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Finding room for everyone: Libraries confront social exclusion

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A local homeless man once told me he was grateful that the library allows patrons to drink coffee, although food is still banned inside the building. The library, he explained, is the only place he can stay warm during the day, but that he'd be kicked out if he falls asleep. Frequent coffee refills allow him to remain inside his only refuge from cold Canadian winters.

Every library has its own policy on allowing coffee through the doors, and every library has its own approach to serving homeless, vulnerable, or marginalized members of the community. Decisions about providing library services to marginalized groups boil down to institutional beliefs about the role of libraries in dealing with social exclusion, a mission which is not universally accepted.[1]

Briefly defined, social exclusion encompasses the social aspects of poverty: not only poverty with regard to material goods and resources, but also the inability to participate in social activities, a lack of access to services, and educational and cultural poverty.[2] Persons or groups may be marginalized and excluded based on ethnic origin, gender, sexuality, physical or mental disability, education, employment, and economic status.[3] Aside from reducing the quality of life of marginalized persons, social exclusion threatens social cohesion within communities and limits opportunities for widespread economic prosperity.[4] Social exclusion therefore threatens the health of communities and must be taken seriously by society as a whole.

A high level of adaptability is necessary on the part of institutions to meet the needs of socially excluded groups, as they are often socially excluded because

their needs have not been anticipated. Adaptability is one of the core tenets of resilience.[5] As Chris McLaughlin explains, resilience means "finding new ways (and maybe renewing old ways) of coping with an unpredictable future."[6]

If communities are to become more resilient, then they must find ways to adapt to the needs of socially excluded populations, by setting up measures that can proactively prepare for the needs of marginalized groups as well as prevent exclusion in the first place. Communities that are working to combat exclusion have greater potential for success if they enlist the support of public libraries, which are in many ways ideally situated to welcome marginalized populations and provide programs and services that combat social exclusion. This chapter explains how this adaptability in response to social problems fits with the mandate of public libraries; examines why and how libraries should confront social exclusion; and looks at the Atwater Library and Computer Centre (ALCC) in Westmount, Québec, as an illustration of how this has been successfully accomplished.

Libraries adapting to change

Every community faces unique challenges with regard to social exclusion, based on the community's demographic and economic profile. To remain healthy and resilient, a community must be flexible and adaptive to constantly changing demographics and emerging needs. However, many institutions are incapable of adapting their programs and services quickly enough to deal proactively with potential issues relating to exclusion. Community institutions often have mandates, matched by budget designations, which focus programs and services on specific needs or community groups. For example, an after-school care center will only serve the needs of children in the community, and a Junior Chamber of Commerce provides resources for young professionals.

By contrast, public libraries have this adaptability built into their identity. The mandate of a library is to serve its user community. While special libraries may have a designated user group, the scope of a public library's mandate is traditionally geographic rather than demographic. Thus, as demographics within this geographic area change, the library's mandate would require that programs and services evolve to serve the changing community, and successful libraries constantly adapt their programming to serve their user community as needs arise. Recognizing that socially excluded groups exist within the library's geographic user community allows for proactive development of appropriate programs and services.

Social exclusion and libraries

While many national library associations have policies on social exclusion, and the International Federation of Library Associations initiated discussion on social exclusion at its 2007 World Congress, tension still exists over whether libraries should be responsible for dealing with socially excluded populations.[7] The

Department for Culture, Media and Sport in the United Kingdom set a precedent for welcoming marginalized groups into libraries with the publication of *Libraries for All: Social Inclusion in Public Libraries* in 1999, but opponents continue to voice their opinions.[8] Information science professor Blaise Cronin, for example, has described homeless people in the library as a "disruptive minority." Cronin is adamant that there is no room in libraries for antisocial conduct or, in essence, "different" behavior, and laments the fact that some libraries have been forced to ban patrons from bringing in bulky bags, stating that the situation should never have eroded this far.[9] Darrin Hodgetts and others describe a public library that brought in permanent security guards after complaints by staff and the public;[10] this action has been taken by many libraries. Libraries worry that the majority of their patrons will feel uncomfortable or unsafe if some marginalized and minority groups are encouraged to use the library. The issue is controversial and has been avoided by many library policy makers for fear of confrontation and disagreement.

