A Staff-Centered Approach to Developing **Comprehensive Teen Services**



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The Path to a Thriving Teen Services Department

Sarah Amazing

In late May of 2020, after weeks of working at home with an old Chromebook that didn't play well with book ordering software or webinar archives, I received a shocking email: I was being furloughed.

When I joined Warren-Trumbull County Public Library (WTCPL) in 2007 right out of grad school, teen services were limited to sporadic programs and a somewhat peculiar collection. Despite technically being a reference/teen librarian who mostly ran the teen advisory board and ordered books, teen services began to flourish, thanks to teens flocking to a newly established anime club and the explosion of teen literature following the publication of titles like Twilight and The Hunger Games. By 2010, the teen services department was moved from the reference department to the newly created youth services department, and my position was expanded to a full-time dedicated teen librarian. In 2016, it became its own department, my position was elevated to management, and we hired additional teen services staff. By this time, every location had programming and robust collections, and we were a happy little department.

Then the pandemic arrived.

Receiving furlough notification was rough, but the worst was yet to come. In the end it was only for three weeks as I was called back to pack away everything in the teen space that wasn't a book and to figure out the teen summer program. Later that same summer, however, the rest of the teen services staff were laid off. Many libraries went through similar tough decisions with regard to staffing, but for me the given reason for laying off almost an entire department was particularly gut-wrenching.

If all programming is canceled, why do we need teen services staff?

I was stunned by this explanation. How could everything we had done for the teens in our communities be reduced to so little? What about the reader's advisory and reference work we did? The safe spaces we provided for those who desperately needed them? The connections, social skills, and all the little things we did to help make the journey through the teenage years a successful one? Didn't they know about all of that?

I spent the rest of 2020 and much of 2021 mourning the department I had cultivated. I nearly quit the profession. But as we slowly returned to "normal," bringing back computers and more service hours, one of my staff was called back. We finally broke ground for our long-awaited renovation and addition, and I found myself swept up in all the excitement. Not just of the building project (which promised a Teen Central three times the size of the previous iteration), but of how we would rebuild

teen services once more. This time, we would ensure that teen services would never be seen as an "extra" that the library offered, but a vital component and essential service offered to the community; one that would never be all but erased ever again.

A Growing Department

As the construction project unfolded, staffing conversations began to take place. In order to provide optimal customer service in a much larger space filled with technology, study rooms, and other fun things, Teen Central would need to be staffed during all library hours. Additionally, with their own much larger space to staff, we could no longer rely on the children's staff for coverage. I created a truly exhaustive list of all our current responsibilities, along with those we hoped to add. With support from the new administration (Deputy Director Kim Garrett), I argued successfully for the creation of two new positions, and the expansion of the existing one—bringing the teen services staff at our Warren location to four, consisting of one manager, one librarian, one associate, and one customer service assistant.

As schools reopened and people ventured back in the library, we realized that teens at our branch library locations were not receiving much in the way of needed services. Garrett advocated for the creation of full-time teen associate positions at each of our three larger locations, and, despite some initial pushback, we made it happen.

Advocating for full-time was key to recruiting dedicated, knowledgeable staff—and the applications we received were the proof of this. The new teen librarian position was quickly filled by a former staff member who had recently finished her MLIS; Haley Zaborsky was eager to return to W-TCPL after a short stint at a different library that didn't quite have teen services figured out. As for the associates at our branch locations, we interviewed many young teachers burnt out from the pandemic—the three we hired are just fantastic and I believe, right where they belong. I recruited a former teen 'regular' to fill our customer service assistant position, and it fills me with joy to watch him pay it forward to a new generation of teens.

Our happy little department is back: in less than two years, our teen services staff members grew from one to seven.

Everything Teen

The staff at our Warren location report to the teen services department manager (me), but the staff at other locations report to their library branch manager. However, I remain responsible for directing our overall mission and philosophy, and ensure all teen services staff are knowledgeable about adolescent development, safe spaces, reader's advisory, programming—everything on the teen side of things. I created a sort of manual in the form of a binder for each location—YALSA's Transforming Teen Services initiative, online resource lists, the GLSEN safe space kit, School Library Journal articles, Mental Health First Aid materials, selected Unshelved comic strips—helpful items collected over the years from conferences, workshops, and the like that will help new staff acclimate to their new library world. One of the most important documents, however, is the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets Framework (https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/development-assets/developmental-assets-framework/) which we use as the guiding principle for most of our work.

