Making Connections: Challenges and Benefits of Joint Use Libraries as Seen in One Community

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This paper explores research relating to the challenges and benefits of joint use libraries and places these issues in the context of one community’s joint use library. In 2002, the Julia Hull District Library, located in rural Stillman Valley, Illinois, USA, entered into a contractual agreement with the village School District to move the library from a small family home, to a new facility which was built on to the Village high school. Originally, the partnership, as is common with joint library endeavors, was created for economic reasons: the school and library districts would share costs, materials, and resources for the benefit of local taxpayers to accommodate student and public patrons. While new opportunities to connect student and public library users through library programs and services have arisen, since the merger, the community has realized additional benefits and challenges foreshadowed by prior international research.

Introduction

Joint use libraries, simply defined as libraries where two or more library service providers form a partnership (Matthews, 2008), are becoming increasingly popular throughout the world as both librarians and patrons see the benefits that can be derived from such collaboration. In fact, for almost one hundred years, partnerships have existed where educational institutions housed public libraries (Bundy & Amey, 2006). Today, although joint use libraries are most common in North America, Australia, and Sweden (McNicol, 2003), other countries around the world, including the United Kingdom, Israel, Thailand and China are adopting the concept (Liu, 2008).

Although joint use libraries may be derived from the collaborative efforts of a diverse group of information service providers including private businesses and governmental agencies, it is most common for public schools, including primary schools, secondary schools and even universities, to merge with a public library (Bundy & Amey, 2006). According to Liu (2008), a typical partnership between a school and public library involves the sharing of a common building (usually within the school), yet the partnering organizations remain unique entities with individual budgets. Dornseif (2001) clarified this need for autonomy and states that there are three levels of integration (minimal, selective...
and full) which serve to meet the varying needs of the partnering organizations and their respective patrons.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the research relating to the ways in which joint use libraries can meet these needs and then view the benefits and challenges inherent in these libraries in the context of the Julia Hull District Library in Illinois, USA.

**Literature Review**

Literature on the subject of joint use libraries, though limited, demonstrates both positive and negative outcomes from connecting two or more types of libraries. Bundy and Amey (2006) summarize that such partnerships can promote greater interaction, access, and partnerships within the communities in which they reside. McNicol (2006) supports these claims, adding that, in many cases, joint use library facilities often act as community centers, providing cultural and social opportunities, especially in small communities where such opportunities might not otherwise exist. However, Matthews (2008) reports that a lack of careful planning and continued cooperation between joint entities may lead to reluctant patrons and staff, inefficiently designed library space, and generally “irreconcilable differences.”

According to Massis (2007) the broad reasons for creating joint use libraries include sharing resources, increasing accessibility to materials, reaching new users, and creating new services. The motivations behind the 2002 merger of the Julia Hull District Library (JHDL) and the Meridian Community Unit School District (CUSD) 223, the focus of this case study, were similar: to create a single library which would serve both the library community and the high school student body. In many cases, when entities like JHDL and Meridian CUSD 223 partner to form a joint use library, the primary reasons for doing so are economic. By combining resources and reducing redundancies in collections, spaces, maintenance, and staff, for example, these collaborating organisations may see significant cost savings. Similarly, joint use libraries are often created in rural areas out of financial necessity, allowing for greater service where funding for public libraries to sustain themselves might be otherwise impossible (Matthews, 2008). In fact, the financial reasons for creating joint use libraries is so pronounced, it is almost impossible to find literature on the subject that doesn’t mention the economic benefits of a merger.

Overlooked in most literature, however, is the increased ability for joint use libraries to connect: not only the two organisations that define the partnership, but also the library’s patrons, staff and the community at large. McNicol (2006) supports this point, stressing that perhaps the greatest advantage of a joint use school-public library is the tendency for these types of partnerships to have a community focus. Further, literature frequently omits concrete examples which other librarians can use for practical application and guidance in deciding whether or not to merge. Thus, the purpose of this article is to examine the Julia Hull District Library, a single example of a joint library, in order to explore, in depth, not only the potential problems that can arise from a joint-relationship, but also the the way in which joint use school libraries can overcome these problems to connect students, teachers, public patrons, and library staff to help build a stronger community.

