



*Peer-Reviewed Article*

## Pathways to Well-being: Public Library Service in Rural Communities

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### ABSTRACT

To answer the question “If public libraries are a component of social wellbeing in rural communities, how are they successful?” we conducted, transcribed, coded, and analyzed 114 group and individual interviews with 202 residents, library directors, staff, and volunteers at eight field research sites in isolated rural communities distributed throughout the United States. Motivating this study is a gap in understanding the library service mechanisms involved at the community level which will yield beneficial social wellbeing outcomes. Through iterative phenomenological analysis, we established how rural residents defined social wellbeing for themselves and how they describe the library’s role in that context. We found that residents forego access to standard amenities for access to deep social connections, natural resources, and community cultures of freedom and mutual support. We found long term local structural, social, and cultural norms, which we call pathways, through which libraries support wellbeing.

### KEYWORDS

Rural librarianship, social wellbeing, public libraries, social infrastructure, community anchor

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## Introduction

Community life and the systems that drive it are complex, dynamic, and relational. Communities face regular additions and subtractions of resources, including businesses, outside support agencies, and talent. Experiences of social wellbeing within a community vary from person to person based on specific intersections of socio-economic status (K. Scott et al., 2018a), gender and racial differences (López-Cevallos & Harvey, 2016; Pilgeram, 2019; Ramos et al., 2020), local historical bias and power structures (Searle, 2008), social connectedness (Stern & Seifert, 2013), and access to capital, trust, and educational supports (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Cramer et al., 2019). Social wellbeing is often described by indicators, i.e., measures of having a good life within a community that we can observe either qualitatively or quantitatively and which represent access to opportunity—for services and experiences such as health care, education, culture, housing, employment, recreation, social connection, and nature (Jarratt et al., 2019; Mccrea et al., 2016; Povey et al., 2016; Searle, 2008). The meaning of a “good life” shifts as social scientists and development researchers continually refine these measures for use across more diverse contexts and with input from community residents (Manley, 2020; Stanojević & Benčina, 2019).

The power and flexibility of indicators of social wellbeing that have been previously developed, tested, and refined arises from the distinctly interdisciplinary space in which they are typically created. This space engages ethnographers (Klinenberg, 2001), urban planners (Azuma et al., 2016), economists (Becchetti & Conzo, 2018; Ferdman, 2018), public health experts (Hone et al., 2015), and more. Recently, cultural heritage institutions (Kelly et al., 2019; Stern & Seifert, 2013) and specifically public libraries (Norton et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2015) have been added into this mix.

In the US, the role of public libraries includes democracy (Mehra & Srinivasan, 2007) on one hand—providing free and equal access to information and equipment (Kaarst-Brown et al., 2004; Real et al., 2014)—and quality of life, on the other—providing enjoyment, education, and discovery (Klinenberg, 2018; Nencka et al., 2020). In small rural towns, libraries often serve as the sole community center, communications hub, and trusted connector between diverse groups and individuals (Bishop, 2016). This paper describes the Rural Library Services and Social Wellbeing project, which investigated whether the role of rural libraries in fostering social connection goes beyond quality of life and symbol of community togetherness to make a measurable impact on social wellbeing. Through in-depth interviews with individuals in eight rural communities across the country, we listened for evidence that libraries were making an impact and looked for common approaches that could inform positive actions at other libraries. As public librarians, we sought to uncover what truly matters in our work: do we improve the lives of people in the communities we serve? And if so, how?

## Literature Review

Our methodology was informed by theoretical pillars from library and information science, education, economics, regional planning, and rural sociology. These disciplines provided the theoretical framework from which to draw, but nuanced understanding of communities comes only from direct communication with the people living within them; to that end, we used methods of phenomenological interpretive analysis (Yardley, 2000).

### Public libraries as social infrastructure

Eric Klinenberg, in his comprehensive study of the function of neighborhood public libraries in *Palaces for the People* (2019), applies ethnographic tools to showcase the ways in which infrastructural components provide necessary support for social connection. Through library design, location, and programming, people are brought together in environments that transcend other local social barriers: newcomers are welcomed, new parents find empathetic friends, and old timers fight isolation. Klinenberg refers to this function of libraries—part built, part human—as “social infrastructure.”

Similarly, Buckland uses “keystone institutions” (1997) to refer to institutions without which a town or neighborhood would not hold the same identity, or in some cases, even exist. “Community anchor” comes from economics and was first used to refer to an employer of sufficient size that its location was apt to stay the same over long periods of time, and if it closed, the primary source of local employment would be gone. The term has come to be understood to refer specifically to publicly owned or publicly funded institutions like public schools, universities, and hospitals (Orphan & McClure, 2019).

### Capabilities approach and social wellbeing

The literature on the role that public libraries might play in health outcomes in communities of all sizes in the US is sparse, even though programming that supports these outcomes is widespread (Apple, 2012; Flaherty & Miller, 2016). Research on social wellbeing—indicators, evaluations, and theory—has occurred largely outside of the US. The foundational text specifically examining US public libraries as community anchors that play a role in social wellbeing outcomes is “Strengthening Networks, Sparking Change: Museums and Libraries as Community Catalysts” by the Reinvestment Fund, a report produced for the Institute for Museum and Library Services (Norton et al., 2017).

This work (Norton et al., 2017) is valuable to the field for its aim to operationalize an economic and philosophical theory—the capabilities approach—creating a new framework for understanding the work of community-facing cultural heritage institutions (museums and libraries, tribal and public). Norton and Dowdall make two well-founded claims relevant to our research. First, they state that public libraries act as community anchor institutions in the towns in which they are located, providing stability of service and community identity over time.

Second, they posit that public libraries commonly provide services in four categories that could have direct impact on local social wellbeing: economic development, lifelong learning and cultural engagement, physical and mental health, and place-making and the environment (ibid). These “categories of work” (p. 36) align closely with the importance placed by the Norton and Dowdall framework on the diverse theoretical foundations and purposes of public librarianship: information center, educator, and place for both knowledge creation and social connection.

Underpinning the framework is a set of ten core capabilities— “ways of being and doing”—which philosopher Martha Nussbaum adapted (2013) from economist Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach (Sen, 2004) for policy makers. Sen sought to rethink how we approach and evaluate economic development; her capabilities approach to community, regional, and national development is human centered and calls for evaluations of progress that focus on the individual level. Our research is built on her concept, expanded by Nussbaum, and codified by Norton and Dowdall, to investigate the primacy of the individual’s story, experience, and capabilities situated within the local and regional systems they occupy.

