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# Should Public Libraries Hire Young Adult Specialists?

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The first national survey of services and resources for young adults in public libraries showed that only 11 percent of the nation's libraries employ a young adult specialist, although 25 percent of all patrons across all sizes of public libraries are young adults, and young adults use the library more than any other age group. The majority of young adults are served by generalist librarians, and adolescents use the public library most frequently for after-school homework.<sup>1</sup>

Individual community estimates in the late 1960s and early 1970s indicated that high school students constituted the largest share of public library patrons, at 65 percent.<sup>2,3</sup> If we generalize to the nation as a

whole, then, a drop to 25 percent twenty years later is significant.

Is there a cause-and-effect relationship between the lack of provision of library services to young adults and their presence in the public library? Common sense would tell us there is. Public library services to young adults are not acknowledged widely today with a trained specialist. Some of the reasons cited are difficult economic times, lack of trained staff, and the smaller percentages of young adults in the general population due to a decline in the national birth rate. But the lack of research to support specific provisions of service and staff to young adults is most frequently cited as the main factor in the demise of the specialty.<sup>4</sup>

Most libraries treat young adults as adults, because their school needs bring them to adult reference. Yet it must be recognized that these clients have internal and external status and credibility prob-

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lems that adults do not, and the self-fulfilling prophecy of treating them as adults may be keeping young adults away from the library since they have some information needs that adults do not. To complicate matters, young adults see no necessity of having a special librarian to help them because, after all, they wish to be treated as adults; however, as part of their psychological development, they seek independence and freedom apart from adults. The fact remains that young adults are engaged in a transition period of identity development that precedes adulthood.<sup>5</sup> The process of identity development for adolescents includes social learning. If the public library is not relevant to young adult social learning needs, this clientele is not offered full opportunity to respond beyond curriculum requirements.

Since young adults have perhaps always been at odds with the status quo, the concept of providing specialized library staff and a structured environment that focuses on the developmental needs of young adults provided the basis of the historical model of service to this clientele.<sup>6</sup> Along with families, schools, and community organizations, public libraries were once acknowledged as pivotal institutions that met the requirements for adolescents' transition to productive adulthood. Study to evaluate the effect of the young adult specialist on young adult literacy and social development is sorely needed. Young adult librarianship is currently threatened with extinction by societal changes that have challenged families, schools, and community organizations over the last thirty years. What are effective and thus essential services and pro-

grams for young adults? What are relevant resources to keep young adults coming into the library even if they have completed school assignments? Do such services mean benefit and value to youth users and the community? Do specialized staff make a difference?

The present study surveyed young adults and defined the concept of "user satisfaction" as a user's self-reported degree of satisfaction with library resources and staff. This study further defined the measure of user satisfaction as a measure of effectiveness—the degree to which the needs and expectations of young adult library patrons are met. Positive satisfaction ratings were interpreted as indicative of effectiveness. Dimensions of both cognitive and affective information needs were addressed in composing the questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed to two large urban libraries, which were then compared for satisfaction levels. The sites chosen were Mesa Public Library in Mesa, Arizona, which offers specialized staff and programs for young adults, and Orlando Public Library in Orlando, Florida, which serves young adults with generalist librarians and offers no specialized programs.

### **Evaluation of Public Library Programs for Young Adults**

Statistical evaluation of programs for young adults to determine if the programs achieve their purpose of meeting personal-interest needs is limited, although descriptions of well-attended, successful programs are prevalent. One might speculate that this is because young adult public librarians see their function as being providers of reading

guidance and programming, an intangible, lifelong learning mission that is difficult to test, whereas young adults patrons perceive the primary function of the library as being a place to receive assistance with schoolwork. School and recreational needs are often viewed in opposition, although this is an artificial dichotomy in terms of user satisfaction.<sup>7</sup>

### **Research on Public Library Use by Young Adults**

As stated previously, usage studies show overwhelmingly that young adults use the public library for schoolwork. In interviews with young adult users, it appeared that most do not see a need for having a special librarian to assist them. Little wonder, then, that a majority of librarians see no need for specialized service to this clientele. However, librarians are also aware of the general dislike of young adult patrons (scruffy, noisy, rude) and point to the inadequate provision of recreational materials that might bring them into the library.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the growth of materials for young adults, few public libraries have the assistance of a young adult librarian in materials selection. The library's provision of popular and controversial materials for this age group is a proverbial "thorn in the side." Such materials have a high loss rate and are most likely to be challenged with reconsideration requests from the community. Young adults list the quiet atmosphere as a particularly inhibiting factor in library use, and among those aspects of libraries young adults most dislike are librarians themselves.<sup>9</sup> However, li-

brarians may not see the logical need for a specialist who will not only minimize the problem of negative interaction but create active users.

