

The Unemployed Worker as a Patron in the Public Library - A Study in Outreach

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As the library community entered the 1970s, Title II was alive and well and busily funding demonstration projects. The keyword for librarians was "outreach"—everyone had an idea for luring the nonuser, for registering the nonborrower, and in general, for reaching those persons whose powers of ambulation were so retarded or non-existent as to deny them access to the mainstream of free informational services. Librarians reached out to the infirm, the migrant worker, the homebound, the incarcerated, and to anyone whom we could label as a member of the "target" population, all the while secure in the knowledge that our efforts were backed by the full faith of the federal government—and sometimes the state governments—and the affiliate social agencies.

But what of realities? With any so-called "outreach" service, the Great Debate whether libraries are purveyors of information, social service agencies, or a meld of the two, inevitably surfaces. And, in fact if not in practice, is there really anything "new under the sun?" Putting it in other terms, is there really now or was there ever any

target group that some librarian has not strived to coax into the reading room? We are faced with the paradox of what might happen if all the community used the library all the time; in other words, what if the registration files held 100 percent of the taxpaying population as active users instead of the usual 25-30 percent that "sounds good" to the board of trustees? It is the premise of this article that "outreach" involves, in reality, the serving of that segment of the population that happens to need the library at any precise moment. Since for several years the prime concern of all but the most exceptional areas of the nation has been unemployment, the economy by default defines the type of patron who may be the prime target for current outreach activities. Such will be the assumption of the discussion that follows, which will be presented as a comparison of two projects which targeted the jobless, misplaced, and sometimes undereducated persons as candidates for library services.

We start about ten years back, in 1973, in an urban setting in Southwest Ohio. In that year, seven libraries in the Southeastern United States were chosen as demonstration sites for the purpose of "attracting the non-user of the library to library services through cooperation with adult education councils and Adult Basic Education departments of public schools." Such a tall order was sanctioned by the U.S. Office of Education, thus, the emphasis on learning opportunities as a criterion for recruitment of library users. The Public Library of Cincinnati was one of the seven libraries receiving a grant for such a demonstration project, \$40,000 for the first year. This particular library was chosen not because of its geographical location, for in theory Southwestern Ohio, like Southern Indiana, is not technically Dixie. However, because of the large influx of Southern migrants who sought work in the numerous industries and factories in the community, this area was selected as a "target." There were no rules or guidelines set forth by the Office of Education other than the general mandate, so each site could tailor its project to suit a particular blend of needs. It seemed logical first to approach the School's administration to set up some General Educational Development (GED) and Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes in neighborhood branches. This posed no serious challenge, because variations of this type of activity had been conducted informally for a number of years at several locations within the Library system. The second activity was to set up a book collection. Paperbacks were chosen as an almost exclusive format, since the "high interest, low reading level" material was generally available only in this medium. The third activity—and this was probably the most important—was the establishment of an ongoing recruitment effort to make persons aware of the availability of the "Library/Adult Basic Education Model Center Project." Since it was learned in the preliminary research that the target group was of a socioeconomic makeup for whom

word-of-mouth was the primary transporter of news, we resolved to initiate an exhaustive telephone campaign. Armed with the city directory, the Criss-Cross directory, and a staff person whose salary was not paid out of local taxes, a block-by-block canvas was accomplished. The return on investment of the calling was one person recruited for classes and one library card registration for every thirty calls made.

As inevitably happens, the Library Administration called for some user patterns and statistics after the fourth month. Book requests were tallied with an interesting twist: those persons in the GED classes were requesting not books for continuing education but materials on careers, employment, and civil service examinations. This was at a time when the unemployment rate for the general population was hovering locally at a "respectable" 6 percent. It was readily apparent that, as suspected, the jobless rates for the under-educated were establishing the high percentages on the curve and thus were defining the term "hardcore unemployed" that was beginning to be the latest buzzword in the news. We found it difficult to talk about the latest bestseller with the "clients" when the foremost issue on their minds was how to qualify for a few hours' work at the labor pool the next day.

There were a number of other elements contained in the project, such as service to jails, but these tasks are peripheral to the matter of service to the unemployed. We learned in the two-year tenure of the demonstration project that many of the usual rules do not work: many of the patrons, while by no means unintelligent, did not have the familiarity with books and research tools that many of us take for granted, and indeed a significant number of them had never entered a library in their lifetimes. This was not the group with which we deal so very often in the 1980s, those persons with skills and knowledge of a particular job that has suddenly become obsolete with advancing technology, but the unemployable (who admittedly are still among us). It is the latter whose basic needs may not be defined merely by those employment parameters they need to know but also by survival information, or life coping skills necessary to work up to and exist until the opportunity for gaining work reveals itself.

