

**Beyond Books: Understanding Libraries as  
Information Sources and Resources Against Poverty**

Andrew Claybrook

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Overseen by Professor Goldsmith

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## **Introduction**

The library is considered a ubiquitous public commodity. An institution for the people of a community, dedicated to the sharing of knowledge and materials on a premise of equal access. Libraries can serve vital roles in their communities, interacting with the causes and consequences of poverty in a variety of ways. On the face, libraries and the books that they contain may be seen as a site of personal development. If knowledge is indeed power, than libraries are artilleries against the disadvantages of life. However, there is a malignant, lingering Literacy Myth--an idea that literacy is a direct counter to poverty. While it is true that literacy often correlates with better outcomes, there is more nuance to the situation. The Literacy Myth presumes a sort of neoliberal personal responsibility that neglects the fact that in modern society, a literacy of books is often not enough--new literacies, like technological literacy, is equally important. A library can provide a vast amount of resources, and training to use those resources, but the people must be aware of them and capable of utilizing them for there to be any effect. This awareness and capability can be mediated by library staff or awareness campaigns, but libraries must recognize their limits. Libraries have the resources and capability to be a public outreach organizations, but must ultimately refrain from overextending themselves--while they are valuable parts of the community, they cannot presume to become the dominant mechanism for poverty intervention. Rather, they should continue to act in concert with other organizations and systems, a part of a larger whole.

I am drawn to this capstone because of my own experience working in community service organizations, including library outreach programs, and my desire to become a librarian. In my experience working at the Rockbridge Area Relief Association on their Emergency HelpLine, I often found myself referring clients to the local library for services like making copies of documents, checking the social media updates of other organizations, or just as temporary shelter while waiting for someone. While making these referrals, however, I was conscious of the limits of library capabilities. I previously volunteered with the Adult Services Coordinator at the Rockbridge Regional Library for a technology outreach program, teaching elderly community members how to use electronic devices like tablets or cameras. However, while in-person programs like the technology program were helpful, they weren't well attended, and a greater portion of

library resources like resume assistance were digitally based. I believe that libraries can be valuable sites of community intervention based on their ability to teach and do community outreach, but there must be a review of services and effect.

### **Methodology**

This capstone's methodology is primarily based in literature review. To understand how libraries are or are not effectively intervening in poverty, this capstone primarily reviews two types of document. The first type is that which is published from a library's point of view. This takes the form of resources such as articles from the *American Libraries Journal*, published by the American Library Association. These materials from the library's point of view highlights what services the library sees itself as providing, and how they highlight their perceived interventions into poverty, its causes, and its consequences. I will then contrast these library centered articles with work that looks at libraries in the greater context of community and informational literacy. These lenses will help provide a sense of how accurately a library is actually meeting the needs of a community, or how services fail to reach people. Regardless, these are text based documents that are having a qualitative interpretation done upon them. Each piece of literature is being viewed both on its own and compared to one another, with the pieces existing in conversation to provide the broadest view of the library as an institution within a larger system of community.

While this capstone may refer to "the library" in the singular, meaning libraries as an institution, that is somewhat of a misnomer that must be disclaimed. There are a variety of different types of libraries—from public libraries to academic libraries to specialized archive collections—but this paper will largely be concerned with public libraries and school libraries, as those are the two assumed to have the most public interaction. As a case study of libraries, the Rockbridge Regional Library system is used by this capstone to review services and programs provided, with a particular focus on the Lexington Branch. The Lexington Branch of the Rockbridge Regional Library serves a variety of populations: it is situated in downtown Lexington, which is ostensibly an urban population, though the greater Rockbridge County is very rural. Roughly one third (32%) of Rockbridge County lives within the city of Lexington, with 43% of the remaining population residing in the nearby city of Buena Vista, roughly fifteen minutes

away (U.S. Census). Buena Vista does have its own branch of Rockbridge Regional Library, but it is only open four days of the week, and with reduced hours, when compared to the Lexington branch, which is open six days a week. Therefore, one could conceivably see the Lexington branch also serving patrons from Buena Vista, especially given it is the same library card that allows access to the whole Rockbridge Regional Library System.

