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*Open Libraries: More than Just Open Books or
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Open to the Public

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An attitude and practice of openness is generally a given in public libraries, even if our rosy view of our social role is not quite accurate. We like to see libraries as the great stepping stone for immigrants in the early 20th century, even as they were still closed to people of color in parts of the country. Even now, we have some distance to go to live up to the ideals we were taught in library school. As Marcia Nauratil (1985) writes, “While the doors of the public library, like the park’s gates, are not closed in the face of any citizen seeking entrance, certain segments have traditionally found the library unwelcoming and indifferent to their needs” (p. 12). As the world of library materials and services grows ever more varied and complicated, we need to strive to open even more generously to our patrons, and so banish that lack of welcome and sense of indifference.

My own sense of what libraries can do to communicate openness has grown to include acceptance and welcoming to patrons of the kind that Carolee Hirsch describes in the sidebars to this article, as well as cultivating an understanding of patrons who encounter daunting barriers to library services. Although the bedrock of openness in public


libraries is a compassionate, unbiased attitude, we can also write it into our policies and make some breathing room for people in unusual circumstances. In opening library services to people with, for example, brain injuries, agoraphobia, inability to read, memory, hearing and visual deficits, and confusion that sometimes comes with age, we at Multnomah County Library have developed policies and practices that support us well in serving people who desperately want to read and participate in their communities but who face serious obstacles.

In Library Outreach Services at Multnomah County, there are several policies in place that give our more vulnerable patrons that breathing room. For patrons who are homebound or use our lobby services at retirement homes, we have longer circulation periods, easy renewals (unless there are holds on an item), no fines, and a general routine of managing accounts and hand-holding that helps patrons through their concerns. Many of our patrons have memory problems or confusion stemming from dementia or injury, but they are still able to enjoy reading or watching movies. As Outreach Supervisor, I overhear conversations everyday in our little cubicle farm in which staff reassure patrons that they are not to worry, they will not be charged, and that all is well.

These practices can be part of a library of any size and do not depend on budget. Our library has recently set new service principles that reflect this flexibility and eagerness to accommodate. One of the service principles reads, “We provide each patron with choices in products and services. We minimize the number of barriers and maximize the number of options.”



Dudley’s brain works slowly. When he attended the beginners computer class, a patient volunteer was available to help him work on the first step as the rest of the class moved forward. Dudley took the class again. And again. Between classes, he came in to struggle at a computer with what he had learned so far. After a year or so, he moved on to the Internet class. The next year was the e-mail class. Now he is learning genealogy.



Barbara was frustrated. She just arrived in town, was homeless, and needed Internet access to connect with her community because she was deaf. And she did not realize how LOUD her voice was. We have several options to give Internet access to people without addresses or a library card. Trying to explain them to an impatient person is difficult; doing so by writing notes to a time bomb was even more challenging. Our most compassionate librarian and a Technical Services staff member who knows American Sign Language communicated with Barbara. Now she uses the Internet every day, greeting us with a cheerful (still loud) hello before settling down to her business.



To my nose, Chester always emitted an odor of dehydrated chicken noodle soup. He spent hours everyday with his nose nearly touching the monitor screen of the adaptive technology computer set at its largest font size. One day, he positively beamed as he told me that he had finally been able to find the information he needed about treatment options for his vision problems.

As we move further into the world of digital reading and listening, I have watched outreach staff find ways to open that world to our patrons. The key is having faith that the brain-injured or very old patron is capable of learning. We have a patron who reminds me of Dudley (see sidebar): she is brain-injured and homebound, but I have listened to one of our staff patiently walk her through the steps of downloading and using OverDrive (the downloadable audiobook and e-book service) to listen to audiobooks on her computer. The staff member speaks slowly, pauses, and repeats; the patron has learned how to do it, with tutelage, and is thrilled to listen to these books since she has great difficulty reading.

Another way to open the doors wider to your community is to look around and see what is needed, even if it does not seem perfectly aligned with your sense of what a library offers. When we began anew to provide adult literacy services a few years ago, we looked at how to support immigrants, beyond the collections in our libraries and outreach already being done. Citizenship classes, surprisingly, were not being offered consistently in the County. Now we have 14 classes a year, full of zealous converts to the free and open American public library.

The same can be said of our Talk Time groups, which give English learners a chance to practice English casually. Having watched a devout Somali woman observing Ramadan explain why she cannot partake of the beautiful pastries to the glamorous Mexican



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Aaron has worn the same torn trousers and tired sport coat as long as I can remember. He also has an unsightly growth on his face. He used to wander the library all day, complaining to himself and avoiding eye contact. However, a few years ago, he learned to use the computer and search the Internet. He also reserves time on what may be the last existing typewriter in Eugene. Gradually, he spends more time talking to staff members than to himself. One day he brought a list of poetry journals in which he was published before being afflicted with mental problems. Recently, he told us some of his work has been accepted by another respected journal. And he asked for help to locate his last known relative, hoping to reestablish contact before he dies of his terminal illness.



Like clockwork, we can count on Edgar arriving just fifteen minutes before closing on Monday, and settling down with a week's worth of newspapers. When we repeatedly reminded him that the library was closing, we could almost see him dig in his heels as he scowled at us. After a few months, we started ignoring him. A minute or two before closing, he would hoist himself out of his chair and put away the newspapers as he left. Then I started saying "Hello, how are you?" as he came in. He still comes in just fifteen minutes before closing, and still leaves just a minute or two before closing, but now he says "Have a nice day!" as he goes out the door.

woman who brought them, I understand the power of opening the doors and inviting in all. These kinds of programs say, "You are welcome. We are open." These newcomers find a friend, and so do we, as they become library lovers.

Our culture stereotypes libraries as tightly controlled, with eagle-eyed overseers ready to cite rigid policy and procedure at the merest suggestion of deviation. We know that is ridiculously outdated, but we still have to work every day to squash that assumption. Too, we hold an ideal within our profession that we have not really achieved. We must telegraph the message that we are open to people, whoever they are and however we find them, and that we want to find a way, any way, to bring them the riches of the library. 🌿

Names and identifying information in this article and sidebars have been changed to protect patron privacy.

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