Nearly ten years later, in 1982, another opportunity to execute an outreach program presented itself. There was money for a demonstration project available through the Indiana State Library, and the Hammond Public Library was fortunate to have been selected to receive \$24,500 in LSCA funds to replicate the project described earlier but in 1980 terms. The theme would be "Library Services to the Unemployed," simple enough in scope but with obvious definite goals in mind and certainly enough potential clientele in Lake County, Indiana, with its steel foundry economy and demoralizing

15 percent unemployment rate. The project would borrow from the successes of the earlier model demonstration and build on them with offerings of new ideas and services in the name of employment information. As a matter of course, the project took on the name "The Job," both in title and in physical location and for the duration of the grant year was a separate entity in the library to which the Information Services or Circulation librarians could point out with the phrase, "ask over in 'The Job.' "

In order to have a pivotal point and benchmark link with existing books in the collection, the first task was for the Project Director, in conjunction with the Technical Services Division, to flag all titles in the Main Library with some sort of identification to note to patrons that the particular materials were job-related. This was accomplished by jacketing the cards in the card catalog with clear plastic, bearing a colored stripe along the top. The number of books in the collection was too voluminous to set apart as a unique entity, but the old Vocational Collection was preserved and enriched as a stepping-stone to developing the core collection for the project. It was decided that the acquisition of only paperbacks, as was the rule in the 1973 project, would not be a limiting factor since it did cause sidestepping of many potentially valuable titles and in fact might constitute labelling of the clientele who were to be served. The room set aside for the project was to be an integrated facility, that is, books, newspapers, periodicals, videotapes, and databases would all be available in one area. There would be a desk in the facility for the librarian in charge to field questions. Publicity this time would be of a paper nature (mailings, flyers, and letters) because, there being a lesser amount of funds available, a labor-intensive activity such as a telephone campaign was unrealistic.

The project ran for the full year in a virtually unchanged format. This was intentional so that the physical facility would be a control and not a variable in the construction of the final report. There were many common denominators in terms of success with the earlier project, and predictions on patron behavior for the most part bore fruit. One overwhelming difference was the availability of such a greater variety of materials ten years hence that were virtually non-existent in the early seventies. For example, the Hammond Public Library moved its TEDS (Training and Educational Data Service) database terminal to The Job and continued making it available to all patrons on a cost-free basis. This was a very logical extension into the project since TEDS offered both employment forecasts and financial aid information both to jobseekers and career planners. A subscription to Bell and Howell's COIN was considered, but this was passed over on the grounds that the information contained therein was redundant. Also made available for the first time through LSCA funds was a complete, national collection of college catalogs

on microfiche. Such documents were always available in paper copy, but there were gaps in the collection and the maintenance of the collection was also very labor intensive. It was computed that 275 hours of processing time per year was saved with the change in formats, and the information so invaluable for financial aid and career information was always on the shelf. Patrons still could take home hard copy since there was a reader/printer already on the premises. There were at the time of "The Job" project also many more titles available on jobs and employment tests from such publishers as Arco as well as a number of good books on test taking in general. The list is, of course, too extensive to reproduce here. Hammond's proximity to Illinois, and to Chicago in particular, gives jobseekers a unique opportunity to seek employment in a metropolitan area while maintaining residence in their preferred Hoosier State. Chicago jobs books were sought and "The Job" tried to provide those titles which were available. Local book reviews helped, but area specific titles were best uncovered through an arrangement with a bookdealer in the Loop. With a guarantee that the Library would purchase at least \$1,000 retail within the time of the project, a 20 percent discount would be extended to any title bought on account through the store. This deal was particularly advantageous on short trade titles where only 5 to 10 percent off list would be realized through normal sources. The crowning touch in new technology for the project was a microcomputer-based resume generator for patron use. Given that most persons who asked for resume books were really seeking content and format and not really purpose, a menu-driven program was created for an Osborne I computer that, with reasonable typing skill and about twenty minutes' time, would produce a reproducible document to get a person started in his or her own personal mailout campaign. To the latter, computer fear in general on the part of patrons was underestimated, but a large part of the hesitancy to use the service was overcome through the construction of a simple form with which the patron could work before embarking upon the keyboard. Typing skills of the general population, too, were underestimated, and at the end of the project year, the resume generator was discontinued.

