THE COLLECTION
ALL AROUND

Sharing Our Cities, Towns, and Natural Places

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LIBRARIES DO A LOT. WE SHARE BOOKS, E-BOOKS, CDs, DVDS, databases, and expertise. Sometimes we share tools or seeds or toys. We provide shared computers and Internet access. We share 3-D printers. We offer classes. We share programs ranging from storytimes to yoga to book clubs to concerts to lectures. We share spaces to read, to work, to focus, to play, to explore, and to be at ease.

The great range of library offerings attracts people of all kinds, matching a need or curiosity to the library’s many offerings. It’s no surprise that in every city and town the library is a magnet and an anchor.

But there’s much more, of course, that people ask of the places they live that isn’t a part of libraries and needn’t be. Cities and towns have parks, recreation centers, and nature. They have museums and dance studios, streets and transit, meetings and activities, history and all the stuff of local community, culture, identity, and civic collaboration. The places around us are made up of wonderful, incredible resources that aren’t the library and that the library doesn’t have to duplicate. Good news! They weren’t all going to fit in the library anyway.

But access to those riches isn’t as broad as it could be. Barriers of cost or of social, economic, or cultural inequality exist. Not every local resource is as
welcoming or as community-focused as the library is. Many of the great assets of cities and towns are poorly shared. That’s where libraries come in. Shared access—help with access—is what libraries do.

Think, then, of the city, the town, the community, and all that it has to offer as a potential collection. The collection all around.

How do libraries help their communities use that collection? How can library members be helped to access the resources around them as easily as a storytime or a best seller? How can librarians help move city and town resources toward the public-goods end of the scale? Can librarians help local organizations meet the public halfway? That’s what this book explores.

It’s interesting. Content the world over has gotten immeasurably more available. While barriers remain, the stuff of books and movies and music and research and knowledge is now unquestionably more abundant and accessible, thanks to the Internet, e-commerce, electronic bazaars and swap meets, digital communication technologies, user-generated content, and other online resources. Whether paid or free, digital or physical, the barriers to getting access to content are not what they used to be. Access can be confusing and often costly and there’s much farther to go, but the change is undeniable. The skills and tools that libraries developed when content was scarce are now in less demand. Libraries are still navigating this sea change. Meanwhile, access to the local museum, theater, enrichment class, and neighborhood improvement process remains about where it’s been for decades. It’s difficult for most people. There are barriers of cost and complexity, language and know-how, connection and convenience. Fortunately, the same skills and tools that libraries developed to facilitate access to content are valuable here. Librarians can help.

And they do! Countless programs of local access have sprouted up in libraries in recent decades. Libraries everywhere are engaged in efforts to improve access to the resources of our cities, towns, and natural places. An impressive variety of library work contributes to this goal. I set out to find diverse examples of this work and to introduce them to a wider audience. Exploring these programs should be valuable to librarians, library strategists, and community members looking for help in accessing their world. Importantly, these efforts cohere as a largely unarticulated service model: libraries and librarians as agents on behalf of the public to our great local resources all around.
Direction and Innovation

There is no shortage of innovation in libraries right now, but this book is not a guide to cool or worthwhile things that libraries are doing. There are lots of great new ideas. Too often, though, those new ideas are either novelties or bear little relation to library strengths. They don’t generate momentum, accrete to anything new, or taken together help clarify what libraries are and what they do.

Work that is aligned—that variously contributes to a platform for going farther, that builds institutional strength—will be more lasting and consequential. This book explores and reappraises many projects old, new, and prospective that share a strategic direction: providing or expanding access to local resources. Most of these projects have received relatively little attention; in some cases, despite drawing on new technologies. A more purposeful mode of innovation can better harness the great energy and dedication in libraries.

This book is about libraries improving access to the resources around us that aren’t part of the library. By way of contrast, this is not

- embedding librarians and library resources in the community: decentralizing library services and resources, the library without walls
- bringing new resources into the library like makerspaces, media labs, online forums, tutoring, publishing, and other library services, performances, and events

While these all have great value, they represent a different direction and a somewhat different set of skills than what’s explored here.

With little fanfare, librarians have been developing new or updated programs and services of great depth and breadth, bringing together their members and the wealth of their (nonlibrary) local resources. I hope to credit that work and show how these programs situate the library in ways that draw on library traditions, skills, and strengths. Where these projects have gotten attention, they haven’t been contextualized as part of a broader strategy. Why not? Probably, first of all, because libraries haven’t organized their work around it: The position of “local access librarian” hasn’t been represented in
any job or division titles that I’ve been able to find. Which library will be the first to create that job in its organization?

