



*Embedding your  
Public Library as a*

# *Community Anchor*

A status report and idea eBook of how libraries have  
been able to further themselves as community anchors  
and how you can do the same.



SirsiDynix®

In the digital age, libraries have a unique opportunity to **play key roles** for their communities.

For centuries, libraries were thought of as institutions reserved for the elite, but in today's increasingly tech-driven society, libraries have evolved into **nerve centers for cities** and serve people from all socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>1</sup>



# 69%

of Americans age 16+  
reported high to medium  
levels of engagement with  
public libraries.

U.S. public libraries are still home to 784 million printed books,<sup>2</sup> but there is much more to libraries than just reading these days, thanks to the explosive expansion of data and the Internet. In the 1980s and 1990s, many believed that the rise of the Web would be the death of the library. However, as libraries actually embraced these innovations, the digital revolution has made libraries more powerful than ever.<sup>3</sup>

So just how many people are using the library on a nationwide scale? And how are these demographics making a meaningful impact on communities? According to a report from the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries titled “Rising to the Challenge,” 69 percent of Americans age 16 or older reported high to medium levels of engagement with public libraries.<sup>4</sup> The evolution of the modern library can account for these high numbers, as libraries are embracing their role as a place where people can better understand their personal and civic identities.



# *Open Information for All*

One of the biggest trends, from small towns to large cities, is the library becoming a community gathering place.

By partnering with nonprofits, schools, and private enterprises to expand this role, libraries have been able to reach out to communities in several different ways, according to Public Libraries Online. In fact, the source goes so far as to call the library “the most important place in town.”<sup>5</sup> By serving as a community-building enterprise, offering support to diverse demographics, functioning as a haven for the arts, focusing efforts on engaging youth, and presenting university-caliber resources for all, the library has become a champion for communities.



# 62%

of public libraries are  
the only source of  
free Internet in their  
communities.

Offering free Internet access also allows libraries to give opportunities to patrons in impoverished communities. In 2011, the United Nations declared Internet access as a basic human right as a means for freedom of opinion as well as societal progression.<sup>6</sup> Aspen Institute's report showed that 62 percent of public libraries are the only source of free Internet in their communities.<sup>7</sup> This means that libraries play a huge role in society based on the valuable services they provide to their citizens—even basic human rights.

Some libraries such as the New York and the Chicago public libraries have even taken this a step further. Both cities have begun programs that allow patrons to enjoy take-home Internet access (also known as Wi-Fi “hot spots”), as well as digital training for citizens in neighborhoods where access to the Internet is low or limited.

“From day one, we have worked to increase Internet connectivity and knowledge for our residents because today's digital skills are 21st-century workforce skills,” Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced, according to the Aspen Institute report.<sup>8</sup>

What's more, libraries have become a boon for an aspiring legion of freelancers and startup companies who don't want to cram

themselves into crowded coffee shops or hand over hundreds of dollars to co-working spaces just so they can put even more effort toward their careers.

