

MIND THE GAP:

Addressing the Perception Gap in Libraries' Important Work

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PINNACLE is the Public library INstitute for New and Creative Leadership Education, a year-long leadership program for Georgia's public librarians. The program is designed by the Georgia Public Library Service and Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia. Participants are grouped together and tasked with studying a real-world issue facing public libraries; the culmination of their research was presented at the 2019 Georgia Libraries Conference.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Librarians often encounter people who feel public libraries will soon be obsolete or are surprised libraries still exist. These people may feel libraries are no longer necessary in the digital age and as a result do not need to be funded by taxpayer dollars. Through review of existing literature, this paper explores the discrepancy between what libraries actually do and how they are perceived by the public, and how this disparity can lead to inadequate support, most dramatically monetarily, from stakeholders and funding agencies. Best practices, tools, and tips for advocating for libraries' importance are provided from two case studies of Georgia library systems that recently faced defunding struggles.

INTRODUCTION

Librarians and library staff are no strangers to questions like "Why do we have libraries when we have Google?" or "Who reads paper anymore, isn't everything online?" It may seem like a daily struggle for library staff, to advocate for the relevancy of libraries in the digital age, when most information is available in electronic form and almost immediately. Perhaps most frustrating is when library staff are placed in the position of defending their libraries' missions to the very people who support it, and may even be selected or elected to do so: our patron-base,

our policy makers and board members, our funding agencies, commissioners, politicians, and the like. The authors of this paper represent a variety of populations across the state of Georgia, from the northwest Appalachian foothills, to the southwest corner, across the Piedmont and towards the eastern coast. In working together, it became clear in our discussions that a correlation might exist between the misunderstanding of libraries' important work and receiving adequate and/or additional funding from funding agencies.

This paper explores a term borrowed from the Communications field to describe the misunderstanding described above: the "Perception Gap." In reviewing available research from OCLC and the Pew Research Center, the authors sought to demonstrate how and why libraries experience this perception gap. With several Georgia public library systems having recently struggled through their own defunding crises, and this fresh in the authors' minds, the authors conducted case studies into these events, garnering advice and lessons learned from the directors of two library systems: Cobb County and Middle Georgia. From this paper, readers should be left with a sense of the necessity of continuously communicating libraries' important work, and will be provided recommendations for avoiding, and if the worst happens, navigating, the gap.

THE PERCEPTION GAP

The Perception Gap is a term borrowed from the Communication field to describe the misunderstanding of how libraries' important work is perceived; it is defined as "the gap between what you mean to communicate and what is actually communicated."¹ A very straightforward example of a perception gap is a simple misunderstanding between the person communicating a message and the person(s) receiving it. Another, and more dangerous, example is when a

¹ Anne Loehr, "Why Communication Fails and How to Fix It: The Perception Gap," Huffington Post, September 27, 2014. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-communication-fails-a_b_5627692?guccounter=1; Brentin Mock, "Why Detroit Residents Pushed Back Against Tree-Planting," Citylab, January 11, 2019. <https://www.citylab.com/environment/2019/01/detroit-tree-planting-programs-white-environmentalism-research/579937/>.

message is received not with confusion but the recipient believes they do understand what is being communicated and, in fact, they have received the wrong message but walk away confident in what they have received. This paper explores the many ways the perception gap reveals itself to libraries, mainly how their important work is perceived by users and stakeholders, but also how libraries perceive their users.

FUNDING & MISSION

A 2018 report, "From Awareness to Funding," highlights some of the disparities in how survey respondents perceive and support public libraries. This report, commissioned by OCLC, the American Library Association, and the Public Library Division of ALA, reveals that while voters support libraries, want them in their communities and even view them as essential local institutions, they do not always understand what or all the services their libraries offer. The report also reveals that voters are not clear on how their libraries are funded: 59% of respondents think most funding comes from state and federal funding, donations, fines, and fees versus the reality, that 86% of funding comes from local sources.² In Georgia specifically, 80.7% of funding comes from local sources with the remaining 17.2% and 2.1% coming from the state and federal funding sources respectively, so for most public library systems in the state, the vast majority of funding is derived locally.³ However, a majority of OCLC survey respondents at 58% would definitely or probably vote in favor of supporting local funding for their libraries, revealing that perhaps if voters are more aware of how their libraries are funded, they would be more likely to support and vote for increased local funding measures at the ballot box.