A person living a life with their full capabilities is often referred to as “the good life” across social indicators and human development research (Chassagne, 2019; K. Scott et al., 2018b). The Norton and Dowdall framework includes ten dimensions of wellbeing distilled into four Categories of Work in which museums and libraries actively engage, see Table 1:

**Table 1**

*Four Categories of Work and related Social Wellbeing Dimensions*

<b>Categories Of Work</b>	<b>Social Wellbeing Dimensions</b>
Economic Development	Economic Wellbeing: financial standard of living Economic Diversity: clustering of industry and populations by economic class Housing Quality: quality of shelter and the stress of affordability
Lifelong Learning & Cultural Engagement	Cultural Engagement: experiences of personal, collective, and other individuals’ heritage, as well as historical and contemporary expression of identity Political Voice: expression and power in political process School Effectiveness: student ability to learn in class Social Connection: opportunities for resident-to-institution and resident-to-resident connections
Physical & Mental Health (by county)	Health: access to care and perceptions of physical and mental wellness Physical Security: physical safety from crime and violence
Place-making & the Environment	Environment: access to outdoor space, air, and water free of pollutants

Table 1. Combined from content on pages 31 and 35 of Norton & Dowdall (2017).

## Rural theory and reality in the United States

The National Center for Education Statistics provides a widely accepted standard definition of remote rural communities as “Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster” (2006). Rural sociologists and demographers describe the complicated realities of living in rural locations in the United States (Quisumbing King et al., 2018; M. Scott et al., 2017), but as Creswell (2015) states, the notion of place is something “constructed” and “contested” over time. It is in dialogue with itself and with the world around it. Therefore, no study of community, including remote rural communities, is accurate unless it is complex and nuanced.

Rural development literature suggests that satisfaction with and attachment to place—both measures that can come only from an individual's personal perspective—are of prime importance to wellbeing, suggesting that researchers should seek descriptions of wellbeing by rural residents themselves. In the 2010 Knight Foundation Soul of the Community study, the primary predictor of economic growth in a place was whether residents would recommend their town to others (2010). Power over how that growth (and community life) happens is key to attachment in rural and highly bonded urban communities (Banerjee & Duflo, 2019; Salamon & MacTavish, 2017; Stephens, 2016).

Conceptualizations of rural development and place-making have begun to discuss migrants more explicitly in the construction of community identity. For instance, in “Predictors of life satisfaction among Hispanic/Latino immigrants in non-metropolitan communities in the Midwest” (Ramos et al., 2020), researchers found the most valued predictors of life satisfaction were “sense of community” and “perceived safety.” Importantly, in both Carvajal’s small study and the longer Soul of the Community study, perceptions of discrimination, lack of belonging, or inequitable treatment led to low satisfaction with, and attachment to, place.

## Gap in Understanding

Motivating this research is the missing connective tissue between research in librarianship, and research on community dimensions of social wellbeing, as defined above. Norton and Dowdall provide the only published literature which attempts to establish this connection, but neither includes rural communities in their work nor deals in the how library practitioners work with community members. Further, the dimensions were constructed by researchers without direct stakeholder guidance. Our study, using semi-structured interviews with community members, allows us to enrich our understanding of social wellbeing dimensions with language and themes we heard from rural residents. Phenomenological interpretive

analysis is not used in any of the library literature on rural service but provides tools to develop a complex and nuanced story of service and its intersection with resident perceptions of community life. This data also provided insights into the specific behaviors & dispositions of the library director which is handled comprehensively in a separate paper, “Rural Library Directors and Social Wellbeing: An Evidence-Based Approach to Practice” (forthcoming, 2022).

## Methodology

To answer the question of whether and how public libraries are a component of social wellbeing in rural communities, we first analyzed quantitative data from the US Census Bureau, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation health indexes, County Board of Elections (Leip, n.d.), and the Institute for Museum and Library Services. We then used mail survey (due to low internet connectivity in remote locations) and phone interview instruments to deepen our understanding of observations made through quantitative analysis and to identify our purposive research sample. Next, we developed an interview protocol for field research and implemented it in eight locations spread throughout each of the four US Census regions. During our field interview process, we recorded and transcribed 118 interviews with 186 community residents and 16 library staff chosen through a convenience sampling method. Transcripts were then analyzed using both deductive and emergent code sets. Each methodological and analytical phase is described in detail below. For our methods in establishing the research sample, please see Methods in Supporting Documents.

### Figure 1

*Field Study Communities*



## Participants

We conducted between 12 and 20 individual or group interviews in each community, for a total of 114 publicly available transcriptions with 202 on-record individuals. Some communities had residents who, even with the positive motivators and community feeling toward the researcher and the library, were not comfortable engaging in a formal recorded interview. While their thoughts could not be included in recorded and coded data, their insights were helpful in providing local information that we used for targeted follow-up questions. For instance, we added “What unique services do people in Elk River need to purchase in order to feel safe living here?” after an off-record resident told the interviewer about the importance of LifeFlight helicopter ambulance insurance.

In some small, isolated communities, being interviewed by strangers is unattractive or even unwise, but convenience sampling helped in recruiting willing participants. As we will show, interview participants averaged slightly older, whiter, and wealthier than the research location averages, but the medians were the same. Further, where a group had underrepresentation within the set of interview participants, we pulled a representative interview of that group to compare to the set as a whole. We found themes that were consistent throughout interview subjects regardless of demographic categories as well as a few points of divergence, discussed in our results.

Because interviews were scheduled by our local library contacts, we entered environments of enthusiasm everywhere we went. This also meant that we interviewed people (Table 2) who the director picked or who self-selected from the community because they were already library supporters. Because our research interest was to uncover what is happening when the library or other community organizations are working well, interviewing library supporters smoothed the interview process while giving us strengths-based perspectives on library service.

**Table 2***Distribution of interviews across communities*

	<b>IA</b>	<b>ID</b>	<b>MS</b>	<b>NM</b>	<b>NY</b>	<b>VT</b>	<b>WI</b>	<b>WV</b>
Interviewer	HD	MG	EG	MG/EG	HD	HD	HD	MG/EG
Total subjects	20	21	13	19	25	44	43	16
Individual interviews	11	19	11	7	10	7	14	6
Group interviews	2	1	1	3	4	8	5	2 / 2
# of participants in groups	5, 4	2	2	5,2,5	6,4,2,3	2,8,5, 3,7,5,2,5	15,2,2,6,4	3,3,2,2

## Data Analysis

To analyze the interview data, we used a mixed coding approach, employing fixed (a priori, or deductive) codes along with emergent coding for analysis of amenities and desirable features of community life (Saldaña, 2015). To make meaning from this large data set, we examined combination or co-occurrence of codes, as detailed in Methods (SD).

