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A Model of Community-Engaged Scholarship Across “Institutional Borders” to Assess the Role of Rural Libraries in Community Engagement in the Southern and Central Appalachia

Abstract

The paper explores a model of community-engaged scholarship developed in a planning grant entitled “Assessment of Rural Library Professionals’ Role in Community Engagement in the Southern and Central Appalachian Region: Mobilization from Change Agents to Community Anchors (CA2CA@SCA-RL)” awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services to the University of Tennessee, recently sub-contracted to the University of Alabama (July 2017 – June 2019). It provides insights bridging “institutional borders” at multiple levels to spotlight “invisible voices” of rural librarians and glimpses best practices in community engagement that might be relevant to other rural areas historically facing similarly challenging socio-cultural/socio-economic circumstances.

Keywords

Model of Community-Engaged Scholarship, Community Engagement, “Institutional Borders”, Rural Libraries, Southern and Central Appalachia.

1. Introduction

In keeping with the 2019 CAIS-ACSI conference theme of “Information Studies in the World: Conversations Across Institutional Boundaries” this paper briefly presents a model of community-engaged scholarship developed in a planning grant entitled “Assessment of Rural Library Professionals’ Role in Community Engagement in the Southern and Central Appalachian Region: Mobilization from Change Agents to Community Anchors (CA2CA@SCA-RL)” awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ (IMLS) Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian—FY 2017 Guidelines (Community Anchors Project Category) to the University of Tennessee (UTK), sub-contracted to the University of Alabama (UA) this year (July 2017 – June 2019). (For grant details, see URL: <https://scholar.cci.utk.edu/ca2ca-sca-rl/>). CA2CA@SCA-RL involved quantitative/qualitative data collection from rural librarians in the Southern and Central Appalachia (SCA) about their perspectives/experiences in community engagement and what past/current role they play in community-centered processes (Mehra, Sikes, and Singh, 2018). The model of community-engaged scholarship was developed through grant conceptualization/implementation in bridging multiple “institutional borders” to address SCA rural digital divides (Mehra, Sikes, and Singh, under review). CA2CA@SCA-RL spotlights unacknowledged “invisible voices” of rural

librarians and glimpses best practices/outcomes that might be relevant to other rural areas historically facing similarly challenging socio-cultural/socio-economic circumstances.

The U. S. Bureau of the Census defines “rural” as areas with fewer than 2,500 people and open territory (Economic Research Service, 2007). *The Encyclopedia of Rural America* defines the related concept of “nonmetropolitan” counties to describe housing developments outside the boundaries of metropolitan areas that have no cities with as many as 50,000 residents (Rathge, 1997, p. 627), in addition to being non-urbanized (Office of Management and Budget, 1998). The word “rural” in this paper reflects both meanings.

So far, CA2CA@SCA-RL’s community-engaged scholarship has involved collaborations with state, county, and other SCA rural libraries to research their community engagement alliances and facilitated framework development and action plan for them moving forward. The SCA is an ideal location to conduct this work because the Appalachian region has traditionally faced economic, social, and cultural challenges that have adversely affected its residents (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2010; Fritsch and Gallimore, 2007). Select research is now beginning to assess the region’s assets, including rural library efforts, and how they are overcoming their past challenges (American Library Association, 2011; ARC, 2015a; Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II, 2017a). CA2CA@SCA-RL is such an example of how the library is and can play a central role in community engagement to bridge rural digital divides and develop sustainable economic viability.

2. The Context of Need for the CA2CA@SCA-RL

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) (1974), created as a United States federal-state partnership, identifies Central Appalachia to include: West Virginia’s nine southernmost counties, eastern Kentucky, Virginia’s southwestern tip, and the northwestern portion of Tennessee’s Appalachian area (Bush, 2003), while Southern Appalachia includes most of Appalachian Virginia and Tennessee as well as the western Carolinas and the northern parts of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.

The SCA has experienced “double jeopardy” owing to:

- A history of logging, coal-mining, and geographic isolation that generated a psychological dis-connect, perpetuated in a “religiously and politically conservative climate”, leading to impoverished conditions, limited availability of resources/technology, illiteracy, amongst other debilitating circumstances (Fisher and Smith, 2012; Ludke and Obermiller, 2012; Mehra, 2017; Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II, 2016a).
- Images during early 20th century of “yellow journalism” and their solely sensationalist coverage of deficit aspects that persisted in public imagination, academic/scholarly discourse, and news coverage until recent times (Cooper and Terrill, 2009; Drake, 2003; Escott, Goldfield, McMillen, and Turner, 1999; Eller 2008).

