
Mix IT Up!: A Blending of Community Informatics and Youth Services Librarianship to Further Social Justice in Library and Information Science Education

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ABSTRACT

Mix IT Up! is a library and information science (LIS) education initiative blending theories and approaches in community informatics and youth services librarianship in order to further social justice agendas. It is based on collaboration with community partners who share similar interests and objectives. Prior to launching Mix IT Up!, community members identified a pressing need to engage with local youth more effectively. Mix IT Up! was developed to address this critical gap. From 2011 to 2015, Mix IT Up! enabled a broad array of community-based connections and projects related to youth advocacy and information technologies—the “IT” in the title—and provided robust opportunities for LIS students to gain experience in community engagement. Mix IT Up! serves as a model of effective practice in LIS education.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, librarians have demonstrated commitment to issues of social justice. Phenix and de la Peña McCook (2007) offer examples of dozens of exceptional library leaders who throughout the past century upheld fundamental principles, provided essential services in challenging circumstances, and evoked positive changes within the profession and beyond. Icons such as Sanford Berman, Ruth Brown, Barbara Gittings, Vivian Harsh, E. J. Josey, and Arnulfo Trejo offer much insight and inspiration. The Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG), a library organization formed twenty-five years ago, describes how libraries serve as principal anchors of an extended free public sphere, which makes an independent democratic civil society possible. PLG asserts that our work is not neutral, in that virtually every library issue (cataloging, indexing, collection development, ref-

erence, automation, management, etc.) embodies political value choices (2014). These choices, when grounded in social justice, demand greater voice and more representation for underrepresented and underpowered communities (Clark, 2011).

Pateman (2014) charges modern libraries to continually adapt and transform into community-led agencies of social change—based on identifying, prioritizing, and meeting community needs. Social justice is central to leadership in this arena (Blackmore, 2009). Today’s library leaders must rise to address myriad public needs by using innovative approaches backed by only limited resources. For youth services, this approach is evident in programs such as the Dallas Public Library’s Teen Wise Centers, which offer technology, games, tutoring, and other activities for at-risk youth; and at the Haines Public Library in Alaska, where local youth are coached to teach computer skills to adults. The project *nine to nineteen: Youth in Museums and Libraries: A Practitioner’s Guide* (2008), developed by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, offers a set of case studies to aid library and museum professionals’ understanding of what constitutes effective practice for youth engagement. Cases discussed represent successful programs that identify and overcome gaps in programming, build connections to participants’ families and communities, offer work opportunities, promote partnerships with community organizations and cultural institutions, and involve participants substantially in the planning process. Publications such as the online magazine *Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)* also recognize and promote these aspects of our work: “Youth-serving professionals must advocate for the . . . rights and services for youth within their libraries, schools, and communities, while providing opportunities for youth to practice decision making and responsibility in running their own projects” (n.d.).

Youth provide the vitality needed to keep libraries and other organizations relevant. Across the country—and beyond—major efforts are underway on the part of governments, social service agencies, private foundations, and not-for-profits to provide spaces and opportunities for youth. Librarians are compelled to ensure that we are included in this work in order to provide leadership for essential programming. Our focus on youth advocacy builds on our profession’s history and strengths in addressing new challenges facing those serving youth. Rich Lerner’s (2005) widely used framework, Positive Youth Development (PYD), informs our commitment to youth advocacy by promoting learning, positive values, social competencies, positive identity, and the environmental and program features that support and empower youth.

Drawing on concepts and practices grounded in social justice such as those discussed above, Mix IT Up!, a multifaceted model of youth advocacy connecting LIS students with community organizations, was conceived in 2010. The initiative was formally launched in 2011 under the leadership

of the author, as principal investigator (PI), at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, with support from an Institute for Library and Information Services (IMLS) Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program Grant (Mix IT Up!, 2013).

PROGRAM MODEL/METHODS

Mix IT Up!'s approach to LIS education incorporates school- and community-based components. It was developed to enable LIS students to consider youth interests and support community needs. Mix IT Up! facilitates a wide array of new learning opportunities. It may serve as a case for others interested in enacting similar efforts to promote social justice in related areas. Mix IT Up! draws on the model of Community as Curriculum, considering aspects of community within a process of inquiry. Inquiry-based learning (IBL) is a means of engagement that bridges classrooms and communities. In IBL, learning occurs as participants actively engage—asking questions, investigating concepts and methods, creating projects, discussing approaches, and reflecting (Bruce, 2014; University of Manchester, 2010).

