Academic Library Outreach: A Framework

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Abstract: Academic libraries could play a role in community service and outreach if a framework was developed to address challenges that often arise in these sorts of ventures. The term "community" has the potential to be applied more broadly by expanding the scope beyond the campus community. By extending the definition of community, we are greeted with a new population of users who have variety of needs—from informational to media literacy–that could be met through outreach endeavors. This paper seeks to outline potential ways in which the core missions of academic libraries align with these broader needs of community partners. Through a case study approach, it was possible to identify not only points of alignment with the library or university mission but also potential limitations and challenges with community engagement beyond the campus community.

Keywords: Academic library outreach, community engagement, outreach, community partnerships

Introduction:

In order to more deeply explore the topic of academic libraries and outreach to the community beyond the campus, I developed a case study to examine a framework for use in academic library outreach. To conduct the case study, I continued to work with a project site, the Shadow Wood community computer lab Champaign, Illinois, USA. Earlier work with this site involved refurbishing ten computers to replace the eight outdated computers in the existing space during a semester-long project in LIS 451: Introduction to Network Systems. The continued work began as not only an opportunity to offer assistance via workshops or programs to the community but also as a way to explore the possibility of academic library outreach to this type of public computing space. By developing a clear way to conduct library outreach, it would make the process easier for all parties involved—librarians, community partners and other key stakeholders.

Literature Review:

Throughout the process of reviewing relevant literature academic library outreach, it became apparent that there is not a clear definition of the terminology. So, to begin with, it is necessary to define academic library outreach. Despite the broad definition of the terminology used in many of the sources reviewed, there are select sources that: help define academic library outreach as an activity and identify motives for outreach; the historical roots of library outreach and how they contribute to the modern notion of outreach; exemplify the types outreach; and assist in determining the scope of outreach initiatives.

When seeking definitions for outreach, it was key to find one that recognized outreach efforts like collaborations, partnerships, and cooperative efforts that went beyond the boundaries of campus and went beyond more traditional types of outreach to campus departments or existing institutions in the community (like public libraries, museums, etc.). According to Tina Schneider (2003), in the article "Outreach: Why, How and Who? Academic libraries and their involvement with the community," the definition library outreach focuses more on "independent efforts of academic libraries to move beyond their walls or traditional clientele to interact with the

surrounding community." By using this definition of academic library outreach, the impact of outreach projects is greatly expanded. Further, it recognizes the types of interactions that can take place. As Schneider (2003) points out, there are different motivations for libraries to engage in outreach. These include: an expressed need, the outreach initiative is seen as part of their library mission, and/or the outreach is in response to a problem (Schneider 2003). Throughout the literature review, it was clear that the examples of community outreach could be tied back to these motivations. Further, it was not evident from the examples of collaboration that a specific approach or motive provided more success than others.

This modern definition of academic library community outreach contrasts past notions of outreach that focused more on partnering with other libraries or other institutions (Schneider 2003). However, elements of outreach exist in early discussions of academic libraries and whether or not community members or non-affiliated patrons should be able to use the materials. In the 1967 article "Community Use of Academic Libraries: A Symposium" moderated by E. J. Joesey, we can see some of the early notions of outreach as well as parallels to some of the motivations for outreach discussed by Schneider. Also, to provide context, inter-library loan as we know it today was in its beginnings at this time as well. Many of the historical articles that mention outreach or collaboration were referring to partnerships between libraries to share materials. Essentially, the symposium described in the article was called because of the various "perplexing problems facing academic libraries attempting to serve the general public" (Josey, et. al. 1967). Of particular note, is the section by Edward A. Howard called "The Work of the Public Library Supplementing the Resources of the College Library." This section offers an example of an institutional type partnership that parallels modern outreach efforts to established institutions in the community. Another section of the article, by Richard C. Quick called "Community Use-Dealers Choice," highlighted the results of a survey that found varying degrees of welcoming community use and that high school aged students were the least welcome of all groups (Josey, et. al. 1967). This sentiment, on the part of college librarians, is demonstrated in one of the more recent examples of an outreach initiative that focused on neighborhood youth that were using the campus library (Kudlay 2000). In general, the discussions in the Josey (1967) article highlight the library seeking to offer community services as a part of their library mission. This contributes to the modern notion of outreach, despite the focus on lending materials, because it does reach beyond the campus walls and it follows one of the motivating factors, connection to mission, described in the Schneider (2003) piece.

