



PATHWAYS OF BELONGING: SEEN AND KNOWN

Primary author: Eli Guinee



Across communities in eight states, a high number of residents described feeling seen and known as a key reason they like living in a small town. They enjoy knowing most of the people they see on a given day, and feel comforted and secure that others are watching out for them. These same people describe how much they appreciate the personalized service they receive at their local library. We sometimes call this tailored or bespoke service, because it celebrates uniqueness and individual attention, but one interviewee best described it as “old timey.”

The individual actions of library staff play a large role in feeling seen and known for newcomers who access library services. It is the small and repeated kindnesses that give people a sense of humanity and value. It is also these actions that build the mutual knowledge and trust required to engage people in meaningful contributions to community good. While simple gestures of kindness and recognition have real value (eg. telling a patron that you ordered a new book from their favorite author), long term positive impact comes from practice repeated many times in different ways.

What is in this tool?

This tool will help you think about the value of making patrons feel known in your library, and ways in which you can use personalized services to make them feel valued and appreciated.

Further Resources:

Want to learn more about creating belonging in your community? Read “Pathways to Belonging: Contribution”. Want to learn more about creating a welcoming environment at your library? Read “Library as the Community’s Welcome Center” and “Is Everyone Welcome at Your Library”?

IN THEIR WORDS

“My son said to me once they were out playing they were throwing softballs back and forth on the road. And of course they had to stop every time a car came by , but they had to wave. My son came up and says I can't play softball because I have to wave too much..”

-- interview #5-2-10

ASSESSING YOUR OLD TIMEY SERVICES

People talk about how they like receiving “old-timey” service at libraries, which includes being addressed by their name and given personalized recommendations on books they might like. In many cases this can be a key to helping them explore new ideas. Because they are given dignity and feel seen and valued, over time they build trust and gain confidence to try new things they would not otherwise try on their own.

Familiarity

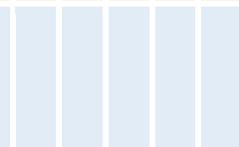
Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5

1 2 3 4 5

Residents visibly know one another across demographic (race, income, age, etc) boundaries by greeting each other with a wave, a salutation by name, or sidewalk chat. For example, it is common for a simple trip to the post office to turn into a lengthy outing.



Library staff and volunteers greet people in the library by name and ask after the person’s wellbeing. If their name is not known, library staff and volunteers introduce themselves to the person.

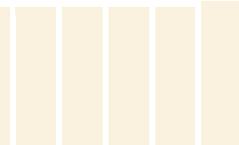


Place-making & the Environment

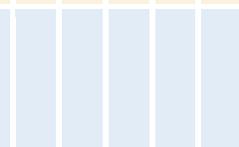
Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5

1 2 3 4 5

Throughout our town there are places to walk and meet people. On a beautiful day, you can almost feel the vitality of the neighborhoods as people interact and enjoy each other's company.



The library provides space for people to stop, rest, and chat, both inside and out. For example, there are seating clusters, ready periodical reading, and warm, free, drinks.

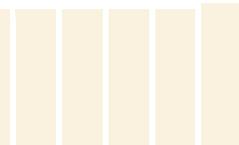


Old-timey / Bespoke

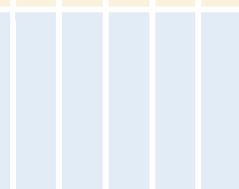
Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 5

1 2 3 4 5

The businesses in town are local. Even chains feel like local establishments. Business owners know when to expect to see people and what services they want. There is two-way trust.



Library staff provide great service when suggesting books or answering reference questions. They take a genuine interest in the people they speak with and engage with them often enough to anticipate their requests.



NEXT STEPS

Compare your answers for the community (gold) and the library (blue). What do you notice?

Are there actions that you would consider taking in the library to strengthen this pathway?

OVERCOMING BIAS

Helping someone feel seen and known includes being aware and respectful of cultural differences. Effective librarians reflect on their own biases and seek to overcome them as an ongoing practices. Consider the following questions as you work to broaden this pathway in your town through library service:

How will people in your community with different cultural practices feel their humanity acknowledged and respected by you?