LIS students typically prepare for professional roles through engagement with theory and practice (e.g., coursework and field placement). Mix IT Up! offered opportunities to explore theory and practice through a variety of means, including new coursework, independent learning, focused dialogue as part of group meetings, formal advising and mentoring, and extensive community engagement. During the four-year grant period, twenty LIS students participated in Mix IT Up!. Those who were recruited with the expectation that they would participate in all aspects of Mix IT Up! are known as scholars (see list of scholars in Appendix I). Scholars worked with one or more community partners for five to ten hours per week for the duration of studies—typically two years—in order to develop LIS programing promoting youth-based interests. Scholars were compensated with tuition waivers and/or stipends through grant funds, similar to graduate assistants employed on campus. This support was essential in enabling scholars to fully engage in project activities. All scholars expressed and manifested deep commitment to social justice and achieving action-oriented outcomes as part of their work with Mix IT Up! and in other contexts (Mehra, Rioux, & Albright, 2009). Additionally, the majority of participants self-identified as people of color, women, working-class, first-generation, and/or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ), and thus could potentially draw on lived experience in confronting challenges related to using LIS and other community services.

Other students, who did not have a formal project designation, supported scholar-led efforts. For example, GSLIS's Center for Children's Books (CCB) Outreach and Communications Coordinator maintained

ongoing contact with Mix IT Up! to provide resources related to collection development and programming.¹ Additionally, several GSLIS faculty and staff offered ongoing insight and guidance. For example, Dr. Sharon Irish, a researcher and instructor for LIS 5901 (Dialogues on Feminism and Technology), a new course developed around an international network of institutions and scholars called FemTechNet, frequently engaged in weekly meetings and provided advising and mentoring to scholars.

Critical Curriculum Connections

Mix IT Up! scholars were expected to complete the core LIS courses required of all students. Additionally, Mix IT Up! scholars pursued a variety of elective courses focusing on youth and community informatics. The majority of these courses had been developed at GSLIS in recent years under the Community Informatics (CI) umbrella. CI is grounded in the philosophy of the American pragmatists, particularly John Dewey (1956, 1966), based on the premise that if individuals and communities are to understand and create solutions for complex problems, they need the opportunity to engage in realistic, challenging situations. The aim of community inquiry is to develop a “critical, socially engaged intelligence, which enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good” (University of Vermont, 2002).

Established LIS courses of particular interest to scholars included the following: LIS 418 (Community Engagement), LIS 451 (Introduction to Network Systems), LIS490ST (Community Informatics Studio), LIS515 (Media Literacy for Youth), and LIS 590SJ (Social Justice in the Information Professions). These courses emphasize a mix of theory and practice that inform understanding and provide opportunities to critically explore many concepts related to Mix IT Up!, such as social justice, outreach, technology, and diverse media (e.g., print, images, games, and music).

One new course, LIS490YS (Youth Services Community Engagement), was developed in tandem with Mix IT Up! based on curricular feedback citing the need for a new course specific to working with youth in community settings. This course is described in the course catalog as follows:

A service-learning course examining youth services by exploring how young people’s information and educational needs are met by community institutions and organizations. This course draws upon youth services librarianship and youth informatics concepts to explore youth informatics in after school programs, community center programs, and other institutions that serve young people. A significant portion of coursework takes the form of service learning or community-based research via approved projects that match students’ interests.

All of the content of this course aligned with Mix IT Up!. As such, scholars and community partners were regularly invited to participate as guest

speakers to inform class discussions by sharing authentic experience, in particular examples of critical issues requiring increased attention.

