

# EXPECT MORE

**Demanding Better Libraries for Today's Complex World**



**R . D a v i d L a n k e s**

### 3. The Mission of Libraries: Expect More Than Books

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The Syracuse University Library was full. There was no room left on the shelves. This is not an uncommon problem with libraries of all sorts, and the solutions range from throwing things away (weeding) to constructing new buildings. Syracuse tried the first, then the second, but finally settled on off-site storage. The librarians were going to take the least used items (those not checked out in about 10 years or so) and ship them to a warehouse five hours away. If an item from the warehouse was needed, it would be shipped back to Syracuse or digitized and sent directly to the computer of the professor or student who requested it.

You might think that there wouldn't be that many books going unused over a decade span, but you would be wrong. In fact if you pick just about any library you will run into something called the 80/20 rule. Of a collection, 80% of use will be from 20% of that collection. Put another way, you could throw away 80% of the books and still meet 80% of the requests from the community. So, why keep the rest? Well, you never know if one of those 20% of users will use one of those 80% of low-use books to cure cancer—and there is no way to know ahead of time.

The library at Syracuse University, though, was not throwing away the low-use books. It was just moving them. It seemed logical. However,

the humanities departments on campus nearly rioted. Religion professors, history graduate students, English majors all went ballistic. They disrupted faculty senate meetings, staged protests in the library, and wrote rather pointed editorials. "Why can't we move the books to someplace local?" "This was a bad collection to begin with, now you're going to make it worse?"

While the librarians were expecting some resistance to the off-site plan, the level of pushback took them by surprise. For years, the librarians had been increasing use of the library. Through the introduction of a learning commons, lots of meeting spaces, a cafe, power strips, and new services, the library was being used more than ever. The library was full not only in terms of books, but in terms of people. The problem was, the humanities scholars didn't see the coffee and undergraduates plugged into power strips as an appropriate use of the space. Every table was a place for more shelves and more books. That, they said, was the purpose of the library—holding books and materials, not meeting spaces and coffee.

This idea, that libraries are about books, is hardly limited to humanities faculty. A few years earlier in Syracuse (apparently a hot spot for library controversy) the county started a book recycling program. Once a year residents could box up their old books and drop them off to be pulped. There were immediate cries from concerned citizens calling upon the public library to intervene. Don't recycle the books, donate them to the library! The library said no, not because it was full, but because it was too busy.

The library didn't have the staff to sort through the hundreds and hundreds of books looking for the right ones to keep—at least that is what they said initially. When community members started to organize the Boy Scouts to sort through the books, the real reason came to light. It turns out the librarians had already gone to the book recycling collection point and found old and rotting books of little value. They also found that residents took this as an opportunity to recycle items like *Hustler* magazine. The librarians weren't that interested in sorting through these shoulder to shoulder with Boy Scouts.

School libraries regularly receive donations of *National Geographic* because they “must” be valuable. Never mind that there is no place to store the physical magazines and the entire run of the magazine is available digitally.

In Glendale, an affluent suburban village outside of Cincinnati, the citizens started their own library with donated books. They lined the shelves and opened the doors. After the first week, traffic evaporated. It seems folks weren't looking to read the books that they had donated and were willing to drive to the three other public libraries within a five-mile radius.

All of these stories highlight one of the biggest myths about modern libraries—libraries are just about books. You can be forgiven if this is what you thought, too. After all, libraries have been very successful in the book business, and, moreover, many libraries have been building this book-library brand in their communities over the past century or so.

At first glance even the most famous library standards scream books. In 1931, S. R. Ranganathan proposed his five laws of librarianship<sup>42</sup>. These laws have become a cornerstone of library thought:

1. Books are for use.
2. Every reader his book.
3. Every book its reader.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. The library is a growing organism.

Clearly, the idea that libraries are about books is deep in the DNA of librarianship.

However, let's look again. How central are books to those laws? Had Ranganathan lived 2,000 years ago, would he have said “scrolls are for use”? If you replace books with eBooks or web pages, do these ideas still hold true? I think they do. These laws really state that the center of the library is the community. The job of the library is to fulfill the needs of the community members, not simply to house materials.

Libraries, good ones and bad ones, have existed for millennia. Over that time, they have been storehouses of materials, certainly, but also places of scholarship, record keepers for nation states, and early economic development incubators. In fact, the idea that a library is a building filled to the rafters with books and documents is only about an 80-year-old view.