Our conceptual categories also explain some of why this is. We know that libraries have collections. We know that libraries have programs attended by members. Libraries do outreach. Libraries have facilities. Libraries have technology. And then there’s all the other offerings and work libraries do that has a foot in one of these and the other foot vaguely in “services.” Like any framework, these categories create some blind spots that affect our thinking and decision-making. They shape how we understand what libraries do and what they do next. Considering a new paradigm—local access—illuminates many things that we may not have realized our libraries are already doing.

Playing to Strength

Libraries continually evaluate potential projects and directions against a background of clamoring possibilities. There’s a world of cool things that libraries can do that are consistent with our mission and have a positive impact in our communities. And we should have high expectations about extending librarians’ skills in new directions. But strategic thinking has to go beyond “Could we do this?” to “Is this something we can do better than someone else?” If another organization—schools, a social service agency, the health department—decided to offer an equivalent program, would the library’s effort be superseded?

Libraries neither need to become all things to all people nor retreat into the familiar. There are real competitive advantages that libraries have as agents of access to the collection all around and that they are practicing already. This direction aligns with librarians’ core skills and the library’s context in the community. It plays to libraries’ strengths.

• The collection all around builds on the existing skills of librarians. The work of improving local access combines outreach, customer service, event management, collection development, and acquisitions. It benefits from good design thinking and thoughtful metadata. It depends on comfort with new technology and creative thinking about how to apply it. It’s in librarians’ wheelhouse.
• The collection all around scales well. With a local access service established, greater and greater numbers of community members can be served without comparable increases in cost. For much of library programming and other services—as valuable as they are—providing twice as much service requires nearly twice the work or resources. Programs of access to local resources generally have staff-to-user ratios and users-per-hour capacities that allow and encourage their growth.

• It lasts. Many of the projects described here, having been established, require much less work to maintain. Having brokered local access, the relationship is easy to renew every year or so. The initial work pays ongoing dividends. That longevity is internalized by the public. They use a service and then use it again on their schedule, year in and out. The library as an avenue of access becomes an ordinary expectation, like circulating books.

• It builds on the position of libraries in their communities. Libraries know their communities as well as or better than anyone. There is goodwill and trust that libraries have built and continually restore. Local access work forms a virtuous circle with libraries’ place in their communities. As these projects become visible and are enjoyed, they strengthen the support of libraries, which improves access to community resources, which raises visibility and strengthens support, which . . .

• That same community position makes libraries among the most effective interfaces for the public to access local resources. Libraries are approachable and familiar in ways that the symphony or community board are not for many. Unfamiliar government agencies and private institutions can all be intimidating at times. This can be especially true for underserved communities. The library is a trusted gateway and a source for personal attention.

• Brokering public access to local resources is a “blue ocean.” Borrowing the metaphor from Blue Ocean Strategy, local access is an area of little competition.¹ Where do people turn for help with better access to their local resources? It’s an open space. Crowded, contested spaces like education or events are important places for libraries’ communities, of course, but libraries inevitably compete there with businesses, schools, and the wide

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Internet. Shared access to local resources is a space in which libraries have a unique position and a competitive advantage.

**The Collection All Around**

The projects described in this book are grouped into five thematic chapters.

1. *Membership.* The programs described in this chapter don’t all fit entirely in the framework of improving access to nonlibrary resources (though some do). Membership, though, acts as a linchpin for the projects that follow. Providing access to nonlibrary resources doesn’t make the library invisible. It makes the library, and library membership in particular, a gateway to those, to the collection all around. Reaffirming the place of library membership in library work is an illuminating place to start.

2. *City Passes.* These are the quintessential local access programs: librarians broker direct access to museums, pools, classes, performances, and venues of all kinds on behalf of the public, with new opportunities and benefits to those institutions as well.

3. *Guides.* Much of the world around us can be made more accessible simply by making it more comprehensible and welcoming, sometimes through providing modest assistance. This isn’t always work that other agencies have a stake in. It is something that librarians understand and excel at providing.

4. *Placemakers.* Access to the world around us includes access to the ordinary stuff of our neighborhoods. Can we get around? Are there places for us? Are the streets and squares and built environment that we pass through ours to shape or someone else’s business? Libraries are working to make neighborhood places more responsive to their members.