In addition to pursuing coursework, Mix IT Up! students registered in independent studies in order to engage in greater depth with topics related to youth advocacy. One student also decided to pursue a doctoral degree building on the Mix IT Up! experience, and another developed a Certificate of Advanced Studies project further extending connections between youth advocacy and LIS.²

The best answer to the question “What is the most effective method of teaching?” is that it depends on the goal, the student, the content, and the teacher. But the next best answer is “Students teaching other students.” There is a wealth of evidence that peer teaching is extremely effective for a wide range of goals, content, and students of different levels and personalities. (McKeachie, Pintrick, Lin, & Smith, 1986, p. 63)

Throughout the course of the project, Mix IT Up! scholars came together to participate in weekly discussions in order to share ideas and learn together. This was an opportunity to engage in supportive high-energy conversations focused on progress with studies and project work. As part of these meetings, every other week scholars selected readings to share among themselves. Participants realized the importance of considering texts representing varied critical perspectives (e.g., critical race theory, feminism, queer studies, etc.). The materials that scholars selected and discussed represent a variety of important perspectives. They supplement works included in LIS courses and inform community engagement practices. The full list of readings is presented in Appendix II.

Collaborative Community Connections

De la Peña McCook (2000) describes several key aspects of community building and organizing. Librarians involved in these dynamic processes should be sincere in their commitment to the long-term well-being of community members, take time to build trust and consider the many facets of the community (e.g., culture, structures, concerns, goals), and be flexible! Community engagement is a process. It requires active participation, ample communication, openness to developing self-understanding, opportunities to achieve visible benefits, simultaneous gathering of information and analysis (i.e., building the boat while sailing), focusing on product and process concurrently, a mix of resources, and community control over decision making.

Mix IT Up! partnerships were established between GSLIS and community-based organizations with activities involving youth. These collaborations reinforced the School’s links to social justice both in terms of being situated within a land grant institution committed to public engagement and our professional emphases in areas such as equitable access to infor-

mation and literacy.³ Partnerships evolved as needs developed and the relationship grew within an iterative process.

Engagement emphasized youth advocacy guided by self-determination. As Dorothy Broderick, founder of *Voice of Youth Advocates*, describes, we aim to “create the conditions under which young people can make decisions about their own lives” (Jones & Waddle, 2002, p. 24). In a similar vein, the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) describes youth advocates as those who assume responsibility to empower youth to identify, retrieve, and use information and those who seek to expand resources, promote access, and encourage exploration of ideas.⁴ Durrani (2008) recommends advancing collaboration in conjunction with local arts groups to develop connections through nonprint media in order to expand the boundaries of the library and provide space in which local culture can flourish.

Mix IT Up! promotes youth advocacy in alliance with a number of distinct and dynamic community organizations. These include the Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center, Champaign Public Library, Don Moyers Boys and Girls Club, Dream Girls Academy, Jefferson Middle School, Puerto Rican Cultural Center, Tap In Leadership Academy, Uniting Pride Center of Champaign County, Urbana Neighborhood Connections, the Urbana Free Library, and WILL Illinois Public Media. Scholars matched with these community partners were charged to identify program development opportunities and cocreate initiatives centered on augmenting youth-based engagement.

Student placements with community organizations enabled many new connections with youth. These multiyear engagements began with LIS students being matched with partner institutions based on mutual interest. Once a match was established, students began a process of learning and listening, conducting organizational and community needs assessments, and shadowing and observing during the first semester. By the second semester, each student generated details describing his or her role in a partner project or series of projects centered on youth, created or chosen in consultation with the student’s partner, peers, and other supporters, which was then carried out as he or she completed the program. Minigrants to support program objectives (e.g., for collection development or purchasing specialized equipment) were available to project partners through a proposal submission process. In order to understand the diverse range of programs that emerged, examples of engagement across partnerships are presented below.

The *Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center (CCJDC) Library* is a long-running project established to promote literacy that was coordinated by Mix IT Up! for the duration of the grant. The Center has an annual population of over four hundred youth, many of whom are poor and/or of

color. Mix IT Up! scholars developed the library collection and programming in consultation with Superintendent Connie Kaiser and teaching staff. Kaiser's long-term dedication to providing innovative programming for youth was recognized during the grant period (Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission, 2013). Her interest in collaboration enabled scholars to offer new services and opportunities. For example, in collaboration with the Center for Children's Books, Mix IT Up! hosted an author visit at the CCJDC featuring Walter Dean Myers, National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, on March 26, 2013. Myers told stories, talked about the writing process, gave a sneak peak at upcoming work—and inspired youth! Mix IT Up! also established a digital music production workshop at the Center, wherein youth recorded lyrics and used Audacity and Garage Band to create audio productions. Mix IT Up! scholars also facilitated a number of reading and writing initiatives at CCJDC to promote basic literacy. Sometimes these evolved into new opportunities to create digital works. Youth had work published and were recognized with awards.