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<sup>42</sup> <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b99721;page=root;view=image;size=100;seq=11>

Take a look at the Free Library of Philadelphia today:



**Figure 1: Present day music room at the Philadelphia Free Library**

Books on shelves around the columns—a library. Now, take a look at the same part of the library from the late 1920's:



**Figure 2: Music room of the Free Library of Philadelphia about 1927<sup>43</sup>**

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<sup>43</sup> Music Room of the Free Library of Philadelphia, circa 1927. Retrieved from <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/75th/SearchItem.cfm?ItemID=75A0262>

Yes, that is the same department. Working tables, natural light—a space more for people and learning than for books.

When did we start thinking of libraries as book havens? Libraries have always housed collections of materials, but even this concept of repository is a relatively modern one. It was formed when libraries were seeking to create comprehensive collections at the same time as a dramatic drop in prices of paper and printing. It was only in the twentieth century that mass-produced books starting filling up libraries as well as living rooms and schools.

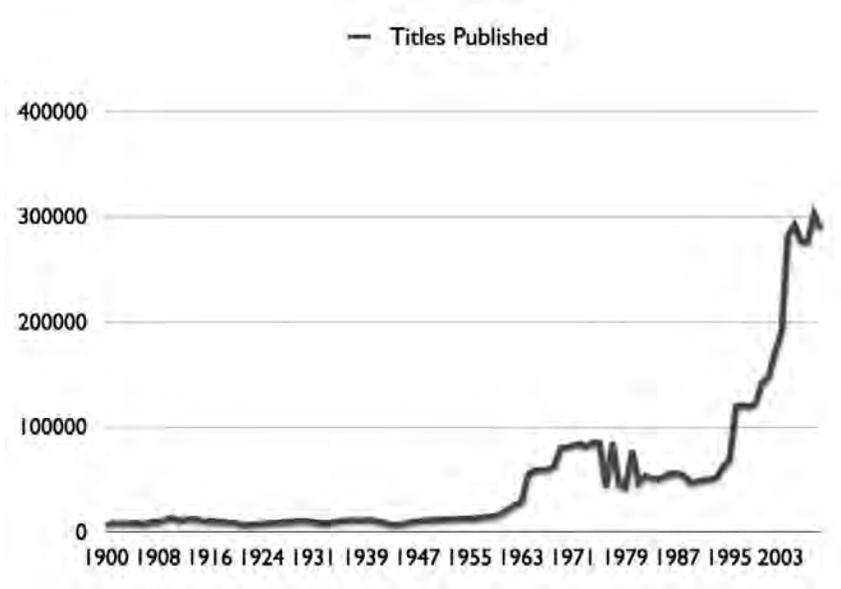


Figure 3: Growth of titles published worldwide<sup>44</sup>

This bibliophilia changed how we look not only at libraries today, but libraries across history.

Let's take a look at the Library of Alexandria mentioned in the first chapter. The original library was a wonder of the world. Today, those who know of it think of it as an enormous collection of documents from the ancient world—and it was. My favorite story is about ships that would pull into the port of Alexandria, one of the busiest ports in the world at

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<sup>44</sup> This data was compiled from the following sources:  
Unesco. (1964). *Statistical yearbook: Annuaire statistique = Anuario estadístico*. Paris: Unesco.  
Wright, W. E., R.R. Bowker Company & Council of National Library Associations. (1956). *American library annual for...* New York: R.R. Bowker.  
The World almanac and encyclopedia. New York: Press Pub. Co. (The New York World)

the time. Soldiers would meet the ships and confiscate any documents they had on board (including those used as ballast). The documents would be taken to the library, copied, and the copies were returned to the ships.

But if you are thinking of the ancient library as a huge document storehouse, like the current picture of the Free Library of Philadelphia, you would be wrong. In fact, the Library of Alexandria was much more akin to the universities of today. There were multiple buildings on the campus. One of the first was a temple dedicated to the Muses called the Musae—where we get the word for museum. The main building of the Library was as much a dormitory as it was a warehouse. Scholars from the known world were brought together and encouraged to talk and create. It was, in fact, one of the earliest think tanks and innovation centers in history. The librarian was one of the closest advisors to the rulers of the city-state.

