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## A Love Letter to Access Services

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# A Love Letter to Access Services

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ANGELA WEYRENS

Angela is the Access Services Administrator at Multnomah County Central Library. She manages a leadership team comprised of twelve leads and supervisors, who in turn oversee the work of 85 Clerks and Access Services Assistants. She has worked and volunteered in Oregon libraries for 17 years.

Access Services, I do love you, ever so. You are my best and most favorite work relationship (although since we're being honest, certainly not my first). I believe in you: your purpose, presence, and importance, your sheer scale and volume. You embody the basic, very important parts of the engine that keeps the library moving forward. Check in, check out, shelve, retrieve, make accessible that which is disordered, create a card, manage a troubled account, say hello to new members of the community, and wish them well when they leave. You do so many things expertly, efficiently, and with the grace acquired by long, repeated practice and embracing enduring standards.

You are the first friendly face our patrons see when they use our physical spaces. You are many things to the myriad folks who walk through our doors. You are a triage specialist, guide, and concierge. You are the welcoming committee for the neighborhood. You greet people no matter their state or purpose, and you do so in an inviting and friendly way. You welcome those who might be hesitant or nervous, unsure if they really belong with us (and you convince the vast majority that they do). You finalize visit details, provide a reassuring send off, and ensure that patrons will come back for more.

By being an advocate for the right to Intellectual Freedom for all users, you are a trusted confidant in a world where privacy is hard to come by. You have an insider's knowledge when it comes to the details of your patrons' lives — their fiscal situations, family additions and losses, living arrangements and neighborhoods, even travel plans. You know them deeply and personally. Even if they don't explicitly tell you, you know so much about the people in our communities. You know when they are expecting a child, when they have cancer, when they are looking into suing their neighbor over that dang barking dog that will just not shut up, or when they are looking for a support group for people who have been abducted by aliens. And you keep it all to yourself. This makes you one of the last of your kind. You give me chills, Access Services.

Where money is concerned, you are compassionate and kind. There are many rules and lots of details to know and understand when it comes to fines: how much, when are payments due, what happens



if I can't pay? What if I was a victim of theft or tragedy, or my dog ate my homework? You answer all these questions with boundless patience and empathy to get at the heart of what's really going on so you can offer options to those most in need. You can turn a patron's tears of frustration into tears of happiness because you handle these situations so quickly and gracefully. You care, and it shows.

In the last few years, you've also staked out quite the claim in the virtual realm. For example, in my library system, patrons can directly interact with you via phone, email, chat or text. Although patrons still make a day of it to come to the Central Library to discuss their accounts, so many are thrilled to find out they can save themselves the trip in the future. Congratulations! You and your expertise should be available in any format that works for patrons and reduces barriers to your services.

And let's talk about referrals: You have learned so much about warm handoffs. Patrons feel like they're collaborating with multiple people as opposed to being ping-ponged around. How many years has it been since you've uttered the unfortunate words "Well, I'm not in Reference, so I can't help you"? No patron has ever heard that sentence and understood it or cared. They just want help! And you make that happen for them. Well done.

It wouldn't be Access Services without a mention of materials. You move mountains of physical items every week. Quickly, efficiently, and over and over. High and low and hard to reach shelves. Dusty items that return to a quiet place in the basement to continue slowly to disintegrate as well as book trucks full of DVDs that get snatched from the cart before you can even park it in a public space. You see and handle it all. It is never-ending and somewhat maddening, and you do it every day. That look on a kid's face when they get their copy of the latest popular wizard book just after you've put it out is worth every armload.

So, my feelings for you are based on all your fabulous and quantifiable traits. But there are a few things I'm hoping we can talk about that have been bugging me. As much as I love and admire you just the way you are, I do stay up some nights worrying about the future.

### **Our Unknown Future**

Any successful relationship relies on growth, and we need to adapt together. Adapting isn't always quick or easy, I know. Previously necessary, some of our enduring operational standards, like imposing and collecting fines, are ready to be reconsidered. For example, the American Library Association's policy statement, "Extending Our Reach: Reducing Homelessness Through Library Engagement" (<http://bit.ly/290LLsl>) calls for "... the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges." Collecting overdue fines is one of the most "library" things we do. At the risk of sounding existential, who are we if we don't do it anymore?

Patrons use my public library, and likely others in Oregon, online more than in person, and that's not new anymore. At my library, physical circulation has been declining for the last five years, while digital content is on the rise. And by "on the rise" I mean by several hundred percent. Movies, music, and audiobooks are available in streaming formats. More and more periodicals are online. As more of our collections become available digitally, many service and staffing models now focus on patron self-service. If patrons don't need the same help using the library as much as they once did, how does this change the way our patrons interact with you, Access Services? And how do we need to change to fit this new model?



