



# LA101X Library Advocacy Unshushed - Week 2 - Perceptions and Advocacy

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This document provides the text of the lecture with citations to the sources used.

## Overview to Week

Welcome to Week 2 of Library Advocacy Unshushed. Last time we looked at the values and commitments of librarianship that are the foundations of advocacy. No matter how large the community, or what kind of community it is, how new the technology, the values that bind librarianship are timeless. These are such values as service and stewardship.

We saw that great libraries and librarianship are deeply rooted in communities – all sorts of human groups - and that's what makes them powerful. When we advocate for libraries, we are really advocating for the future of communities.

This week we look at perception of libraries and librarians, and what these perceptions tell us about how we can be effective advocates. We'll see some wonderfully affirming research, and we'll also see some surprises and wake-up calls. The bottom line is that advocates have to begin with the perceptions of their audience rather than with their own knowledge and conviction.

Video 1, Love and Wake-up Calls, affirms that people do love their libraries and value their services, but that doesn't necessarily get us very far. There is much about libraries that people – even those who are frequent users – don't know – as we see in video 2. They don't know all the services libraries provide, or the economic and social contribution to the community, or the state of library funding. In video 3 we will see that the true supporters of libraries aren't necessarily the users.

And I am talking here about getting support for libraries, rather than increasing library use. We are not focusing here on getting more library members, but on engaging the decision-makers – people who have the power to decide on library budgets, and policies, and legislation. We are also seeking to persuade the people who influence these decision-makers. It may be worthwhile to increase library use, but we all know that doubling our use doesn't mean we get double the budget next time around. In fact, we can double our use and have our budget reduced, and this is what we want to avoid. So let's get on with love and wake-up calls.

## Part 1: Love and Wake-Up Calls

Here is a reality that is basic to understanding advocacy: People who are outside libraries have different perceptions of libraries from those of the “insiders” - people who work in libraries, or serve on library committees or boards. The consultant and popular speaker Joan Frye Williams calls those on the outside, civilians (Williams, n.d.).

If we, as insiders, don’t know and understand these perceptions, we are not in a good position to influence the civilians. In fact, we sound to them as if we’re speaking a foreign language. They just can’t hear our story. That’s not helpful when we are trying to get their support.

I am going to share with you some of the research on perceptions done in various English-speaking countries. This has been done by OCLC, the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the Carnegie UK Trust, the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries, and others. These are referenced in the readings for this week. It’s important for advocates to know this research and let it guide our talk and our actions. The more you know about the perceptions of your own community, the more informed and effective your advocacy will be. This is particularly true for the perceptions of your decision makers where you need to know their starting points. So the following research is going to be most useful when you combine it with local intelligence.

### Love, trust and value

**First**, though patterns of use are changing, people do love, value, and use libraries.

- Did you know that Americans go to libraries of all types more than three times more often than they go to movies? (ALA, 2012)
- Canadian quote from Alvin Schrader: In Canada, a country of 35 million, there were 310 million in-person visits to libraries in 2010, this and other measures of use are in a report for the Canadian Library Association by Schrader and Brundin. (2012, p.4) That’s high use!
- “Public Libraries are Better than Congress, Baseball, and Apple Pie, say Americans” - wrote one writer after reading a 2013 Pew Internet survey about perceptions of libraries in the US. (Meyer, 2013)

Love doesn't pay the bills, but it is a distinct asset when many institutions in society – especially tax-supported institutions - are so clearly unloved.

In 2006, Public Agenda in the United States took a “fresh look at public and leadership attitudes about libraries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” in a report titled *Long Overdue*. Americans were loud and clear about how highly they trust and value the public library.

- They gave their communities high grades for providing well run libraries, ranking them ahead of police and schools (Public Agenda, 2006, p. 20).
- They see the library as an important service for children in neighbourhoods. 80% said all children need a library (Public Agenda, 2006, p. 23).
- They believe free Internet access in the library to be an essential service for low-income residents (Public Agenda, 2006, p. 24).
- 80% commended their libraries for well-maintained buildings and safe environment (Public Agenda, 2006, p 22).
- They value the librarians as friendly and knowledgeable (Public Agenda, 2006, p 22).
- They judge the library to be a careful spender of public funds (Public Agenda, 2006, p 43).

Two surveys in 2013 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project showed Americans to be overwhelmingly supportive of libraries and their services.

- 94% described libraries as warm and friendly (Zickuhr et al., Dec 2013, p 4).
- Librarian assistance was important to 76% (Zickuhr et al., Dec 2013, p 4).
- 75% said that they valued having a quiet safe place (Zickuhr et al., Dec 2013, p 4).

