

Connecting young adults and libraries in the 21st century /

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*ABSTRACT*

While the practice of serving teenagers in school and public libraries changes consistently, these services remain anchored to a foundation of core values. In this paper, the core values of serving teens will be explored. The other papers offered at the conference on subjects such as youth participation, teen spaces, and technology integration all demonstrate these core values “in action.” By understanding these core values, , librarians from libraries of all sizes, and from all nations, can embrace a common language and commitment to teens in libraries.  
(87 words)

Over the past twenty years, I've presented on this topic of connecting young adults and libraries in all fifty of the United States. During these trainings, I often tell people – as a joke – the way to avoid negative experiences with teenagers in school or public libraries is simply to lock the day. Little did I know that in December 2006, a public library in New Jersey wouldn't realize I was joking. While the decision was overturned, it was a scary day with the Library Board of the Maplewood, New Jersey's solution to the "teen problem" in the library was to lock the doors between two thirty and five Monday through Friday in the afternoon. No doubt there was a problem at that library, but I don't think it was just middle school students. The first mistake is viewing teens as problems to solve, rather than customers to be served.

When I first started training back in the late 1980s, the question library staff asked most was "how do we get teens into the library?" Now, the question is more "what do we do with all these teens in the libraries?" But there's also another question, actually more of a complaint, bubbling under the surface that combines the two: "how do we get all of these teens in the library to use the library like we want them to, rather than how they choose." In other words, we think our teen customers are the problem.

In this room, there is a goal we all share: that our work with teenagers in our libraries and in our lives will make a positive impact. We believe that reading, libraries, and lifelong learning can be positive forces in the lives of young people. As individuals, we share many different beliefs. We come to work with different political, social, spiritual, and religious beliefs. Our work with teenagers occurs because of various experiences, skills, and knowledge. But while we are different, I believe we are all the same in the outcome we share: that young people grow up to become caring and complement adults. And I believe we share a common set of professional values that provide the road map to help guide young

people on a successful path through adolescence. These core values are the elements of success for services to young adults in both schools and public libraries.

#### 1. Developmental needs

Young adults use libraries in a variety of ways for a variety of reasons. Like any other group of customers, such as genealogists or small business people, their needs are unique. Not special, but unique. To respect the unique needs of young adults means to understand those needs, to accept them, to accommodate them, and to provide services which help meet those needs. To respect those needs means that collections are responsive and reflect the diverse interests of young adults. It means that space is designed to accommodate teens, including a separate YA space. It means that technology is plentiful, accessible, and that teen use of it is valued. To respect the unique needs of young adults is to value what they value. Librarians which respect the unique needs of teenagers will be approachable, nonjudgmental, and accepting. They will be encouraging, tolerant, patient, persistent, and emphatic. They will understand young adults: their psychology, their literature, and even their popular culture. They will advocate for intellectual freedom, for free access, and for solving problems to knock down barriers to youth access.

#### 2. Healthy youth development

Healthy youth development is a process of creating environments that support the social, emotional, spiritual, physical, moral, and cognitive development of young people. Positive youth development addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models which focus solely on youth problems. The essential concept of positive youth development is that a successful transition to adulthood requires more than avoiding drugs, violence, or precocious sexual activity. The promotion of a young person's

social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development began to be seen as key to preventing problem behaviors themselves. If school and public libraries are to remain vital, vibrant, and valued into the 21st century, it is essential that we refine and perhaps even redefine our role as key players in the process of supporting healthy youth development. We do that by supporting healthy youth development. When we help youth in developing healthily, engaging in positive behaviors rather than negative ones; when we empower youth so they thrive rather than engage in risk taking action; when we believe in youth so they believe in themselves rather than become stuck in a cycle of despair, when we do all of these things, and so much more, we are supporting healthy youth development. Circulating books, answering reference questions, teaching information literacy, developing programs, forming youth advisory groups, promoting reading through booktalking, and every other positive action we take supports healthy youth development. These things are not ends; they are means.

### 3. Developmental assets

Libraries don't serve youth because it is good for the library, but because it is good for young adults. What is good for young adults, it follows, is good for the community. That is the assumption. The Search Institute, located in Minneapolis Minnesota, has transformed this notion into a vision that healthy communities are built through healthy youth. This vision is based on extensive research on youth which has produced the "developmental assets" framework. The forty development assets are the factors which are critical to a young person's successful growth and development. These forty assets are positive experiences, opportunities, and personal qualities that all youth need in order to become responsible, successful, and caring adults. These are the critical factors for young people's growth and development. When gathered together, they offer a set of benchmarks for positive youth

development. The key research finding is this: the more assets young people experience, the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of risky behaviors and the more likely they are to engage in positive behaviors. Relationships are the key to asset building. Forming relationship with teens, and with teachers and others about teens, help pull youth away from the margins. The library at the center of the school or community is an equally strong selling point. Asserts give us a way back to the center, which given home computers, Internet cafés, super book stores, and school computer labs, many libraries are finding themselves headed toward the edges. But what we offer that none of those other places can is quality customer service. What we offer isn't so much our bricks or clicks, but our expertise. Libraries are not really in the information business or the book business, but the people business. The essential role of any library serving any customer is about connecting people and information. Thus, it is about relationships.