UNDERSTANDING USERS

² OCLC and American Library Association, *From Awareness to Funding: Voter Perceptions and Support of Public Libraries in 2018*, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.25333/C3M92X>.

³ Georgia Public Library Service, *Georgia's Public Libraries: Quick Look - Fiscal Year 2018*, 2019. https://georgialibraries.org/statistics_files/GPLS_By%20the%20Numbers_FY2018.pdf

There is another example of a perception gap in how libraries and our stakeholders understand our users. It might be assumed that seniors, those aged 65 and up, use their public libraries the most, but research from the Pew Research Center shows that young adults are actually using the library more than seniors. Libraries also fall victim to a strong nostalgia factor; people remember going to the library as a child or with their young children very fondly, but this does not translate to visiting as an adult, shown by the fact that adults visiting a library once a year dropped 8% from 53% in 2012 to 44% in 2015.⁴ There is hope that this number may be on the rise as the previously mentioned 2018 report from OCLC and ALA has the percentage of voters who have visited a public library in the last year up to 70% for in-person visits and 52% for website visits.⁵

This strong nostalgia factor for public library services also lends itself to a discrepancy between behaviors and beliefs.⁶ Many people have strong ideas and opinions of what libraries should be and how they should contribute to their communities, often based on outdated stereotypes, but they do not visit libraries or participate in library services themselves.⁷

FALLING INTO THE GAP

The perception gap of libraries' important work makes it easy for libraries and their staff to fall victim to catchy and incorrect stereotypes and misunderstandings, becoming convenient targets for funding cuts precisely because their communities do not understand their important work. Libraries can only expect to get funded based on what their funding agencies think they do, made difficult when stakeholders, users, and funding agencies are not made aware of the

⁴ [1] Lee Rainie, "Libraries and Learning," Pew Research Center, April 7, 2016. <https://www.pewinternet.org/2016/04/07/libraries-and-learning/>.

⁵ OCLC and American Library Association. *From Awareness to Funding*.

⁶ Caleb Reading, "There's A Backlash Against The Idea To Replace Public Libraries With Amazon," Uproxx, July 23, 2018. <https://uproxx.com/viral/forbes-anti-library-op-ed-amazon-backlash/>.

⁷ John B. Horrigan, "Libraries at the Crossroads," Pew Research Center, September 15, 2015. <https://www.pewinternet.org/2015/09/15/libraries-at-the-crossroads/>.

important work being done. To avoid falling into that perception gap, library staff need to speak the same language as their stakeholders and determine if they need to provide value stories of why users support their libraries and/or the hard numbers and data that specifically show how often services and materials are being used.⁸ In communicating libraries' important work as an essential service to the community, staff can avoid being perceived as just an amenity, a service that is nice to have but not a necessity and therefore an easy target for budget cuts.⁹

The ultimate end goal with navigating the perception gap is, symbolically speaking, to avoid falling into the gap and engaging in a defunding struggle with funding agencies. One way to do this is to bring the public's understanding and, most importantly, stakeholders' understanding of what libraries do in alignment with the important work libraries actually do, resulting in eliminating the misunderstanding and inadequate support and funding that results from a perception gap. The reality is that defunding happens; what follows are case studies conducted of two public library systems in Georgia and their experiences negotiating the perception gap.

CASE STUDIES

During fiscal year 2018, two Georgia library systems - Middle Georgia Regional Library and Cobb Library System - were experiencing difficulties securing their budgets for the upcoming 2019 fiscal year with their local funding agencies. In Middle Georgia, the Macon-Bibb County Board of Commissioners pushed for higher millage rates, threatening library funding if this goal was not achieved.¹⁰ Cobb Library was no stranger to budget cuts; in 2009, their budget was cut due to the recession - and then again in 2011. Now in 2018, their budget was being threatened

⁸ Demco. "3 Actions Public Libraries Should Be Taking in Response to OCLC's 2018 Funding Report," Demco Software, July 12, 2018. <https://www.demcosoftware.com/articles/3-actions-public-libraries-should-be-taking-in-response-to-oclc-2018-funding-report/>.

