

The Benefits of Including Dedicated Young Adult Librarians on Staff in the Public Library

Background

The Young Adult Library Services Association adopted a strategic plan in 2004. That plan included a Core Purpose and a Vivid Description of the Desired Future. The Core Purpose is “to advocate for excellence in library services to the teen population.” The first bullet below the description states: “There will be a young adult librarian in every public and secondary school library.” The group of practitioners who developed both of these statements understood that advocating excellence in library service for teens goes hand in hand with the provision of a dedicated Young Adult Librarian in each location that serves teens.

Position

Why is it important to have Young Adult Librarians on staff?

Because a significant percent of the American population is composed of adolescents and many of them are library users. There are over 30 million teenagers currently in the United States, the largest generation since the Baby Boomers, and, according to a 2007 survey of young people conducted by a Harris Poll for the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), 78% of these teen respondents have library cards. Not surprisingly, participation in library programs by youth under age 18 has been rising steadily over the past decade, from 35.5 million/year in 1993 to more than 51.8 million in 2001 (Learning in Motion). We also know that while 14.3 million kindergarteners through 12th graders are home alone after school every day (After School Alliance), three-quarters of Americans believe it is a high priority for public libraries to offer a safe place where teenagers can study and congregate (Long Overdue). Unfortunately, many communities do not provide after school or weekend activities that can engage teens, despite the understanding that successful, well prepared young adults are essential to fill roles as contributing members of a vital society, and that teens need responsive and responsible venues in which to develop into successful, contributing members of society.

Why can't generalist library staff serve the teen population as well as Young Adult Librarians?

Because librarians especially trained to work with young adults are age level specialists who understand that teens have unique needs and have been trained especially to work with this particular population. As books like Barbara Strauch's *The Primal Teen: What New Discoveries about the Teenage Brain Tell Us about Our Kids* have shown us, teens' brains and bodies are different from a child's or an adult's. As a result, their behavior, interests and informational and social needs are not the same as those of children or adults.

The Chapin Hall Center for Children, www.chapinhall.org (<http://www.chapinhall.org/>), completed a study in 2004 on Teens in the Library. In the area of staffing, the first statement related to improving youth services in libraries is that “dedicated staff are essential to effective youth programs”. Across all of the sites studied by Chapin Hall and the Urban Institute, senior administrators and librarians agreed “that youth programs require a staff person whose priority is to manage the program...” Library services that best address teen needs and interests are the professional priority of Young Adult Librarians.

Why provide staff and services specifically for teens?

Dedicated library services for teens improves the library as a whole. Armed with knowledge and understanding of adolescent behavior, interests and needs, Young Adult Librarians create programming and build collections appropriate to the concerns of young adults and develop services based on knowledge of adolescent development. They are experts in the field of young adult literature and keep up with current teen trends in reading, technology, education and popular culture. They provide reference services that help young adults find and use information and they promote activities that build and strengthen information literacy skills. They know the benefits of youth participation and understand it is essential to the offer of excellent service to teens, encouraging teens to provide direct input to library service through activities such as teen advisory groups and volunteer or paid work in libraries. They also collaborate with other youth development experts in the community and with agencies that provide services to teenagers.

According to key findings from the “Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development (PLPYD), a Wallace Foundation Initiative,” public libraries selected for this program were challenged to “develop or expand youth programs that engaged individual teens in a developmentally supportive manner while enhancing library services for all youth in the community”. Based on the experiences of the PLPYD sites, the findings conclude that: “Public Libraries have the potential to design youth programs that provide developmentally enriching experiences to teens and have positive effect both on youth services and the library more broadly.”

Young Adult librarians build relationships with teens and help other staff to feel comfortable with them. One of the findings from a study by Chapin Hall indicated that staff prejudice in relation to teens broke down when staff can be mentored to develop relationships with teenagers. Youth development principles were credited with changing the general culture of the library by providing an “important new language” for library administrators that helped the library to establish a new leadership role, in the area of youth development, in the community. In an era when libraries must clearly articulate their importance to the larger community, the role of youth development agency increases the public library’s value as an institution and also makes good economic sense for the community.

Because that’s what teens want and need. A 2007 survey conducted by the Harris Poll for YALSA asked young people what needed to happen in their local library in order for them to use it more often. One in five respondents said they would use their library more if “there was a librarian just for teens.” One third of respondents said that they would use the library more if the library had more interesting materials to borrow and events to attend.

The Young Adult Librarian acts as a significant adult in the lives of many young people, thereby meeting one of the seven developmental needs of teens: positive social interaction with peers **and adults** (Search Institute).

Conclusion

Why employ Young Adult Librarians? The practical reasons are listed above. On a fundamental level the goal is to provide excellent service to a large but unique segment of the population, teenagers. Young Adult Librarians are essential to providing the best service to young adults in libraries and they are essential to keeping libraries viable and up to date by translating knowledge about cultural trends into programs, collections, staff engagement with youth and collaborative efforts in the broader community. So the answer is simple – employing Young Adult Librarians is the smart thing to do.

Resources

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