Connecting with Community: The Importance of Community Engagement in Rural Public Library Systems

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In the past twenty years, public libraries have undergone dramatic changes in response to a changing social and technological environment. As Scott (2011) observes, "Libraries today function as robust community centers, often providing services that people cannot get elsewhere." Martinez and Williment (2012) note "A number of Canadian public libraries are pioneering a new service delivery model, which emphasizes collaborative service development and delivery, with library staff and the communities the library serves." This community-led service model, although still relatively new, is being used successfully in a variety of urban Canadian public libraries. However it has particular value and relevance to rural public library systems, where library participation rates are traditionally lower than in urban systems. This study seeks first to define community engagement and then examines community-led initiatives in rural Nova Scotia public libraries, identifying the particular challenges faced by librarians in these rural communities.

In an analysis of the benefits of community engagement in the public sector, Rogers and Robinson define community engagement as "the opportunity, capacity, and willingness of individuals to work collectively to shape public life" (Roger & Robinson 2004). They go on to note that community engagement strives to achieve two main goals: more responsive public services and civil renewal. Essentially, engaging communities in public services, such as public library services, ensures that these services are appropriately tailored to the specific needs of the community, and also works to "foster

trust, generate networks, teach skills and empower those who are engaged" (Roger & Robinson 2004, p. 9). The benefits of increased community engagement can specifically be identified in reduced levels of crime and anti-social behaviours, and enhanced health determinants and educational achievement (Roger & Robinson 2004).

The province of Nova Scotia, with a total provincial population of under a million people, and only one urban centre, is otherwise primarily rural and sparsely inhabited (Statistics Canada 2014). Nova Scotia is facing particular demographic challenges resulting from significant population declines in rural communities, a consequence of the outmigration of youth, particularly youth aged 18-24 years of age, and little influx of new residents (Statistics Canada 2014). It is estimated that by 2016, over one third of the total provincial population will be aged 55 and over but in rural communities experiencing higher rates of outmigration, this percentage will be significantly higher, approaching 50% in some areas (Canmac Economics 2012).

Under the direction of the Provincial Librarian, the Nova Scotia Provincial Library provides leadership in the coordination of library services throughout the province. Nova Scotia's public library system operates through nine regional library systems that connect a network of seventy-eight branch libraries. Eight out of the province's nine library systems are comprised solely or mainly of rural branches. All public libraries in Nova Scotia operate under a population-based funding formula comprised of a combination of provincial, municipal, and community fundraising revenues (Suitor 2013). Since the population and the tax-base of rural communities in Nova Scotia are declining while the population of the urban centre of Halifax is experiencing modest growth, this funding strategy adds additional challenges to the eight

rural library systems as they struggle to serve widely dispersed populations at a time when costs continue to rise but funding is static or declining (Suitor 2013).

In 2003, almost one third of all Nova Scotians were registered library users, although the membership rate in rural Nova Scotia (an average of 24%) was significantly lower than in the urban centre of Halifax, where 45% of residents were public library cardholders (AHPRC, Coastal Communities Network 2003). Rural libraries have observed a noticeable decline in youth presence at the library and participation in programming, likely due in part to the fact that the number of youth residing in these rural areas is slowly dwindling (AHPRC, Coastal Communities Network 2003). With a smaller population of youth in their communities, rural public libraries in Nova Scotia must find new ways to increase patronage and draw users, including youth, into their branches. In many cases, appropriate programming is already in place, but is under-utilized. Community engagement strategies and community-led services may be a key to developing relationships with youth as well as with other community members, and encouraging them to become public library users and supporters. This strategy should result in more responsive library services and also in civic renewal, a key factor in the survival of rural Nova Scotia communities.

This study gathered information related to the current community engagement initiatives being practiced in rural Nova Scotian public libraries, particularly focusing on efforts to engage with youth of all ages (0-18 years), and situates these strategies on the community engagement continuum. A standard set of interview questions was developed, designed to gather data about the definition of community engagement being used, and the types of community-led initiatives currently being practiced, the youth presence in

each library system, and the types of youth programming being offered. Librarians from the eight rural library systems in Nova Scotia were interviewed by telephone.

Although none of these library systems has a formal policy addressing community engagement, community-led approaches are integrated into their strategic planning and operationalized in a variety of ways. The interviews produced an interesting portrait of the spectrum of community engagement initiatives being practiced in rural Nova Scotia and include community asset mapping, collaborative community partnerships and joint programming with a variety of community organizations, asset building for targeted underserved subgroups such as youth and those in geographically isolated areas, and focused relationship building in the community.

While there are clearly many challenges associated with community engagement and the development of community-led services in small rural communities, one of the clearest findings of this study was the passion with which public librarians in Nova Scotia work with the communities that they serve. Each librarian interviewed had strong beliefs about community engagement – what it is, how it is benefiting both their libraries and their patrons, and how it could be improved upon if with additional resources. Although they clearly face many frustrations and obstacles in their work to bring their libraries to their communities and forge strong community partnerships, they remain dedicated to this cause and are constantly pushing for improvements. One librarian effectively summed up the importance of community engagement to rural Nova Scotia with the observation: "It's our duty to be a good community partner and try and support [community engagement] initiatives in any way that we can … because the stronger and more healthy and more vibrant a community is, the better it is not just for the library, but

for the citizens that we serve." This fosters a cycle where people become more engaged

with the library and the community, which in turn encourages civic renewal, keeping

communities growing and strong within this province.

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