RURAL AND SMALL PUBLIC LIBRARIES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP

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Edited by: Brian Real

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EDITED BY

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EDITOR'S DEDICATION

I have learned basically everything I know about public libraries through two major parts of my life: my work as a Public Services Librarian with the Calvert Library, a rural public library system in southern Maryland, and my work as a research associate on the Digital Inclusion Survey at the Information Policy and Access Center (iPAC) at the University of Maryland's iSchool. This book is dedicated to my colleagues at both organizations—and especially Professor John Carlo Bertot of iPAC—as I would not have the knowledge or skills needed to oversee this volume without them.

I would also like to acknowledge my wife, Dr. Sarah Cantor, whose love and support has been essential in guiding me through writer's block and other crises, both major and minor.

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CONTENTS

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO THE *ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP* SERIES

Through a combination of economic changes, political forces, and technological changes, libraries now find themselves in a position of meeting ever-increasing community needs and filling roles that otherwise would go unmet in key areas of economic and workforce development, health and wellness, education, civic engagement, and fostering and supporting open governments, among much else. Despite often decreasing financial support, the growing political pressures to reduce support for public goods such as libraries, and the voices claiming that Google has made libraries obsolete, libraries of all types—public, school, academic, and special—have never been more innovative, more community focused, and more in demand than they are now.

Libraries play significant roles in digital literacy and digital inclusion, online education, provision of social services, employment skills, and even emergency response. They are creating partnerships with local government agencies and nonprofits to address local needs. They adopt and innovate with new technologies and expand their services and materials through new channels provided by emerging technologies, from online reference to the curation and management of digital resources. At the same time, libraries serve as a primary support structure for social justice and human rights by fostering and promoting inclusion, access, and equity for individuals, for their communities, and for society as a whole.

The *Advances in Librarianship* book series offers a completely unique avenue through which these major issues can be discussed. By devoting each volume—often in the range of 100,000 words—to a single topic of librarianship, the series volumes devote a great amount of consideration to a single topic. By including contributors who are library professionals, administrators, researchers, and educators from many different places, the series volumes bring an unparalleled range of voices to these topics of librarianship. And by exploring these topics as broad issues with a wide range of societal impacts, these volumes not only inform those within the library profession, they inform community members, policymakers, educators, employers, health

information professionals, and others outside of libraries who are interested in the impacts of libraries.

The ability to address current and future issues from both practice and research perspectives at great depth makes this series uniquely positioned to disseminate new ideas in libraries and to advocate for their essential roles in communities. To ensure the most current and future utility, each volume includes contributions in three areas: (1) current best practices and innovative ideas, (2) future issues and ways in which they might be prepared for and addressed, and (3) the large-scale societal implications and the way in which the focus of the volume impacts libraries as a social institution.

This volume of *Advances in Librarianship* focuses on the importance of rural libraries and community archives to their communities. The majority of communities in the United States are rural, and they frequently have greatly reduced access to many services—from healthcare to broadband—available to urban and suburban communities. Many rural communities do have a library, and these libraries provide innumerable services and contributions to their communities. Yet, in the library and information science professional and academic discourse, rural libraries receive far less attention than seems appropriate given how numerous they are and how central they are to their communities. This volume is intended to help fill that gap, presenting a range of perspectives demonstrating the unique value and impact of rural libraries and community archives in their communities.

Ultimately, volumes in this series share innovative ideas and practices to improve overall library service and to help libraries better articulate their vital and myriad contributions to their communities. The range of library impacts can be seen in the recent volumes in the series, which have explored such important topics as library services to people with disabilities, libraries as institutions of human rights and social justice, and efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in the field. Forthcoming volumes will be devoted to socially innovative programs in libraries, library services for LBGTQ populations, the pedagogical roles of academic libraries, and new approaches to MLIS education. As fewer venues publish materials related to library practice, education, and research and many of the journals formerly devoted to library research have shifted their focus more to information issues, the *Advances in Librarianship* book series is an unwavering venue devoted to documenting, examining, exchanging, and advancing library practice, education, and research.