### **Public Library Programs for Young Adults and the Programs' Rationale**

Public library programs for young adults are based on the premise that literacy is a social process rather than simply a cognitive skill and that in adolescence information seeking is unequaled in motivating social interaction.<sup>10</sup> Since an adolescent's cognitive and affective domains are so internally structured that they stand in a consistent relationship to one another, a positive attitude toward the library is based on opportunities for specialized social interaction with other young adults, the library staff, and the library's collection and programs. Young adults themselves rank interpersonal contacts as the most useful way to gather information.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, if we tend to focus on curriculum-based services as essential and recreational-based services as nonessential, we eliminate the valid need for both in young adults' search for an identity consistent with their values. We also eliminate the role of the young adult specialist.

### **Research about Young Adult Use as a Determinant of Adult Use of the Public Library**

Barbara Will's 1985 survey questioned adults in terms of whether they visited the library as children or adolescents. Will found an 85 percent correlation between child-

hood use of the public library and adolescent use. Furthermore, if a person was first attracted to the public library as a teenager, subsequent use of the library increased in later years just as much as it would have had the person begun to use the library as an elementary school child.<sup>12</sup> It is evident that both childhood and adolescent use of the library are strongly linked to later adult usage.

### **The Controversy about the Provision of a Young Adult Specialist for Young Adults**

For years, library directors have been debating the need for a specialized service for young adults. The argument centers upon the necessity of "segregating" young adults by offering specialized staff. This is seen as an unnecessary duplication of effort. By treating young adults as adults, lack of access is not a threat. On the other side of the coin, young adult librarians believe that specialized staff does increase access and does encourage usage, as lack of access can be seen as a psychological and social phenomenon and not just a physical one.

According to Thomas Downen, although library directors predict that in the 1990s there will be an increased effort to improve young adult collections and services, they did not predict corresponding increases in staffing or funding to support programs and collection growth.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, although young adults are perhaps the greatest public library users of technology, they fall through the cracks of organizational emphasis on the value of personal development in the informa-

tional process. It must be added, following the writings of Margaret Edwards, that young adults have little status in public library service and that this is a significant factor in terms of the controversy.<sup>14</sup> Many young adults resist traditional materials, are interested in controversial topics, and may not be liked by librarians known for their preference for the quiet and respectful patron. In the end, the adults who serve young adults must make decisions as to service provisions.

### **Methodology**

A questionnaire was developed to collect data from young adult public library users. The subjects surveyed were between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Questionnaires were completed on a volunteer basis.

### **Design**

The author developed a preliminary questionnaire based on experience as well as on information and ideas found in the literature search, and particularly in *Guidelines for Young Adult Services in Public Libraries in New Jersey*.<sup>15</sup> The purpose of the questionnaire was to measure the ability of the library to meet young adult common interests and needs, whether they be service related, curriculum collection related, or recreation collection related. The questionnaire used forty-three different topic measures and offered a scaled degree of user satisfaction, from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. The representativeness of each measure was rated, as well as the predictive ability of a measure to gauge the outcome of interest, in this case user satisfaction.

The content of the preliminary questionnaire was reviewed by five youth services practitioners in the doctoral program at Florida State University, as well as by the youth services consultant for the State of Florida, for its ability to elicit either affective or cognitive reactions to library services. The questionnaire was then pretested by young adults for reliability and validity at the Leon County Public Library in Tallahassee. Since failure to follow directions was noted in the pretest rather than failure to understand the content, simplified directions and graphic visual aids were added to the final questionnaire. First-time library users were instructed to return the questionnaire to the distributor, as some familiarity with library resources was required in order that a satisfaction level could be scored. Random selection procedures of data collection were followed.

For purposes of simplicity in measuring satisfaction levels, all "No" answers to the questionnaire were collapsed and eliminated statistically through the cross-tabs program, as "No" answers did not rate a satisfaction level. This provided a measurement of those respondents who answered "Yes" along with a satisfaction level, and determined how they differed in their satisfaction level, on a scale of one to four points. A statistical test, the critical value ratio within the t-test for two independent samples, was applied in order to account for the variance of user satisfaction. This study measured attitudes about the library from the young adult user's perspective, inferring from these a performance measure of effectiveness. The null hypothesis

tested was that there are no significant differences between a library that employs a young adult librarian and one that does not. Statistically significant differences were claimed at less than 5 percent.

