

Changing Models of Library Practice to Benefit Rural Communities

Changing Models of Library Education to Benefit Rural Communities

Abstract

Rural libraries whose librarians have expertise in digital literacy and a deep understanding of unique communities contribute to improving quality of life for residents. However, many library education programs do not include the development of students as future leaders of community growth. In this article we describe efforts to build on prior research in the Appalachian region. Offered by Texas Woman's University School of Library and Information Studies (TWU SLIS), a designated Hispanic-serving institution in Texas, the program extends library roles by getting librarians out into their communities, working with community leaders and residents to facilitate needed and wanted change.

Introduction

Texas Woman's University School of Library and Information Studies was awarded \$397,265 in community anchors project grant funding, with \$179,917 in cost share, under the IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarians program in 2018. *Transforming Libraries into Community Anchors in Rural Texas (TLCART)* provides financial support for student's online, asynchronous learning in a 24-month program of study resulting in ALA accredited Master of Library Science degree with a specialty in community informatics (MLS/CI). The project was intended to demonstrate a new model for education for public librarianship, by incorporating community informatics in which students will engage in community development activities including needs assessment, stakeholder analysis, grant writing, and project planning, all within a real-world framework of their own small and rural communities.

Students have been selected based on characteristics that include their residency in, or access to, small, rural Texas communities, minority status, and community engagement. In this paper we describe planning and recruitment for the TLCART project. Institutional Review Board approval was given for analysis of documentation provided by applicants and cohort demography as a precursor to ongoing research.

The TLCART Program

Community Informatics, as a way of viewing library practice, entails a fundamental change in perspective. As Pateman (2014, np) states,

In order to identify needs, libraries must go much further than passive consultation and actively engage and involve all sections of the local community in the planning, design, delivery and evaluation of library services. The community is an expert in its needs. The library worker becomes an enabler, facilitator and co-producer of library services with the community. This requires a number of fundamental shifts in attitudes, behaviours and values.

The TLCART scholarship program was designed to support a cohort of students empowered to engage effectively with their communities, within and beyond the walls of libraries, to broaden the reach of existing information services and create sustainable, community-defined solutions to issues of shared concern. Librarians educated through this program will establish their libraries as anchor institutions within their communities by identifying assets and needs, and partnering with community organizations to enhance broadband access, build coalitions, and support the health, education, and wellbeing of residents in their own communities. Their contributions in rural libraries as community anchors will help support positive change.

The focus of the TLCART educational program, Community Informatics (CI), uses information and communication technology (ICT) to facilitate desired changes in communities.

Gurstein, a pioneer in CI, defines the discipline as

a technology strategy or discipline which links economic and social development efforts at the community level with electronic commerce, community and civic networks and telecentres, electronic democracy and on-line participation, self-help and virtual health communities, advocacy, cultural enhancement, and others” (2000, 1).

The very purpose of this project, and central to its modeling for other LIS programs, is to develop a new generation of librarians highly competent in using data and technology to empower their own communities. In the spirit of Community Informatics, learning goes not just one way from librarians as experts to residents, but *all* ways, with interdependency, shared ownership and disparate expertise, and shared learning for sustainable solutions unique to communities. As a form of participatory research, CI engagement prioritizes trust in relationships between the parties involved -- in this case, MLS/CI students and community residents, including organizations (Parra et al 2015).

The conceptual model for TLCART is particularly informed by the work of Dr. Bharat Mehra and colleagues at the University of Tennessee (multiple publications, e.g.: 2011, 2016, 2017) funded under the IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program and entitled *Rural Library Professionals as Change Agents in the 21st Century: Integrating Information Technology Competencies in Southern and Central Appalachian Region (ITRL)*. Courses in the ITRL program combined focus on information technology and rural librarianship, enabling flexible tailoring for each student, aligned with formal and informal mentoring throughout. Participants were paraprofessionals as a condition of recruitment, so that their studies were greatly enhanced

with workplace experience. The program was delivered completely online as synchronous distance education.