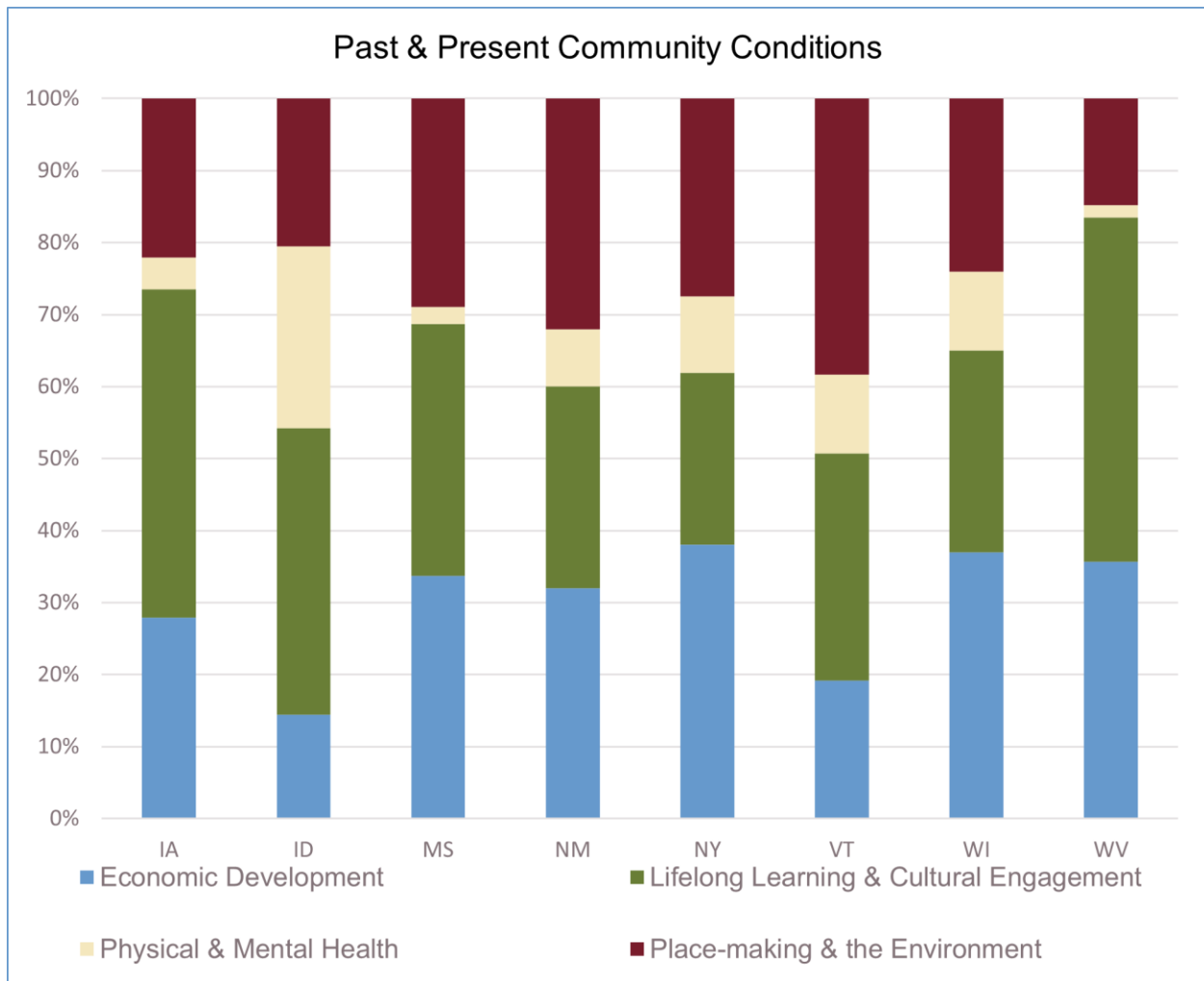
## Results

We found public libraries to have a positive impact on social wellbeing in rural communities. Interviews with more than 200 community residents, library staff, and board members gave us a broad and deep description of the eight local communities and how they changed over time. This served as a context for understanding our primary finding: that what community members want and what libraries provide are well matched to the ways that community residents describe “the good life” as captured through our codes.

## Community Conditions

We will begin describing our results by demonstrating how communities define for themselves the nature of social wellbeing, using analysis of quotes tagged with “Description of Past / Current Conditions.”



**Figure 2***Past and Present Community Conditions*

*Note:* After limiting quotes to only those tagged with “Description of Present / Past Community Condition,” proportional relationships between Categories of Work in each location were found (number of quotes tagged with any specific Category for any specific location / total number of coded quotes for that specific location).

### **Lifelong Learning & Cultural Engagement**

Lifelong Learning & Cultural Engagement represents the majority of what community residents spoke with us about. Codes that co-occurred in analysis are strongly aligned with specific Social Wellbeing Dimensions in this Category of Work (see Table 1). There were few socially connected services or activities that did not tie to either learning or cultural engagement—what libraries are traditionally known for. However, learning and engagement were not all we heard about when residents discussed conditions in their hometowns. Rather,

results in this dimension predominated how residents described their ideal community and the services they received from their local library.

### **Economic Development, Place-making, and the Environment**

“The nature alone makes me feel like I am being totally spoiled and I don't know. I think that people have forgotten in cities what nature does for you. I mean it's been proven over and over a walk through the woods is so good for the mind and for the spirit. And I feel that wealth. I feel very rich and I'm so damn glad I chose to live here.” (Transcript, Quote ID: 61:42)

Economic development most frequently co-occurred with the codes “infrastructure” (58%), “contribution” (15%), and “voice/power” (11%) when residents described their perceptions of current or past community conditions. Economic development was a common point of discussion, although not everyone shared the same goals. Rural communities have commonly experienced periods of extractive industry, such as mining and logging. While this brings job opportunity and is often why the community exists in the first place, it can work against tourism and outdoor recreation businesses.