### **Literature Review and Analysis**

To begin to understand how libraries can and do intervene in the causes and consequences of poverty, one must first get a sense of what libraries provide and do on a day to day basis. The primary function of a library is to be an information resource. Historically, that information has been stored and transmitted in the forms of books. Accordingly, the primary imagination of a library centers on the loaning and curating of physical texts. These texts can be used for self-betterment, but only if someone can read them, and literacy cannot be taken for granted.

Recognizing that literacy is not something that everyone is born with, and indeed something that someone may struggle with, libraries are in the position to stand against illiteracy with programs aimed at helping children and adults develop an ability to read. A 2016 UNESCO document calls on libraries to begin a more systemic intervention into illiteracy, noting that “too often... literacy goals and efforts are not systematically connected to libraries. As a result, these efforts fail to benefit from working closely with institutions that often have the long-standing trust of communities and already provide useful literacy services” (“Using Libraries”). The report goes on to note that “reading to and with children in the first five years of life helps to foster a love of books and reading; develop their vocabulary; stimulate brain development; and build emotional bonds with parents, guardians and carers. These children begin school with a clear performance advantage” (“Using Libraries”).

This focus on the development of childhood literacy is shown in action by the Rockbridge Regional Library. In their community calendar, one can regularly find read-alongs and storytimes intended for young children. This directly is in line with the fostering “a love of books and reading” as per the UNESCO report. Additionally, the Rockbridge Regional Library has an entire section of their website dedicated to “The

Youth Literacy Program,” which offers “trained tutor/mentors work with elementary-age students who are struggling with reading” (The Youth Literacy Program). The goal of this program, as with the read-alongs and storytimes, is to intervene in literacy for young children. Critically, this program by the Rockbridge Regional Library is free of charge, and is run by the referral of children to the program, which is staffed by volunteers. The volunteer aspect is important, as it continues to reference the library as a community organization that caretakes the individuals within the community. That the program is free is monumental in the intervention into poverty. If a student is already struggling with the education-related disadvantages of poverty, then the ability to mitigate those disadvantages without further exacerbating the consequences of poverty—or forcing parents to make a tragic choice—is essential.

Literacy is essential for a flourishing contemporary life, but one must avoid fetishizing literacy as the end all be all of human development, and any unconscious assumption of it as a magic bullet. The primacy placed on books—and the written words contained therein—have given rise to a Literacy Myth, as described by Harvey Graff. Sampling the definition from the *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, Graff’s essay starts with the definition of the Literacy Myth as “the belief... that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility” (Graff). The key word in that definition with which to take issue is “invariably,” as it connotes a sense that once literacy is achieved the rest will follow. Graff claims that “the assumed link between literacy and economic success is one of the cornerstones of western modernization theories,” suggesting that this notion is built into the very core of the systems taken as granted and normal (Graff). The Literacy Myth is seen to have been made normative. Graff summarizes the position by stating that “literacy or at least a minimal amount of education is presumed to be necessary and sufficient for overcoming poverty and surmounting limitations... Implicit in this formulation is the belief that individual achievement may reduce the effects of ascribed social and structural inequalities” (Graff). This focus on individual achievement begins to open the door to a neoliberal approach, understanding the Literacy Myth as an offshoot of a “pull oneself up by their bootstraps” mentality. The effects of systemic issues like educational

disparities are minimized, with a heightened scrutiny on how the individual is perceived as inadequate.

Graff in no way is intending to discount literacy as an important part of human life, but to “contrast the literacy myth, and its seamless connections of literacy to individual and collective advancement, with more complex and often contradictory lessons that are consistent with historical and recent literacy development and practice” (Graff). Subsequently, there is a call to understand how literacy is learned, and with Graff reminding that there is no neutral form of knowledge, that “literacy is a product of the specific circumstances of its acquisition, practice and uses, and so reflects the ideologies that guide them” (Graff). If libraries are understood to be centers of knowledge, then they must be understood as non-neutral. The hope is that the library is not neutral in favor of benevolence, but sometimes benevolence can be misconstrued.