In Kentucky, a three-year IMLS-funded program targeted counties identified as low-income, and recruited library staff without library education. Examining the state for evidence of highest needs for education, low income, joblessness, and poverty led to the identification of 50 target counties for recruitment to a three year program at a technical college, partnered with a university for ‘seamless’ progression between degree programs. As a result, 67 individuals were funded to work toward a library associates, bachelors, or masters degree program, depending on their initial status. The program provided a technology stipend, included mentoring match-ups via a ‘catalog’ of mentors that participants could peruse to find shared interests, and supported attendance at library association conferences of students’ choice (Almquist 2013).

Visionary leaders in LIS and nonprofit organizations advocate change in practice as a result of large-scale cultural shifts. In his landmark book Atlas of New Librarianship (2011), Lankes has called for new librarianship with increased community engagement, and even facilitator roles, in bringing about desired change by collaborating with community stakeholders. In saying “... seeing technology as the sole driver for change is short-sighted in the extreme...” (p.3), Lankes moves away from focusing on technology and toward the centrality of the librarian as a member of the community and a key facilitator for change. Technology, he claims, is so ubiquitous that our previous references to ‘e’ this or that is outmoded; it is simply the information itself, the communication (independent of channel) that is our means of practice. And yet, it is not possible to ignore the need for ‘enough’ technological capability – resources and skills – to be able to participate in this grander conversation, and in bringing about change. Our view, from academia and in other privileged, technology-rich environments, may be insufficiently informed by the

perspectives and needs of others, even failing to consider diverse contexts. The program aims to explore, enable, and engage, through those we educate.

The Assets-Based Community Development (ABCD) model (e.g., Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, McKnight, 2013, 2017), already in use in TWU SLIS educational preparation, provides guidelines for lifting up communities from within by identifying desired change, and facilitating alliances among stakeholders with skills, expertise, and passion to enact those changes. In direct contrast to the traditional need-based planning, ABCD flips the perspective to *assets* of a community and its members: skills, knowledge, dreams, and resources. What can be done with this approach? The idea is sustainability in a community-supported development project that is created in concert with the community itself, suited to a very nongeneric context, but built on a solid infrastructure of process.

Assumptions of the TLCART Program

Supporting communities is a needed and desired goal for librarians, and that doing so in an ethical and intentional manner will be valued by the communities engaged. Small rural communities will benefit from the involvement of our cohort members in expanding the role of libraries in their towns. TLCART will engage willing participants as students, mentors, and invested community stakeholders to facilitate community success. The cohort model, proven effective in previous projects, will continue to be an effective educational strategy for peer support among students and will enrich interactions between faculty and students, and between students and their local communities.

Small and Rural Communities: A Continuing Digital Divide

Lack of access to increasingly digital services and resources contributes to growing disparities for small and rural communities across the United States, impacting residents' quality of life. Residents in rural communities fare significantly worse than those in urban areas in terms of per capita income, education, health, employment, and tend to be older (RHI Hub 2017; U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census). This particularly impacts minority populations, as “the geographic isolation and relative segregation of rural minorities living in majority-minority census tracts continues to be an important component of poverty and substandard housing in many rural and small town communities” (Housing Assistance Council, p.2).

Jobs lost in the recession are not being recovered at anywhere near the same rate as those in urban areas (US Dept. of Agriculture Economic Research Service). Jobs that once formed the core identity of small communities are often no longer available. As Theide, et al., have said, “How do you communicate your communal identity when the work once at the center of that identity is gone?” (2017, p.4). This is not to say that small and rural communities are in any way lesser; instead, unique skills and knowledge reside distant from urban centers, and they should be valued. Rural communities are not homogeneous; they are diverse and have unique local characteristics and issues (Bolin, Bellamy, Ferdinand, et al. 2015). This means any initiative for improvement must use an approach appropriate to the locality to capitalize human and other resources among local stakeholders to facilitate positive and sustainable community changes.

In Texas as elsewhere, projected trends in urbanization suggest that the decline of rural populations “could leave large areas of Texas with more limited access to employment, medical care, educational opportunities, and other goods and services” (Texas Demographic Center 2017). Texas ranks second in size and population among all states, and according to the 2010

Census, more than 95% of the land in Texas is rural and home to more than 15% of the state population, with just under 25% of all Hispanic individuals in the entire nation living in rural and small-town Texas (Housing Assistance Council 2012). The 172 rural counties in Texas are experiencing severe workforce shortages for teachers, social workers, and healthcare workers (Ayala 2017, Hawkins 2015, and Horton 2016).

