
The Values of Libraries

A Report on the RUSA President's Program

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In order to be effective, public service occupations like library and information science must reconcile the values held amongst professionals with the perspectives and needs of the community being served. Such reconciliation is difficult because of the evolving and potentially conflicting values of librarians and library users. During the RUSA President's Program "Our Values, Ourselves" four prominent figures in Library Science discussed the past, present, and future of libraries and their role in society. The presenters were: Wayne Bivens-Tatum, Philosophy and Religion Librarian at Princeton University; Wayne Wiegand, F. William Summers Professor of Library and Information Studies Emeritus at Florida State University; Lisa Carlucci Thomas, Director and Founder, Design Think Do; and Jeanne Goodrich, former Executive Director, Las Vegas-Clark County Library District (retired September 2014). The pieces presented here are edited versions of the presentations, and are abbreviated from the full remarks.—*Editor*

THE ENLIGHTENMENT VALUES OF LIBRARIES

Wayne Bivens-Tatum

I'm going to focus on the historical motivations for the founding and development of modern academic and public libraries. These may or may not be the values that libraries still have, but they were the values that founded them. I argue they were founded upon an array of Enlightenment values, including the use of human reason to study the world, to create and disseminate new knowledge, and to educate the citizens of a democratic republic and enrich their lives.

The Enlightenment can be roughly divided into the philosophical and the political. By Philosophical Enlightenment, I mean all those principles of Enlightenment that coalesce around scholarship and research, the increase of knowledge, the belief in the benefits of science and education, and the right and even obligation to publish scholarly findings. In contrast, Political Enlightenment could be considered the Philosophical Enlightenment democratized—Enlightenment at least within the reach of everyone, even if not desired by everyone.

This rough division plays itself out in the history of libraries. Academic libraries—and the universities they support—to a great extent fulfill the promises of the Philosophical Enlightenment to collect, organize, preserve, and within limitations disseminate scholarly knowledge and the human record. Public libraries fall into the category of the Political Enlightenment, and many have conceived their mission partly as one of making knowledge more available to people.

Enlightenment—philosophical and political—involves the creation of knowledge and its democratic dissemination to prepare autonomous citizens of a democratic republic, as well as the improvement of their lives in various ways.

Academic libraries, from large research libraries to smaller college libraries, are products of the Enlightenment and its promotion of reason and freedom. The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake wherever it might lead, the examination of every possible topic in the light of reason, and the freedom to publish that research to the world—the underlying principles of modern universities—led to the inevitable creation of the libraries capable of supporting those goals. While scholars investigated, examined, experimented and wrote and wrote, academic librarians worked to acquire, preserve, organize, and make accessible the materials they needed, and in the process built up a national network of cooperative collections and services in the support of scholarship.

Public libraries in the United States began as efforts to educate citizens in a democracy and to Americanize immigrants. The Boston Public Library was pitched as the natural extension of the free public schooling system Boston had already implemented. Early promotion by the American Library Association on behalf of libraries often focused on education and improving citizen's lives. Over time, public libraries focused more on popular offerings. Their transition has broadened the conception of what role a democratic library might play in enriching the lives of citizens without necessarily losing the educational function.

While I have focused on the values historically motivating the foundation of libraries, Wayne Wiegand will now take a different and complementary approach. Rather than my abstract perspective on the initial hopes of what libraries wanted to do for people, Wayne will discuss from a “bottom up” perspective to show what public libraries have in fact done for them.

A fuller examination of the Enlightenment values of American libraries can be found in Bivens-Tatum's book *Libraries and the Enlightenment* (Library Juice Press, 2012).

WHY WE LOVE THE LIBRARY: INFORMATION, PUBLIC SPACES, AND STORIES

Wayne Wiegand

The American public library is a unique civic institution because unlike most other civic institutions, like courts and schools, people do not have to use it. As a result, over the generations, users heavily influenced the process of shaping library collections and services. Instead of a “top-down” view, I adopt a “bottom-up” perspective that features the voices of generations of public library users. In no particular order, people have loved their public libraries: (1) for the useful information they made accessible; (2) for the public spaces they provided; and (3) for the stories they circulate that helped users make sense of their worlds.