5. *Rangers.* The barriers limiting access to nature are subtle. Most natural settings are apparently accessible. But there are important roles that librarians can play to provide assurance, expertise, and assistance that are otherwise scarce and that help make connections to nature more available to all.
A conclusion, *All Together Now*, reflects on the ways a local access agenda can be helped forward. I’ll be discussing the value of these projects primarily in terms of access, or ultimately in terms of access. That’s not the only value they each have, of course, and it’s not the frame in which those projects’ leaders necessarily think of them. For example, these projects are each variously educational, service-oriented, or community-building. That’s all true. What these projects do in common, though, is share local access. They can contribute to a common direction and vision.

Because the process of planning and implementing these programs is an extension of other work familiar to librarians, I haven’t spent much time on the basics here. There’s good coverage and coursework on outreach and community partnership methodology elsewhere. From the American Library Association (ALA), consider *Librarians as Community Partners: An Outreach Handbook* and *Successful Community Outreach: A How-to-Do-It Manual for Librarians.*

Throughout this book I refer to the people doing this work as librarians, irrespective of classification, for the sake of simplicity, and I refer to library patrons and customers as members.

Not every relevant program is included in this book. I selected a representative program where there were many. I didn’t find or know how to find countless more. And more programs are still being created. This is all being done without library staff in defined local access roles or departments. Imagine how many more ways will be found to bridge the library public to the riches all around when that’s made an assigned responsibility, a strategic focus, and a topic of shared expertise.

The programs described in this book range from the attention-getting to the taken-for-granted. Many are consequential updates of traditional programs, often using tools that weren’t available until recently. That many superficially look like traditional offerings perhaps explains their being relatively less visible. Hopefully, exploring these projects side by side shows that what’s important about each of them is not their buzz or isolated impact. It’s how they have the potential to reinforce one another and achieve something bigger . . . For example, it isn’t being able to borrow best sellers or Spanish-language board books or jazz CDs or Korean movies or market research each in isolation that makes those things cool. (Though they each are.) It’s that borrowing what
you want is a thing you can do at the library, with offerings matched to each community.

The same is what’s relevant with the city, town, and nature access programs described in this book. As they become a collection, reaching the treasures and ordinary resources all around becomes a thing you can do via the library. That is what can be achieved. Equitable, widely shared access to our cities, towns, and natural places is ambitious and lofty and utopian. But not too much so. It’s grounded in the library as an institution and in the work of librarians.

On the other hand, making the world a better place and empowering people are, of course, tremendous callings. But people looking for providers of these things shouldn’t be expected to think of the library first. Which is the institution that makes the world a better place? Public health agencies, for many. Or a socially engaged church. Which is the one that empowers people? Community organizers and civic groups, for some. Which educates? Schools, of course. Libraries aren’t the answer to every question.

So, to which question are libraries the answer?

How about: “Which institution helps me access the world around me?”

Yes. That’s the library and the collection all around.

NOTES


The romantic appeal of library cards is hard to deny and probably speaks to anyone reading this book. It’s evergreen too. A look anytime at the hashtag #firstlibrarycard on social media will reliably turn up the latest sharing of stories, photos, and enthusiasm about the milestone of receiving one’s first library card. (It’s a nice pick-me-up on Instagram, especially, go see.) A number of libraries recognize this with “My First Library Card” marketing promotions for young children.

But in the end, a library card doesn’t mean that the holder has checked out an item. It doesn’t mean that the holder has been to a library program, searched a library database, or used a library computer. Someone with a library card might never even set foot in a library. Having a library card does correlate with more library engagement, of course, but ultimately the card is just an account. It’s a by-product, an administrative hook for library services and the real work that we do.

But no. That’s not right either.

Whether they’re used or not, library cards are tokens of belonging and potential. Very often, for kids, a library card is their first tangible membership in grown-up society as an individual who is independent of his or her family.
Library cards come with privileges and responsibilities and a whole new relationship to the world. They’re a big deal. It’s a wonder we don’t make elaborate ceremonies out of awarding these talismans.

Library cards represent belonging for adults as well. For new immigrants, for example, a library card may be the first tangible sign of membership in their wider new community, an unhyphenated membership in common with one’s neighbors. Whether one is a first- or fifth-generation American, the community library is the same, membership is the same, and the card is the same.

