



# SLA

SASKATCHEWAN LIBRARY  
ASSOCIATION

## **Community Engagement**

If you were asked to could you stand in front of the folks your library serves and talk to them about their community, their aspirations and concerns? Would they agree with you? When is the last time you had an intentional conversation with community members about their aspirations and concerns? When is the last time that you adjusted your service to support those aspirations and concerns?

Community Engagement is an essential branch of Advocacy work. Investing time into hearing the aspirations and values of your community is at the heart of creating the relationships that cultivate exceptional supporters of your service in your community. It's one thing for stakeholders to hear about the importance of library service from employees but those messages take on even more power when they come from community members who are seen to be without a vested interest. More importantly, in the process of consulting and collaborating with your community through engagement your service will increase in relevance.

A robust framework for carrying out Community Engagement work is the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) project which is a partnership between the Harwood institute and that American Library Association. The Harwood Institute is an American non-profit that focuses on building capacity in organizations and in communities to change the way that they meet the challenges. The "Turning Outward" approach is a very distinct way of approaching community engagement. In essence, the approach is rooted in the belief that by connecting directly with the community and using engagement tools libraries can bring diverse voices together and lead change, resulting in stronger communities. To be successful the library needs to 'turn outward' by putting their energy into learning about their community from their community.

The tools for beginning this work are helpfully laid out in the Libraries Transforming Communities website and workbook which are available for free online via the ALA. Community Engagement tools available through the project include a variety of dialogue and deliberation tools. The 'Ask Exercise', for instance is a quick conversational tool of 4 questions related to community member's aspirations. In a short interview, librarians can capture a snapshot of the aspirations of their community members and align their service area to support those aspirations. The "Ask Exercise" could be something that Board Members take from house to house in a small community or could scaled up to on-the-fly interviews in a large urban center.

The community engagement tools collected for the Libraries Transforming Communities project can be adjusted to fit any number of communities.

The work of community engagement might feel uncomfortable to employ in times of crisis. This work can be time consuming and it can be hard to see the immediate impact. It is doubly difficult to “Turn Outward” particularly in times of crisis when shifting the focus away from your institution can feel more threatening than it would in the most stable of times. But there is power in this work! In order to align with community aspirations and value the focus must be on the community first and foremost. When you successfully align with community aspirations and values the support from the community will return to you in spades.

Read more about Libraries Transforming Communities at:

<http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/libraries-transforming-communities>

Read more about “Turning Outward” at:

[http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/sites/ala.org.transforminglibraries/files/content/LTC\\_TurnOutward\\_0.pdf](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/sites/ala.org.transforminglibraries/files/content/LTC_TurnOutward_0.pdf)

Read more about The Ask Exercise at:

<http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/sites/ala.org.transforminglibraries/files/content/Ask%20Exercise.pdf>