Several articles and book chapters highlighted community-focused academic outreach. This illustrates that outreach has evolved from an inter-library sort of interaction to something more in the field of librarianship. These sources: "Orienting neighborhood youth to an academic library" by Robert Kudlay (2009) and "Reaching Forward: Three High School Outreach Initiatives at Kent State University" by Kenneth Burhanna, et. al. (2009) focus on collaborative/outreach efforts directed towards youth. The motivation behind the first outreach initiative was primarily a response to a problem (Schneider 2003). Neighborhood youth were gathering after school hours to use the public access computers at the college library. Instead of creating rules and policies to control the youth, the library instead found ways to welcome the youth and introduce them to the library. A key point to note about this outreach endeavor is the captive audience: the youth were *already* coming to the library space so involving them in activities was a natural next step. As mentioned earlier, Kudlay (2000) pointed out that not all librarians were excited at the prospect of working with these youth but in the end the library helped start a campus-wide movement to involve youth. Opportunities arose for the youth to participate in campus activities as well as get tours of the residence halls (Kudlay 2000). Other articles, such as "Outreach initiatives in academic libraries, 2009-2011" by Melissa Dennis (2012) highlight a large-scale outreach effort with the community where many institutions are involved. In this case, it was a "big read" type

project. The motivation behind this effort seemed to fit most closely to the library's mission as it applied to the campus and could be extended to the community.

Beyond examples of outreach efforts, many of the sources highlight the scope of outreach activities. The expanding scope of library outreach, which now goes beyond campus departments, illustrates yet again that the concept of outreach is continuing to evolve in the field. In particular, "Breaking out of our shell: expanding the definition of outreach in academic libraries" by Nancy Courtney (2009) from the book *Academic Library Outreach: Beyond Campus Walls* highlighted how academic libraries could become "engaged institutions." This broadens the scope of academic library outreach by involving the library as institution that participates in the image and inter-working of the campus. Further, this chapter highlights the importance of recognizing that outreach is not only service but also can help promote the teaching or research mission of the greater university (Courtney 2009). By focusing on the potential impact, it is possible to broaden the scope of the outreach effort. This opens up additional opportunities for community partnership as well as creates an environment that could support the needs of greater community. A blog entitled "The Outreach Librarian" also highlights the importance of library outreach--for all types of libraries. The founding librarian of this blog, Lizz Zitron, also believes that by broadening the scope of outreach for academic libraries to the community beyond campus is beneficial. In her post "Why?" she explains that through outreach activities people become familiar with the library as well as librarians. At first, people may have a vague sense of what the college or university library is or how the library works. According to Zitron, outreach can help relieve people's library anxiety and make them more comfortable with using the library. By considering outreach to the community, the library can not only further its mission but also support the university's mission. Despite outreach efforts taking quite a bit of coordination, they can offer lots of benefits as illustrated by numerous articles in this literature review.

Methodology:
The research method used a case study approach to analyze the framework used for outreach to the Shadow Wood community. The Shadow Wood site was chosen for this case study due to an existing relationship forged as part of a class project in the previous semester. The management of the mobile home park supports the community center. They wanted to continue to offer Internet access to the children of the community, so our group had refurbished ten computers for the lab (Prairie Net 2013). This previous involvement allowed me to use this community site and partnership with a community ambassador working at the lab to explore an outreach framework that could be applied in academic library setting.

The framework for this study used a community action research based approach, as defined by Randy Stoecker (2005). The first phase, according to Stoecker in *Research Methods for Community Change*, is diagnosing. In this phase of the project, it is important to find what Stocker calls the "change opportunity" for the community. So, before beginning any sort of specific activities, I re-evaluated my existing knowledge about the community to find any opportunities for change. The next phase, referred to as "prescribe" in Stoecker's book, involves gathering the needed information as well as determining and identifying potential issues that need addressing before the community change can take place. In order to fulfill this phase of the project, I made numerous trips to the lab site hoping to observe users to identify how they use the lab space as well as to address any potential needs. The third phase in this methodology is implementation. Initially, I hoped the implementation would involve some sort of program or workshop activity with the lab users in the community but the lab space ended up closing for the summer in early July due to lack of use. Finally, the last phase, according to Stoecker, is to evaluate. For this phase, I planned to use an evaluative method that is less outcome-focused and that will instead help inform the outreach efforts and future community action. The *Reflect and*

Improve: A tool kit of engaging youth and adults as partners in program evaluation seemed like an excellent resource for involving youth in the program evaluation. According to Stoecker (2005), by focusing on the community, the goal is for the prescribed change to continue working within the community space. This reflection toolkit could help promote this concept.