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Paul T. Jaeger, *Advances in Librarianship* Series Editor
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INTRODUCTION: RURAL PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN ACADEMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS

Brian Real

Perhaps the most famous public library building in the United States is the main location of the New York Public Library (NYPL), which has expanded to nearly 650,000 square feet since its opening in 1911. Its iconic marble lion statues were re-christened Patience and Fortitude during the Great Depression by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia (New York Public Library, 2011). As iconic as the NYPL may be, 6,408 of the United States' 16,695 public library buildings serve areas with populations of 2,500 or fewer people and possess a median of 1.9 full-time equivalent employees (Real & Rose, 2017). Rural library buildings average just 2,592 square feet, which is slightly smaller than a typical single-family home built within the United States (Perry, 2016). However, while not as physically imposing as the NYPL, the positive influences that these rural libraries have on the lives of their patrons each year are just as impressive.

Rural libraries offer free broadband access, inclusive of computer terminals and staff assistance in using the Internet, in parts of the country that have the lowest broadband adoption rates (Federal Communications Commission, 2016). The availability of these technology resources is invaluable, as rural areas continue to face employment stagnation, many companies

now only allow job applications to be filled out online, and employers are increasingly searching for candidates with at least basic computer skills. These libraries act as a free educational resource as rural America continues to have the lowest educational attainment rates (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). Rural parts of the country have the fewest physicians per capita (Weigel, Ullrich, Shane, & Mueller, 2016), but rural libraries can at least help patrons search for health information. Any list of the challenges that rural America faces can be met with a discussion of how rural public libraries and librarians actively work to mitigate these issues.

This volume, *Rural Public Libraries: Challenges and Opportunities*, presents data that show just how much rural public libraries do for their communities. As most of the authors of the chapters that follow are academics, I first address the historic and current relationship between academia and rural libraries. This is followed by a brief overview of each chapter, including how they relate to each other and their practical implications for rural librarians. Finally, I conclude by acknowledging the modern political climate that currently surrounds rural America and rural libraries. The current state of affairs presents an opportunity for rural libraries to show their value and obtain greater support, as more attention is being paid now than in recent decades to the challenges those in rural parts of the country face. Rural public librarians are already going above and beyond to benefit their communities, and any additional support will allow them to go even further.

I. THE RECENT STATE OF SCHOLARSHIP ON RURAL PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Excellent scholarship is being conducted on rural libraries by scholars in the library and information science (LIS) field. Of particular note are the efforts of Dr. Bharat Mehra of the School of Information at the University of Tennessee–Knoxville, who in recent years has used his research as a means to meet the practical needs of rural libraries and librarians. Two chapters in this book document his and his colleagues' work in this area, and anyone wishing to learn more about how academics can do more to help rural and small libraries would be well served by delving further into his published research.

Likewise, the recently published book *Small Libraries, Big Impact: How to Better Serve Your Community in the Digital Age,* by Dr. Yunfei Du (2016) of the University of North Texas, provides a broad overview of the specific needs of rural libraries. The book includes a particularly good chapter at

the end on library assessment, including how librarians can assess the needs of their communities and measure the impacts of their libraries. While outside of the direct scope of the public library literature, a book published in 2016 called *The Small and Rural Academic Library: Leveraging Resources and Overcoming Limitations* should be of value to any librarian working in areas that face geographic and economic challenges. The volume is tightly edited by two academic librarians, Kaetrena Davis Kendrick and Deborah Tritt, and features a wealth of practical and actionable advice to overcome resource limitations from their colleagues throughout the field (Kendrick & Tritt, 2016).

This is only a sampling of recent research on rural libraries, and considerably more is cited and discussed throughout the chapters that follow. Any oversights leading to the exclusion of significant portions of the research in this area should be considered the fault of the editor of this volume. Despite the good work already being published, however, there is much more that can and should be done in this area. Academics need to take a leadership role in conducting research that can be used to positive effect by rural librarians, their funders, and their allies. We also need to work with rural library practitioners to help them share information that can be used by their peers in other locations, regardless of whether this is through publication or other means.

When compared to a decade ago, the library and information science corner of academia has fallen behind where we were in terms of advocating for rural librarianship. Much of the most important work in this area was overseen by Dr. Bernard Vavrek of Clarion University, who was a faculty member from 1971 through 2008. He founded the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship (CSRL) in 1978, which continued operation until shortly after his retirement. Despite Vavrek's departure and the closure of CSRL, Clarion does still make a serious effort to reach out to librarians in less populous areas and regularly offers a course on rural librarianship.

Vavrek and CSRL were responsible for a wealth of activities that were supported by partnerships between scholars and rural librarians, including numerous research projects, conferences, and symposia (Glotfelty, 2017). Perhaps their most significant contribution to the field, however, was providing organizational support that led to the founding of both the Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL) and the Association of Bookmobile and Outreach Services. Both highly active organizations continue to operate as the primary professional organizations for their respective, but related, fields. CSRL also published the academic journals *Rural Libraries* from 1980 through 2008 and *Bookmobile and Outreach Services* from 1998 through 2008.

