***Community Assessments: Friend or Foe?***
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## 1. <u>*She Blinded Me With Science*</u>

These days, one would be hard-pressed to find a public library system that has not undergone a community assessment of some variety. After all, how else are we to determine the prevailing wants and needs of a library's surrounding community? How else are we to be sure the library is meeting the needs of as many community members as possible, and reaching out to those who could make better use of its services? Community assessments are powerful and helpful tools when conducted and analyzed correctly, and they are beneficial in areas of collection development, event planning, and even service hours.

The point of this article is not to condemn community assessments, but to recommend a few guidelines to keep in mind for conducting quality assessments, and to suggest ways of ensuring that all of a community – not merely the majority segments – is recognized and acknowledged before, during, and after an assessment (1).

A community, put simply, is a group of people living, learning, working, or playing within a common geographic area (2), and geography determines quite a lot. A community in which the majority of people or families own a home and where the median price of a single-family house is $750,000 is bound to have more wealthy folks than a community largely made up of renters and with a median house price of $150,000. It's math, plain and simple: more well-off people live in rich areas, and more struggling people live in poor areas. But *more* does not equal *all*, and every majority has its mirror minority. When conducting a community assessment, we must certainly familiarize ourselves with the majority, but not forget to equally acknowledge the various minority demographics. It has been said by many a library school instructor that the perfect library is one with nothing on the shelves – in other words, a library with the right book for every patron and the right patron for every book. This pie-in-the sky scenario cannot happen without a range of materials designed for a range of individuals – standard and not-so-standard, majority and minority, average and distinctive individuals whose common interests and magnificent quirks make up a true community.

Public libraries conduct community assessments for a variety of reasons. The most common, certainly, is to get a grasp on the wants and needs of the library's surrounding population in order to provide services that will best meet those desires. The sharing of information gleaned from community assessments is both valuable and, more and more often in these hard economic times, compulsory. Public libraries often compete with other city departments for funds or are asked to explain to taxpayers where their money is going. Proving and defending a library's value is more difficult than demonstrating the value of a corporation or business; rather than present profit margins and fiscal growth, libraries rely on more subjective data (3).

Often, these assessments are created and conducted by the library staff, although outsourcing the task to hired consultants has become quite common in recent years (4). Even when libraries conduct their own assessments, there are many professional tools and certifications that may be used in the process, often for a fee. With a quick Google search, one can discover a wide range of self-assessment tools.

## 2. *The Safety Dance*

When the results of a community assessment come in, we often look first and foremost at the statistics. Who makes up the largest segment of a community? What do they like about their library? What do they want to see more of? Using this data, we the take action to beef up our services in order to meet the needs of the majority. This makes perfect sense, of course – how else to get the most bang for our buck, the most taxpayer satisfaction, the fewest complaints or challenges? Serving the wants and needs of the majority makes librarians' jobs easier. Making people happy makes us happy. As for those we never see because the library fails to meet their expectations? Well, aren't they already invisible? We can't please everybody all the time, can we?

Nevertheless, what if we could please ten percent more? Or what if we could entice just five percent of non-library users to give us a try? Perhaps a community-minded librarian could, while picking up her mid-day caffeine fix, remark to the customer reading a "controversial" book (with a bookstore price sticker still attached), "Oh, we have that book at our library! I just read it. Great stuff, eh? Stop by some time – we're just a block up the road. We have a lot of new books you might like." That took, what, thirty seconds? Or, if you're not the chatty type (or at least until you've downed that quad-shot espresso), perhaps you could do some anecdotal or observational data. Look around the coffee shop. What are people reading? Anything that looks familiar? Do you see any barcodes or stamps from your library on the books? Take note of this, and you just performed an evaluative task, no words spoken (5). That coffee's just about ready.

Our communities are changing all the time. People move in and out. They take jobs, leave jobs, get married, get divorced, and simply come and go as their lives move along. Even if our invented community retains a steady 70 percent of affluent young parents, the components of that demographic will change. People will get older, perhaps move, or take employment elsewhere. Younger families might move in, while older families move away – or the demographic might start to transform internally. Perhaps our young families will begin to turn into families with teenagers – out go the picture books, in come the YA novels and SAT prep guides. And for that 30 percent who didn't fit into our neat categories? We still need to know them, serve them, and welcome them. Change is the only constant.

It's safe and easy to please the majority. We feel happy when the materials we order circulate well. We're meeting the needs of many people, and that feels good. It *is* good. But meeting the needs of that idiosyncratic, unpredictable 30 percent feels good too. Have you ever been asked for a book you were absolutely sure your library couldn't possibly have, and then – boom – there it is? Doesn't it feel great to tell the patron that, yes, we do have it? And, be honest – isn't that a nicer feeling than knowing that you have five copies of every Danielle Steel novel at the ready?  Nobody's saying to toss the bestsellers, but a bit of balance for those who enjoy nonconformity in their reading is a good thing.

## 3. *Don't You Forget About Me*

Catering to the majority makes perfect sense, as does being visible and welcoming to those most likely to make frequent use of the library. This also goes for those most likely to volunteer, donate, or serve on library boards, Friends groups, and committees.

