

Falling Short of Their Profession's Needs: Education and Research in Library & Information Studies¹

Wayne A. Wiegand

Florida State University. Email: wwiegand@fsu.edu

By taking a “library in the life of the user” rather than the conventional “user in the life of the library” perspective in his research on *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library* (2015), the author concludes that Americans have loved their public libraries for three reasons: information access, the library as place, and the commonplace stories that libraries supply by the billions. It is the view of the author that library and information studies research and education concentrate most attention on the first, hardly any on the last two, and as a result, fall short of meeting their profession's needs.

Keywords: reading and libraries, library as place, LIS education, LIS research, public libraries, information access

There is no Holy Book in which God tells us what libraries should be. Over the centuries, the contours of library services and collections have instead been mediated by humans, including founders, funders, managers and—surprise, surprise—users. That's the conclusion I came to after researching and writing *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library*. In it, I trace the history of this ubiquitous institution, largely by listening to the voices of those who have used libraries since the mid-19th century, to identify reasons why it has been loved for generations.

As I analyzed the data, I was surprised at how quickly those reasons organized into three broad categories. People have loved their public libraries for: (1) the useful information they made accessible, (2) the transformative potential of commonplace reading they circulated, and (3) the public spaces they provided. Examples abound.

Information Access

While sitting at a Cincinnati public library desk in 1867, Thomas Edison compiled a bibliography on electricity. “Many times Edison would get excused from duty under pretense of being too sick to work,” a colleague later recalled, “and invariably strike a beeline for the Library, where he would spend the entire day and evening reading . . . such works on electricity as were to be had.”

In 1971, 10-year-old Barack Obama returned to Honolulu from Jakarta. “The first place I wanted to be was in a library,” he said years later. “One Saturday . . . , with the help of a raspy-voiced old librarian who appreciated my seriousness, I found a book on East Africa.” Obama wanted information about Kenya, birthplace of his father, a Luo tribe member. “The Luo raised cattle and lived in mud huts and ate corn meal and yams and something called millet,” the book noted. “Their traditional

¹A version of this article appeared as: “Falling Short of Their Profession's Needs: Education and Research in Library & Information Studies,” *Inside Higher Education*, October 17, 2016, at: <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/10/17/how-library-and-information-studies-research-shortchanging-libraries-essay?>

costume was a leather thong across the crotch.” Shocked by what he read, Obama “left the book open-faced on a table and walked out.”

The Transformative Potential of Reading

After her father died in 1963, nine-year-old Sonia Sotomayor buried herself in reading at her Bronx library and the apartment she shared with her mother and brother. “Nancy Drew had a powerful hold on my imagination,” she remembered. “Every night, when I’d finished reading and got into bed and closed my eyes, I would continue the story, with me in Nancy’s shoes until I fell asleep.” Her mind, she noted, “worked in ways very similar” to Nancy’s. “I was a keen observer and listener. I picked up on clues. I figured things out logically, and I enjoyed puzzles. I loved the clear focused feeling that came when I concentrated on solving a problem and everything else faded out.” Today Sonia Sotomayor is a United States Supreme Court Justice.

In 1984, President Ronald Reagan wrote the daughter-in-law of Harold Bell Wright, whose bestselling 1920s religious novel *That Printer of Udell’s* Reagan read as an adolescent in Dixon, Illinois. Shortly after reading the book, he declared himself saved and was baptized. The novel’s protagonist, Reagan wrote Wright’s daughter-in-law 60 years later, served as a role model that shaped his life. It’s likely the copy of *That Printer of Udell’s* Reagan read came from the Dixon Public Library, which he visited twice weekly in the early 1920s, often reading on the library’s front steps.

