

The Role of Public Libraries in Smart, Inclusive, and Connected Communities: Current and Best Practices

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ABSTRACT

Smart community is a term that has been recently used to characterize efforts to transform communities and make them more sustainable, efficient, transparent, and where citizen participation is the norm. Information technologies are many times seen as enablers of these potential changes. In smart communities, the role of public libraries is key. This poster analyzes current practices in public libraries and identifies the expertise, knowledge, and background that help them contribute to citizen engagement in smart community initiatives. Practices in infrastructure, technology, programming and services, and stakeholder partnerships were classified in three levels: building blocks, good practices and unique practices.

CCS CONCEPTS

- **General and reference** → **General conference proceedings**;
- **Applied computing** → *E-government*;

KEYWORDS

Smart cities, smart communities, connected communities, citizen engagement, public libraries

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1 INTRODUCTION

Though scholars have been working to identify what makes a community smart [1, 2], there is no generally accepted definition. A smart community is one employing technology in an attempt to improve efficiency of operations, quality of life for citizens, and

maintain environmental sustainability while promoting local economy. Though often left out of smart community discussions [3], citizens have been identified as an important dimension in such initiatives [1–3]. Public libraries are considered anchor institutions, important partners in urban planning [4, 6] and catalysts to spark change [7]. They provide services and programs to meet the needs of citizens [6, 7], serve an important role in advancing community goals [5, 7], and act as facilitators of communication [6]. This work aims to understand how public libraries can advance their role as community anchors in smart community initiatives and position themselves as catalysts for innovation and positive change by examining current practices to identify the expertise, knowledge and background that contribute to citizen engagement.

2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

An environmental scan of library websites, media, government documents, library publications and organizations was conducted to identify current practices in public libraries in the United States that could support municipalities in engaging citizens. Libraries were selected based on their communities' current status as a smart city or application for grant funding for smart city initiatives. Additionally, libraries were identified by examining conference program topics, and awards for innovation and excellence in libraries. We explored 32 branch, stand alone and system libraries in a variety of municipalities including twelve large cities, four mid-sized cities, four small sized cities, four large suburbs, and eight smaller municipalities. Specifically, we were looking for practices that engaged citizens, met a need in the community, and were a unique practice (evident in ten or less libraries).

3 PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Public libraries are already offering programs and services designed to maximize citizen engagement. We identified practices as building blocks, good practices and unique practices that position libraries as partners with municipalities in engaging citizens in smart community initiatives in the areas of infrastructure, technology, programming and services, stakeholder engagement and partnerships.

3.1 Infrastructure

Infrastructure building blocks identified were a physical presence as well as a virtual presence in the form of a website and a web based public access catalog. Good practices involved physical spaces in the

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building for specific or flexible purposes, virtual reference services, deposit collections, material vending machines and book mobiles. Unique practices identified include spaces such as digital creation studios and makerspaces that allow citizens to create new media, and spaces designed for businesses and entrepreneurs. Libraries are going beyond basic book mobiles to offer a range of services such as mobile job centers, mobile technology centers and story time buses. Mobile outreach services allow libraries to meet the needs of a wider variety of citizens at places and times that are convenient for them.

3.2 Technology

Building blocks for technology include providing computers, Wi-Fi access during open hours, basic technology literacy courses and access to electronic resources in the form of eBooks, digital audio books, magazines and databases. Good practices in technology involve providing Wi-Fi outside of the library or outside of open hours, Wi-Fi hot spot and technology lending programs and advanced technology workshops. Unique practices identified include technology courses available for download, teens serving as consultants to senior citizens, open data initiatives, and the first ever all digital public library.

3.3 Programs and services

Where libraries connect most with citizens and smart community initiatives are in programs and services. The essential building block is for municipalities to know their community, identify needs based on input, and address all citizens. Most libraries ask for community input in formal and informal ways, and communicate through websites, newsletters and fliers. Good practices involve creating programs to meet specific needs in a community such as offering GED programs, English Language Learning, and tutoring services. Libraries are communicating via social media, and partnering with other organizations to write newsletters. Unique practices include forming micro-colleges, and offering career transition, financial and health literacy services. Some libraries are targeting the most at risk populations including transient populations and incarcerated youth and adults. The creation of new spaces has allowed for unique programming opportunities such as youth entrepreneur programs, digital design, and programs that allow different patrons groups to work together in shared spaces. Some libraries are offering passport and notary services, as well as unique collections that allow patrons to borrow items ranging from games to gardening tools, energy efficiency kits to blood pressure monitors, which serve a dual role - providing patrons with access to things they need, and also drawing new patrons to the library. Libraries have started offering civic engagement opportunities that give citizens the chance to get to know each other and make improvements in their communities.

3.4 Stakeholder partnerships

From local to state level government, other community and cultural organizations, businesses and individual patrons, libraries are creating partnerships that allow them to offer new programs and services by providing funding and other resources. At the building block level, libraries use surveys and ask for input from community

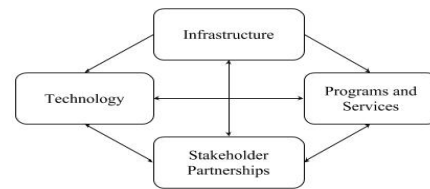


Figure 1: Dimensions examined.

members on materials, programs and plans of services. Good practices involve asking for input in to building renovations, seeking funding from local businesses and involving patrons in the creation of new resources and programs. Unique practices involve creating specific, strategic partnerships that are mutually beneficial to municipalities, libraries and citizens such as open data partnerships, and involvement in community planning efforts.

4 NEXT STEPS

The next steps in this research project involve conducting case studies of four diverse libraries to identify how these current practices contribute to communities' understanding of and participation in smart community initiatives, and to identify the potential benefits, costs, risks, challenges and unintended consequences for public libraries increasing their involvement in such initiatives. These case studies will inform a national survey of all public libraries in the United States.

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