

L550: Issues in Public Librarianship
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Literature Review #2:

Rural Libraries

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Rural libraries face the same essential challenge confronting every public library: how to fulfill the library's mission with the resources available in terms of budget, staff, collections, technology, community support, and opportunities for partnerships. For rural libraries, however, the challenge is greater, since resources are shallower and sparser on all fronts. Many of the givens for urban and suburban libraries—a bookmobile, for example, or IT support, or degreed librarians—are simply unavailable in the rural environment, or require significant effort and improvisatory will on the part of staff, volunteers and library boards to produce. Partnerships, the usual fuel for more ambitious projects, are harder to come by when there is no art museum, no Boys & Girls Club, no Kiwanis, no university with its army of student volunteers and interns (and its own library resources), and few if any local businesses financially strong enough to participate. While the rural library's roles as technology center and community center are arguably more critical for the people it serves than for its urban and suburban counterparts' (since the library may be the sole or one of the few local resources in these areas), it typically has fewer and weaker means of fulfilling those roles effectively. The many rural success stories celebrated in the professional literature, however (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Kellison, 2004; Watkins, 2004), testify to how much a library and its community can achieve with bright ideas, a spirit of mutual support, and successful grantwriting and networking.

Rural libraries are typically harder hit in times of economic downturn, because their communities are harder hit, and likewise have a harder time joining national economic recoveries (rural poverty is a different animal from urban poverty, and receives significantly less attention). The business model will consistently fail rural communities

without outside intervention, since it is too difficult and unprofitable to serve small, dispersed populations. This combination of thin population and lack of services makes the rural library's presence all the more crucial as a community center. Library programs, services and space are especially potent for young adults (Smith, 2003)—fewer things being more sadly destructive than teens with nowhere to go and nothing to do—and for immigrant populations that are increasingly finding homes in rural areas (Snyder, 2004).

Broadband Internet simply does not come to many rural areas, and even dial-up Internet service may be prohibitive when no ISP provides a toll-free local access number (and even when you get it, phone lines may be so bad that you can't keep even a 28k connection). Thanks to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) U.S. Library Program (<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Libraries/USLibraryProgram/>), many rural libraries have received the hardware, software, connectivity, and technical training to fill this gap (a gift undiminished by the fact that these grants also work to ensure greater and more widespread dependence on Microsoft software). The Public Access Computing Project's report on the results of the BMGF U.S. Library Program details the many positive, ongoing outcomes from this kind of support for computing technology in small libraries (Heuertz, Gordon, Gordon, & Moore, 2003). Thanks to BMGF support for WebJunction's Rural Library Sustainability Program (<http://www.webjunction.org/do/Navigation?category=11131>), rural librarians continue to have access to technology training and support. In general, anyone with an interest in rural libraries should take advantage of WebJunction's extensive (if sometimes confusing to navigate) resources (<http://www.webjunction.org/do/Navigation?category=498>).

It is also true that “a library has a distinct personality based on the population it serves” (O’Neill 1995), and rural libraries vary greatly in their size, extent, and levels of activity. Some are lucky to have a State Library that works to provide invaluable resources such as OCLC membership, a state-wide catalog, and encouragement of inter-library relationships (Newell, 2005). Other libraries must struggle on their own as single-branch, independent systems, often without cooperative neighbor libraries. My in-laws live in extremely rural Oklahoma, where the nearest public library is across the county line—but they can’t get a library card there or use the computers because they are not county residents. Melton Public Library in French Lick, Indiana (where I interned) is another stand-alone single-building library in an economically depressed county. It has no relationship with the other two libraries in the county, a tiny (dingy, unused) library in Paoli and a cozy Carnegie library in Orleans. Melton is a vibrant and much-loved community center, thanks in part to a well-designed building renovation that was completed in September, 2001 (just before the economy completely tanked). Much of Melton’s success is owed to the intense commitment and good cheer of the director, Carol Thornton-Anderson, who is also head of youth services. Carol has two full-time and three part-time staff, and none of them has an MLS (including Carol, whose Masters is in Social Work). Carol and her staff manage to make exceptional use of every available resource, and to create resources where none existed through grantwriting and bringing the right people together. Melton has received Gates and LSTA funds to keep two bustling computer centers going (one upstairs in the adult area, one downstairs divided between children and teens), and launched a shoestring “100 Books Before Kindergarten” program that won grant support in its second year. Rural libraries can be remarkable!

References

Anderson, J. 2005. Stevens County (WA) Rural Library District: Stayin' alive, online.

WebJunction. Retrieved September 22, 2005, from

<http://www.webjunction.org/do/DisplayContent?id=11198>.

Profiles the Stevens County Rural Library District in northeastern Washington. Established only in 1996, but prevented from establishing a building by an immediate tax challenge, the library's director kept the library alive online until funds were finally approved in 2002. The library used its website to successfully counter its opponents' misinformation as well as provide library services before physical facilities were available.

Heuertz, L., Gordon, A., Gordon, M., & Moore, E. 2003. *The impact of public access computing on rural and small town libraries*. Seattle: Public Access Computing

Project. Retrieved 9/22/05 from

http://www.gatesfoundation.org/NR/Downloads/libraries/eval_docs/pdf/RuralImpacts0301.pdf.

