

RADICAL ENGAGEMENT:
PUBLIC LIBRARY PARTNERSHIPS WITH ACTIVIST ORGANIZATIONS FOR YOUNG ADULT
PROGRAMMING

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The Richmond Public Library in Richmond, Virginia is aggressively pursuing young adult engagement through literacy and skills-based workshops. Librarians at Richmond Public strive to increase participation and program counts in order to maintain funding levels for young adult programming, levels which have already been reduced over the last decade. Librarians are additionally motivated by Richmond's soaring illiteracy rates, a particularly acute problem among young black males. Due to the coupling of reduced funding and staff with increased community need, Richmond Public librarians have pursued partnerships with community groups to increase the visibility of the library in the community and to expand the library's programming workforce.

Several of the most successful partnerships at the Richmond Public Library have involved programming for young adults provided by activist community groups. These programming initiatives include partnerships with Girls Rock! RVA and the Free Richmond Instrument Lending Library, the People's Library Project, and the librarian-driven BMER (Black Male Emergent Readers) project.

The most successful young adult engagement initiatives at Richmond Public Library from 2013-2014 year have involved activist community groups. This success can be measured in terms of program attendance numbers, retention of program participants across events, public visibility through press and social media, program funding brought in to the library through community partner expenditure, expanded leadership opportunities for young adults at the library, and the quality of relationships between program participants, the library, its community partners, and adult program directors.

Partnerships with activist community groups benefit the Richmond Public Library through increasing program counts, attendance numbers, public visibility, and community engagement. It can be argued that activist groups are valuable community partners for public libraries because they provide an expanded workforce of passionate and dedicated volunteers for programming, are used to working for free or on a tight budget, provide meaningful experiences and learning opportunities for young adults, and engage young adults through pointed, political, and empowering work that is embedded in the teens' community and day-to-day life. Community activist groups share core values with libraries, librarians, and teen library users, and should be sought out as partners for programming in public libraries.

This writing examines the process of forming these community partnerships from the perspective of the library, the community activists, and young adult users. Research includes quantitative analysis of program counts, attendance numbers and retention numbers, materials circulation, and library spending. In addition, interviews were conducted to gain qualitative insight into the experiences of young adult library users, community activists working with the library system, and members of library staff. Current literature on community partnerships, young adult engagement, and activism in librarianship will be reviewed and evaluated in order to contextualize the findings and to make recommendations for all public libraries to pursue similar engagement initiatives.

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I.**Introduction:****The Problem of Public Library Engagement for Young Adults in Richmond, Virginia**

The Main Branch of the Richmond Public Library in Richmond, Virginia is a large, architecturally significant and imposing building occupying an entire city block near downtown and the State Capitol building. The main entrance lies on a stretch of Franklin Street occupied by chic row houses, the exclusive Jefferson Hotel, and grand Victorian mansions repurposed into society houses (i.e., the Garden Club of Virginia). The rear of the library, on Main Street, is a more run-down affair, with empty lots, businesses that keep odd hours, and as compared to Franklin Street, a noticeable absence of commemorative plaques and manicured landscaping. Two blocks from the library is Broad Street, a large commercial thoroughfare featuring discount clothing stores, 24-hour check cashing, the convergence of several bus routes, and an ever-increasing number of art galleries and renovated, inflated-rent “loft-style” apartments.

The library’s physical location belies a contrast existing in the city it serves that manifests in the demographics of the library’s patronage. Library users are a mix of wealthy and middle-class older persons and young professionals, the underprivileged and homeless, and curious hipsters. Young adults also frequent the library, sometimes accompanied by parents, but usually on their own. The accessibility of the library by bus and proximity to several high and middle schools provides easy access for young people.

The Richmond Public Library has aggressively pursued young adult engagement through literacy and skills-based workshops. Librarians are under pressure from the library administration to increase participation and program counts in order to maintain funding levels for young adult programming. Librarians are additionally motivated by

Richmond's soaring illiteracy rates, a particularly acute problem among the city's young black males. Due to the coupling of low funding and staff levels with increased community need, Richmond Public librarians have pursued partnerships with community groups to increase the visibility of the library in the community and to expand the library's programming workforce.

Several of the most successful partnerships at the Richmond Public Library have involved programming for young adults provided by activist community groups. The term *activist community groups* is used here to describe community empowerment-focused, non-profit organizations with a political emphasis embedded in the organization's mission. These include Girls Rock! RVA and the Free Richmond Instrument Lending Library, the People's Library Project, and the BMER (Black Male Emergent Readers) project, a librarian-driven initiative that operates with local youth empowerment nonprofit Brothers on the Avenue among other partners. However, the highest-profile partnered programming initiatives for young adults do not involve activist community groups. These initiatives, such as the IMLS-sponsored Grade Level Reading Campaign, join large institutions with the public library and have done little to engage young adults with the library or the community at large.

With administrative pressure to bring in high numbers of programming participants, and tightly restricted staffing levels and funding, it seemed worth investigating the impact of these lower-profile partnerships with activist community groups to assess their effectiveness in engaging young adults with the RPL and the greater Richmond community. How many people are brought in to library programs through partnerships with these fledgling organizations? With no promise of increased program

funds in sight, might it be wise to increase emphasis, and potentially funding, toward programming with grassroots community partners? Do lower-level, inexpensive partnerships with grassroots activist organizations impact the lives of Richmond's young adult library users in an equally or possibly more meaningful way?

II.

The Wide Angle: Demographics of Richmond Youth and Public Education Statistics

Richmond, Virginia Demographic Information, with Emphasis on Young Adults

The total population of Richmond, Virginia is approximately 204,214 persons as recorded by the 2010 United States Census. Residents aged 10-14 years comprise 4.5% of the population, aged 15-19 years make up 7.7%, and aged 20-24 years 13.2%, although this last age range, 20-24 years, may be inflated by the numerous colleges in the area. Still, using a broad understanding of what ages a Young Adult public library department should serve and be prepared to serve in the coming years, over 25% of Richmond residents are currently or will soon be in the age range appropriate for Young Adult library services. 53,731 Richmond residents are under the age of 21. Over 20% of households in Richmond have a child in residence under the age of 18. The population of Richmond has been estimated to have grown by 10,000 residents in two years after the 2010 census was completed, meaning more young adults are currently residing in Richmond than the census numbers may indicate. Richmond is a racially diverse city with a majority of the population being people of color. Approximately 52% of Richmond's population identifies as Black of African-American, or of mixed race including Black and African-American.¹

Richmond, Virginia Economic and Educational Information, with Emphasis on Young Adults

Approximately 26.7% of Richmond residents live in poverty.² This is significantly higher than the national average of 14.5% (DeNavas-Walt et al 2013, 20), and even more so

¹ *United States Census 2010* accessed via *American FactFinder Online* furnishes all statistical data for Richmond city, Virginia unless otherwise noted.

² *American Community Survey 2013*

than the state average of 11.1%.³ The percentage of Richmond citizens under the age of 18 living in poverty is 40.4%, more than double the national average of 19.9%, and more than 2.5 times the state average of 14.6%.

4.7% of Richmond's population, or 9,681 persons, reside in public housing. More than half of the persons living in public housing, 52% or 5,101 persons, are under the age of 18. 61% of public housing units have children residing there, and 58% of housing units are female-headed households with children. 98% of public housing residents identify as black or African-American.⁴ 87% of public housing households earn income classified as "Extremely low," or below 30% of the median income. Thus, a significant portion of one of the poorest demographics in Richmond can be and/or will be potential Young Adult patrons of the public library system.

Educational attainment in Richmond for adults living in poverty lags behind attainment for residents of higher socioeconomic status. With 40% of young people growing up in poverty, these statistics foreshadow a grim educational outlook for nearly half of Richmond's youth. 36.6% of impoverished adults 25 and over (the only demographic for which statistics were available) in Richmond have not completed high school, and 21.5% ended their education with a high school diploma or equivalency. Another 15.1% completed some college or an Associates degree. 6.4% have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Among the general population of Richmond adults 25 and over, 12.4% did not complete high school, or nearly one-third the percentage of impoverished individuals lacking a diploma or GED. 23.1% of Richmond adults ended their

³ All state poverty and educational statistics taken from the *American Community Survey, 2013* for the state of Virginia.

⁴ *Demographic Profile for RRHA's Public Housing Communities as of June 2014*, Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority

education with a high school diploma or equivalency, 23.7% completed as associates degree or some college, 20.5% possess a Bachelor's degree, and 13.3% have attained a graduate or professional degree.⁵

Richmond Public Schools, test performance, and quality of facilities

Recently, the Richmond Public School system (RPS) has been in the news for poor Standards Of Learning (SOL) test performance and poor school building conditions. In the 2012-2013 school year, the 8th Grade English SOL exam had a pass rate of only 39%, and an advanced pass rate of 2%. The public schools had promised action based on the previous year's low pass rate scores of 69% (19% advanced), which they attributed to a change in the test itself.⁶ Still, two-thirds of Richmond middle schools performed more poorly in 2013-14 than in the previous two years, when the new testing standards were introduced (Reid 2013). While the new testing standards prompted a decline in test scores statewide, RPS test scores were among the lowest in Virginia (Reid).

The 2014 RPS *Proficiency Gap Dashboard for Federal Accountability* publishes data on the meeting of Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs), or subject testing objectives, as well as graduation rates from "traditionally underperforming subgroups" such as non-white and/or economically disadvantaged students. Across all subgroups, the AMO target for reading, a 69% pass rate, was not met, with only 53% passing. For mathematics, the target was met due to reducing the failure rate by at least ten percent, though the average score was still eleven points below the true target of 66% passing, at 55%. In reading,

⁵ All Richmond poverty and educational statistics taken from the *American Community Survey 2013* for Richmond city, Virginia.

⁶ *Richmond Times-Dispatch Data Center, 2012-13 Virginia SOL results for Richmond city* and associated article Reid 2013, citation in KEY SOURCES

economically disadvantaged students had a 46% pass rate; black students had a 49% pass rate; in Mathematics, pass rates were 51% and 49%, respective to the above demographics.

By contrast, white, non-economically disadvantaged students had a reading pass rate of 81% and a mathematics pass rate of 79%.⁷ It is worth reminding the reader that over 50% of Richmond residents are Black or African-American and 40% of children under 18 live in poverty, which means these demographics cannot be rightly referred to as minorities. The Public Schools thereby use the term “subgroup[s],” which in fact comprise the majority of RPS students. In addition, the Richmond Public Schools are one of the chief community partners of the Richmond Public Library. An alarming percentage of Richmond Public students have test scores indicating reading acuity below grade level, indicating a great need for the literacy-promoting abilities of public library service and programming.

Certainly one roadblock to educating young people in Richmond is the condition of RPS buildings. The current mayor has emphasized building new buildings and underfunded the repair of existing buildings, leading to problems such as leaks, a roof collapse, cracked foundations, rodent and even snake infestations, black mold, and entire sections of buildings being walled off as unsafe for use (Nash 2014). One teen from the Richmond Public Library’s Teen Advisory Group (TAG) complained of insufficient security and a constant fear of fights breaking out or other random violence perpetrated by her classmates at a local high school. It should be mentioned that the poorest building conditions, and the lack of security discussed by the TAG member, exist in neighborhoods that are socio-economically among the poorest in the city, the East End and Southside.

⁷ AMO data taken from 2014 RPS *Proficiency Gap Dashboard for Federal Accountability* 2014, full citation in KEY SOURCES

Students at these schools would predominantly belong to one of the RPS' statistical "subgroups."

The Richmond Public Library system, on the other hand, has completed renovation and modernization of all of its branches over the past decade, and has plans to expand facilities. The public library's dispersed branches are accessible to all city neighborhoods, and are open well after school lets out as well as Saturdays and in some locations, Sundays. The Richmond Public Library is ideally positioned to provide for the information needs of Richmond's young adults where the public schools cannot.

