

What Can Harvard Library Learn From The Cambridge Public Library?

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In the midst of Harvard's discussions of "the library of the future," evolving technologies, reconfigured spaces, and staff reorganization, I found inspiration from our close neighbor: The Cambridge Public Library. The Cambridge Public Library has recently expanded from its home in its original historic structure by Van Brunt and Howe, to a new structure that combines the original building with a new wing by William Rawn Associates, creating 104,000 square ft. of space.

I met with the Director of the Cambridge Public Library, Susan Flannery, who gave me a tour of the new facility, and described some of CPL's new innovations and services. The new Cambridge Public Library evolved from community input and collaboration with library staff and administration. The community wanted a library that retained "democratic ideals," housed in "signature architecture," that served as the "civic heart of the community." The new library has been a resounding success. Though built to serve the local community, it draws visitors from all over the world. Two thousand people a day visit the new library. The library borrows 200,000 books a

year through the Minuteman consortium, and lends 130,000 books a year. It also processes 60 bins of book deliveries a day.

If you have the support of the staff and the community the money will follow.

Susan Flannery said initial resistance from the community and the staff to a renovation of the old historic library gradually evaporated as they addressed the concerns and incorporated the suggestions from the stakeholders. Support for the new library increased, resulting in the approval 91 million dollars of funding from the City Council, and 10 million dollars of grant funding. Staff are potentially the strongest advocates of any organization change, especially change that significantly impacts the quality of services offered to its community.

The leaders of the Harvard Library Transition still have not recovered from alienating a large portion of the library staff by announcing that the 21st Century Library requires “a reduced staff” to cut costs. In addition to significant losses of institutional knowledge through VERIP packages, the library is also losing some of its most talented staff, still in the prime of their careers, who do not see a future for themselves in the new organization. In contrast, at the Cambridge Public Library, many employees who were

ready to retire chose to stay a little longer, so that they would have the opportunity to see the vision they helped to create come to fruition. The Cambridge Public Library prefers not to lay off staff, but to deploy them to other areas. They keep a full time graphic designer on staff, which Susan Flannery asserts is less expensive than outsourcing, as they are continually producing graphics to create a dynamic physical and virtual environment, both in their space, and on their web and social media pages.

What kinds of Public Library Innovations Would Transfer to an Academic Setting?

The new Cambridge Public Library sought to “mesh the strengths of a really good bookstore with a really good library.” The Cambridge Public Library keeps the original paper covers on the books because they serve as a kind of marketing tool. They outsource book cover laminating and Dewey Decimal cataloging, but retain a Technical Services staff to work on other projects. Since 80% of the public finds what they’re looking for by browsing, all new material is browsable, including books and audio visual materials. The Cambridge Public Library strives to make material accessible to both patrons who browse via the internet, and patrons who prefer to browse material in person on the shelf. Outsourcing cataloging

would likely not work as well in an academic library, where patrons benefit from the librarians' deep knowledge of subject analysis for locating materials needed for scholarly research, but the idea of visual marketing for books might translate well, especially in art based collections.

Create Unique Spaces for Unique Users

The public library has programmed a variety of spaces to serve the needs of its users, who come from a variety of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, and include children, families, teens, researchers, and historians. The library has community space, silent space, spaces where people can gather in groups and talk, places where food can be eaten, drink only spaces, and no food spaces. Signage is meant to convey a kind "joie de vivre," says Flannery. Every sign features large photos of people from the community of a variety of ages, races, and abilities. They are meant to give a visual cue in addition to the English words on the signs. Many people in the community are native foreign language speakers, who come to the library for assistance in learning English. For that reason also, the library displays ESL materials close to the entrance. For the sake of simplicity and to appear more approachable, the reference desk is labeled "Questions? / Answers!"

Though the patrons of the Harvard Library are the intellectual elite of the world, many of them come from families that are not dissimilar from the patrons of the Cambridge Public Library. They come from the United States, and from far flung international communities. Some struggle with the English Language. All except those from the wealthiest families, and those who qualify for complete scholarships, will be saddled with enormous student loan debt once they complete their educations. Some of the intellectual elite also frequent the Cambridge Public Library. In the basement of the Cambridge Public Library is a large function space and a lecture hall that seats 230 people, as well as an underground garage. Recently events have been hosted here on Greek Mythology, Tip O'Neill, and Architecture. The lecture hall also hosts documentary screenings. Speakers have included Chris Matthews, of Hardball, and Drew Faust.

Use Automation to Enhance Service Not Replace People

Currently 30% of the library's circulation is self-checkout from 4 self checkout stations near the two circulation counters. Flannery hopes to increase this to 60% of the circulation over the next few years, but she hopes in doing so to deploy staff to other areas, rather than lay them off.

She would like to maintain a human presence at the front entrance even if self checkout circulation increases.

Print is Not Obsolete

The DPLA (Digital Public Library of America) is very misleading, says Flannery. Digital material will not replace print any time soon. Currently libraries can only digitize material in the public domain. Demand is much higher for recent editions and new books. At the Cambridge Public Library, the circulation of print material has increased, particularly in children's literature though material is available in all formats. Use of print, says Flannery, is "off the charts." The library buys multiple quantities of the most popular books and retains an "Express" collection of highly in demand books that cannot be renewed or recalled. There is a downside to technology: licenses to digitized materials expire, pages expire, batteries need to be recharged, equipment to read it is expensive, and many in the community cannot afford to purchase E-Book readers, or computers. The Cambridge Public Library is purchasing 50 nooks and Kindles to expand patron access to E-Books. Libraries for the foreseeable future must "ride two horses," says Flannery, and purchase materials in multiple formats.

Invest in Staff

Extraordinary thought is given to the comfort of the staff at the new Cambridge Public Library, and creating optimal work conditions for them. For instance: the staff who work at their desks all day are given the offices with the best view. The staff who move around during the day who do not spend a lot of time at their cubicles have the office with less natural light. The boiler room of the old building serves as the break room, and features cooking facilities, an eating area, a separate relaxation area with a sofa and oriental rug, and TV. There are also shower facilities available for staff who run or bike into work. There was a small room for napping or resting that was never used, that now serves as a workroom for the graphic designer. As a result the Cambridge Public Library has a reputation as a great place to work. Staff are encouraged to be highly creative and productive. They contribute to journals, and are in demand as speakers.

Keep Up With New Challenges

The challenges the CPL still faces are finding time to plan: keeping up with evolving technology, staff development, and management training. The Cambridge Public Library has historically been on the forefront of evolving technology. They were the first library in the world to have high speed

graphical internet, claims Flannery. No doubt, if they keep their focus on how technology can enhance the human experience, they will continue to maintain their status as the “civic heart of the community.” Although Harvard Libraries have major differences in mission, funding, administration, and patrons from the Cambridge Public Library, we are still a part of the Cambridge community. If Harvard is the intellectual hub of Cambridge, it would benefit from absorbing some ideals from Cambridge’s “civic heart.”