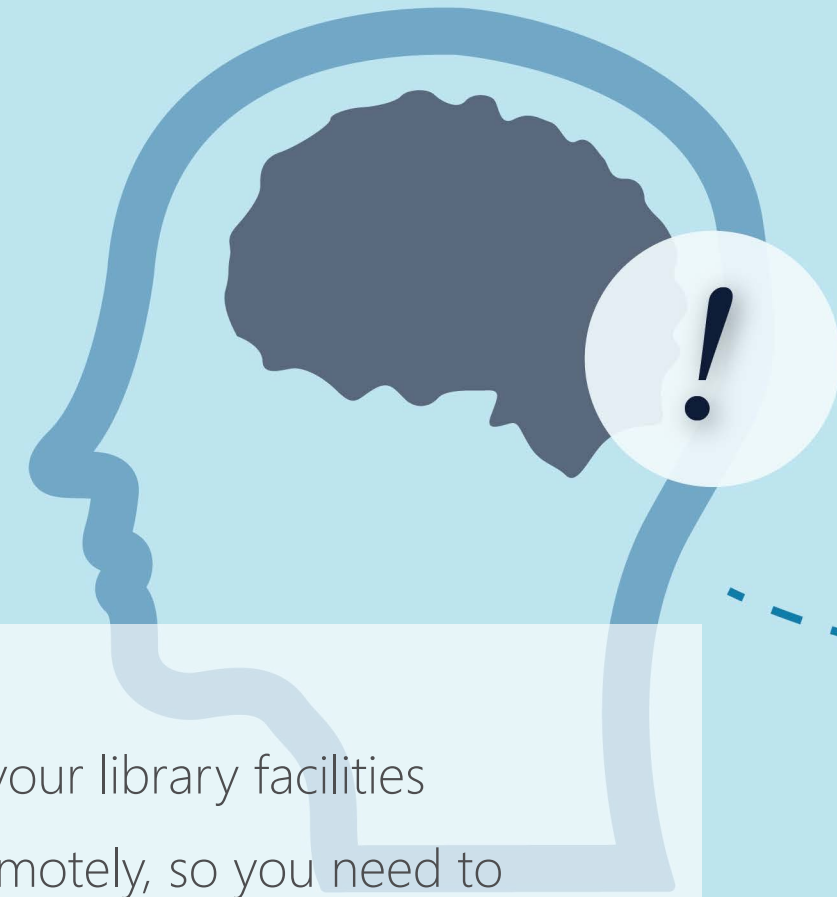
Libraries are becoming a space for all. Patrons can always check out a book, but they can also attend an ESL (English as a second language) class, use the Internet to get some work done during a business trip, attend a neighborhood association meeting, or address social issues within a city or community. Simply put, the library really can mean a lot of things to many people and can connect us in a meaningful way in an increasingly technological world.<sup>9</sup>

## *What it means for you:*

Internet access is a basic human right in the 21st century, and libraries have tackled the responsibility of granting these resources for all. In addition, libraries treat all patrons as equals with digital training, materials for local businesses, and an avenue to address social issues.

## *A place to start:*

- ☐ Invest in the tools needed to foster state-of-the-art Internet access in your library facilities and the cloud. Ninety percent of patrons access the library's portals remotely, so you need to take extra steps to ensure that your site is equipped to deal with high download speeds.
- ☐ Offer digital training for your patrons who are unfamiliar with tech services or the Internet.
- ☐ Partner up with local neighborhood associations and organizations so the library is the foremost platform for addressing issues in your city.







## *Novel ideas:*

- ✦ Spotlight Open Access Week, which occurs annually in late October. During that week, inform the public on the value of open access to information and celebrate its importance together through community events and activities.
- ✦ Offer tours highlighting the vast collections and available information that the library provides.
- ✦ Consider lending Wi-Fi hotspots to your patrons so that all citizens have equal access to Internet use, regardless of whether they are at the library.

Brainstorm your own:

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# *The Library as a Workspace*

If you told someone 50 years ago that libraries were going to be a great place to start a business or use as an office, many would have thought you were joking.

Yet these spaces are tailor-made for businesspeople in many ways, and the reasons are quite clear. Free access to the Internet, multiple locations, partnerships within the local community, and a thriving freelance community in cities across the U.S. have given libraries a unique opportunity to reach out to young entrepreneurs in new and innovative ways.

Fast Company, a magazine that usually caters to the startups, tech, software development, and graphic design communities, recently highlighted this phenomenon. The source centered on Jonathan Marino, a 30-year-old director of content for the tech startup Map Story. The



aim of his business model is to create the “Wikipedia of interactive maps.” However, Map Story’s office isn’t in a towering skyscraper or genius-filled campus in Silicon Valley. Rather, the startup’s “office” happens to be inside one of the meeting rooms of the main public library in Washington, D.C.<sup>10</sup>

What used to be reading rooms are now being converted into “de facto co-working spaces,” according to the source. Simply offering square footage to these young entrepreneurs isn’t all that libraries are doing to support the business community. Programs like D.C.’s Digital Commons and the Eureka Loft in Scottsdale, Arizona, allow librarians and startups to find funding, discover mentors, and relate to other planning resources that could help startups get their businesses off the ground. It’s a wise move for libraries, as this draws them closer to the business community and reintroduces the library to a young and technologically-sophisticated generation.

Freelancing professionals have also found a home in the public library setting. While web access might have seemed like a threat to libraries when the Internet was first introduced to the public, the opposite has happened. The more libraries embrace technology, the more they embed themselves within the community.



## *What it means for you:*

Libraries have a unique opportunity to use their resources to cater to small businesses and freelancers.

