Partnering For Social Justice: MSW Interns in Public Libraries

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**Abstract:**

While the collaborative trend among professional social workers and librarians continues to grow, literature about the utilization of student social workers partnering with libraries is non-existent. Over 64,000 students are currently enrolled in M.S.W. programs through the United States and nearly all are required to complete approximately 900 hours of fieldwork. Such students provide the skills, knowledge, and values that can help take diversity in public libraries to the next level. Public librarians play a critical role in advocating for social justice and change. By reaching out to MSW programs, they invite budding social workers to help advance tolerance for a diversity of people and needs in public libraries. While the professional values and ethics of both librarianship and social work have a strong overlap, librarians need to invite social work students to partner with them; particularly as libraries are still considered non-traditional points of social service delivery. MSW students can assist libraries to expand programming, strengthen outreach, and enhance the professional development of both social workers and librarians to the benefit of patrons.
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While the collaborative trend among professional social workers and librarians is garnering much-deserved attention, literature about social work students partnering with public libraries is virtually non-existent. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the how public librarians can advocate for social justice and change by partnering with master-level social work (MSW) students. Inviting graduate programs to collaborate with libraries through the placement of MSW interns allows librarians to enhance programming and help meet the needs of patrons as informed by our professional values.

Based on existing partnerships throughout the United States, the author showcases public libraries initiating collaborations with MSW students to develop outreach programs; thus advocating for social justice and diversity. Reflecting on the joint program between Azusa Pacific University and its local library, Kelley, Riggleman, Clara, & Navarro (2017) find “libraries constitute a great support for social workers determined to champion equality in their own community” (p. 122). To the extent this is not possible for all libraries, raising awareness that such partnerships exist is nonetheless worthwhile.

Growing interest and collaboration

Ever since San Francisco Public Library hired the nation’s first social worker in 2009 (Karisch, 2017) interest in the collaboration between social work and libraries has grown. Expanding scholarly literature and news coverage reflects this popularity (Blank, 2014) as do attendance at professional workshops and conference panels (Public Library Association, 2018; Dankowski, 2018; Zettervall, 2018b). A Hollywood film central to this message is slated for release (Morehart, 2018). Most of this attention surrounds the intersection of professional social workers and libraries. Currently there are 25 full time social workers employed in North
American libraries (Zettervall, 2018a). Aside from a lone book chapter (Levinson, 1988) and two academic publications (Luo, Estreicher, Lee, Thomas, C. & Thomas, G., 2012; Kelley et al., 2017), scant professional literature addresses embedding social work students into public libraries.

However sparse the coverage, collaboration is growing. Unofficially, networks of social workers and librarians are developing across the United States. Just a few years ago *American Libraries* observed “…the library social worker trend is too uncommon for the National Association of Social Workers to track—yet. Neither does the *American Library Association*” (Blank, 2014). Though no official tallies exist, membership for Whole Person Librarianship Community of Practice (Zettervall, 2018c) currently exceeds 110 librarians, social workers, and students. Kelley et al. (2017) concur “the arena of social workers in libraries is a continually growing field” (p. 123) and provides “a new frontier and an ideal community setting for service, primed to meet the patrons where they are and when they are asking for assistance” (p. 120). Cooperating to elevate diversity, young social workers are well-positioned to help public libraries address the needs of patrons unique to each community.

While still considered a nontraditional point of social service delivery, public libraries meet standards many universities require when seeking potential field placements for students. The author’s own institution aims to situate interns with agencies that have a “commitment to serving a diverse clientele, with particular attention to members of poor, oppressed, vulnerable, and stigmatized groups… [adhering] to the values, ethics, and standards for cultural competence...[providing] services in a new or developing area of practice that is consistent with the School’s mission” (Silberman School of Social Work, 2017, p. 9).
Public libraries long ago ceased to be a place where print books merely circulate. Librarian Cindy Mangel observes “having the services of a social work student available to our patrons is an example of how libraries are changing and expanding services” (Staff, 2018). The skill set required of librarians has morphed (Daily News, 2018) and some find we are taking on the role of social workers. Westbrook (2015) observes “the gray area between librarianship and social work needs to be embraced as a means of helping high-need patrons” (p. 18). Having worked with MSW interns in the past, former Public Library Association President Carolyn Anthony affirms “partnerships should be encouraged, and there’s so much we can accomplish by combining skills…[social workers] enable us to extend our reach and accomplish a lot more” (Zettervall, 2013).

**Shared values to enhance diverse programming**

Facilitating MSW students allows librarians to enhance programs and meet the unique needs of communities. One goal of such partnerships is to include marginalized patrons, thus enhancing diversity. They can also increase “access points…to social services especially for those intimidated by traditional social service providers” (Luo et al., 2012, p. 75). This speaks our core value of education that encourages us “to work with…organizations in coalitions to initiate and support comprehensive efforts to ensure that...libraries in every community cooperate to provide lifelong learning services to all” (American Library Association [ALA], 2004). Furthermore, we have a social responsibility to uphold diversity “by providing a full spectrum of resources and services” (ALA, 2004).

