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Information Science Professionals as Community Action Researchers to Further the Role of Rural Public Libraries in Small Business Economic Development: A Case Study of Tennessee

Abstract
The paper explores how information science professionals as community action researchers and rural public libraries can support small business economic development in Tennessee that has a traditionally debilitating history and culture. It provides insights for possibly applying similar efforts to other rural areas facing difficult socio-economic and socio-cultural circumstances.

Keywords
Information Science Professionals, Community Action Researchers, Rural Public Libraries, Small Business Economic Development, Tennessee.

1. Introduction

In keeping with the 2016 CAIS-ACSI conference theme of "Information Science in our Communities: Reflections on our Work and the People, Places and Institutions Around Us" this paper briefly discusses the involvement of information science professionals as community action researchers in a planning grant entitled "The Role of Rural Public Libraries in Small Business Economic Development in the Appalachian Region: A Case Study of Tennessee" (PLSB-TN) recently (October 2014 – September 2016) awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services' National Leadership Grants for Libraries (Research Category) to the School of Information Sciences at the University of Tennessee[i]. PLSB-TN has involved collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback from small businesses and rural[ii] public libraries in the state to document their needs, wants, and expectations. So far, information science professionals have been involved in the PLSB-TN as community action researchers to organize preliminary planning activities, analyze existing needs and feasibility, solidify community partnerships, and develop initial work plans, blueprint, and a strategic action plan of a public library small business toolkit that will engage, energize, and strengthen ties between various stakeholders (Bishop, Mehra, and Partee II, 2016). PLSB-TN is serving as a pilot case experience and prototype assessment test-bed to expand strategies for the entire Appalachian region and other rural environments in the future (Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II, 2016).

2. The Context of Need for the PLSB-TN

As part of the mid-south buckle of the Bible-belt in the United States, Tennessee's geographic location, racialized history, and conservative politics has drawn controversial attention in recent years. Embedded in a broader stereotyping and marginalizing of the "South" (Cooper and Terrill, 2009; Escott, Goldfield, McMillen, and Turner, 1999) Tennessee's traditionally challenging economic, social, and cultural conditions have adversely affected the population living here (Eller 2008, Mehra, 2014; Scruggs, 2010). Tennessee also forms part of the Southern and Central Appalachian (SCA) region[iii]. American society and the popular press have painted a parochial picture of the SCA belt and its rural library environments (Cash, 1991; Cobb, 2007; Wyatt-Brown, 2008) with their impoverished conditions and limited availability of resources and technology applications (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2010; Fritsch and Gallimore, 2007; Mehra et al., 2012; Mehra, Black, Singh, and Nolt, 2011) in a religiously and politically conservative climate with often hostile cultural conditions toward anyone who is different (Fisher and Smith, 2012; Ludke and Obermiller, 2012; Mehra and Gray, 2014). A recent report (Economic Development Research Group 2007) prepared by a research-based consortium identified collaborations between educational centers of learning (including libraries) and the workforce industry as an important potential impact variable to promote economic growth and cultural and economic development in the region's smaller communities. At the confluence of the "South" and the Appalachian cultural and historical influences, Tennessee's rural libraries now recognize the need to extend themselves towards promoting sustainable economic viability in the region (Mehra, Black, and Lee 2010; Mehra and Singh, 2015; Real, Bertot, and Jaeger, 2014). Information science professionals can play a significant role as educators, researchers, and practitioners to support their rural public libraries to develop meaningful connections with the small business community in this re-directed mission as well as adopt strategic directions towards community building and community development efforts in the state (Mehra et al, 2014; Mehra and Singh, 2014).

3. Information Science Professionals as Community Action Researchers

In the 21st century, information science professionals and the larger academic campuses in the United States are recognizing the significance of community (or civic) engagement to re-define their traditional notions of outreach and service that were earlier applied as add-ons to their teaching, instruction, and research agendas (Harris, 2008; Riddle, 2003; Soska and Butterfield, 2004). According to the Higher Education Network for Community Engagement (2007): "Increasingly, higher education institutions are intentionally connecting academic work to public purposes through extensive partnerships that involve faculty and students in active collaboration with communities. This idea of 'community engagement' is renewing the civic mission of higher education and transforming academic culture in ways that are both exciting and challenging" (para. 1). Community engagement in the information science professions represents a positive and progressive approach to build equitable partnerships between centers of higher learning and agencies external to the academic institutions via information-related work (Mehra and Robinson, 2009).

