerships consist of governmental and community-based organizations, associations, and individual leaders dedicated to carrying out comprehensive programs for revitalization of low-income communities. Most of these community partnerships have created quality-of-life plans that outline strategies for change and record the commitments the parties have made to pursue these strategies.

The prevalence of arts, culture, and educational goals and strategies in these quality-of-life plans is noteworthy, given the importance of other community challenges such as efforts to improve housing, revitalize commercial districts, improve public safety, promote health, and build household income and assets. In many cases, libraries have been key contributors to these plans. IMLS and LISC will encourage communities to build on this expressed interest, taking advantage of the lessons of previous successful experiences of museum, library, and community collaborations.

By using the combined expertise of IMLS and LISC staff in arts and culture, education, and community revitalization, this partnership will support research into past and ongoing collaborations throughout the United States and create a community of practice consisting of those in the comprehensive community change field and in the museum and library community who want to advance collaborative work in this area. Initially we will identify institutions involved in community development work and document their successes and challenges. We anticipate convening and Web site development in 2013 to begin to share this critical knowledge. After the initial phase of the partnership and the release of a promising practices report, we anticipate funding pilot projects that would provide the opportunity to identify effective civic engagement models for libraries and museums. Evaluation will be a key component of this work, and an evaluation model will be developed to be used in all pilot projects. We hope to identify private funders who will assist in leveraging IMLS funds in this effort and anticipate that this work will be an IMLS focus for two to three years.

IMLS is also investing in “The Promise of Libraries Transforming Communities,” an American Library Association (ALA) initiative that has been spearheaded by ALA president Maureen Sullivan. The goal of this program is to assist with the shift already beginning to take place in the role that libraries play in their communities. Specifically, the program will develop tools, innovations, and resources that will help libraries lead a collaborative approach to community engagement and development.

ALA will partner with the Harwood Institute to address the need in local communities for public innovators and change agents by preparing library leaders who can make more intentional choices and judgments about fulfilling the promise of libraries in transforming communities. Rich Harwood, founder and chief executive officer of the institute, is a strong supporter of libraries and their potential in furthering the cause of civic engagement. In an essay, he writes, “Libraries are uniquely positioned at the heart of the local, campus, and school communities. . . . Importantly, libraries are ‘boundary spanning’ organizations, organizations that can span boundaries and dividing lines to bring people together, incubate new ideas, hold up a mirror to the entire community, and build true collaborations” (p. 32).

In partnership, ALA and the Harwood Institute will develop capacity with ALA staff and member leaders, train librarians as facilitators for their communities, and create a pilot set of interrelated professional development components designed to work together to foster a dynamic within the field that will grow and expand over time through national distribution as more libraries and librarians opt in. This is a phased program with the first-year focus of building capacity within ALA and creating a framework for a larger, sustainable initiative that could be piloted in libraries all around the country. Evaluation of what works and the development of effective scalable models are key components of this multiyear effort.
Although I believe that both of these partnerships will increase the capacity of libraries to play a significant role in their communities, it will be very useful to evaluate the similarities and differences in impacts and outcomes in each of the approaches. In the LISC partnership, IMLS is moving libraries and museums into the world of comprehensive community development and highlighting the capacity of those institutions to be players in that new world. In the ALA program, the focus is much more internal, developing capacity among the library community to become more outwardly focused, with the intention of engaging the community development world with the library world.

Seeding effective civic engagement models for library work is critical, and I believe that both these new initiatives, as well as other ongoing work that IMLS is funding, will contribute to the creation of models that can be useful for the field. We are committed to evaluating these efforts and sharing the results as broadly as possible so that the lessons learned can support the vitality and success of libraries in the twenty-first century.

References

Susan Hildreth was appointed director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services in January 2011. She served as director of the Seattle Public Library for two years and was California’s state librarian for five years. She also held leadership positions at the San Francisco Public Library and the Sacramento Public Library.