#### 4. Youth advocacy

Youth advocacy is the very core essence of what we do. Youth advocacy means believing in youth to be treated as “first class citizens” in the library world, not poor cousins and not marginalized. Youth advocacy means believing that services for teens are a right, a given, and an indispensable part of the very business of every library, not an after thought or a “special program.” Youth advocacy means believing that every young person who walks through the door of a library deserves respect, attention, and our best efforts. Youth advocacy means being a voice with and for youth at all levels of a library organization, from ensuring that circulation systems can measure teen use to selecting appropriate furniture to providing information literacy instruction to programs which increase student learning and achievement. Youth advocacy means believing in youth.

## 5. Youth participation

Youth involvement is a broad term that cast a wide net and is the cornerstone value of a new way of thinking about library services to young adults. It involves any project, program, and practice which allows teens a chance to be more than customers. Youth involvement encompasses practices such as teen volunteer programs, teen book selection groups, as well as teen advisory groups. Youth involvement is about relationship building between librarians and teenagers through many different vehicles. Youth involvement is an action, but mostly it is attitude. For a young adult, youth involvement provides a wide variety of benefits. Regardless of the task at hand, youth involvement validates the importance of youth's contribution. For the young person, youth involvement can help them gain or develop a sense of responsibility, self-esteem, and meaningful participation. They gain skills, they gain knowledge, and develop personal traits which will help them succeed. They develop a sense of being part of something larger: youth involvement is citizen participation in action, making a difference at the local level. Youth involvement allows young people to interact with peers, as well adult role models. It allows them to constitutively use their time, to channel their energy into a positive project, and to contribute. For all these reasons, youth involvement is a cornerstone value of services to young adults because the outcome of youth involvement directly meets the developmental needs of teenagers, while at the same time, meeting the needs of librarians to provide the best services possible. The web 2.0 movement is a reaction to youth wanting not to passively consume media, but actively create and interact. The social networking, the media creation, and of technology for communication are in effect youth participation opportunities. If libraries want to remain relevant, they must really adopt the philosophy of Web 2.0, not just throw up a myspace page.

## 6. Collaboration

We believe in collaboration and cooperation for many reasons, but mostly because it works. Outside of the world of libraries, collaboration is seen as one of the elements of success of developing youth programs. When libraries join such efforts, the safety net for teens grows larger. Collaboration is about sharing information, sharing resources, and sharing successes. It is through collaboration that individuals, agencies, and institutions with different methods, means, and motives can come together for the common goal of creating healthy youth. In the public library setting, collaboration with youth serving agencies, businesses, the faith community, government bodies, cultural institutions, and educational bodies that serve teens increase the strength of each group's program and tightens the safety net for teens in the community. Collaboration, in addition to the positive outcomes it can bring to young adults, provides the library with an opportunity to expand its base, triumph its message, and secure supporters in the community. It is where we can share what we bring to the table in promoting positive youth development.

## 7. Information Literacy

Collaboration between school library media specialists and teachers is the foundation of successful information literacy instruction. Working with teachers and curriculum departments, school library media specialists can plan for learning environments supportive of curriculum integration, and design, then implement, a variety of instructional strategies and experiences that engage each student in successful learning. Through collaboration, school library media specialists can ensure that information literacy is not merely part of the curriculum, but instead as integrated as other basic skills, into every classroom. But more than that, the collaboration between teachers and librarians results in positive outcomes for the student. Students are engaging in reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and listening for enjoyment, enrichment and understanding. By placing a value on collaboration, school

library media specialists are increasing the value of the library experience for students. Information literacy is the foundation of the central teen drive: to be independent. By providing youth with instruction on how to become information literate, they can become empowered to find, evaluate, and use information not only for schools, but also within every aspect of their lives.

#### 8. Adolescent literacy

Young adult readers are all over the map. Some enjoy reading picture books, while others are willing to tackle James Joyce as a spring break project. Some read a book a night, while others read only when forced, and sometimes not even then. But what all teen readers have in common is they are developing a relationship with reading. The essential role of the young adult librarian is to nurture that relationship. We learn about teen reading and contribute to improving adolescent literacy when we show respect for the reading choices of young people. We complement, we don't condemn. To say, or to give the attitude of "at least they are reading something" is to show disrespect for what the teen, for whatever reason, has chosen to read. We learn about teen reading and contribute to improving adolescent literacy when we provide access to a wide range of materials for them to choose from and ensure that policies do not deny them access. .When teens are or become readers, their chances to succeed in school increase. But just as important, reading for pleasure is a key asset that shows a young adult's commitment to learning. The relationships we build with young adults to help them commit to learning demonstrate not just our values in action, but demonstrate the value we see in young people.