⁹ Identify Key Stakeholders", American Library Association, April 10, 2013. <http://www.ala.org/everyday-advocacy/engage/identify-key-stakeholders>.

¹⁰ Jennifer Lautzenheiser. 'Funding Challenges Panel.' Presentation, Directors Meeting, Athens, GA, September 27, 2018.

again.¹¹ Both systems were facing the possibility of drastic changes in the services they provided, service hours, and staffing. Fortunately, both library systems were able to maintain their local funding for the 2019 fiscal year. A year later, we followed up with the Directors of these systems to find out how they navigated these situations, actions that worked well or did not, and the measures they are taking to prevent such events from reoccurring.

NAVIGATING THE GAP

Sadly, stories about libraries closing their doors due to lack of funding are not uncommon lately, being such a real-world problem in public libraries, the authors wanted to learn how these libraries in Georgia managed to weather the storm. In this section, the focus is primarily on Middle Georgia Regional's strategies and lessons-learned. The library kept its messages fact-focused while fervently educating its local funding agency on the impact of library budget cuts to the organization itself and to the community; recognized the value of strong, positive relationships with other county departments; and formulated contingency plans for the occurrence of the worst-case scenario.

"It was important for us to focus on facts, not emotion,"¹² stated Jennifer Lautzenheiser, Director of Middle Georgia Regional Library, about Macon-Bibb County's threat to defund external county agencies in 2018. Lautzenheiser was heeding advice to "not be the face of the fight,"¹³ from a fellow librarian who had endured a similar situation. This source also told her that most Directors who get to keep their budgets during these situations end up losing their jobs. If she wanted to secure a win for the library and keep her position, Lautzenheiser would need to advocate for the library while being careful not to burn any bridges, taking into consideration

¹¹ Helen Poyer. Interview with Katherine Gregory. Personal interview. September 12, 2019.

¹² Jennifer Lautzenheiser. Interview with Lauren Mullins. Personal interview. Macon, GA, June 26, 2019.

¹³ Lautzenheiser. Personal Interview.

that she may be working with many of the same community members for years to come. Middle Georgia Regional Library received support from both their Friends of the Library group and several local foundations who were able to be the buffer they needed.¹⁴

Not only was she concerned about maintaining amicable relationships with local funding agencies, but also with other county departments whose budgets were on the chopping block. Per Lautzenheiser's address at a Georgia Library Directors' Meeting, "Our community was in a gridlock.... Our conflict was primarily quality of life services in general and who is responsible to pay for them."¹⁵ Departments that received deep budget cuts include Macon-Bibb Health Department, Department of Family and Children's Services, Macon Transit Authority, all museums and other fine arts organizations, and several other departments. An amended budget was finally approved by the Macon-Bibb Board of Commissioners on the late date of August 21, 2018. "Everyone with the exception of the library, received between a 10% - 50% cut in their annual funding,"¹⁶ Lautzenheiser notified the Georgia Library Directors. Macon-Bibb libraries alone remained the only fully-funded external agency, receiving \$2.8 million from the county.

Lautzenheiser stressed the necessity of understanding that even if a library system comes out the winner in a budget situation, there will be backlash: "For instance, we were having a difficult time finding qualified employees for positions due to our reputation from the budget crisis, and other departments would tell us to just be thankful we had money to hire employees,"¹⁷ she said. Having been in similar situations previously, Helen Poyer, Director of Cobb Library System, agrees with Lautzenheiser on the importance of maintaining close relationships with other locally-funded and community organizations: "Take time to get to know the other departments

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jennifer Lautzenheiser. 'Funding Challenges Panel.' Presentation, Directors Meeting, Athens, GA, September 27, 2018.

¹⁶ Lautzenheiser. 'Funding Challenges Panel.'

