

Developing Community-Centered Programs for Rural Information Professionals

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Abstract

Using survey tools to develop and implement community outreach plans, librarians and information professionals in rural Texas found out what their constituents wanted and built community-centered outreach programs. Community-centered outreach programs gained more institutional support and increased competitiveness of rural information professionals.

Keywords: continuing education, information profession, rural development, community outreach, community-centered program

Introduction

According to the US Census data, eighty-four percent of land in the United States is rural with twenty percent of the total population living in rural areas (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Government report also suggested that baby boom residents are now poised to significant increase in rural and small-town America, with major social and economic implications for their chosen destinations (Cromartie & Nelson, 2009).

Users in rural and small town America are experiencing various challenges due to demographical changes. Traditionally public libraries have been perceived as a necessary fixture in a vital and vibrant community. Public libraries were once viewed as an indicator of what makes a particular community attractive to existing and potential residents. With the advent of certain technologies in recent years, such as the Internet, smart phones, and e-readers, this sense of libraries being an anchoring element of the community has been eroded. The perception by many governing officials that libraries are no longer necessary since “everything can be found on the Internet” has weakened support and funding for libraries. When fiscal cuts are needed, the books and information resource budget, staffing, and facility maintenance are usually viewed as nonessential expenses exposing such expenditures as easy places to cut.

At the same time, rural libraries and information centers, those serve populations under 25,000, are facing a shortage of information professionals with professional degrees and experience on library and information services. Rural librarians’ professional skills are usually limited both by library practice and the resources available (Vavrek, 1995). Even those with master’s degree may found local community needs do not meet their specific leaning objectives (such as reference or cataloging) at library and information science programs (Williams, Bishop, Bruce, & Irish, 2012). The lack of an educated workforce in rural areas is directly related to the dearth of direct funding and lack of securing community support and commitment to rural libraries.

One way of gaining more community support is for libraries to design and implement community outreach activities that partner with outside organizations. However, community engagement has been ignored in information science curriculum. No iSchools or ALA-accredited library science programs offer courses related to community outreach. To address this important issue, this poster explored the following questions:

- 1) To what extent will community outreach activities enhance the support of rural libraries?
- 2) To what extent will community outreach activities enhance professional networking of rural libraries?
- 3) To what extent will community outreach activities enhance professional development of rural information professionals?

Previous Studies

Community Outreach

Traditionally, community outreach refers to equitable library services that are offered outside the walls of the library building such as bookmobiles, homebound services, deposit collections, and service to residential facilities, hospitals, shelters, jails, and other target populations (Meadows, 2004). In recent years, community outreach means an activity that connecting, delivering, partnering, collaborating, teaming up, joining forces, fostering engagement outside of library entities (Barco, 2010). Most importantly, it involves a process of building trust and partnerships with those outside the library (Snell, 2012).

Experiential learning

The essence of community-centered program is experiential learning. Experiential learning theory (ELT) provides a holistic model of the learning process and adult development. Experiential learning theory emphasizes the central role that experience plays in the learning process. The theory originated in the previous works of Karl Jung (1938) and Jean Piaget (1985), and developed by David Kolb (1984). According to David Kolb (1984), learning takes place through four steps: (1) concrete experience followed by (2) observation and experience followed by (3) forming abstract concepts followed by (4) testing in new situations.

While members of the library staff may attempt to interact at some level with local community leaders and organizations, these interactions are often sporadic, random, and without a coherent plan of action. This is representative of the lack of methodology and resources for information professionals in rural settings.

Methods

This study applied One Group Pretest-Posttest Design with several cohorts of librarians or information professionals from rural small towns of Texas. One Group Pretest-Posttest Design is one kinds of pre-experimental design that is applied when true random assignments cannot be achieved (Powell & Connaway, 2004, p. 179). Seventy-four librarians and information professionals participated in this study. Participants first completed a pretest survey on the demographic statistics and current outreach actives. Most of the participants work in a library or information center with an average full time staff of two or less, and serve a community less than 2,500 of population. Among them only five have earned an MLS degree, and most of them earned a bachelor's degree or some college credit.

The experiment followed four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. During the first stage, participants conducted surveys to understand their community needs. After consolidating with local statistics from CENSUS data, they actively reflected community needs. This step encouraged them to think user-centered approach in library services. The abstract conceptualization step was the most difficult part. During the period rural librarians designed community outreach plans and then implemented them in step 4. With the help of project handouts and mentorship from graduate students, librarians followed the templates and finished the draft plans. Eventually plans were implemented and reported to the project managers.

After the participants completed the whole learning process, they were invited back to the site for a two day workshop. Participants completed a posttest survey followed by a focus group interview. The interview session was recorded and transcribed to text. The whole process took from 3 to 6 months.

Results and Conclusions

Initial analysis of data revealed the success of community-centered outreach and partnership programs. Pretest and posttest data shows gains on perception of community support to libraries. Community-centered activities helped their professional growth, enhanced the presence of information services in communities, and greatly increased financial and non-tangible support to libraries and information centers.

In conclusion, successful community outreach may help to change the image of libraries and information centers as a necessity rather than a nicety in today's technology driven society. In the past information professionals often proceeded from the point of view of the workflow, their needs, wants, and priorities. Services were offered with little to no public user input. It seems valuable to train rural information professionals, most of whom without a library science or information science degree, effective methods on how to find out community needs rather than deciding unilaterally what programs or services they want to offer. Community-centered programs have proved to gain broader support and increase the competitiveness of rural information services.

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