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Public Engagement

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SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Research universities have a long tradition of service to their local communities. Often referred to as the “third mission” of higher education, “service” has been defined in many ways over the years, and it is not uncommon to find multiple and overlapping terms used to refer to this aspect of the institutional mission, e.g., “extension,” “outreach,” or “public service.”¹ Over the past decade, it has become more common to see institutions of higher education refer to this aspect of their mission as “engagement,” a term embraced both by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.² While often associated with public universities—especially those with a land-grant mission—this service tradition is found in academic institutions of all types and may be seen as a distinctive characteristic of higher education in the United States.³

Academic libraries contribute to the campus tradition of service to the community in many ways. A number of libraries, for example, allow members of the public to make use of collections through community borrower programs and support broader awareness of cultural resources through public programs, e.g., exhibitions of materials drawn from special collections and archives. Derek Bok, then President of Harvard University, recognized the role that libraries, like other cultural heritage organizations, play in building bridges between the campus and the community by providing such programs.⁴ Many libraries also provide an array of services to the community that transcend the “public access” programs noted by Bok, e.g., cooperative virtual reference services and

instructional services.⁵ In many cases, these “public service” programs are provided as part of the library’s overarching service mission; in others, they are provided as an adjunct to campus outreach efforts. “Outreach services” in academic libraries have been explored in essays such as Tina Schneider’s “Outreach: Why, How, and Who?: Academic Libraries and their Involvement in the Community” (2003), but as valuable and important as these programs are, they are not what we mean by “public engagement.”⁶

“Outreach” programs on campus have typically focused on the provision of access to services and resources to members of the community. While “the concept of engagement is still emerging and is not uniformly understood,” it is typically distinguished from earlier understandings of “outreach” by its focus on collaboration between campus and community to address common concerns and the mutual benefit that accrues to partners on both sides as the result of engagement activities.⁷ The East St. Louis Action Research Project at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, for example, defines public engagement as “the application of new and existing knowledge to address real-world problems and improve local communities,” while the Office of the Vice-Chancellor for Public Engagement at the same institution promotes an environment in which “faculty, staff, and students collaborate with external audiences and partners to address the needs and opportunities of society.”⁸ Finally, engagement is increasingly seen as an area of scholarly endeavor, rather than as an “add-on” to the “real work” of campus faculty, and promotion and tenure guidelines on many campuses now recognize the “scholarship of engagement” as a

legitimate demonstration of rigorous inquiry.⁹ Since the most recent SPEC survey to explore outreach programs in ARL member libraries was conducted over a decade ago, the purpose of this survey was to explore the ways in which traditional “outreach” programs in academic libraries are evolving to address the emergent concept of “public engagement” at the institutional level and the degree to which the library is integrated into campus-level efforts to promote public engagement.¹⁰ As this survey was being launched, a new collection of essays edited by Nancy Courtney, exploring the evolution of the “third mission” in academic libraries, was published.¹¹ Readers should compare the data collected through this survey with the case studies presented by Courtney (2009).

The survey was posted in February 2009. By the March deadline, responses had been submitted by 56 of 123 ARL member libraries for a response rate of 46%.

Public Engagement in Academic Libraries

For the purposes of this survey, respondents were asked to report on “public engagement programs” that met the definition of those that demonstrate the library’s “commitment to community partnerships, service to professional communities outside [your] primary user groups . . . [and that] go beyond the ‘provision of institutional resources for community use,’ and are aimed at bringing the professional expertise of the library to members of the public.” Of the 56 responding libraries, 49 (88%) reported providing such programs as part of their service profile.

Respondents identified a wide variety of programs that they characterize as “public engagement.” The top four areas of library activity reported were programs in the areas of K-12 education (80%), cultural engagement (75%), government information/e-government (68%), and lifelong learning (66%). A review of comments and open responses provided as part of the survey suggests that several of these programs are closer to the traditional understanding of “outreach” (e.g., community borrower programs, public programs and exhibits, and participation in the Federal Depository Library Program) than to the emergent understanding of “engagement.”¹² Others represent library programs designed to complement

or support campus-level engagement programs, such as Cooperative Extension.

Among the programs that appeared to better represent library-based public engagement efforts were those aimed at K-12 students and teachers (e.g., National History Day <http://www.national-historyday.org/>), those aimed at other special user populations, including retirees, homeschoolers, and residents of local correctional facilities (e.g., Osher Lifelong Learning Institute <http://www.osherfoundation.org/>), and those that allowed ARL member libraries to participate in national efforts to facilitate collaboration between academic libraries and community organizations (e.g., the National Endowment for the Arts’ “Big Read” program <http://www.neabigread.org/>), or that direct the information expertise of academic librarians toward public concerns (e.g., the National Library of Medicine’s “Go Local” program <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/golocal/>).