In my forthcoming book, *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library* I give “information,” “story,”

and “place” equal attention because all helped me uncover many ways that public libraries changed lives. I hope to publish the book in tandem with the release of *Free For All: Inside the Public Library*, a major documentary San Francisco filmmakers Dawn Logsdon and Lucie Faulknor hope to finish in 2016, and for which I serve as consultant. In my research, I do not take the conventional “user in the life of the library” approach; rather, I take a “library in the life of the user” perspective because I want to trace the history of the public library not so much by analyzing the words of its founders and managers, but mostly by listening to the voices of people who used them since the mid-19th century.

From “Useful Knowledge” to “Information”

For most of its history, LIS discourse has focused on what in the 18th century was called “useful knowledge,” in the 19th and 20th was called “best books” (still in the ALA motto), and in the late 20th morphed into “information.” First, a few historical examples that comfortably fit the category of “information” as LIS currently defines it.

While sitting at a Cincinnati public library desk in 1867, Thomas Edison compiled a bibliography on electricity. A colleague later recalled: “Many times Edison would get excused from duty under pretense of being too sick to work, . . . and invariably strike a beeline for the Library, where he would spend the entire day and evening reading . . . such works on electricity as were to be had.” In a Detroit Public Library reading room in the 1950s a teenage female pored over comedians' printed monologues. “She appeared in short monodramas, written by herself, without makeup and hardly any props,” Lily Tomlin's biographer later noted, “conjuring up not only the personality of the character she portrayed but also that of unseen people with whom she was talking.” All these people had information needs an American public library met, and the anecdotes I've read nicely fit into an LIS discourse that focuses on “information.” But let me now turn to “library as place.”

Public Spaces and Social Capital

In civic institutions like libraries, people routinely “exchange social capital”—a common phrase in “public sphere” thinking. These institutions also provide spaces that help people develop a tolerance and appreciation for differences and enable them to engage in what Henry Jenkins calls “participatory culture.” By having “low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing with others, and information mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices,” Jenkins observes, members of a participatory culture “believe their contributions matter and have some degree of social connection with one another.” To this “public sphere” thinking James Gee adds the concept of “affinity spaces”—social spaces that people self-select and in which they interact. “Based on their own choices, purposes, and identities,” Gee says, people

Table 1. The Library in the Life of the User: Examples from Influential People

Information	Place	Stories
Thomas Edison	Martin Luther King Jr.	Ronald Reagan
Wilbur and Orville Wright	James Levine	John Wayne
Harry Truman	The Jackson Five	Pete Seeger
William Jefferson Clinton		Gerald Ford
Lily Tomlin		Oprah Winfrey
Barack Obama		Sonia Sotomayor

“can each get different things” from affinity spaces that not only provide “an important form of social affiliation” but also constitute “places where effective learning occurs” outside institutions of formal education.

And from my narrative, I quote a few more anecdotes. In the 1930s at the Atlanta Public Library’s African American branch where blacks felt safe and welcome, director Annie Watters bought books on Ghandi for the library’s adult education discussion groups. In the summer ten-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr. “came to the library many times during the week.” She later recalled their interactions: “He would walk up to the desk and ... look me straight in the eye.” “Hello, Martin Luther,” she would respond, always calling him by his first and middle names; “what’s on your mind?” “Oh, nothing, particularly.” For Watters, that was the cue that King had learned a new “big word,” and they then initiated a conversation in which King used the word repeatedly.

When the Cincinnati Public Library opened a “piano room” in 1955, among its first visitors was a twelve-year-old “Jimmy Levine,” as he wrote his name in pencil on the room’s sign-up sheet. Eight visits later he changed his signature to “J. Levine” and finally “James Levine.” When he gave a concert for 150 children in the Children’s Room in 1957 he had already performed as a Cincinnati Symphony soloist. Today he is the New York Met’s Artistic Director.