This demographic is continuing to thrive as millennials become more creative with business resources. This means that libraries can connect with a new generation both personally and professionally.

Although working from home is always an option for freelancers, not everyone has the motivation to get work done in the comfort of their house. This situation is where a public library really comes in handy for freelancing professionals. Not only are libraries excellent places for research, but they are also much less noisy than crowded coffee shops. Co-working spaces—although beneficial in many ways—are also an added expense for freelancers, whereas the library's services are completely free of charge. This also gives the freelancers needed business connections as they interact with other members of the business community in the library.



## *A place to start:*

- ☐ Offer stellar spaces for meetings. Libraries are great places for networking or alternative workspaces that promote more productivity in a refreshing setting.
- ☐ Partner up with startups. This gives libraries the opportunity to keep their finger on the pulse of the business community in their city and further promote private/public partnerships. Connecting with a younger generation is one of the best ways for a library to remain relevant decades down the road, and many millennials are coming up with creative ways to start businesses across the country.
- ☐ Foster relationships between your library and business associations. Partnering up with your area chamber of commerce in local events or festivals, for example, is an excellent way to connect with professionals in your area.



## *Novel ideas:*

- ✦ Bring business professionals to the library and help them use the library's assets to enhance business relations.
- ✦ Host local business conferences to make businesspeople aware of library resources. This can demonstrate your worth to business leaders in a visual way and even allow you to showcase sample business plans.
- ✦ Create "cellphone-friendly" areas around the library so patrons are free to make business calls or conduct video conferencing.
- ✦ Have a board member designated for job opportunities and advertise ways in which the library can serve as a resource to expand on certain occupational skills. This person can have the sole responsibility of looking up sources and making sure the facilities are business-friendly.

Brainstorm your own:

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# *The Library as a Community Center*

Although community centers are wonderful places for cities and towns, libraries have also begun to fulfill the roles of community centers.<sup>11</sup>

Libraries simply wouldn't exist without community support, and librarians are typically more than willing to offer services to show their city pride and gratitude.

The ties of the community and library often center around place-based development, and the trend is catching on in cities as large as Chicago and as small as Putney, Vermont. Public Libraries Online specifically highlighted former Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's efforts to allow librarians to serve as community builders.<sup>12</sup>



*“Unless you are out there changing neighborhoods, you are not completing the work that you do.”*

— Richard Daley,  
Former Chicago Mayor

In fact, according to the source, Daley addressed a group of librarians stating, “Unless you are out there changing neighborhoods, you are not completing the work that you do.”

In particular, libraries have become community anchors for citizens in low-income neighborhoods. These institutions allow for many doors to be opened for patrons by providing several much-needed services, such as free classes and seminars.

One such example of this phenomenon took place in Hudson, Ohio, a medium-sized community tucked between Cleveland and Akron. One of the keystones of the city’s Main Street business district is the library, which opened in 2005, according to the Mead Public Library (MPL).<sup>13</sup>

Even though Hudson is part small town, part suburb, it didn’t stop community leaders from building a state-of-the-art library facility for its citizens. The building is an expansive 50,000 square feet (compared to the previous building, which only had 17,000 square feet) with modern designs in the interior, and boasts a rotunda that could even make the Carnegie libraries jealous.



But why would the city invest in such an extravagant library space? The answer is simple: The community demanded it.

“It’s become the cultural, entertainment, and social hub of Hudson,” assistant director Margie Smith explained to MPL. “The library programs a lot of readings, there are musical performances every week, and we also have meeting rooms.”

Hudson went all out with the renovation and included a collection of 7,000 DVDs, state and local database access, and more than 50 public computer terminals for its citizens. The library is also open 69 hours per week, giving Hudsonites even greater access to community resources.

The community love for libraries is also present in our nation’s small towns, according to the report from MPL. Even though the small New England town of Putney, Vermont has a smaller population of 2,600 residents, the town’s library still attracts 100 visitors to the space every day thanks to the city’s evening programs. Since Putney is largely a rural community, the library’s seven public access computers are particularly popular, as the city has limited residential broadband access.

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—Margie Smith,  
Assistant Director



## *What it means for you:*

Librarians have a responsibility to understand the social and civic issues that their city and community faces. Communities, in general, love their libraries, and it is always in a library director's best interest to find ways to show their appreciation for their hometown.