**Research in Context: The Julia Hull District Library**

In the United States, specifically in the state of Illinois, public libraries are defined by municipalities or districts. The differences between the two designations are numerous, impacting everything from the collection of taxes, to the filing of state reports, to the configuration of a library Board of Trustees (BOT). However, the primary difference between the two regards a library’s taxing base. Simply put, municipal libraries collect property taxes from and serve a single city or village, while district libraries collect property taxes from and serve multiple cities or villages. Very often within communities, school and public library district boundaries are aligned.

Prior to its partnership with Meridian Community Unit School District (CUSD) 223, the Julia Hull District Library was Stillman Valley’s village library, serving a population of nearly 1,000 individuals. Because of its small tax base, its annual budget was also rather small, reaching a maximum of only $35,000 USD. Furthermore, the physical library was
equally as insignificant: a collection of just under 15,000 items housed in a single family home which had been donated to the village in 1924 by a local woman named Julia E. Hull. That home served as the community library for 78 years.

However, at the turn of the 21st century, the village library’s BOT attempted to pass a referendum that would alter Julia Hull from a municipal to a district library which would also encompass the majority of the Meridian CUSD 223. In 2001, voters passed the referendum, thereby increasing the libraries tax base and patronage to nearly 7,000, and its annual budget to approximately $140,000 within the first year. Today, the public library serves a population of 8,277, houses approximately 36,000 items, and manages an annual budget of nearly $260,000.

Shortly after the referendum, the Meridian CUSD 223 approached the newly aligned library district and proposed building a new facility on school district property which would be physically attached to the school district's high school. This new facility, the Julia Hull District Library, would serve district library patrons, as well as high school students and teachers. The proposition appealed to both the school and library districts predominantly because of the various economic benefits of such a partnership. Ideally, the combined districts would make better use of tax dollars by sharing costs in everything from the purchasing of materials and equipment, to paying the wages and benefits of staff, to covering operations costs (e.g. water, heating, air conditioning, maintenance). Thus convinced of such economic benefits, in 2002 the Julia Hull District Library and Meridian CUSD 223 entered into a contractual intergovernmental agreement, a common procedure for joint use libraries. Since the merger, the Stillman Valley community has benefited and faced challenges foreseen in international research on joint use libraries, in unforeseen ways.

**Connecting Students to Library Services**

One of the greatest advantages for the Julia Hull/Meridian CUSD partnership, in particular, has been internal outreach to teachers and families within the School District. The enhanced ability for joint use libraries to promote library collections and services is just one of several positive outcomes found in research conducted on other joint libraries (Bundy & Amey, 2006). On a small level, library district personnel have accomplished this outreach by making impromptu visits to each site and by surveying teachers. For example, for the past four years, the library district has sent out surveys to teachers at the elementary, junior high and high school levels, inquiring about their curriculum needs. The questions include a survey of subjects taught and specific units of study and research topics assigned. The library district's personnel have used this information to evaluate the library’s collection of materials to determine whether the library has sufficient materials and if materials are current. By including teachers in the collection process, the library district maximizes student use and enables library staff to better assist young patrons seeking library materials, while also filling collection gaps, which may serve general public interests as well. For example, four years ago, the library district boosted its collection of biographies of African Americans to support an elementary-level unit on Black History Month.

In some cases, the library district cannot financially support purchasing materials necessary to connect students to resources. The school district provides a separate annual budget to purchase databases and other reference and research materials necessary to support student curriculum for high school students. Since annual budgets from JHDL and Meridian CUSD 223 cannot always meet all the demands of students, especially those students at the elementary and junior high levels, the combining of budgets is especially impactful.

Another way in which the combined budgets can yield positive effects is for enabling the acquisition of timely books. For example, the state of Illinois nominates annually a list of books for four levels of young readers, from toddlers through high schoolers. One of these lists, the Rebecca Caudill Young Readers’ Book Award (named after an Illinois children's author), is utilized at the elementary level as part of a year-long reading incentive program. While the elementary schools have their own collection of these books (approximately 20 new titles annually), there simply are not enough copies to meet student demand. The library district would purchase a set of these titles annually, whether the school’s reading incentive program existed or not. However, because of the interest and the demand for these,
and other award-nominated titles, JHDL has sought assistance from its Friends of the Library group, who raises funds to purchase multiple sets of these titles each year.

