

An Examination of Youth Services in Public Libraries
By Carla Frazer

Due to the fluctuating nature of the modern library, it is challenging to explicitly define the qualities of a good library. Libraries are quickly developing to change into what the users need as a result of available technology and patron interest. Many different qualities can define an efficient library, and it comes down to the individual parts that make up the whole. Children under the age of 18 are significant contributor of use in public libraries¹, and it's up to their libraries to provide them with the best library experience possible. By looking at various libraries across the United States, we can find patterns in the way youth services are handled in successful libraries and reflect those practices universally.

Youth in the Library

Libraries have come a long way in the past few years in terms of providing a successful experience for children in the library. A survey completed in 2007 showed that out of children ages 8-18 in various parts of the United States, over 75% of them have and use a public library card.² In the same poll, 33% of these minors ages 8-18 admitted they would use their local library more often if “there were more interesting materials to borrow”³ and if “there was a space just for teens”.⁴ It seems that many youth feel like they're not represented in their local library and it is imperative to look into what other libraries are doing to supplement this population. Although there is much variety in the ages that youth services focus on, the general plan for public libraries in the United States is to provide minors access to books, computers and information in general. The

¹ “ALA Youth and Library Use Study.”

<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/professionaltools/HarrisYouthPoll.pdf>, 2

² “ALA Youth and Library Use Study.”

<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/professionaltools/HarrisYouthPoll.pdf>, 2
(accessed 24 Nov 2012)

³ Ibid, 4 (accessed 24 Nov 2012)

⁴ Ibid (accessed 24 Nov 2012)

Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) does provide standards and guidelines for the country's librarians to follow⁵. The standards are generally identical to other library services in that they require the librarian to know the client group and materials in addition to understanding how to work administration in the library. Some other organizations, such as the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) paired up with YALSA to develop the guidelines to cater to specific age groups, like pre-kindergarten or youth ages 12 through 18.

Giving Libraries Grades

A successful library is somewhat difficult, but not impossible, to define. There are several rating systems in the United States that take close looks at libraries and rank them on many different factors. One of these ranking systems is Hennen's American Public Library Ratings (HAPLR) index. This index, created in 1999, looks at different library factors like percentage of budget allowed to materials and circulation per hour and ranks them highest to lowest. Out of the hundreds reviewed, ten of the libraries have been at the top of the list ten times.⁶

In 2009, Library Journal created a new evaluation system called the *LJ* Index. This rating system "focuses more transparently on ranking libraries based on their performance. These annual rankings are intended to contribute to self-evaluation and peer comparison, prompt questions about the statistics and how to improve them, and provide an advocacy tool for the individual library."⁷ The *LJ* Index also narrows down the amount of libraries looked at by only inspecting those public libraries with total yearly expenses of \$10,000 or more that serve populations of at least 1000 and gives a score based on the visits per capita.

⁵ "YALSA's Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth." <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/yacompetencies2010>

⁶ "Libraries by Frequency in Top Ten." http://www.haplr-index.com/libraries_by_frequency_in_top_te.htm (accessed 18 Nov 2012)

⁷ Keith Lance and Ray Lyons, "The New LJ Index." <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6566452.html> (accessed 19 Nov 2012)

One of the main distinctions between the *LJ* and HAPLR Indexes is the number of variables involved and how they are used. The Hennen system starts with eight variables:

five input indicators and three output indicators. HAPLR then recombines these in different ways to produce 15 statistical ratios. The *LJ* Index will employ only four variables—all per capita ratios—and will not recombine these in any way. This relatively small set of index variables is justified on both statistical and philosophical grounds.⁸

According to the calculations of the per capita visits, the *LJ* Index gives each library a number and a certain number of stars; the highest amount is five. The *LJ* Index produces more specified results, and, like Hennen, acknowledges that it is almost impossible to design a truly comprehensive ranking system due to the difficulties of measuring library performance in reference to collection quality, library convenience, accessibility and overall patron satisfaction. Because these factors can be objectively viewed and are challenging to obtain, there is no recorded national data on this information.

