

Where All Are Welcome: Social Capital and the Public Library as a Community Meeting Place

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As the public library's principal role as a "storehouse" of information wanes, public libraries are searching for additional ways in which to increase their impact on their communities and remain responsive to user needs. As a result, the public library as a *community meeting place* is becoming the new vision and the creation of social capital a possible new role.

Social capital is both the process and product of forming beneficial social relationships. It explains, in short, the social and economic benefits of community activity. According to Robert Putnam (2000), social capital is a resource found in "dense networks of social interaction" that encourage civic engagement, reciprocity and generalized trust among community members and help people work together to achieve common goals. Social capital, in theory, increases community cohesion. Given the increasing isolation of North Americans (Putnam, 1995; Oldenburg, 1999; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006), physical (i.e., bricks and mortar) places where community members can meet and interact play an important role in creating a productive social environment. Public libraries appear to be one of these places where informal social interactions can still occur (Leckie & Hopkins, 2002) and where community members of various ages, ethnicities and economic backgrounds can interact with one another and work together to improve their communities. For this reason, it is crucial that libraries and librarians understand the ways in which the public library helps create social capital for its community and what best practices can foster this process most effectively.

This paper reports on a study in-progress (currently beginning the last of its three phases) that is examining the relationship between social capital and public libraries in both urban and rural communities in Ontario, Canada. It examines, specifically, the kinds of relationships that are established between library staff and patrons as well as the value these users place on these social interactions and the library as a public place. The study uses a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2003), employing both quantitative and qualitative methods in its design. First, to understand the relationship between library use and civic engagement, community involvement and levels of trust, the researchers administered questionnaires that collected detailed information on respondents' activities both inside and outside the library. (For comparison, the researchers administered similar questionnaires to non-library users at nearby shopping malls, coffee shops and other gathering places in each participating community.) Second, to better understand the "place" of the public library in the lives of its most frequent users, the researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with library users and staff members at each library. The interviews explored such things as informal interactions between staff and library users and how these along with library programming, staff help, attending community meetings at the library and the use of library

materials and services can help increase a user's sense of connectedness and decrease their sense of social isolation.

Preliminary findings suggest that libraries have the greatest impact on poor urban communities where there are few other resources for residents to draw upon and have the least impact in rural communities where libraries are only one of a number of places where residents have opportunities to gain needed resources. The paper's conclusions explore implications for practice and identify areas for further study.

References

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