

Book Review

Ask, listen, empower: Grounding your library work in community engagement, edited by Mary Davis Fournier and Sarah Ostman, Chicago, IL: ALA Editions, 2020, 176 pp., \$54.99, ISBN-978-0-8389-4740-1 (paper).

Reviewed by Barbie Keiser

As the subtitle of *Ask, listen, empower: Grounding your library work in community engagement* suggests, contributors to this collection explain how libraries actively engaging with the people they serve can help their communities “learn, grow, and improve” (p. ix). Each of the book’s chapters explores a different aspect of civic engagement, but all emphasize the importance of relationship building. Authors of Chapter 2, Erica Freudenberger and Susan Hildreth, speak of libraries as being “anchor institutions.” As such, libraries can act as “agents of engagement,” convening conversations to identify community needs.

In several of the book’s chapters, authors cite a specific instance where their libraries applied a community engagement activity to a particular issue of concern. For example, the Denver Public Library’s *Read. Awareness. Dialogue. Action.* series offered a safe space to discuss police killings of African Americans (Chapter 3 by Hadiya Evans). Ellen Knutson and Quanetta Batts explore how public libraries have used the Government Alliance on Race and Equity issue brief on racial equity to focus on inclusion in community engagement and have strengthened community relationships (Chapter 4). Audrey Barbakoff describes how the King County Library System used feedback from residents to create a new strategic focus and create a plan for economic empowerment programs and services (Chapter 6).

One of the most important messages conveyed in this text is by Cindy Fesemyer, an adult and community services consultant for libraries, who encourages information professionals to collect community relationships with the same care and consideration they use to collect materials and information. According to Fesemyer,

partnering makes for a more efficient, exponentially more creative, better connected, more-bang-for-your-buck library and a more vibrant community. Importantly, partnering also allows for shared risk (p. 33).

The author provides insights into how librarians can approach prospective partners and recommends that libraries start with small projects for an easy win. Her advice: Begin with the community, not the library.

About the Reviewer

Barbie Keiser is an accomplished information professional with a proven track record for establishing start-up information and knowledge operations and transforming existing libraries into modern information centers. Barbie is an acknowledged talent for innovating, launching new information products, services, and tools targeted for use by existing and potential stakeholder groups. She is an established author and sought-after speaker on advanced research techniques and tools, the future of libraries, emerging information technologies, scholarly publishing, competitive intelligence, knowledge management, and transparent government through open information/data. Barbie teaches at the College of Information and Communications at the University of Kentucky and is a reference and instruction librarian at NOVA Community College.



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