In the early 2010s, conversations were being held amongst teen library staff throughout Ohio about the need to go deeper—some of us were tiring of nearly every conference extoling the virtues of duct tape wallets or decrying teen behavior. It was during one of these sessions that I was first introduced to the "40 Assets," particularly as a way to show others why we do what we do. While we understand that our weekly game nights are incredible opportunities to develop social skills and build confidence, others often just see kids playing Mario Kart for two hours. Having such a well-researched tool at the ready to explain to administration, parents, or other key stakeholders is invaluable.

With support from those 40 Assets, we have freedom to create programming and services as we see fit. Emily Thirion, then-newly-hired as the teen

associate at our Howland Library location, asked me at our training session, "What do you see as the objective of a program I create?" I answered, quite simply, "That teens have a positive experience at the library." (Thirion has since completed her MLIS and is now serving as our Community Engagement Librarian, in a newly formed department, though she remains a part of our teen staff conversations. She discusses what we hope to accomplish for our community's teens within this department's charges, below.)

The whole team attempts to meet each quarter, and we discuss the trends we see among our communities and the weird words kids are using; highlight our successes and collaborate on upcoming programs. Teen services can often be a lonely and occasionally emotionally exhausting profession, but it's nice to know we can call on each other when needed.

Where Did the Teens Go?

Prior to the pandemic, we saw 800-1000 teens each month in our small space. But despite returning programming to the library in the summer of 2021, we saw few teens come thru our doors. Then the Warren location closed from March-August 2022 to complete construction, and we really didn't know what to expect. After a successful grand opening, we thought the teens would return in droves, as word spread about our four (FOUR!) big-screen TVs with consoles. Instead, a few came to look at books, but otherwise it was the quietest Teen Central I had ever encountered.

Initially, it was more than a little unnerving. A beautiful, new, huge space fully staffed—but no kids. But we stuck to what we knew: relentless empathy, excellent customer service, Regular programming. Slowly, teens began showing up. The return of our beloved annual event The Love Stinks Chocolate Fest brought in 30 teens, and they began coming to more things, and bringing their friends. This past summer, we had a crew of neighborhood kids that began showing up every day—and soon things fell back to normal. The word is out, and Teen Central is finally back.

FURTHER READING

The Developmental Assets Framework by Search Institute. https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/development-assets/developmental-assets-framework/.

Building Meaningful Relationships through Community Engagement by Chloe Van Stralendorff. Public Libraries Online, April 26, 2018. https://publiclibrariesonline.org/2018/04/building-meaningful-relationships-through-community-engagement/.

Get Out of the Library: Embedding librarians in our communities by Meredith Farkas. American Libraries, May 1, 2018. https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2018/05/01/embedded-librarians-get-out-library/.

Community Reference: Making Libraries Indispensable in a New Way by Colbe Galston et al. American Libraries, June 13, 2012. https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2012/06/13/community-reference-making-libraries-indispensable-in-a-new-way/.

Never-Ending Advocacy

Looking back, I can now see the disconnect between what I knew I was doing, and what others thought was happening. I know that the creation of a successful teen program requires, among other things, knowledge of adolescent development, tracking current pop culture, generational awareness, and tech savvy, but to an outsider, I just look like I'm hosting a video game tournament or making boba tea. I encourage my staff, when time allows, to play a game of Apples to Apples or a few rounds of Stick Fight with teens—only now I talk about it, within my library system, and not just to my fellow teen staff members. In my weekly updates, I talk about how incredibly rewarding it is to have nearly fifty teens running around the stacks trying to find a tiny Freddy Fazbear so the lights don't go out, or what it's like to have teens take ownership of their space and call out their peers for using

discriminatory language. I go out of my way to ensure that everyone within the library knows that there's no such thing as "just" a craft night or "just" a round of Smash Bros. In teen services, we are changing lives.

Meet Teens Where They Are

Emily Thirion-Persing

To best cater to today's teenagers, a strategic and unwavering emphasis on teen services within our Community Engagement department is paramount. We recognize that not all teens can physically visit our locations due to various commitments like academic pursuits, social engagements, and extracurricular activities, leaving them time strapped. Considering this, how can we ensure teens receive the necessary tools and resources? What does a comprehensive service model entail for a community where drawing crowds to regular programming might not be feasible?

The Community Engagement Department at the Warren-Trumbull County public library seeks to address these questions in a way that produces tangible results. We want to make our best effort to meet teens where they are and make ourselves available in the places they gather. The Ohio Department of Education granted our system the Libraries Accelerating Learning Student Engagement Initiative, offering initial funding to launch our department. This initiative delineates several comprehensive approaches to ensure optimal engagement with the teens in our service areas.

