

7-2007

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Recommended Citation

Fontenot, M. J. (2007). A Case for an Integrated Model of Community College and Public Use Libraries. *Public Libraries*, 46 (4), 46-49. Retrieved from https://repository.lsu.edu/libraries_pubs/231

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A CASE FOR AN Integrated Model OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND PUBLIC USE LIBRARIES

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Enrollment in community colleges and the construction of new public libraries is on the rise throughout the United States.¹ In an era of shrinking library budgets, some communities are compensating by constructing an integrated model that serves both the needs of community college students and the general public.² Such a joint system, the College Hill Library (CHL) in Westminster, Colorado, will be used as a case study for this article. In Westminster, the public library and Front Range Community College (FRCC) have merged to provide one library for both user communities. In this paper, some of the challenges in creating and maintaining a joint-use library will be examined, and arguments will be made for the widespread use of this model.

The Case Study

College Hill Library (CHL) was formed in 1995, due to the city of Westminster and FRCC both needing new facilities. Similar joint-ventures were already in place in California and Florida, so a visit was made to Broward County, Florida, to evaluate and ascertain the feasibility of such an option. Following this, an intergovernmental agreement between the Colorado State Board for Community Colleges and the city of Westminster was signed in 1995, architects were hired, and the process began. Costs were divided sixty/fifty between the community college and the city, respectively, for the building construction and ongoing maintenance, though each library paid for its collections. The new library opened in 1998.

Once completed, CHL's first floor was designated the Westminster Public Library, while the second floor was allocated as the FRCC Library. An information desk is located on the first floor for the public library, and a reference desk is located on the second floor for the community college library. Patrons, whether public or community college students, can use both the information and reference desks anytime. FRCC houses the

bulk of the formal reference collection. Both desks perform similar functions, and circulation desks are located on both floors and can be used by either type of patron. Materials that circulate can be checked out by any patron, public or academic, and there are no restrictions as to what type of book a patron can check out. The public library has a much larger circulation desk, designed to handle a much higher volume. Different circulation cards are issued for Westminster public residents and FRCC users in order to identify them, and for the college students to use for other functions, such as meal plans. The cards can be used at both circulation desks and to provide remote access to the library's databases. There is a higher concentration of database and Internet-accessible computers on the second floor for the community college users. Offices are separate, for the most part, while technical services and a lounge are shared. The collections are delineated by the Dewey and Library of Congress (LC) call number systems, and this is clearly explained in the shared online catalog to help avoid confusion.

At CHL, there are directors for both the community college and the public library. Both libraries have hierarchical organizational structures that are typical to most libraries. The employees of the public library section assist the employees of the community college section at the reference desk, and vice versa. Joint meetings between individual departments are encouraged and are helpful to foster communication between the two libraries.

Challenges

Staff buy-in is a real challenge in such a situation.³ Emotions and issues may run the gamut from "Will I lose my job?" to "We've been doing fine by ourselves!" to "How will we be able to serve the needs of such different clientele?" Involving as many of the staff of both institutions at the onset of such an endeavor will bode well for everyone in the long run. Convincing skeptics is a tougher challenge, but one that is critical to the success of a joint-use library. All levels of staff should be made aware of the ramifications of work flow in an integrated facility and educated in order to alleviate fear. Promoting interaction between staff and involving association at the beginning stages of the proposal all the way to final development is critical. Hopefully, when the decision to have a joint-use library has been made, those initially critical of the project (and perhaps unwilling to participate in planning for it) will be persuaded to support it. The majority of the staff, if not all, must

agree in order for such a project to have any hope of success.

In a joint-use library such as CHL, each separate library can maintain its own organizational structure—and in fact this may be an advantage—but communication between the two entities is imperative. If the model of two directors is chosen, it is of utmost importance that a good working relationship exists between the directors from the onset. During all director searches, it should be made clear that such a relationship with the other director is a requirement of the position. The directors should meet at least once a month to communicate what is going on in their respective libraries and see if there is a need for discussion regarding changes in policy.

While there is a concern over loss of identity with a combined library, there are ways to alleviate this. At CHL, as stated earlier, the public library collection is maintained on the first floor, while the community college collection is located on the second. The community college collection continues to use the LC call number system while the public library retains the Dewey Decimal call number system.⁴ The formal reference collection, which uses LC call numbers, is merged on the second floor, although a ready reference collection is available on the floor of the public library as well. The issue can be a territorial one, so advanced planning and cooperation among the employees is necessary.⁵

The home page and online catalogs can be a challenge and they may be some of the most territorial issues in this online age. Two separate home pages for each library may be maintained, although there is a definite shift toward incorporating access to the same information on both Web pages, albeit in differing ways. However, for clarity, separate home pages between the two institutions may be a necessity. Regular meetings between interested staff of the libraries or a formal Web page advisory committee (a strong recommendation) can keep libraries going in the same direction while maintaining their individuality and independence. A shared online catalog, such as the one at CHL, is the most practical option to pursue from both financial and logistical standpoints.⁶ Patrons will appreciate the merged system, as will computing systems personnel. Location fields and call numbers, especially if both libraries use different schemes, can be integrated into the system for ease of patron use.