Use of libraries intensifies during hard times. An OCLC survey in 2010 found Americans used libraries more often and intensively after the 2008 recession both to advance job readiness and search, and FOR LEISURE. Americans harmed by the 2008 recession were even more enthusiastic about libraries and librarians (OCLC, 2010).

In Canada, the Institute for Citizen Centred Services ran a series of surveys over the last ten years to evaluate satisfaction with government services. Canadians over the years have ranked the public library as best of all non-emergency services providers in both the public and private sectors. Better than banks, grocery stores, airlines, municipal governments, hospitals, and many other prominent service

providers. That's a strong endorsement of service satisfaction. (Institute for Citizen Centred Services, n.d.)

A study done for the federation of Ontario public libraries in 2010 showed that membership and use had remained as high as they had been five years before, and that even though people were making more digital visits, the number of in-person visits had not gone down. And Ontario residents still valued the public library, and its traditional services. However, there was a change in the perception of the future importance of the public library as more information is accessed online. And those who were most optimistic about the future of the library were also those most tied to its past, including senior citizens and those without Internet access (FOPL, 2010).

Card-holding-members numbers are high across North America. That's voting with our feet! These figures are arrived at by DIFFERENT METHODS, but give us a general indication.

- An online survey in 2010 by OCLC reported that 75% of American "information consumers" have a library card (OCLC, 2010, p. 5).
- In Ontario, Canada's largest province, 68% of adults report that they are public library cardholders (FOPL, 2010, p. 12).
- In the State of Victoria in Australia 48% are public library members These members, we are told, could fill the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) more than 25 times over (SGS Economics & Planning, 2011, p. 8) .

These studies attest to the love people have for their libraries and the high rates of library membership and use.

Why do advocates need to know this? Because the decision-makers – those who decide how much financial support the library will have - must make difficult choices, and chances are they don't know much about the visceral bond between people and their libraries. We know from research and from our own experience that libraries tend to exist below the radar of decision-makers, so we have to anticipate that invisibility issue with evidence we can vouch for. We especially have to counter the assumption held by many that libraries are on their way out, that they lack relevance in the digital age, and that "no one goes there any more".

## Communities

A second major theme in these studies of perceptions is that people believe libraries are important to their communities and to themselves.

In a 2013 Pew Internet study, 91% of Americans said that public libraries were important to their communities. And 76% reported that libraries were important to them and their families (Zickuhr et al., Jan 2013, p 4).

The Carnegie UK Trust reported similar themes, though somewhat lower numbers, for the UK. Depending on the jurisdiction, up to 76% of British residents regarded the library as either essential or very important to the community. Even people who had not used a library in the previous year believed that libraries were important to the community. However, as in the United States, somewhat lower percentages of British residents (up to 47%) considered libraries to be very important to themselves. (Macdonald, 2012, p.24)

The fact that people rank the importance of the library to the community more highly than they do importance to themselves is quite revealing: even those who don't feel dependent on the library themselves, understand that the library is crucial to others in their community.

This brings me to *From Awareness to Funding*, a study done by OCLC in 2008. That report found that the biggest supporters of libraries are not actually the members; they are civically active people who believe that the library transforms lives and has huge impacts. What an eye-opening study! Up to that time, library people had been assuming that their biggest users were also their biggest supporters. So in expecting these frequent users to speak up for the library, they had been barking up the wrong tree. I will talk about this study in Video 3.

So we are seeing reasonably consistent perceptions of the importance of libraries to communities on both sides of the Atlantic. In a sense, we could infer that people consider libraries to be among the defining features of communities. We certainly see this conviction evident in the banners of "save the library campaigns" when there is a threat to the library's continued existence.

This perception of the importance of libraries to communities isn't limited to public libraries, but there are fewer studies of other types of libraries such as academic or corporate.

People do love and value their libraries. But how much do they really know them, and what does the answer to that question mean for advocacy? We examine that question in the next part – "what they don't know".

## Part 2: What “they” don’t know

Notwithstanding their love of libraries and high regard for the importance of libraries to communities, people don’t know much about libraries and librarians. I’m not talking about the old stereotypes of shushing librarians, distressing though these can be. I am talking about matters of substance. So I’ll share with you some research about what people don’t know.

### Books and Services

People think libraries are essentially about books - this was the finding of an OCLC study in 2010 in which 75% said books were the first thing to come to mind when thinking about the library. (OCLC, 2010, p. 38) In other words, the library brand is books.

