Civic Partnerships: The Role of Libraries in Promoting Civic Engagement

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Civic Partnerships:  
The Role of Libraries in Promoting Civic Engagement  
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SUMMARY. Schools, colleges and universities, and local communities now recognize the key role they play to encourage citizen participation and promote civic engagement. New civic engagement initiatives underway offer perfect opportunities for libraries to fulfill their traditional roles of promoting civic literacy and ensuring an informed citizenry. Today, libraries undertake a vast array of innovative programs that bring citizens together to share common concerns. These programs are most successful when libraries forge civic partnerships to extend their reach and work with other organizations and individuals to strengthen participation in democracy.

“For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.”

Americans increasingly live disconnected lives from each other and from the institutions of civic life. Over the last thirty years, many citizens stopped voting, curtailed their work with political parties and service organizations, and attended fewer community meetings and political events. They have even diminished their pleasurable
get togethers, with fewer people entertaining friends at home. Americans are also less public spirited, giving fewer dollars to charities. It is unlikely that our civic culture will be reclaimed without a sustained, broad-based social movement to restore civic virtue and democratic participation in our society.²

Americans face a variety of economic, moral, and political dilemmas such as improving their schools, expanding job opportunities, combating crime, reducing poverty, and determining their role in the world -- dilemmas that in a healthy democracy require the public to engage in democratic discourse in order to understand the issues, determine options for action and choose among competing policy alternatives. But too often, the public has abrogated its responsibility to participate in this process, delegating this role to politicians and professionals, and relegating themselves to passive spectators in the political process.

Public institutions can make a difference when they help citizens understand these issues and find effective ways to act on public problems. For, it is in the public realm where common political understandings emerge, where political will arises, and where public trust is built. It is there that private individuals connect their self-interests with those of others; where people form public perspectives on problems and where they can make choices about what society should do. And it is within the public realm that people join together to act with a common purpose.

Libraries are among the most trusted public institutions. As the place where citizens turn for neutral information about common problems, many work closely with their communities to find new means to connect citizens and boost civic participation.
Indeed, because libraries uphold and strengthen some of the most fundamental democratic ideals of American society, they not only make information freely available to all citizens, but also foster the development of civil society. Throughout the nation, libraries facilitate local dialogue, disseminate local data, conduct public programs, and boost civic literacy by building community partnerships. When successful, these efforts rekindle civic engagement, promote greater citizen participation, and encourage increased involvement in community problem-solving and decision-making, while garnering greater community support and positioning libraries as even more essential community-based institutions.

An Overview of the Civic Engagement Movement

To Vaclav Havel, “Civil Society…means a society that makes room for the richest possible self-structuring and the richest possible participation in public life.”

Over the last two decades, civil society began to blossom in Havel’s Czech Republic. But in America, the associations and activities that create the glue that strengthen civil society, notably described by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* in 1835, have ensured a structure and climate for more than two centuries of active citizen participation in this country’s democratic system. By the late 20th Century, however, journalists, political scientists, philanthropists, and citizens alike were documenting a declining public sphere, diminishing civic engagement, and eroding social capital. In a widespread acknowledgement of the crisis, social scientists proposed new models to invigorate a weakened democracy and to encourage more active citizen involvement with governance.
Among the leading voices proposing new models, Benjamin Barber prescribes “strong democracy” as a remedy to incivility and apathy, where “active citizens govern themselves in “the only form that is genuinely and completely democratic.” Barber claims that “community grows out of participation and at the same time makes participation possible,” and that “strong democracy is the politics of amateurs, where every [person] is compelled to encounter every other [person] without the intermediary of expertise.” From his perspective, “citizens are neighbors bound together neither by blood nor by contract but by their common concerns and common participation in the search for common solutions to common conflicts.”

In a later work, Barber calls for “a place for us in civil society, a place really for us, for what we share and who, in sharing we become. That place must be democratic: both public and free.”

