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Tribal Libraries: Vital but Often Invisible Treasures

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Tribal Libraries:

Vital but Often Invisible Treasures

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As libraries become increasingly focused on exposing hidden collections and promoting discoverability of unique resources, archival and special collections naturally come to the fore. Yet there is another, often invisible and overlooked, source of hidden treasures waiting to be discovered: tribal libraries. Tribal libraries are not only vital to the communities they directly serve, they are also home to a variety of unique and valuable information resources of interest to researchers in many fields.

Oregon and neighboring states are host to a number of tribal libraries. These libraries are a lifeline for their communities. Yet tribal libraries are often severely underfunded and must rely heavily on donations and grants in order to serve their users. No matter what kind of library you work in, or where you are located, there is something you can do to help support these institutions that do so much for their communities.

What are tribal libraries?

On the surface, this question seems simple, but the answer is complicated. The Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act of 1975, subsequent legislation, and hearings at the White House Conferences on Indian Library and Information Services on or Near Reservations gave rise to the creation of tribal libraries. Tribal libraries are essential in assisting tribes to preserve their cultural identities and to maintain sovereignty (Biggs, 2001). A tribal library must be designated by a tribe. Tribal libraries vary widely in size, collections, staffing, and function. They can include public, academic, and special libraries. Many libraries serve more than one role in a tribal community. Some may support reservation schools while also functioning as a public library. Some act as research libraries or archives. Many tribal college libraries also serve as

public libraries. Some communities might have more than one library serving tribal members. For example, the libraries serving the Tohono O'Odham in Arizona include the Tohono O'Odham Community College Library as well as three tribal libraries.

How are tribal libraries funded?

Surprisingly, tribal libraries do not receive any kind of base funding from the Department of the Interior, the federal agency charged with oversight of Indian Affairs. Although some libraries may receive modest support from their tribes, many are left to fend for themselves. Most, but not all, tribal college libraries are funded from their college's general fund.

All federally recognized tribes are eligible for Basic Grant funding through the Institute of Museum and Library Services' (IMLS) Native American Library Services grant program. These tribes can also apply for that program's competitive Enhancement Grant.

What is meant by federal recognition?

The IMLS uses the following definition: Any tribe, band, nation or other organized group or community, including any Alaska Native village, regional corporation or village corporation that is recognized by the Secretary of the Interior as eligible for special programs and services provided by the United States to Indians.

In the state of Oregon, the federally recognized tribes include the Burns Paiute Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Indians, the Klamath Tribe, and the Coquille Tribe.

Besides IMLS funding, other grant



opportunities exist, but not every tribe employs a skilled grant writer or staff with experience managing grants. In addition, there are many tribes that may be recognized by their states but are not included in the list of federally recognized tribes, which further limits funding opportunities.

If tribal libraries can become recognized by a state library as having public library status, they become eligible for some basic funding. Oregon has made strides in this area, but many states do not recognize their tribal libraries, which deprives them of greatly needed collaboration and funding opportunities.

Who staffs tribal libraries?

Staffing varies from library to library. Tribal college libraries must meet accreditation standards and are therefore more likely to have one or more MLS librarians on staff. But often due to funding issues, many tribal libraries have no degreed staff. Tribal library budgets are often barely adequate to provide for minimal staffing, let alone for MLS staff (Engstrom, 2006). Despite this bleak financial situation, tribal libraries often have a very dedicated library staff. Many tribal librarians are passionate about their work and are always seeking ways to improve their services and collections on a meager budget.

Where in the world are tribal libraries?

Tribal libraries exist throughout the nation. There is no complete and current directory due to the difficulty of tracking contact information. This might become easier to track if more state libraries begin recognizing tribal libraries as eligible for state funding. The most complete directory, which also includes tribal museums and archives, was published in 2005 by IMLS and the Arizona State Museum (see the Related Links section). There is also a directory of tribal colleges

available on the American Indian Higher Education Consortium's Web site. For more information on tribal libraries in your area, you could contact IMLS, your state's Indian Commission, your state library, or the American Indian Library Association.

What YOU can do support tribal libraries

In 2004, The American Library Association's Office of Literacy Outreach Services Subcommittee on Library Services to American Indians distributed a survey to tribal librarians via electronic lists and print mailings. The Subcommittee also gathered input at an American Library Association program featuring speakers Carlene Engstrom, library director at Salish Kootenai College, and Jane Kirby, Virtual Library Manager for the American Indian Higher Education Consortium. Results from the survey were used to create a brief tip sheet for librarians who would like to help support tribal libraries. Participants emphasized that it is essential to establish a dialogue with the tribal librarian in order to best understand the needs and priorities for each institution.

Material donations

Tribal libraries need current, quality materials, like any other library. Materials that are outdated, in bad condition, or outside the collection development policy create a burden. This is especially true for libraries lacking the staff, space, or time to weed, perform selection, and coordinate disposal of unneeded donations. Therefore, it is best to ask the librarian what is needed or to send a list of available items before donating. One example to consider is donating extra copies your library may have of best-sellers, rather than returning them to the vendor.

Tribal libraries may also be interested in furnishings. If your library is remodel-



ing, this may provide a perfect opportunity for you to dispose of unneeded furniture and thus help to make a tribal library more comfortable and attractive for users. Many tribal libraries have only government-donated furniture.

Monetary donations

Direct monetary donations are always needed and appreciated. If your library holds a periodic book sale, consider working with your Friends of the Library group to donate a portion of the proceeds to a tribal library. Another idea is to subsidize the subscription cost of a magazine or journal from a tribal library's desiderata list. To make a donation to tribal libraries in New Mexico, contact:

Friends of New Mexico Tribal Libraries
P.O. Box 2484,
Española, NM 87532

Questions can be directed to the Native American Libraries Special Interest Group at nalsig@yahoogroups.com.