In the PEW Internet 2013 study, 47% of people said they know only some of their public library’s services, and 30% said they had little or no knowledge of what their libraries offer ( Zickuhr, Dec 2013, p. 3). Now, with 91% considering the library to be important to the community, we do appear to have many people ready to listen to the library’s story. This is an opportunity to develop relationships with people in the community, listen to what’s important to them, and consider how the library can work with them. Then they will come to understand what the library really is.

### Academic Libraries

Perceptions of libraries in an academic environment differ between faculty, students, and the librarians themselves.

For one, faculty see the academic library to be largely about purchasing journals and books and data bases to support research and teaching (Schonfeld et. al., 2013 ).

LibQual – another source of information on perceptions of academic libraries is doing a LibQual survey – this is a survey instrument through which an academic library system can investigate the expectations of their various categories of members, and the extent to which expectations are met.

Findings in the OCLC study, *Perceptions of Libraries*, is a good case in point about insiders’ perceptions being quite different from outsiders. We learn that college students begin their information searches at a search engine – 83% of the time, and never at the library website (OCLC, 2010, p 58). Librarians may build the library web site as the starting point for information searching, but college students (as the outsiders) do not appear to view the library Web site as a primary service point

designed to help them. This raises another point - it may be time to re-examine our language in the sell – “information literacy” doesn’t seem to be working, certainly not with students, who consider themselves to be information-literate. Why aren’t we selling this as improving grades and use their time better? Students care about that!

Meanwhile, many administrators of universities and colleges are increasingly making decisions about libraries based on how they view their bottom lines – and look for measures of evidence of the libraries’ contributions to the mission and goals of the university. While librarians talk about service quality and satisfaction – and there is nothing wrong with either - the administrators are increasingly looking at demonstrated impacts and outcomes in areas such as student enrollment and retention, student learning, and faculty research productivity. This imperative to demonstrate impacts on priority areas is the focus of a major report for the Association of College and Research Libraries, a part of the Value of Academic Libraries initiative (Oakleaf, 2010).

Traditionally libraries have not measured all these impacts, and in many cases are not sure how to do it or even whether it can be done. It is interesting to note that, although librarianship has fairly standard definitions and measurements of inputs, including counts of stock, square footage, etc., we do not have agreed measures of outcomes and impacts. This is very challenging, methodologically. However, it is essential that advocates understand these expectations, make disciplined efforts at such assessments, and above all, learn to communicate impacts effectively in the language of their administrators and their communities, in effect to demonstrate that they do, indeed, “get it”. And of course this imperative is not limited to academic libraries; it is true of all types of libraries.

## Special Libraries

In special librarianship, where the librarian is the brand and the service, librarians have learned to be proactive and become deeply embedded in the work of the parent organization, rather than stay with the old model of waiting for explicit requests for information.

How much do we know about perceptions of librarians in special library context? Stephen Abram, former president of the Special Libraries Association, provides some summary information.

The Special Libraries Association has had a challenging time to retain consensus on the use of the term “libraries” in its association name, perhaps reflecting the low level of knowledge in society of what libraries actually do. The association’s research implied that the name might actually be a liability, though that research certainly did affirm the value that corporate executives placed on good

information. Although SLA members voted against changing the name of the association, they did strengthen their commitment to communicate their unique value within in their organizations. This demonstrates another advocacy principle: take nothing for granted. In particular, do not assume that anyone knows what a librarian is and does. Tell them in terms that they care about, and walk the talk - by rooting your explanation in their objectives. In a typical corporate setting, saving time is one of the biggest objectives, so that could be a very good place to start.

## School Library

In the school library sector, it has been a particularly tough proposition to communicate what school librarians do, especially when they collaborate with the principal and other teachers. Despite a significant body of research that demonstrates the major impact of good school library programs – that means facilities, information resources, and most of all, the teacher-librarian doing this collaborative work – on standardized test scores, the facts unfortunately do not carry the day. The unique role and strength of the school library remains poorly understood, and school libraries are struggling in many jurisdictions. We have to communicate this information much more strategically – for one thing, ensuring that relationships of credibility and trust are in place with principals and other decision-makers. It makes no sense for school librarians to be the sole carriers of this message, and they have tended to be. Parents, other teachers – other influencers, in fact - have to be carrying the message. This matters to the entire library sector, and to society. When we look at the difficulties that first-year university students have in doing research for their papers, we see only one of the impacts of poor information literacy skills.

So these perceptions really matter to us, and, though some of them may seem discouraging, these studies, combined with our own local conversations and studies, tell us where our communities and our decision-makers are now. In our next video, we'll look transformative services, and examine some clues about how we communicate about all this.