Additionally, Mix IT Up! successfully connected youth released from the CCJDC with other community programming. This reflects an important aspect of the project: that is, building confidence and interest in being more involved in various educational- and community-based activities.

Mix IT Up! activities with the *Don Moyers Boys and Girls Club* emphasized creating a welcoming area to promote literacy. The library space and collection were rejuvenated during the period of the grant and subsequently after-school and summer reading programs were developed using updated materials.

The Mix IT Up! partnership with the *Douglass Branch of the Champaign Public Library* included working with Project Next Generation, an Illinois State Library initiative aiming to bridge the digital divide by making recent technologies accessible to youth who otherwise have limited access to computers. Youth at the Douglass Branch Library participated in workshops involving digital cameras, online clouds, and online stock market games. Mix IT Up! also supported Project Next Generation's "Dream Job" program. Youth identified jobs of interest and developed lists of skills they would need for these careers. Youth brainstormed, performed online searches, and investigated which colleges offer programs for these careers. Youth also created audio/visual projects about their dream jobs using audio and video editing programs. Over the summer, middle school students at Douglass Branch participated in a fun outdoor scavenger hunt and bike construction program. They used global positioning software (GPS) devices to track the location of bike parts and then assembled a bike with Mix IT Up! scholar supervision.

Dream Girls Academy, Inc. was established in 2013 to instill healthy-relationships, character building, and leadership skills in teen girls (grades 8–college freshmen) while encouraging them to be future leaders and

positive, responsible citizens. In addition to regular programming, Dream Girls was the lead organization for the SMART Girls Conference in August 2014. This event showcased creative activities such as music, visual arts, spoken word, and entrepreneurship. Shortly after the organization was founded and in the late stages of the grant, a Mix IT Up! scholar began working with founder Debarah McFarlane to develop and host the Conference and build up supporting e-based resources.

Mix IT Up! offered weekly digital storytelling workshops to 7th grade ESL students at *Jefferson Middle School*. A scholar who was formerly enrolled in ESL courses as a youth led these workshops. Participants developed personal stories and shared their creations in an end-of-the-school-year celebration.

The online learning program through GSLIS (called LEEP) facilitated a long-distance partnership between Mix IT Up! and the *Puerto Rican Cultural Center*. A Chicago-based online student worked closely with Pedro Albizu Campos High School to encourage academic achievement and further college enrollment. This involved the creation of a scholarship database as well as one-on-one advising with approximately thirty youth to support college preparation. The scholar also worked closely with three youth to maintain the gardens that the school used as sites for applied learning in cultural history, science, and mathematics.

The Uniting Pride (UP) Center of Champaign County is a resource center for local LGBTQ-identified individuals that supports and promotes awareness of these populations. The UP Center hosts various weekly support groups, monthly events, and annual events. A Mix IT Up! scholar worked to digitally capture, preserve, and share stories of important historical figures from this community in order to provide open access now and into the future.

Urbana Neighborhood Connections Center (UNCC) provides educational and social-emotional enrichment to youth and their families, within the context of a structured and nurturing environment, through after-school and break-period programs. Mix IT Up! facilitated a variety of after-school image and video editing workshops at UNCC. Youth who participated in this programming created movies, stickers, e-toys, and drawings. In summer 2013, Mix IT Up! introduced UNCC youth to the Champaign-Urbana (CU) Fab Lab. CU Fab Lab is a collaborative community space dedicated to and supported by several University units. It is part of a global network of local labs enabling invention by providing access for individuals to a wide range of tools. At the Fab Lab, youth were guided through various production activities and created their own works.