It is understandable for one to wonder just what a ranking system can do for libraries, especially if it's so difficult to actually rank them. Ranking public libraries can, if anything, provide librarians claims that libraries are still in use for any advocacy purposes. It could also be a valuable tool to boost morale in the libraries that have scored high and an encouragement for those that scored low to reassess their strategic plan. However, neither of these grading systems specifically ranks youth service departments, but it can be valuable to take a look at some of these top libraries to see what they're doing with their youth services program.

Do Top Raking Libraries = Top Raking Youth Services?

⁸ Ibid (accessed 19 Nov 2012)

The Columbus Metropolitan Library in Columbus, Ohio is one of the libraries that has been at the top of the HAPLR index ten times out of eleven. Their strategic plan clearly states the library's focus, investments and desired income. One third of this investment is for youth and developing young minds and the plans they have to execute each year.⁹ These include but are not limited to homework help centers, volunteer programs for teens and summer reading clubs. Many libraries across the country have programming like this, so the question of what makes the CML and others like it so special should be raised. What are libraries like the CML doing that other libraries aren't?

Youth Involvement

The Carmel Clay public library in Indiana is another library at the top of the HAPLR index and has been there many times. While this library doesn't have a strategic plan available to the public, the CCPL takes a creative approach to community involvement. The library still provides story time and homework help centers like many other libraries, but the youth services department also allows the children of the community to have some influence on what happens in their section of the library through the Teen Library Council. This group accepts applications from school age individuals for a committee that meets monthly to discuss "Choice Picks"; books that should be highlighted and promoted in the library.¹⁰ This is a program that has been established for over a decade and gives children some authority in their library. By allowing them to have a voice in their public library, children will be more inclined to participate and actually *use* the library. If the library is just another place where their voices aren't heard, it can be intimidating. As a result, by giving students some power, the CCPL encourages a passion for knowledge and lifelong learning in individuals. The Teen Library Council is something that fits perfectly into some

⁹ "Columbus Strategic Plan." <http://www.columbuslibrary.org/sites/columbuslibrary.org/files/CML-Strat-Plan-Sept-2012.pdf> (accessed 19 Nov 2012)

¹⁰ "Teen Library Council" <http://www.carmel.lib.in.us/ya/yabooklink.cfm?id=223> (accessed 15 Nov 2012)

of the YALSA guidelines. As YALSA requested, libraries should “actively involve teens in planning and implementing services and programs for their age group through advisory boards, task forces, and by less formal means (i.e., surveys, one-on-one discussion, focus groups, etc.)”¹¹ Granting ownership to today’s youth gives the responsibility and can prepare them for many real life situations.

Website Overhaul

Another one of the top ten libraries is the Santa Clara County Library (SCCL). It is obvious this library is always interested in enhancing itself as a whole as the first thing to pop up on the website is a window asking the user for a few minutes of time to fill out a survey to “understand how [they] can improve library services.”¹² The website is interactive and provides links to the library’s blog, YouTube station, Facebook page, Pinterest board and several other social media outlets. SCCL is communicating to its users that it isn’t just a place that holds books but is also a vibrant repository that offers more than just something to read. For today’s youth, this is the world they are familiar with, and it is essential for libraries to keep up with trends in order to keep up circulation. YALSA agrees; “children and teens have come of age with the web, the iPod, cable and satellite television, the cell phone, etc., and these tools form a seamless part of their everyday lives.”¹³ SCCL provides programming stated in the YALSA guidelines, offering “Teen Picks” and opportunities for schools to visit on field trips so students can learn about the research process.

Loving Library Staff

It should be mentioned that any good library must be staffed with dedicated and passionate librarians. These librarians must be able to sense a void in their services, find a way to fill it, and

¹¹ “Guidelines for Library Services to Teens, Ages 12-18” <http://yalsa.ala.org/guidelines/referenceguidelines.pdf>, 3 (accessed 15 Nov 2012)

¹² Santa Clara County Library <http://www.sccl.org/>(accessed 25 November 2012)

¹³ “Guidelines for Library Services to Teens, age 12-18” <http://yalsa.ala.org/guidelines/referenceguidelines.pdf>, 2

get bodies in the library. While children have always been a target age for circulation, there wasn't always someone dedicated to their services in the library. The 2007 Public Library Data Service Statistical Report tracked young adult service trends in public libraries. The report found that "nearly 90 percent of the public libraries surveyed offer young adult programs, with more than half (51.9 percent) employing at least one full-time equivalent dedicated to fostering young adult programs and services, up dramatically from 11 percent in 1995."¹⁴ This shows a remarkable increase in acknowledging the importance of children's services in libraries simply by the increasing of staff dedicated solely to children's services.