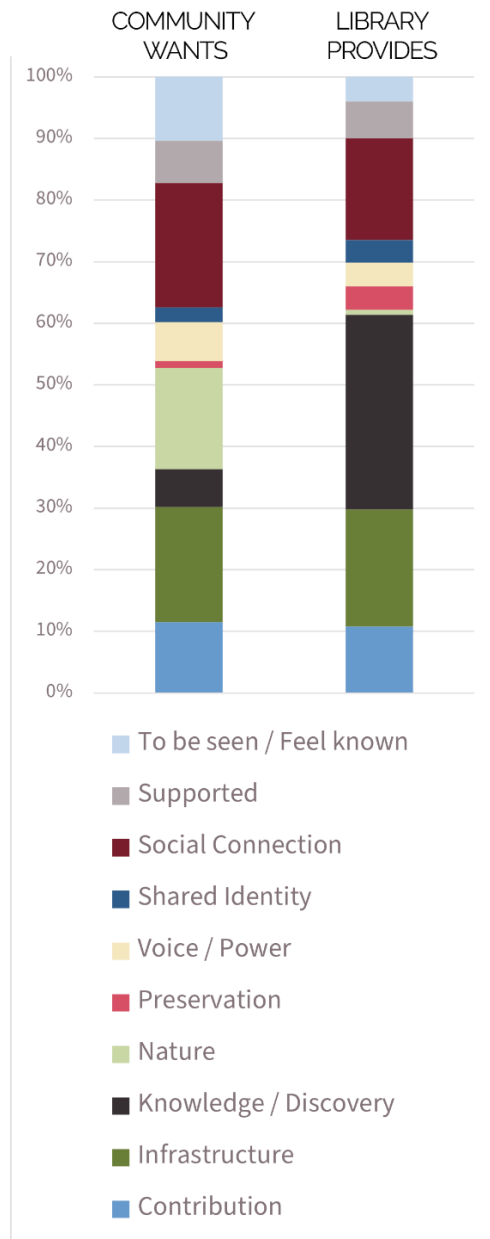
A large number of interview subjects named the local natural environment as a reason why they enjoy living where they live. Given our growing understanding of what has come to be known as social infrastructure (Klinenberg, 2018), it is not surprising that the second most used code for this set, however, is social connection. Family and friends, for example, are often connected through a specific unique place that draws them together year after year.

### **Physical and Mental Health**

In our case study locations, local medical support was low if present at all and residents expressed a varying degree of dependence on medical services. Not having local services ranged from irrelevant to a major problem depending on the individual's overall health and age, their ability to travel, and specific medical conditions they were dealing with. Some interview subjects, across locations, had recently and reluctantly moved to the closest town with significant medical services, but still visited their adopted community if possible. For every one of them there is a sense of loss throughout the story of moving to live near a hospital or specialized care clinic.

### **What Community Residents Want & What the Library Provides**

Almost every interview began with a simple question asking the subject to describe their ideal community. The answers revealed a range of values, wants, and needs, but also some striking similarities across geographies.

**Figure 3***Residents Want, Library Provides*

*Note:* This stacked bar graph displays the relative frequency of each code aggregated across all eight field locations within, first, topic description “Community Wants” and then added and aggregated within the topic descriptions “Library Provides” and “Description of the Director.” What is visible is the consistency of priority as interpreted by the frequency of codes across these topics, specifically in “contribution,” “infrastructure,” and “social connection.” For details, see SX.

Over 98% of our interview subjects said that where they currently lived represented their ideal community. This overwhelming finding was true regardless of local quantitative measures of social wellbeing. That is, feelings of being rich, happy, healthy, and safe were found to be much higher than publicly available quantitative wellbeing data would suggest. And in these locations, it was often the library that facilitated connections between individual residents, and between residents and their local culture which created those feelings of richness and health.

People whom we interviewed often mixed their view of an ideal community with their perception of the way their town was in the past. When we asked for clarification on what appeared at first glance to be nostalgia, we found a deep desire for community level self-determination (measured in part with the code “voice/power”), and the deep social bonds that create strong networks of mutualism throughout the community. Mutualism was a major feature in communities where the codes “support,” “social connection,” and “to be seen/feel known” were at highest frequency.

### **Social Connection, and To Be Seen & Feel Known**

Social connection is an area of priority and close alignment between what residents want from their town and what the library provides (see Figure 3). For many, the love of small-town living boils down to social connection at its essence. As such, our research suggests that the social connection role of the library is largely undervalued in the library profession, especially as it relates to social wellbeing. Activities of the library that connect people, that bring them together for common purpose, shared learning, and similar interests, make an impact far beyond anything that is currently being captured in most statistical reports. Standing out in our research is the impact on families, people at risk of isolation, and newcomers.

Every library we visited provided programs for families year-round. For newcomer families, or parents with their first child, library programs commonly played an important role in connecting them to new friend groups and support networks. Families have specific social connection needs, and they develop deep friendships because they share a common experience of raising children in a specific location. An invaluable service to quality of life, livability, and wellbeing, parents commonly point to the library as the facilitator of those connections.

Rural towns are not static. People come and go: leaving and returning for special occasions (as in Iowa, where the director started an annual event which for the first time built this “returner” population), leaving and returning later in life to live (especially prevalent in “summer” communities where ties to place were built on vacation like Idaho, New York, and Wisconsin), moving for a job (only our communities in Iowa and Vermont were close enough to employment centers that this was common), coming on a whim and never leaving (New Mexico and West Virginia is where we heard this the most), or moving to live with a spouse from the area. The experience of these situations can vary wildly—consider, for example, marrying a

spouse with deep family and friend connections in the area versus moving to town as a single person with no connections—and each has unique social connection support needs.

Helping newcomers develop connection was observed to be especially valuable, and indeed the opportunity to do so seems to be high at libraries where newcomers often visit soon after moving to town. Providing paths towards creating networks of friendship and support, even by simple actions like inviting newcomers to a program or introducing them to neighbors so that they can say hello by name when in the post office, can have positive short-, medium-, and long-term impacts.

It can also be a role of the library to maintain connection to those who moved away. Whether for a job, military service, a new experience, or other reasons, it can be important to a rural community's long-term success to ensure that one-time residents feel invited back, welcomed back, and comfortable when they return. A community newsletter, a social media page, or an annual parade might keep fond memories and personal relationships alive, which can, not uncommonly, lead to a return later in life. In many rural towns, the library is one of the few multi-generational institutions that can offer continuity over decades.

Isolation comes in many forms and exists in every community, due to physical disabilities, mental health issues, racism and bigotry, geographic remoteness, lack of power, and financial insecurity. Case study libraries all found ways to actively address some but not all forms of isolation, and commonly expressed a desire to do more in the future.

