

Whole Person Librarianship

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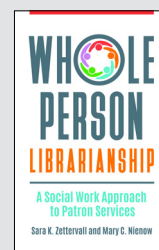
Raise your hand if you've heard (or even perhaps uttered) the age-old cry, "We're not social workers here! We're librarians!" Well, that statement only held water for a while, and then the earth began to shift! Increasingly library staff are connecting their patrons with information and referrals on housing, employment, health care, immigration, domestic violence, substance misuse and more. For many years authors Sara K. Zettervall and Mary C. Nienow have been studying the place where customer service meets social service. While paying respect to the boundaries that divide the two, they've come up with some very valuable advice on how to service not just information needs, but whole person needs as well.

PL: You've been a proponent of "social" or "whole person" librarianship for a long time. What is your inspiration?

SZ: This started more as a personal interest for me while I was learning what it means to be a librarian. That happened to be timed with the start of library systems looking into creating collaborations, so we've continued to ride that wave as it gets bigger and bigger. With so many new people joining the conversation all the time, it's a dynamic and exciting movement, and we're still learning, growing, and discovering what the future will be.

MN: I was inspired by Sara! She was doing an internship at a community center running a book club for Somali girls. She asked me to co-facilitate with her. We started talking more and

more about the intersections between librarians and social workers. As Sara talked about some of the concerns and issues



Whole Person Librarianship

A Social Work Approach
to Patron Services

**Sara K. Zettervall and
Mary C. Nienow**

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facing librarians when they work with patrons, I was listening with my social work lens and thinking about how I would approach the same situation as a social worker. I made a comment to Sara that social workers always consider the “whole person” whenever working with clients, and from there whole person librarianship was born.

PL: How do you define “whole person librarianship?”

SZ: When I present to library staff, I describe it in two parts. The first is the logistics of library-social work collaboration: How do we get social service providers into libraries at all different levels and ensure their roles are sustainable? The second part is applying the basics of social work concepts to library practice: How can library staff be better service providers while staying true to the library’s role as a source of information? This is the part that’s closer to my heart and has become what’s unique about the conversations I have with library staff. There’s a lot we can learn from each other, but that doesn’t mean librarians should become social workers. To make sure we settle on good boundaries, we need to keep talking about what our roles are in this shifting landscape.

MN: I think of it as an approach librarians can take to every encounter they have with patrons. No one comes to the library with one story, one information request—there is a complex

interplay of factors which may never be known to the librarian, but are still there impacting upon the interaction. It is understanding and treating each patron with the dignity and respect they deserve as a whole person, not seeing them as just one thing.

PL: Speaking of your backgrounds, talk a bit about the journeys you’ve taken to get your respective messages across. Where have you found the greatest success and where have you hit the biggest wall?

SZ: I honestly didn’t get into this expecting to launch a whole side career of offering consultation and training. I just thought we were going to do some research and write a book! But the training work has turned out to be so crucial to the whole endeavor. While we were writing the book, we often presented together, and those interactions really shaped how we presented content in the book. Since then, I’ve mostly flown solo on trainings, and having those ongoing conversations has helped me continually refresh and refine my understanding of what’s most important to library staff in particular. I’ve been called on by people around the world, and that’s been a huge success. But at the same time, it’s been challenging to figure out how that fits into the rest of my life.

MN: When we first started this work, the ideas and concepts were really embraced by the library community. The majority of places we presented were

library conferences. However, as I discussed it with students, colleagues, and connected with the social workers doing the work, it started to take hold. Similar to Sara, I think fitting in the time to do the research, networking, and presenting needed to really get the message across is the biggest challenge.

PL: Sara, in a *Public Libraries* article published in 2015, you credit the San Francisco Public Library as being the first to hire a full-time social worker. Why did they do it and how do you think it’s worked for them?