Additionally, we claim diversity as a core value “and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve” (ALA, 2004). One way to better attempt “solving the critical problems of society” (ALA, 2004) is to invite
MSW students to partner with us in civic outreach and program development. This requires we extend our hands to local universities; raising awareness to social work field directors and professors to consider libraries a viable option for students to conduct required internships.

In helping meet the diverse needs of patrons, collaborating with MSW students means pairing with a profession that shares many of the aforementioned core values as reflected in their own Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2018). Central to the social work profession is advancing social justice and diversity through community work. According to many universities’ guidelines, public libraries are fitting placements for MSW students as they seek field agencies that have “policies, procedures, and practices in accord with the NASW Code of Ethics and NASW Standards for Cultural Competence” (Silberman School of Social Work, 2017, p. 16). Deborah Miles (2015) discovered that “libraries are the perfect fit for social workers...I supervised two MSW students...the language of librarians is the language of social workers: we both want access, advocacy, engagement, development, wellbeing and inclusion” (p. 20).

Regarding our value of inclusivity, Moxley and Abbas (2016) agree “the collaboration among public librarians and social and human service providers…expands possibilities for advancing social inclusion within communities in which there are many needs” (p. 322). The multiple needs our patrons present with speak to the necessity for creativity in how we address them. Luo et al. (2012) argues “the need for public libraries to tackle social exclusion and engage in social justice” is urgent and “innovative approaches are needed to reach out to communities, meet the needs of the underserved and succeed in the pursuit of social justice” (80). Through interdisciplinary collaboration, we deploy our core values alongside budding social workers in order to provide diverse services for our patrons.
In need of an invitation

Social work students provide the skills, knowledge, and shared values that can help public librarians elevate diversity. The student body is vast and diverse: over 64,000 MSW students are enrolled in one of 254 accredited graduate social work programs in the United States and nearly 40 percent full time students are from “historically underrepresented groups” (Council on Social Work Education, 2017). Central to their education, they are required to complete approximately 900 hours of fieldwork (Shaffer, 2013). The primary requirement and purpose of internships is to “reinforce students' identification with the purposes, values, and ethics of the profession… [to] model [an] understanding of and respect for diversity” (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, pp. 10-11, 17).

With novice partnerships, it is especially crucial for librarians to extend themselves to social work programs as many students and educators do not consider libraries an option for field placement. To raise awareness about this possibility, librarians can encourage university administrators, professors, and field instructors to partner with them. In turn, MSW students can work with libraries to expand programming, strengthen outreach, and enhance development of both professions to the benefit of patrons.

Examples of librarian-initiated partnerships

Though each is unique, many existing partnerships tell a similar story of librarians generating collaborations with their local graduate school, establishing an internship, and encouraging student-led needs assessments of patrons and staff with the aim of enhancing relevant programs to the benefit of its diverse community.

The trailblazing community-university partnership between San Jose Public Library and San Jose State University began when librarian Deborah Estreicher simply called “the School of
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Social Work, spoke to Professor Peter A. Lee, who thought a fine partnership might be had, and the rest is history” (Estreicher, 2013). Recognizing an opportunity to take diversity to the next level, they developed the Social Worker in the Library (SWITL) model in order “to provide information consultations services to the public...support social justice by expanding access to information...especially for disadvantaged populations” (Luo et al., 2012, p. 73). Following a student-led needs assessment, SWITL launched the following year. This model has since been adopted at libraries throughout the country (Aurora Public Library, 2017; Kansas City Public Library, 2018). On a larger scale, the University of Maryland School of Social Work was recently awarded a two year National Leadership Grant to implement SWITL by placing six MSW interns at three Baltimore branches to “promote public libraries as strong community anchors that enhance civic engagement and economic vitality and will demonstrate how urban public libraries can better serve the changing needs of their customers” (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2017).

Long Branch Free Public Library (LBFPL) Director Tonya Garcia wanted to host a social work intern at her branch. LBFPL already had established relationships with neighboring Monmouth University, but not with its School of Social Work. Eventually, former veteran and MSW student David Perez began his placement at LBFPL in 2015 as the first social work library intern in New Jersey. Upon graduation, Perez broke additional ground by becoming New Jersey Public Library’s first Social Work & Diversity Services Manager (D. Perez, personal communication, December 4, 2017). Now he oversees the following programs developed as an intern while supervising three new students:

- **Community Connects**: local social service agencies conduct monthly visits to the library; setting up booths to showcase services available to patrons with a diverse set of needs.
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- **Fade to Books Barbershop Literacy Initiative**: recognized by the New Jersey Library Association with the 2017 Innovative Partnership award and has since expanded nationally (Long Branch Free Public Library, 2017).

- **Fresh Start**: Perez helped facilitate this award winning (News, 2014) prisoner re-entry program.

