

**How Public Libraries Can Be Used to Cut Costs and Provide More Sustainable Levels of  
Equity to Patrons Who Are Struggling Financially**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines considerations for designing services for patrons struggling with inequity and financial insecurity. Inequitable cultures offer fewer resources to many. This paper provides a literature review regarding services patrons want, information on how to reach patrons, culturally inclusive practices, and what works when designing services to bolster equity through financial savings. This paper concludes with a discussion of the following findings from the literature and the author's experiences: patrons struggling with permanent housing and patrons who have immigrated stand to benefit significantly from library services, and it is up to individual libraries to step up and provide services in an inclusive and supportive manner. This paper is of interest to librarians assisting patrons with issues of inequity.

**Keywords:** Inequity, financial struggles, library services, inclusive communication, individual effort.

**Introduction:** In inequitable cultures, many peoples do not have the same opportunities, agency, or resources as those in power. This is due to harmful practices of those in power that perpetuate systems of oppression against peoples, supposedly for a part of themselves that those in power feel is different from them (race, gender, sexuality, physical and mental abilities, immigration status, housing status, and many other factors). In a culture that provides less equity to many, the library can act as a lifeline to help turn the tide. This paper acknowledges that not all peoples in historically excluded groups are struggling with financial insecurity, and that any person can be struggling with this. What a patron would spend on membership fees, wifi, food and groceries with no assistance or resources, health and wellness, housing and tenant issues, financial consultations, career counseling, a lack of information on services provided to immigrants or those previously incarcerated, translation services, supportive programming, educational resources and professional level research resources is staggering. Libraries can provide many of these services at no cost or can direct patrons to those who can. The personal funds patrons would have spent on services outside the library are now free to be used for other things, at the patrons' discretion. This paper examines how libraries are meeting the needs of patrons who are struggling financially. It will examine the importance of welcoming and inclusive communications and practices, of recreation options, of services for patrons who have immigrated or who struggle with permanent housing, and how additional services should be created. Libraries are truly in a position to step up and act as centers of equity for their patrons and communities, but it is up to libraries to make the effort.

**Literature Review:** This literature review aims to provide a scaffolding for librarians to use when building services and programming to assist patrons and communities struggling with inequity. Acting as hubs of free services and resources to patrons set back by discriminatory

societal structures helps to provide a leg-up. When approaching how to best create services that help provide equity, it is imperative librarians understand supportive and inclusive language and communication practices, directly communicate with patrons, and realize how these factors and feedback will contribute to what services will be utilized.

**What Services Do Financially Struggling Patrons Want?:** Holt's article, *Fitting Library Services into the Lives of the Poor*, provides background information (library ideals vs. ambivalence, the nature of poverty, and services that are useful) and an overview of current library services for low-income patrons. Their findings suggest that many libraries are out-of-touch with what patrons want and need, and with how to provide it (Holt, 2006). This leads to an interesting study by Moore and Henderson titled, *"Like Precious Gold": Recreation in the Lives of Low-Income Committed Couples*. It examines the importance of recreation in romantic relationships and the challenge of being able to partake in recreational activities while struggling financially (Moore & Henderson, 2018). Keeping Holt's findings in mind, this is important information regarding services that low-income couples want and could benefit from that libraries could help to address. Moore and Henderson state that recreation can help form meaningful bonds and reduce stress. Their findings show low-income couples engaged in 4 main recreational activities: home-based (board games), date nights (going to a movie), utilitarian (doing chores together), and partner-support (supporting a hobby their partner enjoys but they do not) (Moore & Henderson, 2018). The authors' findings showed that, "noticeably missing was any mention of couples taking part in organized public recreation programs" (Moore & Henderson, 2018, p. 65). This shows an opportunity for libraries to step in and provide this type of programming for their communities. Providing free "date-night" programming and options would meet a beneficial, recreational, need for low-income patrons that is not being addressed.

In addition to recreation options, Weiss's article, *Libraries and the Digital Divide*, imparts how important and desired access to digital services is for library patrons (2012). Weiss illustrates that access to such services is greatly tangled with issues of social inequity in the U.S., creating a kind of "snowball effect" of inequity. The article delves into the ongoing shift from internet access being considered an optional service to being considered a necessary household utility. Weiss uses a helpful framework for this, ranging from wide-spanning political elements such as policy and government-funded wifi, to local elements such as libraries rising to help bridge that digital divide for their patrons, to the very real issues that come with this new social need and the responsibilities of those who are having to fill it (Weiss, 2012).