In a nation where individuals spend more time watching television than reading,¹⁵ it is imperative that libraries emphasize the power and enjoyment that comes with reading. While youth services have traditionally been about story time and the occasional puppet show, programming for the under 18 crowd has taken a different approach to getting youth in the door and the Library Journal has been acknowledging those people that have been pushing the limits. For the past ten years, LJ has highlighted "Movers and Shakers" in the field of library and information science and technology. These people are not all librarians but they have shown innovation, creativity and ingenuity that's made a difference in their communities¹⁶ and many of these people have affected children's services in libraries in some way. The larger group of movers and shakers has been sorted into different categories according to their projects.

One of these movers and shakers is Rebecca Renard. She works at a public library in the District of Columbia and is labeled as an innovator because of her dedication to her position as the Teens of Distinction Program Coordinator. Involved with all 26 branches in the district, she's

¹⁴ "Youth and library use studies show gains."

<http://www.ala.org/news/news/pressreleases2007/july2007/yalsastudy07>" (accessed 26 Nov 2012)

¹⁵ "American Time Use Survey – Results" <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/atus.pdf>, 3 (accessed 25 Nov 2012)

¹⁶ "LJ Movers & Shakers: Nomination Guidelines."

<http://lj.libraryjournal.com/lj-movers-shakers/> (accessed 25 Nov 2012)

dedicated to keeping youth interested in the library. She's not only created a book buddies program for children and teens, Renard has also sponsored a writing program that gets help from National Public Radio. To her, running a library is about “creating environments where young people feel welcomed and supported—where they find structure and possibility.”¹⁷ Another LJ M&S innovator, Jennifer Velásquez, agrees, “a library means nothing if there is not dedicated teen services staff to facilitate and foster teen participation in the context of library service”, she says in her LJ interview¹⁸. Velásquez is the teen services coordinator in the San Antonio public library system and believes that a good library is one that keeps up with the current trends in technology and pop culture. Libraries have come a long way from simply providing books to people and the libraries Velásquez is a part of focus on turning “real life experiences into learning opportunities”.

¹⁹ These learning opportunities allow the children and young adults involved in the programs to gain something from the library that they might not have known was possible.

Another Library Journal Mover & Shaker has been highlighted as a “community builder” with her innovative idea to get teens more involved in the library. Emily Ellis increased program attendance by over 100% and created a teen advisory group, not unlike the one from Carmel Clay library. Ellis sees potential in today’s youth and her goal is to “create future community leaders”.²⁰ She admitted working with school age children isn’t always easy but it is always rewarding because the library gives her generous creative license and encourages her to “explore, and try, and try again, and

¹⁷ “Rebecca Renard – Innovators – 2011 Movers & Shakers.”
www.libraryjournal.com/csp/cms/sites/LJ/LJInPrint/MoversAndShakers/profiles2011/moversandshakersRenard.csp
(accessed 15 Nov 2012)

¹⁸ “Jennifer Velasquez – Innovators- 2011 Movers & Shakers.”
www.libraryjournal.com/csp/cms/sites/LJ/LJInPrint/MoversAndShakers/profiles2011/moversandshakersVelasquez
(accessed 15 Nov 2012)

¹⁹ “Jennifer Velasquez – Innovators- 2011 Movers & Shakers.”
www.libraryjournal.com/csp/cms/sites/LJ/LJInPrint/MoversAndShakers/profiles2011/moversandshakersVelasquez
(accessed 15 Nov 2012)

²⁰ “Emily Ellis – Community Builders – 2012 Movers and Shakers”
<http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2012/03/people/movers-shakers/emily-ellis-movers-shakers-2012-community-builders/>
(accessed 15 Nov 2012)

that's the same opportunity [she hopes] to offer [her] teen patrons.”²¹ By employing passionate librarians that advocate for age groups that are often misunderstood or not given enough credit, a successful youth program can be created, and with it, a successful library. Many young people, especially those not interested in reading, see the library simply as a vessel for books. What is unknown to them is the variety of media that awaits them once they walk through the doors.