## Transformative impacts

We've been looking at studies of perceptions about libraries.

Even frequent users of libraries who are enthusiastic supporters see libraries as providers of transactions. They value those transactions, but they tend not to know the big picture in which libraries truly transform communities.



For example, *Making Cities Stronger*, a study of urban libraries, (Manjarrez et.al., 2007 ) highlighted investment in **early literacy** as one of four major ways in which public libraries make a city economically stronger . Literacy is a huge determinant of later well-being for the individual and the community. The evidence shows that **preschool reading readiness programs** in public libraries have a major impact on family literacy behaviours, when those programs are offered in ways that involve the parents and caregivers and when they focus on specific pre-reading skills. Furthermore, this impact occurs regardless of income levels and ethnicity. Wow. Now there's a big impact. We know from research that a child who is reading poorly in first grade has about a 90% probability of reading poorly at the end of the fourth grade – an early start is critical (Ipatenco, n.d.). We all know what happens when this goes badly. It's connected to dropping out of school, getting in trouble with the law, having poor access to good jobs, and so on. When early reading goes well, the individual is more likely to thrive, and so is the community. So that investment in reading readiness is a big lever.

We also know from research that we become proficient readers by reading a lot. The public library - again – has the collection and the services from librarians to make reading enjoyable, both of which are fundamental to reading a lot (Ross et. al., 2006, p. 46).

As advocates, we need to talk up the role of libraries in reading readiness, enjoyment, and proficiency as fundamental to a thriving life. We need to use the language that helps people understand how powerful the work of librarians is

In my view, phrases like “story time” are unhelpful in communicating what really goes on. Our preschool programs are really about reading readiness. People care about that. Let's talk that way, so that people will understand what is at stake.

Another transformative service identified by this study is **employment readiness and support**. And indeed, a later study by OCLC (2010) showed just how many people used the libraries' job-related services – help with career resources, access to technology for job searches and job applications, and improving technology-related job skills for the future. These services come to the rescue of individuals and communities in economic downturns. And of course their free services support learning and recreation when there's just no money. Libraries have been referred to as “recession sanctuaries” – what a great way to communicate the value of libraries in bleak economic times.

**Small business** is third area of impact. Public libraries support small business development by providing practical information and a network of connections and local partnerships to aspiring entrepreneurs.

And finally, **library buildings** themselves are catalysts for economic and social development. That's because they attract large numbers of people to safe, attractive community space and contribute to neighbourhood life. These are impacts that aren't obvious in individual transactions, so they are not obvious to individual library members, or to non-members who make decisions about libraries, but they are hugely significant for communities. As advocates we need to understand these impacts and speak the language of economic and social development.

## Library Budgets

Another surprise: "Civilians" do not see libraries as being highly vulnerable on the financial front. Insiders – staff, boards, and friends – are constantly occupied with the problems of being cash strapped. The lack of civilian awareness may be part of an "always there", the 'taken for granted" syndrome. But more than one study – *Long Overdue* (Public Agenda, 2006), and *From Awareness to Funding* (OCLC, 2010) – have found that people don't know much about library budgets.

This has implications for the way we communicate both importance and urgency, since libraries can't live on love. People tend to find out about the vulnerability of libraries when there's a budget crisis and a threat of loss. This is no time to establish sober understandings. We have to develop the relationships and understandings in advance.

## Economic Impact

We have noted that the economic impact of libraries is largely unrecognized. Yet many studies in several countries have demonstrated that libraries deliver a high return on community investment.

A recent study, of the Toronto Public Library system showed it as returning \$5.63 for every dollar spent to support it. To individual members there is a total direct benefit of up to \$500 (Martin Prosperity Institute, 2012, p. 1).

In the State of Victoria, Australia, the return for every dollar invested in public libraries was \$3.56. It was also determined that public libraries supported over 4,000 jobs, and added \$ 120 million to the gross state product (SGS Economics & Planning, 2011, p.13).

Studies in Norway, Korea, Australia, Florida, Seattle, and New York City all show that benefits significantly exceed the costs.

There are several categories of benefit, and methodologies for measuring them. But if these impacts are not “talked up” by committed advocates who know and understand the priorities of the community’s decision-makers and influencers, the studies are simply documents on a shelf. Advocates need to know and understand the terms used in economic impact studies so that they can themselves use the evidence to influence community support.