Patrons need to have the internet to function in today's digital world, especially for work, school, and life management functions like paying bills online to get a discount, or using online banking to better manage money. There are also costs to be able to afford the equipment needed, like a router/modem/or Google Nest service that libraries can sometimes help to address, like the NYPL did pre-pandemic (Pyatetsky, 2015). For many, not having access to digital services is not a realistic option.

### **Reaching Our Patrons/The Words We Use:**

The cultural context of Mestre's 2010 article, *Librarians Working with Diverse Populations: What Impact Does Cultural Competency Training Have on Their Efforts?*, was interesting. Librarianship has, unfortunately, historically been a very white-dominated profession (McKenzie, 2017). The tone and intended audience of Mestre's article seems to be white people, yet it was hard to determine if that was intentional or the author's innate perspective. An example of this would be when Mestre writes,

"When librarians work with individuals from diverse cultures they

need to be flexible and make exceptions to traditional practice. Gomez provides scenarios of how librarians from the mainstream population (white European Americans who are English speakers) can become culturally competent in order to become effective communicators, liaisons, and advocates for members of minority cultures” (Mestre, 2010, p. 480).

Using terms like “mainstream population” and defining that as “white European Americans who are English speakers” perpetuates a status quo (Mestre, 2010, p. 480). There are many communities where the prevailing demographics are Latinx patrons, Black patrons, and an International community of Patrons.

The tone and content of Mestre’s article recognizes that whiteness and its trappings are a persistent problem in the U.S., and that the white population is going to need the most assistance and training in understanding and unlearning oppressive systems they have benefited from, which I agree with. Yet the article has a seemingly unacknowledged implicit bias in itself. It is unclear if the author realized that they seemed to be writing to a white audience (while that is the audience who would largely benefit from some of the information conveyed), and what that implied about librarianship and its historically white make-up. The article seems to keep a door closed. This is something librarians need to avoid. To truly welcome and seek out diverse voices in librarianship, the tone, audience, and content of communications should be welcoming and diverse. Which brings us to the important work of Cardwell, Havard, Rao, Diaz, and Kunkel.

Cardwell et al.’s 2019 article, *Anti-Oppressive Composition Pedagogies*, examines the power of everyday language and how it can be used to “un-teach ” oppressive systems.

Instructors at UC Berkley formed a group called “Radical Decolonial Queer Pedagogies of Composition” (Cardwell et al., 2019, p. 1). They examined how instructors and students think

about and use language in all aspects of their courses: from content, to how assignments are created, to grammar rules and grading practices. These elements were evaluated to recognize and root out influences and structures of white supremacy, sexism, racism, ableism, queerphobia and other oppressive structures (Cardwell et al., 2019). Recognizing that systems of oppression shape and influence our education system and resources is important for libraries to also acknowledge and actively work to dismantle when creating library services. These instructors acknowledged and actively worked to change these elements in order to become a more accepting and welcoming space for historically excluded peoples. This highlights the importance of how we communicate with one another, the language we use, and how deeply it can affect us. Cardwell, et al. provide an impressive discussion on how insidious systems of oppression are and that university courses needed to be examined and restructured, starting with language.

All of this information and perspective is important to librarians who are working to create programs and services that will help bolster levels of equity for struggling patrons. This assertion is supported by Katopol's article, *Stereotype Threat and the Senior Library Patron*, which highlights another communication factor librarians should be cognizant of: the issue of "stereotype threat" (2016). Katopol does an excellent job of demonstrating the very real anxiety, stress, and navigation strategies that occur due to the fear of perpetuating existing stereotypes of oneself. Katopol's discussion of stereotype threat was very well done. They illustrated the concept of dealing with stereotype threat in action, then expanded the discussion to include perspectives of more historically excluded groups and the issues they face when navigating a world rife with people who believe in harmful stereotypes (Katopol, 2016). The problem in these scenarios is not the person worrying about navigating harmful perceptions held by those who

believe in stereotypes. The problem is the person or group that is perpetuating racist, sexist, ageist, ableist, or other discriminatory and oppressive stereotypes.