Electronic resources can also be a challenge, especially in relation to cost sharing in these challenging economic times. With a dual clientele of college and public patrons, questions of FTE (full-time

equivalents) and public user population are important because of the overall cost. There will be databases that can be used by both clienteles, but there are also some that will be exclusive to a particular group and that individual library may need to decide whether it is willing to absorb the entire bill. It is important to get the division of payment for databases arranged in writing before embarking on such an endeavor. Keep in mind that FTE will control the costs, so if the library plans on making these databases available to populations outside of the library, there may be some additional costs. The libraries will also have to judge which of these databases are necessary to their clientele remotely. Another necessary step is to plan for future growth. In all likelihood, the patron base will grow over the years, so the administration should be prepared for these higher costs and demands.

Benefits

When budgets are tight, or land and construction of new projects is limited, that may be the perfect time for an enterprising municipality to consider the idea of a joint-use library. While many libraries and librarians are territorial in the interest of serving their patrons, the ramifications of such an experiment have worked out successfully to varying degrees in such states as California, Colorado, and Florida.⁷ As a profession that touts the sharing of resources as one of its hallmarks, would not an endeavor such as this bring that hallmark to a new level?



Serving the needs of two very different patron groups is a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. The integral part of the community college's service mission is usually based on educating students in a given geographical area (see FRCC's Web site at the end of this article), which lends itself well to the notion of a joint-use library. Many of the college patrons at the local community college may be adults who used the public library heavily as they were growing up. There is crossover in the nature of questions asked at the reference and information desks of the libraries. There is also the new experience and challenge of learning how to provide reference to two varied clienteles. Working at a community college reference desk may inspire a public reference librarian to integrate more teaching into a reference transaction with a patron, while working at a public library desk may give an academic reference librarian a much better understanding of public needs and how to work more efficiently and effectively in high-volume situations. Patrons may also find themselves in an advantageous situation, as high school students as well as nontraditional college students will both be in close proximity to a community college and the advantages of post-secondary and continuing education. Community college students have the advantage of a campus that is more than a traditional college campus. The possibilities for activities such as field experiments or surveys may also be enhanced for community college students by the proximity of the public in a joint-use facility.

How does this model benefit the patron? First and foremost, for both sets of patrons, (public and student), exposure to each other is educational in itself. The public benefits from the interaction with students as well as provides the opportunity for advanced and lifelong learning, which ties in nicely with the Association of College and Research Libraries' information literacy standards (www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm). The public can also benefit by having access to more scholarly materials that may not necessarily be available in the traditional public library. Students benefit from interaction with public patrons, as stated earlier, with the possibilities of projects and field studies in tandem with their traditional lecture format classes. The benefit of diversity that is normally seen in the traditional college setting is raised to a higher level with a joint-use facility serving both students and public. In this day and age of passion for all things electronic, including research, both groups benefit from having access to more—as well as atypical—databases that they might not normally have access to in the traditional campus or

public library. The advantages that children have in such a model are twofold. They will grow up with an exposure to post-secondary education to a higher degree than normal. Students who are majoring in fields such as education or nursing have the distinct advantage of informal exposure to children prior to launching their formal careers. In many respects and cases—and in my humble opinion—the advantages to the patron of this type of joint-use facility far outweigh the challenges involved in setting up and maintaining such an enterprise.

In conclusion, communication and planning from the outset are key components to the success of this kind of project. If you do not have the support of governmental agencies such as the library board, city council, and college administration, serious problems will be encountered. Involve members of both staffs and the public and academic communities at every step of the way, but especially at the initial proposal and planning processes. Get all agreements in writing at the very inception. In today's culture, an integrated facility is not always the best solution, but it is definitely a possibility that should be considered. While such an endeavor can be challenging, it can also be rewarding and to everyone's advantage. ■

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Web Sites of Joint-Use Libraries

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- www.frontrange.edu Front Range Community College, College Hill Library
- www.sjlibrary.org San Jose Public Libraries and the San Jose State University Library
- www.spjc.edu/centrallibonline/ St. Petersburg College Library Online
- www.spcollege.edu/scl Seminole Community Library
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