While the discourse around literacy and Literacy Myth exists, the notions of the Literacy Myth branch out into other forms of literacies that also deserve attention. In his essay “Information Literacy, ‘New’ Literacies, and Literacy,” John Buschman suggests that a literacy based only on the ability to read and write is not enough. Buschman begins sociologically, stating that “there is ample evidence of socially constructed – and understood – literacies for different purposes,” intending in this case to discuss the differences between more academic tones and more casual forms of literary communication (Buschman). However, this opens the door to understanding literacy as something context dependent, a sort of shibboleth to trade in, and needing to be taught to achieve the “higher” forms of literacy that may be inadequate. It is no longer enough to be merely literate, one must be literate correctly for the circumstance.

Understanding that there are multiple types of literacy, Buschman begins to lay out a conceptualization of informational literacy. Reviewing contemporary literacy studies writings, Buschman identifies literacies such as “cultural, visual, multiple, interactive, workplace, media, critical, consumer, cross-cultural, moral, historical, scientific, mathematical, technological, political, geographic, and multicultural... the social media of Web 2.0” (Buschman). Buschman identifies literacy in the internet separately, as if to give it heightened importance in the eyes of the reader. However, when exploring how “new” literacy can be developed, Buschman casts the library as an

institution in an unfavorable light, claiming that “one could argue [information literacy] is hopelessly tainted by its heritage and environment in education, libraries, bibliography, books and printed texts” (Buschman). The implication here is, just as Graff pointed out that knowledge acquisition is not neutral, libraries act as gatekeepers and intercessors in the way information and learning transmission take place. This may not always be for the better, and can be split between incapability on the library’s part—such as if they lack funding—or deliberate action that may be grounded in the social framework out of which libraries operate.

In their paper “The Access Gap,” Shana Pribesh, Karen Gavigan, and Gail Dickinson examine how school libraries are meeting the needs of students living in poverty. The authors make clear that they are talking about school libraries rather than public libraries, but they do make a point to discuss some of the issues where public libraries stumble while engaging with poverty. While there may be a conception that the public library is an egalitarian space—and there is, perhaps, some theoretical truth to that—the authors point out that things like library fines can create barriers to library usage for people in poverty. Another common argument in favor of libraries is the touting of their electronic services, but the authors state that “funding for technology often tends to go to libraries that already have electronic resources” (Pribesh et. al). This pattern would indicate that once a library is lacking in technological resources, it will not catch up, and the suggestion is that poorer areas will suffer more than more affluent, well-funded libraries. This is in line with the cyclical nature of poverty, and is a reminder that the social organizations built are still subject to social forces. Recalling the Buena Vista library, with its shorter hours than the Lexington branch of Rockbridge Regional, one begins to see how this cycle turns. A less funded library can afford to be open fewer hours, which minimizes services. When the personal and career development services of the library are largely digitally based, this problem of access can become even more pronounced. Should someone lack reliable internet access at home, as will be discussed later, the individual is reliant on the open hours of the library to use those services intended to be decentralized. They in turn are punished for having to rely on the library’s facility. The availability of the library, and discussions therein, begin to open a larger discussion about the library’s physicality.

However, this discussion of information and literacy does not preclude libraries from intervening in poverty in other ways. Richard Gunderman and David C Steven's "Libraries on the Front Lines of the Homelessness Crisis of the United States" evaluates the roles libraries can play in addressing the needs of people experiencing homelessness and mental illness in their communities. Initially, I am wary of the way that Gunderman and Stevens seem to have lumped homelessness and mental illness together. They note that mental illness often accompanies homelessness, which is not untrue, but the two are not directly, essentially, or inextricably paired as the authors seem to indicate. However, understanding that homelessness—or other experiences of poverty—can lead to more difficult mental health is vital to understanding the consequences of poverty, and is a useful lens to at least consider. Gunderman and Stevens wrote this essay based off of informal conversations had with librarians (267). This is not to discount the value of an anecdote as it reflects a lived experience, but this essay is not a large scale study.

