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## **Meeting the Expectations of the Community: The Engagement-Centered Library**

**Note:** This is a preprint version of a chapter that appears in *Library 2020: Today's Leading Visionaries Describe Tomorrow's Library*. Please cite the published version; a suggested citation appears below. Correspondence about the article may be sent to [connawal@oclc.org](mailto:connawal@oclc.org).

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**Suggested citation:**

Connaway, Lynn Silipigni. 2013. "Meeting the Expectations of the Community: The Engagement-Centered Library." In *Library 2020: Today's Leading Visionaries Describe Tomorrow's Library*, edited by Joseph Janes. Preprint available online at:  
<http://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/library/2013/connaway-library2020.pdf>

The library in 2020 will be engagement-centered.

In 2008, Lorcan Dempsey stated that it used to be that users built their workflows around the library, resources were scarce, therefore, the users' attention was abundant. He went on to say that the library now must build its service around the users' workflow because their attention is scarce and the available resources are abundant. This scenario most likely will intensify. As Mitchell Kapor said, "Getting information off the Internet is like taking a drink from a fire hydrant."<sup>i</sup>

The library of the future needs to be constantly changing or it will not survive. Regardless of whether the library is public or academic, in order to remain relevant in a rapidly changing global environment, it will need to provide an environment for "innovation, productivity, collaboration, and knowledge" (Mathews, 2012).

Libraries traditionally have been most concerned with access to information and content (Mathews, 2011). Accessing information is no longer an issue. Librarians can fill a niche in the use, creation, and curation of information and content. Librarians in 2020 will be assisting users in the creation, evaluation, and production of content. We will not only need to create repositories for content but also to engage and motivate researchers, scholars, and business people to contribute, share, and reuse the content. Librarians will need to develop partnerships with the individuals who create, collect, and analyze data

sets in order to provide policies, systems, and services for the storage, access, preservation, and shared use of these data.

Something that often is difficult for library and information professionals to comprehend is that the majority of the population does not use libraries to get information. Many people get their information from human resources (family, teachers, professors, colleagues, peers) and the Internet (Connaway and Dickey, 2010; Head and Eisenberg, 2010; Prabha, Connaway, and Dickey, 2006; Connaway, Prabha, and Dickey, 2006; Connaway, Lanclos, White, Le Cornu, and Hood, 2012; Connaway, White, Lanclos, and Le Cornu, 2012). Google and Wikipedia often are the first places individuals go for information regardless of age or educational background (Head and Eisenberg, 2010; Head and Eisenberg, 2009; Connaway, Lanclos, White, Le Cornu, and Hood, 2012; Connaway, White, Lanclos, and Le Cornu, 2012). Why? Because people go for what's convenient (Connaway, Dickey, and Radford, 2011; Connaway and Dickey, 2010).

If this is the case, why not gear library services and systems to those who actually use them? This also may be more efficient for the library. Andy Priestner and Elizabeth Tilley propose this in the concept of boutique academic libraries (Priestner and Tilley, 2010; Priestner and Tilley, 2012). They equate the boutique library with the boutique hotel – personalized service. It's a customer-focused approach that will utilize the skills and knowledge of professional librarians, possibly eliminating the more clerical responsibilities of some current library positions. Subject librarians will collaboratively work with users and develop relationships with them to create services specifically geared to their needs.

Relationships are important to both librarians and users. Research in virtual reference services (VRS) reported that both VRS librarians and reference service users value the relationships developed in both face-to-face (FtF) and virtual environments. Even though VRS is more convenient, users often prefer FtF reference because of the relationships they develop with librarians (Connaway and Radford, 2011).

Felicia A. Smith coins the term, Helicopter Librarians, based on the concept of Helicopter Parents. She describes Helicopter Librarianship as “a holistic approach to a human interaction based on individuality and genuine compassion” (Smith, 2012). She stresses the importance of building relationships during instruction sessions and reference encounters, and by embracing “new and unconventional methods” for users to contact and interact with librarians when they need help (Smith, 2012).

This may call for a new type of librarian and information professional - one who embraces change and possesses a willingness and eagerness to try new technologies and modes of communication and delivery of services. When users visit our online catalogs and web sites, they often find them confusing and difficult to use (Connaway and Dickey, 2010; Connaway, Prabha, and Dickey, 2006). Why not provide a pop-up chat box that asks, “What can I help you find?”? We need to be *where* our users need us, *when* they need us. If the majority of our users prefer to communicate via mobile phone texting, chat, or IM; to learn through gaming; by accessing the library’s unique collections and materials via social media, such as Facebook<sup>ii</sup> and Wikipedia; or to meet with us FtF outside of the library, we need to be there!