Librarians Inspiring Librarians

Because the standards of literacy instruction and items provided by the library are defined more by the community needs rather than an association, libraries rely on other libraries. So, librarians, their collections, and their services must adapt to the community and share with one another the things that work in their individual settings. Through a website called Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki,²² librarians can do just that.

Library Success describes itself as a one stop shop for new and beneficial ideas and information for all types of librarians. The website encourages readers to share the things that have been happening in their libraries and explains the different categories that ideas can be entered into. These categories range from programming ideas to marketing the library and include postings shared by successful librarians. In the services to specific groups section, there is a link that leads to services for teens. There, librarians have shared links to video game programming, suggestions of virtual worlds for teens, YA author websites and more. While Library Success has some links that are not fully fleshed out, it is updated regularly and provides many valuable documents for interested librarians and even the general public.

The Library Success website promotes collaboration, which is an essential key to any successful library program. Some that have been examined already, like the Teen Council from

²¹Emily Ellis, “Beyond Books”. <http://www.greenwoodlibrary.us/articlesDetail.asp?id=132> (accessed 15 Nov 2012)

²²“Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki.” http://libsucccess.org/index.php?title=Main_Page (accessed 20 Nov 2012)

Carmel Clay Public Library, display the valuable skill of collaboration. While libraries may customize programs and services to fit the community's needs, libraries cannot know the needs unless the community expresses its interest and desires. This shows that collaborating, on any level, can benefit libraries.

New Directions in Programming

Some libraries take an interactive approach to creating an inviting atmosphere for youth with collaborative and inventive programming. The Madison Public Library (MPL) in Madison, Wisconsin (which scored four out of five stars on the *LJ* Index in 2012), has an entire newsletter promoting events around the city that take place at or through the library.²³ The Madison branches encourage family participation and involvement, rather than just the children themselves attending the library. By showing the library in an untraditional way and as a sort of community center, libraries demand they be noticed and appreciated for the variety of services provided. In addition to family friendly programming, Madison offers programming that promotes learning in new and inventive ways.

There is a lack of explicit instruction standards in public libraries, and the ones that do exist are specific to a certain state or city. Therefore, it's up to the individual branches to decide if educational programming becomes a main concern. Unlike school libraries, public libraries have a little more flexibility when it comes to planning programs and providing instruction. Because of this creative freedom, public libraries take an "Instruction 2.0" approach which provides patrons with a casual learning experience. This means the instruction isn't outwardly apparent because it essentially disguises the learning by taking it out of a classroom setting. In addition, Instruction 2.0 incorporates new technology, games, and other things that patrons are interested in learning into

²³"Kidspages." <http://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/sites/default/files/kids/Kidspages.pdf> (accessed 27 Nov 2012)

account. Public library programming is usually user driven and participatory. An example of disguised learning is the Madison public library's "Play Literacy" series:

The Madison Public Library Youth Services Librarian brings all of the supplies needed for a Play Literacy visit: toys and literacy materials related to a theme, such as Post Office, Fishing, or Ice Cream Stand. After reading a related story, library staff models how to play and emphasizes the literacy activities that go along with the theme. Staff incorporate pretend reading and writing into the program through group-based and individual literacy activities. For example, staff might write a grocery list or a letter and read a menu or a fishing map, and then help the children to do the same. Children and adults then have the opportunity to play with the toys ("go shopping," "take pizza orders," "play post office.")²⁴

By setting the literacy instruction inside a world created by the children, it's not seen as something boring and difficult; reading and writing is actually *part* of the game. Afterward, the librarian shares books related to the subject and recommends checking them out for more research and future playtimes. This Instruction 2.0 continues to pop up in imaginative programming across the United States, and inspires an interest in learning and participation in youth. This interest can benefit the child in so many ways, and teaches them that the library is a place that welcomes and inspires them.