III. Young Adult Library Service in Richmond, VA

Richmond Public Library Strategic Vision, Budget, and Circulation Statistics

The Richmond Public Library (RPL) is a mid-sized urban library system with nine branches serving a local population of 200,000 residents.⁸ The library has undergone funding and staff cuts over the last ten years, at a period in time when public library usage across the country has increased (Morales et al, ALA Press Release April 2010). This is not an uncommon occurrence with public libraries, and as public library use increased with the onset of the recession in 2008, public library funding across the board did not increase to meet new demand (Morales). Still, the Richmond Public Library is especially underfunded, understaffed, and stocked with increasingly outdated materials.

In a five-year Strategic Vision document published by the library's Board of Trustees in 2010, it was estimated that in proportion to Richmond's population, the public library system's nine branches are undersized by 59%.⁹ The plan formed to meet this need involved renovating the branch libraries first, then building new branches or adding on to existing locations. The first phase of this plan was completed in 2014, and the second phase has yet to begin. In both branch locations in which I have worked, the Young Adult section was the smallest demographic or type-specific section of the library. While the small Hull Street Branch had two designated teen computers, they were not in practice restricted to use by teens. The Main Branch has no designated teen computers. The strategic plan, while describing a need for expansions in borrowing-library space,

⁸ *United States Census 2010*, via *American FactFinder Online* furnished all statistical data for Richmond city, Virginia unless otherwise noted.

⁹ Richmond Public Library Board of Trustees, *Strategic Vision: Richmond Public Library 2011-2016*, 2010.

technology centers, and a mix of the two, never mentions expansions in space for young adults or any particular age demographic (8).

The document states that the current materials budget at RPL is one of the lowest per capita among Virginia public libraries, at \$476,850 annually for the 2011 fiscal year (10). The collection is generally described as in need of updating, with an average item publication date of 1981 not including special collections or older/duplicate items removed to the lower-level stacks. According to the document, the RPL has a low materials turnover rate for a library of its size: 1.07 for the system as a whole (excluding the main branch, which by its inclusion skews the rate to 2.15) as compared to the current median rate of 3.18 for libraries serving a similar population (10).

In respect to young adults and young adult programming, the Strategic Vision states a plan to increase program opportunities for young adults, elevating programming from individual branch efforts to larger-scale programming that operates at a more “significant level” (11). However, additional funding for YA programs has not been granted by the administration in the past two years. This general expression of need for increased young adult programming is the only time this demographic is mentioned in the Strategic Vision, compared with families/parents/caregivers mentioned six times throughout, and children/childhood mentioned seven times. It also seems significant, compared to the lack of specificity in the document’s treatment of YA, that the children/family and adult programming sections outline specific initiatives already underway in children’s and adult programming and expresses a desire to expand upon these initiatives (11, 12). In addition, the adult programming section contains the only mention of “community engagement” in a programming or direct user services context in the Strategic Vision (12).

The document also acknowledges the need for additional library staff, but cites reduced city budget allocations as the reason why the system must focus on inexpensive ways to train existing staff as opposed to hiring. Staff reductions have occurred at RPL due to city budget restrictions and reductions and the library is in need of additional well-trained staff to meet the goals of its Strategic Vision (9, 10). However, hiring over the past year has prioritized additional provisional, temporary, or part-time employees over the hiring of certified librarians.¹⁰

In the first quarter of fiscal year 2015, expenditures on full-time staff salaries reached 21% of the annual staff salary budget, and expenditures on part-time staff salaries reached 19% of the annual budget allotment. Assuming 25% as the quarterly maximum for salary expenditures, it seems the Richmond Public Library should have the ability to release additional funds to hire staff. However, the head of RPL's Human Resources department has stated that hiring directives come from City Hall, not the library administration, a practice that hamstrings the library's hiring abilities even where the budget seemingly allows for it.¹¹ It should be noted that only one librarian in the system is designated as a Young Adult librarian, that two of nine branches have no staff representative in the Richmond Public Library's YA committee, and that two YA committee members are employed as library assistants and not librarians. By comparison, the Main Branch employs two full-time Children's librarians, and other branches have staff at least at the higher Library Associate level, if not Librarian level, devoted to Children's Services.

¹⁰ Personal observation based on experience as a library employee.

¹¹ Judith Marston, Head of Library Human Resources, Personal Interview 2014.

Circulation statistics at Richmond Public Library further complicate this picture. For the year 2014, circulation statistics for the Richmond Public Library system and its Main Branch are as follows:

Figure 1—Richmond Public Library Circulation of Library Materials by User Age Demographic¹²

	Total Circulation	Main Branch
<i>All Materials</i>	816,491	147,665
<i>Children</i>	267,317 (32.7%)	43,875 (29.7%)
<i>Young Adult</i>	42,165 (5.1%)	6,974 (4.7%)

Young adult circulation is comparatively low for the RPL system and for the Main Branch. This seems out of step with the general public's consumption of YA literature, which is the fastest growing segment in publishing today, with titles frequently topping bestseller lists (Corbett 2011). Certainly the low turnover of materials at RPL is a possible contributing factor to the low YA circulation, as parents may choose to purchase titles for their children as opposed to making them wait weeks or months to read the hottest new YA book or series. Other factors contributing to this low number could be the lack of outreach to and engagement of the YA demographic evidenced by the single YA-specific staff member, low annual funding of YA programs, and lack of mention of YA in administrative strategic vision documents. The problem is certainly an institutional one, as young adults are a large segment of Richmond's population.

¹² Data provided by Head of Circulation Services Sheila Tyler, Oct. 29 2014

In order to provide context for Richmond Public Library's funding, circulation, and services, it is useful to examine comparative circulation, funding, and staffing data for other state libraries and compare this to RPL. Below is a table with current data from the past fiscal year comparing Richmond Public Library to the library system of neighboring Henrico County as well as Arlington county, a similarly-sized urban library system in the northern part of the state. Henrico county serves as a useful comparison despite its suburban location because the user base between the two systems is shared: residents of the same municipalities are eligible for library cards at both Henrico County and Richmond Public Libraries.¹³ Henrico county's population, however, is significantly larger than Richmond's, at nearly 300,000 residents.¹⁴ Arlington County Public Library serves a similarly urbanized area, and the county has a similar population size to Richmond city proper.¹⁵

Data was obtained using the Compare Public Library Services online research tool provided by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and reflects fiscal year 2014.

¹³ <http://www.henricolibrary.org/i-want-to/borrow-items/get-a-library-card>

¹⁴ quickfacts.census.gov

¹⁵ Approximately 226,000, via quickfacts.census.gov

Figure 2—Comparative Data: Richmond, Henrico County, and Arlington County, Virginia Public Libraries¹⁶

	Richmond Public Library	Henrico County Public Library	Arlington County Public Library
<i>Total Operating Expenditures</i>	6,049,200	14,716,462	11,888,751
<i>ALA-MLS Librarians</i>	16	58	38
<i>Circulation per capita</i>	5.71	16.28	14.56
<i>Total program attendance</i>	50,799	62,027	68,991
<i>Total number library programs</i>	3,005	3,537	1,791

Richmond Public Library lags behind these two peer libraries in terms of operating budget, librarians on staff, and per-capita circulation. Though YA-specific circulation statistics were unavailable through IMLS, I believe the above data supports my assertion that Richmond Public Library is generally under-staffed and underfunded. The number of librarians on staff at RPL is less than half the number at Arlington, which serves a similarly urbanized and only slightly larger user base. The operating expenditures at Arlington are nearly twice those of Richmond. Though Richmond’s poverty rate is unusually high for the state, and likely has a reduced amount of tax revenue for city operating expenses, it is also true that the city of Richmond has reduced the amount of funding allocated to the public library in recent years. By comparison, wealthier, suburban Henrico county is very highly funded and staffed with more librarians than the other two featured library systems combined. Arlington and Henrico, with higher funding and numbers of librarians on staff, also have a much higher per-capita circulation than RPL. The above data shows a

¹⁶data from <https://harvester.census.gov/imls/compare/index.asp>

correlation between higher operating expenditures and staff levels with increased per-capita circulation and program attendance.

It is worth noting the high number of programs and program attendance at RPL, which is competitive with the peer library systems, and which was achieved with the smallest operating budget and staff of the three library systems. However, RPL managed to bring in 18,000 fewer attendees than Arlington public library despite hosting nearly twice the number of total programs. This could be an indicator that greater community engagement efforts are required. In addition, I believe the RPL program attendance count is inflated by monthly First Friday art gallery events at RPL that correspond with a city art walk and do not necessarily attract attendees for library-specific purposes or record accurate age demographics. I will explore in the following sections Young Adult staff, funding and programming data at Richmond Public Library. Young Adult Services at RPL constitutes a small part of the library system's funding and staffing which has been shown to be low in comparison to other public library systems.

Personal Experience with Young Adult Services at RPL

I started work as a Library Assistant II in August of 2013 to assist the Young Adult Librarian at the Main Branch of RPL after a three-month internship and I continue to work occasionally with the RPL system. The lack of funding is a constant obstacle for myself and other members of the Young Adult Committee when planning programming. From a total library budget of over \$5,000,000, very little is designated to program funding. What little funding there is for programming comes out of Special Funds accounts, including surpluses,

revenues from paid services, and funding provided by the Friends of the Library.¹⁷ In a breakdown of program funding for the Fiscal Year 2014, out of approximately \$30,000 allocated to programming-related purchases and expenditures, approximately \$2,500 was utilized for YA. The Young Adult Committee operates with a general programming budget limitation of \$2,000 annually and can request additional funds as needed. However, in our discussions, many ideas are rejected out of hand as too expensive, or sidelined until a YA Committee member has time to write to a granting agency for outside funding.

There is one designated Young Adult Librarian in the library system. Other branches, some of whom employ only one certified librarian (and at various times have not employed not a single certified librarian), send delegates to serve on the Young Adult committee. Some delegates are not YA specialists, or are employed part-time, and serve on the YA committee in addition to other job duties, in effect taking on more work. This makes attendance in committee meetings spotty, and at times hinders the ability of committee members to commit to decisions made at meetings or to implement programs system-wide. The lack of resources, both in terms of program funding and dedicated staff hinders the ability to serve the young adult demographic. Grant writing, fundraising, and personal expenditures are common ways in which staff increases available funds for programming. Another valuable method of expanding the resource pool, in terms of both staff and funding, has been through partnerships with community groups.

¹⁷ Correspondence with Clay Dishon, Deputy Director of RPL, October 29 2014

Current High-profile partnerships for Young Adult Programming

The Richmond Public Library launched a “Campaign for Grade Level Reading” in the summer of 2012. The library’s literature boasts of partnerships with Richmond Public Schools, the YMCA, the Children’s Museum of Virginia, and other high-profile community groups in an effort to boost literacy rates in Richmond children and young adults.

Richmond Public Library’s director Harriet Coalter initiated the program. I have not witnessed an in-house program related to the Grade Level Reading campaign at the Richmond Public Library. The community partners listed in library employee orientation literature do not have a programming presence at RPL, apart from the separate Summer Reading program, which is a partnership between RPL and the public schools. One part-time employee is on staff at the main branch whose work pertains to this grade level reading campaign.

Program Funding at Richmond Public Library

In an IMLS document consisting of meeting minutes for a consulting session, Library Director Coalter emphasized that “libraries must be willing to work outside of their own walls” to engage the community.¹⁸ While preaching the necessity of literacy-promoting library programming to take place outside library walls, the RPL has a policy that requires high in-house programming numbers in order to obtain or maintain program funding. Additionally, the literacy rate in the city, especially among young black males, has reached historic lows (Virginia DOE Report Card 2013).