Libraries are finding practical ways to connect with their communities as well. Many librarians will offer the physical space of the library to serve as an emergency response center, a voting location for citizens, a workplace development center, and, in some communities, a temporary health clinic. These efforts create a wide net of services for patrons and positively impact people on a personal and civic level like no other place in the city can.

## *A place to start:*

- ☐ Host events that are fun, cater to kids, and involve all members of the community. These can include everything from street festivals to potluck dinners to author signings. Being the center of the community's social scene allows patrons to identify a positive relationship with the library on a personal level.
- ☐ Create classes and activities that people are generally interested in. These can range from knitting and yoga to woodworking and kayaking. This allows citizens to expand their horizons, find new interests, and do so for free.<sup>14</sup>
- ☐ Become a voting center. During election cycles, make sure the library's facilities serve as a place for people to exercise their constitutional rights. This could be an excellent opportunity to showcase resources to people who might have never set foot in a library before.



# *Novel ideas:*

- ✦ Host movie nights based on the season—you can even show films that were originally books, such as “The Grinch” during the holidays or “Frankenstein” during Halloween. There’s also the Outside the Box program, which partners up with Redbox to obtain traveling movie kits so libraries can set up an inflatable movie screen, projector, and sound equipment.<sup>15</sup>
- ✦ Put on an outdoor concert with local bands.<sup>16</sup> Try to team up with area universities to find specialized performances, such as jazz concerts during Mardi Gras or Irish music on St. Patrick’s Day. Of course, you can always keep the music even more local by throwing your very own street festival complete with local bands to attract younger patrons to library services.
- ✦ Create a kid-friendly zone. There are the obvious events, such as summer reading series. However, thinking outside of the box can also keep little ones interested in library services. For example, the Boston Public Library had patrons waiting outside for a half-hour to participate in a Lego-building contest, which created a fun atmosphere while promoting education and problem solving.<sup>17</sup>
- ✦ Offer “teen only” nights where teens can participate in unique events like Nerf wars, beauty nights, henna parties, etc. Likewise, provide a separate adult after-hours night where adults can get together and enjoy one another’s company and enriching activities.
- ✦ Provide an “adult prom” where—much like teenagers—adults get together and enjoy a formal night of fun and dancing.

Brainstorm your own:

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# *Special Collections Matter*

Another aspect of community-centered librarianship is special collections, serving as an archival hub for the city's rare or historically significant items.

These can also include original artwork or documented efforts to rebuild during a disaster. Special collections are always fluid because they continually reflect specific community needs.

In a way, librarians are well-read in their community's social problems. This part of the library can include oral histories and historical artifacts, as well as digital history projects, all of which are of crucial value to the city or town.