In 2005 the *Washington Post* carried an article by Eric Wee that focused on a District of Columbia branch library in one of Washington’s poorest neighborhoods. Every Tuesday night a homeless man named Conrad Cheek entered the library and set up his chessboard on one of the tables in the children’s room. The reporter immediately noticed a transformation taking place. “No more ignored pleas” for this homeless man, “no averted glances. During the next hour, people will look him in the eye. They’ll listen to his words. In this down-at-the-heels library he’s the teacher.” Inside the library, Wee reported, “They call him Mr. Conrad.”

The Power of Stories

Because I want to know why Americans love their public libraries, I’m not much concerned with the book as “object,” which reflects traditional library discourse. Instead, I focus more on how the stories books carry function as “agents” in the everyday lives of library users. Because readers can

control it, the act of reading stories becomes dependably pleasurable, empowering, intellectually stimulating, and socially bonding. And it is in the act of reading stories that social and cultural acts of defiance take place. If cultural authorities lack the power to check voluntary reading for interpretations legitimized by dominant cultures, ordinary readers construct their own meanings, sometimes as groups, sometimes as individuals (see table 1).

In Glendale, California, Marion “Duke”

Morrison (later known as “John Wayne”) “spent hours reading in the solitude of the library,” his biographer notes, “losing himself and his troubles in romantic adventures” like Zane Grey novels, and biographies of Kit Carson, Buffalo Bill, and Jim Bridger. In Dixon, Illinois, young Ronald Reagan visited his public library twice a week in the early 1920s, mostly to check out Frank Merriwell stories, *Tarzan* novels, and books by Horatio Alger, Zane Grey, Sherlock Holmes, and Mark Twain, many of which he read on the library’s front steps. “I’m a sucker for hero worship,” he later admitted.

For Oprah Winfrey, reading stories was “an open door for freedom in my life” and “allowed me to see that there was a world beyond my grandmother’s front porch” in Mississippi, “that everybody didn’t have an outhouse, that everybody wasn’t surrounded by poverty, that there was a hopeful world out there and that it could belong to me.” In a small Milwaukee apartment she shared as a nine-year-old in 1963 with her half-brother and half-sister, she read a public library copy of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*—her “first all-night book—the story of Francie Nolan whose life was full of humiliation and whose only friends were in books lining the public library shelves. ... I felt like my life was hers.”

Many famous scholars, entertainers, and political figures have been deeply impacted by stories they read during their early development. A list has been compiled at the end of this piece featuring influential people who have explicitly cited stories as a core aspect of their growth. Notice all these very meaningful experiences occurred in a place we call “library.” To categorize them as “information” gathering fails to capture their significance in the lives of each of these individuals.

Over generations the power of stories and the library as a place has been as or more important in changing people’s lives as the information public libraries have provided. For the most part, however, LIS discourse has overlooked, undervalued, and regularly ignored both. Yes, in recent years we have begun counting on a national level the number of people attending programs and exhibits in public library spaces, and, yes, we have surveyed users as library space “consumers.” What we have not done is investigate ways these activities affect the production of human subjectivity on an individual and a community basis.

In my lifetime of research into American library history I’ve read hundreds of sweeping predictions concerning the future of these ubiquitous institutions, and none proved true