Another proponent of citizen participation, David Mathews, has applied practical techniques to this active citizenship model, engaging lay citizens in deliberation about issues of common concern. As president of the Kettering Foundation, he has developed a national network for civic forums, teaching citizens to frame issues, make choices, find common ground and act in their community’s best interest. Others contributing to the civic renewal chorus include James Fishkin, who has also helped pioneer this framework for citizen deliberation, Daniel Yankelovich and his colleagues at Public Agenda, who have analyzed issues and created choices for public deliberation, and political scientist Harry Boyte, who has advanced new models for reinvigorating communities by creating free spaces or commons for public discourse and deliberation. But not until Robert Putnam published his bestselling book *Bowling Alone* did the importance of reviving
community and increasing civic engagement transcend academic discourse and gain widespread public attention.

Many of the theorists who focus their scholarship on new forms of citizen participation recognize the central role of information to bolster civic engagement. Boyte devotes a chapter of his book on the return to citizen politics, *Commonwealth*, to the information age, elaborating the importance of schooling citizens in democracy by informing them about issues and utilizing public spaces to listen, negotiate, exchange, act and hold officials accountable. Others, like Lawrence Grossman, Anthony Wilhelm, and Douglas Schuler, accentuate how access to cyberspace presents both promises and challenges for wider participation in a 21st century democracy. More recently, Boyte has worked with colleagues Lewis Friedland and Peter Levine to test pilot projects that utilize new technologies to build citizen spaces in partnership with community organizations.

Echoing these theorists are a new cadre of librarians advocating a broader new “civic librarianship” where libraries build community and solve local problems. Recent books such as R. Kathleen Molz’s and Phyllis Dain’s, *Civic Space/Cyberspace: The American Public Library in the Digital Age*; Kathleen McCook’s, *A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building*; Ronald McCabe’s, *Civic Librarianship: Renewing the Social Mission of the Public Library*; and Nancy Kranich’s, *Libraries and Democracy: The Cornerstones of Liberty*, all advance the notion that libraries provide both real and virtual civic spaces that engage citizens and renew communities.

*Civic Engagement Initiatives in Schools, Colleges and Communities*
Today, scholars, teachers, journalists, and foundation leaders explore new opportunities to rekindle civil society in schools, colleges and local communities. For example, the Carnegie Corporation of New York has funded a 2003 report recommending that schools renew their civic mission by helping “young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives.” In addition to promoting civic engagement, the report also encourages communities and local institutions to collaborate to provide civic learning opportunities. Another report that year issued by the Albert Shanker Institute promotes the adoption of state standards for civic education. Also in 2003, the Kettering Foundation published a document demonstrating how public engagement can improve education and strengthen democratic participation in communities. A year later, Kathryn Montgomery and her colleagues completed a study of youth civic culture on the Internet and recommended models that nourish the web for youth by increasing their access to civic information, teaching civic literacy skills, and reserving spaces for a youth voice.

Like schools, colleges and universities have also rediscovered the once vital tradition of civic education. Many colleges now actively promote public engagement as a critical part of their overall institutional mission—with faculty incorporating civic content into their curricula and students participating in socially responsible extracurricular activities. Eager to connect liberal learning more directly with service and civic responsibility, the Association of American Colleges and Universities and Campus Compact launched the Center for Liberal Education and Civic Engagement in 2003. To date, 450 college presidents have committed their institutions to educating students as
active and knowledgeable citizens. Recognizing that a robust democracy and the public welfare depend on an engaged and informed citizenry, colleges and universities are now willing and eager to strengthen both the study and practice of civic engagement in a diverse democracy and interdependent world.

The National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) in conjunction with the Ohio-based Kettering Foundation, develops discussion guides for deliberative forums hosted in community centers, libraries, and churches. Citizens use these NIF guides to tackle topics such as the environment, terrorism, immigration, public education, health care and the Internet. Over 30 institutions across America, including colleges and universities, civic and other grass-roots organizations, conduct NIF Public Policy Institutes to train citizens to convene and moderate forums and to frame issues of local concern. A number of other organizations also sponsor forums to engage the public in issues of the day; among them are national programs like Study Circles and the Choices Program at Brown University, as well as local programs such as Community Conversations based in Owensboro, Kentucky, Texas Forums in Austin, and the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center Civic Engagement Initiative in Northern California.

