



IS EVERYONE WELCOME AT YOUR LIBRARY?

Primary author: Susan Green



Let's look at ways we can find out who is not coming into your library. I work as the director of a small rural library in Vermont. When I first came to the Jaquith Public Library in the summer of 2009 I was so excited to be working in the town where I have lived since 1971. After years of commuting to work 30 to 45 minutes away it was great to work 5 minutes from my home. During my first year as director, I started to notice many of the people in my community did not come to the library and I wondered why. I decided to make it my business to find out. I wanted to identify who the library was not serving in order to better meet the needs of my community and make sure we were not unintentionally keeping people away.

IN THEIR WORDS

"I would like to see diversity. Diversity in all areas: race, income, religious beliefs, political beliefs. Diversity."

Sally
interview # 5-2-12

What is in this tool?

This tool will help you identify who is and is not using your library and evaluate your current library practices to ensure inclusion.

Further Resources:

Once you have done the hard work of transforming your library into a more inclusive space, it is time to look at the systems in the wider community that mean some people have more of a voice than others. Try the tools "Building Local Political Knowledge and Voice", and "Awakening to Community Potential".

Want to learn more about accessibility issues specific to the blind? Read the "Guide to Visual Accessibility".

WHO ARE YOU SERVING?

Why do we need to know who we are serving and why do we care? There are many reasons but here are a few:

Ethical: It is only right to make the doors to your library accessible to all and to encourage all to come. It is wrong to make certain groups feel unwelcome.

Diversity: To build empathy and understanding, it is important for people of all socio-economic groups and walks of life to intermingle. This is a fundamental role of your public library. Remember, diversity comes in many forms, and even if the community does not describe itself as diverse, it really is.

Delight: Everything is more fun when we do it with different types of people. We invite new kinds of programs and new interests and ideas for books and materials we would not have thought of on our own.

Financial: The more patrons you serve, the more your library will be seen as essential by the community and subsequently, funding for your library will be approved without budget cuts.

Involving trustees and community members in each of the following steps will help paint a more complete picture of the community.

What are some reasons that some people are not currently using your library?

STEP ONE: WHO LIVES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Need help identifying groups? Look for:

- Current US Census data: <https://data.census.gov/cedsci>
- Visit your school district's data page. If it isn't easy to find, start with your state's education department and look for "Report Card".
 - o This will give you school lunch statistics for free and reduced lunches. You can get this information by calling the schools in your service area. The percentage of children eligible for free and reduced school lunches gives you an idea of the economic status of the people in your area. It will also tell you how the kids in your district are doing with literacy compared to other districts in your state.
- Ask trustees and community members which groups they identify with. Ask them what organizations, agencies, and institutions they trust.

- Here are a few links to services that can help you find statistics about your community:
 - o <https://learning.candid.org/resources/knowledge-base/demographic-information/> This site lists different ways to find demographic information about your community with a few helpful links.
 - o <https://www.lrs.org/> This site has a power point: “Using Demographic Data to Inform Planning”.

Below, please list what you have learned about your community:

STEP TWO: WHO IS NOT COMING TO THE LIBRARY

Now that you are on your way to knowing who makes up your community let's look at ways we can find out who is not coming into your library:

- Do a survey: A survey can work well because you can keep it in circulation for a long period of time. You can send it out on social media, through emails, have them available at the local store, post office, church and school and hand them out when people come to the library and at library programs.
- Group Discussions: Find a cross-section of the community to be participants, such as representatives of organizations, your own library board, teachers, library patrons, community committee chairs, town historical society members, fire department, church leaders, etc.
- One on one discussions with individuals in your town.
 - o The American Library Association's Libraries Transforming Communities Turning Outward Resources has excellent worksheets and guides, including the Ask Exercise and Aspirations Exercise.
<http://www.ala.org/tools/librariestransform/libraries-transforming-communities/resources-for-library-professionals>
- Intentional Observation: Make it a mindful practice to check your blinds spots. Who do you see around town but not in the library?

- Visit gathering places in your community. Go where the people are that you want to reach. Spend some time chatting with people at the gas station, the post office, the local store.

List the places you will go to learn more about who lives in your community. Include both digital and physical places you can go.

STEP THREE: ASSESSING YOUR LIBRARY PRACTICES

Designing for those who are left out

Maybe your research shows you there is a religious group in your community where Saturdays are a day for prayer, but you always hold your library programs on Saturday afternoons. Or maybe you discover a group of people who love to hunt and fish but you never see them at the library. Try holding programs about your community's wildlife and aquatic life; better yet, invite them to present the program (and be sure to have a relevant book display ready).

Maybe you notice teens don't come to the library very often. A good rule of thumb is that teens only come to things they designed for themselves. So form a teen advisory committee or ask them if they want to design their own program (and the library will buy the pizza). Use the opportunity to ask them to help pick out new YA books, or make recommendations for new video games for the library's gaming console.

Are the activities and programs geared towards current library users and leaving people out? Are there logistical problems that make it hard for some people to attend?