FROM COMMITTEES OF RUSA

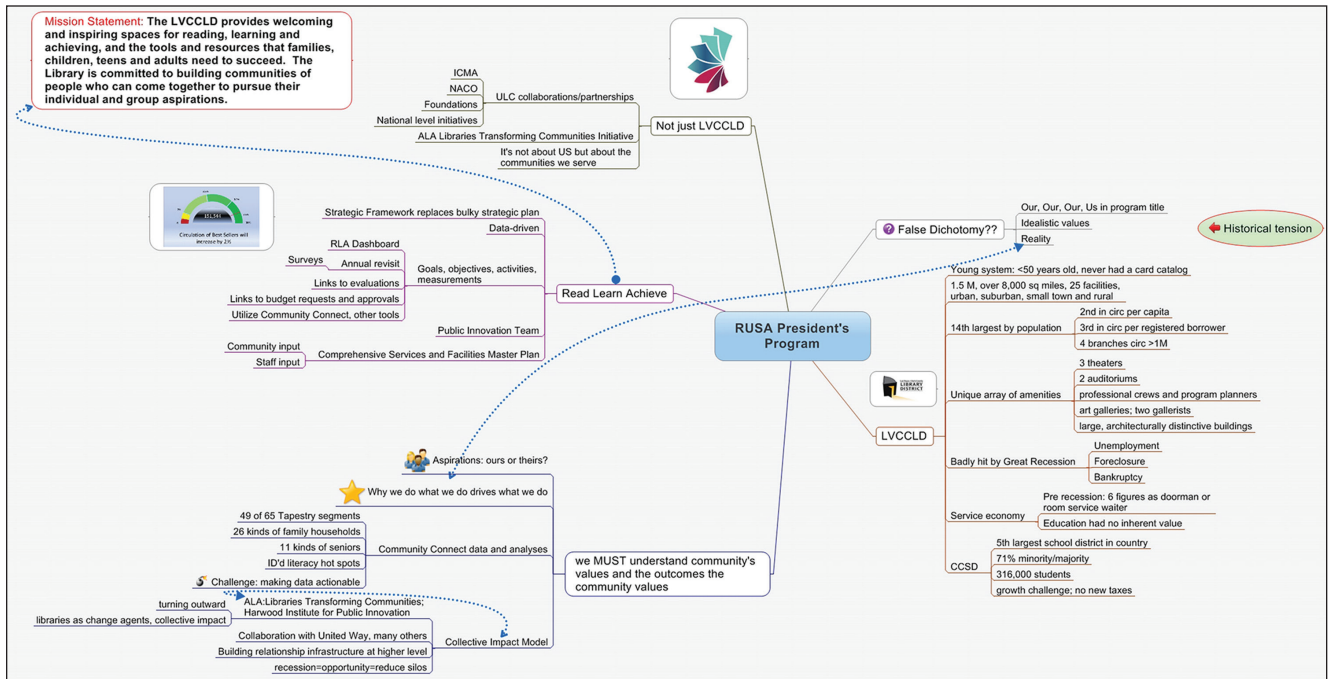


Figure 1. Mind Map from Jeanne Goodrich's Presentation

that did not also give equal consideration to the power of stories and library as place.

During the President's Program, Wiegand provided examples of the "library in the life of the user" from the above famous people as well as from non-famous people.

The theories and examples provided in these remarks receive a more full treatment in Wiegand's forthcoming book *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

THREE PERSPECTIVES

Lisa Carlucci Thomas

We can compare and contrast "library as place" with any emergent space for creative discourse, but would be remiss to overlook the weight of librarianship's legacy on libraries' futures. Public libraries are not agile startups. But more and more, they're expected to behave as such. And lacking iterative, responsive policies, programs, and services—we risk looking tired.

Wiegand discussed three literatures from which we can explore from the "bottom up" the experience of the library in the life of the user: for information, for stories, for place (community). For many of us, our public library is one of the first places we can go, independently, for all three. For many, this develops into an inquisitive adulthood, where we can benefit from the library's offerings at our convenience, and explore with our children, too.

Do our library's values—envisioned and actual—align with what our communities really want? If what I want today

is information, I might start online or look for open access resources or visit an academic library. If what I want is stories, I might start by asking a friend what they're reading before asking the local librarian. And when I want participatory culture, I seek out creative peers at a location designed for this purpose.

While personal experiences and library values may speak to the public library's role in these three literatures we must do more to highlight our strengths in these areas. Research indicates that children and young adults do use libraries regularly, but this behavior pattern dips in adulthood, and increases once users have their own children or grandchildren. What would it take to draw users out of the dip? What do *they* need the library to be? That's our programming and marketing challenge.

Listen, tune in, and provide opportunities to offer *space* for social sharing and ideas to grow. Advocate for bright, welcoming, secure spaces. Invite involvement, welcome *participation*. In *The Atlantic's* recent video, "Why Libraries Matter"—young adult librarian Rita Meade observes, "When library doors close and parents aren't home, I don't even know where else they [the young adults] are going to go." Library as place may truly be the only place to be.