The Role of Libraries in Civic Engagement

Free and open access to information is essential to civic participation because it encourages the development of civil society. When people are better informed, they are more likely to participate in policy discussions where they can communicate their ideas and concerns freely. Most importantly, citizens need civic commons where they can speak freely, discern different perspectives, share similar interests and concerns, and
pursue what they believe is in their and the public's interest. Members of the community must have the real and virtual spaces to exchange ideas -- ideas fundamental to democratic participation and civil society. Ultimately, discourse among informed citizens assures civil society; and civil society provides the social capital necessary to achieve sovereignty of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Within this calculus, libraries serve as pivotal community institutions upholding, strengthening, and realizing some of the most fundamental democratic ideals. Quintessentially American, libraries make knowledge, ideas, and information available to all citizens by serving as the public source for the pursuit of independent thought, critical attitudes, and in-depth information. They prepare citizens for a lifetime of civic participation and encourage the development of civil society. Effective citizen action is possible when citizens develop the skills to gain access to information of all kinds and to put such information to effective use.

Civic engagement initiatives underway in schools, academic institutions, and local communities offer perfect opportunities for libraries to fulfill their traditional roles of promoting civic literacy and ensuring an informed citizenry. Many libraries already present thoughtful, engaging programs about community concerns -- programs that encourage more active citizenship. Librarians also help citizens learn how to identify, evaluate, and utilize information essential for making decisions about the way they live, work, learn, and govern. In short, libraries play a critical role in rekindling civic spirit by providing not only information, but also by expanding opportunities for dialogue and deliberation that are essential to making decisions about common concerns.
Examples of Civic Partnerships

Today, libraries throughout the country undertake a vast array of innovative programs that bring citizens into a commons where they share interests, concerns, and decision making. In addition to hosting community-wide reading programs, libraries are: convening groups to consider local issues and teach civic skills; creating digital neighborhood directories and community information services; educating voters; serving as polling places; and partnering on civic projects with local museums and public broadcasting stations. These collaborative efforts benefit individual citizens as well as increase the community’s social capital—the glue that bonds people together and builds bridges to a pluralistic and vibrant civil society. The challenge for libraries in the information age is to extend their reach well beyond educating and informing into a realm where they increase social capital, rekindle civil society and expand public participation in democracy. To that end, libraries accomplish these goals not by working alone, but by building strong partnerships—partnerships that establish new constituencies, widen public support, broaden and diversify sources of funding, and strengthen public involvement with local affairs.

The Library as Civic Space. Libraries abet social capital by providing a space, or commons, where citizens can turn to solve personal and community problems. Over the past decade, communities, schools, colleges and universities have refurbished or built exciting new spaces for their libraries—spaces that also serve as public gathering spots. They anchor neighborhoods, downtowns, schools, and campuses. They provide inviting, comfortable, and attractive commons for residents to reflect and converse. They offer an exciting line up of programs that increase the use of all their resources. More people
come to the library when they perceive it as a desirable place that beckons them inside and glues their communities together. And partners depend on the library to offer a comfortable, neutral space conducive to civic activities.

The Library as Public Forum. When libraries serve as public forums, they also encourage civic engagement. Many libraries host public programs that facilitate the type of discourse that offers citizens a chance to frame issues of common concern, deliberate about choices for solving problems, create deeper understanding about other’s opinions, connect citizens across the spectrum of thought, and recommend appropriate action that reflects legitimate guidance from the whole community. Librarians moderate forums in conjunction with such groups as the Kettering Foundation’s National Issues Forums, Study Circles, Choices, and others who seek community sites and involvement in their promotion of participatory democracy.