#### 9. Student learning and achievement



One outcome of positive youth development is success in school. Increasing student learning and achievement is an important goal of public libraries and an essential one for the junior high or high school library. Student learning encompasses the broad process of learning, whereas student achievement is closely linked with success on standardized tests. Within the educational community there is debate as to which of these is more important, but to most students, both are important. Few students enjoy failing any test, and most students, despite numerous obstacles, do want to learn. As schools focus on student learning and achievement, libraries serving teens must look at the role they can play. In school libraries, the value of a strong program is well documented in the variety of studies. Given a relationship between library media center expenditures and test performance, what intervening characteristics of library media programs help to explain this relationship? The size of the library media center's total staff and the size and variety of its collection are important characteristics of library media programs that intervene between library media center expenditures and test performance. Funding is important precisely because its specific purpose is to ensure both adequate levels of staffing in relation to the school's enrollment and a local collection that offers students a large number of materials in a variety of formats.

#### 10. Equal access

The unique nature of young adults, no longer children yet not adults, is the central contradiction which emerges in the debate over equal access. When is a person considered an adult? The debate rages, in particular in the juvenile justice system. It depends on what state that person lives in, the political climate of the legislature, and what the young person wants to do, or is to be punished for doing. In the US, sixteen year olds can drive in most states. They are given the legal authority to operate a dangerous piece of machinery, yet that same person, in many libraries, might be still considered a child and denied access to the

Internet, to DVDs, and to other collections or services. It is about teens having the same access to information as adults. Is some of the material that teens would access harmful? Of course, it is. But is it more harmful to deny access to information they want and need? Again, of course it is. The importance of youth advocacy is especially evident when the library, through its policies and procedures, provides equal access to resources. Access begins in selection; libraries must purchase and promote materials that teenagers require to satisfy their varied needs. In particular, information about sexuality is not only of interest to teenagers for obvious reasons related to physical development, but also it is necessary, even life-saving, information. Rather than protecting young adults from information, which is something few teens would want or need, librarians must offer the resources and guidance to help adolescents make the transition to becoming adults.

If these ten core values are the building blocks, then where and who are the carpenters? In most libraries, services to teenagers are more often that not reactive and delivered by non-young adult librarians, rather than proactive and planned, developed, implemented and evaluated by someone whose job description actually reads “YA librarian.” But in the States, that might be changing. In the United States, services to teens have exploded in the past ten years. Just a few examples: the start of Teen Read Week, Teen Tech Week, and the creation of the Printz Award for best young adult book by the Young Adult Library Services Association by YALSA, as well as projects such as the Urban Libraries Council’s Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development. Few large urban libraries in the United States dare open any more without a large “teen zone” and not feature teen services front and center. But to be clichéd, it is not about bricks or bytes, but about building bridges between what teens want and needs with what libraries can provide. Libraries to remain relevant to teens must reflect read young adult needs, be planned in

cooperation and consultation with teens, and always focus on the bottom line: healthy youth development.

We know this. We know that young people with assets are more likely to contribute to, rather than take from, society. We know the cost to the community of kids without assets in social services, corrections, and other institutions. We know that libraries can and do build assets. Thus, libraries build communities. Assets create positive outcomes and positive outcomes create stronger communities. We serve teens because libraries build community.

We measure circulation of young adults books, but what really matters most is the outcomes we create in young adult lives. The question is no longer only asking what does a young adult find in a school or public library when they enter it, but also asking what happens to that young adult as a result of checking out a book, attending a book discussion program, spending time as a student assistant, or learning how to locate information on the Internet. By placing services in this broader context, administrators and other purse string holders can begin to realize the true value of serving young adults in libraries. Young adult librarians don't just develop collections; they help in the vital process of developing young people to become competent, caring adults. Libraries do not, should not, and cannot develop services for young adults because it is good for the library, but rather because these services will make an affirmative impact leading to positive outcomes for teens. Libraries are in the youth development business working to develop the positive assets in the lives of teenagers.

So, we're posed to make a choice. We can lock the doors and shut out a generation of library users, or we can unlock the creativity, excitement, energy, and passion of both these teen users and the librarians that serve them. For a long time, the American Library Association used the slogan "Libraries change lives". Fact is, most libraries are made up of ugly carpet, poor lighting, jammed printers, and books few people will ever read. What changes lives are people who work in libraries, people like you.