

It Takes Two (Or More) Developing Partnerships to Serve Marginalized Populations

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This student-edition column features the work of students in a course taught by Dr. Tess Prendergast at the School of Information, University of British Columbia.

As our name suggests, the Library Service to Underserved Children and Their Caregivers (LSUCTC) committee seeks to help library staff better serve children and families who are often marginalized and overlooked by traditional library programs and services. A significant part of our committee's work is focused on developing toolkits that provide resources and ideas for assisting a variety of these overlooked demographics,¹ and we encourage readers to visit our toolkits here: tinyurl.com/lsucctoolkit.

One major difficulty in reaching underserved populations is due to our own ignorance.

- How can we serve marginalized communities when we don't see them inside our buildings and/or have little knowledge of their needs and concerns?
- How can we ensure authentic connections where we are not forcing our personal values or making assumptions about whole groups of people?
- How does our personal understanding and our organization's understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) help us to evaluate our current programming and evaluation methods?²

One answer is to create partnerships with those who have a strong knowledge base of these underserved communities and can guide library staff in best practices for outreach. Whether you reach out or the organization approaches you, it's vital to plan and design outreach with your partner to find common values.³ This relationship will help both groups feel fully invested in the partnership and desired outcomes.

Research Your Community

Consider demographics, but also connect with individuals outside the library. Survey your landscape to see what organizations are in your vicinity—schools, religious institutions, homeless shelters, agriculture, specialty stores, and local businesses. Remember that underserved communities are likely not your regular visitors. If possible, connect with staff or community members who are either familiar with or a member of these underserved communities. Ask yourself:

- Who is the library not serving? What barriers are preventing these groups from accessing library services?
- Do the library's values overlap with this community's values? If this answer is no, analyze how the library's culture may need to change or if this underserved community actually doesn't benefit from current library services.

Community Partnership Example: Reluctant Readers

Melody Leung

From demographic research, I knew my community was at least 10 percent Hispanic, and I learned that there were even more Latinx families who were not counted toward the census due to a migrant community that changed every summer and sometimes throughout the year.

I connected with a local English Language Learner-focused teacher who wanted to find a way to partner with the library to help her students. This teacher also had experience previously teaching English to farm workers. We discussed the needs of the school and came away with a plan to help the students facing the biggest hurdles—third graders from diverse backgrounds who were reading far below grade level.

During weekly lunch recess, I brought books for the kids to check out; read picture books about self-esteem, dreams, and feelings; and provided beginning readers that the kids could practice reading in small groups. The kids who participated felt safe in this space and shared more often than they did in front of their other peers.

Through surveying the kids and their teachers before and after the program, most kids felt more confident reading and showed greater enjoyment in books. Most importantly, they connected to me at the end of the series, when I shared that I too didn't start reading English until second grade and was behind in school for a few years before catching up.

Community Partnership Example: Children on the Autism Spectrum

Marika Jeffery

In 2017, the Mission Valley Library, a branch of the San Diego Public Library system, realized that its typically crowded, loud summer reading program events were not friendly to families with children on the autism spectrum.

Since staff had little knowledge of how to best assist this community, we sought help from Autism Society San Diego. Thanks to their input, the library discovered that most diagnosed children had robust weekday routines with scheduled classes and therapies, so a special library event catering to these kids would best be held on a weekend day.

The Autism Society also advised the library to host a program during hours when the building was only open to

families with children on the spectrum. This meant that if a child had a meltdown or didn't conform in other ways to generally accepted library behavior, the family wasn't subjected to glares and complaints from additional library users.

The Autism Society provided many other helpful suggestions and would attend every autism event the library hosted to offer their support, guide the program as needed, and advertise their services to attendees unfamiliar with their mission and work. Both the library and the Autism Society were mutually committed to helping children on the spectrum access library resources and programs and increase their access to the Autism Society's information and services.

When you've found a potential partner, determine a common outcome based on shared values.

- What goals or values do you each have and where do they overlap?
- What impacts and outcomes do you both hope to achieve?
- What do you each bring to the table and how can you complement each other?

Evaluate

Programs and events have a start and an end, but outreach is flexible. If the first idea isn't successful, the community will still be there. It's easy to get discouraged when a program loses traction or the library's relationship with a community partner changes. When planning and conducting outreach, it's important to think of the work as a cycle with the only unchanging element being the community you aim to serve. When evaluating your outreach, keep these questions in mind.

- What type of casual feedback did you obtain? Were there any barriers that prevented those families or others from participating?
- What impacts and outcomes did you achieve? Were they the same as what you had originally planned?
- If attendance was low, did you put enough effort into marketing in places where your underserved community frequents or trusts? Remember that attendance numbers aren't equal to success.

We encourage you to check out our committee's toolkits (particularly the "Professional Resources" and "Community Resources") at <http://www.ala.org/alsc/sites/ala.org.alsc/files/content/professional-tools/lsspcc-toolkit-2015.pdf>. If you have questions, ideas, or would like our committee to focus on a particular underserved group, please email lsuctc@gmail.com. &

References

1. Jaime Eastman and Joe Prince, "Providing Timely Resources for Underserved Populations," *Children and Libraries* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 34–35.
2. Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services (ODLOS), "ODLOS Glossary of Terms," American Library Association, accessed February 14, 2021, <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/odlos-glossary-terms>.
3. Project Voice, "Project Voice Training Series Webinar 2 Designing Community Outreach Using Value-Centric, Outcomes-Based Planning and Assessment," May 7, 2020.