¹⁷ Jennifer Lautzenheiser. Interview with Lauren Mullins. Personal interview. Macon, GA, June 26, 2019.

and let them get to know you. Remind them you are all on the same team. You are all valuable public servants. We provide library cards for all County employees. We want them to love and support their library.”¹⁸

Lautzenheiser also educated Macon-Bibb’s Commissioners on how their libraries are funded and the effects budget cuts would have on services and staffing. In early 2018, “multiple [Macon-Bibb County] Commissioners publicly announced that all ‘outside agencies’ were parasites on the government and should be completely defunded.”¹⁹ Lautzenheiser’s response was “to offer multiple Library Funding 101 sessions for Commissioners and members of the administration. [The library budget] slowly moved from an expected cut of 100% to 70% to 30%.”²⁰ However, this cut was still too large to allow Macon-Bibb to receive State funding or belong to the PINES system, according to the Memorandum of Expectations with the State.

After the Macon-Bibb County Board of Commissioners failed to pass a higher millage rate after multiple attempts on July 28, 2018, “the Administration proposed a budget that did not have any increase at all to meet the legal requirement of a budget prior to the start of the fiscal year on July 1. The proposed budget covered only Sheriff, Fire, E-911, and essential administrative functions. All other elements of the government – both internal and external were completely cut. The Commission stated they had 45 days to amend the budget.”²¹ Lautzenheiser immediately switched into preparation mode. She met with her Financial Officer to find out how long she could keep the library’s doors open until current funding ran out; she quickly found ways to cut costs to extend that deadline, including closing all Macon-Bibb branches, except for headquarters. She also called State Librarian Julie Walker for support and managed to visit

¹⁸ Helen Poyer. Interview with Katherine Gregory. Personal interview. July 29, 2019.

¹⁹ Jennifer Lautzenheiser. ‘Funding Challenges Panel.’ Presentation, Directors Meeting, Athens, GA, September 27, 2018.

²⁰ Lautzenheiser. ‘Funding Challenges Panel.’

²¹ Ibid.

each branch before closing that day to notify staff in-person. In early August, when the Commission was again unable to reach a consensus, Lautzenheiser had another big decision to make: "We then had enough funding to either responsibly close a library OR pay another full payroll. The board decision was to responsibly handle employment requirements and the archives."²² Even though difficult decisions with negative consequences had to be made, each one clearly considered patrons and staff first and foremost.

On August 14, the day before the Macon-Bibb libraries were scheduled to close to the public, Lautzenheiser "asked for [state] attendance at a committee meeting with the Commission [where she] presented the regional plan to vote Macon-Bibb out of [the Middle Georgia Regional Library System] to preserve State compliance for the remaining counties. [She] shared the specifics of what that meant to Macon-Bibb residents and the actions that the county would have to take to restore library service if they delayed it further.... The committee voted to reinstate emergency funding to the library to sustain services. The result of this meeting was that it was the first time that [Macon-Bibb County libraries] were able to extract [themselves] from the budget conflict."²³ This action positioned Middle Georgia Regional Library to express its importance as independent to their local funding agency's millage rate increase vote.

NARROWING THE GAP

When asked for recommendations to help other libraries prevent experiencing local budget shortfalls, Lautzenheiser responded "we really had no control over the occurrence of the situation; that was under the control of our local government."²⁴ A library may not be able to prevent local budget cuts, but these Directors have taken steps to ensure their libraries will survive

²² Jennifer Lautzenheiser. 'Funding Challenges Panel.' Presentation, Directors Meeting, Athens, GA, September 27, 2018.

²³ Lautzenheiser. 'Funding Challenges Panel.'