The relationship between the school and library district, however, extends beyond providing necessary materials to its young users. It also meets its social and lifelong learning needs, yet another advantage of joint use libraries highlighted by Bundy and Amey (2006). One example of this was demonstrated in working with a group of first grade students who visited the library in conjunction with an elementary class project. The theme of the project focused on introducing students to different organizations within their community. Thus, upon their visit, library staff read them a story, then gave them an interactive tour of the library and talked about topics such as how to obtain a library card. The purpose of the introduction is to familiarize non-users with the library, as well as to create a fun initial library experience that will inspire these students to return (with their families) to utilize library materials and attend other non-school programs.

One of the most successful examples of internal outreach took place in conjunction with the 2009 and 2010 summer reading programs, the purpose of which is to encourage youth toward reading for enjoyment. At that time, the school district initiated its own summer school-based reading program—not so much for fun, but to remediate young struggling readers. In the Spring of 2009, then superintendent of Meridian CUSD 223 contacted the library director to brainstorm how these two programs might work in tandem. Since many of the students enrolled in the school-based reading program were otherwise non-users of the library, in addition to being struggling readers, it was first important to introduce the families of these children to the library and register them for public library cards. To continue to build the relationship between these students and the public library, JHDL held a separate weekly story hour for students in grade levels 2 through 5 as part of their summer school curriculum. Summer school teachers brought students to the library on a routine basis, at which time they would return materials, listen to a story, and have a chance to browse for new materials to check out. As Meridian CUSD 223 sought to supplement their curriculum, JHDL sought to build a new community of users, forming yet another partnership which ultimately enabled both sides to provide the best quality programming for its young users.

Connecting Generations of Learners
In the fall of 2008, JHDL received a grant from the Institute of Museum & Library Services for $21,700 to purchase a mobile computer lab for the purpose of providing computer technology training courses to older adults and senior citizens. While the public library continued to offer standalone courses for the target demographic throughout the grant year, JHDL decided to expand the offerings to include intergenerational instruction. McNicol (2006) illustrated that joint use libraries have the special capability to “encourage interaction and improve relations between different generations” (p. 524). In the case of JHDL, developing intergenerational programming proved equally beneficial to senior and teen users alike.

One example of a successful intergenerational program at the library included a series of courses on Apple’s iMovie computer software program. For the purposes of the class, local senior citizens were paired with students from a high school computer communications course. The groups worked cooperatively to plan, record, upload, edit and present a promotional movie which they would design using the movie making software on the mobile computer lab. While seniors were part of the entire creative process, they also learned the basics of movie creation via computer software with the assistance of the more tech savvy students who thus lent to the grant’s success. Conversely, the program enabled students to fulfill curriculum requirements using newer technologies that were not otherwise available within the school. Because of proximity, students and seniors were able to meet and utilize the library’s facilities without hassle or spending money for travel.

Connecting Spaces
Upon entering into their intergovernmental agreement, both the school and library districts fully expected to utilize library space to meet their various youth services and programmatic
needs. However, neither party could’ve imagined the potential for creative use of space afforded by the library’s access to the rest of the high school facilities.

On several occasions, the library has needed space to hold programs that, due to the needs of performers and/or to accommodate a large audience, would not be possible at JHDL, let alone many large, urban libraries. For example, over the last three years, the JHDL has begun its summer reading program with a large program aiming to generate excitement among youth and their parents by showcasing a special entertainer. In 2008, the library invited a youth ensemble that performed African percussion music and traditional African dance. The group of approximately 50 children performed to a crowd of almost 200 patrons in the high school’s cafeteria. With only 7,500 square feet, the majority of which is utilized for shelving, computers and circulation, the library building does not have the space needed to accommodate the performers, let alone the audience. Similarly, in 2009, the summer reading kick-off event was moved to the high school gymnasium to accommodate over 225 patrons who came to watch a professional ballet company perform; in 2010 and 2011, the event took place outdoors on school grounds.

A public library could easily arrange an agreement to hold events in public school buildings; however, having the library attached to the school facilities is particularly advantageous. If a school and library were to otherwise partner for a school to host a public library event, users would most likely meet at the school facility. However, in a situation such as the one with JHDL, the adjoined buildings allow for more efficient organization of public events by allowing patrons to meet in the library facility. This arrangement provides the public library staff with the advantage of exposing potential patrons to library services and collections.

**Connecting Teens to Their Communities**

Recently, JHDL began to leverage its position as a joint use library to connect with students through the creation of a Teen Advisory Council (TAC). Developed by library staff to attract more junior high and high school student users to the library during after-school hours, the JHDL TAC, like many TAC programs in the United States, serves to give a voice to teenagers (ages 13-18) who assist with planning teen programming, contributing ideas for improving the library’s collection, and providing input for a teen library blog. TAC members of the TAC are even in charge of connecting with other area youth by promoting the organization and recruiting new members. This includes home schooled students, who might not otherwise connect with the Meridian CUSD 223 student body.