Libraries in Texas' small rural communities serve as primary connection points, but only 6% of Texas libraries have the minimum broadband speed recommended by the FCC (Siwinski 2017), and most rural Texas libraries do not have an MLS librarian. Librarians in rural communities throughout America face multiple challenges, including lack of sustained funding, limited digital access in public libraries, limited digital literacy, outdated equipment, inadequate staffing, and lack of professional training and education to assist with civic engagement and community development (Real, Bertot and Jaeger 2014).

The Texas Legislature appropriated \$1 million in its 2018 state budget to support broadband Internet in rural libraries. With these funds, a consultant hired by the Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC) will help up to 100 rural public libraries apply for E-rate funds to bring low-cost high-speed internet connections to their communities. More recently, a Microsoft study found that while the FCC has claimed complete coverage in rural areas (FCC 2018), the reality is far different: outside of town centers, access drops precipitously (Lohr 2018 and Smith 2018).

The TLCART Team

The table below identifies and describes the function of TLCART team members.

Table 1. TLCART team members

Recruitment

Recruitment for inclusion in the TLCART program has specifically focused on individuals living or working in rural communities, prioritizing Hispanic individuals. A separate application instrument with specific factors directly related to the project was used to review admission applicants in terms of their ethnicity and race, residency in or access to a small or rural area (population under 25,000), aptitude and interest in community informatics, technological proficiency, and demonstrated community engagement.

Geographically, Texas has been divided into 10 regions by the Texas Library Association (TLA) (see Figure 1). Project personnel led the recruitment efforts targeting communities in the border regions, encompassed by TLA Districts 4, 6, and 10, or West Central Texas, South Texas and the Rio Grande Valley, most with substantial Hispanic populations, with activities including electronic dissemination of project information flyers, virtual open house webinars, and on-site visits in El Paso, McAllen, and Brazoria County. Coordinated efforts also include exhibit attendance at Texas Library Association Annual Assembly, and direct email communications with small public libraries in Texas which have received E-rate funding.

Located on the southernmost U.S. border with Mexico, the fast-growing Lower Rio Grande Valley, for example, includes four counties with high percentages of Hispanic residents and individuals living in poverty, according to the 2010 Census: Cameron (88.1% Hispanic, 33% poverty rate), Hidalgo (90.6% Hispanic, 32.8% poverty rate), Starr (95.7% Hispanic, 37.6% poverty rate), and Willacy (87.2% Hispanic, 37.2% poverty rate) (United States Census Bureau). Comparing poverty rates for these counties against the findings of a recent Pew Internet study suggests that between 53-71% of homes have broadband, far less than those whose income meets

or exceeds \$75,000 (87% with broadband), a 20% discrepancy. Disparities in access are also ethnically based: with 47% of Hispanics having broadband at home, versus 72% of whites (Pew Research Center 2018).

Applicant materials included applications to the TWU Graduate School, SLIS, and to the TLCART program. Aside from location, ethnicity, and community engagement, factors in selection decisions also included technological competency. Application packets were assessed holistically, including admission essays, prior work and education, and open-ended responses in both the TLCART application and a follow-up, indepth survey. Scoring and assessment of application materials was done by PI and Co-PI, with discussions to clear all ambiguities or areas of disagreement.

Figure 1. Texas Library Association regions.

Descriptive statistics in this section provide a portrait of the final cohort who will participate in the TLCART scholarship program. From 62 initial applicants, 20 (32%) were chosen after meeting selection criteria. General incoming applications for the MLS program were also scrutinized for possible eligibility, with several people invited to apply.