When considering the way libraries interact with homelessness, one must consider why someone would come to a library in the first place. Normal information needs are explored, from books and newspapers to internet access. However, there is also recognition of the value of accessible public restrooms, as well as simple "warmth and shelter" (268). Gunderson and Stevens point out that many shelters are only accommodating people overnight, but clients must be out of the shelter during the day. One place they can reliably go is to the library, where there is no cost associated with their presence. In that space, they have permission to just exist without the environment directly demanding some form of productivity or output, though there are resources for that development should the person experiencing homelessness wish to engage.

Once there, there is the question of how the library should serve the needs of the clients. Gunderman and Stevens point out that while the American Library Association recognizes the role libraries play in addressing the needs of homelessness through initiatives such as the 1996 Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty Task Force, there is still a lack of institutional, standardized curricula in library science programs to teach librarians how to address these needs. Within their work, Gunderman and Stevens got the suggestion that generally one strategy "at least for large libraries with sufficient



numbers of personnel, is to designate a member of the staff as a specialist in these matters, who serves as a resource person for other employees” (268). These staff members, and these programs, are funded out of the library’s general budget, which may or may not be directly intended to have these programs. Recalling the earlier discussion about funding, if a poorer area already has an underfunded library, it is likely that there is more difficulty in finding and supporting this staff specialist. Gunderman and Stevens indicate that some major cities such as San Francisco, Washington DC, and Philadelphia are all implementing more direct homelessness intervention programs in their public libraries, and perhaps one concrete suggestion to better develop these services is to have discrete funding set aside for serving these vulnerable populations. This could take the form of a staff member trained in social work who deals with the issues of community poverty, rather than just a member of the staff who is designated for such things, especially when keeping in mind that library science curricula does not intrinsically prepare an individual for facing these issues.

While this is not the most complex investigation on libraries, this essay does serve to continue to highlight common grounds where libraries engage with the individuals in the community who are experiencing poverty, and providing a way to—if not solve it—make the experience more tolerable through the essentials that may be overlooked, such as simply being a building free to enter and stay in with heating in the winter and air conditioning in the summer.

For an international perspective, Malda Women’s College librarian Bibhash Ram Singha and Calcutta University Associate Professor Sabuj Kumar Chaudhuri review the state of homelessness in Kolkata, India and offer proposals for how libraries can assist. Singha and Chaudhuri indicate that in their research, one of the driving causes for homelessness in Kolkata is a lack of housing to keep pace with people seeking economic opportunities. People immigrate into the city since that is where jobs and economic growth happen, but once there, Singha and Chaudhuri state that they cannot stay employed long enough to secure long term housing, instead falling into one of the many manifestations of homelessness.

Regarding libraries, Singha and Chaudhuri actually refrain from discussing them for most of the article, instead elaborating on the state of homelessness. In the last part of the article, Singha and Chaudhuri propose that libraries should offer such services including but not limited to “the establishment and development of regional information support centers,” “informing and involving Social Workers,” “set up proper distribution policies of government schemes,” and “organizing awareness program/extension services... regarding government facilities and other social activities such as education, job skills, political agenda, everyday news, about mainstream social life” (Singha and Chaudhuri). While these conclusions come from and are informed by the specific context of Kolkata, the proposals speak across nations to the same sorts of services identified by Gunderson and Stevens.

In both cases, the library as a site of direct information access is embraced, as well as seeing the library as a potential point of contact between social workers and those experiencing poverty. Even if there is not a designated social worker present within the library, a member of the library staff could serve as a reference point to connect individuals to social workers or assistance programs, should they be sufficiently knowledgeable about the local resources. This knowledge is favored by virtue of libraries being staffed by those community members. As pointed out by Singha and Chaudhuri, libraries already serve as regional centers, allowing targeted assistance to individual populations. In the U.S., this can work on a county by county basis, and even within a county—such as Rockbridge—one can see how libraries serve individuals on a community by community basis. Ultimately, the library is still seen as a midway site between people experiencing poverty and the more specific programs directly suited to helping them. This perhaps is not a bad thing—there is a danger, if all possible suggestions are embraced, that a library or library system could become over-encumbered with the demands and needs of social work. The library is particularly suited as a site to connect people to services, but it is not ultimately designed—at least in its current manifestation—to take the place of a service work organization. Until librarians are specifically trained for understanding the causes and consequences of poverty, and until there is adequate funding to support both individuals doing social work and the programs in libraries, organizations like the Department of Social Services

should remain the primary social outreach organizations, with libraries serving as intermediaries and doing referrals.