SZ: I saw a *PBS News Hour* video about SFPL at every training, and I recommend it to anyone who wants a great overview of their work (<https://youtu.be/oOeBLhs5Jko>). Even though it’s a few years old, it’s relevant and is a place where you can see the SFPL folks speak for themselves about their reasons and experiences. Their model continues to be the foundation for the vast majority of collaborations, so I would absolutely call it a success. The one thing I think has evolved the most since they started over a decade ago is that their program, and almost all of the initial library social worker hires, was based on a very urban need to serve large populations of patrons experiencing homelessness. What we see now is a diversification of the reasons libraries engage with social services and the responsibilities of library social workers. They address all kinds of basic needs among

patrons but support the mental health of library staff, too.

PL: What do you feel are the biggest challenges public libraries are facing today that might lead them toward considering adding a social worker to the team?

SZ: These collaborations were growing exponentially in advance of the pandemic, and a lot of that was in response to immediate needs libraries saw among their in-person patrons. During the pandemic, libraries lost funding sources and may not be able to continue to hire at the pace we saw a couple of years ago. But social service providers have struggled to make virtual connections just as much as libraries have, and we've been able to help each other expand our reach. I think the biggest challenge the pandemic raised, though, was that many libraries were asked to become social service providers, and this has really challenged all staff to face how we draw the boundaries of our work in a way that feels much more immediate. We've really valued mutual support and collaboration, but many library staff members don't feel comfortable taking on de facto child care provider or health enrollment specialist roles. This is a moment of opportunity for librarianship as a profession to come together and decide who we are, who we want to be, and how collaborations fit into that big picture.

MN: I think the overwhelming human need is what will help

them continue to move in the direction of hiring social workers, e.g., mental illness, homelessness, drug use, poverty, joblessness, health care, etc. I also believe as more of the outcomes of having a social worker in the public library become clear, libraries will see it as a necessary and efficacious investment.

PL: For libraries without a social worker but facing the same problems, what are some other solutions to improving patron services?

SZ: One thing I always try to convey to libraries is that you don't need a social worker on staff (though they do contribute a lot). This is where we talk about the idea of "relationships are the new reference collection." Library staff are capable of applying a reference-based model to their community partnerships: they can cultivate, curate, and connect to those interpersonal resources without taking on the roles of social service providers. If you have deep knowledge of the services available in your community and personal relationships with the folks who provide them, you can make a hand-off for your patrons that connects them to experts, so you don't have to feel like you're supposed to be the expert.

MN: In our book we discuss a number of different ways libraries can improve services without hiring a social worker. Sara's response is one way. Other ideas include working with local schools of social work and

providing the library as a practical site; or having community social workers offer "office hours" or resource fairs at the library in order to connect with patrons and provide them with additional support.

PL: For many libraries, the best (and most realistic) answer is to train staff to better deal with the social issues their patrons bring in. How would you suggest they go about designing that training? What's important to learn and how, where, and from whom can it be learned?

SZ: I really can't emphasize enough that defining roles and boundaries is key. Before identifying training content and sources, staff members should have an inclusive conversation about challenges. Which questions do they get a lot that they can't answer? When do they find themselves in uncomfortable situations with patrons? Ideally, staff have a facilitated conversation where they can come to consensus on what they want to take on vs. what they want to pass to other organizations. That can be used to say, we want to learn these things for ourselves, but for the rest, we want to learn what our partnering organizations do so we can feel confident handing patrons over to them.

MN: I think Sara's answer really gets to the heart of it. One thing I know about librarians is that they are pretty resourceful! Looking at the community and identifying the local social services department, homeless

shelters, community clinics, non-profits, mental health clinics, hospitals, schools, community centers, nursing homes, Universities, legal clinics, city council members, county board, state legislative members, congressional offices, or advocacy organizations within the community will lead libraries to the people, resources, training, and social workers they need to design and implement high-quality training.

PL: In your book you suggest collaborating with students of social work and even considering bringing in interns. What kind of contribution could you ask and expect those interns to make?

SZ: It's always important to keep in mind that while social work students may seem like "free labor," they are there to learn. They need guidance and are working on a time-limited schedule. They're best for clearly defined projects like developing one particular training, or doing an environmental scan to identify community partners.