Continuing to explore the importance of how we communicate with one another in an inequitable society, Maar, Bessette, McGregor, Lovelace, and Reade's article, *Co-creating Simulated Cultural Communication Scenarios with Indigenous Animators: An Evaluation of Innovative Clinical Cultural Safety Curriculum*, shows the importance of accurate cultural representation in those creating the media, content, and tools we use (2020). This is also true for library services.

In the U.S., there are countless examples of content, be it books, movies, medical infographics, etc., where the few characters of Color or varying gender and sexual identities were created by white, cis, men. They are not accurate representations and often play into stereotypes that limit the perspectives of the consumers. Inaccurate representation of peoples who have historically been excluded has deep and negative implications in areas of specialized knowledge, communication styles, terminology, and language taught in white-centric programs. This leaves gaping holes in cultural context, knowledge base, and communication styles. Historically excluded peoples must have accurate representation to receive accurate and supportive services (Maar et al., 2020). Librarians should understand that accurate representation is a crucial element to effective, inclusive, and welcoming communications, language skills and services.

In Maar et al.'s study, to address recurring problems regarding, "the teaching of clinical communication skills for culturally safe care to Indigenous patients" (Maar et al., 2020, p.1), local Indigenous animators, the Northern Ontario School of Medicine, and the article's authors formed a mutually beneficial partnership not based on concepts of whiteness and one-sided power dynamics. They worked to create a "new teaching modality of simulated cultural

communication scenarios” (Maar et al., 2020, p.1). The study recognized a problem and embraced accurate representation, inclusivity, and anti-oppression dialog to create a training program that communicated in methods preferred by Indigenous practitioners and patients (Maar et al., 2020). The study’s representation, language, and communication styles used, also embraced anti-oppression mentalities and discarded harmful practices of whiteness.

**What Works When Designing Library Services to Bolster Equity Through Financial Savings?:** Holt discusses ways libraries assist patrons who are struggling financially and gives an analysis of their efficiency, as well as how and why improvements should be made. Holt asserts that for libraries to successfully provide beneficial services patrons will use, issues of accessibility, usefulness, and practicality must each be a strong focus, but the most important consideration is to have direct communication with the patrons the services are being designed for (Holt, 2006). Moore and Henderson emphasize that for low-income couples seeking out recreational activities, their finances, schedules, transportation, and health affect what they are going to choose to do (Moore & Henderson, 2018). These are all important factors for librarians to consider when creating services.

Holt’s main three points are 1) that libraries can fall prey to the mentality of “othering” those they see as “lesser”, leading to a failure in communication, 2) that there are opportunities for libraries to counter this mindset by communicating directly with patrons, and 3) that communication is crucial to developing services low-income patrons need and will use (2006). Holt asserts that it is up to individual libraries to raise their standards for communications with low-income patrons. Holt says the question to ask is, “How can my library develop and fit its services into the lives of the poor so they will benefit from what we know how to do?” and not

“What services should my library offer to the poor?” (Holt, 2006, p.184). I believe both questions work in tandem, providing beneficial paths for the libraries asking them.

Holt gives an action plan to use when working with low-income patrons to create and provide services. The plan’s steps solicit information, organize quality services, decide limits of services provided, deliver services at times and locations convenient to users, make partnerships with agencies who know their neighborhoods and constituencies, publicize services in neighborhood venues, recognize that kids lead, organize family experiences and performance venues for kids, and promote cross-service use (Holt, 2006). I approve of creating this action plan, which is broken down into tangible and detailed steps.

**Discussion:** After examining what services patrons want, the importance of reaching patrons through supportive, accurate, and inclusive communications, what works when designing library services to bolster equity through financial savings, and my own experiences as a librarian, several findings were concluded. These are that patrons struggling with issues of permanent housing, and patrons who have immigrated to the U.S., both stand to benefit significantly from free library services, and that it is largely up to individual libraries to make the effort to reach out and provide these services in an inclusive, supportive, and welcoming manner.

