

“Beyond Books: Building Bonds and Bridging Communities at Your Fort Bend County Library”

When developing a new slogan for our Fort Bend County Library, our board knew we needed to focus on all of the ways our library serves the community beyond books. From discussions with community members who don't use the library, we learned that much of the public still thinks of public libraries as very “old school”; they are places to check out books, so if you're not a big reader, why would you go? This misunderstanding went a long way in illuminating just how much work our library needs to do to showcase how valuable we are to our community, aside from being a place for books, leading us to the start of our slogan: Beyond Books. I thought the slogan should be short enough to digest easily, but direct about what the library does. It was an easy decision to go in an alliterative direction as everyone loves a catchy slogan. From here, I wanted the slogan to clearly point to what we do and who it's for. By calling it *your* Fort Bend County Library, we're emphasizing our space as a space specifically for you, our community member. The next step was to analyze the programs we offer to convey to the public exactly how their library serves and benefits them. Looking at the online calendar, FBCL offers a range of non-book programs to children, young adult, and adult audiences. Many of our programs focus on connecting with our fellow community members, which is where “Building Bonds” comes in. Our childrens clubs include those dedicating to video gaming, anime, card games, and artistic development. We offer a variety of art and skills development for young adults, including instructional craft programs, how to hand-sew, and forming a basic budget. The “Bridging Communities” aspect relates to how our many educational and cultural benefit the community. Many of our adult programs focus on lifetime learning. We offer computer classes ranging from basic computer skills to advanced software, various heritage series such as the “Taste of Africa” cooking program, ESL conversation circles, and more. By focusing on teaching each other skills and heritage, we are bridging our community and integrating our respective cultures and values.

Blog Post: Beyond Books: How FBCL Enriches our Community and Why Your Vote Matters

In our increasingly digital age, some may view public libraries as relics of the past, but nothing could be further from the truth. Fort Bend County Library is a cornerstone of our community, providing services that go far beyond lending books. With a proposed 15% budget cut looming, it's crucial that we highlight all of the ways FBCL supports, educates, enriches, and connects the lives of everyone in our community. Voting to preserve our library's budget is a vote for books, but more than that it's a vote for a stronger, more connected community, dedicated to lifelong learning, literacy, creativity, and community connection.

Lifelong Learning

Fort Bend County Library is a hub for lifelong learners of all ages. ESL conversation circles are held regularly, encouraging English learners of all levels to come and practice conversation in a relaxed environment. We at Fort Bend County are dedicated to the idea that reduced communication barriers result in an increased feeling of community. While we host these conversation circles to promote language learning and education, these conversations bridge barriers and foster bonds with each other, as well as open doors to new opportunities for non-native speakers. Our computer classes cater to varying proficiencies and interests, ranging from beginner typing skills to programs teaching advanced software applications. These classes help ensure that everyone in our community can navigate the digital world effectively. Specialized skills workshops such as sewing basics for teens provide our young adults with practical knowledge for everyday life. Additionally, our children's science project and robotics programs ignite curiosity and a love for STEM in our young patrons.

Literacy

Fort Bend County Library is dedicated to literacy in all forms, and we offer a variety of programs supporting this. While it may be surprising to learn, 1 in 6 U.S. adults currently read below a 4th grade level. Since the founding of public libraries in America, a driving force behind offered services has been the promotion of a more literate, informed citizenry. FBCL considers this to be especially important in our age of low literacy and high misinformation. To this end, we are striving to becoming true media literacy educators in addition to being champions of “traditional” literacy. We offer many regular programs promoting traditional literacy, including daily storytimes, young adult book clubs, and adult book clubs of various themes. Going further, FBCL embracing digital literacy in many ways. Our documentary series provides adults an opportunity to screen informative documentaries and discuss relevant topics and themes. As previously mentioned, our library offers computer skills classes for all levels. For those struggling with their devices, we offer “How to use your e-reader” sessions. Drop-in tech sessions are also offered, providing on-the-spot assistance for any tech-related issues, ensuring no one in our community is left behind in our increasingly digital world. We offer video game programs catering to tech-savvy patrons, promoting a sense of community among gamers. For those interested in design, we offer classes on 3D-printing and Canva training.

Our dedication to literacy extends beyond books and digital media, encompassing legal and financial literacy as well. FBCL understands that understanding legal and financial matters is essential for everyone to live independently. Our library offers legal workshops such as “Pro Se Basics”, to help individuals become legally literate and navigate the legal system independently. Our financial workshops teach crucial skills such as budgeting and investing for teens and adults alike, enabling our community members of all ages to make informed financial decisions.

Community

Creativity flourishes within the walls of our library. FBCL hosts a plethora of craft programs to all ages. Both instructional and social, our craft programs provide outlets for artistic expression as well as community connection. We have board game clubs for children, teens, and adults. Our library supports local writers by offering workshops of poetry, prose, creative writing, and more.