In addition to involvement in national efforts such as these, respondents identified a number of innovative programs reflective of local interests and opportunities for collaboration, such as the Get Graphic program at the University at Buffalo <http://getgraphic.org/>, and the School Partnerships in Research and Information Technology (SPIRIT) program at the University of California, Irvine <http://spirit.lib.uci.edu/>. Finally, one must note the degree to which digital library services and programs provide opportunities for public engagement and collaboration with community partners, for example, the University of Georgia’s involvement in the Civil Rights Digital Library <http://crdl.usg.edu/>, and the involvement of multiple institutions in the Government Information Online (GIO) Virtual Reference Service <http://131.193.153.128/>.¹³

Organizational Culture and Structure

The organizational culture of a library and its parent institution influence the level of commitment to, and involvement in, public engagement programs. The organizational structure of the library, as well as the structure for coordinating and communicating public engagement initiatives at the campus level, also have an impact on the degree to which public engagement programs have become embedded in the mission,

vision, strategic initiatives, and regular activities of the library.

A commitment to public engagement may be found in the mission statements of many institutions, especially those founded either with a land-grant mission or a religious mission. Thirty-one libraries (84%) indicated that public engagement was part of the strategic plan at the institutional level, but only 28 (76%) indicated that it was part of the library strategic plan. Likewise, while 33 libraries (100%) indicated that public engagement was part of the institutional mission statement, only 23 (70%) reported this as true for the library mission statement. These responses may suggest a gap between the commitment to public engagement at the institutional level, as opposed to the library level, but they may also be related to the differences in the way “engagement” is defined across institutions. In the library, for example, broadly defined phrases such as “outreach,” “public service,” and “sharing information with the community” may lead respondents to extrapolate a public engagement component to their mission. On the other hand, comments such as “no formal recognition [of public engagement] but part of the total package” suggest that a commitment to engagement may be implicit at many institutions, though without formal integration into planning documents such as strategic plans. In short, it is difficult to determine whether either the presence or the lack of concrete statements regarding the significance of public engagement programs for the library in mission statements or planning documents tells us anything meaningful about those programs.

The majority of responding libraries (31 or 69%) indicated the existence of a coordinating body at the campus level that serves as a focal point for engagement initiatives. Notable is the broad variety of “homes” in which such a body may be found, including the Office of the Chancellor, the Office of the Provost, the Office of Public Affairs, the Alumni Association, and an array of academic units and free-standing centers. While comments suggest active contribution by the library to the work of these campus coordinating bodies, respondents reported limited library representation on the body. Only 7 (23%) report having a representative on the main group, and 9 (29%) a representative on a subcommittee of the

coordinating body; more than half reported no library representation on the campus coordinating body.

If it is notable that the majority of responding libraries have no representation on campus public engagement committees despite the array of programs and services they provide, it is likewise notable that few libraries appear to have formal structures for coordinating and promoting public engagement as a component of the library mission. Only 12 of the responding libraries (26%) reported having a committee, working group, or task force charged with promoting public engagement programs and only two of those are standing committees.

At 6 libraries, an individual with formal responsibilities for one or more public engagement programs has primary responsibility for coordinating these activities. At 5 libraries, a public affairs, development, or advancement office has this responsibility. At the other 27 responding libraries, one or more individuals plan public engagement activities.

Also indicative of the different approaches being pursued at individual libraries in supporting their “third mission” is the way in which responsibility for engagement programs is recognized in formal assignment of time or position descriptions. Thirty-one respondents were able to identify at least one member of the library staff with formal responsibilities for public engagement representing at least a part of his or her professional assignment. The titles of these positions demonstrate the overlap between public engagement programs in academic libraries and complementary programs in Advancement, Public Affairs, and Special Collections: Marketing and Outreach Officer, Events and Communications Coordinator, and Director of Communications and Library Advancement, for example. At the same time, other respondents identified positions that may represent a broader view of the engagement mission, such as Community Outreach Services Librarian, Liaison Librarian for High Schools, and Health Sciences Outreach Librarian.

Only 8 of the 67 positions that have formal responsibility for public engagement (12%) are full-time assignment; in the vast majority of cases, responsibility for public engagement programs in academic libraries is shouldered by multiple members of the library staff on a part-time basis.