Action research contributes to both the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework. (Rapoport, 1970, p. 499). It is a valid research method in applied fields, providing outcome-based results, and suggesting direction for progressive change (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Stringer, 1999). Essential action research characteristics include decentralization, deregulation, and cooperativeness in execution to make possible transformations in social practice and

changes in the social institutions where they take place while re-defining relationships that support it (Mehra, 2006).

There is a natural (though not fully operationalized) intersection between the role of information science professionals and community action researchers owing to a common service-based ethics, focus on needs of local communities, and attention to rigor and details in praxis (Maack, 1997; Mehra and Braquet, 2007; Mehra and Sandusky, 2009). However, historically binding expectations and internally-and-externally imposed perceptions (Mehra, Rioux, and Albright, 2009) as mere storehouses of world knowledge and information providers (McCook and Jones, 2002) have limited the discipline from playing a more proactive role in shaping progressive social changes at the local, regional, and national levels (Harris, 1973; Muddiman, 1999).

4. Community Action Researchers in the PLSB-TN

The following salient aspects of the authors' involvement as community action researchers in the PLSB-TN are significant towards energizing and enabling rural public libraries in Tennessee to support small businesses in the state:

Practical Concern: In response to the slow economic development in the state, the PLSB-TN is developing a practical solution to address the problematic situation that has traditionally kept the state behind in terms of economic growth and economic revitalization.

Tangible Product: Gap analysis of the feedback provided by the two stakeholder communities is on-going and is providing a blueprint for the design of a public library small business toolkit for feedback from key partners in the region to develop a strategic action plan for its operationalization and implementation. It gives a ground-zero perspective of translating research into action that benefits local, regional, and national communities experiencing economic crises and facing challenges towards economic recovery.

Local Partnerships and Collaborations: By building initial stages of a public library small business toolkit with best practices and resources to facilitate economic recovery, economic development, and economic growth, the PLSB-TN helps strengthen ties between small business agencies and rural libraries. Based on data collected during the research the blueprint and preliminary strategic action plan gets tested and operationalized in the rural state and the Appalachian region.

5. Conclusion

In order to meet the challenges in the 21st century (Mehra and Davis, 2015) public libraries are getting out of their comfort zones and into their local and regional communities to engage with various stakeholders (e.g., K-12 schools, colleges, universities, non-profit agencies, government organizations, and others) (Mehra and Hernandez, 2016). This paper proposes information science professionals and rural public libraries to work together to support small business economic development in Tennessee that has been challenged, traditionally and chronically, by its history and culture. The case study offers possibilities for extending key lessons to other similar socio-economic areas beyond Tennessee.

As community action researchers in the PLSB-TN the authors are applying their skills as information science professionals in information organization-retrieval-management-dissemination processes (Mehra and Braquet, 2014) to develop potentially

viable solutions to the challenges being experienced across the state (Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II, forthcoming). These solutions are getting explored at various scales of inter-related application that include: 1) Development of a user/use-based model to represent the information context of small businesses; 2) Gap analysis of needs and expectations of multiple stakeholder groups; 3) Collaborative action research strategies between small businesses and rural public libraries towards economic development; 4) The process and development of a blueprint design of the public library small business toolkit. The experience is focused on information science professionals extending their roles as community action researchers to support rural public libraries in small business economic development.

Though we will present research findings regarding the toolkit blueprint in future publications, preliminary analysis is identifying information categories, query types, and particular information resources for rural public libraries to provide small businesses in the state. This is important in part because answers to seemingly simple small business-related questions are difficult for users to find online. Public libraries take tremendous pride as community referral agents (Black and Muddiman, 2005). Hence, rural public libraries can take several steps to improve dissemination of locally-relevant and regionally-appropriate information on their websites. The public library should serve as a virtual storehouse and reservoir to local small business information and its website needs to provide local content to make answering location-based questions easy for both users and non-local librarians. Tennessee's rural public libraries should also begin to collect local information related to small businesses to answer different types of questions in a knowledge base/service that may be of use to other library systems as well (Bishop, Sachs-Silveria, and Avet 2011). The findings from this research will get integrated in classroom and advising discussions, particularly for rural students enrolled in public library courses. The integration of the PLSB-TN research experience in the critical and emerging area of small business service planning and practical librarianship in the library and information science and business curriculum is also important. It will allow many future students to benefit from learning of skills that help them play a more meaningful role during harsh economic times towards economic development and economic growth in marginalized areas such as rural environments.

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[i] For more details about the PLSB-TN, see URL: http://scholar.cci.utk.edu/plsb-tn.

[ii] 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 the spread of housing developments outside the boundaries of metro 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 is used with regard to both the meanings.

[iii] The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) (1974), created as a Unites 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.