When the Library of Alexandria was destroyed, much of the collection eventually found a new home in Moorish Spain. There, these documents did not sit around but were translated, augmented, and used. This became apparent during the first crusades at the end of the medieval times. As crusaders “liberated” the city of Toledo, they found library after library after library. It must have been stunning to see that one of the 80 libraries held more volumes than did the entirety of France. More remarkable was that the citizens weren’t simply preserving manuscripts, they were using them to develop new forms of architecture, new aqueducts, new modes of governance, and a little thing called algebra (including the whole concept of zero, by the way). In fact, one historian credits the living libraries of the Muslim world with the creation of universities and the Renaissance.

In Victorian England, public libraries had gaming parlors. Andrew Carnegie built over 2,509 libraries<sup>45</sup> around the world to encourage democratic participation and social opportunity. Public libraries have been art galleries. They have added children’s collections when the modern concept of childhood was virtually created with the advent of child labor laws. They’ve even strapped a diesel engine onto the front of collections in the form of bookmobiles to serve rural and remote populations. My point is that if you think of a library as a bunch of books in a building (or worse, if your librarian thinks of it that way), you need to expect more—a whole lot more.

Today’s great libraries are transforming from quiet buildings with a loud room or two to loud buildings with a quiet room. They are shifting from the domain of the librarians to the domain of the communities.

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<sup>45</sup> <http://carnegie.org/about-us/foundation-history> (accessed May 8, 2012)

What is guiding this transformation? What is shaping Ranganathan's "growing organism"? A long-held mission:

*The mission of a library is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in the community.*

To be clear, this is my wording, but the underlying concepts can be seen historically where scholars used to run libraries to advance the research agenda of their colleges. It can also be seen in the librarians of Kenya and Columbia who started off this book. Bad libraries only build collections. Good libraries build services (and a collection is only one of many). Great libraries build communities.

Stone tablets became scrolls, scrolls became manuscripts, manuscripts became books, and books are rapidly becoming apps. The tools that libraries use to achieve the mission, any mission, will change. The purpose of using those tools (and new tools) remains steady over long periods of time. Libraries should be about knowledge, not tools.

The rest of this book will take a look at what you need to expect out of a library based on components of the above mission statement (what do I mean by improve, by knowledge, by facilitate, etc.?), but before we do that we need to tackle two issues: reading and the general utility of a mission.

## **I Love Reading...No Really**

Take a look at the mission again: improving society through facilitating knowledge creation. What ever happened to promoting a love of reading and/or books? Does expecting more from libraries mean abandoning reading and literature, fiction and poetry? The reason reading isn't in this larger mission is that not all libraries are centrally focused on reading. School libraries and public libraries see the promotion and expansion of reading skills as one of their core goals; corporate and academic libraries assume the people they serve already have these skills. What's more, while reading is a crucial skill to creating knowledge, it is not the exclusive route to "enlightenment." Some learn through reading, some through video, others through doing, and the vast majority through combining these. We should expect our libraries to support all of these modalities of learning.

When folks ask me about libraries, reading, and my proposed mission they are normally asking "can't I just use the library to read a good novel or borrow a DVD without worrying about saving the world? Isn't there value in just reading for recreation?" My answer is yes and that fiction is as important to learning and building knowledge as is non-

fiction. Stories are how we dream and how we test our ethical bounds. A good novel can reveal fundamental truth in ways no academic tome of philosophy ever can. What's more, the ideas and inspirations for great action often come when we least expect it.

Much of library literature focuses on concepts of information and empowerment, often ignoring or silently assuming that libraries can still support recreation and reading development. To be sure, this book is focused on libraries as places of social engagement and learning. The question isn't "should libraries support recreational reading?" The answer to that question is dependent on the community—like supporting the arts or parks. The real question revolves around individuals who want to turn recreational reading into something social, or geared towards some larger goal.

So I read a book and love it. That may be enough for me. But what if a beautiful piece of fiction inspires me to write my own novel, or invent some new device, or form a group of others who love the book and seek to act. It is not the role of the library to predetermine the outcomes of reading (or inventing, or movie making)—that edges too close to telling people what to read and why. Rather, it is the place of the library to be a platform for the community members to turn their love and passion into something for the good of the community and/or themselves.