The 2014 Pew Research Center survey and report *From Distant Admirers to Library Lovers—and Beyond* derived types of public library engagement in the United States.1 In the two groups least engaged with libraries—“Distant Admirers” and “Off the Grid”—28 percent nevertheless reported that they have a library card. That’s kind of remarkable.

**The Thing Itself**

It makes sense, then, to start with a noninstrumental view of library cards. They have meaning to people whether or not they are used. The cards confer civic membership. They embody access to and a place in the city. From that starting point, we can extend library cards’ meaning and use in practical ways.

Used frequently or infrequently, the cards themselves are carried around, seen, and handled by library members. Their designs affirm the library’s brand and can communicate in other ways. The San Diego Public Library created limited edition cards for Comic-Con (the vast comic book convention held there every summer) and issued them with library registration held at the event (see figure 1.1); special library cards were created for the opening of their new Central Library; and standard-issue cards are available in five colors. When new members register, they’re surprised and delighted to be asked to choose the color of their library card. The cards create a connection with members. Using one of them may remind users of the time they got their card—their membership—at a special event or a local occasion, or when they just selected their own color. They’re part of the library community with a history that is both personal and shared.
Similarly, the Seattle Public Library created cards in partnership with the NFL and Seattle Seahawks. The Brooklyn Public Library featured a Sesame Street card to accompany a major exhibition. The Cleveland Public Library created a card honoring local author Harvey Pekar. In 2015, a number of libraries piggybacked on the ALA’s licensing of Peanuts for Library Card Signup Month that year.

Libraries have led library card campaigns for years, and in 1987 the ALA launched the September observance of Library Card Signup Month. That effort originated with then Secretary of Education William J. Bennett who said, “Let’s have a national campaign . . . every child should obtain a library card—and use it.” Every September, thousands of public and school libraries join in this national effort.

**Students Belong Here**

The recognition of library membership as a valuable focus in itself continues to grow. In 2015 the Obama administration’s ConnectED initiative set a Library Challenge goal of registering every enrolled student in thirty partner cities for a library card. The Challenge is supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the Urban Libraries Council, and the ALA.

In some cases, the Library Challenge goal is being pursued through traditional means: essentially, library card campaigns partnered with schools. In others cases, library membership is being directly integrated with school enrollment. Library registration and activation are automatic via school enrollment in each of these districts:

• 154,000 Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) public school students’ IDs function as library cards.
• 60,000 Nashville (TN) public school students’ IDs function as library cards.
• 15,000 Kansas City (MO) public school students’ IDs function as library cards (the ID numbers require a library prefix for operation).
• 70,000 Washington, DC, public secondary school students receive the city’s DC One Card, a school and municipal ID that is also available to adults. The ID card provides access to Park and Recreation centers and programs, serves as a transit pass, and is an activated library card.
• 20,000 Boston (MA) public high-school students receive the city’s Boston One Card. The student ID card also serves as a library card, community centers pass, and transit pass.

Some systems provide mechanisms to opt out of either borrowing privileges (leaving digital services in place) or out of library membership entirely. As another way to address concerns about automated account creation, some systems do not generate fines for late materials on these cards. Coordination between library vendors and school ID providers must be undertaken to ensure the compatibility of numbering schemes and to avoid duplication.

Like the DC and Boston cards, one way to build on library membership is to make the library card the hub of access to other community resources. The MyDenver card is an ID/pass for Denver youth from ages five to eighteen. The program first developed as a teen pass to city parks and recreation facilities and programs that was issued by public schools on an opt-in basis. The pass provides access to twenty-seven recreation centers where youth can take advantage of amenities and participate in structured drop-in activities revolving around sports and wellness, arts and culture, science, technology and education, community engagement, and social recreation.

A bond measure in 2012 included expansion of the program to all Denver residents ages five to eighteen. Card registration then moved from schools to online sign-up and was administered by the Denver Parks and Recreation Department. The city’s Office of Children’s Affairs now oversees the program and coordinates with the Denver Public Library (DPL).

Use of the MyDenver card for library services began in January 2013. Youth using the library then activated their MyDenver card for library use, but no forms were required. The library had access to the MyDenver database and imported records into its integrated library system (ILS) as needed. Beginning in 2016, all Denver public school students are now issued a MyDenver card
via school registration with a simple opt-in. The schools provide the DPL with a data file that is loaded into the ILS. These accounts require no other activation for database and e-book access. For circulating materials, youth using the library obtain a library bar code to add to the record, but no other forms or permissions are required.