Re-Imagining Access for Teens

One potential solution to overcome the engagement barrier involves restructuring the library card registration system. The Community Engagement department is actively working towards providing a library card to every student in grades 6–12 within our service area. This initiative aims to significantly enhance students' access to both digital and physical library collections. Recognizing the time constraints faced by teens, who may find it challenging to access our physical collections, the library card grants them the ability to borrow virtual books, movies, and music at no cost, conveniently from their homes or school classrooms. Moreover, it offers educators a valuable resource for integrating materials into their curricula. Referred to as a Take2 card within our system, this library card also provides a second chance for teens with previous fines, allowing them to borrow materials without incurring steep fees associated with their existing juvenile cards, especially if they have faced challenges in caring for library items due to turbulent home situations.

Another pivotal focus area within our department involves establishing depository collections in schools serving students in grades 5—12, situated more than five miles away from any of our W-TCPL branches and lacking a fully operational library within the school premises. The underlying rationale for this initiative is twofold. Firstly, we aim to support teens by enhancing their literacy through clear access to contemporary and captivating literature. Frequently, school libraries face neglect either due to inadequate funding and resources or the prioritization of media centers over traditional libraries. Secondly, recognizing that many teens in our community lack reliable transportation to access our physical locations, we envision that these depositories will offer increased opportunities to lend and circulate materials from our collection by placing them directly within the reach of teens.

In tandem with our depository collections, we aspire to provide high school students with the chance to undergo vocational training and cultivate essential work-readiness skills. Our commitment to comprehensive teen services revolves around addressing the holistic development of individuals. Across all our depository locations, we engage student volunteers, guiding them in acquiring crucial

work-readiness skills such as filing, organizing, data collection, reporting to a supervisor, and delivering exceptional customer service. This initiative, known as the Student Representative Program, empowers teens by granting them autonomy and ownership over their school's library collection.

While we recognize that our three initiatives are not the exclusive means to revolutionize teen services in our community, we firmly believe that they create fresh access points for teens who have historically encountered barriers when engaging with the library and its resources.

Embracing the Unexpected: A COVID Librarian's Journey to Teen Connection and Community Growth

Haley Zaborsky

In the library profession since 2019, my journey as a librarian has been uniquely defined by the challenges of the pandemic era. I affectionately dub myself a "COVID librarian," as my entire professional career unfolded amidst the uncertainties and disruptions caused by the ongoing pandemic. Graduating with my MLIS, I envisioned a world of possibilities, only to find myself navigating a largely quiet and desolate library due to low foot traffic and pandemic-related restrictions. It was a disheartening period, fostering doubts about the career path I had chosen.

The library's closure for construction further compounded my feelings of frustration and boredom. When we finally reopened, the teen patrons, who were once sporadic visitors, seemed disinterested in engaging with library staff. Some sought solace in solitude, and we respected their need for personal space. However, a remarkable shift occurred last summer, defying expectations. Teens not only started frequenting the library, but they actively participated in various programs. The library transformed into a vibrant space, where teens, previously reserved, began to open up. **[ADD A SENTENCE OR TWO HERE ABOUT WHY THE SHIFT OCCURRED, WAS IT THE NEW SPACE? NEW PROGRAMMING?]**

Encouraged by our manager, Sarah, to go beyond conventional library roles, I found myself immersed in unexpected activities. From playing board games like Fluxx and Quelf to reluctantly delving into the world of Roblox and engaging in gaming marathons with titles like Mario Kart, Stick Fight, and Ultimate Chicken Horse, my work dynamic evolved in unforeseen ways. Despite initial reservations, the experience has been incredibly gratifying.

The true joy emerged from building genuine connections with the teens. Laughter, shared interests, and a sense of safety enveloped our interactions. Witnessing these teens evolve into friends, forming connections with one another, was genuinely special. As fall arrived, we initiated the "Art Assignment" program, exploring different art variations each week. Personally leading the art journaling sessions, I discovered the joy of artistic expression shared with a teen keen on the same activity.

Our library's transformation continued into the fall, with weekly programs like the "Art Assignment" fostering creativity. One teen eagerly joined me for art journaling sessions, another delved into the Throne of Glass series during our reading sessions, and the rest passionately sought our participation in their Roblox adventures.

The summer became a turning point, not only for the library but for me personally. The connections forged, the laughter shared, and the growth witnessed among the teens have reaffirmed my passion for this profession. I am grateful for the unexpected turns that allowed me to become an integral part of our teens' lives, fostering a sense of community and belonging within the library walls. PL