“When we first we came up here we didn't want to run all the way into St. Germaine because Sandy needed an onion ... So, we went through the mobile station, and they didn't have any and the lady there said, ‘Well just a minute I'll run home and get you one.’ That's the people.” (Wisconsin resident describing their experience as newcomers.) (Transcript, Quote ID: 434:7]

A large percentage of interview subjects noted as a primary value that they like to be seen and feel known. They talked about how good it feels to know everyone at the post office or spend an hour at the general store chatting with people they bump into. While some expressed a desire for privacy, few described this as synonymous with anonymity.

Personalizing service for library visitors, or giving them extra assistance, helps residents feel known and valued by the library staff. While this is closely tied to social connection and feeling supported, simple actions to make someone feel seen (e.g., greeting them by name) or known (e.g., recommending a book they might like) can make a difference. Our case study libraries all demonstrated an intuitive understanding of this dynamic, which we describe as tailored or bespoke service.

## Infrastructure

“So that's another thing that to me is important: I have access to the store. So, if I ever need anything I can get in and out of the store. It's a nice little store now and they've got some rooms upstairs we have some places for people to stay overnight here now.” West Virginia resident describing the value of the recently created community owned general store, (Transcript, Quote ID: 56:7)

Even when interview subjects described their current town as their ideal town, they commented on vacant buildings, loss of jobs, and the need for housing opportunities, to varying degrees. Economic development was tied closely to infrastructure. In one study location, a disused cheese factory meant not only a disused building, but the loss of a historical economic driver. In another, a shut-down general store threatened a collective community disaster.

Each of the case study communities have experienced population decrease, loss of local jobs, and abandonment of services. Infrastructure is another area of strong alignment in coding frequency between what community members want and what the library provides. There was clear recognition that reliable high-speed Internet could offer personal opportunities. Living without Internet access can mean serious degradation in access to social and health services, education, and job opportunities, among other things. We found a high level of understanding within the broad community that this was not only a nice service, but in many cases an absolute necessity. Support for school children, job seekers, and seniors was frequently named.

In every community residents spoke about the importance of the physical space of the library for the community as a whole. Interview subjects noted with high frequency both the utilitarian usefulness and symbolic nature of the library as a gathering space (84 of 114 interviews used “symbol”, “gathering”, “hub”, “meeting”, or “useful”). Non-readers might never check out a book, but still visit the library regularly for community meetings and other gatherings. This was seen as different from space that might be available at a church, Masonic Lodge or similar, in that it was truly for everyone.

## Knowledge & Discovery

“When I moved here [I was] basically a shut in with no transportation. And I came into the library—it was like I could breathe again. Because there were books.” (Mississippi resident describing something we heard in all eight locations - the physicality of print books in a library facility generated very personal visceral feelings of attachment, comfort, and curiosity.) (Transcript, Quote ID: 485:34]

Tied closely to quality of life, mental health, and social connection, access to cultural opportunities, self-improvement, and the discovery of new knowledge ranked high in importance to rural residents. This is an area where the difference between how residents described their ideal community and how they described library service were the most

divergent. In asking interview subjects to describe their ideal community they commonly focused on relationships and personal connection; when asked about the library, however, they had very strong positive perceptions about what the library provides in access to knowledge and discovery that would not otherwise be available.

“The people in this area are very interesting ... They're innovative and they dream up crazy things they decide they want to do you know and they know they can come to the library and if it's not here they'll find it for them.” (Library Trustee in West Virginia on the unique gateway to discovery the library provides because the community residents expect unique discoveries!) (Transcript, Quote ID: 53:25]

Community members commonly talked about the importance of books in their life, often further qualifying that the physical book and the physical space of the library contributed to their love of reading. This was often in the context of the library providing access to things that would not otherwise be available in the area.

### **Contribution & To be Supported**

“So, to me the community is people working together. To help out, but not interfere.” (Transcript, Quote ID: 58:1]

Community members value having ways to contribute to the whole by volunteering their skills and knowledge, and by donating money and goods. This was especially strong in Helvetia, West Virginia, where the low population level and large number of community activities provided many opportunities throughout the year to help with planning and implementation. There, we noted that newcomers were encouraged to not just help out, but fully participate in cultural activities, take leadership roles, and even develop new initiatives. Tied closely to this, those newcomers gained social connection quickly, and thus rapidly became part of networks of mutual support.

A healthy and resilient community is essentially self-insured; that is, security comes primarily from the ability to call in support from individuals to help other individuals, or pitch in to help the collective whole. Control over the economic destiny of themselves and their community is wrested through personal contribution to a shared destiny. In the context of an isolated town, diversity of knowledge, talents, and experience provides important insurance against an unknown future. Residents accept differences between neighbors while maintaining the expectation of mutual support and contribution, for practical not moral reasons. A young man with an intellectual disability, in one example from the research, is assisted in the administrative work of independent living (e.g., bill paying, banking, appointment setting), and he is the community's premier wood cutter. It is his passion, and in a community of older adults his zeal is warmly appreciated (and paid for with cash).

Where contribution was highly encouraged, mutual support—mutualism—was thus witnessed to be more than just a symbiotic dependence, but an avenue to delight and discovery. It is perhaps the primary tie between self-determination of the individual and self-determination of the community. In other words, a community that appreciates its residents giving of themselves—in both their experience and expertise, but also their unique and idiosyncratic ways—will be in a better position to control its own future.

Libraries in communities that value mutualism are facilitators and reinforcers of sharing, and personal connections. We saw this relationship in the data where the frequency of these codes combined showed that they were priorities in both perceptions of community life and in how the library played a role in this. The sense that “we are all in this together and if we don’t help each other nobody else will,” was expressed in many ways.

The library itself is an institution in which direct support is inseparable from its purpose. In case study communities, we saw that the boundaries of this support were flexible and sometimes non-existent (i.e., everyone will do anything for anyone). In communities with a culture of high mutual support, the expectation may be that the library is never closed, and library staff are never off the clock. In such cases, mutualism can be so highly developed and so greatly valued (even if taken for granted) that hardly anyone involved even considers the open hours listed on the door of the library. The same is true of the content and manner of support. Where mutualism is high, libraries tend not to consider what is out of the bounds of normal library work, and simply do what they can with what resources the library has to help the most people.