### Sample Selection

The survey sites were chosen for their representation of large urban populations of library users and their contrasting administrative opinions on the effectiveness of public library staffing for young adults. *Coordinators of Children's and Young Adult Services in Public Library Systems Serving at Least 100,000 People* was examined as a preliminary to the choice of sites.<sup>16</sup>

Mesa Public Library has served its young adults with specialized staff since 1977, when an LSCA grant provided funds for this purpose. Orlando Public Library served its young adult population with a young adult specialist until 1982, when the young adult program was discontinued. The researcher distributed 150 questionnaires to the young adults who frequent the Orlando Public Library. The same number of questionnaires was mailed to Mesa Public Library for distribution on-site. The return rate for the questionnaires was 97 percent.

## Findings

### Personal Background Information

The majority of young adult users were between the ages of twelve and fifteen (69.9 percent), female (62.5 percent), and in grades six through ten (64.7 percent). Those young adults age fifteen, at eighteen percent of the population, were

the most frequently represented category of users.

### Satisfaction Levels

The young adults surveyed were generally satisfied with the library service they receive and were able to rate a satisfaction level for information that reflected varying interests,

regardless of staff assigned. However, ten significant differences in the satisfaction levels of the population were found. (See tables 1 and 2.)

### Conclusions

In light of the findings described, several conclusions may be drawn

**TABLE 1**  
Questionnaire Items Showing Statistically Significant Differences in User Satisfaction between Mesa Public Library and Orlando Public Library

Question	Significance Level < .05
4. I feel welcomed by the staff in my library.	$p = .031$
6. I use the interlibrary loan service provided by my public library.	$p = .017$
12. I take advantage of the programming and activities the library sponsors for people in my age group.	$p = .019$
30. I know my public library has hotline information should I experience a personal crisis.	$p = .043$
33. I am interested in other popular library materials such topics as horror, science fiction, glamour, sports and humor.	$p = .009$
38. I particularly enjoy the booklists that are available to me on young adult reading.	$p = .047$
42. I find an area in my library where I can play games.	$p = .011$

These items represent staff services, collection provisions, and space provisions that are effective for the young adults surveyed at Mesa Public Library.

**TABLE 2**  
Questionnaire Items Showing Statistically Significant Differences in User Satisfaction between Orlando Public Library and Mesa Public Library

Question	Significance Level < .05
14. I know where to find information of interest to me on the topic of sexuality.	$p = .022$
21. I know where to find information of interest to me on the topic of sexual or physical abuse.	$p = .033$
22. I know where to find information of interest to me on the topic of pregnancy.	$p = .013$

These items represent collection provision that are effective for the young adults surveyed at Orlando Public Library.

regarding the areas in which the young adult librarian is effective.

Generally speaking, it appears that the presence of the young adult specialist forms a multidimensional model of library effectiveness that consists of factors beyond those of collection provision and collection use alone. Such a multidimensional service reflects an awareness of the social and developmental needs of young adults and suggests areas of quality control for young adult services. We can conclude that staffing for this area of service will have a positive impact on other areas of service because of its recognition of the young adult as a unique and desirable client. Seven areas of significant user satisfaction document the benefits of young adult service; three areas of significance suggest directions for improvement.

Second, since a young adult specialist positively affects user satisfaction in providing a feeling of welcome to the young adults who use the public library, one may say that the young adult specialist has a significant interest in and respect for the young adult user. Young adults respond positively to this attitude and are more willing to participate in library services as a result. In 1968, Armin Grams wrote, "The problem for the adolescent is to accumulate, organize, and evaluate enough ideas, beliefs, attitudes and values to enable him to arrange these into a priority system uniquely his own, yet not entirely incompatible with the accepted standards and values of his society."<sup>17</sup> Young adult librarians are communicating effectively with clients because they tend to excel at a interest in the needs of the person, not just the researched pro-

ject, and are aware of the adolescent compatibility problem as a necessary part of development, and the dynamic "theater" role of the public library for young adults.

Third, a young adult specialist positively influences use of interlibrary loan by this clientele. This may be because interlibrary loan is offered more frequently to young adults by a young adult specialist than it is by generalist librarians. The young adult specialist, as a result of networking with local schools and teachers, tends to be more aware of the curriculum requirements of students and better able to judge the collection's assets and limitations. Providing relevant materials can also be seen as a cooperative effort between the young adult library staff and the school, as this service is most often used by the young adult for homework assistance. As a form of networking in itself, interlibrary loan can be considered a function of maintaining an information bridge from young adulthood to adulthood and as such may be given emphasis by a young adult specialist.