The more we do of something the better we get. So we need to support reading of all kinds where appropriate (in the library, in school, on the playground, on vacation, in the laboratory, in video games). When you read the words "knowledge" and "learning" throughout this book, don't think I am limiting that to just to the ideas that end up in textbooks and research articles. Poetry, novels, and a good science fiction story all carry equal weight to me in knowledge creation. However, I believe that we should also expect libraries of all kinds to be ready to support the outcomes of that reading.

So let us now turn our attention to how libraries tackle these ideas in their mission statements.

## **Mission to Nowhere?**

A mission statement is an important thing. It represents a sort of consensus on what an organization thinks is important. It is in the mission that we can begin to see how libraries are setting expectations for themselves and the communities they serve. Let's take a look at statements from some libraries and organizations:

Let's start with a great mission from the New York Public Library:

*"The mission of The New York Public Library is to inspire lifelong learning, advance knowledge, and strengthen our communities."*<sup>46</sup>

You can't get much better than advancing knowledge and strengthening communities.

Speaking of advancing knowledge, check out the mission of the libraries of the Massachusetts's Institute of Technology:

*"The mission of the MIT libraries is to create and sustain an intuitive, trusted information environment that enables learning and the advancement of knowledge at MIT. We are committed to developing innovative services, strategies, and systems that promote discovery, preserve knowledge, and improve worldwide scholarly communication. We empower MIT through knowledge."*<sup>47</sup>

Now check out the Library of Congress':

*"The Library's mission is to support the Congress in fulfilling its constitutional duties and to further the progress of knowledge and creativity for the benefit of the American people."*<sup>48</sup>

Note that it is clear in defining its community: the American people, but only after the Congress.

For the parents, teachers, administrators, and those interested in schools, here are great mission statements from school libraries:

*"The mission of Tehiyah Day School is to inspire curiosity, a strong sense of community, and a vibrant connection to Judaism. At Tehiyah, we live the curriculum!"*<sup>49</sup>

and

*"The mission of the school library media program is :*

- to be an integral part of W'hittier Elementary School and its surrounding community*
- to provide collaboration with staff to create authentic learning for all students*
- to provide quality resources and instruction to students and staff*

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<sup>46</sup> <http://www.nypl.org/help/about-nypl/mission> (accessed May 8, 2012)

<sup>47</sup> <http://libraries.mit.edu/about/mission.html> (accessed May 8, 2012)

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/about/mission.html> (accessed May 8, 2012)

<sup>49</sup> [http://www.tehiyah.org/Learning\\_at\\_Tehiyah/Library/mission.html](http://www.tehiyah.org/Learning_at_Tehiyah/Library/mission.html) (accessed May 8, 2012)

- to encourage staff and students in becoming effective users of ideas and information
- to promote life-long reading and learning both for pleasure and for information”<sup>50</sup>

and

*“The mission of the Howard County Public School System is to ensure excellence in teaching and learning so that each student will participate responsibly in a diverse and changing world.”<sup>51</sup>*

I love them—love them all. They show you that, across a range of institutions, the mission can be short and meaningful. They can also be about the impact the libraries want to have, not the stuff they collect. It is no accident that these organizations have international reputations.

With that in mind, let me turn to some not-so-inspiring missions. I have changed the names of all of the libraries to “MyTown” or “MyCollege” to protect the not so innocent.

*The MyTown Public Library provides materials in a variety of formats and services for persons of all ages, to help community residents obtain information that meets their personal, educational, and professional needs. All library services are vigorously promoted to increase public awareness and thereby increase the quality of life for MyTown citizens.*

Aside from the fact that this mission is clearly about the stuff the library collects, one feature of this mission drives me nuts. It is the mission of the library to promote the library? And not just to promote itself, but do so vigorously?! Isn’t it a bit arrogant to say that simply by knowing the library is there, life will improve for citizens? Also, what should you expect from this library? Stuff, yes, but also a sort of “me first” attitude.

