Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Assessing the Gap Between Intention and Implementation in Seed Lending Libraries

Reviewed by:
Hilary Jasmin
Information Specialist
Center for Evidence-based Policy
Oregon Health and Science University
Portland, Oregon, United States of America
Email: jasmin@ohsu.edu

Abstract

Objective – To survey seed lending programs in libraries on their goals and marketing. The research questions focus on the theoretical underpinnings of creating a seed library, the promotion and marketing materials used, and the gaps and connective points between the marketing and the underpinned intent, especially surrounding activism.

Design – Literature review and survey.

Setting – Academic and public libraries in the Seed Lending Network in the United States and Canada.

Subjects – Librarians responsible for seed lending programs identified on each library's website.

Methods – Online survey with a mix of open- and closed-ended questions covering reasons for starting seed lending and workshops and other programming around seeds.

Main results – 58 completed surveys were returned, 42 from public libraries and 16 from academic libraries. Some academic libraries who curate seed libraries do so in support of their agricultural degree programs, while others noted campus community gardens. Public libraries responded that their primary purpose was to support community gardeners; some less neutral responses included food deserts and rural libraries concerned about the loss of heirloom and non-GMO seeds. The marketing and programming around these programs primarily focused on gardening and how-to classes, including making paper with food scraps, creating natural dyes, and others. There is a gap between the initial intentions that were less neutral and the programming language that is more neutral and less activist.

Conclusion – Some surveyed seed libraries stated goals around food justice, but there is a gap between that intention and the more neutral marketing and programming for their seed libraries. This could be due to preservation in a precarious time for public libraries.

Commentary

Seed libraries have been studied in public and academic contexts, both as a programming offering and as an equity service for community food access (Dean & Mezick, 2020; Peekhaus, 2018; Roberson, 2016). Library neutrality has received a wealth of study as well (Gibson et al., 2017; Macdonald & Birdi, 2020), but this is a novel intersection of these topics. This is the author's first foray into the subject, according to their Google Scholar profile.

The study and survey instrument were appraised using the Descriptive/Cross-Sectional Studies tool by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2024). The study excels in its adherence to its research questions, and the survey instrument is appropriate for gleaning the information the author sought. The author acknowledges bias in the design, as it is impossible to design a study around neutrality without acknowledging the author's own definition of the concept. Regarding the study sample, seed libraries may exist in varied capacities and may or may not market these collections on their websites, so it's hard to determine if the size is adequate. The results are presented clearly but could have shown more cross-examination between programs that used neutral programming language and those that chose an activist frame. Additionally, in the coding of responses, "sustainability" is included as a neutral concept alongside "healthy eating" rather than more activist concepts like "food justice." This placement could certainly be debated, and an argument could be made that discussions of sustainability imply an activist lens.

There may also be bias by intentional omission in responses, especially considering funding precarity and political scrutiny. This is addressed by the author, and nuance should be used when discussing neutrality and considering these programs in the current climate. Apart from these critiques, this study of the gap between theoretical intent and promotion is of high value not just in seed library contexts, but in any context where goal setting for libraries is discussed.

As the author mentions, this article does not go deeper into the use and outcomes of seed libraries. This is an area other program coordinators may be able to explore and write up. It may be particularly interesting to compare programs with more explicit activist language and their program outcomes versus programs with more neutral marketing.

Implications for practice may be most applicable to public libraries and academic libraries with an agricultural component to the universities, but this could certainly expand to larger undergraduate campuses that offer access to community gardens, sustainability initiatives, and environmental student groups. A focus on libraries as non-neutral spaces has implications across all domains, and these conversations will have much broader implications as library budgets and political landscapes evolve.

References

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