**Finding 1: Patrons Struggling With Issues of Permanent Housing Stand to Benefit Significantly from Library Services:** I am a strong believer in libraries acting as centers of equity for their patrons and communities. This is a large part of what is at the heart of my own work in libraries and in this MLIS program. Collins et al.’s article, *Addressing the Needs of the Homeless: A San Jose Library Partnership Approach*, supports programming created specifically for patrons without permanent housing. The article also asserts that partnerships formed between libraries and various assistance agencies can significantly benefit this demographic even further.

There are also potential benefits that can be achieved through partnerships between academic and public libraries. These two institutions can bolster each other's services to patrons without permanent housing (2009). Public libraries may have resources and programming geared towards older adults experiencing homelessness, and academic libraries may have more resources targeting students or faculty who are experiencing homelessness. Sharing ideas, resources, and options with one another can benefit all of the collective patrons without housing. I was fascinated by this article's examination of the joint city/library initiative that incorporated so many elements of programming, services, and partnerships, including the library's own architecture. Physical library spaces and design can be made into resources to support the use of a library (Collins et al., 2009). I think there is a lot of amazing potential there.

Examining specific services that the New York Public Library provides that can benefit patrons struggling with a lack of housing, there is an extensive amount of overlap between general services and targeted services. For instance, library cards are free to everyone, which benefits all patrons including those experiencing homelessness. There are a multitude of supportive programming resources and options, both virtual and online, with information provided on their website (New York Public Library, n.d.-l). There are many educational resources for teens, including free assistance in preparing for the GED (New York Public Library, n.d.-d). Pre-pandemic, the NYPL was providing free mobile hotspots (New York Public Library, n.d.-j) to low-income patrons, so that they could have internet access from wherever they were (Pyatetsky, 2015). That provides significant financial savings to those struggling with income, and provides important access to the internet for patrons experiencing homelessness who are seeking resources online, applying for jobs, or checking the status of assistance requests, without having to make the trip to the library each time.

Some of the more targeted assistance the NYPL provides which benefits patrons struggling with housing include community support resources (New York Public Library, n.d.-c) that address imperative needs such as food security (for instance, patrons can find local food banks) and even access remote-based community support resources (New York Public Library, n.d.-e). NYPL also provides health and wellness resources that include vetted lists of available general health services or providers and organizations, many which are free of charge to patrons, along with detailed summaries about what each health resource is for, what they provide, and their contact information (New York Public Library, n.d.-g).

NYPL provides housing and tenant rights resources that includes information on rent relief programs, shelter information, and free legal-advice options (New York Public Library, n.d.-h). Working from the stance of providing preventative measures to help patrons from losing existing housing, NYPL provides career and finance resources that can benefit those struggling with permanent housing. These services provide free information on mortgage assistance, utility bill relief, and free tax preparation resources as well as career counseling and virtual job fair events (New York Public Library, n.d.-o). There are resources for patrons who have been previously incarcerated, a population who often faces discrimination from employers and landlords. These resources include detailed and current employment option information (The Correctional Services Staff of The New York Public Library, 2018).

**Finding 2: Patrons Who Have Immigrated to the U.S. Stand to Benefit Significantly from Library Services:** NYPL also provides community support resources that address imperative needs such as food resources for undocumented immigrants. There are specific, free, resources for those who have immigrated to the U.S., including programming, ESL courses, free

language learning options (New York Public Library, n.d.-p), and information on representation (New York Public Library, n.d.-i).

Payne's article, *How Can Libraries Support Children and Immigrant Families? By Doing What We Do Best*, recognizes the horrific experiences being wrought onto families at the southern U.S. border by the U.S. Government (2019). It also focuses on ways that libraries can support these families. I was glad to see the article was relatively recent, as I feel like this issue is once again being swept under the rug by mainstream media. In Payne's article, libraries sought to help children who had been immigrating to the U.S. across its southern border when they were separated from their families by the U.S. government.

The main way that a library in Brooklyn, NY found to help was to provide backpacks filled with children's books in Spanish, as well as arts and crafts materials, activities, and even some toys. These backpacks were distributed to children by lawyers representing them in a complicated, drawn out, and trauma-inducing court system. The goal of the backpacks was to help the children feel slightly more comfortable, and to provide distraction from the traumatic and isolating experience they were undergoing (Payne, 2019). The need for something like this is truly heartbreaking. No amount of assistance will ever feel like enough until the U.S. ends its human-rights violating immigration practices, many of which were intentionally exacerbated by the trump administration (Amnesty International, 2018), and closes the ICE detention camps, reuniting the families they've separated and providing reparations.