¹⁸ IMLS Early Learning Task Force, Consultative Session Meeting Summary, December 5, 2012. <http://www.imls.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/12.5.12%20Early%20Learning%20Notes.pdf>

Funding for Young Adult programming at RPL relies on maintaining a high level of public participation in program attendance. However, the total annual funding for YA programs at all nine branches of RPL is \$2,000. The members of the Young Adult committee have requested additional funding and been denied on the basis of paltry attendance counts. Aggressive pursuit of community partnerships with local organizations has been a successful method of increasing program numbers and attendance counts, and stretching the annual program budget. Over the last year, the largest program counts for YA have come, not through large-scale partnerships with nationally known nonprofits and major public institutions, but through partnerships with local activist community organizations and individuals.

Research Objective: The Value of Activist Community Partners in YA Programming

Activist-led, community-focused programming for young adults at RPL is provided in part by the subjects of this research: the People's Library Project, Girls Rock! RVA and the Free Richmond Instrument Lending Library, and the BMER (Black Male Emergent Readers) Project. It is my contention that the young adult programming provided by these activist groups, persons, and initiatives has been the most successful effort in engaging young adults at the Richmond Public Library. This success can be measured in terms of high numbers of program participants and retention of participants across multiple programs, increased volunteer library staff, low library expense, increased programming funds through grants and donations, and increased library visibility in the community.

Partnerships with activist community groups benefit the Richmond Public Library through increasing program counts, attendance numbers, public visibility, and community

engagement. Activist community groups provide a dedicated volunteer base, increasing available staff for programs, and thereby increasing the library's capacity to run programs. Activist groups increase opportunities to expand public relations for library programming, exposing the library to new media outlets and sharing the workload of a PR campaign with librarians. Partnerships with activist groups stretch library programming budgets through obtaining grant funding and pooling resources, and because activist groups have experience with the DIY concept of hosting events on a dime. Smaller-scale, community-focused partners like these are more nimble than more bureaucratic, higher-profile community partners and more capable of responding quickly to the immediate and changing needs of Richmond's young adults.

By gathering activist group-partnered program numbers and attendance, quantifying outside funding and additional volunteer staff brought in to the library through these programs, and conducting interviews with participants including young adult users, library staff, and community partners, I have been able to quantitatively and qualitatively assess the impact of partnerships with community activist groups for young adults at RPL, and formulate a model that could be replicated at any public library to engage young adults, but that would be especially useful in the face of staffing and budget reductions.

Richmond Public Library – Main Branch and Young Adult Users

The majority of the RPL Main branch users are African-American, as is the general population of the city of Richmond. All young adults involved in the RPL-Main's Teen Advisory Group, the most frequent YA users of the library, are African-American, middle-class and below, and attend public school. Young adults attend library programs

frequently, sometimes use the upstairs computer lab, and occasionally use the designated teen space (limited to use for ages 11-18) as a study area or place to socialize. Most frequently, they enter the teen space simply to find a book. The most popular YA literature, the graphic novels and series, are placed just outside the teen space for higher visibility and because the collection of graphic novels and series continues to expand. The Teen Space was recently moved to a well-lit and attractive corner near the front of the main floor General Collections area. There are comfortable chairs, tables, displays, and plants arranged throughout, as well as an enormous, two-story window, creating an open and inviting atmosphere. YA programs are frequently held in the teen space, with larger programs held in the Children's Activity Room, downstairs Auditorium or computer lab, or outside when weather permits.

Out of a total library circulation of 147,665 at the RPL Main Branch in 2014, only 6,974 items circulated were young adult specific materials. That is only 5% of total library circulation. Contrasted with Children's materials circulation, comprising nearly 30% of all items circulated at the Main branch, and considering the young adult demographic consists of approximately 15-20% of Richmond's total population, the YA percentage of circulation at RPL appears paltry. However, there could be confounding factors at play. Firstly, young adult library users may check out a range of materials that include items from the Children's and General Collections. Secondly, young adult users are required to read more materials for school work, perhaps increasing school library circulation or purchases of specific items from retailers in order to meet curricular requirements. As mentioned before, the RPL's low rate of materials turnover is likely not fast enough for voracious young adult readers with expendable income intent on reading the newest installment of a

series as soon as it is released. In addition, though the library has the ability through its circulation software to mark an item read in-house as having been used, librarians cannot keep track of all items read in-house. As many teen users drop by the library to study or read after school or on weekends, an undercount of materials used in-house could affect circulation statistics.

It is also worth considering that YA circulation may be low as a result of the inadequate facilities, staff, program funding, and other resources allocated to YA library service in the Richmond Public Library. A lack of staff dedicated to YA is not uncommon in public libraries. The 2012 Public Library Data Service Statistical Report reveals that only 33 percent of public libraries have one or more full-time staff member dedicated to teen services. At RPL, tight funding limitations also impact the amount of outreach and engagement work librarians can do to reach young adults. It is likely that a combination of the aforementioned factors affect YA circulation, helping to explain why it is unusually low.

The library system's insistence on high program and circulation counts to justify funding becomes like a snake chasing its tail: the circulation and program counts are lowered because the funding is inadequate, and the administration does not focus its efforts on YA because the counts are low. The emphasis on Children's literature, programming and funding as evidenced in the strategic vision and budget documents are in line with the high rate of circulation of Children's materials. If that amount of attention and funding could be directed at young adult services, the public library could begin to address the burgeoning crisis of illiteracy and below-grade-level literacy among Richmond Public School students in the YA demographic. The library is well-positioned to do this work, but the opportunity needs to be seized, the funds allocated, and the staff trained or augmented.

If YA services could get the same level of enthusiasm that Children's services have received from the city and library administration, perhaps we would not be seeing the massive drop-offs in literacy among Richmond's teenage students, and disproportionately among the poor students, those most in need of the free services of a public library, and young men of color. The neglect of the young adult demographic is a problem, and it seems is an institutional one, as our previous analysis of the RPL's strategic vision barely mentioned young adult services. Still, the YA Librarian and members of the YA committee have worked tirelessly to attract and serve young adults through programming.

The Main Branch of RPL had 1,686 program attendees for regular, librarian-sponsored Young Adult library programs in 2014, not including attendance for programs hosted by activist community partners to be detailed in later sections. The average number of program attendees for 2013 and 2014 was 1,802 attendees. With an annual budget cap of \$2,000 for young adult programming, the Richmond Public Library allocates, approximately, the amount of \$1.11 (rounded *up*) per program attendee annually. The ratio of YA items circulated to program attendees is 4:1. This low ratio translates into a relatively low number of materials checkouts and implies limited repeat visits among program attendees. One way to increase this ratio would be through an aggressive community engagement initiative targeted at the young adult demographic.

There were a total of 63 YA programs held at RPL in 2014. The previous year, which saw 83 YA programs, and during which time I was employed as assistant to the YA Librarian, had a higher attendance count of 1,918. There has not been an assistant to the YA Librarian added permanently to staff after the expiration of my provisional contract, although the numbers show the additional staff expanded the library's capacity for YA

programming. Community partnerships are an excellent way to implement a community engagement initiative and improve library service in public libraries. It is my contention that the Main branch of RPL, though it meets many best practices for young adult engagement that will be reviewed in the following section, is limited in its ability to excel in young adult library service by a lack of funding and staff. For RPL and libraries in similar situations, partnerships with activist community groups can augment community engagement efforts and broaden the impact of the library's young adult services. In the following section I will review best practices for Young Adult Engagement before exploring the impact of activist community groups on YA engagement through partnered programming at RPL.

IV. Literature Review: Best Practices for Young Adult Engagement and Community Partnerships in Public Libraries

Community Engagement Defined

“Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices.”

—Fawcett et al., 1995, “Evaluating Community Incentives for Health and Development”

Engagement necessitates working together in and between groups comprised of people with shared experience. It necessitates shared power in decision-making, "working *with* them, instead of creating programs *for* them, so they become co-creators of programs that reflect their needs" (Hirzy 2011, 3-4). Engagement can occur with citizens and the civic sphere, or between and across individuals and organizations within a community, or both.

Young adults can be somewhat elusive patrons for public libraries. Taking an engagement approach to serving young adults in libraries means involving young adults in all stages of planning and decision-making for YA library service, so that they are invested in the outcomes of library services. Typically a first step in initiating engagement is to identify needs in a community. Libraries must strive to understand the needs of young adults in the communities they serve, and must understand that young adults “know best what their needs and interests are.” (VPL Community Engagement Values Statement, 2010). Libraries must allocate funding and staff to young adult engagement (VPL). The process of decision-making and evaluating outcomes must be shared with community members, and this process should be documented (VPL).

It is important to note that engagement is a continuous process. Young adults will grow up, and new young adults with new needs and interests will visit public libraries. Additionally, the process of becoming engaged exists in a continuum. The idea is to improve library service and experience for young adults, through taking young adults from passive users of library services to active participants, planners, and directors of library services.

Being involved in an engagement initiative is beneficial for both libraries and young adults. Libraries can increase circulation, program attendance and quality, visibility and value in a community through effective engagement. Young adults are provided a safe space, leadership and management opportunities, information literacy skill-building, social interaction, and an additional boost to résumés or college applications. While YALSA, the Young Adult Library Services Association, provides best practices for young adults in terms of staff competencies, teen space design, and general library service, specific best practices for engaging the young adult community are not defined. I have outlined in the pages below several best practices for young adult engagement in public libraries, the result of a thorough review of the current literature.

Best Practices for Community Engagement in Public Libraries

- Best Practice: Start a youth engagement initiative by conducting a needs assessment.

Before beginning a major engagement initiative with young adults, librarians should determine the needs of young adults in their community by getting input and/or feedback from them directly. Young adults, their parents, and other adults who work with teens and

young adults should be included in this assessment (Hirzy, 27). Inquiries should not be limited to in-house library resources, as libraries can and should provide more than information resources to teens (Williams and Edwards 2011, 143). In addition, non-library related needs can help direct librarians to seeking appropriate community partners for programming. Opinions should be gathered regarding the appearance of the teen space or common areas of the library, the website and social media presence, and about programs and/or awareness of programs.

A needs assessment can be conducted through surveys, interviews, or input from existing teen clubs or advisory groups at a public library. There is no one way to conduct a needs assessment, though we will identify in the next section some guidelines for making a needs assessment appealing to and meaningful for young adults.

- Best Practice: Identify barriers to library engagement for the community's young adults.

Young adults are absent from public libraries for a variety of reasons. Librarians should take into account the barriers to accessing the library that young adults face in order to better serve their needs (Hirzy 32). In the Richmond Public Library administration's needs assessment focus group, outlined in the next section, the teens themselves described "barriers" as one of the major issues facing their community. A commitment to addressing barriers to young adult involvement not only increases access, but also makes the librarian a visible ally and resource to young adults in a library's community.

Young adults have fewer legitimate places that they can spend time in than children or tweens (Williams and Edwards, 142-3). The overlapping/conflicting relationship between adolescent school schedules and adult work schedules make it difficult for teens

to access transportation and creates a barrier between young adults and adults, preventing positive intergenerational contact (143, 145). The “location and image” of the library can affect how young adults “get there and whether they feel welcome” (Hirzy 32). Whether or not young adults feel welcome is a mental barrier, whereas transportation and scheduling difficulties are logistical barriers, both of which factor in to young adults’ capacity for engagement (32). It is important that a library be an inviting and accessible space for young adults, physically and mentally.

Other barriers are informational. Howard (Library Quarterly, 2011) found in a survey of young teens that 40% of those surveyed rarely visited the library because they just didn’t think about it. 35% reported they would attend library events if they knew about them (Howard 322). Library promotional materials should always be worded in a way young adults will understand, as unfamiliar language can be a barrier to engagement (Hirzy 32). Needs assessments and informal conversations with young adults can help identify barriers to engagement and formulate a plan to overcome these.

- Best Practice: Form a Teen Advisory Group.