Strong arguments have also been voiced in favor of library outreach to socially excluded groups. Annette DeFaveri, a children and youth librarian for the Vancouver Public Library, states that inclusiveness is part of a library's core values and not an optional add-on.[11] Indeed, Florida Atlantic University Librarian Rachael Cathcart notes that "the issues associated with users struggling with homelessness and mental illness have more or less become part of the fabric of public libraries."[12] Matthew Williamson, an education advisor with the University of London, points out that individuals or groups are socially excluded because they do not have access to resources that the rest of the population possess, and that the "the cessation of this injustice is a prime role of the public library."[13]

Library strategies for tackling social exclusion

When it comes to the nuts and bolts of reaching socially excluded groups through the library, employing a variety of options can account for the reality that no community deals with the same exclusion issues. In any situation, however, use of public libraries by the socially excluded is primarily for recreational purposes.[14] DeFaveri suggests greater use of library space for nonlibrary community programming, as well as removing financial barriers to access: rethinking policies on fines and membership costs for low-income individuals, and making memberships available to people without fixed addresses.[15]

Human resources are an integral part of a library's interaction with socially excluded groups. Culturally diverse staff can open doors to interaction with equally diverse users.[16] Staff must also learn to be sensitive to the unique needs of marginalized and vulnerable library users. Libraries can reach out to excluded groups by partnering with individuals and agencies in the community who have experience with these specific populations. Consultation and partnership with community associations, service agencies, and other local groups will inject new expertise which libraries can combine with their own resources and facilities to provide services that cannot or would not be offered elsewhere.[17]

In today's information society, information accessibility plays a key role in allowing all people to take part in community. As information providers, libraries and librarians find themselves in a position that no other organization can fill. They are able to help socially excluded individuals and groups overcome the disadvantages they otherwise face when accessing and using information.[18] Libraries can provide education opportunities for all ages and offer computer training. Many libraries provide language training and citizenship courses, or skills development and career preparation. The information required for all these tasks lies within a library's walls; by helping disadvantaged individuals access this information, libraries take a key role in helping everyone become active members of society and in creating more healthy, equitable communities.

The Atwater Library and Computer Centre: a legacy of meeting community needs

The Atwater Library and Computer Centre, located in Westmount, Québec (a separate municipality within the geographic boundaries of the city of Montréal), was founded in 1828 as the Mechanics' Institute of Montréal. The Mechanics' Institute movement, originating in Scotland in the early nineteenth century, promoted educational opportunities for tradesmen and their children. Mechanics' Institutes around the world provided some of the first adult education to social groups who did not have access to these opportunities elsewhere. As most Mechanics' Institutes evolved into publicly funded community libraries, often joining existing library systems, they brought their emphasis on education for the masses to the public library movement. Coming from this context, the ALCC draws on a 180-year legacy of working with disadvantaged social groups.

The ALCC facilities and resources are open to the public; while borrowing privileges require membership, there are no restrictions on information access, library use by nonmembers, or the length of time spent in the library. Unlike other Mechanics' Institutes, the ALCC did not become a publicly funded library. Instead it remains privately funded by membership fees, private donations, and a variety of community grants and other funding programs. This funding situation poses challenges, but it has also opened new doors for meeting the needs of marginalized groups in the community. The ALCC is able to make decisions regarding collection development and programming independent of the red tape that hampers proactive programming in some public institutions, allowing library services to be as flexible as necessary to meet the needs of the user community. Some of these programs and services are described below, as well as the community partnerships that have made them successful.