The Libraries Transform Campaign reflects both how libraries see themselves interacting with communities and how they believe the communities see libraries. The campaign is a joint venture between the American Library Association and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, facilitated by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Richard Harwood, of the Institute, “believes that libraries are some of the most trusted institutions in our nation’s communities,” making them an important site to launch public campaigns (Brewer). The president of the ALA echoes this sentiment, stating “community engagement is such a critical part of librarianship today, and it is vital that librarians be skilled in this area. By helping libraries everywhere step into this role, we open new realms of possibilities for libraries and for communities” (Brewer). This reflects a library’s notion that the institutions are enmeshed in their communities, and are poised to actually enact change from that position. The UNESCO report highlights that libraries “often have the long-standing trust of communities,” and are therefore poised to do their work. Indeed, workshops like estate planning as hosted by libraries utilize the trust people have in the institution, such that when people are making serious financial decisions for themselves and their families, that the library is providing an accurate and trustworthy resource. However, as the library continues to tout their place in the community, there is a concern that they may be over-relying on this position. To be clear, it is valuable and essential that the libraries are enmeshed in their communities, staffed by members of the community, and serve the community. To have another system veer into the realm of paternalism. However, a library cannot rest on its bona fides of being a community organization and allow itself to become complacent. That this is the most common refrain from libraries is telling, both in its value but also in its risk to become just a buzzword.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When considering the operations of a library, one must consider the larger ethical framework in which the library operates. If this is a system intended to do good, there must be a conception of what “good” actually entails, and what it may look like. In this

case, I argue that a good library should work in a non-utilitarian fashion, and focus on upholding Nussbaum's capabilities. Utilitarianism is the moral and ethical principle that what is good and right is that which serves the greatest number of people, producing the maximum amount of utility. This may seem attractive for a public resource like a library, which is collectively funded by taxpayers. However, this principle begins to fall apart when one considers the position of the minority or those living in the margins of society, in this case namely people experiencing poverty. If a utilitarian policy serves the majority, then those in poverty will not necessarily be served by the policy. For effective intervention, procedures must be aimed at those whose experiences are more uncommon, less standardized, but no less valuable.

In practice, this dichotomy may manifest in the library by showing how utilitarianism does not necessarily serve people and how targeted acknowledgement of the minority's conditions can lead to more effective intervention. The Census estimates that 77.9% of Rockbridge County households between 2016-2020 have home internet subscriptions (Census). This would suggest that nearly one in five members of Rockbridge County does not have reliable home internet access. The Rockbridge Regional Library has, on the main page of their website, a variety of resources aimed at career and personal development. These include online career prep, online learning courses, and job help—this job help consists of resume assistance, interview tips, assistance on filling out unemployment forms, and application coaching. These resources all, however, presume that people can access them and have sufficient computer literacy to use them. This is not an inherent failing of the library—it can be viewed as the most effective distribution of resources. For people who do have home internet, it can be very beneficial to not have to journey to the library to use these services. However, it should be kept in mind that those people who do not have home internet access and therefore cannot access these personal and career development tools are more likely to be the people for whom those tools are intended. Those experiencing poverty are now more likely to be cut out from the services intended to alleviate poverty.

By contrast, the Rockbridge Regional Library recognizes and serves the internet connectivity needs of the community by offering 10 mobile hotspot devices available for checkout. These mobile hotspots—portable internet access points—demonstrates the library's sensitivity to the issues of internet access in the community. Now, a person who

may have a phone that can connect to the internet but does not have home internet subscription can utilize an independent point of access. One may contend that the public computers at the library are enough internet access for the general population. This is an accurate notion, but not a comprehensive one. While the public computers and public internet access offered by the library do permit people without internet access a terminal into the online world, they lack the privacy that others take for granted with private, home based internet. If we accept that people living in poverty inherently possess and deserve to be treated in accordance with their human dignity, then it is not enough to have equal access to things—there must be equitable and just comparative services. This means, in the case of internet access, having a way to give people a sense of privacy, that what they do can happen within their own homes without being viewed by the public at large in the library.