Payne's article goes on to explain that one of the best ways libraries can be a resource to families who have immigrated to the U.S., is to remain a consistent and trusted source of accurate information, and to provide warm and accepting services, especially through books and outreach services. This is substantiated by Jensen's article, *Service to Day Laborers: A Job*

*Libraries Have Left Undone*. Jensen asserts that providing safety and recreation information to day-laborer organizations, and ensuring that libraries are consistently welcoming and useful to day laborers, are some of the best ways to truly serve these patrons. Jensen gives specific steps libraries can take to provide better services to day laborers. Articles that provide “action-plans” like these, have really done the research and the work for libraries, presenting them with attainable and ready-to-go ways they can jump in with their services. Jensen implores libraries to maintain cultural respect at all times, and to not diminish day laborer’s chances of finding work by intruding on the time they spend waiting for job offers (Jensen, 2002).

I strongly advocate for the concept of libraries acting as the “third-space” in communities, and in moving even beyond that (the first space being the home, the second being work, and the third being a center of community: the library) (McKenzie, 2017). Libraries seek to provide what patrons need and want: social spaces, local events, art, etc. The library acting as a community center embedded into the lives of its patrons is especially important to those who have immigrated to a new country. Immigrants are often learning new social structures and systems, and libraries are places that incur no costs, provide free resources, and often have materials in their first language, if it varies from that of the country they have immigrated to.

Shepherd, Petrillo, & Wilson’s article, *Settling In: How Newcomers Use a Public Library*, examines how immigrants to Canada utilize libraries as “...a place to study, read or meet other people” (Shepherd et al., 2018, p. 583). The study also showed that those who have immigrated to Canada utilize the library, its services, and its spaces more frequently than other demographics, such as those with lifelong Canadian citizenship (Shepherd et al., 2018). To me, this implies libraries are effectively reaching communities of people who have immigrated there, and that there is a welcoming attitude towards immigrants and refugees in the library.

**Finding 3: It Is Largely Up to Individual Libraries to Step Up and Provide These Services in an Inclusive, Supportive, and Welcoming Manner:** It is often up to an individual library to actively make the choice to put in the work and effort needed to reach their struggling patrons and communities. Collins et al. emphasizes the need for libraries to put more effort into reaching patrons struggling with a lack of housing especially (2009). Holt's article focuses on this same concept and uses it to build recommendations for better serving low-income patrons. When examining the ALA's stance on library services to the poor, Holt states "Like so many other ALA statements of principle, this one comes to life only when individual libraries deal with the specifics involved in the issue" (Holt, 2006, p.180). I believe that Holt's article and perspectives do a great job illustrating that it is up to individual libraries to make the effort in bridging communication gaps that affect their patrons and services.

Moore and Henderson's study shows a great opportunity for libraries to step up and meet programming needs for low-income couples. Libraries are not mentioned once in the study, likely due to the authors and participants being unaware of free library programming, libraries not providing "date night" programs, or libraries not reaching their audience. The authors assert that recreation is an important element of healthy romantic relationships and a barrier to recreation for couples can be a lack of funds (Moore & Henderson, 2018). This provides an opportunity for libraries to serve communities with "date-night" programs.

Moore and Henderson assert that the four main types of recreational activities low-income couples engage in are home-based (board games), date nights (going to a movie), utilitarian (doing chores together), and partner-support (supporting a hobby their partner enjoys but they do not) (2018). This is excellent data for librarians to use. Instead of providing patrons with more of what they already can do on their own, librarians can design programming that

embraces different recreational activities for low-income couples, providing variety, novelty, and access. This brings communities into the library.

Libraries can even expand on this by hosting singles nights, or even safe “date-night” programs for teens, who are just testing the waters of romantic relationships. Libraries can help shape that growth in positive and healthy directions. Libraries can also incorporate safe sex education and host supportive programming for sexual assault awareness and prevention. The opportunities for individual libraries to step up and use available research to create supportive programming for their communities are endless.