A Mix IT Up! scholar supported weekly after-school Teen Tech Lab programming at *Urbana Free Library*. Teen Tech Lab participants play musical instruments, record raps and songs, use audio editing software to mix their productions, use 3D printers, and play video and computer games.

This programming provided opportunities for self-expression, critical thinking, and creativity by introducing new ways to use technology and gain familiarity with emerging tools.

According to *TAP In Leadership Academy* founder and executive director Sally Carter, people need to tap into what is inside themselves in order to tap into the community and new possibilities. TAP In facilitated this process via an after-school enrichment program for middle and high school students involving several University campus units, including the College of Education, Math, Science, and Technology Education (MSTE) and GSLIS. Tap In Snapshot was a weekly photography and digital storytelling program initiated by a Mix IT Up! scholar in which youth were taught the art of photography and video production. Participants developed digital stories with iMovie, combining photography, audio, and text.

WILL Illinois Public Media is a service of the College of Media that aims to educate, entertain, inspire, and empower community members. The Mix IT Up! partnership with Illinois Public Media included offering media literacy lessons to 2nd–5th graders at Stratton Elementary, a local magnet school. These lessons equipped students with the tools to think critically about the media they consume and produce. On a weekly basis, students shared their experiences with media. Students made digital presentations and participated in activities to draw attention to the ways in which teachers communicated and shared information with students. The capstone project, Photovoice, guided 2nd–5th graders through an analysis of the media on the walls of their schools. Additionally, a Mix IT Up! scholar developed two newscasts with twenty middle school students and taught them how to blog about their work. These examples of emergent youth advocacy initiatives offer insights into the range of social justice–based experiences afforded by linking LIS students and community organizations. As interests, needs, and resources shift, so does engagement. Some facets of Mix IT Up! activities ended after grant completion. Others continue to evolve via other means, such as class projects, practica, and volunteering.

DISCUSSION

Mix IT Up! was developed in response to local community members who identified a pressing need to engage with local youth more effectively. By blending theories and approaches in community informatics and youth services librarianship and collaborating with community partners who shared similar interests grounded in social justice, Mix IT Up! enabled a broad array of progressive community-based connections and projects related to youth advocacy over a four-year period.

Social justice through youth advocacy includes supporting and empowering youth as individuals, as members of families and communities, and as part of society as a whole. In an effort to better conceptualize our experience with youth advocacy in the context of LIS, Mix IT Up! participants

developed a list of approaches. These practices, which scholars grouped into three general areas—advocacy mindfulness, advocacy @ the library, and advocacy in the community—may serve as a guide for others seeking to augment youth advocacy efforts (see table 1 for these approaches to youth advocacy in LIS).

During the course of the project, LIS students assumed many roles and had ample opportunities to engage in learning and leading. They shared insights and lessons learned in small groups and at local events as well as in scholarly and professional arenas. New scholarship emerged in unanticipated ways. For example, Jeanie Austin's paper, "Critical Issues in Juvenile Detention Libraries," was selected for presentation at the YALSA Trends Impacting Young Adult Services event in January 2012. In fall 2013, Joe Coyle cowrote a paper, "Reimagining Juvenile Justice Through Juvenile Detention Center Writing Programs," to present at the Modern Language Association Conference in collaboration with Terrence Sampson, a 36-year-old individual who has been incarcerated in Texas since the age of 12, and Lil Deontamommy, a young person from the Champaign-Urbana area who attended weekly writing workshops at the Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center Library (Sampson, Coyle, & Deontamommy, 2013). Together the three authors explored the value of writing programs as spaces for young people "to make meaningful decisions, establish con-