In this way, libraries begin to show how they can take a capabilities approach to human dignity, as elaborated upon by Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum defines ten central capabilities: Life; Bodily Health; Bodily Integrity; Senses, Imagination, and Thought; Emotions; Practical Reason; Affiliation; Other Species; Play; and Control Over One's Environment (Nussbaum 33). The capabilities most directly related to libraries and library services are Senses, Imagination, and Thought; Practical Reason; and Control Over One's Environment. Senses, Imagination, and Thought specifically are detailed to include "literacy and basic mathematic and scientific training," which are essential services provided by libraries and the ones most commonly conceptualized through the notion of a library as a place of learning and repository of knowledge (Nussbaum 33). It is other capabilities, like Control Over One's Environment, that is upheld by initiatives like the mobile hotspot, which enables a person to have that control over their privacy and an ability to engage with the online world at their own discretion. Control Over One's Environment can also be exercised by viewing the library as a refuge for those experiencing homelessness, as they take themselves out of the elements.

In my community engagement work over my four years as a Bonner within the Shepherd Program, I have had the opportunity to see firsthand how privacy and dignity concerns are expressed by people experiencing poverty. Often on a call on the RARA HelpLine, a client will express a sentiment somewhere along the line of "I've never needed help like this before," and that it was difficult for them to reach out for help.

They say this with some element of shame in their voice, as if it is a personal failing that they are needing assistance for rent or utilities. RARA upholds strict confidentiality policies both because we handle sensitive information such as addresses and dates of birth, but also because clients have the right to control who knows what about their lives. There should not be a stigma around needing aid, but such a stigma around poverty does currently exist. As part of the application process, HelpLine volunteers ask if clients have utilized other RARA programs, or if they have received aid from the Department of Social Services such as SNAP or Fuel Assistance. While SNAP tends to have higher knowledge around it, clients often are unsure what Fuel Assistance is and hesitant about applying for it, as they see the Department of Social Services as too bureaucratic to assist, or are unwilling to officially apply for government aid. People have a right to control how they see themselves and how they carry themselves in the world. Respecting human dignity includes respecting a person's autonomy, even if the exercise of their autonomy means they do not end up utilizing services that can directly help them due to the stigma they perceive around it. But, as I referenced earlier, just as some are unwilling to use Department of Social Services resources, they are willing to utilize the library. Within those spaces, people deserve the same amount of privacy and respect to their capabilities as understood by any other service organization.

### **Recommendations**

With all this having been reviewed and discussed with regards to libraries, there remains a question of what exactly should be done. Different authors have different thoughts and opinions about the role libraries should play, and how they should address poverty and inequality in their communities. Drawing on the UNESCO report, which outlines five policy goals for libraries as they relate to literacy, I agree that libraries should be involved in policy discussions. The UNESCO report limits this to just conversations regarding literacy, as libraries are already engaged in literacy campaigns and know the needs of their communities, but I charge this to be expanded. Libraries and the people who staff them are intimately involved with the workings of their communities, and should be involved in guiding how those communities develop. I also agree with the proposals that “libraries should serve as a convenient hub where diverse groups can find relevant literacy materials and support. This includes materials, services

and activities for people with different literacy levels and abilities” (“Using Libraries”). This includes proposals for multi-lingual resources, which continues to expand accessibility. Crucially, policy recommendation number four calls for libraries to “institutionalize professionalization and invest in ongoing training for all library staff,” which they elaborate upon to mean “training should be provided to help library staff develop a service- and needs-based approach to modern libraries” (“Using Libraries”). This echoes the previously stated needs of library staff who are specifically trained for engaging in poverty work, and can serve as valuable resources.