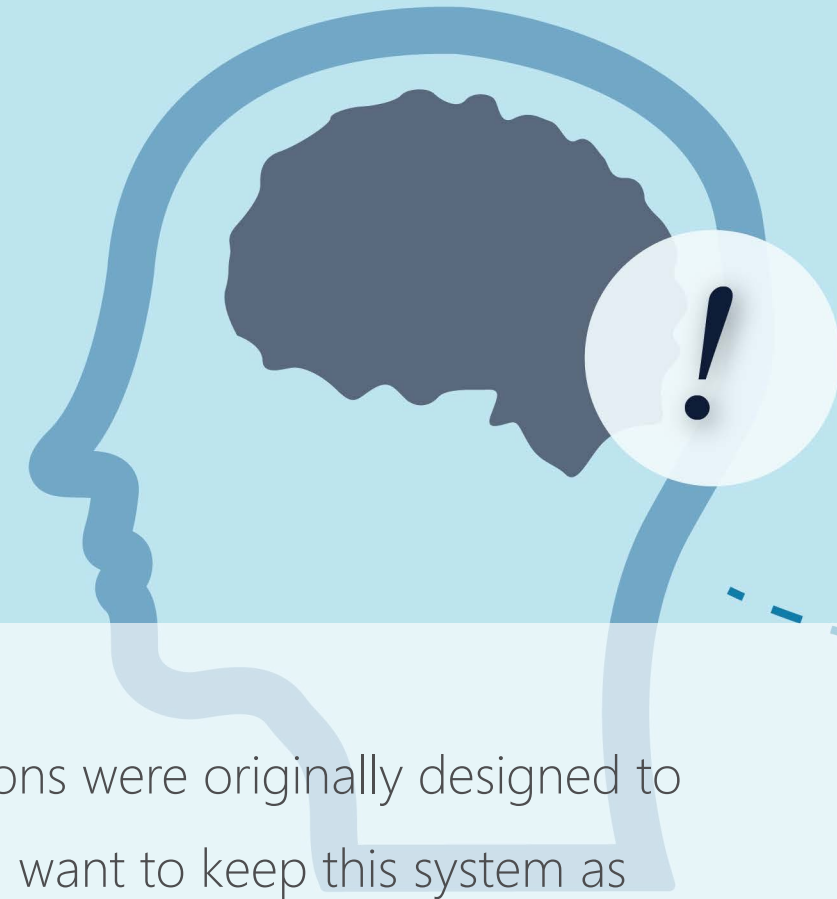
### *What it means for you:*

Tulane's story is just one of many instances when special collections left an indelible mark on a city. However, special collections are incredibly diverse and depend on the openness of a library director in terms of what to curate or preserve. Ultimately, these collections should be shareable with patrons and add significant value to your city.

One such instance where special collections made a difference was in New Orleans following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Tulane University's Howard Tilton Memorial Library, a massive expanse about the size of a football field, was critically damaged by the flooding. The library's special collections were especially affected.

Thanks to community efforts, more than 300,000 print volumes, 18,000 reels of microfilm, and more than 629,000 other special collection items were salvaged from four feet of water and mold. New Orleans came together more than ever following Hurricane Katrina, and the city's efforts to restore its historical items at Tulane were clear reflections of this. Remarkably, the Tulane library reopened in the spring of 2006, just months after the waters receded, showing the value of the library to the community.<sup>18</sup>

## *A place to start:*



- ☐ Cultivate special collections that cater to researchers.<sup>19</sup> Special collections were originally designed to give students a way to perfect their research skills. This means that you want to keep this system as organized as possible. Whether you organize your special collections through dates of the records, types of materials, or genres, be sure they are user-friendly.
- ☐ Often, special collections can seem like an intimidating area of the library. To further promote openness, try not to hide them. Keep your special collections in the center of the library space so everyone can experience them.<sup>20</sup>
- ☐ Be sure your special collections are meaningful and thought-provoking. Special collections are a way for libraries to really shine and reflect their cultural relevancy. As a result, make sure the relics or artifacts bring about a sense of community pride for your patrons.



## *Novel ideas:*

- ✦ Apply for traveling exhibits. Libraries have plenty of unique opportunities to bring the experience of a museum to their users. For instance, the American Library Association recently partnered with the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History to showcase the traveling exhibit, "Exploring Human Origins."<sup>21</sup> Offers such as these allow your library to display important works and increase visibility to the general public.
- ✦ One of the biggest trends for libraries is digitized special collections. For instance, the California Digital Library grants access to archives and museum material that caters to university campuses as well as grade school teachers.<sup>22</sup>

Brainstorm your own:

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# *Libraries as Centers for the Arts*

Libraries and the arts community have a working relationship and this connection has been strong for decades.

The link makes sense: libraries have always been at the forefront of fostering creativity. Moreover, libraries also provide research tools for artists to create new things and seek inspiration, whether it be through the written word, music, or visual arts.

Local artists are also great stewards of city libraries, as many of these individuals use the space to promote their work. Having art on display in a library adds a personal touch to the space and also creates a warm and inviting atmosphere for patrons. In fact, it's almost impossible to imagine what a library would be like without the support from and partnership with the arts community.



Many prominent art institutions will also have their own library on the premises, showing the need they have for archival data. One of the best examples of this relationship is the Fine Arts Library at Harvard University, a research facility that provides curricular support for art, architecture, photography, and decorative arts. There is even a digital images and slides collection that catalogs paintings, drawings, sculptures, photography, and several other forms of media that have been part of the Harvard community since 2001.<sup>23</sup>

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, considered one of the most prestigious museums in the world, also has its own renowned library and research facility in conjunction with Sotheby's Institute of Art.<sup>24</sup> The Philadelphia Museum of Art might be the most connected to the city when it comes to partnering up with libraries. In addition to digital collections and archival documentation of European and American artwork, the on-premises library also houses installations and auctions, and provides access to around 200,000 books, catalogs, and periodicals. These examples show how in-tune the library is with the fine arts.