MN: It depends on whether or not you bring in undergraduate (BSW) or graduate (MSW) students. Undergraduates are being trained as generalists, which means they are learning how to apply foundational skills. They can perform needs assessments, case management, resource referrals, basic interviewing, advocacy, and support groups. However, they are not considered clinicians, which means

they can not do individual or family psychotherapy. Graduate students, depending on their specialization, may be able to provide more in-depth therapeutic treatments for higher need patrons. MSW interns may also be able to provide support to library staff who are struggling with difficult situations or complicated patron interactions.

PL: Could you each share what in your own careers or backgrounds most inspired you to write this book? What do you hope to accomplish?

SZ: My first master's degree was in creative writing, so the idea of publishing a book of some sort was probably hanging over me more than it does for most people. But I might not have considered it for this if we hadn't been approached by our editor at Libraries Unlimited, Jessica Gribble. She saw the potential in this work even though she had no experience with it and has been a great person to work with. As for what I hope to accomplish, I think we did it with the book. There was so much happening but nowhere to turn for guidance on creating these collaborations. I know the library social workers in big systems provide great guidance and insights for folks when they can, but for now, there's nothing out there like what we wrote.

MN: As a university professor, writing and publishing is a major expectation within academia, so this was part of my motivation. It

was also another opportunity to partner and collaborate with Sara. Bringing our perspectives together and interweaving them into a book was stimulating and incredibly rewarding. I hoped to provide readers a framework for this work. I wanted others to see themselves in the case studies and be inspired to replicate the work within their own setting. Because this is something new, it can feel overwhelming and people can struggle with knowing where to start. We often joked we were "building the plane while flying it." This is the instruction manual for future pilots.

PL: Can you share a success story that library directors could use when first introducing the concept of "whole person librarianship" to their teams?

SZ: Our book centers each chapter on a case study, so I would love for library directors to look to those for success stories. Because the content of the chapter builds on the case study, they can immediately identify how they could implement the same type of work. Otherwise, I recommend taking a look at the interactive map on <https://wholepersonlibrarianship.com>, which shows where these collaborations are happening across the US and the world. They can identify libraries near them or library systems of a similar size and get contact information to reach out directly and hear from folks who are in their same situation.

MN: I think it's important for library directors to start with their own context. Why is this approach needed? Are the ways

it's being dealt with working? If not, whole person librarianship offers an alternative solution that has proven effective and can

support not only patrons, but the library team. 

ALA Executive Board Reinforces Commitment to Safeguarding Intellectual Freedom and Social Justice

Recently, the ALA Executive Board released the following statement opposing initiatives to censor information resources, curriculum, and programs addressing racial injustice, Black American history, and diversity education.

The American Library Association is committed to upholding our core values, which include equitable access to knowledge, social justice, and intellectual freedom. As members of a profession committed to free and equitable access to information and the pursuit of truth, we stand firm in opposing any effort to suppress knowledge, to label “controversial” views, or dictate what is orthodox in history, politics, or belief.

At present, efforts to censor any consideration or discussion of racism, slavery, Black American history, and related issues and concerns in our schools, colleges, and universities pose a real and present threat to libraries' ability to fulfill their role as trusted community institutions that provide factual and accurate information that reflects the breadth of the American experience about these topics.

A commitment to intellectual freedom and social justice requires that libraries not only protect the truth from suppression but also prevent its distortion. Consequently, the American Library Association has joined other educational institutions and civil liberties organizations in opposing any legislative proposal or local initiative intended to ban instruction, consideration, or discussion about the role of racism in the history of the United States, or how systemic racism manifests itself in our schools, workplaces, and government agencies.

ALA member leaders and staff pledge to join with library workers, libraries, and state and regional library associations to oppose any proposal to censor information resources, curriculum, or programs addressing racial injustice, Black American history, and diversity education. We commit to supporting libraries, library workers, schools, and universities facing these challenges and to develop tools that will prepare library workers to defend their collections, counter falsehoods, and engage their communities in important conversations about racial injustice and empowering everyone to fully participate in our democratic society. Visit www.ala.org for more information. 