

Trends

This is a time of extraordinary ferment in nearly every sector of our society. We can observe a variety of trends; it's hard to know which of them will prove definitive of our shared future.

The brief list below doesn't begin to scratch the surface of a growing literature concerning the future of public libraries; however, it may spark further discussion and insight in the planning process. Any one of these trends might transform future operations. Please see www.coloradostatelibrary.org for updates.

- The Community Centered Library. For many people, the public library represents the “third place” (the place after work and home where people willingly congregate). Public library gate counts are rising across Colorado. So are virtual counts, as libraries make greater use of their own websites, subscription electronic resources, blogs, and social networking sites. The modern public library is not only a bustling community hub, both physically and virtually. Library resources – physical, electronic, and human - can be a vital community asset, convening and moderating discussion, helping to define shared questions and preliminary answers, moving from “ready reference” to the making of meaning. This trend is about moving from a standalone institution to one that is more aware of, contributing to, and tightly integrated with its larger social, intellectual, and political environment. It calls for more frequent and probing conversations with the community (through surveys, focus groups, and other processes), and perhaps a far more active professional visibility.
- Demographics. The release of the 2010 census and subsequent data will be available soon. These resources, combined with an understanding of the unique needs and preferences of each generation in our community, will provide rich resources for needs assessment and strategic planning. A third component is the continued demographic shifts in Colorado communities based on immigration to our state. Many entering our communities for the first time continue to have the highest need for basic information in order to effectively assimilate into the community and become successful contributors.
- Emergent literacy. Research in brain development has uncovered the importance of early childhood exposure to language. The traditional services of the children's story time, the Summer Reading Program (designed to keep kids reading for fun, and incidentally retaining academic skills), and a quality collection have been revealed as among our most powerful tools for growing smart human beings. Public libraries need to deeply understand and passionately articulate this role of advocacy for literacy.
- From input to impact. The trend in the assessment of library services goes like this: first, we track inputs (how much goes into libraries). Then we track outputs (the use per capita of a service). The frontier of library measurement is moving from such tidy tables to more meaningful outcomes and impacts. How was a life transformed? How did a community improve?

- From use to support. The measurement trend speaks to another pressing issue: while library use is rising in Colorado, library funding is declining. Use does not generate support. Libraries can, and indeed must, get better at communicating and demonstrating not just what we do, but why it deserves funding.
- Publishing. Most libraries have already begun the replacement of paper periodicals with rented digital archives. The same process is well underway for reference “books,” now a series of electronic resources. Some pundits predict that by 2012, up to 20% of the commercial publishing output will be electronic only. How will this affect library checkouts and space use? As of 2009, self-publishing suddenly overtook commercial publishing. There are now over twice as many self-published titles published per year than commercial; few of these can be found in library collections. Moreover, there are a host of new digital objects, combinations of text, image, music, and movies. Data on what other libraries are spending on various kinds of materials can be found at www.lrs.org. How should the library manage these emerging forms of intellectual content?
- Content-creation. Many see libraries as warehouses of content created by others. But some librarians seem to be thinking about libraries as laboratories for the creation of unique local content. Is there a role for public libraries as digital workshops, music studios, and more?
- Mobile computing. Once, libraries focused on hardwired PCs. While we can anticipate the need for ever wider and faster telecommunication pipelines, we now support many wireless devices, from laptops to cell phones to tablets. Can we put the library in every pocket?
- Merchandising. Many of today's libraries utilize a host of retail tricks to move physical items (open face display of books, a more thoughtful exploitation of traffic patterns and space.) How will that translate into the digital world? Wall-sized iPads? How can libraries “go viral?”
- Self-service. Many library patrons now place reserves online, swing by the library and check out the materials themselves. “Ownership” of library titles blurs as we move more materials through multiple library locations, bridging jurisdictions and the Rockies themselves. How can we better empower our users to get what they want where, how, and when they want it?
- The Green Library. New energy-efficient technologies reduce operational costs, help staff and customers stay healthy, and perhaps provide for long term sustainability.