Library as Place

In the 1930s at the Atlanta Public Library’s African American branch, one of the few public places where blacks felt safe and welcome, 10-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr., came to the library sev-

eral times weekly. Director Annie Watters later recalled their interactions. “He would walk up to the desk and . . . look me straight in the eye.” “Hello, Martin Luther,” she responded, always calling him by his first and middle names. “What’s on your mind?” “Oh, nothing, particularly.” For Watters, that was the cue King had learned a new “big word,” and between them they had a conversation in which King used the word repeatedly. Another game involved poetry. Again, King would stand by the desk, waiting. “What’s on your mind, Martin Luther?” Watters asked. “For I dipped into the future, far as the human eye could see,” he responded. Watters recognized the Tennyson poem, and finished the verse: “Saw the vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be.”

In 2005, the *Washington Post* carried an article by Eric Wee on a District of Columbia branch library in one of Washington’s poorest neighborhoods. In it, Wee reported that every Tuesday night a homeless man named Conrad Cheek entered the library and set up his chessboard on a table in the children’s room. Wee immediately noticed a transformation. “No more ignored pleas” for this homeless man, “no averted glances. During the next hour, people will look him in the eye. They’ll listen to his words. In this down-at-the-heels library he’s the teacher.”

Information access, the transformative power of commonplace reading, library as place—all three combine to explain why Americans have valued their public libraries for the past 160 years. By harnessing the literatures on information access, commonplace reading, and public spaces to analyze the historical roles of American public libraries, *Part of Our Lives* shows that from their origins they have contributed to their host communities in multiple ways.

They have been places of performance where users displayed moral progress and achievement. They have functioned as centripetal forces to craft a sense of com-

munity among disparate populations and evolve community trust among its multicultural elements. They have acted as key players not only to increase literacy (like tens of thousands of their predecessors, immigrants are still learning English by reading printed materials from their public libraries) but also to construct group identity through the stories and places they provided. And public libraries have also started neighborhood conversations, welcomed the recently arrived into their midst, and served as community anchors.

A Limited Focus

I could only come to those conclusions, however, by tapping deeply into non-library and information studies (LIS) literature that addresses reading and place. For most of its history, LIS has focused instead on what in the 18th century was called “useful knowledge,” in the 19th and 20th was called “best reading,” and in the late 20th morphed into “information.” That focused term has given particular meaning to phrases like “information access,” “information literacy,” and “information community” that not only tend to exaggerate the role of LIS in the larger world of “information” (see, for example, how much attention LIS gets in James W. Cortada’s *All The Facts: A History of Information in the United States Since 1870*), but also dominate—and in my view limit—the profession’s thinking.

Take American library education, for example. As professional education programs evolved from “library schools” into “schools of information” in the last 30 years, most have focused on “information” as defined by the professional discourse they inherited, and then incorporated into that discourse analysis of the storage and retrieval properties of developing communications technologies. In the process, however, they removed the library from the center of their curricula as a subject for instruction and research. Thus, when the 17 American “I-schools” (12 were accred-

ited by the American Library Association) met for the first time in 2005, none had core courses analyzing reading and place from the “library in the life of the user” perspective that I took in *Part of our Lives*.

That’s unfortunate, because my historical research suggests that not knowing more about the reading and places libraries of all types provide greatly limits our ability to understand more deeply what libraries actually mean to their host communities. My research has demonstrated that generations of users have valued the public library as a place by voluntarily visiting it again and again for multiple reasons, many of which had nothing to do with information access.

Although I-school curricula emphasize services leading to the kinds of information Thomas Edison and Barack Obama found useful, they undervalue the impacts of information products that guided the lives of Ronald Reagan and Sonia Sotomayor, and they overlook the importance of library as place so evident in the experiences of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Conrad Cheek.

If *Part of Our Lives* proves that reading and place have been as important to the American public library (and other types of libraries) as information access, then not having a core course in either at ALA-accredited programs is the equivalent of an American Bar Association-accredited law school without a core course on the Constitution or civil procedure. Unless organizations like the Association for Library and Information Science Education and the American Library Association, as well as the ALA Committee on Accreditation, insist that reading and place are essential parts of librarianship’s “domain” that must be taught at the core level, LIS education programs will continue to manifest limitations.