The NYPL provides a staggering amount of free education resources for children, including remote learning options and free access to subscription services like ABCmouse (New York Public Library, n.d.-d). There are also ample educational resources provided for adults (New York Public Library, n.d.-a), such as research resources for those in school or for professional or personal use (New York Public Library, n.d.-m). NYPL also provides a free e-reader app and explains to patrons what is accessible through it (New York Public Library, n.d.-n).

In their article, *Who Is Most Qualified to Serve Our Ethnic-Minority Communities?*, Gomez also asserts that it is up to individual libraries to provide for their patrons and communities (2000). What really reached me in Gomez’s writing and personal reflections, was their assertion that libraries are socially progressive institutions (Gomez, 2000). I feel this relates deeply to the current social unrest in the U.S., and how libraries are well positioned to become centers of equity. Gomez states that even though libraries have historically been socially progressive, many are still slow to respond in helping patrons struggling with inequity (Gomez, 2000). Even though Gomez wrote that over 20 years ago, it is unfortunately often still the case.

Oppressive mentalities in a library can have a snowball effect on all aspects of that library: approachability, accessibility, programming, staff retention, funding, etc.

As a personal example that I feel relates to the tone and subject matter of this paper and of Gomez's article, a few years ago I was simultaneously working part-time in two different library systems. "Library 1" operated from a compassionate, respectful, and informed place when working with their patrons who struggled with issues of permanent housing. They also had an entire area of the building devoted to providing resources to those who had immigrated to the U.S.. They provide information on what to do if ICE was pursuing someone or knocking on their door, information on how to obtain citizenship, free English classes, and many other resources, most provided in Spanish and other languages predominant in the community. They also had an incredibly impressive Spanish language collection, much like Gomez discusses in their article.

Working in "Library 2", I was horrified at how they treated their patrons who were struggling with permanent housing (as if these patrons were dogs, the staff shooing them away and rolling their eyes in disgust). This library had also installed "anti-homeless" additions to their architecture, such as spikes on ledges to prevent anyone sitting or resting there. This practice is in complete opposition to utilizing the physical spaces of libraries as inclusive and welcoming spaces. Library 2 also had a shamefully small collection of titles in Spanish and none in other languages, and they had no focus on creating resources, programming, or displays for their patrons who had immigrated to the U.S.. Both of these libraries were operating in the same time period, only several miles away from each other.

Payne's article presents a library in Brooklyn, NY that made the effort to send resources (care-backpacks) to children near the southern US border who had been detained and separated from their families while immigrating (2019). This sent the message that libraries anywhere can

help. Jensen advocates for those working as day laborers, showing that they could benefit from library resources, and that it is up to individual libraries to make the effort to reach them. Jensen also conveys the importance of cultural knowledge and respect. That is a critical mindset for libraries to understand and demonstrate, especially since Jensen illustrates how libraries have generally failed this group of people (2002). Katopol encourages serious self-reflection and a compassionate approach to all those in need of library services, especially those who are having to navigate a world where many people believe in harmful stereotypes against them (2016). It is shown to us over and over again: the choices individual libraries make to reach out to those suffering from inequity are crucial.

**Conclusion:** This paper concludes that patrons struggling with issues of permanent housing may be dealing with significant issues of inequity and stand to benefit substantially from free library services. These services can be as basic as a safe and clean public bathroom, access to water fountains, and climate control, and as advanced as routine partnerships between libraries and social workers, recreation options, programming for all ages, internet and printing services, job services, resume services, and summer meals programs. Many libraries are even finally doing away with fines, to enhance access to materials for low income patrons and families. This paper also concludes that patrons who have immigrated to the U.S. may be struggling with issues of inequity and stand to benefit substantially from free library services. These can range from free ESL classes, a safe and free community space, information on legal representation, library outreach to day laborers, to care-backpacks sent to children in immigration detention camps. This paper also concludes that it is largely up to individual libraries to make active decisions to reach out and provide services in a culturally respectful, inclusive, supportive, consistent, and welcoming manner. I am passionate about libraries providing equity to historically excluded

peoples. I believe that in the complex web of poverty, mental health issues, access to resources, inequity, job and housing stability, healthy relationships, and systemic oppression, libraries are in a position to act as a compassionate hub of holistic information and services to struggling patrons.

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