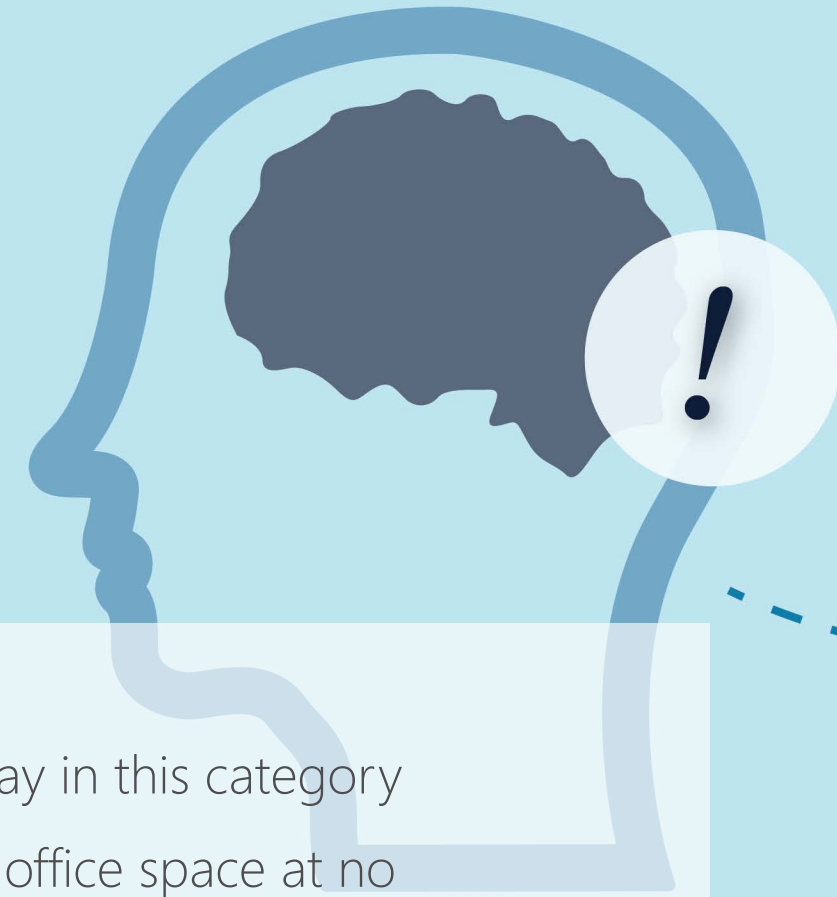
The Library as Incubator Project is a nationwide nonprofit that began as an advocacy campaign at the University of Wisconsin's School of Library and Information Studies.<sup>25</sup> The co-founder of the project highlighted some of the top ways that libraries support community artists in a contributing Huffington Post blog.<sup>26</sup>

## *What it means for you:*

Showcase local artists and artwork whenever you can. This is the most obvious way to support artists, but it's also one of the most effective. Libraries are taking bold approaches with this idea. For instance, the San Diego Public Library has its very own impressive art gallery on the library campus that gives access to free exhibitions that pertain to visual artistic endeavors and local culture.<sup>27</sup> For people who have never set foot inside an art gallery of a museum before, these efforts make a huge difference in expanding the cultural scope of the community and, perhaps, inspiring some to become artists themselves.

## *A place to start:*

- ☐ Host writers and artists in residence. The Boston Public Library leads the way in this category with its Children's Writer in Residence fellowship, which offers \$20,000 and office space at no extra charge to help authors write and publish their works.
- ☐ Utilize social media. In addition to promoting local artists on social media platforms, think of fun ways to engage your audience and promote artistic endeavors at the same time. For instance, librarians could take an idea from David Lee King's blog and create a Spotify account (a huge music streaming service that also has a social media element).<sup>28</sup> This allows librarians to create playlists and share music with library patrons. Not only does this support musicians in a meaningful way, but it also connects libraries even more to younger demographics, who are some of the most frequent users of services like Spotify. Similarly, librarians could create Pinterest boards to highlight events and ideas that the library wishes to promote.
- ☐ Have local artists give tutorials to members of the community who would like to become artists. This shows support in an interchangeable way and connects patrons with one another through library services.