Fort Bend County Library is dedicated to being a safe and inclusive space to *all* of our community members. We are incredibly lucky to live in a county as diverse as Fort Bend, and our library celebrates and promotes this diversity through a variety of services. Cultural programs like our various heritage series, such as June's "Taste of Africa", foster a mutual understanding and appreciation of different cultures within our community. These events enrich our collective experience and strengthen community bonds. Social events like our literary lunches and genealogy programs allow us to connect with each other and explore our shared passions.

We at FBCL believe health and wellness are pivotal to a healthy community, and our library is committed to promoting these through our programs. Our fitness programs including yoga, dance, and zumba classes encourage physical activity and overall well-being. These sessions are accessible to everyone, regardless of fitness level, making it easier for our community members to stay active and healthy. Our focus on wellness extends beyond physical health and we offer mental health programs including "The Vital Importance of Therapy", to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health in our community. Fostering open conversations

around mental health is an incredibly important step in supporting everyone in our diverse community.

A Call to Action

Our library is more than just a place to borrow books; it is a lifeline for education, digital access, social support, and cultural enrichment. The proposed budget cut threatens to undermine all the ways our library serves our community, and cut valuable programs and services that so many of our community members rely on. We urge you to recognize the invaluable role our library plays and vote to preserve its funding. Stand with us and vote to protect our library—because a strong library means a strong community.

Reflection

Since 2021, I have worked in 2 public libraries and 1 academic. This professional experience has provided me with a lot of first-hand knowledge of the way different libraries are run and services they often provide, but this class has taught me a significant amount that I had not considered before. While my ideas of public libraries haven't necessarily changed over the course of the term, this class has solidified my passion for public library service.

My biggest takeaway from this course is the idea that libraries are not neutral (Chancellor 2017). This is a concept I've wrestled with since first working as a part-time library assistant in 2021, when my library administration denied my proposed Pride display. With this in mind, the concept of "radical inclusivity" has been exciting and promising to learn about (Gustina & Guinnee 2017). The idea that in any given community there exists more and less privileged populations, and as librarians we need to be asking difficult questions and amplifying the voices of those less privileged, regardless of our prescribed "neutrality". The concept of various forms of "literacy" has been impactful to me as well (Agosto & Magee 2014). Thinking about literacy in different forms has been very eye-opening for me and has provided me a new way to think about programming. In an age of such high misinformation and low literacy, I think it's incredibly important to focus emerging programs on various media forms to help our communities become more media literate. I think it will be beneficial when program planning to consider what specific types of literacy our programs support, because even "social" programs can be designed to promote and encourage digital literacy. My library admin has historically opposed a video game group, and I am going to pitch it as both a social exercise and media literacy training.

I think the biggest challenge for public library staff is to communicate and emphasize to their communities the true extent of their value and service, beyond books. I've worked in libraries for years and even my immediate family, whom I talk to about libraries all the time, still primarily associate libraries with books. I think this misperception goes hand in hand with another challenge library staff face, which is the expectation to perform social work for their communities, without actually being social workers (Troknya 2015). So much of the value libraries provide to their communities *is* social value, and social work. This is such an important aspect of library work to highlight when emphasizing our value to our communities, but at the same time, it can be something of a double-edged sword when librarians are expected to perform this care work without the support in place. Considering our hypothetical PR project, for example. When librarians have to defend the work they already do to maintain the low funding they already have for the social work they're already doing, there's little room to ask for more funding to employ an actual social worker. I hope to one day work for a library system that employs social workers as I've witnessed the need for the service first hand in my library.

Concepts I plan to take with me to apply to future work include the HOMAGO library model: hang out, mess around, and geek out (Agosto & Magee 2014). I think this is a great idea to foster interest in technology for all library patrons. I very much appreciated the section of this course focusing on how social public spaces such as public libraries are vital for community connection (Hallman 2020). I fundamentally believe that community connection is one of the most pressing needs in our isolated society today, and I got a lot out of the content focusing on how the design of space sends a message to our community about who and what we value. This is something I failed to previously consider, and think the TED talk brought up many good points. Incorporating outlets, soft seating, plants, and outdoor space, all send clear messaging

about how our space is meant to be used. One quote from this section that I greatly enjoyed was, “In a radically inclusive library, not only are all welcome, but all are welcome to use the library without criticism of conformance to rules of productivity, implicit or explicit” (Gustina & Guinnee 2017). I will definitely be intentional about the design of my future library’s space to emphasize that all groups in my community are worthy and welcome in their public library.

I also hope to be able to incorporate non-traditional materials into my library’s circulation collection in the future. As brought up in the Stamberg reading, I think it’s a wonderful idea to circulate items such as cake pans (Stamberg 2013). I recently saw a talk by ALA president Emily Drabinski, where she talked about her home library circulating carpet cleaners. My public library circulates non-traditional materials such as WiFi hotspots and museum passes which I’m already very impressed by, but think cleaning and cooking tools are an excellent idea.

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