


12-18-2017

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Recommended Citation

Braum, Heather (2017) "What's Next After a Library Community's Legislative Advocacy Campaign? Three Scenarios from the Kansas Library Community," *The Political Librarian*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/pollib/vol3/iss1/8>

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What's Next After a Library Community's Legislative Advocacy Campaign?

Three Scenarios from the Kansas Library Community

Heather A. Braum

Abstract

Almost all public library funding in the United States is controlled by local, state, and/or federal budgets, policies, and laws. Influencing budgets, policies, and laws happens through lobbying and advocacy campaigns. When significant changes or cuts to library funding are proposed, how do stakeholders respond and what is the potential outcome of advocacy efforts? As (fictional) President Josiah Bartlett asked again and again throughout the TV Series *The West Wing*, "What's next?" (Sorkin, 1999). This study explores the question of "what comes next" by crafting three theoretical scenarios for the Kansas library community set in 2030, based on Kansas library history, lessons from other states, and the numerous advocacy messages posted to social media and submitted testimony against HB 2719.

Keywords: *library advocacy, budgets, future of libraries, Kansas libraries, public library funding, legislative advocacy, social media advocacy, regional library systems*

Almost all public library funding in the United States is controlled by local, state, and/or federal budgets, policies, and laws. Influencing budgets, policies, and laws happens through lobbying and advocacy campaigns. When significant changes or cuts to library funding are proposed, how do stakeholders respond and what is the potential outcome of advocacy efforts? As (fictional) President Josiah Bartlett asked again and again throughout the TV Series *The West Wing*, "What's next?" (Sorkin, 1999).

The Kansas library community faced such a situation when House Bill 2719 (HB 2719) was introduced on March 8, 2016 and a hearing was scheduled for March 14. On March 9, the Kansas Library Association was alerted to the bill's existence and its library-funding-related content (Warburton, 2016). As *Library Journal* reported:

Kansas library professionals, forced to mobilize quickly and using social media to rally support and spread their message, convinced lawmakers to remove language from a fast-tracked tax bill that they said threatened the survival of the state's seven regional systems and, in turn, promised a trickle-down reduction in services for public libraries. (Warburton, 2016)

But what happens next? What comes next after a groundswell of advocacy efforts and public support? In the Kansas case, the library-related portions of the bill were eventually amended. But what happens if, in spite of advocacy efforts, budgets are cut or eliminated or funding structures and authority are changed? Total advocacy wins do not always happen; partial wins/defeats and even total defeats are more common. Libraries usually continue on, even in drastically changed environments. What comes out of those advocacy efforts?

This study will explore that question of "what comes next" by crafting three theoretically scenarios for the Kansas library community set in 2030, based on Kansas library history, lessons from other states, and the numerous advocacy messages posted to social media and submitted testimony against HB 2719.

Literature Review

Jaeger et al. (2014) describe an approach for libraries to advocate to political leaders, providing a 14-step-approach that includes focusing on expanding who advocates for the library and empowering those voices, exploring and utilizing new forms of technology in advocacy efforts and crafting better advocacy messages (p. 120-123). Nelson (2006) considered the dual role of marketing and advocacy to build support for public libraries. McClure et al. (2006) discussed the importance of networking in local political systems. Additionally, at least two major studies have looked at the state of library funding and public attitudes towards libraries (Public Agenda, 2006; De Rosa & Johnson, 2008) and the Pew Research Center has published numerous studies on libraries from 2005-2017, including studies on Americans' attitudes toward public libraries.

But what comes after an advocacy initiative or advocacy efforts? Many New York public libraries have gone through public referendums to change their funding structures. Andersen (2003) examined lessons learned from New York public library directors who had gone through these referendums to change the library's budget from being a line in the city budget to becoming a special taxing district. These lessons were framed around an additional library (Albany) going through its own

successful referendum in 2002. The scenarios I suggest will explore what could follow advocacy efforts.

Background

Kansas public libraries' history traces back to the territorial days when "slave-owning Missourians and 'book-loving New Englanders' rushed to stake land claims in the former Indian territory" (Gardiner, 1982, p. 1). The basis of the State Library of Kansas was founded through a Territorial Library in 1855; several local public libraries claim to be the longest continuous uninterrupted library service.

In 1965, the Kansas Legislature passed legislation that permitted the organization of regional library systems, K.S.A. 75-2547 and 75-2548. These systems were established to support local public libraries, and "the primary goals were, and remain, the improvement of existing library services and programs and the extension of library service to areas where it was previously unavailable" (State Library of Kansas, n.d., Regional Library Systems).