Jennifer Hoffman, manager of books and borrowing at the Denver Public Library, explains that “the big thing is making it really clear and easy for parents. One of the things that we realized early on is that the kind of parent who’s going to see the library as a benefit for their child probably has already signed their child up for a library card. So we have to be prepared for duplication and how to deal with that. The other thing is that we have different ways that we work with the schools in terms of registering whole classrooms for cards.” The DPL is working “to make signing up for the MyDenver card the preferred method of getting a library card for any child who’s in the Denver public schools system.” While the MyDenver card started independently of the library, the library was envisioned early on as a partner. Today there are 70,000 MyDenver cards activated for online services with the DPL. No visit to the library is needed for that level of membership. To activate a MyDenver card for full borrowing privileges, students only need to visit the library and present their card.

Just as importantly, Denver’s Office of Children’s Affairs has worked with partners at the Denver Art Museum and the American Museum of Western Art to add museum admission benefits and discounts to the MyDenver card. The expanded school, library, and recreation center core now includes benefits with the Denver Botanic Gardens, Denver Center for the Performing Arts, the Denver Zoo, the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, and many more. Work is under way to include mass transit access.

All of this places the Denver Public Library, through its joint-use card, at the hub of Denver youths’ access to local arts, culture, recreation, and education. That’s real community membership.

One for the Power Users

The Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) is experimenting with a “Power Users” program to build a closer relationship with its most active members. The program,
which was launched in October 2015, used circulation totals to identify 150 patrons who had checked out over 5,000 items (over the available lifetime of ILS data, in their case, since the mid-1990s). A letter was then mailed to each of these patrons to invite their participation in the Power Users program. Less than a month into the program, over 10 percent of the patrons notified had brought their letter in to staff at a Brooklyn Public Library location. The first patron to do so was met with a round of applause.

Power Users get a branded library card, a tote bag, and a water bottle. Other perks are being explored, but for now patrons are responding mainly to the recognition. The Brooklyn Public Library asks Power Users if they’re willing to advocate on behalf of the library. The BPL hopes to cultivate these superfans as advocates for library members, with their advocacy addressed to the library system. Brooklyn Public Library’s strategic initiatives manager, Diana Plunkett, explains that the program “creates an opportunity for us to have conversations with our heaviest users and have them help guide us. It’s a great way to have a dialogue with people who are really invested in the library, and it can help us learn how we can make the experience for themselves—or for others who might not be at their level—even better and more powerful.”

Early participants are also being asked to help shape the program, which is expected to evolve, and to act as ambassadors to the next 150 invitees. So far the Power Users tend to be older, but the first group of invitees did include families and teens, plus a local government official. As the library makes contact with the invitees, it’s learning more about who the library’s most active users are—their demographics, geography, local branch, and interests—and also at how that picture changes as circulation thresholds are reduced to expand the membership in the program.

The “superfan” identity quickly raises a question about using circulation counts as an indicator. Circulation is only one measure of library use, of course, and the library is experimenting with other metrics for the Power User recognition. The BPL would like to include program attendance, for example, and it has experimented with card swiping. Plunkett reports that program attendees were comfortable with that, but didn’t always have cards with them and that it was a poor fit for caregivers and class visits. It’s a question the library is still looking to resolve. PC and Wi-Fi usage are other measures it’s looking at.
Circulation, too, is not simple. The library’s measure doesn’t include e-book circulation, for example, because data on individual patron usage resides with e-book platform providers, not with the library. The BPL is working to get those numbers, but they’re not ordinarily available to client libraries. The noncirculation use metrics are increasingly important to libraries. An emphasis on membership and the collection all around may push this farther, and using a metric like card swiping might become more common and taken for

Going Cardless
We’ve been talking about library cards as physical things, but one could just as well be wondering about digital “cards” and other forms of secure identity. An account needs only an ID and PIN combination. A digital token can be passed from a smartphone, watch, NFC (near field communication) bracelet, and so on to accomplish anything a library bar code does ubiquitously now.

What about that? Is a virtual card different? Does it matter that it’s less substantive? If we can’t hold that totem and scrawl our name on it, can we still attach the same mystery and power to it?

Los Angeles Public Library Card
Card designed by Shepard Fairey. Illustration courtesy of Shepard Fairey/Obeygiant.com

We’ll see.
But whether physical or virtual, at hand or regularly lost, the role of the card doesn’t change. The important thing is that meaning and utility both are bound up in library membership. Online and in plastic, there’s a place for libraries to leverage art and branding. And of course, both physical cards and virtual cards can and do coexist and will both be used.
granted. Library privacy policies and data aggregation and anonymization should follow into these areas.