## *Novel ideas:*

- ✦ Highlight special collections featuring music and books. The Libraries as Incubators Project highlighted the Iowa City Public Library Local Music Collection as an inspirational guide for city libraries that want to support the local music scene. With a password and library card, patrons can enjoy full albums from the ICPL Local Music Collection for free via download.<sup>29</sup> Not only is this an excellent way to connect with a younger generation of patrons, but it's also an easy and fun way for local residents to connect with their community.<sup>30</sup>
- ✦ Grant access to public art. One excellent example of public access endeavors took place at the Los Angeles Public Library, which connects viewers with many art forms, including public art in the LA area, virtual tours of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, a National Jukebox with more than 10,000 historical recordings, and other features related to the National Endowment for the Arts.<sup>31</sup>

Brainstorm your own:

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# *Page Public Library*

## *Page, Arizona*

"We really try to do extraordinary things for the community, and we've had success in it," said Debbie Winlock, Director of Page Public Library.

Located in northern Arizona on the southern shores of Lake Powell, Page Public Library (PPL) serves as a community anchor for Page, Arizona; the Navajo Nation Reservation; and a handful of Utah's southernmost cities. Despite the fact that Page's population barely reaches 7,500,<sup>32</sup> PPL's wide range of community-centered programs meet the varied needs of over 12,000 cardholders.



With a mission to offer each patron “an opportunity to seek knowledge, pleasure, personal betterment, and reflection” through enlightenment, PPL offers geological symposiums, adult prom fundraisers, and teen nights where middle-through-high-school students can experience Nerf wars, beauty stylists, henna artists, and more.

PPL also partners with businesses, churches, museums, and more to educate its community through unique opportunities and events. Whether that means providing food and educational resources on recycling through trash pick-up Saturdays for teens, partnering with businesses near Lake Powell to provide boat trips to the public, or offering early literacy classes through social services, Debbie advises libraries to “think outside the box. Pay attention to your patrons’ requests and don’t be afraid to get ideas from other libraries.”

“With ebooks and digital resources coming out, many might not find libraries essential, but we are. We are a community place,” said Debbie. “We’re here for people to meet, to find education, to leisure, and learn.”

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—Debbie Winlock,  
Director of Page Public Library

# *Libraries Serve as a 'People's University'*

No matter your income, racial background, level of education, sexual orientation, disability, or language, librarians strive to ensure that you have a safe place to represent your unique background in your community.

Although libraries were once thought of as resources for the rich and powerful, they are now one of the few places where patrons are treated as equals. This is perhaps the most important component of the library as an institution.

The U.S. has changed dramatically over the past century and libraries have always been supportive of minority communities and organizations. For instance, many libraries provide



resources for immigrants and non-English speakers looking to bolster their careers or learn English. Some libraries even host bilingual book clubs and ESL classes (as mentioned above) as a way to introduce their services to minority communities.

In 2001, the American Library Association adopted a policy on library services for people with disabilities.<sup>33</sup> This clearly defined the library as a safe place for these people, who are often presented with learning challenges. The ALA also encouraged staff across the country to be proactive in assisting those disabled persons with library technology. Librarians can also assist this demographic with gaining employment and in social activities.

Another area where libraries have really shined is in supporting the LGBT community. The New York City Public Library leads the way in providing support, information, and resources for this demographic, as the institution connects through many forms of media, including social media. However, the NYPL also has its own LGBT collection that chronicles landmark activist movements over the past few decades.<sup>34</sup> The ALA has also strived over the years to support this community with its Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table. This organization provides free