But what about those who don't use the library, or who are not likely to give of their own time to make it stronger?  A quality community assessment reaches out to this demographic as well, and asks the tough questions: What about the library is unwelcoming, inconvenient, or unpleasant? Perhaps it's hard to get to the building from certain neighborhoods; perhaps the collection is geared toward those whose interests aren't appealing to this group; perhaps the hours of operation aren't convenient for those working long hours. And perhaps, just *perhaps*, the staff is less welcoming toward those who look or sound or act…well, different.

Circulation statistics are often front-and-center in the results of a community assessment, and they are very important. But we must remember a few points when we analyze this data. The most obvious is that not all members of a community have an active library account. Circulation statistics only account for people who actively use the library, and they provide no information at all about those who don't. Circulation statistics also don't account for use of reference books, or for other materials used in-house but not checked

out (6). Materials seen as potentially controversial or overly personal would certainly fall into this category, and it's no challenge to imagine several hypothetical situations to illustrate this. An abused wife contemplating leaving her spouse might very well sit in the library and read about safety plans, restraining orders, and child custody, but she would be quite unlikely to check out books in these areas and take them home. Or consider the teenager struggling with gender identity issues, the young woman recently diagnosed with a serious mental health disorder, the man struggling over how to tell his family he is in the beginning stages of Alzheimer's disease. This is where libraries help people without anyone knowing it – by having the information right there, free and ready, with no judgment and no prying eyes.

Focus groups, interviews, and surveys are also strong community assessment materials, but, again, those answering the questions must consist of library users, supporters, and non-users. So, by all means, add a survey to the library's website, but also mail it out or drop it off at neighboring homes, businesses, and organizations. Partner with nonprofit agencies and other community groups seeking to be of service to underrepresented community demographics, and they can help reach out to non-users of the library. Reaching out to local workforce development groups, social service agencies, and nonprofits serving youth, seniors, and LGBT individuals as part of a community assessment would go a long way toward reaching nontraditional potential future library patrons. Focus groups and interviews with both workers and clients of these groups would surely result in a wealth of information.

## 4. *Every Breath You Take*

Lately, outcome data has become big news in library community assessments. When we swipe our loyalty cards at the grocery store, our buying information becomes data for that corporation to market back to us. If we purchase, say, a bedroom comforter on Amazon, we are likely to be met with suggestions for comparable pillow shams or sheets the next time we log into our account. This practice, known as predictive analytics, is commonly used by corporations to determine an individual's buying patterns. Just as retail and online stores keep track of a customer's purchases in order to determine potential future purchases, the suggestion that libraries ought to keep track of patrons' lending habits on an individual level has become more popular, though controversial. Even with the "scrubbing" and "warehousing" of data that is meant to keep individual patron information confidential and safe, there are no industry standards in how data is collected, cleaned, and stored (7, 8). All of this raises hackles among library employees and patrons alike. Libraries are not stores or corporations, and library patrons would certainly be justified in the expectation of a certain level of privacy when it comes to their borrowing habits. Without serious changes in standards, permissions, and ethical methodologies of data usage, the practice of

predictive analytics in public libraries is fraught with serious legal and ethical concerns (8, 9). A reasonable assumption may very well be that library workers should hold themselves to different, if not outright higher, ethical standards. The principles and driving forces of librarianship are dramatically different than those of corporate life. Where we draw the line is up to us – we can only hope that our professional principles will keep us in check.

## 5. *What I Like About You*

Having a clear, up-to-date collection development policy can go a long way toward using community assessment results wisely and fairly. When libraries of any size rely on staff to order materials without a shared framework and common set of goals, the odds of bias and confusion become much greater. A rational collection development policy ideally should also be a public document – after all, it was generated by the data provided by the public – in order to help the community understand assessment results and library goals. Furthermore, it can be a lifesaver in case of a challenge to certain books or other materials. The collection development policy must also be dynamic. As communities change, policies must change along with them (10).Transparency is key – if a situation arises in which library staff are at all worried about having to show their collection development policy to any member of the community, it's a clear sign that the policy is outdated, unclear, or slanted. The wants, needs, and desires of a young, well-to-do member of the 70 percent club will ideally be represented in the policy with as much significance as those of an 80-year-old retiree on a limited income, or a college student, or a member of any other demographic who doesn't fit into the majority.

What, then, makes up a quality community assessment?  It's all about data, and data takes many forms. Numbers and statistics are important, but they alone do not yield true data. We must know our communities. When we participate in observations, conversations, questions, and perhaps even a series of slow walks and drives around the neighborhood, we are already going above and beyond the standard (11). We can chat with commuters who work there but live elsewhere. We can talk with those we see frequently at the library, and try to gain information from those we never see there. We can look at billboards, businesses, car makes and models. Everything we observe and everything we *don't* observe is data.

Most importantly, let us remember that a community is made up of individuals. Many fit into the mainstream, and many others do not. The very idea of a geographic area where everyone is alike comes off more as a creepy cult than a neighborhood. Diversity makes communities whole and exciting. How tiresome it would be to work for a Stepford library! As librarians, we are graced with the pleasure of embracing our neighborhoods'' mixtures

of individuals as we interpret our assessments, plan our collection development policies, and serve our quirky, weird, and wonderful communities.

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