### **Voice / Power**

“We want to be part of a group that we can feel like we are heard, and we can make some difference.” (Vermont resident on what she loves about living in her community.) (Transcript, Quote ID: 475:2]

Voice and power primarily concern the perspective of the individual, but only exists in the context of the larger community. Dynamics of voice and power exist at the intersection of the personal with the collective, comprising confidence, risk, clarity of understanding, self-determination, and the ability to influence community decision making. Community members want a voice in decision making about all aspects of community life, including goals/measures of success, specific actions taken to achieve those goals, transparency of decision-making systems, and if and how those things change over time.

In State Line, Mississippi, most interview subjects expressed a high degree of frustration at a decision made by the town council regarding removal of the town’s only playground. Follow-up questioning revealed little understanding of why the town’s action was taken in the way it was or why the equipment was not reinstalled elsewhere. Perhaps more importantly,



there was very little knowledge of paths of action that community members could take to fix the problem themselves or to force the town council to find a satisfactory solution. In this case, the library director played an ongoing vocal advocate role, giving voice to those who felt they had none.

Libraries satisfy a facilitation role, making useful connections between residents and resources. They may also structure themselves in such a way that residents feel ownership in the library as a community institution. This improves alignment between services and allows the library to be nimbler, making choices that larger, more complex organizations could not easily pull off.

“A small public library in a community like Plum Lake has a greater impact on the users and the community. More so than what you would find in a large library because everybody feels like it's theirs. They have a feeling of ownership in it. It means so much to them...It's just such a big part of the community.” (Transcript, Quote ID: 421:1]

### **Preservation & Shared Identity**

Shared identity, where agreed upon and generally positive for all, informs residents' sense of social cohesion. As in all things relational, the practice of shared identity is complicated. In developing or pronouncing a shared identity there are local power struggles in some communities about what that local narrative should be. Additional tensions come to bear on a community's sense of itself when narratives and how they are performed have economic impacts for the town. Where no other organization is providing the preservation needs, that duty commonly falls to the library. Going further, some libraries actively work to surface and support specific community heritage by focusing programming, celebration, and grant writing efforts on that heritage.

Helvetia, West Virginia, for example, is a heritage site and some local jobs come directly from tourism. Abiquiu, New Mexico, attracts tourists for its natural beauty made famous by Georgia O'Keeffe as well as its unique and varied history dating back to its 18th Century establishment by the Spanish. In its role as preserver of cultural heritage, the library can help individual community residents find their own cultural voice and build their power to determine their own future. For example, in Abiquiu the library has leveraged interest in its unique history as a Genizaro land grant to host and develop a unique archive sought by researchers from around the country, while also supporting local residents' skills and power in the collection and description of their own heritage. In both, the library plays a role in how locals interact with their heritage and with tourists drawn by that heritage, and who is included.

### **Nature**

“I can let my daughter roam free and do her thing.” (Transcript, Quote ID: 79:1]

There is an association in resident interviews between access to nature and freedom. The primary cross-community value is freedom as defined by the individual, and that included the perception that natural surroundings were safer for children and individuals, and so made freedom possible. Libraries circulate materials that help connect residents with nature, like snowshoes, fishing rods, and nature center passes. They also provide the organizing structure that residents need to make positive environmental impacts where they live. Residents we spoke with live in an isolated rural community because nature and being outside are important features of “the good life,” so nature as a part of library service was not prioritized.

### **What the Library Director Does**

Each interview asked for a description of the library director and what they do to help the library be successful. Almost all indicated a strong positive perception, with most pointing to social skills, selfless dedication to the community, and an outgoing nature as critical to their success. A strong finding was that it was exceedingly rare for community members to mention the professional qualifications, or lack thereof, of the library director as playing a role in their ability to serve the community. The directors in our case study libraries were: engaged in their communities, participating in community wide initiatives beyond their duties as librarian; considered to be able to get along well with a wide range of people; seen as active supporters of education and families with young children; recognized as conveners around issues of community wide concern; and accepted as belonging to the community, even if they were not originally from the area or do not live in the town in which they work. These qualities had impacts across Social Wellbeing Dimensions and were spread throughout the Codes.

Our case study librarians do not follow a playbook given to them; they have intuited that role and taken it on because of their deep connection to the community. They are able to develop feelings of belonging and acceptance, because they themselves feel like they belong and are accepted. Using the Topic Descriptor “External Supports” we were able to determine that the attributes of impactful library directors exist independently of the external support resources available to them. Public library directors serving rural communities are important to the operational effectiveness of the library and demonstrate a wide variety of approaches; in order to give them the attention they deserve, we will discuss our detailed results and findings in another publication.

### **Discussion**

Social wellbeing indicators serve as necessary but imperfect stand-ins for how an individual experiences the “good life” in their community. This begs the question, “What is a good life?” It is worth stating what is perhaps the obvious: the good life is defined by each of us through our unique priorities and passions. Our field interviews suggest that rural residents prioritize things like access to nature and social connection more highly than access to health care facilities and short commutes. The vast majority of the people we interviewed indicated that

they live where they live by choice, that they are where they want to be. They are willing to have less access to some services if it means they live in this particular place with these particular people. They want to live in a place where everybody knows them, and they know everybody.

If social connection is a primary purpose of the public library—and our research suggests it is—then it may be important for libraries to make special efforts to identify, understand, and reach those at risk of its opposite, isolation. A library doing the work of promoting social connection for those that are easy to reach and easy to serve is doing an important job, but only half of it. Without working actively to end isolation in its various forms, the library will not be maximizing community potential, resilience, and ability to evolve positively. It may be necessary to do this work in partnership with other organizations, and with a high degree of intentionality. While some have argued for a more socially just profession (Mehra, 2017), a library wanting to stay far away from anything looking like activism should not use this as an excuse to ignore the isolated.

### **Pathways introduced**

One observation of our research is that people who share a common geography, with a shared sense of history, develop not just physical pathways to get them from one place to another, but experiential pathways as well. Someone passing through will likely not see them; these are local norms, customs, and narratives that are observed over time, commonly by “outsiders” who join the community by marriage or happenstance (or by snoopery researchers with recording devices). We call the process by which libraries positively impact social wellbeing “pathways to wellbeing,” and offer them as descriptions of what libraries do when they design, build, maintain, reinforce, and sometimes divert common life paths toward positive wellbeing outcomes in their communities.

When they are active and engaged in their communities, rural libraries take on a role that goes beyond providing a passive platform for community interaction and discussion, and beyond provision of information and entertainment. Where we observed libraries actively connect individuals to their community in a long term, multi-step process that is bespoke to both the individual and the community, they were impactful. We found few to no shortcuts. The process takes time, a personal touch, a deep understanding of what makes here unique, a building of trust, the ability to see the full variety of community assets and know how to activate them, and a lot of passion for the inherent beauty of a particular place.