## *What it means for you:*

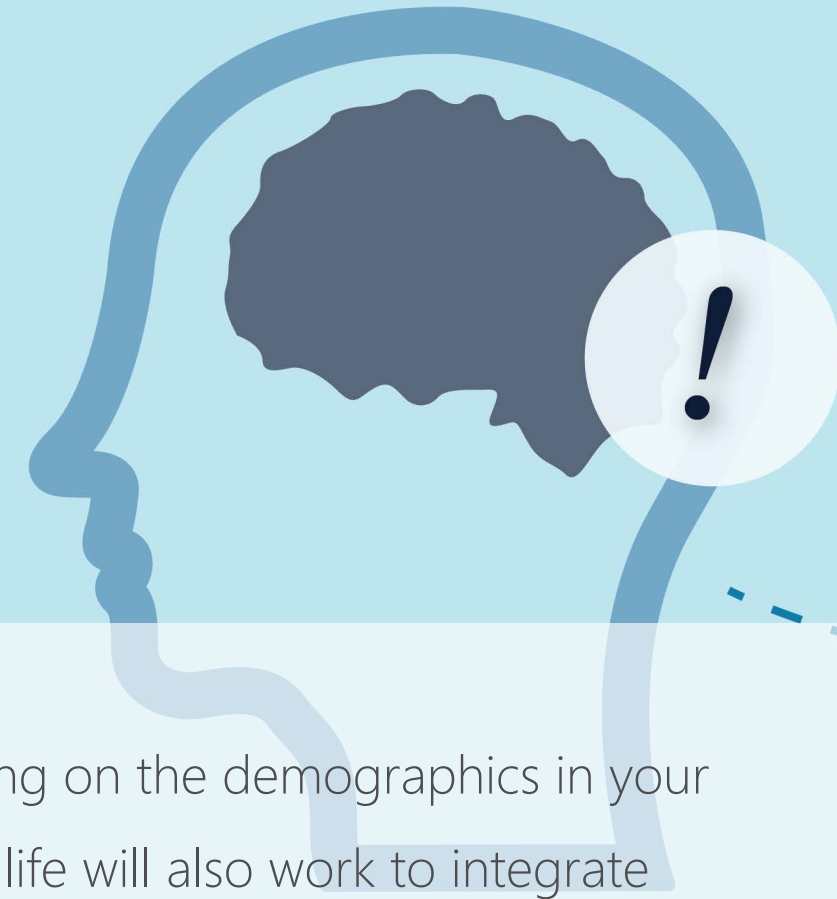
The library is an institution that opens its doors to all and serves patrons from all kinds of backgrounds. Demographics are changing rapidly across the U.S. during the 21st century, which means that librarians need to pay close attention to the needs of minorities and the services that can not only offer, but celebrate culture and diversity.

information to all persons interested in supporting the rights, works, and art of the LGBT community on a nationwide scale.<sup>35</sup>

As libraries continue to become forces in their communities, it's important for directors and staff to continue to come up with creative ways to remain a haven of support and resources. It's been said that a city with a great library is a great city.<sup>36</sup> In this way, libraries have a special role in lifting up their patrons and communities as a whole.

## *A place to start:*

- Mirror your English collections with those of other languages, depending on the demographics in your area. Carrying fiction and nonfiction works from authors of all walks of life will also work to integrate libraries into the various ethnic neighborhoods around town. You can also celebrate these cultures by hosting events that feature music and ethnic cuisine based on the heritage of the patrons you serve.
- Make it a priority to hire bilingual librarians. A significant sector of the U.S. population speaks Spanish as their first language, so the need for more diverse library staffers is crucial.<sup>37</sup> These individuals can also work with community organizations and elected officials to better help the patrons in your city.



## *Novel ideas:*

- ✦ Contact the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom to obtain LGBT materials and information about events or displays that support the gay community.<sup>38</sup>
- ✦ Speak out for more diversity and support for all minority demographics. For instance, Matthew P. Ciszek, an assistant librarian of Lartz Memorial Library, leads free lectures that are open to the public about the support of LGBT students in higher education. Putting an emphasis on library services and their impact on the LGBT community is a great way to create and promote inclusion in your city.
- ✦ In communities that tend to have a larger population of delinquent youth, provide classes that teach subjects like “parenting for teens” or “addiction recovery.” By offering these classes instead of forcing them upon the teens, you give them an outlet and place of refuge to come and be informed.

Brainstorm your own:

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# *In Conclusion:*

Whether you'd like to secure your library as a community center, a go-to workspace for local startups, or a center for the arts, one thing's clear: your library is a valuable resource for each individual community member. With a wealth of obtainable ideas and places to start now at your fingertips, what novel ideas will you create to embed your library as a community anchor?

# About this Guide

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SirsiDynix connects people with knowledge at more than 23,000 libraries around the world. Through library management technology and search and discovery tools, libraries using SirsiDynix technology bring relevant resources and the power of knowledge to their users and communities.

SirsiDynix technology is architected to be open, scalable, and robust, offering a complete out-of-the-box solution and unparalleled flexibility through APIs and web services. Complemented by the most experienced training, consulting, and support staff in the industry, SirsiDynix helps libraries create tomorrow's libraries, today.

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