End-of-year and annual reports must, in general, be factual and offer data and statistics. Essays, such as this one, can be a bit freer and report personal observations and conclusions from a project and be more subjective. There are ten issues which are professed to be truths about a project such as "The Job" and whose applicabilities and relevances are left to those who would read them:

1. Projects of this nature are expensive. If it costs your library \$1.50 to circulate a title, be prepared to discover that a special, outreach project may incur costs to two or three times normal, or \$4.00-\$5.00 per circulation. If you plan to circulate a lot of books and are successful in doing so, you may be locked into spending

some real money. Be sure you write your grant proposal with a sufficient cushion to cover unexpected high yields in business.

2. Be prepared to experience some book losses. This is not a warning of intentional thievery, but merely a caution that there will be greater than usual failure on the part of new patrons to bring back loans made on a library card application, and the like. The most common parallel among public libraries is the loss of the Armed Forces, Post Office, and Police Department examination books, as well as the disappearance of the manuals on resume preparation.

3. Make plans for continuation of the project before writing the proposal to begin. State and Federal agencies are quite willing to fund demonstrations, but only where some good faith on the part of the library and the grant writer is shown that some elements of the project will become permanent parts of the library's function after the seed money runs out. This should be in the form of a permanent book collection, a service, the making available of some equipment, or a combination of the three.

4. Be pragmatic. Theory is all right if your project's main thrust is research, but for service and outreach, plan elements that will show some tangible benefits. If you want your project to cause a 10 percent increase in book circulation in a given subject area, say so in your proposal. Don't spend all year (or half your final report) theorizing why something should or should not work. You want jobless persons to find a refuge in the library and information to help themselves through a bad situation, not opinions why a red book is better than a blue one for relaying job information.

5. Bear in mind that the greatest single benefit to the library should be the earning of goodwill. The project is a public relations campaign, not an all out effort to register half the town for library cards. You will learn that the bulk of the users will be those persons already registered who are using the facility more frequently and for a new purpose. This is not to say that you cannot attract new patrons, but those persons registered in mass signup campaigns tend to result in soft statistics and just make registration files tighter.

6. Don't expect a great deal of feedback from patrons in a job information project. It is possible to set up measurements and data reporting techniques, such as number of patrons finding work, number of GED examinations passed, ect., but such figures are extremely hard to gather. Be content in obtaining your strokes from the less casual patrons who bring back the latest bestsellers and thank you for knowing "exactly what they want." Many times just convincing the jobless person that a book is one answer to his/her plight is a major accomplishment in itself.

7. Don't play amateur psychologist and regard the job information center as a "bootstrap" device. In other words, don't take the attitude "if I can get them in the door, they'll see books as the pathway to better things." This is a highly pontifical stand, and may even

cause a patron to take offense that the library is making a "cause" of his/her plight. Give them the service with no strings attached. As in issue 6, the reward will be the creation of a repeat customer—for whatever reason. Leave the attempts at bibliography for library service to hospitals.

8. Don't be surprised if the patron demands, even on a non-verbal level, instant gratification. Socioeconomic status of the patron has little to do with this if it happens. Remember that your client may have been out of work for months, and a visit to the library for some information—any information—may be a last ditch effort. Compare this with the number of the times that the request is made of the reference librarian for a practice examination book for the GED, and the ensuing look of absolute horror on the patron's face after thumbing through Barron's for a few seconds. Take it for what it is—that person's normal, human reaction to the hard reality that nothing comes easy and that the library, like anyplace else, doesn't harbor magic solutions. Don't apologize for something to which the patron might take an initial dislike, if the item is offered in good faith.

9. Use whatever audiovisual aids are at your disposal. Think of your initial contact with a new and potential repeat patron as a teaching experience. Use videotapes of GED preparations, programmed texts, lecture cassettes on interview techniques, job-search seminars presented in the library by other agencies—anything that will make a lasting impression.

10. Perhaps most important of all: Don't, in any way, attempt to duplicate any phase of activity or task performed by the Indiana Employment Services bureau. To do so sets up the library as a satellite employment agency. It is all right to have a bulletin board of employment possibilities or even to allow the Employment Services bureau to set up a table in the lobby once a week to distribute literature, but to provide referrals and input to specific employers, particularly if no jobs currently exist among those employers, is asking for trouble. The idea for setting up a job information project is just that—to provide information, and every piece of literature, promotion, newspaper article, and radio spot generated by the library should emphasize the information providing aspect. After all, the central purpose for any library-centered special project is to attract users or to increase patronage by existing users, and the library does not want to become merely a feeder for another State agency.

Service to the jobless can be highly rewarding and at the same time, depressingly frustrating. But if even only occasionally the librarian receives a smile from one person who reports that the library's material helped to find a job or to improve employment skills or even merely make that person feel more competitive in the job market, it is an effort on the part of the library that is richly rewarded.