While it is common for a library to have a direct impact on the quality of life of an individual (e.g., by providing a wide selection of books to check out), there is seldom such a simple and direct one-step connection between a specific library action and community-level wellbeing. A close look at social connection in rural communities has revealed some nuanced complexity that is worth discussion for libraries committed to positive outcomes. Social wellbeing is positively impacted through a series of supports, unique to each community, which

include informal one-on-one relationships, formal library programs, everyday library services, information exchange, physical building space, and a variety of serendipitous interactions. The research suggests that it is not one of these that makes a difference, but all of them together.

We have identified six specific pathways that highlight the ways case study libraries connect individuals to collective support systems. The unique features of place will shape the nature of building a pathway, and pathways should be constructed within the constraints of the community.

### **Pathways to Belonging**

Belonging is key to developing deep social connection that leads to long-term community-wide benefits. It works in two directions: the individual feels they belong (or that they do not), and the community feels that the individual belongs to them (or that they do not). In interviews, a community member, library director, or library board member might express belonging through their word choices—commonly by using “we, us, our” versus “they, them, their”—distinguishing whether a particular individual or group is considered to belong.

Feeling as though we belong, as though we are home in a space or in a group, allows us to act toward goals for ourselves and the community at large. Conversely, feeling that an individual or group belongs to the local “us” can allow us to benefit from what they have to offer, thereby increasing our overall wellbeing and ability to meet new challenges as a collective group.

Home is closely tied to pride in a specific community feel. Successful communities provide easy access to both solitary and social experiences of natural and built environments. A director from Plum Lake, Wisconsin said she saw a division between feeling at home and belonging among residents determined by how long they had lived there. Belonging and “home” are clearly related, but not quite the same. We found that both created a sense of attachment, a topic explored in depth in the *Soul of the Community* study (Gallup, 2010).

We noted that in communities where all three pathways to belonging and feelings of home are strongly observable, we heard more stories of mutualism between community organizations, residents, and institutions. Where they were not that abundant, community-wide support networks were not observed. For example, in Helvetia, West Virginia, committees and individual elders run the town in lieu of an incorporated government. This structure allows for an annual town meeting where each attendee has a say in the upcoming year’s actions, financial expenditures, and cooperatively owned enterprises. Attendees are not only residents, although many grew up in town and moved away; some have only part-year homes in the valley, some own no property at all. It is more than the delightful community-wide events that keep those who have left dreaming about returning. It is also a say in the future.

In Cranberry Lake, New York, full-year residents expressed feelings of abandon, exploitation, and powerlessness over newcomers and part-year residents. In this environment

the library must always dance delicately between divergent interests of The Boat Club and the Town Council. They each hold financial power over the future of the town and its public goods, but there is no sense of mutual belonging and shared identity. Rather, these groups remain factions. The mutualism in the belonging path, which is built through contribution, demands individual and group investment in place, and support for environmental resources that the community uses in common.

### **Pathways of Contribution**

In “Attaching Your Heart: Pueblo Community Engagement,” Carnell Chosa (2017) details his findings on the importance of contribution to creating belonging among non-resident pueblo youth. We heard this relationship between contribution and belonging described in all our study communities but with varied language. For instance, in Iowa, Wisconsin, West Virginia, and Idaho, contribution was strongly tied to feelings of ownership. As one resident who was part of establishing the local library put it: "It's close, easy. It's ours. That's the point: it's ours." (Iowa resident) (Transcript, Quote ID: 63:18]

In other locations, though, belonging through contribution was less about ownership and more about individual self-expression. In Marshfield, Vermont, and Abiquiu, New Mexico, residents described the freedom, joy, personalized attention, and subsequent feeling of authentic acceptance they received when asked to provide their own unique talents and gifts. This dynamic is ingrained not just as a way to support the continuation of culture, but as a part of the culture itself.

### **Pathways of Delight**

Delight is personal but can tie a person to a place in a very powerful way and can be an entry point for long-term social connection. A program that entices someone into the library and encourages them to return, for example, may not in itself improve wellbeing in the short term, but can be the first step on a trail that leads to long term social support.

Rural community residents and librarians intuitively use delight as a device to keep the scores of people who moved away for work or opportunity engaged and updated. Newcomers to rural communities often cite attending a community-wide event as their introduction and first love with a particular place. For older generations, especially in tourism-heavy communities we studied, it is childhood memories which drive them to return to a place at retirement. When interviewed, seasonal and part-time residents told of their 5- and 10-year plans to move to the community.

### **Pathways of Feeling Seen & Known**

People talk about how they like receiving “old-timey” service at libraries, which includes being addressed by their name and given personalized recommendations on books they might

like. In many cases this can be a key to helping them explore new ideas. Because their dignity is respected and they feel seen and valued, over time they build trust and gain confidence to try new things they would not otherwise try on their own.

When thinking about practices that support this pathway, they are the mix of actions that support or expose the ways in which individual identities are shared across community, are supported by both individuals and groups, and have social connections that feed both feelings of shared identity and support. Social connection is not defined by only one kind of relationship. We heard the positive benefits of having a variety of relationship intensities, both neighborly greetings and deep bonds, to feeling seen and known in community.

The individual actions of library staff play a large role in feeling seen and known for newcomers who access library services. It is the small and repeated kindnesses that let people know that their humanity is on display. It is also these actions that build mutual knowledge and trust required to engage people in meaningful contributions to community good.

### **Pathways to Mutualism**

Mutualism can be an outcome of widespread feelings of belonging but can also be built independently. Even though many of its impacts on social wellbeing are the same as those related to belonging, this pathway focuses specifically on improvements in social infrastructure (Klinenberg, 2018) and explicit connection building between community members. Kramm (2020) describes mutualism and reciprocity as part of feelings of deep connection one can have to place. Small libraries may have an advantage over their more urban counterparts in modeling mutualism as an organizational behavior because there are often fewer barriers to non-traditional actions in a rural library.

Pathways to mutualism are built over time through all those actions which reinforce trust between neighbors and organizations. Libraries that host routine small group gatherings (e.g., coffee and the newspaper, book club, community supper) are supporting the bonds between individuals that make mutualism possible. In Elk River, Idaho, although the community is geographically isolated, living within the community is a very connected social experience. (Transcripts, Doc IDs:8-3-04; 8-3-17] These networks are made through daily visiting routines which started at the library with coffee and chat over newspapers.