Teen Advisory Groups are an effective way to get teens and young adults engaged in library planning, programming, and decision-making. Cultivating a dedicated Teen Advisory Group can give librarians direct input on the needs of young adults in their local community. Teen Advisory Groups (TAGs) can meet once monthly and provide a library with suggestions from teens on how the library can better serve them. A TAG can advise the library on programs and collections (Kendrick-Samuel 2012, 15). One way to cement commitment to TAGs is to offer volunteer credits or hours to teens and young adults, to offer to write

college recommendations on their behalf, and/or act as a reference for job applications.

If a library already has a well-established TAG, it may want to consider upping the ante for young adult engagement and forming a Junior Friends Group. Junior Friends Groups can take on a more active organizational and financial role within a library (15), which can give teens and young adults a sense of ownership, strengthen commitment to the library, and improve grassroots fundraising capability (16). Junior Friends Groups can fundraise in the form of craft sales, bake sales, and events. The resulting funds can be used for young adult library services at the discretion of the Junior Friends (16). When starting a Junior Friends Group (JFG), it may be wise to restrict opportunities for volunteer hours to members of the Junior Friends in order to get firm commitments from young adults (16). Seeking cooperation from a supervisor, existing friends group, and associated departments or library branches in forming a JFG can ensure organizational efficiency and meaningful impact (17). Allowing teens/young adults to conduct their own JFG meetings with a librarian present as a mediator will show sincere interest in JFG projects and can control any negative behavior (17).

For either a TAG or a JFG, it is best to begin with young adults who are already involved with the library in some way (Hirzy 34). Librarians should decide on membership requirements with input from existing teen volunteers or library regulars, and communicate clearly the expectations for participation as the TAG expands. The group should be given real authority and decision-making power, and librarians must be willing to make compromises between their own vision and that of the group (Hirzy 35). A young adult group can also be a great tool to assess engagement initiatives. Assessments should involve young adults in the planning and be undertaken annually (Hirzy).

- Best Practice: Foster year-round engagement through quality, young adult-centered programming.

When providing programs for young adults, it is essential to involve them as more than just participants but also as advisors in program ideas. When young adults are involved in the creation of programs for their public library, they gain a sense of accomplishment, investment, and attachment. Allowing young adults to be involved in the development of new events and programs gives the librarian a chance to make the young adult users feel empowered and confident and allows them to gain experience and competence. Programs that young adults create personally become meaningful and more relevant to them (Honnold).

Young adults benefit most from stable, long-term programming efforts, so it is essential to be pragmatic in planning the scale of youth engagement programming to ensure its sustainability (Hirzy 7). Taking a youth development approach to programming is best. Promoting “positive outcomes for youth...by giving them the opportunities, relationships, and support they need to participate fully in their own personal, social, and cultural growth” (Hirzy 5) is a key to successful engagement.

As much of library programming ought to revolve around reading and literacy, libraries should emphasize pleasure reading for young adult users without promoting “good” over “bad” literature (Howard, “Pleasure Reading”). Pleasure reading, regardless of the critical reception of the material, has been shown to have a positive correlation for youth in terms of likeliness to create art, volunteer, play sports, attend cultural events, and visit cultural institutions (47), indicating that a non-judgemental approach to the literary tastes of young adults can deepen engagement with the library itself and foster repeat

visits. Reading for pleasure enhances young people's personal development, formation of career goals and political beliefs, and awareness of dangerous behaviors and their consequences (50-52). Integrating pleasure reading into youth development programming is a key to effective community engagement efforts for young adults in public libraries.

A youth development approach should also consider the transliteracy practices of today's young adults, which extends far beyond the ability to read print. Transliteracy means "the ability to read, write, and interact across a range of platforms, tools, and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks" (Couri, 18). In 2011, a branch of the New York Public Library vastly increased summer program attendance among teens by extending the idea of "reading" to other media in a large-scale "Summer Library Club" programming series focused on learning "new media literacies" (19). The library successfully celebrated what their teens were bringing to the table, and provided learning opportunities to grow teens' existing skill sets and interests. Just as "good" literature should not be promoted over "bad," it is important to keep in mind that learning opportunities and ways of expanding literacy are not limited to reading books. Exploring gaming, coding, making and building, art, music, app-based technology, and other media in programming is relevant to young adults' lived experience, and these alternative media are rife with teachable moments.

- **Best Practice: Train Staff to Serve Young Adult Patrons**

It is important that staff be trained to work with young adult patrons. One of the basic services libraries can provide to young adults is "assuring access to caring adults" (Bishop and Bauer, 36). Staff members are critical to making a library friendly to young adult

patrons, and should consider young adult users and their needs equally important to persons of other age groups (Bourke, 99). Even if a library is well-funded enough to have a state-of-the-art YA room, “[t]he most brilliant youth space and resources will not compensate for surly, unfriendly or unhelpful staff. Staff...will determine whether our libraries are youth friendly or not” (99).

Jones and Delahanty (2011) showed that after staff in a Kentucky public library underwent youth development training, participants “discovered the need to form community partnerships, to expand upon youth engagement efforts, and to create or enhance relevant after-school initiatives” for young patrons (43). Staff recognized that stereotypes and negative perceptions of young people were obstacles to library service and a positive library environment (43). It is important to address the significance of negative perceptions of young adult patrons with all library staff.

- Best Practice: Develop community partnerships and strengthen ties with public schools.

Fostering strong community partnerships should be a goal of any successful youth engagement initiative. Community partnerships offer opportunities for libraries to expand their reach and recruitment efforts, pool resources, increase visibility, and improve the quality and quantity of program offerings.

Urban areas may offer a wealth of partnership opportunities for libraries, while other locations may have fewer potential partners. Librarians should consider arts and cultural institutions, schools, parks and recreation departments, government agencies, nonprofit youth services groups, and existing youth services community partnerships (Hirzy, 42).

To identify potential community partners, library staff can undertake a community asset mapping activity, ideally involving teen library users. Asset mapping involves identifying the assets a library has to offer, and the assets of other organizations or resources in its community. Ideally, young adult users or members of a Teen Advisory Group can assist in creating asset maps. Organizations serving youth in a community should first be identified and then contacted in order to learn more about what they do (Rutherford, 24). Ideally, the teens themselves could attempt to contact these organizations under a librarian's guidance. Effective community partnerships are mutually beneficial (Hirzy 42).

Rutherford (2010) suggests conducting focus groups with teens to assess interests and needs and identify community trends (24). This provides insight into opportunities for collaboration with partner organizations (25).

Librarians should consider the public schools as a major community partner. Libraries can and should promote their services directly to schools. When seeking to establish a partnership with the public schools, librarians can try to address teachers directly on school staff development days (Bourke, 101). Librarians can emphasize that libraries provide opportunities for "free-choice" or self-directed learning, a complement to structured school curricula (Jones and Delahanty, 42) that can enrich students' intellectual lives. Partnerships between schools and libraries can "promote innovative learning collaborations" (41).

Once a librarian has made contact with teachers and communicated what libraries can offer to the schools, the next step can be addressing students at schools in assemblies (Bourke 102) or even better, in individual classes. Homework help hours or expanded

Summer Reading programming at the library can be offered in exchange for the opportunity to address students at assemblies and the ability to distribute library promotional materials in schools.

Librarians can make the library available for field trips to classes or clubs at public schools. Field trips can showcase the library as a place for these teens to pursue their passion for a variety of subjects and information materials, and more generally as a place for “self-directed learning that affords autonomy” (Jones and Delahanty 43). Reach out to niche interest groups of young adults through the schools, as “a significant amount” of teen learning “stems from what they are intrinsically motivated to learn on their own” (42).

RPL and Young Adult Engagement: Suggestions for Expanded Best Practices

Another useful strategy, upon which I will expand in the coming pages, is for librarians to identify small or emerging activist groups or grassroots youth services organizations in a community and, if a public library is equipped with meeting and/or activity rooms, offer free space to those groups. For the Richmond Public Library, these partnerships have facilitated a greater number and more diverse array of programs, increased program participation, expanded the user base of the library and volunteer staff, increased the visibility of the library in the community through expanded public relations efforts, and brought in available funding for programming through independent grant writing and fundraising.

Librarians are burdened with increased workloads as library funding and staffing continues to be cut nationwide. Community partnerships can vastly increase your resources and impact for and with young adults. Howard (Library Quarterly 2011) found

that, of young teens surveyed, the reason most did not attend library programs was they simply didn't know about them or think about them. Community partnerships increase the visibility of the library in the community and among young adults, increase the impact of promotional and recruitment activities, and increase resources for strong, youth-centered programming. Community partnerships with activist community groups can enrich civic engagement for young adults who may be about to reach voting age. This allows for young adults' experience of the library to become embedded in their lived experience as a community member and citizen, and allows the librarian to be a facilitator of civic and community empowerment to young adults.

V. 2014 Young Adult Needs Assessments at RPL: Divergent Approaches

Assessing Engagement

Conducting needs assessments, hosting dynamic programming with young adult input, and forming community partnerships are great ways of getting started with an engagement initiative. It is however, important to assess the progress of any community engagement efforts as these efforts progress. One way to do this is to conduct needs assessments with young adults and show results from participants' input, such as through the timely implementation of a policy or program, and then to seek feedback or additional input. These qualitative responses will often share similar words, themes, criticisms, or suggestions, which can be used quantitatively (ie, "the majority of young adult library users report that...") in reports submitted to administrators, board members, donors, or prospective community partners. To assess the effectiveness engagement at RPL through activist community partnerships, I used qualitative analysis of needs assessments conducted, personal interviews, internal library documents, observations and experience, and quantitative data on program attendance and repeat visits to programs. In addition, I interviewed teens and members of the community partner organizations for qualitative assessments of successes, failures, and suggestions for improvement. I explored the results of my research within the context of current library literature. The following sections are the result of this approximately 15-month period of investigation. The findings support my assertion that partnerships with activist community groups have been highly successful in augmenting young adult library service at RPL.

Young Adult Needs Assessments at RPL

In 2014, two vastly different needs assessments were undertaken at Richmond Public Library to ascertain issues facing the young adult community. One session was hosted by the activist community group Girls Rock! RVA in the form of a Community Visioning and Zine Making workshop, and the second was a Community Conversation scheduled by the administration with a paid consultant interviewing members of the library's Teen Advisory Group. Conducting a needs assessment is considered the first step to a successful community engagement initiative (Community Tool Box, 2014). The purpose of a needs assessment is to bring community members to the table and discuss an issue or range of issues in which they have a direct stake. This can deepen understanding between organizations and communities, help improve or design services, and ultimately empower and engage community members by facilitating stakeholder input into decision-making, program planning, or other community-based actions from the earliest stages. Instead of merely providing services and programming, libraries can tailor services and programming to the needs of their users and ensure community involvement and support from the outset by beginning with a needs assessment.

Needs assessments can take many forms, but there are guidelines for conducting them effectively. The Community Toolbox from the Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas outlines best practices for conducting needs assessments. The Toolbox suggests that needs assessments should be conducted throughout the duration of a project. In addition, a broad range of stakeholders, inclusive of anyone whose life may be affected by decisions made as a result of an initiative or who

may bring a unique perspective, should be involved. This includes those citizens experiencing firsthand the needs to be addressed, as well as health and human service providers, government officials, influential community members, community activists, and members of the business community, when and as appropriate. The group to provide the assessment should represent all stakeholders and mirror the diversity of the community. A purpose for the assessment should be clearly identified, and an evaluation process should be devised. The questions to be asked and a method for collecting data should be decided upon in advance, as well as a way to communicate results to the public.¹⁹

In the following sections, I will discuss the two differing approaches to needs assessments followed by Girls Rock! RVA and the Richmond Public Library's administration. I will examine the planning, process, results, and community impact and analyze the assessments in light of best practices.