Perhaps the greatest benefit to participants of the TAC, however, is their ability to use the group as a vehicle to connect with the community through volunteer activities. Members volunteer at library events and offer support for other library activities, including programs for children. In return, participating teens receive community service letters from JHDL, which they may use to earn credit for school organizations such as National Honor Society, as well as enhance their college applications. In a recent service project, TAC members collected donations of used paperback books to send to American troops serving overseas.

**Connecting Patrons to Programs**

One of the greatest advantages that joint use libraries have over their stand-alone counterparts is the ability to easily and effectively promote youth services and programming. McNicol (2006) pointed out that combined school-public libraries sometimes promote services and programs effectively within the school, but fail to successfully promote to the general public. However, for the JHDL, leveraging the school-public library relationship has proven successful for promoting the library to community youth, as well as to area adults.

The simplest of all JHDL promotional materials, printed copies of the library’s calendar of events, are easily the most effective. Students at both district elementary schools are given a condensed two-month calendar of children’s and family programming and special events every other month. The calendar lists and describes the library’s regular and special youth events. Since beginning this promotion, JHDL has seen an increase in program attendance and circulation from its younger patrons. The increase in exposure has increased the demand for youth programming so much that new programs, including an additional
Saturday story hour each month, have been added to meet the needs of district patrons. An unforeseen benefit to this method of promotion has been an increase in overall library attendance, particularly among new library users. Many parents of primary school students who were once unaware of library offerings have now become regular patrons.

Promotion of JHDL youth services and programming is not limited to external communication channels. JHDL uses internal communications to build awareness among school district teachers and administrators. District employees are made aware of upcoming library offerings through regular e-mails from the library's director. Additionally, the director uses her joint position of public library Director and school administrator to inform teachers and administrators of upcoming library youth events and materials at faculty and administrative meetings.

The success of such simple promotions may be attributed to the important social role community schools play in rural America. As Liu (2008) pointed out, one of the most significant advantages of joint school-public libraries is “increased use and awareness of library services and resources in a community as schools are more visible to the community” (p. 58). Since the JHDL is located approximately thirty minutes by car from a major metropolitan area, and there are limited community choices in terms of entertainment, the district’s schools serve as a major economic and social entity within the community. As a result, information and announcements from schools within the district are highly visible. Such visibility is especially important in an increasingly technological world which is why, for example, the school district provides a direct link to the library district’s website from their homepage.

Challenges Faced by the Julia Hull District Library

Joint libraries often face many challenges: balancing the needs of both entities; fulfilling the contractual obligations set forth in partners’ intergovernmental agreements; and trying to follow two (often diverging) sets of state and federal laws. However, JHDL faced other challenges to programs and services, including overexposure, intimidation, location and potential censorship.

Overexposure

In the case of JHDL, high school students have open access to library facilities. Whether visiting as part of a class, completing homework during a study hall, typing a paper on one of the library’s computers or searching independently for leisure-reading materials, the library is open to meeting the various needs of its student body. Since the library is physically joined to the high school, students may (and often do) spend any portion of their school day, as well as immediately before and after school, in the library. While the library encourages such use of its facilities, it recognizes the implications of student access on library use during public evening hours and on weekends. Students’ frequent (and often mandatory) exposure to the library for school-related reasons often prevents them from returning to the library after they leave school. Simply put, programming offered at traditional public libraries which entices young adults to attend outside the normal school day has often failed at JHDL because, some students see the library as a place to work, not as a place in which to pursue leisure activities. Thus, staff created organizations such as the TAC in the hope that by giving young adults a voice in the decision making process about youth services and programming, more youth would willingly, even enthusiastically, participate.

Intimidation

JHDL opens to the public at 9:00 AM each morning, six days a week, so school and public hours overlap for a large portion of the day throughout the work week. This overlap means that high school students, teachers, adults, small children, and babies mingle throughout the day. Likewise, school and public library programs often coincide: the Pre-School Story Hour, Terriffic Twos, or Babies & Books, for example, may run simultaneously with a student bibliographic instructional session. Because the library has no separate programming room,
these programs must run, essentially, in the same space. Thus, the noise level in JHDL is often higher than in traditional public libraries.

