Libraries, Technology and the Route to Relevance

By better aligning their services to community needs, they can target inequities and support economic opportunity.

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Like the footings beneath the shelves they line, books have traditionally formed the foundation of the services that public libraries offer their communities. However, with the shift from print to digital publishing, libraries face a battle in maintaining their status as bastions for learning, community engagement, workforce development and citizenship.

This challenge has not gone unnoticed by local-government budget-writers, who are increasingly likely to cut funding for libraries in favor of more "necessary" departments and programs. Nevertheless, library professionals remain hopeful that technology will help moderate inequities in areas such as access to information, educational achievement and economic opportunity. But to successfully leverage technology to this effect, we must make sure that those who make funding decisions see libraries not as stuffy stacks of yellowing pages but as modern community learning centers.

This can be achieved through thoughtful assessment and partnership. Here's how:

First, libraries need to identify service gaps by evaluating the needs of their users against the services they provide. Technology can be a great help here, given the variety of data-driven mapping tools now available to help shape precise community profiles. These tools, typically employed for purposes of planning and zoning, offer libraries a detailed dissection of a neighborhood's demographics, including education level, family composition and transit information.

Once libraries have this profile defined, they can assess how their services align with the community's needs. One tool to assist in this effort is Edge, a library-technology benchmarking service led by the Urban Libraries Council and developed through a coalition including the American Library Association and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Edge provides an evaluation of a library's technology offerings and generates recommendations to better align technology to users' needs. Critically, it also provides resources and templates to help library employees better communicate the value of the services they provide.

There are already some exciting instances of libraries successfully leveraging technology to pull in paper of a new color -- green. The Pottsboro Area Public Library in Texas, for example, received no public funding at all, relying entirely on donations and community fundraising, until it was granted $4,000 by the city in 2010. Since then, the Pottsboro library has seen its budget steadily increase to $26,000, thanks in large part to its use of these tools and templates. Additionally, leaders in the small community about 75 miles north of Dallas saw the possibility of a mutually beneficial relationship, leading the city manager to request that the library manage IT for the entire local government after seeing its successful implementation of its own technology services.

As seen in Pottsboro, convincing policymakers of a library's capacity to alleviate some of the responsibilities of other public departments can be key in securing support. By partnering with other agencies such as municipal IT networks, school systems, community colleges and workforce-development organizations, libraries can provide value not just to their users but also to the individuals entrusted with the community's policies and spending.

With municipal backing secured, libraries will be well positioned to impact educational inequities, having long offered after-school and weekend programs to children and teens. More and more, homework assignments, study guides and other resources are administered in digital format, disadvantaging children without internet access at home. As public learning centers, libraries can compensate for this imbalance. Ways to bridge the "homework gap" include extending operating hours and adding more computers and other internet-capable devices.

This isn't just an equity issue; it is highly correlated with economic growth, since empowered learners are better equipped to identify and pursue economic opportunities. As such, libraries should help strengthen the workforce by offering job-preparedness training and useful resources for working-age adults. Some library systems already offer free courses in highly technical skills, such as software coding, while partnering with community colleges or nonprofits. This investment pays dividends when graduates of these programs are able to fill local technology jobs, bolstering the community's economy and improving its technology infrastructure.

Libraries can also assist those with physical disabilities and language barriers via new and adaptive technologies. These tools range from voice-controlled typing software to screen magnification and reader tools for the visually impaired. And earbud-like devices can translate languages in close-to-real-time, enabling librarians to better assist non-native speakers.

Though showy devices like 3D printers and virtual-reality headsets are proliferating in larger library systems, libraries should first focus on building foundational and sustainable technology practices. The newest gadget may draw initial interest, but it is thoughtful programming that will ultimately secure funding, improve communities and keep libraries relevant for years to come.

Lourdes Aceves, senior program manager for the Urban Libraries Council, contributed insights that helped to inform this column.

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