Volunteer your time

Volunteer assistance can be a great gift, but its value depends on the expertise, reliability, and dedication of the volunteers. Please contact individual libraries directly about current volunteer opportunities. Ways to volunteer include donating your time to assist with Web site development, cataloging, programming, and other activities. Volunteer time can be counted towards a grant match for a tribal library, and increases the library's chances for supplemental funding.

You or your institution could choose to sponsor a tribal librarian to attend a conference, including funding a substitute to staff the library while the tribal librarian is away. Most tribal librarians cannot afford the luxury of valuable professional development opportunities such as participation in ALA or other organizations. Yet another idea is

to assist tribal libraries to develop a Friends of the Library Group, or a broader state or regional advocacy group.

Project/program support

Library faculty members who coordinate student field work might consider collaborating with tribal libraries on student projects and internships. This is a great way not only to assist a tribal library, but also to provide a student with valuable practical experience.

The development of long-term partnerships is also important for tribal libraries. "Adopt-a-library" programs are just one example. Although most programs have geographic limitations, long-distance partnerships are also a possibility.

Finally, share your programming ideas. Your ideas for incentives, materials, graphics, and summer youth programming could be an invaluable resource for an understaffed tribal library.

Training/consulting

As previously mentioned, training and professional development opportunities for tribal librarians are rare in geographically isolated areas. In addition to inviting tribal library staff to participate in conferences and other activities, consider offering your programs at their site.

Grant writing assistance is another area where you may be able to share your expertise. Assist a tribal library to write an IMLS Enhancement Grant or other grant, or offer to review the grant once written. In addition, IMLS maintains a consultant directory. Let IMLS know you are willing to act as a consultant for tribal libraries. Most tribes are eligible for funds to hire a consultant.

Advocacy

Be an advocate for tribal libraries by including them in planning discussions; make sure they are "on the radar" for your institution.



Most tribal libraries are not recognized within their states as public libraries and are therefore not eligible to receive state funding. You can help tribal libraries gain status as public libraries within their states, or assist them in working toward meeting the state criteria.

Other ideas


Since most tribal libraries serve user communities of 2-3000 or less, consider sharing your library or consortium database purchases with tribal libraries. For most tribal libraries, OCLC is beyond their monetary capacity. Offer OCLC for free or a reduced price through state consortia. You can also help by giving tribal libraries generous inter-library loan privileges.

Another way to provide support is to work with the tribal librarian to create an Amazon or Barnes and Noble gift registry or wish list for the library, and then invite others to purchase the items as gifts.

These are just a few practical ways to help tribal libraries and to preserve these vital treasures for new generations of users. Developing a relationship with a tribal library will help generate other creative ideas. A simple way to get to know tribal library staff in your area and to open up communication is to offer to pass along information about professional development/training opportunities, grants, etc. You can also report back on information you learn at conferences when the tribal librarian can't attend. Your involvement in any of these areas will be appreciated.

Finally, join The American Indian Library Association (AILA) to stay in touch with people interested in the improvement of library services for American Indians and Alaska Natives. As a member, you will receive a quarterly newsletter and have access to an electronic discussion list. AILA-L is a wonderful place to post vacancy an-

nouncements, and allows your institution to publicize opportunities to an audience you may not have had a way to reach in the past. Personal memberships are just \$15 per year, and institutional memberships are \$30.

There are many simple ways that anyone can help to support tribal libraries. Developing a relationship with a tribal library in your area can be very rewarding for both partners. 

Resources

Biggs, B. (2001). *Tribal Library Census and Needs Assessment Project Final Report*. Library of California, Tierra Del Sol Region. Available at <http://www.csusm.edu/bbiggs/loc/report.html>

Engstrom, C. E-mail to author. September 14, 2006.

Oregon Blue Book 2006. Available at: <http://bluebook.state.or.us/national/tribal/tribal.htm>

Related links

American Indian Higher Education Consortium, <http://www.aihec.org/>

American Indian Library Association, www.ailanet.org

Institute of Museum and Library Services, Basic Grants, <http://www.imls.gov/applicants/grants/nativeAmerican.shtm>

Tribal Archive, Library and Museum Directory, http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/aip/leadershipgrant/directory/tlam_directory_03_2005.pdf

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Services to American Indians, chaired by Kelly P. Webster.

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Warm Springs Library

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Today, the library employs a part-time Library Aide and is administered by the K-12 Education Support Services department. Funding continues to be a challenge. The facility is provided at no cost by the tribal government. Our primary funding source is IMLS. We have received cash support for personnel from the Warm Springs Community Action Team. Thanks to generous book donations from Sunriver, Tygh Valley, Maupin, and Jefferson County libraries, we have books on our shelves. The Willamette Writers organization and private donors from New York City and Connecticut

frequently send new or nearly new books and donations. An organization, Libraries of Eastern Oregon, donated equipment for loan to our patrons.

Now, my dream is that our library will provide the opportunity for tribal community members to access information and apply knowledge in order to reach their full potential for the benefit of our reservation and future generations. 🌿

IMLS Native American Library Services Grants: <http://www.ims.gov/applicants/grants/nativeAmerican.shtml>

ALA and Tribal Libraries

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suggestions. Finally, please consider nominating yourself or a colleague to serve on an ALA committee. You will find my online

committee appointment volunteer form at <http://cs.ala.org/roy/volunteer.html>. 🌿

Oregon Collaborative Project

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Institute of Museum and Library Services, sponsored by the Western Council of State Libraries, and hosted by the Oklahoma Department of Libraries. 🌿

For more information about the Oregon Collaborative Project, please contact MaryKay Dahlgreen at: marykay.dahlgreen@state.or.us or (503) 378-5012.