Successful Youth Services

After reviewing many qualities that are considered when ranking libraries and children's services, it appears that a successful library allows youth to have a voice in the programs, employs dedicated librarians and displays out of the box thinking on creating events and classes available to the public. As libraries' services and materials become more and more changed by today's technology, they are not struggling to keep up with the transformations. Instead, libraries

²⁴ "Educators: Play Literacy" <http://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/kids/play-literacy> (accessed 19 Nov 2012)

themselves are transforming to fit the new mold of the modern library. As children grow up in this volatile world, they will be happy to know there's a place just for them inside their public library.

Bibliography

- "2011 Movers & Shakers." *Lj.libraryjournal.com/*. Library Journal, 2011. Web. 15 Nov. 2012.
<<http://www.libraryjournal.com/csp/cms/sites/LJ/LJInPrint/MoversAndShakers/profiles2011/moversandshakersRenard.csp>>.
- "2011 Movers & Shakers." *Lj.libraryjournal.com/*. Library Journal, 2011. Web. 15 Nov. 2012.
<<http://www.libraryjournal.com/csp/cms/sites/LJ/LJInPrint/MoversAndShakers/profiles2011/moversandshakersVelasquez.csp>>.
- "American Time Use Survey - 2011 Results." *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. U.S. Department of Labor, 22 June 2012. Web. 25 Nov. 2012.
<<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/atus.pdf>>.
- "CCPL Teen Council." *Http://www.carmel.lib.in.us*. Carmel Clay Public Library, n.d. Web. 15 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.carmel.lib.in.us/ya/yabooklink.cfm?id=223>>.
- "Columbus Metropolitan Library: Purpose. Vision. Strategy." *Columbuslibrary.org*. Columbus Metropolitan Library, 2012. Web. 19 Nov. 2012.
<<http://www.columbuslibrary.org/sites/columbuslibrary.org/files/CML-Strat-Plan-Sept-2012.pdf>>.
- Curry, Keith, and Ray Lyons. "The New LJ Index." *Lj.libraryjournal.com/*. Library Journal, 15 June 2008. Web. 19 Nov. 2012.
<<http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6566452.html>>.
- "Educators: Play Literacy" *Madisonpubliclibrary.com*. Madison Public Library, n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/kids/play-literacy>>.
- "HAPLR FAQ." *Haplr-index.com*. Henne's American Public Library Ratings, Apr.2010. Web. 19 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.haplr-index.com/faq.html#Quality>>.
- Harris Interactive, Inc. "American Library Association Youth and Library Use Survey." *Ala.org*. American Library Association, N.p., 2007. Web. 24 Nov. 2012.
<<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/professionaltools/HarrisYouthPoll.pdf>>.
- "Kidspages." (Sept. 2012): n. pag. *Madisonpubliclibrary.com*. Madison Public Library, Sept. 2012. Web. 27 Nov. 2012.
<<http://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/sites/default/files/kids/Kidspages.pdf>>

Kuenn, Stephanie. "Youth and Library Use Studies Show Gains." *Ala.org*. American Library Association, 24 July 2007. Web. 26 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.ala.org/news/news/pressreleases2007/july2007/yalsastudy07>>.

Bibliography (cont.)

"Libraries by Frequency in Top Ten." *Haplr-index.com*. Hennen's American Public Library Ratings, Apr. 2010. Web. 18 Nov. 2012. <http://www.haplr-index.com/libraries_by_frequency_in_top_te.htm>.

Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2012. http://libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Main_Pag

Santa Clara County Library. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2012. <http://www.sccl.org/>

"YALSA's Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth." *Ala.org/yalsa*. Young Adult Library Services Association, Jan. 2010. Web. 19 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/yacompetencies2010>>.

YALSA, and RUSA. "Guidelines for Library Services to Teens, Age 12-18." *Http://yalsa.ala.org*. Young Adult Library Services Association, Mar. 2008. Web. 15 Nov. 2012. <<http://yalsa.ala.org/guidelines/referenceguidelines.pdf>>.