In Bartlesville, Oklahoma, the public library has co-sponsored a standing-room only, award-winning series of forums about the First Amendment. At the Columbus, Ohio, Metropolitan Library, staff trained as moderators have hosted forums about the future of the community’s public schools in conjunction with the Council for Public Deliberation and the Mayor’s Office; they have also conducted a series on racial and ethnic tensions with the United Way Vision Council on Race Relations and framed issues around environmental quality with the local Health Department. Similarly, the Hennepin County, Minnesota, Library System, with funds from the Hennepin County Foundation, has teamed up with the Twin Cities Public Television Station and the Star Tribune to launch a forum series, beginning with a pilot on terrorism held at the Mall of America; the Johnson County, Kansas, Library has joined with the Kettering Foundation to sponsor
a forum on U.S./Russian Relationships; and the LaPorte County Public Library has partnered with the Democratic Women’s Club and the League of Women Voters to enhance its longstanding study circles series with dialogue about the county jury system and voting. In Virginia Beach, the public library is proposed as the lead agency in a Civic Academy project aimed toward expanding the community's civic capacity for leadership, collaboration and problem solving in order to develop and nurture a whole new generation of community partners.27

Academic and special libraries are also hosting forums. At Ripon College in Wisconsin, McDaniel College in Maryland, and Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire, librarians have joined with faculty, clubs, and the student radio station to promote campus forums. And at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, staff have worked with the Kettering Foundation, state humanities council and the Texas Library Association to launch Texas Forums in 2002 in order to help Texans deliberate about issues of common concern.

The Library as Civic Information Center. When libraries provide civic and government information to the community, they build social capital and encourage civic involvement. Thanks to new technologies, libraries now deliver numerous local databases and web sites to citizens eager to find and utilize vital services within their communities. Citizens can look at meeting agendas and actions of local board and commissions, seek social services, and identify emergency contacts. Joan Durrance and her colleagues at the University of Michigan School of Information have identified and evaluated successful civic library projects in Onondaga County, New Haven, Chicago, and Multnomah County; help immigrants and minorities in locales ranging from Queens,
Austin, and San Jose; and teach youth to participate in community problem solving in Harlem, Newark, Oakland, and Detroit. They have also highlighted library-based collaborative community networking efforts in Tallahassee, Michigan, Pittsburgh, and suburban Chicago that pull together essential information and communication resources that might otherwise be difficult to identify or locate. All of these civic information projects require libraries to collaborate and build partnerships with the organizations that are listed in their databases if they are to foster civic education and community development.

The Library as Community-Wide Reading Club. In a phenomenon sweeping the country, public, school, and academic libraries are hosting community-wide One Book/One Community reading clubs. Launched initially by the Seattle Public Library, the idea has caught fire in cities from Rochester, New York, to Greensboro, North Carolina, where 125 facilitators were trained to moderate 200 discussions with 12,000 people that came out to consider surrounding racism. Like many of the communities undertaking these efforts, Chicago went well beyond promoting reading by “giving a ‘public voice’ to what is usually considered a private activity…to discover or build unity in a diverse city.” And in Kentucky, the State Library linked up with Kentucky Educational Television (KET) to launch a highly successful statewide reading effort with outreach and engagement activities that took on a mix of partners that numbered more than 130 educational institutions, bookstores, public and school libraries, businesses, media outlets, adult education centers and arts, civic and social service organizations. The American Library Association Public Programs Office has joined with libraries in promoting this highly successful collaborative experiment to engage citizens in
community-wide dialogue by co-sponsoring with the Public Library Association a One Book/One Conference discussion series at its 2003 Annual Conference in Toronto and publishing a CD-Rom planning guide for members. Each of these efforts has included numerous cosponsors, giving libraries the opportunity to spread involvement and interest throughout the community.

The Library as Partner in Public Service. After Pennsylvania State University hosted a conference on the importance of developing partnerships between public broadcasters and other public service organizations in 1999, it launched the Partners in Public Service (PIPS) initiative to demonstrate how collaborative projects between public broadcasting stations, libraries, museums and educational institutions could enhance services to the eight participating communities. With support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), PIPS produced a useful guide with case studies on how to undertake these institutional partnerships in order to help communities revitalize by reinventing themselves by utilizing digital technologies and fulfilling unmet needs. Considered a vision for a “community as a learning campus,” IMLS built upon the PIPS idea by launching its 21 Century Learning Initiative, which included a conference, “Exploring Partnerships for 21st Century Learning,” publication of a report, and the funding of numerous collaborative civic projects around the country. Likewise, the Urban Libraries Council has endorsed similar initiatives, recognizing that they enhance the capacities and opportunities for member libraries to contribute to civic agendas.