Services Provided

The services most commonly provided by libraries in support of public engagement efforts are reference and information services (87%) and public programs and exhibitions (80%), followed by orientation programs (67%), subject specialist services (e.g., health information services) (63%), government information services (61%), and information literacy instruction (50%).

Collections services were identified as a central feature of public engagement programs. Special collections and archives were noted in particular for providing public programs and exhibitions, while preservation and conservation programs were noted for the expertise they provide to community members. The University of Georgia, for example, participated in National Home Movie Day <http://www.homemovieday.com/>, in which expert advice was provided to community members on how to preserve home movies. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, librarians, archivists, and museum curators collaborated on a "Preservation Emporium," during which community members could seek advice on how to preserve an array of "heirlooms, artifacts, and family treasures."¹⁴

Archives and special collections also form the foundation for many partnerships with community groups, public libraries, state libraries, cultural heritage organizations, and governmental agencies. Two examples of such partnerships are Oklahoma State University's Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project <http://www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/wotol/> and the University of Kansas' Territorial Kansas Online <http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/>.

Digital collections and services also provide critical support for public engagement programs. One example of these kinds of Web resources is the University of Chicago's eCUIP Digital Library <<http://ecuip.lib.uchicago.edu/>> which was designed in collaboration with the Chicago Public Schools. Other digital library services, such as institutional repositories, also may be integrated into campus engagement efforts. At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, for example, the ScholarWorks repository includes community engagement collections for a number of programs <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/engagement/>.

Challenges

As noted earlier, one of the most significant challenges in articulating and promoting a commitment to public engagement in higher education comes from lack of clarity in terms of the definition of what "engagement" is, and how it differs from "outreach" and "service." This challenge appears to be all the greater in the case of the academic library, which brings to this issue a tradition of service and outreach shared among cultural heritage organizations, but distinct from those found in other academic programs. This challenge is also reflected in the gap between the number of libraries reporting that librarian position descriptions included formal statements of responsibility for public engagement programs (12 or 28%) and the number of libraries reporting that there are positions for which there is an assumption of informal responsibility for such programs (33 or 77%).

The array of human resource arrangements found across the responding libraries reflects a second major challenge, i.e., the availability of appropriate support in terms of budget and personnel. Multiple respondents noted that public engagement programs compete with other library services for funding, personnel, time, and space, and that support for such programs is often seen as secondary to the primary mission of service to the campus community.¹⁵ Several libraries have pursued external funding as a means of meeting at least part of this challenge with 26 respondents (58%) having pursued grants through the American Library Association, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and a variety of state and local funding agencies. Advancement activities, by contrast, provide less support for public engagement; only 13 libraries (29%) reported having pursued fundraising efforts to address public engagement program needs.

The limited coordination of public engagement programs at the library level and the limited involvement by the library with campus engagement initiatives also presents a challenge to these programs. As one respondent noted, "many flowers blossom in our garden . . . [but with] little coordination." This situation has made it difficult for librarians to identify key campus partners, to develop contacts in the

community, to direct scarce time and resources to programs with the greatest potential for impact, to “get the word out” among potential users of these services that they are available, and to establish a sustainable approach to committing to public engagement as a core service program of the academic library.

Finally, there is the challenge of assessment. Despite the increasing concern in the library community about assessment of services and identification of the contribution that the library makes to campus goals, there is limited attention to assessment of library public engagement programs. Of the 46 responding libraries, only 17 (37%) reported any assessment of public engagement programs, and, among these, several reported approaches of limited value, e.g., counting attendance at public programs, or informal assessment. Public engagement programs with a digital component employ usability studies and use statistics as a means of assessment, while comments about other programs suggested the use of individual interviews and focus groups.

Conclusion

The evolution from outreach to engagement is clearly underway in many ARL member libraries (and in their parent institutions), but a shared understanding of both the meaning of engagement and the library’s role in it has yet to emerge. Academic libraries are contributing to campus efforts to engage the local community, but they are doing so across a spectrum of programs ranging from traditional outreach activities to providing support for engagement activities led by other campus units. Fewer responding libraries are leading library-based efforts that meet the definition of engagement set forward in the introduction of this summary and embodied in the recently established Carnegie Classification in Community Engagement. In reviewing the results of this survey, the authors were reminded of the 2002 SPEC Kit on “Reference Service Statistics and Assessment,” in which Eric Novotny concluded that, rather than identifying “best practices” for assessment of reference services, his survey had simply revealed “a situation in flux.”¹⁶ Our survey, too, has uncovered as many questions as answers, suggesting that this topic is one to be revisited. As funding for higher education, accreditation standards,

long-standing institutional missions, and other factors continue to motivate universities to demonstrate their value to the broader community, public engagement is likely to gain momentum as a strategic initiative in academic libraries.

