

IJIDI: Book Review

Fournier, M.D., & Ostman, S. (Eds). (2021). *Ask, listen, empower: Grounding your library work in community engagement*. ALA Editions. ISBN 9780838947401. 176 pp. \$49.99 US.

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In *Ask, Listen, Empower: Grounding Your Library Work in Community Engagement*, editors Mary Davis Fournier and Sarah Ostman compiled 12 chapters written by 13 librarians or specialists from across the U.S. The purpose of the book is to explore the concept of community engagement as it relates to public and academic libraries and to offer concrete examples of programs that have worked to integrate the community in library services planning and delivery.

“Library as catalyst” is a theme that runs through all the chapters. This is a significant shift from “library as collections” or “library as computer access” or “library as homework help central”. Catalyst is the right noun: it evokes the energy of change that comes from the interaction of elements. The interactions and the elements vary from state to state and library to library, but the common denominator is the re-positioning of the library from one of assuming what the community needs to that of asking the community what it needs. The listener (the librarian or library administrator or library staff) have their ears to the ground, whether at the mall, the townhall or the foodbank. As volunteers and members of various organizations in the community, library staff come to understand the needs of the people they are serving. They become the connectors of people who can enhance the lives of all the people in the community, not just steady users of the library.

Most of the chapters detail programs or initiatives in the public or academic library systems in California, Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, New York, Tennessee, Washington State, and Wisconsin. Several of the chapters report on the work of libraries or librarians nominated for the *Library Journal’s* “Best Small Library in America Award” and “Mover and Shaker Award”, the Public Library Association’s “Upstart Innovation Award”, or another equally prestigious recognition or distinction. It should be noted that Aspen Institute’s Dialogue on Public Libraries, Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, and ALA’s Center for Civic Life are mentioned throughout the edited volume.

Cindy Fesemyer outlines a path to community engagement. In “Partnering for Greater Impact,” she identifies steps that anyone can take to understand and incorporate themselves into a community. Fesemyer uses the example of a liaison librarian at a university casting around for connections to the town and the local community. The librarian identifies the owner of a boardgames store as having a population of undergraduates who like hanging out there. The partnership flourishes so that games nights can happen at the library and the library can use the

store to hold information sessions and focus groups. Through word-of-mouth, invitations to participate in other community projects can grow. While Fesemyer encourages deliberate collaboration, she cautions that sometimes the coffee date to woo a potential partner can result in a poor match. No worries! The librarian, as the nexus, can pass along the information to other potential partners. As a “promiscuous partner” the library has no problem allowing others to build their own relationships for the greater good of a strong and connected community. Fesemyer writes “[w]ith partners from hospitals to financial specialists, theaters to community centers, we’re strutting our stuff all over town” (p. 45).

In a real-life example of community engagement, the King County Library System (KCLS) in Washington State developed an “Economic Empowerment Framework” to replace the patchwork set of services, resources, and equipment formerly provided to jobseekers, entrepreneurs, and the local business community. The old way of doing things is based on what the library had to offer: the community engagement way “begins by centering the community, not the library” (p. 51). Essential to this approach was that KCLS “intentionally began the project by focusing only on understanding the external community, without considering its relationship to library services” (p. 51). The tools they used to consult their community were environmental scans, asset maps, and key stakeholder interviews. KCLS also consulted all the staff within the library system itself by using online surveys, SOAR analysis with focus groups, and a racial equity assessment. After all the consultations “Negocios Redondos / We Mean Business” was launched. It serves the Latinx community in specific ways: programming on Saturday, not Sunday; family attendance and children’s activities; elevator pitch training; business success story panel; and more. Because KCLS was so committed to the process of community engagement, *Negocios Redondos / We Mean Business* meets the needs of the Latinx population of King County.

In a more theoretical chapter, “Ethical and Inclusive Community Engagement,” Ellen Knutson and Quanetta Batts explore how difficult it is to put aside bias and privilege when planning services in libraries. Their rubric “Public Involvement Continuum,” can help libraries pinpoint where they are on the continuum of projecting to involving. At the most library-centric end of the spectrum, the library informs or educates its users on what the library does. At the most community-centric end of the spectrum, the “library works with community members to plan services” (p. 64). Knutson and Batts use the core community engagement principles outlined by “The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation.” They are: careful planning and preparation; inclusion and demographic diversity; collaboration and shared purpose; openness and learning; transparency and trust; impact and action; and sustained engagement and participatory culture. (p. 65). One of the more powerful sections of the chapter is about power and privilege and while it might make some people uncomfortable, understanding those concepts is essential to changing a libraries’ services, programs and collections (pp. 66-69).

Tasneem A. Grace and Andrea Blackman co-wrote the chapter “Civil Rights Center: Community Engagement and Special Collections,” outline the way a library can both embrace vulnerable people while challenging difficult opinions. It’s an amazing chapter. Tasneem A. Grace is the Nashville Public Library’s Director of Community Engagement. She has worked for years in journalism, nonprofits and Central America as a community engagement manager. Andrea Blackman is its Director of Civil Rights Center (CRC), Special Collections Center, and Votes for Women Center. Blackman is also an adjunct professor. The knowledge, skills, understanding, and lived experiences of both Blackman and Grace make the transformative work at the CRC possible. The CRC’s archival collection is a starting point for extended, facilitated, awkward and hard conversations about race and injustice. Grace and Blackman call this “deliberate engagement”

(p. 105) and more than 10,000 people have engaged in these guided group discussions in a five-year period. People are encouraged to ask really, really hard questions and the others in the session listen deeply. These questions include “What do I when I see injustice happening right in front of me?” or “What does it mean to love America but despise its history?” (p. 105). The nation’s legacy of racism, slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration quickly surface some of the reasons for more recent events like the murder of Trayvon Martin (p. 101). There are no easy answers, but participants continue “with one eye still glaring at the past, and the other focused on the future” (p. 107).

Readers of IJIDI will find the chapters inspiring and the examples of programs useful to their own work in a library or their research on diversity and inclusion in libraries. There is so much rich content for the reader: specific examples, guidelines, rubrics, and stories of success. Individual chapters, and as a collection, it has a lot to offer all of us working toward meaningful, sincere, and long-lasting engagement with the communities in our catchment areas.

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