The web page explaining the Power Users program (www.bklynlibrary.org/poweruser) lets all BPL card holders look up their lifetime tally and compare that to average and maximum totals for the system or for a zip code. Very cool. (Individual lifetime circulation totals are a standard part of Brooklyn’s Innovative Sierra ILS, but not all ILSs tally this.) Plunkett notes that “it’s a bit of a challenge to think about what the library can do in a benefits program when everything is free.” The BPL has shown, though, that for some libraries this is a terrific way to highlight and build on library membership as a value in itself.

What Else Is This Card Good For?

While multiuse community membership cards are fairly new to public libraries, they’re well established in academic settings. Although they don’t share public library cards’ mystique, student ID/campus cards are multifunctional and are unmistakably tokens of membership on college and university campuses. The campus card combines identification and a library account and usually also includes debit, meal plan, and digital and print services. Often it integrates facility access/electronic door management, transit, event ticketing, and more. Off-campus merchant support is increasingly common.

At many colleges and universities, this very multipurpose campus ID card is a library offering. Bill Folden, library circulation supervisor at Humboldt State University in northern California, shared a window into their particular experience. At that school, campus ID cards are made in the library but are administered separately.

Traditionally, [campus cards] were looked at as separate from library work. But we had the space in the library to make them. It was convenient and we were open more than any other building on campus. There was a natural tie-in with issuing ID cards and checking out library books.

Now we’re trying to do away with the [separate] office, to make it more a part of regular library services. Our next step is to bring the ID functions out of this office, bring it out to the checkout desk, and transform that checkout desk to a library services desk, to expand the services we provide. People
walk up to the checkout counter, they need an ID: “Great, stand over here, take your picture, here’s your card.”

Humboldt State University ties a number of complementary functions to its campus card, including arrangements with three transit systems for unlimited free bus service. The transit pass is tied to a student ID number encoded in the ID card’s magnetic stripe. The same number is used as a “convenience card” account to access stored funds and to receive discounts. Businesses on and off campus accept the debit cards, which also work with print/copy networks, vending machines, laundry, and more.

The functions are handled by different software systems. In Humboldt’s case, PeopleSoft is the campus administrative system software which manages student IDs, course records, and finances. Another product, ID Flow, is used to generate cards and integrate them with ID records, secure entry (facility door) systems, debit systems, and with the library ILS. While other campus agencies manage each of these back-end systems, the primary student-facing touchpoint for the campus card is the library. In other words, the place to get your debit card for campus laundry, which is also your dorm room key, your bus pass, and your campus membership, is at the library circulation desk from library staff. That’s fantastic and has been easy to take for granted. It’s also a reminder to public libraries that the possibilities for attaching managed membership services to the library card are there and that a technological foundation for doing this has already been developed by universities.

Public libraries are borrowing from the campus model and finding applications of their own. Public library cards often integrate with managed printing, photocopying, and computer reservation systems. This integration is valuable and is a feature that public libraries can look to extend. Just as the campus card provides access to computer and print services campus-wide, PC management products might give public library members access to computer and print services around town. A meaningful share of library computer lab and copier use is for simple tasks like printing passes, coupons, applications, resumes, and so on. Could this be a portable feature of a library membership that is available at community centers, shopping plazas, or cafes?

The Iowa City Public Library maintained an off-site computer lab at a police substation. Kara Logsden, community and access services coordinator for the
Iowa City Public Library, explained that the program came out of their strategic planning. They had data on “who was using their library card to sign in to our Internet computers. We saw that on the southeast side of Iowa City, that part of town was using the Internet computers [at the downtown library] more, and that they would benefit from more computer access in their neighborhood. We put a computer lab out. Our city had a police substation in that neighborhood and so the facility was there, they had a really nice conference room, the city’s Internet was already there . . . The reality was, nobody came. They didn’t want to come do Internet in a police station.” There were also difficulties with the limited schedule the computer lab was on.

Although the program was discontinued after a year, the identification of the need and the lightweight response deserve credit and are an interesting example of making a library membership benefit portable.