Today it’s not unusual for librarians to make themselves physically available within the academic departments, student unions, and cafeterias. This is referred to as

embedded librarianship. Kessleman and Watstein (2009, p. 385) stated that “bringing the library and the librarian to the user, wherever they are – office, laboratory, home, or even on their mobile device is at the forefront of what it means to be embedded.” Some academic librarians embed themselves in both FtF and online classes, which provides them with the opportunity to interact with the students and faculty on a regular basis.

A more innovative example of embedded librarianship was the October 2011 announcement that the William H. Welch Medical Library at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, would close its physical doors to patrons on January 1, 2012.<sup>iii</sup> The plan was for the library to continue to provide resources completely online. One of the main reasons for the closing of the library was the decrease in use and circulation of physical materials and the exponential increase in the use of electronic materials. The librarians have been embedded within the academic departments for the past 6 years and are available to students and faculty via email or phone (Kelley, 2011).

Embedded librarianship also is an important aspect of public library engagement with the community. Many public libraries are providing kiosks in public spaces, such as train and bus stations and parks, for users to check-out and return print, audio, and electronic books, magazines, newspapers, and journals.

I was visiting Washington, DC several years ago and as I walked down the street, there were several individuals who were wearing yellow shirts, with the word information printed on them, standing on the street corners. I decided to ask for directions (although I did not need them). The person was very pleasant, gave me directions, and offered me a map as well. I immediately thought that this would be a perfect venue for

public librarians to engage with the community and to communicate the library's value, although I am not advocating yellow shirts!

A similar idea occurred to me several months ago when a friend, who is very involved in local politics in Aspen, Colorado, called me to discuss the Pitkin County Library's request for funds to renovate and expand the library. Although he had no idea of the library's impact on the community or how the library and its services are used, he felt that the request was unwarranted since the library occupied a beautiful space that was sufficiently staffed and funded to meet the needs of the community. I immediately thought of the information kiosk at the corner of the pedestrian mall in Aspen that is staffed by local volunteers and that I often frequent to find out about daily events, restaurants, and shops. Wouldn't this be the perfect outpost for the library? It would give the library visibility in a bustling small town and would demonstrate the library's engagement with and contributions to the community.

My mother works in retail and always says that "one size fits no one." This pertains to library services and systems as well. No one service or system will meet the needs of every individual. We need to develop an economic model for the allocation of resources for the various modes of user engagement based on the specific user groups' needs and expectations.

The library of 2020 will provide user-centered services and systems that will meet the expectations of the community. The library staff will need to develop relationships with their users and partner with other organizations in order to produce, store, and preserve content and data sets and to provide personalized services. Recruiting and retaining innovative, creative individuals who are willing to engage with users and to

Connaway: Meeting the Expectations of the Community: The Engagement-Centered Library embrace new technologies and modes of communication will be imperative for the success of the library of 2020. Access to the library and its resources when and where users need them (which may involve being accessible in multiple physical and virtual locations), will be essential since convenient access to resources, whether human, print, or electronic is the most critical factor for users. As stated by one of our study participants, “If it is too inconvenient I’m not going after it” (Connaway, Dickey, and Radford, 2011). Ultimately, the library must develop strategic plans and continually change and innovate in order to respond proactively instead of reactively to community needs and engagement opportunities.

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<sup>i</sup> Taken from Image: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/will-lion/2595497078/>;  
<http://giveupinternet.com/2009/01/14/mitchell-kapor-getting-information-off-the-internet-is-like-taking-a-drink-from-a-fire-hydrant-pic/>

<sup>ii</sup> The Director of Research Collections and Services at the University of Nevada, Reno created Facebook profiles for Joe McDonald, a sophomore at the university in 1913, and his girlfriend and future wife, Leola Lewis to promote the library's special collections. Although Facebook made the library remove the profiles since the two individuals are no longer alive, the site is still active and has attracted thousands to the special collections (DeSantis, 2012).

<sup>iii</sup> The library did not close its physical doors on January 1, 2012. The Board is still reviewing the options to determine which will best provide services to its users.