Measures of rurality were determined with the use of Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes (RUCA), a designation used by the United States Department of Agriculture, using census tracts, “the smallest geographic building block ... based on data from the 2010 decennial census and the 2006-10 American Community Survey (ACS)” (US Dept. of Agriculture 2016). In this schema, census tracts are given a score from 1 to 10, with 1 being the most urban. Following examination of the RUCA score, census tract areas were explored for information on minority demographics

and poverty levels using data provided by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). This second, more detailed layer is based on actual street addresses, taken from reporting provided by the Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council, which is mandated to report on census, income, and Metropolitan Area data (2018).

Nine of 20 cohort members (45%) live in census tract areas comprised of >75% minorities; 3 (15%) live in areas with 50-74% minority residents; 5 (25%) in areas with 30-49% minorities. 12/20 (60%) live in areas with populations that are at least 50% Hispanic. 17/20 (85%) live in areas where residents are at least 25% Hispanic. 15/20 (75%) are residents in areas that exceed the official poverty rate of 12.3%.¹ With a median age of 40.7 years, members of the cohort range from 23 to 65 years old. All possess bachelors degrees (a requirement for application to the graduate school), while 6 (30%) have earned prior graduate degrees, including 1 with an earned doctorate. Prior or current involvement in libraries ranges from no experience to director or executive directorship (see Table 2).

Table 2. Cohort library experience

Cohort Education

In the TLCART program, students will enroll in two courses per semester in a completely online, asynchronous learning mode using the Canvas Learning Management System. Of the 12 required courses, six are new. The existing program will be modified to frame student education

within the context of community engagement, including experiential learning. For example, the existing course, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), will highlight concepts relevant to the management of information and communication technology related to library and information work, such as databases, networking, and web technologies. It emphasizes social and ethical aspects of ICT as applied to libraries and information agencies. Six new courses are entirely dedicated to community informatics. For example, Grant Writing and Management enables students to gain the skills necessary to compete for community based funding, and Community-Based Project Design focuses on the study of design and social innovation and the role of libraries and nonprofits as community anchor institutions in society. The capstone will be a culmination of student learning outcomes for the informatics program through an organization and/or community-based interdisciplinary/interprofessional project supported through informatics and technology.

MLS/CI students will also be required to participate in a program capstone, which offers students an opportunity to apply what they have learned in community settings. The courses are:

Semester	Course
Spring 2019	Foundations of LIS (MLS required) Information & Communication Technology (MLS required and MLS/CI)
Summer 2019	Information Retrieval (MLS required) Community-Based Project Design (MLS/CI)*
Fall 2019	Information Organization (MLS required) Communities in the Knowledge Economy (MLS/CI)*
Spring 2020	Grant Writing & Management (MLS/CI)* Collection Development (MLS required)

Summer 2020 Information Sources & Services (MLS required)

Library Management (MLS required)

Fall 2020 Trends & Issues in Community Informatics* *or* Assessment in Practice
(MLS/CI)* *or* Medical Library Information: Consumer and Patient Health
Information
Capstone in Informatics (MLS/CI; to meet MLS practicum requirement)*

*Courses marked with an asterisk are newly developed for the CI focus. Most have been taught for 1-2 years prior to the MLS/CI program.

Scholarship funds will cover approximately 75% of students' costs, including participation in three Texas Library Association (TLA) annual conferences, which will also be used to orient students, provide face-to-face meetings with mentors as well as opportunities for students and the program staff to disseminate the results of their work.

Competencies

The TLCART MLS/CI educational program is based on the core ALA accredited MLS program with the following ALA Competencies-related learning objectives:

By the completion of their MLS program, students will be able to

1. Apply professional competencies in acquiring, organizing, delivering, and preserving information and knowledge;

2. Demonstrate evidence-based practice in professional decision-making;
3. Plan for community-embedded services to meet the needs of diverse constituencies;
4. Apply technologies to meet information needs in a variety of contexts;
5. Disseminate professional knowledge through venues such as teaching, research, publication, and service activities;
6. Plan for continuous, career-long professional development.

For the CI portion of the TLCART MLS/CI program, the following student learning objectives have been identified: Students will be able to:

1. Critically analyze the history, literature, settings, and purposes of community informatics;
2. Effectively use data, ICT and information resources to support the role of community anchor institutions;
3. Reflectively consider ethics, values, laws, diversity, and fundamental principles of participatory community engagement;
4. Successfully apply knowledge and skills in design and implementation of a community based project.