Do you need to do some independent research and learning about specific micro-communities so that your exchanges and invitations are authentic without reinforcing unequal balances of power and feelings of exclusion?

What specific steps will you take to educate yourself, practice your new understandings, and repair mistakes in relationship-building you may have made in the past?

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Familiarity:

Community: Knowing everyone at the post-office, waving to cars and people passing by, attending funerals en masse: familiarity is both a hallmark of belonging and an essential feature of feeling at home in a place. When asked to describe her small New York town, one resident put it like this: “My son said to me once they were out playing they were throwing softballs back and forth on the road. And of course they had to stop every time a car came by, but they had to wave. My son came up and says I can't play softball because I have to wave too much.” (Interview #5-2-10)

Library: This community resident's story of the library director paying specific attention to a child, holding that child accountable through loving support, and that child's sense of pride and confidence from his resulting success is moving. It is also emblematic of a defined feature of pathways: they need an entry point and navigational guidance. Familiarity is a key library entry-point for resident belonging through feeling seen and known. “And there was one child who pretty much on his own 'cause Mom's at work all day you know you know how that goes latchkey kid so forth and he was not a reader. But the other day I saw him and he said Mr. [Local Resident] would be so proud of me.” (Interview #1-3-01)

Place-making & the Environment:

Community: So much of what we heard in Wisconsin was about feeling at home, no matter how short the resident's tenure there was. In one exemplary quote a new resident described leaving their previous city behind after thirty years and realizing that he and his wife lost nothing. They didn't miss their connections - after three decades there was little to hold them. But their new small town feels like a permanent and deep line tether holding them to home. (Interview #3-2-07)

Library: “the dinner that happens here every week. It's a guy [who] has been cooking for 20 years...it happens while the library is still open. So there's this great element of... socialization and eating together that our community does, all types of people, all ages, all backgrounds, all belief systems. Everything is represented in that room. And then

people filter in here, or there might be an evening program happening, our kids run out to the playground, and... It just feels like this place this is serving a lot of people in that one evening. Meeting a lot of needs for the community.” (Interview #4-2-3)

Old-timey:

Community: Our conception of "old-timey" service being a component of the nature of a resident feeling seen and known comes from a business owner in Idaho. She describes her experience best: "“Just because it is kind of a step back in time and that's what we'd been used to doing and so we step back in the time we took that extra effort of someone came in and needed a bolt like this. Well of course it's [a] general store but go out in the shop and dig through the bucket of bolts and find him something. And then next time they would come they'd bring us more bolts to put in our bucket in case someone else needed one. And so it was always. When we [were] in that cafe at the store also or somebody just wanted to buy horseradish. OK we don't have any in the store. I got it in the kitchen. I'll just give you a [to] go container of it. So this is I think it's kind of. We enjoyed that kind of old timey ness of it and that's kind of in essence even though we are getting modernized now, all the businesses. And the library and everywhere keep that old time. Tiny thing of you know helping people along taking the extra step.” (Interview 8-3-11)

Library: Old-timey is the foundation that allows for the trust required for self-determination pathways to be built. It is also the core of mutualism - where service isn't only for others, but because the one providing the service is the receiver of community benefit as well. It is both a sense of self-satisfaction but also authentic connection with community wellbeing. It is not martyrdom - the person providing the service does so because the investment of labor benefits them many-fold in their own personal lives. "the play group... My two and a half year old and I really love running [it]. She enjoys it, moves the furniture with me and brings down the toys, and tests the snack. That serves me in the way that I love to help moms and women in general, just kind of have a moment of presence. It's like I was saying the New Moon table I put up once a month upstairs. I wake up early and I make a cake, brownies, a boiled tea from herbs in my garden and I just it's really nice for me to care for adults who are gonna say thank you and really feel gratitude about it. So that also serves me even though I'm kind of servicing the people here it's really lovely. I love doing that.” (Interview #4-2-8)