OK, next one:

*The mission of the MyTown Public library shall be to:*  
*Provide for the recreational needs of its patrons by supporting leisure time activities through the provision of library materials and services.*  
*Provide for the collective and individual information needs of its patrons by selecting, acquiring, cataloging, organizing, and distributing information and materials.*  
*Provide for the cultural enhancement of individual patrons and the MyTown community by providing materials and attendant activities that foster understanding of*

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<sup>50</sup> <http://schools.fcps.org/whes/lmc/missionstatement.htm> (accessed May 8, 2012)

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.pingry.org/page.cfm?p=466> (accessed May 8, 2012)

*the development of international, national, community, and individual heritage and lifestyle.*

*Provide for the continuing educational needs of its patrons by supporting learning beyond that required for attaining academic degrees or meeting job qualifications by providing materials that enhance daily life, personal interests, and job performance.*

*The MyTown Library recognizes the impact of technology, specifically electronic communication and information, upon the MyTown community. The Library strives to identify, to retrieve, to organize, and to provide access to technology in its various formats. In fulfilling its mission, the MyTown Library fully supports the principle of freedom of expression and the public's right to know. The Library will foster an atmosphere of free inquiry and provide information without bias or discrimination.*

Wow! Can you see printing that on a T-shirt? My main complaint here is that it is all about pushing out materials, not co-owning or creating them with the community. This is not about the library as a service, but instead about the library as a servant. It shows another interesting aspect of old versus new librarianship's worldview, namely the relationship of the library to the community.

Libraries “*for the people*” is an old way of looking at libraries. It sees the library as apart from the community, a service the community can use and pay for, but ultimately ignore or discard. The new view is the library “of the people.” The community is an integral part of what the library does, and librarians are full-fledged members of the community. Librarians do their jobs not because they are servants or because they are building a product to be consumed by the community, but ultimately to make the community better. Community members don't support the library because they are satisfied customers, but because the library is part of who they are.

This concept of a library is analogous to democratic government. When the people feel part of the government, their views are represented, their voices are heard, and they are governing themselves (of the people). When, however, they feel the government is a sort of distant standing political class, dissatisfaction occurs (or, in the very extreme, you get the Arab Spring). Libraries must be of the people, not for them. When a member of the community walks into a library (or clicks into it), he or she must see an opportunity to contribute, to have a voice, and to improve the institution. Otherwise, the library is just another Borders or Blockbuster.

Likewise, the librarian seeks to provide excellent service not only out of an altruistic drive but out of a selfish desire to improve his or her own condition. If the librarian does his or her job well, the community will improve, and an improved community then improves the situation of the librarian. It is a virtuous circle.

Let's take a look at some discouraging academic library missions:

*The University Library strengthens the MyCollege academic enterprise by providing, presenting, and preserving a wide range of information resources. We utilize innovative approaches in working with faculty and students to help them discover, use, manage, and share the array of information that supports their research, teaching, and learning.*

To be honest, this one isn't too egregious, but it is still very much about strengthening an institution by providing stuff (information resources). Also, while innovation is good, it only extends to library functions in this case. It is not about helping innovators or fostering innovation within the community. It is also very much saying that faculty and students will improve by working with the library, but not about the library learning from (and preferably with) the community.

Next:

*The mission of the MyCollege Library is to support the research and curricular needs of its faculty and students by providing a superb collection of legal materials and by offering the highest possible level of service. To the extent consistent with its mission, the Library supports the research needs of the greater MyCollege community as well as scholars from outside the MyCollege community requiring access to its unique collections.*

In other words, come get your stuff here, and it is really great stuff. Let's move back to the public library for one more example:

*The MyTown Library, a public service agency, is to provide all residents of the MyTown with a comprehensive collection of materials in a variety of media that records man's knowledge, ideas and culture, to organize these materials for ready access, and to offer guidance and encouragement in their use. Special emphasis is placed on popular materials in all formats to all ages and on providing a lifelong learning and education center for all residents of the community. The Library especially serves as a place for children to discover the joy of reading and the value of Libraries.*

Where to start in this sort of kitchen sink, stuff-based example? How about doubting that this library has a comprehensive collection of man's knowledge, ideas, and culture? Talk about overpromising and under-delivering. Add to that serving everyone, and do we really want anyone indoctrinating children?

## **A Mission Based on Higher Expectations**

So libraries are on a mission: to improve society through knowledge creation. Of course, the mission of libraries is unique among most other institutions. The mission of the library almost always sits within the mission of a larger organization. A public library is part of a city or county. An academic library is part of a college or university. School libraries are there to propel the overall mission of a school. Corporate libraries are there to contribute to the bottom line.

We will return to how the mission of improving society is ultimately shaped and shapes a community when I discuss what exactly I mean by “improve society” in Chapter 5. For now, let us turn to the more immediate concern of how libraries actually fulfill their mission. That is, first and foremost, what does a library do? To know this is especially important since a library does much more than simply collect books.