Today, regional systems continue to support local libraries, and almost all Kansans have access to some type of public library service, including access to shared library catalogs across the state and connected to the State Library of Kansas. Other regional library system services include continuing education, board development, technology support, consulting, funding grants, shared technology systems, shared materials, and processing services (Hastings et al., 2016). These seven systems are managed by independent boards who have "budget-setting and policy-making authority" (Hastings et al., 2016, p. 240).

With technology advancements and cuts to state aid and, in some cases, local library budgets, many Kansas libraries would be in trouble without the regional library systems. As Rossville Community Library Director Adrienne Olejnik (2016) wrote on her political campaign Facebook page on March 13, 2016:

Most people aren't aware of regional library systems, but they are the backbone of public library service in Kansas. Rossville's regional library system, NEKLS [Northeast Kansas Library System], provides the highest quality in training, support, and advocacy that allows our library to function smoothly...I could

go on and on about the wonderful support my library has benefited from in the six years I've been director. Without regional library systems, our community libraries would significantly suffer, and therefore, our communities would suffer.

Additional threats to libraries include the elimination of the federal Institute for Museum and Libraries Services' (IMLS) money that is used to fund state and local library projects (Price, 2017). Threats could also come from local funding challenges, another recession, and continued political and policy battles over library funding, an area neglected by library scholarship (Jaeger et al., 2014, p. xi).

Kansas Advocacy Efforts Against HB 2719

On March 8, 2016, HB 2719 was introduced into the Kansas House and was referred to the House Taxation Committee, where a bill hearing was scheduled for Monday, March 14 (KLA, 2016, March 11). The bill was "AN ACT concerning local government; relating to certain taxing jurisdictions, approval of bonds, tax levies by electors or elected bodies" and it was meant to "empower the citizens of Kansas with a means to control the amount of property taxes levied against real and personal property by requiring any such taxes to be levied or approved by an elected body" (House Committee on Taxation, 2016, p. 1). On the first page, the bill appeared innocuous. But inside, the bill required multiple types of special taxing authorities (regional library systems, museums, recreation commissions, one city university, fire districts, airport authorities, water districts, and city libraries) to put their budgets to a general public vote instead of board approval. Multiple sections 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 21, specifically addressed libraries. The bill contained 84 references to libraries.

The Kansas Library Association (KLA) put out a call for legislative action, describing the bill's major purpose was: to remove taxing authority from library boards and regional library systems. While this in itself is disturbing, the bill would also require a public vote on a yearly basis to decide whether or not to fund each of the 7 regional library systems. This would most likely mean the end of the regional library systems and the loss of statewide resource sharing. (KLA, 2016, March 11) Specific talking points included a discussion of efficient and effective library sharing facilitated by the regional

library systems; that regional library budget oversight already existed at multiple levels; and that “32.4 percent of libraries in Kansas have budgets less than \$20,000. These libraries cannot survive without grants and professional services from the regional library systems. 48 communities lose their libraries; 58 more would be at risk” (Kansas Library Association, 2016).

Regional library systems posted messages to Facebook pages, which were in turn shared by librarians, library supporters, libraries, and concerned citizens inside and outside of Kansas. The NEKLS message began with the sentence, “Newly introduced HB 2719 will end Kansas public library service as we now know it” (Northeast Kansas Library System, 2016). This post was shared 172 times and reached over 18,000 people on Facebook. Southwest Kansas Library System’s (SWKLS) Facebook message included a discussion of the costly budget election process, and that the bill included no recourse if the budget failed to pass: “HB 2719 would require SWKLS to hold annual special elections in its 7 taxing counties. This is a difficult and a costly process that would have to be paid for by SWKLS. There is no remedy or recourse if the elections fail to approve a budget” (Southwest Kansas Library System, 2016). Central Kansas Library System (2016) described the public libraries in Kansas and what the bill’s impact could be:

There are 329 public libraries in Kansas. Of these, 294 libraries serve communities of less than 10,000 (and are considered rural). 503,326 people are served by these 294 libraries. If HB2719 passes and makes it impossible for these 294 libraries to be funded, more than half a million Kansans will be without library service including access to the Internet (which is often only available to these residents through their library).