A serious conversation has begun in public libraries, and you're a critical player, Access Services. Homelessness, the housing crisis, poverty, mental illness, and addiction are becoming more complex and prevalent. That means our priorities and services need to change, and many already have. Your perspective is critical to this discussion, and these tough topics cannot be ignored. Together, we need to confront them head on, right now. This likely means making some changes to the way we do business, so what will that look like and how will we get there?

Often, Access Services, your skills and knowledge around consumer technology and consumer-ready information via channels like Google are not put to maximum use, due to job classifications and old-school reference-versus-access dividing lines. All too often — even if an organization wants to include all library staff in providing tech-related services — there's no easy structure to showcase your knowledge. How will we remove this barrier to providing patrons with the best experience?

### **Learning As We Go**

So, what do communities want from their public libraries, if they even want them at all? What does your future hold, Access Services? While I don't have all the answers, I know a few things.

### **Getting Comfortable with the Gray Areas**

There's a lot of ambiguity and unknown stuff out there. We're not going to know where we're going, exactly, for a long time. Your job duties will change, absolutely, and I may not be able to tell you exactly what they'll be. It's likely your role in technology-related interactions will evolve, considering the proliferation of e-books and smartphones. And the Internet is becoming a basic human necessity. You'll play a crucial role in making sure people can access the Internet and learn new technology as it rapidly evolves.

The firm definitions between Reference and Access Services will continue to blur. We often try to shoehorn our patrons' questions into neat silos of "reference" and "directional" using our industry's standardized but somewhat outdated definitions. This no longer works. How do we best answer questions like "Can you look up this phone number for me?" And "Is there a picture of a dog on the front page of *The New York Times* today?" We need to develop, refine and leverage our technology skills related to mobile devices and consumer ready information via search engines like Google.

And we'll need to lead by example. In most libraries, you're not at the top of the hierarchy, but that doesn't mean you can't help carve out how we better serve our communities tomorrow. Sure, like anyone, you've got opinions and plenty of them. But there are so many voices in the conversations about the future of libraries right now (and that's great!), that what may be more noticeable is to diversify your approach: take measured and measurable action. That means staying calm when things move fast, learning new things that patrons want help with. It means being supportive of each other as library staff when we feel skeptical or even left behind. It means being willing to take risks and to admit and learn from mistakes. Whatever you do during the work day, do it with gusto. Infuse your interactions with your passion and spark for connection and the betterment of the neighborhood you serve. Be the good thing that happened to a patron or a colleague today.



### **Staying Safe**

We have to take responsibility for creating an environment where all patrons can feel comfortable in our physical spaces when they do choose to visit us. We are all in charge of ensuring the safety and security of our environments. We need to work better together to communicate with each other about what's happening in our buildings. Libraries are no longer the places where nothing bad ever happens. Being proactive will keep us safer.

### **Starting A Community Conversation**

Outside influences in our communities will affect you too, Access Services. We've existed a long time sheltered from the weird world out there. That time is over. As our communities' needs change, so must we. And to best find out where and how we're needed, we need to engage our patrons and our non-users and create time and space for listening. Then we can begin to adapt to meet the needs of our communities.

### **Getting in Touch with Tech**

We have to embrace technology and an online presence in Access Services. People want different things from us than they did even five or ten years ago. It's our job to meet them where they are, not the other way around. We need our services to be available online, and we need to be ready to talk about our mobile apps, websites and e-content.

### **Growing Together**

With you by my side, Access Services, I know we can work together to create a sustainable future for our libraries. One in which we all learn to adapt to our quickly evolving communities while maintaining the pieces that already work really well. Yes, we want to retain our baseline reliability, expertise, friendliness, and commitment to service. We absolutely want to build on those fundamental basics. After all, these are the things that make us such a good team.

However, we need to be:

1. Open to trying new technologies and platforms to deliver our current and future services.
2. Flexible and responsive to our communities when they make it clear - whether spoken aloud or through their actions and use - that they need something new and different from us.
3. Comfortable with ambiguity and the inevitability of reinventing ourselves to remain needed and wanted, even when we may be averse to taking risks.

Navigating change is scary, but I'm committed to this relationship and I know you are too. It's going to take some sacrifices and even some tough changes to how we work, but we have a responsibility to not only remain relevant by trying new things, but to evolve the current services our communities depend on. So take my hand, Access Services, and let's take a leap of faith. As we listen to our communities and shed our outdated barriers and definitions, there's no challenge we can't solve — together. 