Girls Rock! RVA's "Community Visioning and Zine Making" Workshop: Summary

In January 2014, Girls Rock! RVA, a local rock 'n' roll camp for girls, gender non-conforming, and trans youth, hosted their third in a series of during-the-school-year workshops at the RPL that was intended to identify needs, issues/concerns, and interests of Richmond youth in the form of a collaborative discussion and art-making workshop. The program was promoted heavily through the library's general social media and e-newsletter as well as those of Girls Rock!, the library's teen-specific tumblr, flyering around town, and PSAs on the local independent radio station. The event was led by six Girls Rock! organizers including myself with help from members of the Teen Advisory Group. I acted

¹⁹ Guidelines in this paragraph from the University of Kansas Work Group for Community Health and Development Community Toolbox, available online <http://ctb.ku.edu/en>

as a representative of the RPL staff in addition to Girls Rock! RVA. Families were encouraged to attend, and the event was targeted to young people ages 8-18. The Main library's branch manager sat in on most of the session. The resulting group of participants included library staff, community activists, a diverse group of young people with varying backgrounds and varying levels of library engagement, members of the Teen Advisory Group, parents, regular adult library patrons, and Girls Rock! RVA volunteers. Several attendees had not participated in camp or library programs previously to my knowledge. Approximately 64 people attended the session, far exceeding the number we had anticipated.

Girls Rock! RVA organizers, including myself, had drafted an instructional design plan detailing the questions to be presented and activities to engage in within the two-hour session. Our first point was to introduce ourselves and to define the idea of a "community" in general terms. We gave examples of communities to which we consider ourselves to belong, leaving specific community identification up to workshop participants to write down in their worksheets. We then asked for input from participants to create "group agreements" that functioned as ground rules for participation and respectful discussion. We asked the group to reflect on a series of prompts for the next ten minutes either individually or, for the youngest participants, with the help of their parent or guardian. The first was, "where will you be in the year 2050?" or, for older participants, "where will a child in your life be in the year 2050?" This prompt was intended to "warm up" participants to the reflective process. After ten minutes, we asked that participants respond in writing to one or more prompts provided and begin a collage, painting, or drawing that visualized their response to the prompt. These prompts were: "What would

an ideal community for young people be like?”, “What things in your community do you like, and in what ways would you like your community to change or improve?”, and “What does a healthy community look like?” During the twenty minutes allotted these tasks, workshop leaders walked around and chatted with participants and checked their progress. No one struggled with the prompts, though leaders made themselves available for questions and assistance.

We next divided the participants into small groups, each of which was led by a workshop leader, to discuss their responses to the prompts. The idea was for participants to express individual thoughts to the group and look for and agree upon themes shared between small group members’ responses. These common themes would, as a result of the prompts, take the form of community aspirations, issues and concerns, suggestions, and desires for change. These were then shared with the group at large, and we made a large word cloud of a “Shared Vision” for the Richmond community on a large paper attached to an easel. After the word cloud was finished, participants were instructed to finish their artworks. The artworks were compiled into a full-color zine that was distributed freely to program participants, public library branches, community centers, and local businesses. The zine communicated a vision for a better Richmond from a relatively diverse cross-section of the community, and importantly for us, of the youth community.

The word cloud functioned as a collection of key issues and concerns important to the group. The following ideas were included: “Be active in your community,” “More supportive environment for youth,” “less chemicals,” “access to healthy food,” “no GMOs,” “better treatment of animals,” “put time into conversations,” “learning to live with less,” “acceptance of diversity and freedom of expression,” “more playgrounds,” “feeling

empowered to DO,” “greener places and less trash,” “less pollution,” “share food and resources to meet needs,” “prioritize safety, shelter, and food,” “no progress without history,” “greater access to resources,” “quality free education about what we love,” “accountability,” “be and stay creative,” and “are we alone in the universe?”

Individual artworks and reflection sheets showed many concerns about the environment, animal welfare, health, and the food supply/nutrition. Improving education was another major concern. Others expressed a desire for a more feminist world, greater community support and expanded social services, and a desire for safe spaces. A few explicitly mentioned a desire for more accountability from government and institutions.

Girls Rock! RVA’s “Community Visioning and Zine Making” Workshop: Analysis

The Community Visioning and Zine Making Workshop was designed as a “Community Dialogue on Building a Healthy Community” as per guidelines laid out by the University of Kansas Community Tool Box.²⁰ The Community Tool Box recommends using a community dialogue as a way of “expanding the base of constituencies and voices,” “integrate the workings of formal institutions with grassroots groups,” “surface common issues...and uncover innovative ideas,” and “generate local media attention,” among others for organizations to ascertain and assess community input into decision-making. For Girls Rock! RVA, the needs assessment was a way to learn about our participants’ interests, concerns, and needs so that we could implement meaningful programming through our newly-formed partnership with the Richmond Public Library. We wanted to make sure

²⁰ Accessible at:
<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/community-dialogue/main>

that people of any age felt comfortable expressing their opinions and voices and that, through the dissemination of their artworks and ideas in the zine, participants could feel that they were impacting their community. The zine was distributed around the city and was immensely popular, disappearing from shelves almost immediately. The artwork functioned as a way to maintain the interest of participants of all ages throughout the two hours and to allow those who were less vocal to still express their visions to the group.

We wanted to immediately follow up with programming related to their concerns to show that they had been empowered in the decision-making of our organization. Because so many participants had showed concern over health and nutrition, our next workshop was a body-positive fitness and nutrition workshop with a local vegan restaurateur who also runs a fitness non-profit teaching simple callisthenic exercise to residents of public housing in Richmond. Because Girls Rock! RVA is small and volunteer-run, not hampered by bureaucratic processes of larger organizations, we were nimble enough to respond immediately to the expressed needs of the group. Another positive outgrowth of the community visioning session was a new partnership between Richmond Public Library and Richmond Zine Fest, facilitated through Girls Rock! RVA, that resulted in a plan to host the 2015 Zine Fest at RPL's Main Branch. This event will bring hundreds of community members to the library.

The community visioning session was far from perfect, however. Because of our emphasis on the artwork and zine making, we were unable to go as in-depth as a standard community dialogue. While we succeeded in many elements of a community dialogue, we were unable to interrogate in detail the barriers impeding community health as expressed by the participants. For example, a lack of access to education, good food, or safe spaces

was mentioned repeatedly as a barrier to community health, but we did not have time in the session to gather more specific ideas about these things. These generalities may have been sufficient for us to plan and implement more relevant programming, which certainly was a primary goal of the event, but the lack of data generated certainly affected our ability to present these community needs to a larger organization such as the RPL administration or a major grant providing foundation. In addition, my attempts to bring this program to other branches of the public library were met with hesitation, and the event was not replicated system-wide as I had hoped. The community dialogue was not representative of the entire community, but rather a subset, of which a significant portion was already engaged with Girls Rock! RVA. While the press and zine distribution certainly increased visibility of Girls Rock! RVA and the RPL, the lack of sustained dialogue did not make for lasting impact or continued engagement.

The community visioning session was a success for Girls Rock! RVA, but to expand this model of community dialogue for general library use would involve significant changes. For one, allotting less time to artwork and more time to nuanced discussions of barriers facing community health could yield more usable data for libraries while still being appealing to or maintaining the attention of young people through the creation of visual art. Secondly, in order to be most effective in applying input to a library system as a whole, these sessions would need to be held at varied locations or library branches around the city, and would need to happen repeatedly at regular intervals, perhaps every six months or annually.

“Community Conversation with Teens” Summary

In March of 2014, the RPL administration hired a consultant to conduct a discussion with the members of the Teen Advisory Group to ascertain their needs and desires from and for library service. I attended the meeting and took copious notes. The session was more formal in style than any other young adult happenings at RPL. The session was mandatory for the teens, taking place on a Saturday afternoon, and it was to last two hours. It was held in the Children’s Activity room, where some tables and chairs had been set up in a U shape. The session leader identified herself as a consultant from Washington, DC hired by the library director to talk with the teens about their experiences at the library, and to find out what the library is doing well and what it could stand to improve. The consultant and I were the only white persons present.

The TAG members are all highly intelligent teenagers. Their responses to questions were thoughtful, measured, and mixed an expression of specific personal preference with generalities indicating profound community mindedness. Here is a sampling of the discussion, with questions and responses.

First, the group set ground rules. The moderator offered rules such as respecting each others’ views, listening, waiting your turn to speak, and that there were no wrong answers to questions. Teens proposed similar guidelines and the group agreed to follow the rules.

The first question was “What issues does your community face? What do you think your community needs, or how could your community improve?” Teens responded that they wished their communities were safer and greener. They wished their community felt

more united, with greater interaction between neighbors, and “more avenues for dialogue.” One teen identified a need for greater outreach and support for the disabled. They expressed desire for a more cohesive and positive community identity.

The next question asked was “Why are these things important? Why is it important to identify these issues?” The teens started to respond more actively at this point, when prompted for a personal opinion. They thought it was important to identify issues like these to plan for the future and to make improvements. They identified racial barriers as problematic. “Barriers” became a term used frequently to describe lack of services or lack of access to services that members of their community face. The teens went on to describe violence as a problem facing their community, and that they have seen teens become involved in the violence. They identified a general lack of consensus in the community as a problem. They said that public education in the city was of low quality. They said there was a lack of programs for teens and a lack of support from families for teens in their community. The teens talked about bike safety as a problem they face, as they primarily use bikes and buses to get around. One teen complained about a lack of civic transparency, and hoped conversations like these could open up more opportunities for community involvement.

The moderator then asked for the two or three most important issues facing their community. The teens said “barriers,” as one – implying a host of issues such as economic and language barriers limiting opportunity. They then stated education was the second most important. As the third issue, they expressed a need for community togetherness, saying “people need to try to get along.” The moderator then asked teens to identify the single most important issue facing their community, to which teens replied that barriers

were the most important issue. They expanded on this idea and stated that barriers are tied up with other issues and many types of barriers exist, giving socio-economic barriers as an example. One teen stated that one type of barrier is when people speak for groups they are not a part of, like when privileged people speak for or at less privileged people. She said that this happens all the time, and it blocks communication and makes the people spoken for/at not want to listen. She was speaking generally and did not offer specifics, though the previous discussion points created a context in which her statement was understandable. Another teen identified poor early childhood education as a barrier to success and opportunity. She said people are lucky to have parents who stress education, but not everyone has parents who do or are able to. Lack of access to contraception was mentioned as a barrier. Lack of comprehensive sex education in school was also mentioned. Religious divisions were seen as a barrier in the teens' communities. Lack of access to good quality information was listed as a barrier.

The moderator asked, "Are your communities getting better or worse?" The teens replied that they believe their community is getting better, but wavered a bit on this stance. They suggested a change in focus to education to make real improvements. They stated that the economy is definitely worse, and that homelessness is a greater problem now. They said they have watched people lose motivation in their progressive causes and burn out trying to make changes in their communities. Again they mentioned violence, citing recent spikes in violence on campus at Virginia Commonwealth University as well as violence near campus. They said violence prevention in their community was non-existent, and that the only response to violence they see is in response to incidents that already happened. One teen said she doesn't feel safe at school, violence at school is a distraction

for students and teachers alike, and that suspending students after committing violence is not effective and the focus should be on prevention.

The next question was, “what is stopping you from making progress in your communities?” This seemed like a redundant question, in that the teens had been describing the barriers they faced in their communities throughout the session. Still, they came up with new responses that seemed to synthesize their previous ideas. They thought their community lacked cohesive identity, and saw a lack of knowledge and structure within it. They stated that the environment at school prevents learning, for themselves and their peers. One response really struck me, which was that they would like to see more of people succeeding in community projects to feel empowered to make changes. I thought that this could be what drew these teens to the library, and motivated them to engage with the activist community groups involved with programming at RPL. They also identified a lack of community spaces as something stopping them from making progress in their community. Again, I thought this must make the library an appealing place. They did not know how to start making progress, and expressed a certain fear of speaking out. They said that among many young people, there is a general sense of apathy about politics.

