Why Your Community Needs You More Than Ever

Libraries: Part of America’s Education Enterprise

By Valerie J. Gross, President & CEO
Howard County Library System, Columbia, Maryland

A growing number of libraries across the country are ushering in a new era. Recognizing that the public library in America was originally established as an educational institution, these libraries are taking steps to regain that esteemed status. How are they accomplishing this? They are repositioning their libraries as a key component of the education enterprise, alongside schools, colleges, and universities.

The Education Advantage

As libraries from all U.S. regions begin implementing this concept, they are finding that their inherent value is no longer questioned. They no longer need to constantly explain why they are important. No one looks at them anymore with a puzzled look, asking, “Tell me again what you do?” Instead, the library systems enjoy heightened respect in their communities and optimal funding. This is because they are now assigned the same enduring worth assigned to schools.

Education Defined

Note what this vision is not. It is not “We support education” or “We play a role in education.” These statements convey only that we collaborate with the schools. While we do partner with schools, the educational equation for libraries is far stronger than this. We are education—an educational institution in our own right.

The concept becomes more self-evident when we look at the complete definition of education, which includes:

• In Information about a subject matter
• Knowledge acquired by learning
• Activities of educating, instructing, or teaching
• The process of acquiring knowledge
• An enlightening experience

Indeed, everything we do falls under education.

It’s Simple

Implementing this powerful approach is simple. It does not require changing anything we do—only what we say.

Carefully designed, the philosophy took shape over a decade, incorporating feedback from thousands of library professionals across the United States, Canada, and countries around the world.

Harnessing the power of language, this strategy:
• Repositions libraries as the provider of what the world values most, education
  • Classifies library staff as educators
  • Categories all that libraries do under three, easy-to-remember pillars:
    □ Self-Directed Education—utilizing our diverse collections.
    □ Research Assistance & Instruction—this pillar includes classroom seminars, and workshops for all ages, taught by library instructors.
    □ Instructional & Enlightening Experiences—through cultural and community center concepts, events, and partnerships.
• Replaces traditional terminology and jargon with strategic language that people outside of the field immediately understand (e.g., education, instruction, and research replace terms like information and reference; and the word class takes the place of storyline and program.)

Benefits Abound

Embracing this new approach is a great way to shatter the misguided notion that the only thing libraries do is loan books. This has never been the case. Although loaning books is a major component of our overall curriculum, the Three Pillars visual readily conveys all three categories of our curriculum, each of which is critically important.

For library staff, board members, Friends and foundation members, and other volunteers, aligning themselves with this vision establishes a distinctive purpose, instilling great pride in ourselves, our work, and our profession.

The tremendous power, effectiveness, and simplicity of this premise is that the very words we use convey the true value of our jobs, work, and profession. It renders us indispensable—today, tomorrow, a century from now.

Education is a given. It’s what the world values most. And it is timeless. So too, are public libraries.

Consider Joining the Growing Movement

Library Journal calls this approach “a 21st-century model worthy of study and consideration by every library in America, if not the world.” (http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2013/06/awards/2013-galelj-library-of-the-year-howard-county-library-system-md/).

Everyone can recognize the true value of libraries from the words we use. Just like schools, colleges, and universities, libraries are education—a timeless, economic imperative that merits immense respect and maximized funding.

For more information, catch one of the following conference sessions:

Thursday, March 13 — Mini-pre-sentation: “Our Education Imperative: Why Your Community Needs You More Than Ever” (March 13, 2014; 3:30 pm at the ABC-Clio Exhibit Booth #1212)
Friday, March 14 — PLA Virtual Conference Session Webinar: “Who We Are, What We Do, and Why It Matters: Establishing Our Distinctive Purpose” (March 14, 2014; 5:00 EST)

Saturday, March 15 — PLA Conference Session: “Who We Are, What We Do, and Why It Matters: Establishing Our Distinctive Purpose” (March 15, 2014; 10:30 am, Room 143-145, Indiana Convention Center)

Valerie J. Gross is President & CEO of Howard County Library System (MD), named 2013 Library of the Year (Gale/Library Journal). Ms. Gross is also the author of Transforming Our Image, Building Our Brand: The Education Advantage (Libraries Unlimited/ABC-Clio, 2013).

Shuttle Schedule

PCLA is providing shuttle service from the four hotels outside of the downtown area. Buses will pick-up/drop-off at the front of each hotel and at the Maryland Street Canopy of the Indiana Convention Center (ICC).

Shuttle Route One Hotels include the Crowne Plaza Indianapolis Airport and the Wyndham Indianapolis West.

Shuttle Route Two Hotels include the Indianapolis Marriott North and Sheraton Indianapolis Hotel at Keystone Crossing.

Today – Wednesday, March 12
Beginning at 6:30 a.m., shuttles leave hotels on the half hour. Last shuttle leaves ICC at 7:00 p.m.

Tomorrow – Thursday, March 13
Morning – First shuttles leave hotels at 6:30 a.m. and continue on the half hour until 11:00 a.m.
Afternoon – Shuttles begin leaving ICC at 3:30 p.m., with last shuttle departing ICC at 6:30 p.m.
Evening – Audio Publishers Association Dinner Transportation Shuttle Route One – First shuttle leaves JW Marriott at 8:00 p.m.; last shuttle leaves JW Marriott at 9:00 p.m.
Shuttle Route Two – First shuttle leaves JW Marriott at 8:00 p.m.; last shuttle leaves JW Marriott at 9:30 p.m.