The Library as Enabler of Civic Literacy. Children and adults alike must learn a broad range of 21st Century literacy skills if they are to become smart seekers, recipients,
and creators of content, as well as effective citizens. Reflecting the growing concern for such skill development as early as 1989, a special ALA presidential committee issued a report stating that, “to be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information.”

Since that time, both the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) have developed standards, showcased best practices, and promoted the development of partnerships to enhance 21st century literacy in schools and colleges. Information literacy partnerships equip citizens for full participation in the digital age. Partnerships focusing on civic literacy ensure that the public has the political knowledge and skills to serve as active informed citizens. Libraries can join with other civic-literacy institutions like Study Circles, newspapers, and organizations such as the League of Women Voters to extend their information literacy initiatives as well to elevate the competency of citizens and enhance civic engagement.

**Libraries as Builders of Civic Partnerships**

Efforts abound that encourage more active citizenship. They offer libraries ideal opportunities to get more involved with promoting civic engagement in their communities and to join forces with the many organizations and institutions already committed to strengthening participation in democracy. Public, school, academic and special libraries can forge civic partnerships with other organizations and individuals that extend their reach and help them achieve their mission. They can benefit from new relationships that provide expertise, financial support, experience, and good public
relations. Civic partnerships that establish new constituencies can widen public support, broaden and diversify sources of funding, and strengthen public involvement with local affairs.

Libraries and librarians can participate in rekindling civic engagement from many venues. College and university librarians should consider working with the Association of American Colleges and Universities and Campus Compact to promote community service and develop student citizenship skills and values, encourage collaborative partnerships between campuses and communities, and assist faculty with integrating public and community engagement into teaching and research. School librarians should consider participating in projects such as the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools grants sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Knight Foundation to renew and elevate civic education in America's schools, and First Amendment Schools grants, aimed at helping teach students the rights and responsibilities of citizenship that frame civic life in a democracy. Public librarians should consider partnering with a long list of civic organizations to develop civil society programs, guide citizens to community information, and host reading clubs and other public forums. All libraries should participate in the September Project, a September 11th effort to bring people together in libraries for talks, roundtables, public forums, and performances in towns and cities across the country.

Nonetheless, committing the library to forging civic partnerships requires political savvy. Libraries need to identify individuals and groups with common concerns, looking far beyond the normal sources for allies. Building a broad base of support for civic engagement not only ensures participation from many segments of a community, but also
serves to spread the workload and prevent burnout of committed volunteers. Libraries should recruit steering committee members for their civic efforts who can strengthen partnerships through their professional or civic involvement -- individuals such as school administrators and teachers, faculty with subject or experience building civil society, and leaders of local civic organizations like the League of Women Voters. One partner not to overlook is the media. Like librarians, journalists are deeply concerned with civic involvement and they can add significant benefits by covering activities and highlighting a positive image of libraries undertaking these endeavors. Furthermore, the library can extend its outreach efforts by encouraging partner organizations to showcase joint efforts through their newsletters, Web sites, and other public relations tools.

   In the words of Robert Putnam, “Citizenship is not a spectator sport.”\textsuperscript{41} If libraries are to fulfill their civic mission in the information age, they must find active ways to engage citizens in order to encourage their involvement in democratic discourse and community renewal. Working closely with a rich and diverse array of partners, libraries of all types must help rekindle civic engagement, promote greater citizen participation, and increase community problem solving and decision making.

\begin{enumerate}
\item Putnam, 2000, pps. 15-47.
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21 For more information about Center for Liberal Education and Civic Engagement, see: http://www.aacu.org/civic_engagement/objectives.cfm.

22 An up-to-date list of signatories to the Declaration is available at: http://www.compact.org/presidential/plc/signatories.html.


24 For a complete listing of available discussion guides as well as recent network news, events and other information, see the NIF website at http://www.nifi.org/.


29 Putnam and Feldstein, 2003, p. 53


32 Pennsylvania State University, 2002.


41 Putnam, 2000, p. 341.