All TWU library students complete a 'Final Exam Portfolio' upon completion of coursework, which asks for two essays and three work products. The work products are comprised of three course assignments that students feel provide evidence of competencies acquired during the MLS program. They are accompanied by a 'Work Products' essay that makes the connections between documentary evidence and professional competencies clear. A second essay asks students to

provide a detailed narrative of their professional growth in the program, and a prioritized, concrete plan for continued learning beyond the degree's completion.

After being introduced to the ALA Competencies in their first course (Foundations of Library and Information Studies), TLCART cohort students will be using a new 'Competencies Tracker' to self-evaluate knowledge and skills throughout the program, and to identify personal priorities and methods for lifelong learning. A version of the Competencies Tracker was introduced to students enrolled in medical library courses since Fall 2018, based on the recommended competencies of the Medical Library Association (2017). Amended for TLCART purposes, students will respond to ALA and CI associated competencies at the end of each semester using an ALA-based MLS/CI Tracker set up in Google Sheets. While the Final Exam Portfolio asks students to look back over their entire MLS education, the Tracker enables course-level, more immediate reflection of competencies addressed each semester. Students can use the tracker to add notes about work products. A separate component suggests ways in which continued learning can take place (e.g., professional association memberships, journals, etc.). Doing so will aid in assessment for the program staff, as well as measuring students' perceptions of progress throughout the program and reinforcing connections between course-level learning objectives and a nationally-recognized list of desired skills and knowledge, strengthening cohort members' candidacy for future positions, while also introducing the idea of lifelong learning as a normal part of practice.

Mentorship

During the second semester of the program each *TLCART* student will establish a formal mentorship relationship with an alumnus of TWU with leadership experiences in public libraries . Mentors will provide additional guidance and support for *TLCART* students and establish a lasting relationship expected to extend to professional practice following degree completion. Special online spaces are set up in the Google and Canvas learning management systems for the *TLCART* cohort students, mentors, and project staff. The collaborative spaces will include access to specialized resources as well as discussion forums providing the opportunity for *TLCART* students to exchange ideas, socialize, and build community. Additionally, other virtual venues will be explored to facilitate intra-group communication. The online forum will also enable *TLCART* program staff to survey participants about their experience throughout their education, community-based activities, and dissemination activities.

Future research

Our future research plan, in addition to facilitating needed and wanted change through small and rural librarian involvement in communities, lies in understanding the needs of higher education students who are mostly minorities and reside in rural areas while obtaining their Masters in a completely online program.

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Table 1. TLCART team members

Team members:	Function
TWU	
Dr. Ling Hwey Jeng	Program Director and PI
Dr. Carol Perryman	Professor and co-PI
Sarah Merrill	Assessment Officer
Kelly Meyer	Facilitator, Mentorship & Practicum
Cynthia Englehart	Academic Advisor
Advisory Board Members	Affiliation
Dr. Will Senn	Emporia State University
Dr. Bharat Mehra	University of Tennessee
Mark Smith	Texas State Library & Archives Commission
Dana Braccia	Executive Director, Texas Library Association
Dale Saenz	Library Director, Laredo Community College
Ted Wanner	Director, Education & Membership Engagement, Texas Library Association

Figure 1. Texas Library Association regions.

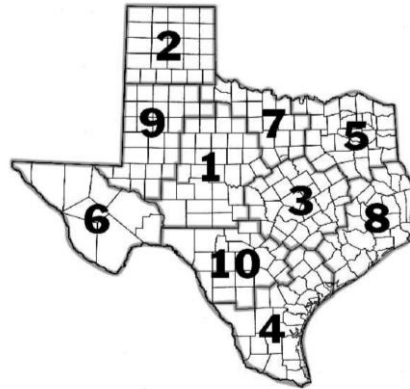


Table 2. Cohort library experience

Role	#	%
Director or Executive Director	6	30
Branch Manager or Assistant Director	2	10
Paraprofessional	6	30
Volunteer	5	25
No experience	1	5
Totals	20	100