Table 1. Approaches to youth advocacy in LIS

Advocacy Mindfulness	Advocacy @ the Library	Advocacy in the Community
Recognize youth as individuals while understanding the social contexts in which they operate	Seek input to inform LIS services directly from youth	Advocate for institutional and social structures which support youth development
Remain informed about issues that impact youth	Protect and defend the rights of all youth to access library materials and services	Challenge systemic inequities and institutional biases
Discuss issues that impact youth	Provide thoughtful, respectful, and equitable library services to all youth	Promote youth civic engagement
Consider who is not represented and/or engaged	Provide library services that support successful youth development from birth to adulthood	Facilitate advocacy efforts by others
Consider your own privilege	Provide youth with information, tools, skills, and spaces to advocate for themselves	Support and/or partner with organizations and individuals that engage in youth advocacy
Practice empathy	Promote youth creativity, self-sufficiency, and critical literacy	Provide communities with information, tools, skills, and spaces to engage in youth advocacy

nections with folks on the outside, and be treated as an author or artist rather than a *juvenile offender or delinquent*.” The result was a thoughtful article that offered a powerful counter-narrative demonstrating the ways in which organizations often silence the perspectives of people who are incarcerated. Finally, on June 28, 2014, our Mix IT Up! poster, “LIS Students, Youth, and Community Collaboration,” was recognized with a third-place award at the 2014 American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference. We were very pleased to have the students’ efforts acknowledged in this manner as we were approaching the final chapter of our project.

By emphasizing social justice and advocating for youth-centered community needs, Mix IT Up! positively impacted upon students, practitioners, faculty, curriculum, community organizations, and hundreds of local youth. Through a mix of inquiry-based curriculum and community engagement, LIS students developed knowledge and experience with youth advocacy. Subsequently, students who graduated have gone on to secure employment and/or pursue further study—and to continue leading critical LIS initiatives grounded in social justice. The Mix IT Up! Blog, <http://mixituplis.wordpress.com/blog>, serves as an access point to learn more about and extend on our efforts to link LIS education with youth advocacy.

APPENDIX I

Mix IT Up! Scholars and Placements

Jeanie Austin* – Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center
 Karen Barton – Urbana Fee Library
 Jeannette Bruno – Puerto Rican Cultural Center, Chicago
 Cat Calcagno – Urbana Neighborhood Connections Center
 Joe Coyle* – Don Moyers Boys and Girls Club, Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center
 Sasha Kinney – Illinois Public Media
 William Langston – Douglass Branch Library, Champaign
 Lucas McKeever – Uniting Pride Center of Champaign County
 Jhani Miller — Don Moyers Boys and Girls Club, Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center
 Jerrod Moore – TAP In Leadership Academy
 Ana Ortega – Jefferson Middle School
 Jane Sandberg – TAP In Leadership Academy
 Tezeru Teshome – Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center
 Nicole Webb – Dream Girls Academy
 Seida Shifa Yishak – Douglass Branch Library, Jefferson Middle School

* Also served as Mix IT Up! Project Coordinator, a 50 percent graduate assistantship position working with the PI, Dr. Rae-Anne Montague, in planning, facilitating, and documenting program activities.

APPENDIX II

Mix IT Up! Scholars Selected Readings

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NOTES

1. The CCB (<http://ccb.lis.illinois.edu>) is a crossroads for critical inquiry, professional training, and educational outreach related to youth-focused resources, literature, and librarianship. The Center's mission is to facilitate the creation and dissemination of exemplary and progressive research and scholarship related to all aspects of children's and young adult literature; media and resources for young (ages 0–18) audiences; and youth services librarianship. The Outreach and Communications Coordinator is a graduate assistantship. The students who held this position during Mix IT Up! (Lauren Chenevert, Thaddeus Andracki, and Anna Shustitzky) generously contributed to project discussions and activities. Claire Gross, who also worked with the CCB as well as serving as a teaching assistant in youth services, and DoMonique Arnold, who provided initial support to launch program activities, also provided valuable contributions.
2. At the time of this writing, Jeanie Austin's preliminary dissertation title was "Libraries for Social Change: An Examination of Public Library Services and Juvenile Detention." Joe Coyle's CAS Project was based on a syllabus he was designing to teach a new LIS course, "Library Services for Youth in Custody," soon after Mix IT Up! was complete.
3. See University of Illinois Public Engagement, <http://engagement.illinois.edu>; and American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/aboutala>.
4. See Young Adult Library Association (YALSA), "Definitions of Youth Advocacy," from *Serving the Underserved II: Training manual*. Seminar conducted by Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association, January 1996, San Antonio, Texas. Also see <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/advocacy> and <http://youthserviceslibrarianship.wikispaces.com/Advocacy>.

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