Continuing on the theme of training, I believe that library science as a discipline should see institutional recognition of the way the discipline is intersecting with the issues of poverty and inequality, and work to begin the formal training of librarians in this field during their graduate education. This will have two benefits. Firstly, when everyone is trained with sensitivity to poverty and human capability, all libraries become more capable of responding to these issues in their own communities. There are not just single individuals who are specifically trained for these issues, and therefore limited in where they can help. The diversification out from the single individual also reduces the cost of hiring that person—they would no longer be a specialist, which could conceivably reduce the cost of staffing that libraries face.

My final direct proposal is just that libraries continue to be funded, and that there be specific consideration for the disbursement of funding and grants to libraries that have been historically underfunded. Drawing on the issues of technology in “The Access Gap,” libraries should be as close to the cutting edge of technology as possible to equip their patrons with the skills needed to navigate the modern world. Inadequate technology and resources are not sufficient, and there should be a mechanism for increasing funding. This likely should not fall to local taxpayers, as the libraries that lag behind are noted to likely be in poorer areas, and increasing the financial burden on the patrons is not the solution. However, a federal grant system could be an option, and seen as an investment both in America’s people, communities, and future.

## **Conclusion**

In their paper “How Do Low Income People Form Survival Networks? Routine Organizations as Brokers” authors Mario L. Small and Leah E. Gose draw on brokerage

theory to understand how people form community and utilize institutions for their mutual benefit. The work examines how mediators, people or organizations that bring people together—referred to as a “broker” in this paper—create ties via a process of interaction. Small and Gose identify how brokered relationships can resource outcomes in the form of emotional support, information, services and material goods, generalized exchange, a sense of belonging, and access to other organizations (Small and Gose). Specifically within the context of the library, Small and Gose reflect on another study that found that the space of the library reduced a sense of loneliness, The intersection between libraries and information needs has already been discussed within this capstone, but relationships developed within the library can facilitate the further access of information. Finally, especially in the way of connecting organizations to organizations, Small and Grose describe how the theory of connection “provided their own resources and opportunities” to further human flourishing (Small and Gose 103).

The point within the article ultimately being that libraries as an entity are positioned to be both a point of connection to the individual patron and to connect the patron to other entities. These networks of mutual support become an integral part of the community, and in some ways perhaps become the community itself. The more time people spend together and the more time people engage in their institutions, the better they find these services and the better connections are formed. In the case of the library, this recursively benefits the services that can be provided—the more a system or service is used, the better its chances of being a long term program. In my introduction I spoke about my experience working with a technology education outreach program, but this program was ended during the term of my volunteering due to low turnout for the sessions. Community is shown as valuable by community engagement.

In the ways that we consider what services a library should or should not provide, people must be conscious about what expectations they project upon patrons. Complicated and nuanced expectations like the Literacy Myth must be confronted so that libraries can be used for the resources that they are, and not limited by a narrow understanding of services. Indeed, with the right mindset and consideration of suggestions by myself or other professionals, the library can be transformed into a space much more capable and effective of intervening into poverty.



Ultimately, libraries offer a form of intervention into poverty that must be understood for what it is, rather than projecting what people may want libraries to be. Firstly, there is an understanding that libraries are not neutral institutions—the ways we talk about knowledge and literacies, and how we communicate that information—are guided by social forces. This manifests in things like embedded social measures that reinforce barriers against lower income patrons: things like library fines. At the same time, a library cannot be neutral, and should not strive to be—a library should intend to do good in its community for its community members. However, there must be a consideration for how this work is done. In a classical utilitarian framework, libraries do not actually stand to help their most marginalized patrons, instead focusing their services and efforts elsewhere. However, with targeted and deliberate forms of intervention that recognizes and embraces the needs of the community, libraries serve to provide very meaningful assistance. Libraries have programs and services that can be of great value to patrons--resume assistance, job resources, community information--in an environment outside of the traditional social services framework. The library as an institution cannot be expected to replace the social services that already exist, but instead recognize its unique place in the community to maximize its good and uphold its community members' ability to live dignified and flourishing lives.

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