The moderator asked the teens, “What could we achieve realistically in our communities?” The teens immediately expressed a desire for more facilitated conversations. They thought it would be feasible to promote reading over TV watching to increase knowledge in their community. They thought that more diverse sources of information in news media could be promoted as well. Teens thought that technology can be isolating, or have an isolating influence on community members, and that more

community conversations, promoting reading over television, and diversifying exposure to news media could help their community be more tuned in and less cut off by technology.

Then the moderator asked, “In the future, what things could you see to show that the things we talked about are happening in your community?” Teens replied that violence rates could decrease, graduation rates could increase, there could be more community involvement and pride, more freely available programs and discussions, more workshops and classes, better bike safety measures, new laws, and increased understanding. They thought that realistically, they would like to see small, everyday changes signaling improvement. One teen said that she would like another meeting in the future with the library administration to show accountability, and to provide proof that they were working to address some of the identified issues and suggested improvements. The moderator stated that she would present notes from the meeting to the Administration, and they would decide where to go from there. There were no administration members present at the meeting, and no promise of a future meeting was given. There has not been another community conversation with teens at the library since this time.

“Community Conversation with Teens” Analysis

The Community Conversation with Teens at RPL was a needs assessment conducted in the form of a focus group. According to Community Toolbox, “[a] focus group is a small-group discussion guided by a trained leader. It is used to learn more about opinions on a designated topic, and then to guide future action” (2014). Focus groups are differentiated from groups in general through limiting discussion to a specific topic, the presence of a facilitator or leader to keep the discussion moving and on topic, and by emphasizing an

environment where participants feel comfortable speaking freely, expressing opinions, and responding to one another as well as to the questions posed by the leader.

The facilitator hired by the RPL Administration was excellent in keeping conversation going, though at times was lax in her direction. This more lax approach was useful, in that it allowed the young adults to have more control over the session, giving the teens a structured opportunity to act as representative leaders of their community, a cornerstone of a youth-centered approach (Hirzy 5).

However, the focus group was not truly representative of the Richmond community. The Teen Advisory Group consists of teenagers who already attend most library programs, who are highly literate in both traditional print media and digital technology, and who are generally above average if not gifted students. The majority of TAG members are female, and all are African-American. Most are moderate to high academic achievers. The TAG members do not represent all young adult users of the RPL. Additionally, the facilitator was not a member of the Richmond community, and merely acted as a representative for higher-ups in the library administration who were not present for the session. This was perhaps a missed opportunity for teens to commune with persons of authority, or to address these people directly with their concerns. By comparison, the Girls Rock! RVA program featured a more diverse representation of the Richmond community, as well as a more direct conduit to community leaders.

The focus group also seemed to lack a clear purpose or goal. The questions were generally broad and concerned the community, but participants were never required to define what they meant by the word. The questions and responses were so broad that it was difficult to understand how the responses would be of use to the library's

administration. Additionally, there was no promise of these responses being used for any specific initiative. Teens seemed unsure who would be using their suggestions, and when and how their suggestions would be used. Rutherford (2010) suggests conducting focus groups with teens to assess interests and needs and identify community trends in order to provide insight into opportunities for collaboration with partner organizations (24-25). This did not seem to be a purpose of this session, but could have been an outcome had the YA Librarian been invited to attend. This seems a missed opportunity.

The one need expressed that the library could easily remedy was the request for more programming, but the YA budget has not been expanded for fiscal year 2015. The lack of invitation for participation by the YA Librarian was also of concern, as the YA Librarian is most certainly a major stakeholder in a needs assessment involving her most engaged users. There was no follow up from the administration regarding this session to the YA staff. Even though one participant (somewhat cheekily) requested accountability from the library in the form of meeting to check in on policy changes in the future, this was never offered. It is unclear how this data was to be used or assessed, but I believe it was a focus group conducted for a future Strategic Vision document. Problematically, the authority given to the teens in the discussion during the focus group was not maintained. Teens benefit from long-term stability in engagement efforts (Hirzy 7), and this one-off, unreciprocated interface with the library administration showed no indication of being either long-term or stable.

VI. Activist Community Groups At Richmond Public Library

The People's Library Project

The People's Library Project was initially conceived by Mark Strandquist and Courtney Bowles to be implemented at the MLK Library in Washington, DC. Strandquist's background in art and sociology, combined with Bowles' background in anthropology and environmental studies, provided the framework for a project that would take discarded or weeded library books and recycle the paper to create new, blank books. These blank books would then be entered into the library's catalog and checked out to members of the community, who could fill the books with their personal histories or histories of their families, neighborhoods, or communities. The finished books would become part of the library's permanent collection. The MLK library was not interested, for one reason or another, in making these books part of the library collection, leaving Strandquist and Bowles to look elsewhere for a venue for this project.

In November 2012, Strandquist and Bowles met Patty Parks, the manager of RPL's Main branch. Parks was open to the project, including making the books part of the permanent library collection. In December 2012, The People's Library Project received a grant to begin the project. Starting in February 2013, the People's Library Project began holding recycled paper-making workshops on First Fridays, a monthly art walk in the Richmond Arts District, within which the Main Branch of RPL is located. The venue, the central main branch of the library, and timing, highly attended and publicized First Fridays, allowed good exposure for the People's Library Project to the Richmond community. In order to fabricate the blank books, many sheets of recycled paper were required. In

addition, the process of recycling paper is messy and loud, two elements that are uncommon in typical library programs, but that also made the activity appealing to young adults. The initial paper-making workshops raised community awareness of and young adult involvement in the project, as well as furnishing the materials needed to realize its ultimate goal.

After the launch of the People's Library in May 2013, the People's Library Project continued work through programming in and outside of the RPL. Part of their work was training young adults, high school and college students, to be "People's Librarians," who functioned as interns for the organization. Young adult People's Librarians are taught the technical craft skills required to recreate project materials, and provided leadership and teamwork opportunities through leading workshops, representing the project at public events, and developing community organizing skills. People's Librarians can choose to engage with a specific community or theme and perform outreach to bring histories into the People's Library collection. As of this writing, Strandquist and Bowles have accepted a socially engaged art fellowship opportunity in Philadelphia, and the trained People's Librarians have now become the stewards of the project, under the guidance of RPL staff and other adult project volunteers.

The People's Library project was perhaps the most successful engagement initiative for young adults at RPL. The project has hosted over 50 workshops and events, engaging hundreds of community members, and empowering dedicated young adults into leadership positions. New blank books continue to be made and added to the collection, as the program is highly popular and the original volumes have been filled. In addition, young adults have been trained as "People's Librarians," capable of leading paper-making and

bookbinding workshops for peers, and interfacing with the public to promote the project through tabling at community events. Though specific attendance counts could not be obtained for the People's Library's programming from 2013-2014, an estimated total would put the number around 350 total program participants, a significant portion of the approximately 1,802 total program attendance count.

The pragmatic scale of the project allowed it to grow organically and sustain itself even after the departure of its founders, and makes the model easy to replicate for other libraries or community institutions. The project generated funding for RPL programs and new library materials through grants. Program attendance had a wide range, from smaller paper making workshops involving 10 participants, to large public events, such as the launch party, which drew over 100 attendees. A select group of young adults is estimated to have attended more than half of all People's Library events at RPL, as well as events outside the library. The project consistently generated press and exposure for itself and the RPL system, including articles in local and national press, additional partnerships with Virginia Commonwealth University and printmaking studio Studio23, and promotion at local Jackson Ward History day and the local TED-affiliated conference, TEDxRVA. Most importantly, the project was impactful for young adult library users. The project was intended "as a vehicle for producing alternative models of education, art, and community activism,"²¹ and provided a path for young people to take an activist leadership role in civic and community affairs. The project was deeply embedded in personal and shared experiences of Richmond, which resonated with young adults, as it was not just relatable but accessible. The fluid nature of the People's Library's structure allowed young adults to

²¹ Personal Interview with Mark Strandquist and Courtney Bowles, November 20, 2014.

have immediate and lasting impact on the project's direction, empowering them to make decisions of consequence to their community.

Girls Rock! RVA and the Free Richmond Instrument Lending Library

Girls Rock! RVA is a non-profit musical empowerment camp for girls, gender non-conforming, and trans youth in the Richmond, VA area. The organization is entering its fifth year and began a partnership with the Richmond Public Library in the summer of 2013. When the partnership began, Girls Rock! RVA had held three successful, week-long and volunteer-run rock camps annually in the preceding years. The camps involve girls, gender-non-conforming, and trans youth ages 8-15. Campers apply, are assigned instruments, divided into bands, and over the course of one week receive instrument instruction and compose and rehearse an original rock song with their band to perform at a public showcase. The camp also includes a variety of workshops on topics including body positivity, gender identity, lyric writing and poetry, zine making, screen printing, healthy relationships, the history of women in rock music, among others. The camp was seeking to expand its presence in the community and more thoroughly engage young people in Richmond by offering year-round programming. I am currently Vice President of Girls Rock! RVA, and am responsible for the community partnership between Girls Rock! (GR!) and the RPL, which offered free space for the camp to hold its 2013 showcase as well as monthly programming throughout the year. I asked other organizers with Girls Rock! RVA to answer questions about the partnership and programming in order to avoid personal bias in my analysis.

Contact between the public library and GR! actually pre-dated my involvement in either organization. YA Librarian Natasha Payne-Brunson had reached out to camp organizers in 2012 via Facebook seeking possible collaboration, but as both organizations were stretched thin for staff and time, nothing came of it until I was hired at RPL and suggested collaboration. This highlights a potential weakness in public library partnerships with community activist groups in that it can be difficult to cement a commitment to the partnership. If a library is understaffed, and a community activist group does not have a dedicated community outreach representative, it can take time to get a firm commitment from both sides. It is worth it for librarians to take a long-term approach and dedicate time to the partnership. I had been hired first as an intern, and later as a library assistant, at RPL after pitching a presentation for community engagement through all-ages live music performances at the library. I decided to put this proposal into practice by hosting the Girls Rock! RVA 2013 showcase in the library's sprawling and underutilized Library Park, located behind the Main Branch building. Approximately 200 persons attended the showcase, and it was the highest-attended library program of the year.

After taking the beginning of the school year to plan, Girls Rock! launched programming at RPL in November 2013 with an event co-sponsored by the People's Library Project. The event was called the People's Sewing Circle, in which participants collaborated to create a community rag rug as well as share stories of "home" and reflect on the value of domestic labor. The event was well-publicized and well-attended, with PSAs on local radio and a feature story in the local arts and culture weekly. Approximately 55 people attended the event, with more than half of attendees belonging to the young adult

demographic, making it one of the larger program turnouts for young adults at the library that year. The cooperation between the People's Library, Girls Rock! RVA, and the library allowed for resources to be maximized: the People's Library brought materials, Girls Rock! used its sizeable social media presence and PR capabilities to promote the event, and the public library promoted to its users and provided the YA area to host the event. If a goal of community partnerships is to be mutually beneficial (Hirzy), this most certainly was so, for all three groups involved. It should also be noted that the cooperation between Girls Rock! RVA and the People's Library was facilitated by public librarians, who noticed similarities in the organizations' missions and thought to introduce the two groups. In addition, many attendees at the People's Sewing Circle were Girls Rock! campers and their families, making our first attempt at engaging with our campers year-round a seeming success.

