

The Evolving Role of Public Libraries: Fostering Equity and Building Community FASS Undergraduate Research Internship – Summer 2019 – Samphe Ballamingie

The role of public libraries is rapidly changing; they are no longer just a repository of books and audio-visual materials for lending (McCarthy, 2018). As Ottawa begins consultations over a new central library campus, now is an opportune time to research innovative practices from international libraries. In May 2019, I visited libraries in several northern European cities (Tallinn, Estonia; Helsinki, Finland; Stockholm, Sweden; Oslo and Bergen, Norway; and Copenhagen, Denmark) and interviewed libraries in each location to survey best practices. In July 2019, I studied the Ottawa Public Library, to understand programming more locally. I aimed to better understand the innovative ways libraries build community, while remaining attentive to considerations of social inclusion and equity. Upon coding my data in Nvivo, three themes emerged, all of which helped to elucidate the evolving role of public libraries: the changing nature of librarianship; the diversification of service delivery to ensure ongoing relevance and community engagement; and the importance of public spaces in fostering greater equity and inclusion.

The role of librarians has moved away from content-work and towards people-work. They now serve myriad new roles: as pedagogues, cultural facilitators, digital literacy pathfinders, and social workers. While some of a librarian's fundamental duties have remained the same, their work touches deeply the social realm to foster personal development, build community, and support democracy.

As the needs of clientele change, libraries introduce innovative programming and resources to keep their diverse membership engaged. Innovative new offerings discovered include (but are not limited to): BiblioBike programs that use bikes and trailers to bring themed collections to special events for public lending; complete integration of state-run social services (Maternal and Child Health; Mental Health and Addiction; etc.); "Talk to a Lawyer for Free": individuals can book 15-minute appointments for pro bono legal advice; among others. Such innovative services ensure libraries remain relevant and necessary in the 21st century.

Finally, libraries continue to support the most vulnerable segments of society – low-income populations, newcomers, seniors, and youth, to name a few – by providing accessible public space, and necessary social supports and public services. Libraries represent some of the last-remaining venues of "public space", and an important aspect of fostering equity and inclusion ensures everyone, regardless of background and identity, has access to space for education and personal development.

Drawing on qualitative primary research conducted in May-June of 2019, this research uncovered a changing librarianship that actively responds to the needs of all its clients in a digital age. Libraries are symbols of democracy and critical arenas for socialization and public debate. No matter the society, the need for greater equity, community inclusion, and public engagement remains the same. The critical services and programming libraries offer foster greater equity and inclusion in a world where it is sorely needed.