**Who Needs a Ride?**

Another innovative partnership developed out of the Iowa City Public Library’s strategic planning process. The library does a community survey every five years. The library had frequently seen that its members wanted easier access to their downtown library, in part driven by perceptions of limited parking downtown. The library also had data showing that its patrons came from all over the city, but that some underserved neighborhoods had transportation barriers impeding access. Making it easier to access the library became a strategic plan initiative.

They first experimented with a “Ride and Read” program which allowed any patron at the library with a valid library card to receive a pass for a bus ride home that same day. The program was good for Tuesdays through Thursdays and was available from all library public service desks. The limited schedule proved confusing, though, so it was later expanded to all six days with bus service. A simple tracking program limits patrons to two uses per week. Kara Logsden explained that the library next heard from teachers “who were very concerned about children having access to the library in the summertime.” The library decided to complement the Ride and Read return-trip program with a “Summer Library Bus” to the library, free to students up to age eighteen.
and the adults riding with them. Their library card was the bus pass.

At first, the Summer Library Bus program used a dedicated, decorated shuttle bus operated by Iowa City Transit on a limited schedule. This was successful, but it proved to be too constrained by the route and schedule. The program grew to allow children or teens and accompanying guardians to present a library card for a free ride downtown on any Iowa City Transit route, weekdays off-peak (9 a.m. to 3 p.m.) all summer, from the day school lets out for summer to the day before school starts in the fall. (See figure 1.2.)

The already established Ride and Read program provides the bus rides home, and “if there’s a student who wants to use it more than twice a week, we’re flexible and we’ll give them more passes.” The bus rides are all charged to the library at a discounted rate by Iowa City Transit. Buses record the number of rides given and the transit system bills the library monthly. The library budgets for the cost, which was a little over $2,000 in 2014. Because the library and the transit system are both operated by the city, the city does the charge through internal accounting. “We think it’s money that’s very well spent.”

Statistics on the program show strong and growing use. In summer 2015 there were over 3,200 Summer Library Bus rides downtown. The Ride and Read return trips for all of 2015 exceeded 1,500. While the usage is measurable and has tangible benefits, investing the library card with “real-world” applications like this has intangible value as well. The membership role of the library card grows. Members have access to the library and to their city: books, public places, programs, and . . . mobility. Logsden continued:

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Our transit system is wonderful and great to work with. We’ve been doing some cross-promotion where we go out to the schools in the spring to get kids signed up for library cards and transit comes out with their bus. We have the stand, “Sign Up for a Library Card,” and we have the bus right there. We have bookmarks about the Summer Library Bus.

We’ve been doing a lot of cross-promotion, specifically targeting Title I schools or a school in need of assistance. It’s worked really well and the use is pretty amazing. It’s wonderful to go to a school and say, “Hey, if you have trouble getting to the library, all you have to do is show your library card and you can hop on a bus!” It’s brought a lot of kids into the library.

Librarians brokering improved access to cities and towns—in this case through a thoughtful and valuable transit benefit, negotiated with a civic partner—has expanded library membership. Access to the resources around us can be a matter as literal as getting there. Mobility is a promising piece of the collection all around.

Financial Connections

Access to the world around us is also built on basic economic participation, on having a means of receiving, storing, and spending pay and benefits. The “I Love My Library” card, an experimental pairing of library card and prepaid debit card, was developed by the library automation vendor SirsiDynix and was piloted at three libraries starting in 2014. Maryland’s Frederick County Public Libraries, Illinois’s Lansing Public Library, and Mississippi’s Lamar County Library System participated.

Prepaid debit cards offer unbanked patrons a convenient way to store and save money, similar to a checking account but without requiring a bank account or credit check and without the extraordinary fees of check-cashing services. Despite limited consumer protections, prepaid debit cards are widely used. A total of $167 billion was projected to be loaded into prepaid card accounts in 2014, an increase of 42 percent from the amount loaded in 2010. Most cards accept direct deposits and carry loss and fraud protections. Social Security and Supplemental Security Income recipients are required to receive their payments electronically, for example, and the cards are one way that many people do receive these payments.
Many prepaid cards carry high fees, however, and have opaque fee structures. The product partnered on by SirsiDynix carried fees that were average for the category. An expectation held by SirsiDynix and the libraries is that by pairing debit storage with a library card, users will be more likely to retain the dual-use card longer than is typical for prepaid cards. This avoids activation and other fees when obtaining a new one. According to a 2012 study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, prepaid cards have an average life span of only six months. The SirsiDynix card also featured affinity card functionality, allowing local businesses to offer discounts that would be automatically applied when the card was used. Controversially, a portion of the card’s fees was returned to the library as revenue. Although activation and funding rates were higher than forecast early on, ultimately, the product didn’t align well enough with library principles and didn’t offer exceptional value for members. It was discontinued in August 2015.