In closing, we need to remember that “civilians” don’t classify libraries into neat little categories the way insiders do. Insiders think of public libraries, academic libraries, and school libraries, and special libraries as being quite distinct, but the civilians don’t. Several years ago, research on the attitudes of executives towards librarians showed executives to have been influenced by their experience of their high school librarians! In our next video, we’ll look at the difference between holding libraries and librarians in high esteem and actually demonstrating support.

### **Part 3: Awareness and Funding**

We’ve been looking at research on attitudes towards libraries and perceptions of librarians. We’ve generally identified two points: people hold libraries and librarians in high regard, and there’s a lot they don’t know about library services and budgets.

And now for a sobering observation: Love as a feeling doesn’t necessarily translate into supportive actions and behaviours. By supportive action, I mean votes at the ballot box when the library is looking for increased budgets or funding for new facilities. Those budgets are declining in the US, and library levies and bond measures to raise funds have been failing (OCLC, 2008, p viii, p 1-1, p 1-2). So what’s going on? Why, when libraries are well regarded and much used, do key library projects fail to get funding and the library’s cause receive insufficient support? Is support for libraries, which looks a mile wide when we talk about love, really just an inch deep?

The OCLC (2008) study, *From Awareness to Funding: A study of library support in America*, makes excellent connections between public perceptions and practical advocacy.

This report groups residents by their attitudes to libraries and library funding. These attitudes are much more significant than the actual use of the library by these residents, as we shall see. The four categories are

1. super supporters (people who will always vote for the library and speak up for it),
2. probable supporters (who have positive views but may not necessarily act on them),
3. those with barriers to support,
4. and chronic non-voters.

The report includes a separate section on the perceptions of decision-makers such as municipal politicians and senior administrators. Their findings are the most vivid wake-up call I have seen yet. I only wish we had recent parallel data for every country.

Here are the highlights.

1. Most people claim they'd support library as voters; but few are firmly committed to it.
2. People don't know much about the library. That's not a surprise; we've seen this in other studies.
3. But here IS a surprise: Library support is NOT related to library use. This is counter-intuitive, isn't it? We can get great stories from users, but they are unlikely advocates. The strongest and most consistent supporters have an attitude that the library is an essential and valuable institution, even if they themselves never use it.

Here are three strong points we can take from this report: (p. 1-6)

1. First, librarians themselves really matter. Librarians who are seen as "passionate" and who are also involved in the community make a documented difference – they actually engage the super and probable supporters for the library.
2. Second, the library is viewed as a provider of practical answers and information. However, the information field is a very crowded space, and people tend to be confident that they can find information themselves online, and find it conveniently. The library has no monopoly on information. In view of this, the library needs to be repositioned.
3. Third, a belief that library is a transformational force in people's lives is directly related to their support. I can't prove it, but all my professional experience in various kinds of libraries suggests that you could do this kind of study about any type of library and get similar results. It's not about individual transactions or numbers; it's about impacts that matter in people's lives.

Two additional observations from this report:

1. Increasing support for libraries may not necessarily mean a trade-off of financial support for other public services like fire, police, and public health. Libraries should be presented as being on a par with these essential parts of community infrastructure.
2. Finally, elected officials are supportive but not fully committed to increasing funding.

What is the practical consequence of this study for library advocacy? Fundamentally, the engagement of Probable Supporters and Super Supporters to help raise library funding is essential. Not surprisingly, people in the probable supporters and super supporter categories are active and civic-minded. They are exceptionally well networked and exercise disproportionate influence.

The authors of this report say that library advocates should focus on three things in their communications: (p. 1-8)

1. Make the library relevant for this century. That is, talk it up based on our society's current agenda. What are the things we want to achieve as a society?
2. Instill a sense of urgency by putting the library in the same set as other public services like police, parks, and fire. It's not just a nice-to-have.
3. Activate a conversation about the library as a vital part of the community's infrastructure and future.

The report developed several messages that form the basis for a library support brand and an associated campaign to mobilize probable and super supporters. One result is a social media campaign called "Geek the Library". This report is an advocacy gold mine and I hope that libraries act on the urgency that is clearly present. This wraps up the perceptions of public libraries. There are of course additional studies of **use** of public libraries.

I trust that you have found this short summary of perceptions of libraries to be a helpful reminder that we need to understand how libraries are viewed from the outside before we can influence those who make and influence decisions. It is a staple of advocacy – as it is a staple of marketing – that people do things for their own reasons, not for our reasons. So we must understand their reasons and their priorities. I do urge you to read the reports and studies I have outlined in this session. You will get a much more nuanced and detailed picture of these perceptions, and a strong foundation for investigating the perceptions of the decision-makers who are your own targets.

In our next session, we will look at the processes and techniques of influence – what works, and doesn't work.

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