At present, however, academics in the LIS field are not doing enough to show librarians—in rural areas or otherwise—that we actually care about their work and their needs. This is perhaps too broad of a statement, but one of the key indicators of a disconnect is ARSL's 2016 call for presentations for its annual conference, which stated that it "is not the proper venue for post-graduate dissertations or marketing products" (Association for Rural and Small Libraries, 2016). The fact that an organization that was started with the support of an academic research center and that previously co-published an academic journal is now lumping academics together with people who are trying to sell them something is a problem. Knowing some of the people from ARSL personally, I can confidently say that this should not be taken as a blanket statement without nuance, but there is hesitancy to trust some academics to produce work that has practical implications for rural librarians. LIS academic programs do not have a right to a constituency, and rural librarians are not required to see value in research activities or graduate education programs. The burden of proof for this rests solely on those of us in the academic community, and the authors in this volume have made an earnest effort to meet this.

The chapters that follow include rigorous academic research, including in-depth and complex statistical analysis. However, the authors have attempted to make their work accessible, never losing track of the practical implications of our research. Our intention is for these findings to be useful for those working in the field, whether for direct application in libraries or for broader advocacy purposes. None of the chapters should be the final word on what they present, but should instead act as a foundation for further scholarship that can show the practical value of LIS research.

II. CHAPTER LAYOUT AND CONTENTS

The first chapter of this volume, Claire Petri's "Rural Libraries and the Human Right to Internet Access," argues that access to certain forms of information to which people are considered to have a right, including government information that allows one to fully engage in a democracy, can only be fully and efficiently accessed through the Internet. If the Internet is essential to exercising one's rights, then it can be said that the Internet, in itself, is a right. Considering that rights are only meaningful if they are extended to all people in a society, government intervention to diminish the impacts of geographic and economic barriers to broadband deployment and Internet access in rural areas is not just a means to increase rural residents' quality of life, but is also an act of social justice.

This is followed by a chapter I co-wrote with Norman Rose, "Rural Public Libraries in America: Continuing and Impending Challenges," on broad national trends for rural public libraries. The first half of the chapter uses data from both the Institute of Museum and Library Services' (IMLS) Public Libraries in the United States Survey and the Digital Inclusion Survey, the latter of which I worked on under Dr. John Carlo Bertot at the University of Maryland's Information Policy and Access Center. Norman and I split the data from these studies in a manner that shows a more nuanced understanding of rurality, delineating how trends across libraries change as they are farther from population centers. What we found was that rural libraries near the fringes of population centers have more resources than those that can be described as "distant" or "remote." This three-tier breakdown provides a better understanding of what types of libraries must be targeted to address the needs of rural residents than previous statistical analyses, which have most often grouped all rural libraries together.

While the first half of this analysis primarily focuses on technological issues, the second half moves on to look at obstacles that are caused by organization structures that do not facilitate resource sharing, as well as small and aging buildings. These long-term problems will be exacerbated as it becomes more cost prohibitive to purchase increasingly in-demand digital resources without consortia in place and as the public library field's increased focus on public programming leaves behind locations without adequate physical infrastructure. Statistical data for the analysis of these issues are combined with information gathered from conversations with Becky Heil and Andrea Berstler, library professionals in Iowa and Maryland, respectively, who are both past presidents of ARSL. The end result does not lead to a simple, silver bullet solution to some of the primary challenges rural public libraries will face in the coming years, but we define the problems and begin the discussion about next steps.

This leads into "Exploring Rural Public Library Assets for Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)," by Karen Miller of the University of South Carolina. The first portion of this text includes a discussion of the ABCD framework developed by John Kretzmann and John McKnight of the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research at Northwestern University. Under this model, communities can improve the quality of life for local residents by first focusing on what assets they already possess and then combining these with other local assets to allow for a multiplier effect in terms of positive impact. Miller argues that computer terminals, well-trained and helpful staff, information resources, and other library offerings constitute such assets.