What happened next is worthy of its own study. Over the next few days, hundreds of social media messages were crafted, legislators were emailed and called, and at least 17 pieces of written testimony were submitted to the House Taxation Committee (Kansas Legislature, 2016). Almost all were authored by librarians or library supporters against HB 2719. When the hearing came around, library supporters packed a small hearing room. Warburton (2016) described it as such, “The hearing room’s 52 seats for the public filled quickly; other observers jammed the perimeter around the legislators while more crowded in the outer hallway.” A play-by-play of the hearing was

posted to Twitter by several people and I gathered many of these posts into a Storify creation, a digital content storyteller website (Braun, 2016). Numerous media outlets covered the hearing (Carpenter, 2016; Gosnell, 2016; Clarkin, 2016; KAKE News, 2016; Koranda, 2016, March 14). Ultimately, the library related sections were amended on March 18 (Koranda, 2016, March 18).

Research Design and Research Positionality

For this study, a scenarios methodology (Elahi et al., 2014) was chosen, to look at what could come next out of advocacy efforts that succeed or fail, as well as helping library advocates see possible creative ways of responding to seemingly potential catastrophic changes to public library funding and/or services.

Before describing that, my connections need to be described. I was deeply involved in the original advocacy efforts against HB 2719, and I was also a long-time employee of a Kansas regional library system. My own words are part of the HB 2719 advocacy record. I crafted hundreds of social media posts through my own personal pages, as well as on my own organization’s social media pages; I left comments on an untold number of other posts. I also authored multiple blog posts. I am deeply tied to this event, and that needs to be disclosed.

Methodology

This study uses a scenarios methodology (Elahi et al., 2014; Ramirez, et al., 2015), to craft three possible scenarios of the future of the Kansas library community after advocacy efforts. According to Elahi et al. (2014), scenarios enable “us to take a fresh look at the world and opens our eyes to other possibilities...[and] provide us with a framework that enables us to examine any possible blind-spots we might have, to compare our individual assumptions about the future with others and to explore how the forces of change might impact upon its future” (p. 1). Ramirez et al. (2015) describe scenarios as “a small bespoke set of structured conceptual systems of equally plausible future contexts, often presented as narrative descriptions, manufactured for someone and for a purpose, typically to provide inputs for further work” (p. 71).

The scenarios are based on what is known about the Kansas library community, as well as anticipating potential future threats. Some of the descriptions in the

scenarios are based on direct quotes from social media posts during the real HB 2719 advocacy efforts. These posts, mostly from Facebook, were archived in late March 2016, via several Facebook search queries, including variations of “Kansas Libraries,” “KS Libraries,” “regional library system,” and “HB 2719.” Facebook does not have a robust search available, particularly one that allows date-specific searches. I recognized in March 2016 that the Facebook posts needed to be archived in some manner to be reviewed and utilized at a later date. When a relevant post was located, it was archived as a link and a screenshot using the Zotero software. Additionally, surrounding posts on the poster’s site were reviewed to locate additional content. The archived posts were mostly public; some were posted by librarians, some by library supporters, some by library Facebook pages, and some by politically focused Facebook pages. In all, almost 1900 Facebook posts were archived; at this time, some duplication exists in that count.

Scenarios Setup

The following scenarios are set up under the following circumstances: a decade has passed since the 2020 Kansas Legislature took up HB 9876, a bill that proposed to remove local library board budgetary authority, drop bill levy caps back to 0.75, and repeal the state statutes that established the Kansas regional library systems and their tax funding structures. The scenarios explore the state of the Kansas library community in 2030, partially crafted based on advocacy messages shared by Kansas library supporters during the March 2016 advocacy efforts against HB 2719, as well as past messages in historical documents, and working to predict where the Kansas library community could be in 2030. Specifically, the scenarios will be based on three possible outcomes to the fictional HB 9876.

Scenario 1: A Decade of Advocacy

One librarian’s reflections on the March events.

I remember March 2020 quite well. One afternoon, I was preparing for summer reading in between courier processing and managing the circulation desk when the phone rang. I picked it up, and Tessi, the librarian in the next town started in before I could even say hello.

“Did you see THE email or all the Facebook posts yet?”

‘No, I haven’t been in my email since lunchtime. You know I’m the only one working today and there are courier bags to fill...’ Tessi broke in.

‘The State Legislature is coming after our libraries, but even worse, the regionals are targeted.’

‘WHAT?!?!?’

‘My library can’t survive without my regional system grant. That’s my materials budget, technology purchases, and story time supplies. And all the different ways they support us...’ (Stevens County, 2016).