In Meservey, Iowa, the resident speaking below had connections that had built over long years – both through the farmers coop and engagement in the public library:

“Well, I think it's just a caring community. I'll just give you an example my husband was involved in a serious accident last August almost a year ago. He rolled a tractor on himself, and we spent 19 days in Rochester Minnesota. And the community support. That we had was - Now I'm gonna [sic] cry. You can edit that out. No but you can't imagine the people that helped. You

know and I don't think that people in that urban areas would ever get anything like that. You know hundreds of people helped us.” (Iowa resident) (Transcript, Quote ID: 68:2]

Following from this example, we see how mutualism and reciprocity are directly tied to resident physical security. Knowing that you live in a community where individuals throughout the town are there to support you changes how you behave and what you are willing to do to protect the feeling of freedom that comes with security.

### **Pathways to Self-Determination**

Libraries can positively impact self-determination by providing for infrastructure needs and connecting residents around topics of common concern. Those who feel that they have power over their own futures are able to make decisions that impact both themselves and their neighbors. This investment in a community's future also influences engagement with the local economy, not uncommonly with strong local displays of cultural heritage which create a strong tourism draw. Communities that are strongly self-determinant seem to draw resources to them in the form of creative, intelligent, well-resourced newcomers—people who arrive by choice.

Sometimes pathways to self-determination are structurally blocked, and the frustration of voicelessness is evident in resident interviews. In State Line the public library is part of a six-branch system that spreads throughout three counties in southeastern Mississippi. The feeling of powerlessness over the public library is exacerbated by the geographic disparity between who can run for elected office in State Line and who is served by it as the incorporated local government. Only people living within the 2.12 mi by 2.2 mi city limits can run for elected office, but the government decides services for surrounding communities of Eret and State Line - both less than 7 miles away from the city center but powerless to lead.

The Pueblo de Abiquiu Cultural Center and Library supports the development of self-determination through strategic partnerships that focus on benefiting pueblo youth. For years, the Berkeley-Abiquiu Collaborative Archaeology project has brought students and educators from University of California—Berkeley Archaeological Research Facility to collaborate with interested Abiquiu youth in exploring the foundations, artifacts, and heritage sites throughout the historic pueblo. Young people from Abiquiu are paid for the summer labor; they gain valuable skills in digital photography, audio recording, and GIS mapping. Further, they are uncovering their own family histories. The Collaborative project gives them an explicit connection to their shared history with a constructed pathway to a skilled future of their own making.

### **The Role of Libraries in Community Decision Making Systems**

Every community has systems, usually well-worn, sometimes formal, sometimes not, by which decisions are made that affect specific individuals and the average wellbeing of the town. Picture, for example, a town council budget meeting in which funding priorities are argued over,

or a committee decides whether to hold a Memorial Day parade this year. Whether residents have the ability to—and feel invited to—influence the many decisions that happen throughout the course of a year, can make an enormous impact on how residents experience that town.

In our research, these dynamics touch every aspect of community life. It follows that libraries wanting to have positive impacts in these areas can start with developing a deep understanding of which decision systems exist, how these systems work, how they interact with each other, and who the “gatekeepers” are that control access to influence. Finding entry points to participation in decision-making systems and leverage points where even small amounts of participation can make a large impact, allow libraries to build pathways for those who tend not to have any influence. More research is needed to better understand ways in which libraries are already doing this and approaches that other libraries could take to increase access for all.

### **More Investigation Needed**

Qualitative site-based research has the potential to develop deeper and more nuanced understandings than are currently available. This project leveraged the social capital of the case study librarian, so there it skewed towards overrepresentation of regular library users and supporters. Interview questions were framed in the positive, assuming neutral or positive impact from library activities, seeking to identify and better understand what those positive activities were, as well as the underlying mechanisms that might be supporting wellbeing. This provided useful information to answer our particular research question. We did not actively seek negative responses to determine what, if any, activities of the libraries were having a negative impact on wellbeing.

The research subjects interviewed in this project skewed toward the appearance of the researchers—non-Hispanic white—and did not fully reflect the communities they represented. This includes communities in which nearly 70% of the population considers itself Hispanic or Latino/a/x, but where our interviews still overrepresented Anglo voices. That said, in interviews with Latino/a/x and Hispanic residents in all subject communities, the answers held the same themes as other resident interviews in that community, with small exception. In Abiquiu (NM) and Marshfield (VT), long-time Latina residents shared that although they still felt belonging in their respective communities, their overall sense of safety and wellbeing as US citizens had been damaged by national political rhetoric and policy. In both individual stories, the women stated their connection to the town facilitated by the library provided them with belonging, delight, and a feeling of safety. This specific area – how an explicitly inclusive library practice can create feelings of personal power and safety and mitigate the harm either in the community or outside of it, is a timely area of rich nuance and necessary investigation.



## Conclusion

In especially resource-poor areas, the library is often the last social service that has remained and continues to fill gaps in community needs; rural librarians see the unique needs of their community and find ways to fill them. In the larger library profession, much of what they do might be considered “non-traditional” services or “mission creep.” For our case study locations, these labels are irrelevant; they are simply doing whatever they need to do to support community members with the resources at hand—materials, space, a little funding, and, especially, people. They may not label this support as social wellbeing support, but that is, effectively, what it is.

There are lessons to be learned that will provide valuable insights to all libraries. Further, our research suggests that current measurement methods are capturing only a small percentage of community value provided to the community. Rural libraries are often measured with measuring sticks made for relatively resource-rich libraries. The impacts can be negative, both in opportunity cost—larger libraries are not learning from rural libraries—and divisiveness—making rural librarians feel separate from the profession they are working within.

Rural towns comprise an enormous pool of talent, experience, skills, knowledge, and wisdom. Communities are not homogenous; a key element in social connection and wellbeing is the flow in and out of individuals. Library directors who have been especially good at tapping into the assets of their town know that the greatest asset is the people themselves. The research demonstrated that regardless of the status of this relationship between individual/collective and the government, successful libraries can maximize input from community members. While more research is needed to better understand the role that libraries can play in formal and informal community decision making systems, our research suggests that successful libraries support community-based determinations of community goals and what is counted as “success” in any given place.

The most significant finding we can share is that anything worth building in your community through your library will be built in small, incremental steps, over time, using your full heart, off-the-scale amounts of dedication, and a deep-seated belief that the people and environment that surround you represent a vast pool of potential that, try as you might, you will never see the bottom of.

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