Miller follows this with some of the most in-depth statistical analysis of the state of rural libraries available. Using the fringe, distant, and remote coding, she looks at significant factors that determine what assets libraries have to offer their communities. This includes considering government funding assistance and how it allows libraries in some parts of the country to do more for their patrons, regional trends in the number of librarians who hold a Master of Library Science (MLIS), average numbers of computer terminals and how these meet patron needs, and more. Miller combines her statistical analysis with discussions of the practical implications of her findings, making suggestions as to what librarians, governments and other funding bodies, and those of us in the academic community can do to help close service gaps between libraries in different parts of the United States.

"A Gap Analysis of the Perspectives of Small Businesses and Rural Librarians in Tennessee: Developments Towards a Blueprint for a Public Library Small Business Toolkit" by Dr. Bharat Mehra, Dr. Bradley Wade Bishop, and Robert P. Partee II of the University of Tennessee–Knoxville acts as an appropriate follow-up to Miller's research by analyzing library resources as potential assets for small businesses. Through short interviews with librarians and small business operators throughout the Appalachian region, the research team found that there is a significant amount of crosstalk between these two groups. Rural librarians have certain expectations of what types of information small business owners need. The actual information needs of small business operators often differs from these expectations, and business operators are often unaware of the library as a potential source for informational guidance in general. The practical implications of this research are clear, not only providing a framework that the authors intend to use in development of a small business toolkit and suggested outreach actions for rural public libraries, but also putting forth a research model that can be emulated to better understand relationships between libraries and other potential user groups.

Research from the University of Tennessee–Knoxville's School of Information Sciences continues in the next chapter, "Rural Librarians as Change Agents in the 21st Century: Applying Community Informatics in the Southern and Central Appalachian Region to Further ICT Literacy Training," by Dr. Bharat Mehra, Dr. Vandana Singh, Natasha Hollenbach, and Robert P. Partee II. Using federal grant funding from IMLS, Mehra and his team developed an MLIS program that specifically targeted professionals already working in rural Appalachian libraries. As discussed at various points in this volume, the majority of rural librarians do not hold a MLIS, so targeting individuals already working in the field allowed persons who had already

shown their dedication to the profession to expand their skill sets and better serve their communities. The research team worked with an advisory board of professionals in the field to initially shape the curriculum, and students were expected to complete projects in their courses that could then be used in their own libraries. As the full findings discussed in the chapter demonstrate, the end result is a highly practical MLIS program that can serve as a model for academics in the field. This is the case regardless of whether some of the concepts are adopted into MLIS programs or integrated into non-credit-bearing continuing education programs.

This is followed by research on the preservation and promotion of rural cultural heritage in "Defining Community Archives within Rural South Carolina," by Travis L. Wagner and Bobbie Bischoff of the University of South Carolina. Through interviews with representatives from nine different cultural heritage organizations throughout rural South Carolina, the authors show how local culture is often preserved and promoted in informal ways that often do not fully align with proper archival and museological practices. Rather than suggesting that these practices need to be changed or improved, Wagner and Bischoff probe the reasons for these variations from rigorous professional norms and find that they are often rooted from necessity and a desire to better connect with local communities. This is followed by discussions of outside resources that are available to small organizations for the care, preservation, and digitization of their materials, as well as suggestions for how more resources of these types can be developed in the future. This exploration of the archives space is not, by any means, a deviation from this volume's primary focus on rural libraries. Instead, the authors note that several of the collecting institutions they analyzed were founded by being spun off from the activities of rural public libraries and that many of the tools detailed can be used to preserve and promote rural library collections. As public libraries in general move toward a greater focus on public programming, an understanding of how local cultural heritage collections are formed and used will be invaluable for rural librarians who wish to design events that build on the history of their communities.

Jennifer L. Jenkins of the University of Arizona continues to look at crossover between the archives and rural public libraries in her chapter, "Exhibiting America: Moving Image Archives and Rural or Small Libraries." She begins with a historical analysis of how rural libraries historically used small-gauge motion picture films to educate and entertain their publics. This included circulating these materials via bookmobiles and setting up makeshift screenings in remote areas that lacked access to theatres and other forms of visual entertainment. While the advent of video and other distribution means led to

the end of these practices and declines in the popularity of small-gauge film, Jenkins argues that there is much that rural public libraries can still do with historic motion pictures. Several regional film archives have begun collecting home movies, amateur productions, educational works, and other materials that document and reflect neglected and forgotten elements of local culture. Jenkins discusses how some of these archives have successfully partnered with rural public libraries to present programs that reinforce the value of local culture and details potential resources that have not yet been tapped by the library community.