Some adults and senior citizens have expressed complaints not only about the activity and noise level, but also about the fact that the library is utilized predominately by high school aged students. Teens' presence intimidates some older library users, as well as users with small children. As McNicol (2006) explained,

> [S]ome members of the local community may be reluctant to enter a school because they have bad memories of their own school days or because they are put off by the prospect of sharing the facility with a large number of teenagers. (p. 525)

In any case, the challenge of intimidation must be addressed in order to best serve patrons (and taxpayers) of a joint library.

In addition to creating an inviting, user friendly facility for all ages and utilizing appropriate marketing, joint libraries can also attempt to remedy intimidation by connecting multiple generations through programming such as the joint teen-senior technology instructional session. This latter point has been exemplified by joint libraries in the UK, according to McNicol (2006), in which users, especially teen patrons, demonstrated greater levels of comfort with using joint library facilities and services after becoming accustomed to them.

**Location**

Research has supported one of the other primary challenges faced by JHDL: the challenge of location. McNicol (2006) stated that “secondary schools in particular are often not located close to other community facilities” (p. 525). JHDL is no exception. Stillman Valley High School is separate from the downtown area, or village center, where the majority of businesses and organizations in town are located. Additionally, the end of the building that houses the library is adjacent to a residential area and is nearly invisible from the main town roads. To further complicate things, the joint facility is not centrally located within the district. These factors create challenges for promoting youth services and programs. While it is easy to promote teen programs within the village, public library, and the school, reaching younger children and their caregivers in outlying areas has proven problematic. Many library patrons do not subscribe to local newspapers in which the library advertises youth programming, and many patrons do not have Internet access in their homes, thus limiting their access to library information which may be provided on the library's website. However, it is possible to counter the challenge of location as the JHDL has demonstrated by its creation of program flyers to distribute to all elementary aged students.

**Potential Censorship**

Censorship is one of the more insidious challenges faced by joint school-public libraries. Communities in the United States and around the world often challenge libraries to remove what they deem as inappropriate or controversial materials. While school libraries may have less will to battle such challenges, and school boards may site a book's lack of educational value as means to remove it, public libraries less frequently cower in the face of such challenges. In fact, public libraries typically advocate patrons' freedom to read and the building of diverse collections.

McNicol (2006) cited one of the disadvantages of a joint library as having a potentially limited collection since school libraries tend to be “too school focused” and often ignore the larger needs of the community (p. 525). However, JHDL utilizes its school and public budgets to equally meet the needs of both entities. School library funds are used to purchase materials that support school curriculum, while public library funds purchase anything and everything else. This includes not only books, but also movies, music CDs and games, many of which may not support school curriculum, or may be deemed inappropriate to young users.

Reconciling such philosophical differences can be difficult. However, joint use libraries can remedy potential censorship challenges without forsaking intellectual freedom. At JHDL, for example, student patrons have access to two different library cards: a school
School cards may be used during school hours only and for books, magazines and audio books alone. To checkout audio visual materials such as movies, a student must have a public library card. This resolution aims to deter materials challenges to the school district, while maintaining the rights of public patrons (including youth) to access information.

**Conclusion**

While joint libraries like JHDL can provide an array of opportunities for the community of users which they serve, such partnerships are not without challenges. Likewise, not all communities would benefit from joint school-public libraries, which work best in small towns or rural areas, rather than larger suburban or urban settings. For example, small or rural organizations lack the funding available to larger organizations which force them to look for creative cost savings; since they've smaller and arguably less diverse user groups, these organizations may be less likely to insist upon a traditional library model.

Nonetheless, many community schools and libraries can connect student and public patrons, even without becoming legally joined. Disregarding some of the more technical aspects of the relationship, many of the programs described previously are duplicable in even the most traditional of libraries. The success of any school-library partnership, joint or not, rests not so much in the details, but rather in the vision for creating a lifelong community of users who participate in the community sharing of ideas and resources.

**References**


**Author Note**

Joanna Kluever, Director of Julia Hull District Library in Stillman Valley, Illinois, USA, has served for nearly 5 years in her current position, during which time she has expanded library programming, increased patron attendance, and helped re-define the library’s role in the community by re-inventing its strategic plan. Joanna has presented papers at IFLA and ALCOP, and her most recent publication appears in *The Frugal Librarian: Thriving In Tough Economic Times*.

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