The SCA is part of the 205,000 square mile area around the Appalachian Mountains where in August 2017, out of its total 420 designated counties, 84 were distressed, 115 were at-risk, and 208 were transitional (ARC, n.d.a). Forty-two percent of Appalachian region residents live in rural areas, compared with 20 percent of the national population (ARC, 2015b) with two-thirds of the Appalachian counties with populations less than 50,000 people, and 125 counties with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). These rural communities have historically experienced limited financial opportunities, low information literacy, inadequate information technology, amongst other marginalizing circumstances (Mehra and Singh, 2017; Mehra, Singh, Hollenbach, and Partee II, 2017; Spatig et al. 2009). Over 2.5 million people reside in

rural areas of the Appalachian region (ARC, n.d.b.; Mehra, Singh, and Sikes, 2018). According to the IMLS' Public Library Survey, there were almost half (46.8%) rural libraries of the total 8,956 public libraries in the United States (Swan, Grimes & Owens, 2013). This same study found that although per capita revenue had decreased over a three-year period, visitation and circulation had increased for small and rural libraries. CA2CA@SCA explores community engagement in all kinds of SCA rural libraries though public libraries are a significant stakeholder group. This paper spotlights an instance of community-engaged scholarship with rural libraries that are playing a constructive role in their asset management and local capacity building to overcome past socio-environmental limitations (Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II, 2018; Scruggs 2010). It challenges past solely deficit notions and parochial picture of the SCA and rural library environments painted in American society (Cash 1991; Cobb 2007; Wyatt-Brown 2008).

3. Community-Engaged Scholarship and Information Professionals

Community-engaged scholarship reflects a recent trend in the 21st century of North American colleges and universities (especially land-grant institutions) proactively applying their academic pursuits towards community building and community development (Harris, 2008; Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II, 2016b; Soska and Butterfield, 2004). The Higher Education Network for Community Engagement (2007) and the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, amongst others, call for "Collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Campus Compact, 2018). Dwindling economic resources in widespread regions have also brought about a demand for greater accountability of the universities' research-teaching-service activities (Gupton et al., 2014).

CA2CA@ is a unique action research (AR) example of collaborations between library and information science (LIS) researchers and rural librarians, together seeking to improve a situation in focused geographic regions (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). CA2CA@SCA-RL AR characteristics include community participation at varied levels in research and action, learning in collaboration, community inquiry into everyday experiences, mixed methods use, situated applications, and concrete outcomes (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Mehra, 2006; Rahman, 2008; Stringer, 1999).

4. CA2CA@SCA-RL Plan

The following project objectives were achieved to document SCA rural librarians' perspectives/experiences in community engagement:

Objective 1: Two online quantitative surveys provided SCA rural librarians' feedback (from paraprofessionals, staff, managers/directors) of existing (n=126) and future (n=40) engagement initiatives regarding their "aboutness", partners, challenges, and outcomes in eleven domains including: agriculture, diversity, economy, education, environment, government, health, information technology, law/justice, manufacturing/industry, and social welfare.

Objective 2: Thirty rural librarians in 15 qualitative interviews and five focus groups (with three librarians each) discussed their role as community anchors to conceptualize a community engagement framework prototype identifying potential actions, resources, and best practices.

Objective 3: The team has drafted deliverables (*Community Engagement Framework & Strategic Action Plan*) based on the above feedback and input from an advisory board of 11 rural librarians who also assisted in project planning/design/implementation.

Other publications will share these details (e.g., Mehra, Sikes, and Singh, forthcoming; etc.). This paper explores the CA2CA@SCA-RL’s community-engaged scholarship in bridging multiple “institutional borders” to overcome SCA rural digital divides. CA2CA@SCA-RL is serving as pilot experience and assessment test-bed to expand using similar strategies for rural environments nationwide based on future funding (Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II, 2017b). To train future professionals provide better services, we are integrating grant experiences into the LIS classroom/curriculum, sharing at regional/national conferences, and publishing in professional journals. Expected outcomes will provide generalizable data on how rural libraries empower/engage communities, develop/test deliverables from systematic collection of rural datasets, and expand research of rural library community engagement.