This volume then concludes with "Rural and Small Libraries: The Tribal Experience" by Jennifer L. Jenkins, Guillermo Quiroga (Yaqui), Kari Quiballo (Sioux), Dr. Herman A. Peterson (Diné), and Rhiannon Sorrell (Diné). This chapter begins with a brief literature review of research on tribal libraries, followed by interviews with Quiroga, Peterson, and Sorrell about their work in cultural heritage organizations for their respective tribes. The authors argue that tribal libraries and other cultural organizations have traditionally faced geographic and economic restraints that have created barriers to service in ways that parallel challenges faced by rural public libraries throughout the United States, as well as substandard broadband deployment that has hindered digital inclusion. These findings make it clear that as the rural public library community develops advocacy and action plans to overcome these problems, tribal librarians need to be included in the discussion. Likewise, the work of these institutions in preserving and promoting the cultural identities of their communities—even with limited resources—can provide invaluable lessons to rural librarians who wish to develop or expand their own community heritage activities.

III. CONCLUSION: THE STATE OF THE FIELD, CURRENT DISCUSSIONS, AND LOOMING THREATS

To conclude this preface and frame this volume, it seems necessary to acknowledge two recent, major developments in the modern political landscape. The first is that, in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, rural America is getting more press attention. To say that this rhetoric has some questionable elements would be something of an understatement, and fully parsing this out is beyond the scope of this volume. Key among these issues is that the phrase "white working class" has become synonymous in many cases with "rural" (Ehrenfreund & Guo, 2016), although rural America is most certainly not

racially homogenous and the working class is not solely the domain of white persons. Perhaps, a less loaded concept is the idea of rural Americans being "forgotten," as repeated by campaigns and various news outlets (Przybyla, 2017). It is in this climate of the election that the book *Hillbilly Elegy*, on the lives of rural Americans in the Rust Belt and Appalachian regions, became a bestseller (Rothman, 2016). Put simply, people across the political spectrum are paying attention to rural problems. This is a difficult political situation to navigate, with serious potential for cynicism and empty promises from both major parties, but at least policymakers will not risk ignoring rural America and the challenges it faces during the coming years.

The second is that public libraries, and especially rural libraries, are once again at risk of serious funding reductions. In the years following the 2008 recession, public libraries saw significant budget cuts and staffing decreases, along with a loss of funding to state libraries and other support organizations (Lyons & Lance, 2011). We have seen these trends reverse as the economy has recovered and strengthened, but even after a return to stability, the President's recently proposed budget has asserted that the federal government does not need to support public libraries. This proposal called for the complete elimination of IMLS (Bullard, 2017).

Stating a desire to fix the problems of rural America and cutting support to public libraries—and doing so through the elimination of IMLS specifically—is a contradiction. I do not say this out of partisan alignment. I say this as a person who grew up in a rural area, as a public librarian for a rural system, and a researcher with years of experience analyzing what rural libraries actually do. The authors in this volume provide clear documentation as to how rural libraries assist their local residents with finding job information, developing skill sets that lead to employment, locating health information, applying for government benefits, interpreting information that allows for greater participation in our democracy, and other activities that improve people's quality of life. Several chapters in this volume also discuss how libraries can engage in cultural heritage activities in a manner that increases rural residents' pride in and sense of personal connection to their communities, which can make these areas more appealing to current and potential residents.

IMLS has been one of the staunchest advocates for rural public libraries, most notably dedicating millions of dollars from their budget each year to specifically benefit these communities by supporting broadband development, technology training, and other efforts (Bullard, 2017). Several of the authors in this volume have, as discussed throughout the following chapters, worked on IMLS-funded research projects that have directly benefited rural

libraries and librarians. ARSL has condemned the elimination of the agency in no uncertain terms, noting its unassailable value to the operations of rural public libraries (Calhoun, 2017).

If both major parties are now determined to win over the hearts and minds of rural residents, allowing for any reduction in support for rural libraries should be a political dead end. This is a difficult line to walk, as tipping in too partisan of a direction can in itself be an attack on public libraries' relative neutrality or their strength as places that welcome persons of all backgrounds and beliefs. Instead, the response to any assault on public library support should be a clear and firm assertion of how every dollar spent on libraries is paid back in the form of various community benefits. Considering the budget restraints that most rural libraries face, we need to remind people that we have not yet seen the upward limit on how these institutions can make their communities stronger. As rural librarians and their allies argue that they should not accept less but instead deserve more support, I hope that the documentation in the following chapters of how rural libraries help their communities will be useful.

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