

An Analysis of Public Library Values and My Career Goals

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Introduction

My current career goal is to work as a public librarian and help patrons access the information that they desire while also ensuring that they feel welcome enough at the library that they view it as a second home. My reason behind enrolling in Wayne State's School of Information Sciences was that since the librarians I had met growing up always made me feel valued and at ease, I wanted to make others feel the way that I felt. However, other than a semester where I was a reference assistant at my college's archives, I have not actually had the opportunity to work in a library setting, so I have not been able to put this into practice. Additionally, as this semester goes on and I learn more about the information professions, I have started to wonder whether my vision of what a library should be like is compatible with my expected career path. I believe that libraries should feel like a second home, that the information libraries hold should reflect the diversity of the patrons that access them, and that this information can be accessed for free. Do my values align with those of a public library, or are my expectations and their reality different enough that I would be best to pursue other career goals?

Culture of the Information Professions

Libraries are, first and foremost, a social environment, and as an integral part of the public sphere, the librarians working there are responsible for providing patrons access to all kinds of knowledge and culture (Audunson et al., 2019), and so the ability to converse with all types of people is required to work in a public library. Patrons have a larger variety of needs compared to academic libraries and archives; some patrons may view the library as a source of information or entertainment while others may view it as shelter. The homeless, for instance, have become much more frequent patrons of public libraries in recent years, as rising poverty rates and a high cost of living have turned them to libraries for assistance (Wahler, Rortvedt, and

Saecker, 2022). Other patrons may use libraries as a source of research or a source of entertainment, but regardless of their intentions for doing so, those who use public libraries share a common culture. This focus on creating a community seems intentional given that a recent analysis of 80 public library mission statements found that ‘community building’ was the number one constant value across the statements collected (Fraser-Arnott, 2021). Clearly, there is a focus on making patrons feel close to the libraries they use.

Other than community building, public libraries also serve as an information hub for the general public, and given how diverse the public is, it would make sense for this diversity to be reflected in the collections of the libraries they use. Generally, public libraries in the United States make an effort to be inclusive in selecting literature to add to their collections. Some libraries, for example, have Spanish sections to reflect how their patrons might not speak English as a first language, a decision welcomed by those patrons (Hall-Ellis, 2008). Some libraries have started to incorporate LGBTQ+ materials for their younger patrons, although the degree to which these materials are added depends on the region (Brendler et al., 2017).

Diversity is not limited to subject matter either; the mediums through which patrons access library resources also reflect their various needs. In recent years some public libraries have begun to add non-traditional forms of media to their collections. Despite their non-professional nature and lack of bibliographic information, zines have started to appear in various public libraries across America, reflecting the evolving tastes and desires of patrons (Hays, 2018). Of course, a change in medium is not always driven by a change in culture; external factors might also determine what kinds of materials libraries add. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic’s limit on in-person interactions greatly influenced how patrons used public libraries, as patrons

unwilling to visit the library in person increasingly turned to accessing digital materials over physical ones (Jamali and Hider, 2023).

Evolving to meet the ever-changing needs and desires of patrons takes considerable financial investment for all libraries, as the costs of procuring and maintaining resources can be quite expensive. Public libraries, however, are unique in that they must balance these costs while also being free to access, making it difficult for some to meet the needs of their patrons. Multiple factors also exacerbate this issue. The location of a public library often relates to its level of funding, which impacts the quality of its services. Libraries in rural and low-income neighborhoods, for instance, have been found to have fewer electronic resources and suffer from more staffing shortages compared to libraries in higher-income areas (Sin, 2011). Additionally, *where* a public library receives its funding often impacts how much it receives. Libraries that are partly funded by taxes and owned by the government receive more funds per capita than libraries that do not, meaning that independently funded libraries are more likely to be lacking in resources (Ebdon et al., 2019).

Of course, part of why public libraries have funding issues is because they are not run like businesses. Many public libraries do not systematically track how much it costs to acquire and keep a new patron (White, 2009). Additionally, many of them have also invested heavily into digital resources like databases to keep up with rising demand, and in some cases, they invest into databases that do not justify their existence. Librarians at the Tulsa City-County Library, for example, lobbied to keep their Magazine/Journals and Newspapers database despite its low usage statistics (Koehn and Hawamdeh, 2010). To librarians, these decisions make perfect sense; a public library is not run for profit but for the public good, and cutting services to ensure that a library makes money is the antithesis of its purpose. At the same time, entities such as “the

public good” cannot be easily quantified, and the governmental departments or philanthropic groups that fund librarians want to ensure that their investments are effective. To them, the easiest way of measuring effectiveness is simply comparing the cost to circulation; services that are used the most and cost the least are regarded as effective, regardless of whether the service actually contributed to the public good (Holt and Elliott, 2003). Given this, it seems that although many of their services are free, public libraries are under a constant strain to maximize the cost-effectiveness of their services and must balance providing quality services with ensuring that they have enough funding to provide these services.

Personal Directions

After researching the unique challenges that come with running a public library, I believe that I have an understanding of the general values that they hold, and now that I do I believe that I can safely state that my career goals still include becoming a public librarian. The commitment to community-building, diversity, and service that I found when researching closely aligns with my own values on what the “ideal library” should be like. First, their focus on customer service and ensuring that patrons feel welcome fit well with my belief that libraries should feel like a second home. Additionally, their inclusion of a wide variety of mediums and subjects in their collections closely aligns with my belief that the collections of public libraries should accurately reflect the public they serve. Finally, their general openness to the public reflects my belief that vital library resources should be free to access.

However, I find it important to mention that although I believe that public libraries *generally* share the same values that I do, certain public libraries might be less in line with them than others. For instance, although I found that generally public libraries are becoming more inclusive over time, the extent of this inclusivity is not uniform across library systems. While a

public library might be diverse in its collections, this diversity might not be reflected in its library board and staffing, hampering the library's efforts to connect with its patrons (Kumaran and Templeton, 2020). Additionally, although public librarians are meant to serve communities and enrich them, they are not always treated as part of the community and may be subjected to harsh treatment by patrons. In a recent survey, 96.7% of public librarians reported feeling unsafe at their work, with 67% saying that they feel unsafe a few times a week to a few times a month (Stevenson, 2022). The survey additionally found that although 85% of the respondents had filed at least one report in response to these incidents, many of them were concerned with whether the reports actually did anything, and some were fearful of reprisal (Stevenson, 2022). Another survey conducted further elaborated on this by finding that the most common factor that public librarians listed as being their top stressors was their interactions with management (Jordan, 2014). Clearly, there is a trend of public librarians facing stress from rude and harmful patrons and management that is actively working against them. It seems to me that although public libraries are meant to be a bastion of community and diversity for the public, the employees who work there are sometimes not included in this mission.

Conclusion

While I have found both positive and negative aspects of working in a public library, I still intend to pursue my goal of working in one in the near future. Although I found evidence that I may encounter difficulties with unpleasant customers and abusive management, these issues are not unique to public libraries. Any career that involves interacting with customers comes with the risk of negative interactions with them, and toxic management practices are found in every industry, so there is a good chance that I would still encounter these problems if I decided not to work in a public library. Granted, I believe that my expectations of public libraries

have been tempered and I now know what to expect when I start working in one, but I still desire to in spite of these issues. Besides, public libraries are focused on community-building, so it is not out of the question for me to focus on building a community *within* the library to improve relations between patrons, librarians, and management. Ultimately, I find that the values public libraries hold (including community building, diversity, and openness) greatly mirror my own and that my current career goals are generally in line with these values. At the same time, I realize that there are also challenges to working in a public library and that I must take these into account when I start working in one.

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