Situated on the border of the city of Westmount and the city of Montréal, the ALCC is in close proximity to a number of minority populations and vulnerable groups. The population of the city of Westmount is almost 30 percent immigrants; roughly 20 percent arrived in the five years preceding Canada's 2006 census.[19] The ALCC neighbors a YMCA temporary housing facility for refugee claimants. It is across the street from a children's hospital that draws patients from rural and

impoverished communities around the province; some of these families face similar cultural and language barriers in the "big city" as the nearby refugee claimants. There are a large number of homeless persons in the area as well. The ALCC is one of the closest community libraries to the downtown Montréal area, making it a popular drop-in for homeless people during harsh weather. The ALCC is also situated in an area with an aging population. According to 2006 census data, 21 percent of the population in Westmount was over sixty-five.[20] In summary, the library is positioned in close proximity to several vulnerable or marginalized groups: immigrants, refugees, newcomers, homeless persons, and seniors.

Immigrants, refugees and newcomers

Immigrants, refugees, and newcomers are often excluded simply because they face language barriers and may have no permanent address, making it impossible to apply for a library card. Immigrants use the library for cost-effective leisure and entertainment, but the library can also help meet basic needs, such as online resources concerning housing, employment, or completing government paperwork related to immigrant or refugee status. Immigrants may also be interested in educational opportunities to help them find employment.[21] Appropriate library services for immigrants are best determined by identifying the needs of the population that an individual library will be serving.[22]

To determine local needs and reach this segment of the population, the ALCC has worked with neighborhood organizations to identify outreach opportunities. As mentioned above, libraries can help excluded groups by providing membership options that waive fees or do not require a fixed address. Since the neighboring YMCA opened its refugee center in 2001 the library has offered free computer center memberships to residential refugee claimants, giving them member pricing on computer use. A discounted full membership is available once these members acquire permanent housing.

The influx of refugees and other newcomers has highlighted language and cultural barriers. The ALCC draws on a cohort of 130 volunteers who speak a total of fifteen languages. Some of these volunteers first used the ALCC's services as refugee claimants, and they have returned to volunteer their time and language skills. As previously noted, culturally diverse staff can open library doors to ethnic groups within the community. To break down language barriers further, the ALCC has pursued partnerships to provide multilingual resources. Funding from the city of Westmount allowed for the creation of a multilingual collection of information resources for orienting oneself in the community.

Many new immigrants in this community are seeking to improve their English or learn other skills that will help them find employment. The ALCC's "Lifelong Learning Collection," developed in cooperation with other community service organizations, makes early literacy materials available to adults learning to read or learning English for the first time. A large collection of computer books and periodicals helps library users become familiar with computers or update their skills in various computer specializations.

The close relationship with the YMCA refugee center has highlighted a unique information need of new Canadians: they must complete specific online

documents to apply for refugee status or residency. Another partnership with the neighboring municipality of the borough of Ville-Marie provided funding for new computers and communication hardware (webcams and microphones). This provides refugees and immigrants with access to the online information they need, and it also allows them to easily keep in touch with family back home.

Homelessness

Service to homeless populations sparks debate, as noted above, but many libraries including the ALCC are embracing these patrons. In a study to inform their own library services to the homeless, the staff at the San José Public Library reflected on what services the homeless population requires. They concluded that the information needs of homeless individuals will vary according to their circumstances, although a heavy emphasis can be placed on resources for meeting basic needs and help learning new skills for employability. Library programs and literacy resources are important, and the library should make programs and services available to homeless users who cannot obtain a library card because they do not have a permanent address.[23]

The ALCC has been welcoming to the significant population of people who are homeless in the area. There are no library programs unique to homeless users, but many existing programs and services are highly relevant. Computer center services are available without library membership—an important issue for patrons without permanent addresses. Literacy tools and other self-education resources are available for library patrons to use on-site without membership, and these are a great help to homeless patrons who want to find employment. Daily newspapers are also popular for their "help wanted" sections. As with all library patrons, homeless users are expected to be quiet and courteous to others. The official policy is that all members of the public can use the library as long as they do not disturb other patrons. Rules for library behavior are applied regardless of economic status. Thus, while policies on library use are firm, library use itself is flexible.