Banking remains an important component of community membership and access in the meantime, though. Libraries educate and assist on financial literacy, but going farther, the place of libraries in their communities makes them good prospects for connecting the public with banking and credit services. Cooperative banks and community-development banks may be partners to consider for their membership and community benefit missions. Librarians that are able to broker financial services between the public and financial partners, particularly in communities that are unbanked at higher rates, could provide a valuable service. The practical utility of this is clear and foundational, and the contribution to community membership and belonging is also important. Facilitating library-assisted and member-serving economic participation is consistent with the library as a gateway to local access and is a challenge for librarians to consider.

Local Citizens

Discrete programs like these are excellent ways that librarians have extended library membership. Local governments have also led noteworthy programs of civic membership, usually with ties to libraries. Municipal IDs are photo IDs provided by an increasing number of cities and counties. The cards help community members who have difficulty obtaining state-issued IDs—for example,
undocumented immigrants, the homeless, foster youth, the elderly, and formerly incarcerated individuals—to gain better access to civic and economic life. As described in the Center for Popular Democracy report *Building Identity: A Toolkit for Designing and Implementing a Successful Municipal ID Program*, “typically all government agencies and officials (including the police) will accept the card as proof of identity in any interaction with a community member.”²

Without the right form of ID, a person may not be able to open a bank account or cash a check, see a doctor at a hospital, register their child for school, apply for public benefits, file a complaint with the police department, borrow a book from a library, vote in an election, or even collect a package from the post office. A municipal ID removes all of these barriers with a single stroke. A municipal ID can be a powerful symbol of inclusion and welcome extended to marginalized community members. Young people, especially those with unstable home environments, often have trouble obtaining official IDs either because of the cost or because they do not have access to the necessary documents. Having a valid ID can help them avoid being detained by the police or being issued a summons.

The largest municipal ID program is New York City’s IDNYC, with 863,464 cardholders as of June 30, 2016. Library registration is not automatic, but the IDNYC card can be tied to existing library accounts or used to open new ones at all three library systems covering New York City’s five boroughs. About ten other cities offer municipal IDs and an equal number are seeking them. In most cases, government agencies run the service but there are also private and nonprofit-administered programs.

A survey of 70,000 IDNYC cardholders found that among immigrant cardholders, 36 percent rely on the municipal ID as their only form of photo identification and 77 percent reported that their IDNYC card has increased their sense of belonging to the city.³ IDNYC and other municipal ID programs have developed additional benefits paired to the IDs, including discounts at cultural institutions and local businesses, access to park and recreation centers, and the inclusion of emergency and medical information. Over half of IDNYC survey respondents have used the card to obtain free memberships to forty cultural institutions—such as museums and performing arts centers—and to receive discounts on groceries, pharmacies, and fitness centers.

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A similar card is offered nationally in Scotland: the National Entitlement Card provides library membership and works as a smart card for transit, debit and prepayment, printing and photocopying, door access control systems, and discounts at cultural institutions. Another membership model is Canada’s Cultural Access Pass, which is available only to new citizens. The pass is free and valid for one’s first year of citizenship. The pass includes free admission to hundreds of Canadian museums, national and provincial parks, events and performances, and discounts on travel and hotels. A number of libraries act as pass distribution sites.

While these programs have not originated with libraries, libraries have been active partners in them. Where localities do not have the interest or capacity to lead on municipal IDs, libraries might pursue a leading role. They have relevant experience in all aspects of these projects. Where the IDs are led by other city departments, libraries should be primary enrollment centers. (In New York City, a select number are.) The fit with libraries’ mission and expertise is clear and is consistent with the fundamental role of membership and community identity in library practice.

**A Home for Community Membership**

Library membership has an important place in facilitating access to the world around us. It ties the wide variety of those programs and services together. It’s where the collection all around starts. Library membership is also a reminder that the work of making the valuable resources around us more available to all has a long-standing institutional home and practice: the library and librarianship.

There are many directions for benefits attaching to library membership yet to come. The thoughtful, deliberate work of “local access librarians” will yield some efforts that we can all learn from. We know that librarians have the expertise, experience, connections, and place in the community for the job. Let’s see what they come up with.
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