The next event held at RPL hosted by Girls Rock! RVA was an "Inspiration Workshop" in which local visual artist Eliza Childress walked participants through her process of drawing inspiration from poetry, images, and music in the creation of original artwork. Participants listened to poetry read aloud and discussed it as a group, looked at a selection of art books from the library's holdings, and listened to and critiqued records with Eliza before being given a chance to write a reflection piece on what was inspiring to them from the selections. Participants then created an original piece based on how they had been inspired by the works presented. Though the attendance was lower than expected, at only 18 participants total, this number far surpassed previous visual art workshops I had attempted at the library without the help of a community partner. The date of this workshop, in mid-December, also likely contributed to the lowered attendance, as young people are either in the midst of exams or readying for holiday break that time of

year. For Girls Rock! RVA and the Richmond Public Library, the workshop was a success in terms of attendance counts, quality of instruction, and repeat visits by campers.

Our next program was in January, the Community Visioning session outlined in the previous chapter, which was a success for RPL and Girls Rock! RVA. The following workshop was a fitness and nutrition workshop in February that brought in 24 participants. Girls Rock! RVA took a “spring break” from programming in March and returned in April with a “Learn to DJ Vinyl” workshop on a First Friday at the library. Many campers came out to this workshop, and including parents who stayed to watch there were approximately 42 persons in attendance. The RPL’s location in the Arts District of Richmond’s downtown allowed Girls Rock! RVA to be part of the highly-publicized First Friday event that April, which is a monthly art walk featuring gallery openings, musical performances, and other activities. While RPL afforded Girls Rock! RVA a valuable PR opportunity, the partnership facilitated engaging programming for children and young adults at no cost and without burdening staff.

Richmond Public Library allowed Girls Rock! RVA to use its address as the office address for the organization as the group sought to incorporate in the state of Virginia and seek official 501(c)(3) federal tax-exempt status. Another benefit of this address to GR! was that it made the organization eligible for a grant through Richmond CultureWorks to fund programming. The Main Library’s branch manager Patty Parks alerted Girls Rock! to the existence of this grant. In the Spring of 2014, I applied for and received nearly \$1k to begin a project called the Free Richmond Instrument Lending Library. In our Community Visioning session, we heard a lot of talk of “increasing access” to services to make for a more healthy community. In addition, we frequently received questions from parents

wondering how their child could continue to play music outside of camp week. Often, these parents were concerned with cost, such as “do you know anyone who teaches inexpensive lessons?” or “how can my daughter keep playing drums if I can’t buy her a drumkit?” Girls Rock! RVA decided to deepen the partnership with the RPL by integrating owned instruments – several guitars, bass guitars, keyboards, and drum kits – into the library’s catalog, and making them available for young people age 8-18 to check out, free of charge, with a library card. The process of cataloging, as well as purchasing new equipment with the grant money from CultureWorks, began in May 2014 with a launch date for the program set for September 2014.

In June 2014, Girls Rock! co-sponsored an event with the Richmond Public Library called “Girls of Summer,” an evening of book recommendations, all featuring positive representations of female and minority characters, hosted by local authors Meg Medina and Gigi Amateau. An all-female punk band comprised of Girls Rock! camp counselors performed on the front steps of the library to open the event (full disclosure: I play drums in that band). The event had been held the previous two years, but attendance in 2014 was the highest ever, drawing in nearly 300 attendees. Many Girls Rock! campers attended as well. August of 2014 saw the Fourth Annual Girls Rock! RVA showcase, which had over 250 attendees. The Free Richmond Instrument Library launched in September 2014, garnered much press attention, and operates continually every other Saturday from a kiosk in the foyer of the Main Branch.

Girls Rock! RVA either hosted or co-hosted a significant amount of high-attendance programming at RPL from Fall 2013-Summer 2014, the period during which I collected data. In Figure 2 below, I have outlined relevant data concerning the partnership between

Girls Rock! RVA and the RPL, including program counts, repeat program attendance, and funds brought in to RPL through the partnership. Girls Rock! affiliated programs accounted for nearly 1/3 of total program attendance at RPL during that time period. GR! brought in more than \$1400 for use in library programs, vastly expanding the YA budget. More difficult to quantify, though important to consider, are the number of staff hours diverted to other library matters as a result of Girls Rock! hosting programs instead of RPL staff. The relationship has certainly been mutually beneficial, with Girls Rock! meeting its need for a cost-effective way to work with the community year-round, and RPL meeting its need to expand YA services with limited resources. Though the partnership had its pitfalls, which will be explored at the end of this chapter, overall the numbers, especially the high percentage of repeat attendance, point to a successful partnership and effective young adult engagement.

Figure 3 – Program Attendance Statistics for Girls Rock! RVA at RPL Sept 2013-Aug 2014

Program Name	Attendance Count	Est. Repeat Attendance
<i>People's Sewing Circle</i>	55	--
<i>Inspiration Workshop</i>	18	40%
<i>Community Visioning</i>	64	60%
<i>Fitness + Nutrition</i>	24	60%
<i>Vinyl DJ Workshop</i>	42	80%
<i>Girls of Summer 2014</i>	287	--
<i>Girls Rock! RVA Showcase</i>	250	--
Total Girls Rock! RVA Affiliated Program Attendance	740	
Average Estimated Repeat Attendance	60%	
Total RPL Other Young Adult Program Attendance, average 2013-2014	1,802	
Percentage of Annual YA Program Attendance affiliated with Girls Rock! RVA	29%	
Total Funds Spent on Library Programs from Girls Rock! Funds	\$450	
Total Funds Awarded to Girls Rock! for use in Library Programs	\$995	

The BMER project: A Cautionary Tale

One of the most impressive community engagement initiatives at RPL was the BMER, or Black Male Emergent Readers, Project. Conceived in April 2013 by law librarian

Meldon Jenkins-Jones in response to an alarming report that only 11% of Richmond's eighth grade black males were reading at grade level, the BMER project aimed to engage young black males with the library to boost black male literacy rates city-wide. A team of librarians including Meldon, the YA librarian, the Emerging Technology librarian, and two Branch Managers were assembled to design and plan the initiative.

Drawing heavily from the works of Dr. Alfred Tatum, a leading expert on young black male literacy, BMER was structured as a programming and research initiative with goals to engage black males with "enabling texts and activities." According to Tatum, these texts and activities should promote a healthy psyche, reflect the real world, focus on the collective struggle of African Americans, and serve as a road map for being, doing, thinking and acting. Enabling texts and activities should be inspiring and help young black males come to terms with their racial identity. Reading enabling texts should not just be reading for the sake of reading.²²

The BMER team researched grant opportunities, and identified an ALA Diversity Research Grant that seemed like a good fit to fund the initiative. Unfortunately, the team was unable to get a proposal together in time for the deadline. A Dollar General Literacy Foundation Youth Literacy grant was targeted next, but again the team was unable to make the deadline due to numerous other commitments. The team decided to try for the Dollar General grant the following year, and focused on reaching out to community partners in the interim to expand their ranks. A public information session was held at the library and invitations were sent to potential community partners. Activist community groups that came on board were the People's Library, the young black empowerment non-profit

²² Dr. Alfred Tatum, from *Reading For Their Life*, 2009.

Brothers on the Avenue, and the African American Genealogical Society of Richmond. A plan was laid out to host recurring sessions twice weekly after school. Sessions would alternate between an enabling text book club and discussion on Mondays, and an enabling activity workshop provided by a community partner on Wednesdays. Three of the nine RPL branches were committed to the project. Goals were lofty and long-term: to increase black male grade-level reading proficiency by 20%, graduation rates by 20%, increase college enrollment, and increase black male young adult employment, intellectual curiosity and self-directed learning. Success would be measured by analysis of Richmond Public Schools statistics over time.

The BMER launch was slated for May 5, 2014. Author Clay McLeod Chapman was selected to hold a discussion of the latest installment of his enabling text, *The Tribe* series, and lead a writing workshop. Community partners were not involved in leading the event. The launch was not promoted through local media outlets, but aggressively promoted through library social media. The total attendance was 35 people. This was the only BMER event held at RPL to date, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, personal issues in the lives of two of the librarians central to the team forced them to be away from work for significant periods of time. Some staff had been shifted around to different branch locations, and one member of the team had been fired. A proposal for funding to hire part-time, provisional staff (full disclosure: this part-time staff member was to be myself) to create an app-based game that could track the progress of BMER participants had been rejected by the administration, leaving the Emerging Technology librarian and myself, the architects of that project, disheartened. Community partners from the People's Library had accepted a

fellowship to produce socially engaged artworks in Philadelphia. The initiative was shelved, no pun intended, until a later date.

It was disheartening to witness such a well-conceived and significant initiative fail. I believe it happened for a variety of reasons, and I have included the BMER project in my writing as a cautionary tale. Firstly, I think the scope of the BMER initiative was too wide reaching. It is essential to implementing successful, youth-centered programming that planning be pragmatic with regard to scale (Hirzy 7), which is key to the best practice of quality, youth centered programming that is sustainable in the long-term. The stability of programming and long-term program sustainability, which are major factors in meeting the needs of young adults, depend on a reasonable and attainable scale (7). It may have been more prudent to engage a small group of struggling black eighth graders and track their success before opening the initiative up more generally and pursuing grant funding from major foundations. This could have been done through a partnership, the foundation for which already exists, with the Richmond Public Schools, the YMCA, or Boys and Girls Clubs of Richmond. Librarians could, when they decide to revisit BMER, perhaps approach one public school with a particularly low reading achievement score, and offer reduced disciplinary sentencing or extra credit for troubled or struggling students in exchange for their participation in the program. After collecting data and assessing the successes and failures among this smaller group, the program could be expanded and grant funding or administrative support could become easier to secure. This would allow more time for outreach and promotion, and provide more information to deliver to the press and potential community supporters.

Of course, the grant proposals were not written in the first place due to overburdened staff. That a staff of half a dozen or more librarians could not between them write a grant proposal over several months for a project that had been thoroughly researched by its founder is deeply problematic. The staff members may have been overly confident in their abilities to make time for the extra work, but the administration also rejected a request for funding to hire additional staff to share the BMER workload, indicating a lack of support for the initiative from the top. No one can anticipate personal issues like the ones that befell BMER's team members, but when staff is stretched so thin, the loss of one team member can be devastating. The loss of one and the temporary diversion of two others was too much for the team to survive. The reduced staff dedicated to the initiative did what they could to deliver a program launch event, but were incapable of implementing a PR campaign outside of social media. Most young black males in Richmond probably do not follow the public library's Twitter account. This underscores the importance of shared promotional efforts through community partnerships, which for the BMER project were inadequately formed.

In terms of best practices for young adult engagement, the BMER project met very few. The needs assessment was based on research from public school standardized tests, and not directly from community stakeholders. Though a public meeting was held, it did not involve many, if any, struggling young black male readers. The Teen Advisory Group was heavily involved, but most of the members of TAG are female, and moderate to high-achieving students. Other young black men who advised or volunteered to assist the project were RPL interns and members of a summer program called the Mayor's Youth Academy – again, moderate to high-achieving students. The underperforming black males

that BMER was trying to reach were not contacted directly, and therefore could not give input into the decision making process, a cornerstone of engagement. Barriers to engagement for this demographic could not have been identified directly, only assumed. In addition, the lack of contact with, and by extension lack of decision-making power placed in the hands of, the target group precluded BMER programming from being young adult-centered. Ties to community partners were too weak and too few for such a sweeping and ambitious initiative. Finally, the lack of direct support from the library administration in terms of funding and staff allocation likely prevented many of these best practices from being attainable in the first place.

In an underfunded public library such as RPL, a library that does not adequately support young adult services, trying to take on a large-scale community problem must happen slowly and incrementally. It is easy to be swept up in the passion for a cause as public librarians, especially if the cause combines community welfare and literacy, but any librarian-driven program needs to be steered by a pragmatic and achievable vision. The BMER project is an innovative idea appropriate for public library service to young adults aimed at addressing a major crisis in the Richmond community. If stronger partnerships were formed with activist community groups in the city, some of BMER's obstacles could be overcome.

