



Museum Libraries and Community

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by my personal experiences working in reference for a public library, I discuss the stark difference in community within libraries in museums compared to public libraries. I explore libraries' origins rooted in exclusivity and how academia's restrictive nature perpetuates community members' apprehension of museum libraries. Despite these origins, cultural institutes have rectified this by making accessibility a priority. This article considers how community engagement and outreach could be a solution to the modern problem of libraries in museums lacking community.

Introduction

Since December of 2024, I have worked as a reference library assistant at my local public library. Stepping into this role, I understood the reference desk to be a crucial link between patrons and information. I did not anticipate that it is also a site for deep-seated social bonds between the community and the workers of the reference department. The relationship between reference librarians and the patrons they serve expands far past simply assisting with standard reference questions. I have received drawings and nicknames from patrons and in return gave a listening ear to those

unhoused and in need to express themselves, building trust between us. These relationships have impacted me in a personal and profound way, shaping my understanding of librarianship beyond simply acting as a mediator for information. When patrons feel welcome in the library on a personal level, they become encouraged to utilize the information services provided at a higher rate. The increase in use by community members upholds a library's mission to provide resources for acquiring knowledge. I now understand that community itself is integral to obtaining information, so long as information professionals create inviting environments with patrons in mind.

My work as a reference librarian inspired me to continue my education and pursue a Masters in Library and Information Science. Since beginning my degree, I have been exposed to different libraries, such as academic and museum libraries, with different patrons and practices than that of the community library I worked in. I have noticed a shift in demographics with these scholarly libraries, which serve mostly graduate students or academics conducting independent research. I believe the general public's hesitation to use museum libraries stems from the elitism that surrounds academia. This exclusivity creates the illusion of inaccessibility, despite both museums and libraries being available to all people. In this paper, I explore the importance of implementing strategies in museum libraries to demystify the academic library and develop an inclusive community of patrons.

Historical Context

Advancing beyond personal collections and literary salons, the concept of a public library emerged from the subscription libraries of the elite. Most notably in the United States, the Library Company of Philadelphia was created by Thomas Jefferson in 1731.

[1] Members would pay a subscription fee in order to have access to the diverse collection. Noting that constant payment was not sustainable for all members, the Library Company of Philadelphia eventually allowed non-members to borrow books, so long as they left a deposit. [2] The subscription-based system reflected their belief in knowledge as a selective practice, reserved for those able to afford the resource. Superseding membership-based libraries in 1854, circulating libraries became free and

publicly available. Notwithstanding claims of availability to all, the public library practiced discrimination against various members of society: immigrants suffered from libraries promoting assimilation as thinly veiled support; Black people were denied access to many libraries until *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) permitted them access to notoriously underfunded libraries.^[3] These foundational issues surrounding class, race, and gender evolved into prejudiced practices in libraries.

The Dewey Decimal System (DDS) restricted the Black experience to “slavery” and “colonization,” which limited Black people to these categorizations. In the 1930s, Dorothy Porter challenged the classification system, expanding the categories beyond racist labels and eventually became integrated into the DDS.^[4] The Library of Congress continued the tradition of dehumanization through classification systems, as they used subject headings “aliens” and “illegal aliens” for materials related to undocumented individuals. Decisions to change this were made in 2021, after years of pushback from those who understood the impact of the phrases.^[5] Noting the disparities and altering classification systems to incorporate Black people and those who are undocumented exemplify efforts to make libraries inclusive from an institutional level. While related concerns still permeate contemporary public libraries, they have evolved greatly from the 17th and 18th centuries into the institution we use today.

The museum originated from the elite showcasing their cabinets of curiosities to wealthy peers in the private settings of their homes.^[6] Similar to libraries, museums have since expanded into public institutions. While technically accessible, the museum’s prestige deters members of society who were not introduced to the arts or could not afford the time or money to attend them. Museums fund programming committed to involving the community, as engagement is an “important strategy by which public and private institutions seek to strengthen links with local communities, and enable change within those communities.”^[7] Museum community engagement is typically managed through their education departments, which prioritize primary and secondary students and families. This makes access to a museum’s library reliant upon whether or not that museum’s education department considers it as important to its educational and outreach mission. Because of this, museums often neglect their libraries when forming

relationships with the community.

Two of the core values of the American Library Association (ALA) are access to all, “regardless of technology, format, or delivery methods,” and equity, “to create spaces that are accessible, welcoming, and beneficial for all.”^[8] The current outreach standards for museums isolate the general public, by focusing their attention on programming for parents or academics. This prevents local community members who do not fit those categories from engaging with a museum’s resources and its trained and expert professionals. While the attention to families and parents shows some concern with accessibility, this scope is limited and needs to be expanded through the implementation of programming and outreach that make museum library departments more inclusive to adult users who are not only engaged in academic research.

