

The Rural Library as Economic Development Center

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Topic

This brief describes how libraries worldwide are positioning themselves to be key partners in community discussions about local workforce development, entrepreneurship, and 21st century skills acquisition.

Executive Summary

When the local economy fails, libraries fail. When libraries facilitate conversations about economic development, everyone in the community has an opportunity to speak up, to learn, and to create an economically sustainable community based upon local, shared, values.

Introduction

Nearly every paper written about rural libraries, worldwide, describes the dwindling resources for libraries in non-urban areas. Staffing has been reduced; hours are reduced; in many cases, libraries have been closed.

The root issue is not, as might be surmised, lack of support for public libraries. Rather, the root issue is lack of unity in community conversations about economic development. In communities with poor economic stability, there is a perception that libraries cannot be funded.

Rural people in all countries tend to routinely solve problems as individuals [Abu, 101]. Sustainable economies cannot be remade or reinvigorated exclusively on an individual level. People need an invitation to begin to solve problems collectively, to create a viable local economy as a community.

The work environment in rural areas has shifted away from agrarian manual labor and manufacturing toward increasingly information-based and service-based skills. People have been left struggling for ways to continue providing income for their families, still relying on 19th and 20th century skills alone. Their children and/or grandchildren, meanwhile, are already skilled in the digital world, able to communicate, create, and collaborate via the internet. There is a gap between how young people process information and how adults in the community are accustomed to working and thinking.

Well-funded libraries can help bridge that gap, bringing working adults and seniors into the 21st century by providing them with fun opportunities to explore digital applications and collaborative skills [GLA, 8]. Libraries are the natural partner to fill gaps between rural school systems, adult education centers, community colleges, and local businesses.

Significant Steps

Invite Community Discussion

1. Facilitate conversations
2. Develop partnerships



Support Entrepreneurs

1. Space
2. Fast, free broadband
3. Mentoring
4. Tech training



Support Lifelong Learning

1. Create a playful learning environment
2. Find local experts
3. Encourage peer teaching & mentoring



Conclusion

When communities are struggling to meet increased demands for services with decreased resources and diminished returns, funding for libraries is often targeted. Libraries that actively participate in fostering sustainable economic development in their communities, prove their value. Thriving local economies are good for everyone.

Libraries provide a neutral space for fostering community-wide conversations about shared values, local resources and knowledge bases, to create a strong vision of what our most sustainable economic future should be. Libraries provide space and resources to support people as they master 21st century skills, create and collaborate on projects, initiate business enterprises, and build their knowledge base and confidence.

Such community-building conversations satisfy the participatory and user-centric goals of Library 2.0 evolution, and dovetail perfectly with our stated mission of building community and fostering a love of learning.

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