According to NY Times, we're all "Faking Cultural Literacy." In this ubiquitously connected tldr world, sharing experiences around tangible connections: location, context, and culture, becomes all the more important. From town hall, classroom, job center, tech sandbox, to reading group or play group—at the library, we are our truest selves, unencumbered. We are able connect to the people, places, and things that matter to us while still being connected to the

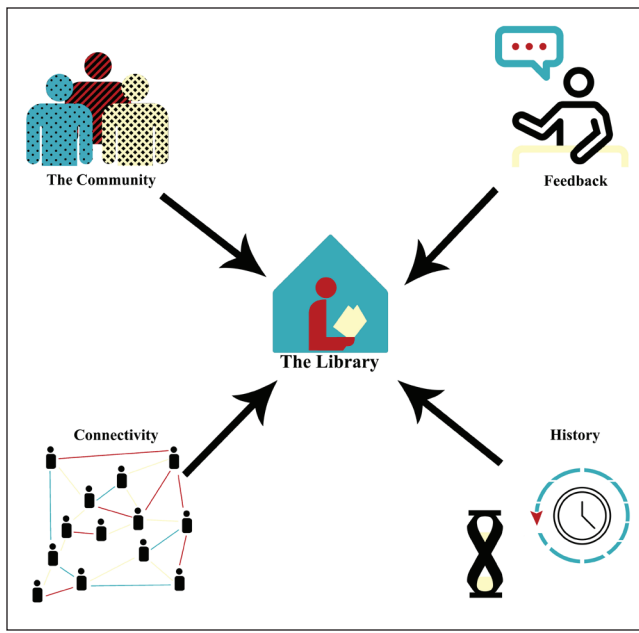


Figure 2. Community and Professional Influences on Libraries

information, in all of its forms and formats, which we create and consume daily.

COMMUNITY DRIVEN LIS

Jeanne Goodrich

Using the structure of the Las Vegas–Clark County Library District (LVCCLD) and a pictorial model (see figure 1), Jeanne Goodrich presented her thoughts and experiences with libraries as shaped by the community. She started by deconstructing the myth that LIS philosophical values are at odds against the lived realities of communities being served. Goodrich believes that as a profession librarianship is malleable to meet the needs of patrons, meaning that the values of LIS are never in conflict with services provided at a library so long as the communities' needs are being met.

The LVCCLD is a new system less than fifty years old that serves a large diverse population. With twenty-five facilities in rural, suburban, and urban areas of the county the LVCCLD works with a population of over 1.5 million patrons. This library system holds many unique amenities open to the public including three theaters, two auditoriums, thirteen art galleries, and professional program planners.

Overwhelmingly this county is a service economy that was heavily impacted by the recession, which in combination with an increased school aged population has resulted in higher need for library services with less tax dollars to support the LVCCLD.

In order to best serve patrons Goodrich invested time, money, and energy into gathering demographic data that the library could then use to inform their actions. For example, many public libraries have data that lets them know roughly what percentage of their patrons are family households. The information gathered by the LVCCLD takes that one step further by breaking down families into different family subgroup types. In depth demographic data allowed the libraries to better identify new services to invest in, outside organizations to team up with, and provided opportunities for librarians and patrons to think creatively with evidence-based framework as support. Goodrich believes that libraries can only serve if they know the realities and values held by the community and work alongside them to achieve shared goals.

Using data, the library's strategic plans have been significantly cut in length and streamlined to clearly address the goals, objectives, activities, and measurements of the county library system. Strategic planning materials are to be used both by library staff and the community, which has prompted turning many of the measurements into graphs and other visual representations of data. To serve the community the library needs to make its values, realities, and operations accessible to all who have a vested interest.

Goodrich views libraries as agents of change and innovation, but first and foremost as support for the communities we serve.

CONCLUSION: OUR VALUES ARE A CONVERSATION

Bivens-Tatum, Wiegand, Carlucci Thomas, and Goodrich have articulated the challenges faced in LIS through four perspectives on the values of libraries and librarianship (see figure 2). These are: the historical values that formed and underpin libraries in the United States, values held by individual patrons in why they love the library, the values in connections found at the library through place and story, and the values of our communities. Whether at odds or in tandem these values open channels of conversation within the profession of librarianship that encourage us to explore directions we might take to serve the individual, the local community, and develop for future generations.