²⁴ Jennifer Lautzenheiser. Interview with Lauren Mullins. Personal interview. Macon, GA, June 26, 2019.

any future threats. These library systems have turned negative situations into positive outcomes for their libraries and patron-bases by continuing to communicate and be proactive with their local funding agencies and keeping the ball rolling when it comes to visibility in their communities

When asked about the best way to show local governments how much libraries matter to their communities, both Directors agreed - stories of impact, supported with statistics. "Having that combination of business terms and improvement on quality of life helps to build our credibility with them,"²⁵ says Lautzenheiser, citing the example of a young patron vocalizing the library's importance in her life at a Commission meeting. Middle Georgia Regional Library staff collect both statistics and stories of how the library has impacted its patrons' lives on a monthly basis to share with their Library Board and, when the opportunity arises, with their Board of Commissioners. In addition to sharing stories of impact and statistics with their local funding agency, Cobb Library System educates each new Commissioner on "all they need to know about the library."²⁶ These inductees receive a binder containing this information, and the Director reviews the content with them.

"Again, educate them on all you do, and if an opportunity comes available to participate in a local government committee, take it,"²⁷ says Cobb Library System Director Helen Poyer, and she is practicing what she preaches; her library demonstrates its importance in the community by proactively helping Cobb County achieve its goals via responsive library programs and services. When the library realized the number one reason people in Cobb County visited the emergency room was due to the result of a fall, they partnered with county Senior Services to host fall prevention classes and related programs throughout the library system. Thanks to their

²⁵ Lautzenheiser. Personal Interview.

²⁶ Helen Poyer. Interview with Katherine Gregory. Personal interview. July 29, 2019.

²⁷ Helen Poyer. Interview with Katherine Gregory. Personal interview. July 29, 2019.

preemptive approach, the library provides relevant and beneficial programming to their community, while conserving tax-payer funds and demonstrating their value to the county.²⁸

Fortunately, difficulties lead to opportunities for strength and growth; both library systems have experienced positive outcomes despite the hardship and negative effects of their budget struggles. Cobb Library System's response to 2009's budget cuts paid off greatly by building incredible strength in community support, which played a significant role in maintaining, and even increasing, the library's local funding in following years:

“When we went through the budget crisis during the recession, we had strong patron support, but not [from] County and community groups. From that experience, we created the Community and User Engagement Department... who conducts outreach, develops partnerships with groups of like mission, and tells our stories. Recently, when funding was threatened to be cut, we had the support of County departments, more community organizations, and of course, our patrons.”²⁹

Additional results Cobb's Community and User Engagement (CUE) Department produced include the PASS program, which allows students to check out books using only their school ID and a STEAM programming partnership with a local university.³⁰

Similarly, Middle Georgia Regional Library utilized the visibility their funding crisis created in the local media to spread their mission, stories of impact, and the good things their libraries are doing in the community. Shortly after securing funding for the upcoming fiscal year,

²⁸ Poyer. Personal Interview.

²⁹ Helen Poyer. Interview with Katherine Gregory. Personal interview. July 29, 2019.

³⁰ Poyer. Personal Interview.

Middle Georgia hired marketing staff who “picked up that momentum and [have] kept the ball rolling ever since.”³¹ Marketing staff invited the local media into the libraries - to programs and classes, and spent time giving interviews on events and services. In addition, marketing staff built and maintained a strong social media presence and created a Report to the Community, which showcased just how huge a return on investment the library is to its tax payers. For 2018, Macon-Bibb County libraries alone were nearly a \$9.5 million return on investment, and the community seems to be receptive to the library’s message: “I [think] that the Telegraph choosing our staff as its Person of the Year validated them and their work,” said Lautzenheiser. “It made our staff feel very appreciated by the community we strive to serve....[This experience] was a reminder that relationships matter: positive relationships with funding agencies, other community agencies, and supportive relationships between staff members.”³²

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are some strong commonalities for staying ahead of the perception gap based on the provided case studies and literature reviews. First, it is important that everyone – all stakeholders – know who funds what. Transparency is key here – people will fill in knowledge gaps with negative information based on their perceptions more often than realized. People also color their understanding of a situation very differently from one issue to another, even if the issues appear to be the same, such as funding for the library.³³ After a recent and very large-scale renovation project, Marshes of Glynn Libraries needed to raise funds for materials and programming costs that were not covered by the renovation funds. They recognized there might be a perception gap in public understanding of what construction funds could and could not be

³¹ Jennifer Lautzenheiser. Interview with Lauren Mullins. Personal interview. Macon, GA, June 26, 2019.