Discussion of Findings:

The framework for this summer's case study was based on several different theories and principles. As highlighted earlier, the most notable is Randy Stoecker's community action based research. Additionally, the case study at Shadow Wood this summer was heavily informed by readings from my previous semester's class: Virginia Eubanks (2011) and John Dewey (1998). These various theories and principles worked together to help me create a very community-focused rather than a top-down focus to my outreach efforts. Virginia Eubanks (2011) redefines the digital divide paradigm by declaring it is not a divide. Rather, the "have-nots" (defined as not having technology in the paradigm) do indeed interact with technology, just not in positive ways. Further, Eubanks emphasizes the importance of knowing the community (and misconceptions of the community) you are working with on a project. John Dewey (1998) and his ideas of popular education shaped how I planned to deliver the outputs of the outreach—programming or activities at the computer lab. I wanted to work with the community to create a learning experience that defies the typical classroom and a top-down approach. Though I did not get to offer a workshop, I gained first-hand experience in working with a community partner.

Despite the strength of the framework tested by the case study, additional factors to consider are: timeline of the project; level of community involved and commitment; intended audience of outreach; level of librarian/library (or in my case graduate student) involvement; entertaining possibility of multiple venues or options for outreach. These factors will all impact the use of Stoecker's framework and thus those attempting outreach using this framework should plan to accommodate them.

In addition to examining the framework for outreach, I recognize it is important to consider the role of the library in the outreach. Several of the articles and examples encountered in the literature review were focused on partnerships with other institutions or were conducted in such a way that the community voice was no longer apparent or evident in the project. The silencing of the community voice is further complicated when we consider that outreach efforts often stem from the library's mission or are created because of a community need (Schneider 2003). Ignoring the community voice is not conducive to the type of outreach I was attempting with the framework. Further, it is likely not the type of outreach that will offer tangible benefits for both the library and the community. Additionally, some of the examples from the literature review contained captive audiences or guaranteed partnerships. These factors will greatly shape the outcomes of the outreach initiative. Though there was an established partnership with the site I was working with, there was not a guarantee on lab attendance over the summer. Due to lack of attendance and other circumstances at the lab, I was neither able to test these last phases of Stoecker's framework nor employ the *Reflect and Improve Toolkit*. Still, this is not a limitation on the project. The thorough literature review allowed me to see the evolution of library outreach over time and how my project is situated on this continuum.

Conclusion:

Due to complications with the field experience, like the lab closing for the summer, it was challenging to evaluate the outreach framework laid out for this project. With that said, it was clear that the beginning phases of Stoecker's community action based research were exceedingly

useful in preparing for working with the lab site. Despite the time and effort involved in the early steps, they are a key part to this approach because they help provide a voice for the community.

When looking at this project through the lens of an academic librarian it could seem discouraging because of the lack of quantifiable success in reaching out to the community. In order to apply this framework more successfully in the future, it would be helpful to consider the following factors in combination with the framework: plan more than one project site; work with the community partner to develop a plan that will work for them; recognize that the rest of the world does not function on the academic clock--as in spring semester, summer semester, etc.; and realize that while the work you are attempting is important to you or your library, you may need to reframe your way of thinking in order to be most helpful to the community partner. Even though the project initially seemed feasible the timeline of my project did not allow for these factors.

In closing, looking at academic library outreach as well as attempting to engage in an outreach initiative based on a specific framework was very informative. As the literature review illustrated, library outreach comes in many forms. The important part is *trying* to reach out to the community and then becoming *engaged* in community. Much like my own case study, examples from the literature review had varying degrees of success. Often, the outreach efforts that were working smoothly were long-term projects that had evolved over time (Kulay 2008; Zitron 2013). By working with the community, the academic library has much to gain. Ideally the outreach will not only fill a community need but will also help the academic library grow into a trustable and recognizable part of the greater community.

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