Community Engagement Fellows Project Report

Accessibility at the Bellingham Public Library

Suzanne Carlson-Prandini

Bellingham Public library serves a broad range of learners and the Fellowship has deepened my understanding of what community engagement could look like as well as increased my awareness of resources within our community.

Initially, the plan was to workshop an identified grant and create some sort of new offering that would make library access easier for people with disabilities. While the original concept was to add assistive technology to the library's collections, that concept morphed into creating a webpage with referral information. Three things happened that impacted planning: A) I started connecting and conversing with various stakeholders who either work with people with disabilities or who live with disabilities, B) the identified grant wasn't offered in 2017, and C) staffing changes within my department and parent organization altered the scope of the project.

While I had anticipated that the grant might not be offered, the conversations I was having with various stakeholders quickly led me to understand that the end product would have to be different from the original concept. I had visualized setting up a physical space with assistive technology, creating the supporting documentation to help people learn how to use the technology and then creating a reservation system for the space. However, after meeting with multiple experts in the field and individuals, it became clear that technology wasn't necessarily lacking in the community. What was lacking was awareness of existing resources and opportunities for people living with disabilities to connect with each other and the larger community.

So, in acceptance of current staffing and budget limitations as well as the impossible nature of choosing which type of disability to focus on, I concluded it

would be best to surface referral information for patrons who are seeking resources for a wide range of disabilities. The current manifestation of this is a webpage. The webpage hasn't gone live yet, but the organizations currently listed on the draft are the Hearing, Speech, and Deaf Center, United Blind of Whatcom County, the Ershig Assistive Technology Resource Center, Northwest Youth Services, National Alliance on Mental Illness of Whatcom County, Whatcom County Developmental Disabilities Program, and the Arc of Whatcom County.

I anticipate updating this resource page as needed. I also anticipate incorporating ASL videos explaining library services and eventually building a volunteer program that facilitates connection between mentors from within specific communities to people who are new to the community. For example, offering a session at the library where a person who is blind instructs others on how to use NVDA, the screen reader software available on all public computers at the library. A webpage is a far cry from an assistive technology collection, but it didn't make sense to recreate what was already available through the Ershig Center and other organizations. It did make sense to raise awareness of those existing services.

Ultimately, the conversations and the resulting connections were the most valuable aspect of this experience. It is so tempting to create a checklist and systematically mark off each to-do. The reality I was reminded of is that ongoing education efforts require maintenance because needs vary and resources change. I'm so grateful to the people I've spoken with throughout the year. I've learned a great deal and look forward to the ongoing effort. Please contact me should you have thoughts, questions, or suggestions on how the library might better facilitate community members connecting with disability services.

scarlson-prandini@cob.org

360-778-7236