Fourth, a young adult specialist provides young adult programming and activities. Young adults do take advantage of these if they are provided. Since young adults have a great social need to interact with one another as well as literature of specific interest to them, such programming reinforces social learning experiences, as it enhances a strong developmental need of social interaction among peers. As Larry Amey wrote, "There is no topic of greater interest to teenagers than teenagers."<sup>18</sup> Although usually not conceptualized in such a way, the area of young adult programming may be

seen as a viable reference function of the public library.

Fifth, young adult users tend to express satisfaction when hotline information is available to them. A free pamphlet with hotline information is a convenient way for young adults to seek local community resource counseling for problems such as divorce, AIDS, alcoholism, suicide, rape, and incest, or runaway information on a twenty-four-hour basis. The pamphlet can be taken home and does not generate a specific circulation record, so anonymity is assured. Because young adults tend to be the most self-conscious of users, they tend to be the least confident of searchers. They are therefore satisfied not only with hotline information and its relevance to them should they experience a personal crisis, but also with the tactful format in which it is offered.

Sixth, a young adult specialist provides popular library materials on such topics as horror, science fiction, glamour, sports, and humor to a greater degree than a generalist librarian does. This popular collection acknowledges areas of interest to young adults and promotes, through reinforcement, reading for recreation. Because it is organized in a central area, it is also more available as a focused collection and encourages self-sufficiency.

Seventh, a young adult specialist, aware of the appeal of young adult literature, tends to provide booklists on young adult reading that are particularly enjoyable to young adults. Young adults are satisfied with these booklists because lists, like the staff and collection, encourage interaction with literature of value to them.

Eighth, if young adult users are provided with a dedicated space

for playing games, or talking in groups, they are satisfied with it. Such a provision is an effective recreational provision for this clientele because it promotes social interaction with peers.

Ninth, generalist librarians provide information on sexuality, physical or sexual abuse, and pregnancy to a degree which is significantly more satisfactory to young adults than the degree to which such information is provided by a young adult specialist. This is not a question of lack of access to this information because the information is provided in both libraries. Similarly, we cannot conclude that the information itself is more satisfactory at one library than another. We can only conclude that the information is more readily available to the young adults surveyed at Orlando Public Library. Is it appropriate to place such information in the young adult collection, where it would be part of a focused collection? Young adults themselves may experience an innate reluctance to express interest in such private topics and may be more comfortable with their inclusion in the adult collection. Community values and the needs of parents to protect adolescents may also determine adult collection placement. This protectiveness may be based on parents' unwillingness to modify their own relationship to their adolescents as they enter the sexual emancipation process. It may also be based on parental fears that adolescents will be encouraged to experiment if provided with information on sexuality. However, it should be remembered, as Gerald G. Hodges and Frances Bryant Bradburn wrote, "major findings in studies of teenage pregnancy, abortion, and prostitution



underscore the glaring need for appropriate sex information sources."<sup>19</sup>

## Recommendations

### For Public Library Practitioners

Based on the conclusions of this study, the author offers several recommendations. Library systems should utilize the assistance of young adult librarians, since their presence encourages library usage by young adults. If the employment of a young adult specialist is not possible, such amenities of service as increased collection emphasis on materials of popular appeal, provision of booklists on young adult reading, and provision of a local information and referral pamphlet for crisis intervention should be instituted as they have been shown to motivate library use.

The challenges of collection provision to address specific needs of information on sexuality, sexual and physical abuse, and pregnancy are compounded when the client is an adolescent because generational issues enter the picture. However, the home provides the first and most permanent of all influences on the sexual development of the adolescent, and the public library does not act in loco parentis. Although in these areas of human development young adults may be served more effectively by an adult or integrated collection, adult titles concerning these topics should be duplicated for shelving in the YA area.

### For Public Library Researchers

Additional research efforts regarding the effectiveness of the young adult specialist need to be pursued. For example, case studies of public

libraries with active young adult rooms should be conducted to further determine the role of the young adult specialist.

An experimental design is possible, comparing the satisfaction level of young adult public library users in one library before and after the provision of a young adult specialist. Did the satisfaction level change as a result of the implementation of the services found to be effective in this study? Did circulation of young adult materials increase?

This study might also be redesigned to compare the user satisfaction levels of young adults in three different public libraries—young adults who are provided with a young adult specialist and a young adult collection, those provided with a young adult collection and no young adult specialist, and those not provided with a specialist nor special provisions of collection.

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