The limitations I find in American LIS education and research are also evident in prognostications. In *BiblioTech: Why Libraries Matter More Than Ever in the Age of Google*, for example, John Palfrey

rightfully contends that library digitization can equalize access to education, jobs and information, but he worries that “bad nostalgia” for services like commonplace reading and traditional library programs will interfere with future planning. In a January 11, 2016, *Wall Street Journal* article, Steve Barker laments that because of emerging technologies “the role for librarians and public libraries is shrinking.” “Don’t mourn the loss of libraries,” John McTernan argues in a March 29, 2016, *Telegraph* article, “the Internet has made them obsolete.”

Ironically, unlike LIS educators and researchers, library practitioners intuitively seem to recognize the value of reading and place. The American library press abounds in reports of popular programs. Kathleen de la Peña McCook devotes much attention to library as place in her two editions (2004 and 2011) of *Introduction to Public Librarianship*. ALA initiated a “Libraries Transform Lives Campaign” last year to increase awareness of the multiple roles America’s academic, school and public libraries play in their host communities. Then there’s the “Project Outcome” initiative ALA’s Public Library Association (PLA) recently crafted to measure public library impacts, the report *Public Libraries: A Vital Space for Family Engagement* released on August 9, 2016, by the Harvard Family Research Project and the PLA that calls on libraries to increase efforts to engage families in children’s learning, and the three-year study entitled “Bringing Home Early Literacy: Determining the Impact of Library Programming on Parent Behavior” that the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services is funding.

And regarding “library as place,” academic librarians in the U.S. and across the globe especially have shown leadership in recent years by renovating spaces rescued from print collections now digitized and accessible online into group study areas that students use for a variety of class-related purposes. The sociability that reading has fostered for generations among stu-

dents is much in evidence in these places. Many college and university libraries also installed coffee bars. The collective effect of these actions (sometimes referred to as the “information commons” movement) is obvious at my home institution, Florida State University, where students now call the main Robert G. Strozier Library “Club Stroz.” In recent years, turnstile counts have spiked.

For all of those efforts, however, American researchers *outside* the profession and already overworked library practitioners have taken the initiative. Where is the LIS research community? Why aren’t members of that community conducting longitudinal studies evaluating library activities like the impact of summer programs on student reading levels as they move from one grade to another? Where is the LIS research that identifies the community effects of programs like film festivals, book clubs, children’s story hours, English-as-a-second-language classes, literacy tutoring, art exhibits and musical presentations that thousands of public libraries have routinely been hosting for generations? Where are the LIS researchers to perform similar evaluation studies on the multiple community effects of library reading and library as place across the country and over time that take into account demographic variables like race, age, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc.?

Data generated by such research would not only benefit librarians struggling to define mission statements and justify budgets to city managers, council members, and school and college and university administrators, many of whom are convinced the Internet has made libraries “obsolete.” It would also help librarians identify which programs and services are providing greatest benefit to their communities and thus deserve additional resources.

Part of Our Lives shows that, over the generations, American public library users learned many things in multiple ways through the useful information libraries made accessible, the commonplace read-

ing materials they circulated and the public spaces they provided. But until LIS educators teach library reading and library as place in their professional programs at the core level, until LIS researchers ask questions about what users learn from their interaction with libraries to determine how that learning fits into their everyday lives, both are addressing only a fraction of what libraries actually do for their patrons. And as a result, both fall short of their profession's needs. I encourage *JELIS* readers outside the United States to analyze libraries in their countries from the "library in the life of the user" perspective that I

found so instructive in *Part of Our Lives*, and then use those findings to determine if the education programs and research agendas evident in their professional discourse manifest similar limitations.

Wayne A. Wiegand is F. William Summers Professor Emeritus of Library and Information Studies at Florida State University, and author of *Part of Our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Between January and May, 2017, he will be Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the Library of Congress's John W. Kluge Center.