³² Jennifer Lautzenheiser. Interview with Lauren Mullins. Personal interview. Macon, GA, June 26, 2019.

³³ Brentin Mock, “Why Detroit Residents Pushed Back Against Tree-Planting.”

used for and dealt with that upfront in a fundraising brochure. They clearly stated why they were asking for donations, what it would be used for, and how much they needed.³⁴

Have an elevator speech ready, but also be prepared to talk more in-depth if someone asks questions or expresses concerns. For example, consider giving someone a quick breakdown of how you are funded, “We receive 65% of our funding from the county, 30% from the city, and 5% from the state.” And then be prepared with a little more information if someone asks. “The city and county agreed upon that split two years ago based on population figures in our county.” “State money is used for x and y, but cannot be used for z. So, for z, we depend upon the county, city, private donations, grants, etc.”

Always present facts early in the conversation and with clarity and tact; it is easy to lose public trust and goodwill and very difficult to regain it. And of course, remain non-threatening and pleasant and personable; this humanizes the experience and allows the facts to be front and center, instead of opinions. It is easy to dismiss emotional arguments and opinions, but much harder to dismiss facts. If library staff say, “We need libraries because they are good for the community,” that can be countered with, “Everything is available online so, no, we don’t need brick-and-mortar libraries anymore.” However, if facts are given, “Library programs focused on job skills increased worker readiness, which led to a 20% increase in hiring at the local job fair last year,” that is much harder to rebut negatively.

The goal of all library interactions with funders and stakeholders is to remain positive and relay the facts of how libraries impact their local communities in constructive and concrete ways. Toward that end, the Georgia Public Library Service (GPLS), has an ROI calculator on its website. The American Library Association and the Public Library Association have tools and resources on

³⁴ Marshes of Glynn Libraries, *Turning the Page Campaign*, 2019.

their websites as well. Using a ROI calculator allows library systems to illustrate in a very concrete way how their local library or library system impacts their local community. Sharing this information with elected officials and the public, as Middle Georgia Regional Library has done, shines a spotlight on the important work libraries are doing at a local level and lessens the perception gap.

In addition to marketing one's important work to the public, the case studies of both library systems show the importance of ongoing education and training for elected officials. Cobb Library System's CUE department conducts library training sessions for elected officials, department leaders, and community organizations. Similarly, Middle Georgia Regional Library has hosted "Library 101" sessions with elected officials and county employees. These programs have been effective in narrowing the perception gap between the libraries and their funding agencies. Library systems interested in starting similar programs can start small, perhaps with a single training session offered at local government offices, and add more customized sessions for their local funders as library staff begin to communicate their message more effectively.

CONCLUSION

It is the authors' hope that this paper has provided readers with a sense of how important it is to continuously communicate the important work of public libraries - the daily accomplishments and big picture missions - to stakeholders. Referenced resources are listed; key take-aways are combined into an easily digestible infographic. Readers are encouraged to take every opportunity to inform and involve stakeholders, elected officials, board members, and library users. Never become complacent nor assume that the value of public libraries' important work is being communicated effectively, especially when it matters most.



MINDING THE GAP

tips and tricks for navigating the perception gap

BE VISIBLE!

Don't get comfortable.



Find new ways to involve both your library and its stakeholders. Invite new commissioners and officials for a library orientation. Be aware of your funding agencies' goals, missions, issues, how your library can provide support, as well as meet other needs in the community.

BE SPECIFIC!

Continuously communicate with your funding agencies.



Offer stories of impact to your funding agencies, let them know how your library's funding is structured, what budget cuts would mean, and which services would be cut and when. Focus on facts, not emotions.

BE INVOLVED!

Establish a presence.



Provide services like newspapers and technology training to other departments in funding agencies. Reach out to community groups and other local organizations to develop strong partnerships.

BE SPECIFIC!

Libraries provide essential services.



Funders won't pay for what they don't see. Make your Important Work clear to your funding agencies, whether this is by providing data, dollar figures, or impact stories. In speaking their language, communicate that your library provides essential services to avoid being perceived as an amenity.

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