  Librarian Leslie Clark approached Rutgers New Brunswick University about her hopes of taking on a MSW student intern at Newark Public Library (NPL). Social work student Kenyetta Clark began her placement by assessing needs of NPL staff and patrons. The aim of such assessments, Kahn explains, is to “try to figure out what are the priorities for a very diverse community and see what support we can get from that analysis” (Kearney, 2017, p. 9). Clark’s work identified a service gap to pre-teens and subsequently developed programming with these young patrons in mind.

  As Director of Outreach at Kansas City Public Library (KCPL), Mary Olive Joyce laid the groundwork for an internship with Park University. Jason Pearl became the first social work intern at KCPL. Based on the success of this venture, he was officially hired as Outreach Librarian and Pearl supervises the growing internship program (Kansas City Public Library, 2018). Absent formal collaboration with social work interns, many public libraries like Kansas City have existing outreach services as a means of program implementation. Several offer their own version of Coffee and Conversations, a popular program if supervising an intern is not an option (Africawala, 2015; New York Public Library, 2018). This low-stakes form of outreach can be facilitated by either a MSW intern or library staff.

  In Azusa, California “the city librarian approached [Azusa Pacific University] Social Work department to ask whether a graduate-level social worker could assist the library staff in
the efforts to address a broad array of patron needs” and “for potential solutions to extend expertise and provide supportive social services to city library patrons” (Kelley et al., 2017, pp. 112, 115). The success of this invitation is reflected in the subsequent hiring of a Community Resource Specialist to maintain programs initiated by the MSW interns.

Due to her outreach with the University of South Carolina, 2015 Library Journal Mover and Shaker Heather McCue, “helped establish an internship at the [Richland Public] library for MSW students. She interviewed, hired, and trained grad students to work with library customers, and along with the interns she created an emergency services guide for the many who come to the library searching for assistance” (Library Journal, 2015). Additional collaborations among MSW interns and public libraries further illustrate the growing list of recent and current partnerships, including Hampton Bays, NY, Georgetown, TX, and New York Public Library’s joint venture with the NYU Silver School of Social Work (Zettervall, 2018a).

**Assignments for MSW Students**

**Needs assessments**

If your branch has agreed to partner with a MSW program, it is crucial to begin with a needs assessment. As every branch varies, programming is not uniform. To prepare for and honor the unique needs of each branch, conducting needs assessments of both its patrons and staff is an excellent starter assignment for MSW interns. Eleven graduate social work students from worked with Azusa Public librarians to collect data about the local community. Learning about both the demographics and needs of Azusa patrons directly from library staff was crucial in ascertaining relevant programming. Students discovered staff members desired to enhance the number of their workforce, including the need to hire additional volunteers. They also identified
that having a social worker in the library would aid in their knowledge base and assist with time management.

**Library staff training**

Librarians strive “for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers…” (ALA, 2004). Interns can offer staff training about the needs of their library’s unique community. This fusion of civic education and professional development addresses ALA’s policy on Library Services to the Poor (2012). Such trainings can help further educate and sensitize library staff to the presenting issues of patrons in need. Moxley and Abbas (2016) assert, “through interaction with their social service colleagues, librarians also gain professional experience and increased expertise in serving members of vulnerable populations...increasing their own holistic understanding of potential interventions and resources needed to bring about such incomes” (p. 322).

**Programming**

Programming for patrons should be informed by what is revealed in the needs assessments. Evaluations may reveal needs for housing information, ESL and literacy workshops, or employment-based workshops. In addition to macro-level program development, assessments may indicate a need for micro-level services such as advocacy, referral work, and creating research guides for patrons. Additionally, interns can assist members navigate e-government forms. This mode of addressing the digital divide reflects a core value that information “should be readily, equally, and equitably accessible to all library users” and “free and equal access to information for all people of the community the library serves” (ALA, 2004). Interns can help share the workload with overwhelmed library staff by assisting patrons in need.
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In Azusa and throughout the country, “libraries constitute a great support for social workers determined to champion equality in their own community” (Kelley et al., 2017, p. 122).

Conclusion and Call to Action

Since so little has been written in the scholarly literature about MSW students interning at public libraries, one aim of this paper is filling a portion of the existing literature gap. Another goal is to provide a tool--replete with examples and a relevant bibliography--public librarians can use to highlight the existence, need, and success of community-university partnerships. Every year over 25,000 MSW students seek quality field placements (Council on Social Work Education, 2015) throughout the United States. These students provide untapped skills, knowledge, and values that can help take diversity in libraries to the next level.

Public librarians can play a critical role in advocating for social justice by reaching out to MSW programs; inviting budding social workers to advance tolerance for a diversity of people and needs. While professional values of both librarianship and social work have a strong overlap--exalting inclusivity, tolerance, human rights, and social responsibility--librarians must invite MSW administrators, professors, field instructors, and students into this nontraditional space. In turn, students can work with public libraries to develop programming, strengthen outreach, and ultimately “empower library personnel to appropriately meet patron needs” (Kelley et al., 2017, p. 120). If we are indeed “living in what may become a golden age of library-social work collaboration (Zettervall, 2015) let us seize this opportunity by partnering with MSW students to “reflect...diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to...communities” (ALA, 2004) and bring about social justice and change.
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