Also published in *Rural Libraries* 23(1); however, retrieval from WilsonWeb fulltext in HTML format does not provide figures and tables (PDF not available at this writing). Bound copies of the journal at IUB are stored in the Alternative Library Facility (ALF). Reports on rural libraries and computing, based on surveys and site visits to evaluate the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation U.S. Libraries program. Provides useful definitions of "rural", and summaries of challenges facing rural communities. Finds that computing has liberated rural librarians and their patrons for information-seeking and collaboration, and that small-scale deployment in these smaller libraries has largely avoided the headaches associated with technology in larger systems. The challenge now is to sustain development and keep library staff (and patrons) trained as new technologies become available.

Kellison, E. 2004. Whitman County Library: The little library that could. *WebJunction*.

Retrieved 9/25/05 from <http://webjunction.org/do/DisplayContent?id=798>.

Profiles the Whitman County Library in southeastern Washington, which almost closed in 1998 but was resurrected by a positive, energetic new director (promoted from within the staff) willing to make changes. Director Kristie Kirkpatrick re-energized staff by granting autonomy,

focusing on personalized customer service and patron recognition, and requiring tech savviness (some staff left, unwilling to get onboard with the new program). Inspired by Kirkpatrick and her staff, the community rallied as well, with the Friends group growing from fourteen members in 1998 to 220 in 2004. Extensive promotion through community networking, development of web-based services, and successful requests for State Library technology help also contribute to the library's revival.

Newell, B. 2005. Montana libraries: Good neighbors. *WebJunction*. Retrieved online at <http://webjunction.org/do/DisplayContent?id=10816>.

Published by the Montana State Library as a Microsoft Word document on the WebJunction site, this "pre-planning document and white paper" couches statistics on Montana's communities and libraries in breezy, positive, yet realistic language from the Montana State Library Director, Bruce Newell. Montana libraries rank low on many national scales for salaries and budgets, but the State Library fights to provide services and build inter-relationships to pool and strengthen resources. Newell recommends a focus on cooperation, on developing web-based relationships and resources, and on always setting the success of the library user as the library's goal.

O'Neill, L. 2005. A small public library and its community: Case study of Churchill County Library. *PNLA Quarterly* 69(4), 12-13, 32. Retrieved 9/22/05 from <http://bert.lib.indiana.edu:2306/hww/Journals/getIssues.jhtml?sid=HWW:LIBFT&issn=0030-8188> (WilsonWeb via Indiana University Libraries).

Concisely summarizes rural library issues and background scholarship before profiling Churchill County Library (CCL) in Fallon, Nevada. CCL has 6.13 FTE staff serving a population of 24,000 spread over 2,000 miles (4.5 persons/square mile). A farming town that is fast becoming a bedroom community for Reno 65 miles away, CCL is focused on keeping up with the changes among its patrons and keeping its services meaningful (and publicized).

Smith, E. L. 2003. Why rural public librarians should (and how they can) serve young adults. *Rural Libraries* 23(2), 45-68. Retrieved 9/22/05 from <http://bert.lib.indiana.edu:2306/hww/Journals/getIssues.jhtml?>

sid=HWW:LIBFT&issn=0030-8188 (WilsonWeb via Indiana University Libraries).

Summarizes research and statistics on 1) young adults in general and rural teens in particular; and 2) library services for young adults and their impact. Demonstrates the effectiveness of library programs for young adults in providing meaningful outlets and a safe haven for rural teens.

Snyder, T.A. 2004. Rural library services to minority populations: Case studies in the

United States. *Rural Libraries* (24)1, 51-63. Retrieved 9/22/05 from

<http://bert.lib.indiana.edu:2306/hww/Journals/getIssues.jhtml?>

sid=HWW:LIBFT&issn=0030-8188 (WilsonWeb via Indiana University Libraries).

Presents results of a survey of library services to minorities and immigrants, and illustrates principles with examples from eight rural libraries in Florida, Kansas, Colorado and Wisconsin. Concludes that there are seven primary challenges to minority services in rural libraries: 1) language barriers (including multiple regional dialects of Spanish); 2) establishing trust of the library, which is associated with the government and immigration; 3) poor attendance of targeted programs; 4) funding; 5) staffing, particularly staff who can speak immigrant languages; 6) serving fluctuating migrant populations; and 7) changing negative attitudes of majority populations towards immigrants.

Watkins, C. 2004. Small libraries, big ideas. *American Libraries* 35(3), 28-30.

Stresses that “*small* is not the same as *less*” in an encouraging examination of how library networks and creative, community-responsive programming and partnerships help rural libraries provide vibrant, valued service. References the 2003 Public Access Computing Project report. The first of five cover-story articles on rural and public libraries in this issue. Some might argue that accentuating only the positive does not help rural librarians get the attention they need—as evidenced by the ALA Task Force on Rural School, Tribal and Public Libraries 2004 report, which found that rural librarians are intensely frustrated by neglect from national library organizations (http://www.ala.org/ala/olos/outreachresource/ruraltf_finalrpt.pdf, accessed 9/25/05). No action appears to have been taken to address the concerns expressed in the report, and the careless way in which it was published (typos intact) only underscores its conclusions.