Notes

1. John V. Byrne, 1998, “Outreach, Engagement, and the Changing Culture of the University,” *Journal of Public Service and Outreach* 3, no. 2: 3–8; Karin Fischer, 2009 (July 20), “Reimagining the 21st-Century Land-Grant University,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <http://chronicle.com/article/Reimagining-the-21st-Centur/47095/> (accessed July 29, 2009); Carolyn D. Roper and Marilyn A. Hirth, 2006, “A History of Change in the Third Mission of Higher Education: The Evolution of One-Way Service to Interactive Engagement,” *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 10, no. 3: 3–21.
2. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, 1999, *Returning to our Roots: The Engaged Institution*, <http://www.aplu.org/NetCommunity/Document.Doc?id=183> (accessed July 8, 2009); The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2009, “Community Engagement Elective Classification,” <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp?key=1213> (accessed July 8, 2009).
3. Kelly Ward, *Faculty Service Roles and the Scholarship of Engagement* [ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, vol. 29, no. 5] (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
4. Derek Bok, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social Responsibilities of the Modern University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
5. Marcia Stockham, Elizabeth Turtle, and Eric Hansen, 2003, “KANAnswer: A Collaborative, Statewide Virtual Reference Pilot Project,” *The Reference Librarian*, no. 79/80: 257–66; John A. Shuler, 2008, “The Civic Contours of a National

- Digital Reference Service: The Research Implications of the Government Information Online Project," *The Library Quarterly* 78, no. 4: 459–66; Kenneth Burhanna and Mary Lee Jensen, 2006, "Collaborations for Success: High School to College Transitions," *Reference Services Review* 34, no. 4: 509–19.
6. Tina Schneider, 2003, "Outreach: Why, How, and Who?: Academic Libraries and their Involvement in the Community," *The Reference Librarian*, no. 82: 199–213.
 7. David J. Weerts and Lorilee R. Sandmann, 2008, "Building a Two-Way Street: Challenges and Opportunities for Community Engagement at Research Universities," *Review of Higher Education* 32, no. 1: 73–106.
 8. School of Architecture, College of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007, "East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP)," <http://www.arch.uiuc.edu/programs/engagement/eslarp/> (accessed July 8, 2009); Office of the Vice Chancellor for Public Engagement, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009, "Public Engagement," <http://engagement.illinois.edu/> (accessed July 8, 2009).
 9. Ward, *Faculty Service Roles and the Scholarship of Engagement*; Clearinghouse and National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement, n.d., "The Scholarship of Engagement Online," <http://www.scholarshipofengagement.org/> (accessed July 19, 2009).
 10. Tamara Lee and Claudine Jenda, *The Role of ARL Libraries in Extension/Outreach* SPEC Kit 233 (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, August 1998).
 11. Nancy Courtney, ed., *Academic Library Outreach: Beyond the Campus Walls* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2009).
 12. Public programming, while perhaps not fully representative of the emerging understanding of "engagement," was an especially fruitful field for responses, with libraries reporting an array of exhibits, book discussions, speaker series, colloquia, and film series. A review of previous SPEC Kit titles does not show any recent study focused on public programming in ARL member libraries, and this may be a valuable topic for future study.
 13. For an earlier discussion of these opportunities, see, for example: Louise G. Glogoff and Stuart Glogoff, 1998, "Using the World Wide Web for Community Outreach: Enriching Library Service to the Community," *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* 3, no. 1: 15–26.
 14. Preservation Working Group at the University of Illinois, 2009, "Heirlooms, Artifacts, & Family Treasures: A 2009 Preservation Emporium," <http://will.illinois.edu/pwg/item/heirlooms-artifacts-family-treasures-a-preservation-emporium-at-the-spurloc/> (accessed July 19, 2009).
 15. On the challenge of building a sustainable approach to a public engagement initiative as a core academic library service, see, for example: Kenneth J. Burhanna, 2007, "Instructional Outreach to High Schools: Should You Be Doing It?," *Communications in Information Literacy* 1, no. 2, <http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php/cil/article/view/Fall2007AR3/52> (accessed July 19, 2009).
 16. Eric Novotny, *Reference Service Statistics and Assessment* SPEC Kit 268 (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, September 2002), 9.