Community Engagement as a Solution

Broadening engagement to include the library department creates an interdisciplinary educational model in museums that can reach beyond families and school-aged students. The average adult is an undervalued demographic in the museum’s outreach, especially in the library department. In the article, “Community Engagement - Building Bridges between University and Community by Academic Libraries in the 21st Century,” Jack Hang Tat Leong examines how university libraries engage with community members. He articulates the significance of combating the disconnect between academic libraries and community members in the Digital age, noting that the internet has blurred “the boundary between university users and the general public.”^[9] The availability of information on the internet has reduced individuals’ need to seek out library services, especially academic ones, due to longstanding elitism. He alludes to cultural institutions outgrowing the level of accessibility that satiated previous generations, requiring modifications.^[10] This new standard has prompted universities to include community engagement in their mission statements to adapt accessibility measures.

In his article, Leong mentions, “outreach has been gradually broadened to encompass Information Literacy within and beyond the campus, exchange and partnership, visiting

programs, exhibitions and library events.”^[11] Emphasizing how community outreach has developed, institutions that are encouraged to expand their influence on the larger community in their mission statements must adopt a comprehensive approach. The first category mentioned was “community access,” which provides services to community members and students.^[12] Many universities provide community members with access to its space for free, borrowing privileges for a fee, or materials available upon request.^[13] Academic libraries that enact public access are foundational to encouraging non-students to utilize the space. However, this is most effective when paired with community engagement and outreach opportunities that begin to build trust and bonds within academic spaces. “Information Literacy,” as the second category presented in the study, is instructional programming that assists people in training on specific subject matters.^[14] These courses typically help students to build research methods and skills as they continue their education. Leong observes that some universities, like the University of Toronto, does not provide Information Literacy programming outside the classroom, but acknowledges that other universities, such as the State University of New York at Buffalo and Texas Woman’s University, do.^[15] Community members and librarians from public libraries expressed interest in these opportunities,^[16] establishing a demand for more opportunities for adults who are not students. These services, when offered to the general public, equip community members with new proficiencies that build comfort in exercising their access to academic libraries.

The third category of community engagement Leong presents is “exhibitions and scholarly events,” to highlight the institution’s collection and showcase it to visitors.^[17] Exhibitions put on through universities are on a variety of topics and “accompanied by a public lecture or opening ceremony in which scholars and community members can discuss.”^[18] This level of community engagement maintains the integrity of the academic library by presenting topics relevant to the library or the university as a whole. It also bridges the academic and public communities, reducing hesitation among community members when entering these spaces. Relationships between the academic community and the general public created by these events form a

new network that extends beyond the librarians within the institution. Within the realm of networking, the final category, “cooperation, exchange, and partnership” is the act of resource-sharing between different institutions, including other libraries and communal organizations willing to exchange resources.^[19] The resources exchanged through these various institutions “include cataloguing, resource sharing, preservation of materials, information infrastructure, as well as librarian and materials exchanges.”^[20] Expanding these resource-sharing efforts to community organizations, as in the previous section, gives community members broader access to library resources they would not normally have in a public library. The more effort institutions put in, the more patrons will feel inclined to communicate with librarians and engage with the collection. Leong focuses on academic libraries in his exploration of community engagement opportunities due to similar sentiments of elitism within the academic space; museum’s libraries would benefit from similar approaches.

Library departments in museums that have the chance to undertake engagement demonstrate a commitment to the accessibility and equity proclaimed by the ALA. Through the guidance of librarians, the engagement and outreach programs provide attendees with a comprehensive look at the collection and resources for navigating the space individually. Museums must eliminate patrons’ perceptions that they are exclusionary and elitist, and replace those perceptions with a sense of belonging as patrons with access to the resources held by these organizations. By encouraging community use of their libraries, museums could become trusted and welcoming environments for community members to build relationships with museum collections. They would also have the opportunity to develop social bonds with the librarians at the reference desk in these museums, similar to those I experience at my community library.

Author Bio:

Marissa Brown is a dual-degree student pursuing a M.A. in Museum Studies and a M.S. in Library and Information Science. She holds a BA in Africana Studies from the University at Albany. With an emphasis on archives, she hopes to be a practitioner of preserving Black history.

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- [3] Oliver, *Overdue*, 21.
- [4] Laura Helton, *Scattered and Fugitive Things: How Black Collectors Created Archives and Remade History* (Columbia University Press, 2024), 115.
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- [16] Leong, "Community Engagement," 224.
- [17] Leong, "Community Engagement," 225.
- [18] Leong, "Community Engagement," 225.
- [19] Leong, "Community Engagement," 227.
- [20] Leong, "Community Engagement," 227.