Obstacles to Engagement Initiatives

Lack of administrative support, funding, and resources are obstacles to engagement at RPL that I have mentioned many times over in this writing. I asked members of the

People's Library and Girls Rock! RVA to describe obstacles they faced in their partnership with the RPL, if any, that had a detrimental effect on engagement efforts.

One organizer of Girls Rock! RVA, while generally positive about the partnership overall, thought that the library's policy of scheduling programs four months in advance was problematic for a group like Girls Rock! that tailors programs to camper requests and volunteer availability. This has been a problem, not only for Girls Rock!, but for the library itself. The lack of flexibility hinders the library's ability to respond quickly to the needs of its community. Additionally, at times programs planned this far in advance see workshop leaders having to cancel as unforeseen circumstances arise. For the launch of the Free Richmond Instrument Lending Library, for instance, I was initially told that I couldn't have the auditorium on a weekend in September when I wrote to reserve a date because they had committed the space to another program. I had to downsize an event that had brought the library nearly \$1k of funding for additional materials because of the bureaucratic nature of program scheduling. Girls Rock! RVA organizers felt disrespected, after a year in which we brought in over 700 program participants and in excess of \$1400 in program funding to the RPL, to be told they could not have space in the library for a grant-funded, heavily promoted program launch that would certainly benefit both organizations. Girls Rock! has since started to look for other venues to host programs, and other community partners, such as local art galleries and the YWCA, who might allow for more flexible scheduling. Librarians should be aware that a flexible scheduling policy for library programming is useful in attracting and maintaining involvement for community partners, especially smaller, emerging, and grassroots organizations.

Another Girls Rock! organizer suggested that the library place more emphasis on young adult input in all of its YA programming in order for the library itself to be more embedded in the young adult community. I think the goal of Richmond Public's YA librarian is to emphasize young adult input into library programming, but that this process is just beginning. The Teen Advisory Group and the development of engaging programming through partnerships with community activist groups like Girls Rock! RVA are ways in which the YA librarian and myself work toward this goal.

The People's Library organizers did not take issue with any RPL policy, stating that they were impressed that RPL librarians were willing to allow a messy, noisy project to take place in the library and were grateful to RPL librarians for connecting them with young adult library users. The refusal of the MLK library to admit People's Library books into the permanent collection was an obstacle that Strandquist and Bowles faced, and would not compromise their vision to overcome. The openness of RPL librarians to unorthodox programming resulted in the highly successful People's Library project. This openness and willingness to expand the idea of what a library is or can do should be common practice for young adult services in public libraries. Excluding unorthodox library practices can result in major missed opportunities for engagement and service to young adults, such as the MLK library missing out on hosting the People's Library project.

Assessing Activist Community Partners: What the Teens Have to Say

I interviewed members of RPL's Teen Advisory Group to get feedback on activist community partnerships at RPL. Teens generally had incredibly positive things to say about these community partners. TAG members reported attending multiple events held by

Girls Rock! RVA and the People's Library project. The two most dedicated TAG members reported attending 50 RPL programs over the past year, or approximately 75% of all RPL programs, respectively, and held a leadership or organizational role in many of these programs. One teen reported attending over 20 People's Library programs and 5 or 6 Girls Rock! RVA programs. Most TAG members attend required meetings, the TAG annual craft sale, and occasional workshops throughout the year. Of The People's Library, one teen said "if the people's library asked me to do a workshop on the moon at 12 in the morning I would still go." The teens reported attending events with the People's Library and Girls Rock! RVA that took place outside the library itself, evidencing a connection to these community groups that extends beyond their responsibilities as library TAG members. In addition, the teens reported that their involvement with RPL librarians and the activist organization leaders has helped them personally, through adding impressive extracurricular activities and garnering solid recommendations to add on to college applications. One TAG member, currently in her freshman year at the University of Virginia, attributes her acceptance at UVA to her work with RPL and her increased community involvement.

Skills and abilities teens attribute to their work with RPL and its activist community partners include creative and unconventional thinking, looking to the community for avenues to solve problems, the ability to talk with others in an engaging manner, confidence in their own abilities, increased motivation, power, and direction to make change in their communities, deeper connection to their communities, the ability to take initiative, leadership experience, and the ability to actualize dreams for their future. One TAG member said her experiences with RPL, The People's Library, and Girls Rock! RVA

have inspired her to pursue an MLS so that she can become a “knowledge sharer.” Teens stated that many of these skills and abilities will help and are helping them as they enter adulthood.

VII.

Discussion: The Value of Partnerships with Activist Community Groups for Young Adult Programming in Public Libraries

Partnerships between activist community groups and the Richmond Public Library have a large and lasting impact on young adult library users. One theme that is common across both young adult needs assessments explored earlier in this writing is that teens are passionate about issues facing their communities. Participation in activities outside of school that stems from intrinsic motivation based on personal interests has been shown to increase well-being and sustain commitment among young adults (Mulder, 26). Following through on teens' internal motivation to affect change in their communities has been crucial to the success of RPL's young adult engagement initiatives. This has been achieved by providing young adults with access to community activists through programming partnerships. These partnerships embed the library in a wide, community-based "web of knowledge" in which young adults become "civic actors who will benefit from and, most importantly, add to this web" (Malin, 9). In my research, I uncovered a growing body of research indicating that partnerships with community activist groups have been successful in many other library public library systems in the United States and internationally. A community-oriented approach to library service is becoming standard practice in today's world.

Repeatedly in this writing I have described problems or barriers to engagement at RPL as "institutional." Goulding (2009) reports that the United Kingdom hired a consultant to assist with community engagement efforts in the nation's public libraries, who identified a lack of "clarity and vision around community engagement" as a major

institutional barrier (40). The RPL has a similar institutional barrier to young adult engagement in that the demographic is largely neglected in guiding strategic documents outlining the library's priorities. This obstructs library staff and library partners involved in successful engagement initiatives from accessing administrative support, adequate funding, and the full range of library resources. To address the RPL's problem, which is certainly not unique, of library funding being allocated on the basis of program attendance and circulation counts, Lynch (2000) presents an interesting solution. Lynch suggests changing a library's mission to being defined "in terms of community needs and interests," which would shift "focus from outputs to outcomes... in this era of greater funding emphasis being placed on community outcomes" (7). The Richmond Public Library mission statement is currently as follows:

The mission of the Richmond Public Library is to inform, enrich, and empower Richmond's residents: to enrich lives and expand opportunities for all citizens by promoting reading and the active use of cultural, intellectual, and information resources through a dedication to excellence and professional service.²³

The statement is only specific in terms of outputs, what the library makes available to users, in pursuit of community outcomes, which are highly generalized. If the mission's emphasis were shifted to more specific community outcomes, the library's success and impact in the community would be easier to gauge and present to City Hall to maintain or increase library funding and staff levels. In terms of young adult programming, community engagement initiatives and existing partnerships with activist community groups could be given the priority they deserve. A shift in the library's mission to emphasize meeting

²³ <http://richmondpubliclibrary.org/content.asp?contentID=4>

community needs, addressing community interests, and seeking positive community outcomes could remove a significant institutional barrier to engagement initiatives.

Apart from the research presented in this paper, there is much documented evidence of the successes of a community engagement-oriented approach to library service that extends to young adults and communities at large. In a Florida public library system, Lynch (2000) writes of community partnerships as common practice, especially when exploring new ways of providing library service (such as, perhaps, placing greater emphasis on community engagement). The risk of undertaking a new initiative or implementing a change can be ameliorated by “heading into new arenas together with partners” (7). In addition, strengthening ties with partners creates a network of strong library advocates in the community (7). Goulding writes that partnerships in engagement initiatives allow librarians to “work across various sectors” within a community, which “raise[s] the profile of library service” (43).

Public libraries can offer much more to the community than promoting reading and the use of cultural/intellectual/information resources described by the RPL mission statement. These assets of public libraries, useful in engaging users and attracting community partners, include space/infrastructure, the capacity to commit to projects, highly skilled in-house staff, credibility, and the perception of being an honest broker in agreements and advocacy (Hovius 215). Partnerships with activist community groups have elsewhere been shown to add to what libraries can offer communities. In a partnership between youth art-based empowerment organization Transit Lounge and the public library in Queensland, Australia, Burnett and Spelman (2011) underscores the mutually beneficial relationship of community partner to library in a way that mirrors the

outcomes of activist community partnerships at RPL. Transit Lounge gained access to librarians' skill set, library resources, and cost-effective space to conduct activities with the ability to retain organizational independence through their partnership with the public library in Queensland (25). The library benefited from the partnership through gaining non-library perspectives and critiques of existing protocols, resulting in opportunities to rethink library service (28). Additionally, the library gained an engaged set of program participants and external staff to lead programs, as well as access to alternative community networks and resources (28). Burnett and Spelman noted that her organization could assemble young adults and organize events more quickly than the library could (29), underscoring my previous assertion that flexible program scheduling is important to successful partnered programming initiatives. Burnett and Spelman also echoed the findings of my research with her assertion that "partnerships are cost effective...with partnership projects outcomes are multiplied" (30). Scott (2011) states that partnerships with community organizations such as nonprofits "enabl[e] the library to do more with fewer resources" (219).

There is also evidence in the literature that public library partnerships encouraging users, and specifically young adults, to participate in civic activism are highly productive. Libraries can engage users in "civic discourse," connecting organizations to resources, "bridging divisions, and developing the capacity for their communities to solve problems" (Scott 211). Connecting young adults to needed resources and giving them agency through community activist-partnered library programs can lead to "activating young people," making them "part of the solution to community problems" (Burnett and Spelman 30). Johnson (2010) writes that libraries deeply embedded in the community through

partnerships can increase users' social capital and capacity for collective action (154). "[T]he density of both formal and informal organizations in a community" is a major predictor of collective action (149), and as libraries aggregate and connect community partner organizations and users, they become agents of community action. Additionally, Johnson presents evidence that institutions isolated from other organizations and community members are weakened in "their ability support or defend local interests" (149). It follows that institutions such as libraries, when deeply connected with community members and organizations, are strengthened in their ability to meet local needs and advocate on behalf of local interests. In an article advocating for community activism in public library service, Parker (2012) states that "the greatest asset a library has is its image in the community, but not everyone uses the library. The solution to this problem is to become part of as many aspects of your community as you can" (6). A library embedded in its community with strong ties to activist organizations multiplies its own institutional power and influence, and can simultaneously imbue young adults with greater social capital, empowering young adult users to engage in community activism and work to solve community problems.

VIII. Concluding Remarks: Replicating the RPL Model for Partnership with Activist Community Groups for Young Adult Engagement

The Richmond Public Library's partnerships with activist community groups have been fruitful in terms of increased young adult engagement, greater program numbers, program attendance and repeat attendance, higher visibility in the community through PR campaigns and social networking, expanded financial resources from grants and partners' expenditures, and increased volunteer staff. The programs provided by these organizations were among the most well funded programs the library hosted from 2013-2014, at no cost to the library itself. These programs were the most successful of 2013-2014 in terms of attendance, engagement, and publicity. Partner organizations benefitted through accessing free space to hold programming, the prestige of being associated with a major public institution, access to skilled staff and a diverse user base, and increased fundraising opportunities. Perhaps most importantly, these partnered engagement initiatives have had a profound impact on young adult participants, who reported feelings of empowerment and increased community involvement as well as newly developed skills, abilities, and self-confidence.

These types of partnerships can and should be replicated by public libraries that have yet to develop ties to activist organizations. Asset mapping activities and/or hosting a community dialogue with the involvement of young adult users is an excellent starting point to pursuing partnerships of this type. A key component to success is being open to unorthodox programming and partnership ideas. Even in the absence of adequate resources or administrative support, these types of partnerships can expand young adult library service without substantially increasing librarian workload. Successful

partnerships with activist community groups can potentially provide compelling evidence for increased funding or emphasis on young adult services and an institutional shift to focus on community engagement.

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