

LIBRARY ASSOCIATION OF ALBERTA

Response to Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel On The Status and Future of Canada's Libraries and Archives

October 22, 2013



Introduction:

The Library Association of Alberta (LAA) represents and provides services to 750 members and institutions in Alberta, including public, academic, corporate, government and school libraries and archives. The mission of the LAA is to “strengthen the library community in Alberta by effectively providing responsive member services, advocating for libraries and cooperating with partners”. The Association has three belief statements:

- The Library Association of Alberta believes that libraries are fundamental to the cultural, educational, recreational and economic well-being of the people of Alberta.
- The Library Association of Alberta believes that libraries are strengthened by the united voice of an umbrella association linking those working within the library community with members, governments, other organizations and library users.
- The Library Association of Alberta believes that libraries are the link between those who want to know and those who have the knowledge.

In preparation for this process, LAA conducted a short member survey in order to best represent our members and member institutions. Based on the results of that survey, and on the current work of the Association, LAA has chosen to focus on the following five framing questions in response to the RSC Expert Panel:

How would you describe the services Canadians, including Aboriginal Canadians and new Canadians, are currently receiving from libraries and archives in Canada?

One of the most telling responses to this question in the member survey was that library services are a “postcode lottery”, depending upon local funding and infrastructure. Municipal grants in Alberta range from \$86 per capita to as little as \$2.00 (2011). Seven Regional Library Systems provide services such as acquisitions and consulting to 266 public library service points in the province, and Alberta has a strong resource sharing mechanism both through the regional systems and the Alberta Library (TAL), and a strong culture of collaboration between public and post-secondary library sectors.

Alberta has the fastest growing population in Canada, with a high net international migration, and for many new Canadians, the public library is the first place they come to. Settlement Services are established in public libraries in several urban centres in Alberta, including Calgary and Edmonton, and collections, services and programs reflect the increasing diversity of our province.

Library Services to Aboriginals in Alberta is a concern. In 2011, 6.2% (220,000) people in Alberta reported an Aboriginal identity, which accounts for 15.5% of the Canadian total. Just under half of these (47.3%) live on the 140 reserves in Alberta, while 53% live in other municipalities, the highest concentration of which is in Edmonton. The Aboriginal population in Alberta (as in Canada) is growing, and is a younger population than the Alberta average. The scope of services to Aboriginals, like many targeted services in Alberta, depends upon the library or municipality, with reserves falling outside of the municipal jurisdiction. Thanks to a collaborative effort, Alberta celebrated the establishment of its first public library on a First Nations reserve on the Blood Reserve in southwest Alberta in 2013 and is a member of the Chinook Arch Regional Library System.

Libraries in post-secondary institutions in Alberta provide services to more than 267,000 learners. The University of Calgary Taylor Family Digital Library is an innovative learning and research centre at the leading edge of the digital movement. Post-secondary institutions in Alberta work collaboratively with each other to the benefit of their learners; for example is the NEOS consortium led by the University of Alberta. Post-secondary institutions in Alberta have experienced recent budget cuts, impacting services and staffing.

In the digital era, what support for patrons do/should libraries provide? What role should libraries and archives take in the digitization, the dissemination and the long-term preservation of Canadian heritage (print publications and archives)?

Support to address access to digital information and the essential skills required to participate fully in an increasingly digital society are important roles for libraries in all sectors.

The long-term preservation and dissemination of Canadian Heritage has importance at both the local and the national level, and LAA members feel strongly that Library and Archives Canada has a vital role in the digitization, preservation and provision of free access to Canada's national heritage.

What in your opinion are the specific roles of libraries and/or archives and/or museums and other heritage institutions in community building and memory building?

Creating a sense of community is important to those who work in a library. Librarians and library staff are facilitators for other groups working on community issues. They provide space to connect with each other, a way for different groups to interact that might not otherwise meet. Many have defined this role as the "living room" or the library as a place. Libraries are continuing to foster creativity through programming or collaborative workspace and technology. There is a trend toward the library as a place of creation rather than consumption, and new technologies provide opportunities for libraries to play a role in the creation and preservation of local content.

What changes, in your judgment, are necessary in the professional education and training of librarians/archivists in the 21st century?

Project management, advocacy, strategic planning and visioning, leadership, facilitation and community engagement are increasingly necessary skills in libraries and archives. The Library Association of Alberta has a mandate to support and provide continuing education for the library community in Alberta, and sees continuing education and professional development as fundamental to the success of libraries and archives in the future. Many in the profession are learning some of these skills years after their professional training has been completed. In rural communities, library services are generally provided by staff without professional library training but who face the same issues, trends and demands as professionals in larger centres. Opportunities for current professionals and library workers to build upon their skills and meet the challenges presented by our changing environment are necessary.

What do you see as the challenges for libraries and archives in the forthcoming years?

Significant challenges facing libraries and archives are generally consistent across sectors. Among the responses to our survey, the most common is funding. As referenced earlier in this document, levels of municipal funding are generally lower for smaller, rural communities. Respondents feel that libraries and archives will increasingly need to utilize alternative funding sources: grants, investments from private sector and fundraising. Related to this is the continual challenge of demonstrating impact in the digital age, an age in which traditional output measures do not fully tell the Library story, and in which public perception of libraries is often based on assumptions and tradition, and not of the 21st Century Library. These challenges create pressure to develop new vision, knowledge and skill sets and infrastructure.

Conclusion:

The Library Association of Alberta values the opportunity to be a part of this process. While the future of libraries and archives in Canada is a topic with many areas to explore, LAA's responses reflect what we gauge to be important issues and examples of service in our province and among our members. We look forward to our conversation with you.

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