A core group of homeless patrons have learned that they are welcome and treated with respect in the building. They spend cold days at the reading desks, enjoying reference materials and periodicals. Others take advantage of "by-donation" coffee to warm up and stay alert. They are welcome to bring their bags in with them as long as they are not oversized or unpleasant in any way; again, this is a general rule that would apply to any library user, emphasizing equality of all patrons.

Seniors

The aging population presents a different set of issues. Many seniors are disconnected from the community because they suffer from accessibility and autonomy issues. The *Canadian Guidelines on Library and Information Services for Older Adults* explain that seniors have a wide range of needs. Libraries that wish to promote their services to seniors should ensure that they are reflecting the needs of seniors in their immediate community through collections, programs, and services. Library facilities should be safe and accessible, and librarians should

treat older patrons with respect. Library programs can address technical skills, reading topics, and unique interests related specifically to seniors.[24] Many public libraries have focused on providing delivery of materials for homebound individuals, purchasing collection items in large print or on tape for seniors with sight impairments, and coordinating computer programs or reading groups that focus on issues pertinent to seniors. Libraries can also provide opportunities for seniors to volunteer in their community.[25]

Recognizing the mobility issues of several seniors in the neighborhood, the ALCC started a delivery service in 2010 to homebound residents with funding from Canadian Heritage and the borough of Ville-Marie. Telephone and online renewal have been promoted to seniors and are popular during winter months when icy roads make it difficult for older adults to get to the library to return their books.

Library collections and programs are developed with local seniors in mind. A sizable local Scottish community has helped fund the acquisition of books by Scottish authors or about Scotland. Best-selling fiction is also popular among older library users. Basic computer courses for word processing, e-mail applications, social media, and a variety of other computer programs fill up quickly. Special classes have taught participants how to use eBay, research genealogy, or make travel arrangements online. These allow seniors to communicate with distant family and to maintain a degree of independence.

Many of the ALCC's 130 volunteers are seniors. Volunteering gives them an opportunity to get out on a regular basis, to be involved in social activities, and to interact with like-minded individuals. Regular social events for volunteers build community for older adults in the area.

These programs and policies provide vulnerable groups in this neighborhood—immigrants, refugees, newcomers, people who are homeless, and seniors—with a place where they can know that their unique needs are acknowledged and respected. New programs are initiated on an ongoing, as-needed basis, in response to emerging demographic trends. As a result, minority and vulnerable populations have not been excluded but are instead embraced by an established community institution.

Communities tackle social exclusion together: strength in partnerships

It should be noted that the ALCC is not offering these services on its own. While the ALCC does not receive public funding, specific programs are funded by grants from local and national governments (as described above). Libraries can have greater impact if they involve other individuals and groups in partnerships for service provision.

These relationships are mutually beneficial. They allow local municipalities to participate in providing services that create inclusion and build for resilience. The city of Westmount and the neighboring borough of Ville-Marie are composed of dynamic and multifaceted populations. While the municipalities provide many

core services for their residents, they are incapable of catering to every group: infrastructure, human resources, and bureaucracy are not flexible enough to offer a range of programs for every population segment. The ALCC, on the other hand, has space that can be adapted to meet the needs of the community. As a library, it also has a mandate to serve all members of the public. The partnership between funding partners and the ALCC creates an inclusive environment that none of these organizations would have the resources to provide in isolation.

Stronger libraries, stronger communities

Communities that recognize the great potential libraries offer and build on these strengths will discover new ways to combat exclusion, strengthen citizen engagement, and build brighter futures. Libraries that reach out to socially excluded members of their community are stronger for it, as they embrace a greater part of their mandate to provide information access. As a result of directed programming, adjusted membership policies, culturally sensitive and multilingual staffing, and enhanced access to relevant information, every demographic group can find a place for itself within the library. The ability of libraries to proactively adapt programs and services means that, in a community with an aware and involved library, no one needs to slip through the cracks.

NOTES

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