5. Bridging “Institutional Borders”

This paper represents meanings emerging from media culture and cultural studies’ symbolic multimodality perspective of “borderlands” (in the plural) conceived as “complex, constructed, impure hybrids, with crucial overlaps” that are contextualized, dialogic, and assume critical interpretations in the CA2CA@SCA-RL and its rural settings (Fornas, 2002, p. 89). It resonates with metaphorical borderland research of its assessment of pedagogies, epistemologies, and educational practices as “symbolic barriers that divide communities along race, class, gender, and sexual orientation lines, academic disciplines, and organizational structures” (Elenes, 2006). The paper’s use of “institutional” also relates to a symbolic recognition of structure (as in social movements) in its demarcation of knowledge/phenomenon topics into distinct areas of scrutiny (Goodwin, 2003). The paper highlights the bridging of CA2CA@SCA-RL’s “institutional borders” according to multiple levels of functional categorizations represented in Table 1.

Sr. No.	Element	Description	Application in CA2CA@SCA-RL
1.	Approach	The strategy.	CA2CA@SCA-RL’s community-engaged scholarship.
2.	Who	Stakeholders involved as initiators and subjects of scrutiny.	LIS researchers engaging in scholarship with rural librarians about their external stakeholder collaborations.
3.	What	Object of scrutiny.	Community engagement in eleven domains and their “aboutness”, partners, challenges, and outcomes.
4.	Why	Underlying motivations shaping community-engaged scholarship.	Assessment of SCA rural librarians’ role in community engagement (unacknowledged/“invisible”).
5.	Where	Area of stakeholder involvement; implementation of community-engaged scholarship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration across two institutions (UTK and UA). • Feedback from rural librarians in ten SCA states.
6.	How	Methods used in community-engaged scholarship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two online surveys. • Interviews/focus groups. • Summit discussions. • GIS and website representations.
7.	Deliverables	Identifies the emerging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-engaged framework and strategic action

		tangible/intangible products/outcomes.	plan. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GIS visualizing representative best examples. • Strengthened stakeholder relationships across “borders” to generate future resource-sharing collaborations.
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Table 1: CA2CA@SCA-RL’s model of community-engaged scholarship bridging multiple “institutional borders.”

6. Conclusion

Though the paper focus is not on detailed analysis of best practices emerging in the CA2CA@SCA-RL, the following glimpse provides possible application in other rural settings:

- Adopting the aboutness-collaborators-challenges-outcomes strategy to document community engagement is practical/useful in describing rural library efforts.
- Conducting an inventory of engagement alliances in the eleven domains paints an extended picture of rural libraries’ impact across “institutional borders.”
- Applying multiple research methods (including GIS) tells holistic story of rural library experiences.
- Engaging rural libraries and others across boundaries (e.g., SCA states) strategically strengthens alliances and future resource-sharing.

CA2CA@SCA-RL’s next step involves organizing a summit in Tennessee and possibly another in Alabama to discuss operationalizing grant deliverables (e.g., framework, strategic action plan) with key stakeholders. The CA2CA@SCA-RL’s model of community-engaged scholarship allowed us to bridge multiple “institutional borders” to overcome SCA’s rural digital divides and highlight rural libraries’ positive efforts. The model elements of approach-who-what-why-where-how-deliverables in the CA2CA@SCA-RL addressed an urgent concern in providing visibility to SCA rural librarians’ work that has been overlooked/marginalized in past efforts (to get replicated in future studies). Applying AR led to development of tangible information-related products through local collaborations with key partners who benefited in the region. This paper urges information science professionals to get involved in community-engaged scholarship with their rural stakeholders and further their impact in community development. The study offers possibilities of extending best practices to other rural areas beyond the SCA region.

Acknowledgments

The authors appreciate the IMLS grant reported in this paper. We also acknowledge contributions of research respondents and CA2CA@SCA-RL partners including: 1) Blount County Public Library, TN (<http://www.blountlibrary.org/>); 2) Clinch River Regional Library, TN (<http://sos.tn.gov/products/tsla/clinch-river-regional-library>); 3) Library of Virginia, VI (<http://www.lva.virginia.gov/>); 4) Sevier County Public Library System, TN (<https://www.facebook.com/SevierCountyPublicLibrarySystem/>); 5) Wiggins Memorial Library, NC (<https://lib.campbell.edu/>).

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