Design with an Awareness of Other Cultures

Design displays, decorations and programs that are sensitive to the cultures in your community, keeping in mind that there may be some you are not aware of. Have alternative activities ready if necessary. Your community might be very diverse with people, for example, who are Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, agnostic and atheist. If your library is in the habit of decorating for Christmas every year, consider taking a different approach to the holiday season: make it celebratory without religious overtones, or highlight the celebrations of multiple cultures.

Write in this space some ideas for inclusive activities and programs:

Collection Development

The research has shown that personalized collection development can help build feelings of belonging. Consider how you could purchase materials for specific people to make them feel seen and valued. For the cost of a book, you might have a lifelong library user and supporter.

Does your book and materials collection reflect the people who live in your community?

If you notice lots of parents and young children coming in but you are missing tweens and teens, you might need to enhance your young adult collection. At our library we decided we needed a better juvenile and young adult graphic novel selection. For developing this part of our collection we used a vendor specializing in Young Adult Fiction.

If 50% of your community's population is over the age of 70, you might want to consider enhancing your large print collection and placing it a more convenient location.

If you have a population who speak another language besides English, make sure you have books for them as well as.

Write here some ideas for your collection development.

Inclusive Policies

Are your library policies biased against some members of your community?

Policies requiring productivity from patrons, such as only using the computers for research or not allowing “loitering,” work against inclusivity.

Unnecessary rules posted everywhere can work against the library feeling like a safe and welcoming space.

Asking patrons to sign in to reserve a computer or attend a program or making them pass a security guard when entering the building can, can deter them from using the library.

Are you using overdue fines as an income stream, with negative impacts on some people who cannot afford to pay them? At my library, we did away with overdue fees. This really helped people feel more welcome because they knew they would not be penalized for being late with an item.

Write here some policies you may want to review:

Accessibility

Many small rural libraries are in buildings which have been “grandfathered in” and do not have to make accommodations for people in wheelchairs or using walkers, but accessibility should not be about doing the minimum required by law. Consider developing a five- year plan to make your library accessible. It may seem like a daunting task but it is crucial that we meet the needs of people with disabilities. Some libraries have removed shelving in order to make more space between stacks. Making such difficult decisions sends a signal to your community about how you prioritize services, saying “we really are for everyone” and “we do what is right, not what is easiest.”

Write ideas for making your library more accessible:

Open Hours

Are your library hours designed for the convenience of the staff or the patrons? Are they meeting the needs of working families?

Find out what percentage of the people in your community work out of the home, work from their home, are self-employed or are retired. Then look at the hours you are open. Do you have 75 % retirees in your community? Maybe you want morning hours and earlier evening programs. Do you have many families with young children? Make sure you have family programs before their bedtimes or naptimes. Do most of the people in your community work during the day? Make sure you have at least some evening and weekend hours.

Write ideas for considering more flexible library hours:

STEP FOUR: PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Now you have a great list of ideas for making your library more inclusive and welcoming to the diverse members of your community. If you have done the first steps alone, now is the time to involve others in your work. Take these ideas to your Library Trustees and to any library committees pertinent to this work. Consider asking everyone to read the same book or articles on the topic of inclusion before coming to the meeting.

1. Set up a meeting
2. Have everyone look over and discuss your findings in advance of the meeting
3. Choose a facilitator, a note taker and a timekeeper.
4. Do a brainstorming session and go around the room and get everyone's response to your ideas for change. Use a blackboard, white board or large piece of paper and have the note taker record the responses. Encourage people to include their own ideas for making the library more inclusive.
5. Have people rate the different ideas. There are many different rating systems, for example you can give everyone 10 star stickers and ask them to put a star next to the ideas they feel are most important. They can divvy up their stars and divide them how they like, putting more than one star on the ideas they feel are most important. You can give everyone sticky notes and have them rate each idea on a scale of 1 to 5.



6. This information is useful for strategic planning. If you already have a plan, then see if you want to add to it. Maybe you will start on the next plan now, looking towards the future. This is very important work! Good Luck!!

Programming for Diversity in Marshfield, VT

At my library in Marshfield Vermont we spent a summer celebrating different cultures during our summer concert series and community suppers. We had a Caribbean Steel Drum band, a band doing Latin music, a Klezmer band, a French Canadian band, a jazz band and a soul music band. We asked different people to head up a theme for a supper and for six weeks we explored foods from different areas of the world: Asia, Africa, Italy, India, Mexico, and Canada. The people at the suppers were delighted with the food and the cooks who prepared the dishes from their favorite recipes were excited to share food from their diverse cultures.

We also held a program called "Showing Up For Racial Justice: Living Room Conversations About Racism". Once a month we held thought-provoking conversations about racial justice around topics such as ending racism in our communities, talking about racism with our friends and neighbors, the movement for black lives, tracing our ancestry and immigration, free speech in the time of Charlottesville, practice session to interrupt hate and talk about racism, and ending white supremacy in our hearts, minds, and community.