‘I know... Without our NEKLS grant, we would have to close’ (Effingham, 2016).

‘I’m hanging up the phone now to read those messages, call the library board, the friends groups, my super patrons, the mayor, and my representative!’

Little did Kansas librarians know when word began to spread that March day, that they would succeed in their advocacy efforts. The librarians called and emailed legislators and neighbors, told patrons, board members, and friends groups, posted on social media, and traveled to the bill hearing. Rural advocates from across the state picked up on the situation and traveled to Topeka. “My heart is breaking,” one wrote. “I’m going to Topeka on Monday ... and want you to come, too. Can you? Some of the best of rural Kansas is in jeopardy -- libraries, fire departments” (Penner, 2016).

Legislators were stunned at the filled hearing room. Testimony after testimony had legislators admitting they had no idea of the bill’s ramifications or the impact of the regional library systems. When it was all over, the bill was tabled, effectively killed and it died at the end of session (Kansas Legislative Research Department, p. 47). Kansas librarians and library supporters cheered and celebrated, and then went to work over the next ten years.

A statewide marketing campaign was launched to celebrate the regional library systems and educate Kansans about how these small, previously hidden organizations impacted the entire state. Legislators were brought into regional library system offices for presentations on the various ways the Kansas library community was effectively, efficiently, and collaboratively using tax dollars to serve all Kansans from the tiniest communities to the

largest metropolitan areas. Legislators were so impressed, new studies were ordered to discover what the economic impact of these libraries were on Kansas communities, particularly the role of the regional library systems in the communities. The findings were astounding and became a model for other states.

As new library technologies were adopted, and local libraries continued to be unable to afford platforms that were higher than their entire budgets, the regional libraries would offer these platforms as consortia services. Agreements were entered into with the larger urban libraries to offer even more services.

Education of small library directors continued to be a challenge, but the regional libraries worked with library schools to create special bachelor degrees specifically created for small public library directors, degrees that were mostly funded through scholarships and donations.

Kansas librarians and library supporters continued to advocate for their libraries; after many years of diminishing state aid that had reached a pittance level, the 2030 Kansas Legislature grew tired of hearing from the library community and finally developed a plan to increase state aid again to levels that would help library's serve communities at higher levels than ever before.

Scenario 2: Things Fall Apart

Another librarian's reflections on the March events and what came next.

I remember March 2020 with a hefty dose of cynicism. We were so naïve back then. When HB 9876 was introduced we fought like cats and dogs against it. The legislature removed the amended part of the bill (the repeal of the regional library systems), but all the libraries lost our budgetary authority and we had to fight with the city or township or county for dwindling tax dollars every year, because the state kept taking away local tax dollars to fill the gaps in its own state budget. The worst parts? The State Library was eliminated eight years ago, and the regional systems were repealed five years ago.

After advocacy efforts half-succeeded and half-failed, the Kansas library community went back to serving communities, but as library budgets began to shrink—due to

cities and townships and counties making all budgetary decisions and deprioritizing the library—libraries that had money continued to thrive and libraries that didn't turned inward. Interlibrary loan numbers began to decline. Libraries pulled out of shared systems because they couldn't justify costs anymore; cities wanted them to only be paying for services for city residents. When the State Library was eliminated due to continued budget crises and because of the *why are libraries still needed with the Internet?* attitude, the statewide interlibrary loan system completely fell apart, the state lost its federal funding, and several statewide technology platforms disappeared.

Cities continued to be unhappy that residents who weren't paying taxes could use the library and its services, and so five years ago, they successfully lobbied the legislature to repeal the regional library system statutes. Soon, libraries returned to charging people if they lived outside the city. As one librarian who used to work in Florida described, this was a return to the past, "When I worked in a public library in Florida, we had to charge for library services for people that lived outside of the district. Issuing library cards was an arduous process. It felt contrary to the spirit of public libraries, a spirit so celebrated and embraced over the last 140 years" (Taylor, 2016).

After the 2020 advocacy efforts, Kansas librarians were disheartened and stopped working together; eventually, the entire system fell apart. Local communities closed the doors on their libraries as library budgets dwindled to zero, and communities no longer saw the library as a vibrant space. As librarian Andy Woodworth (2017) posted to Twitter, "Things that are not the library killer: Internet, Amazon, ebooks, cafes, makerspaces, mission creep, paraprofs Things that are: Funding." The death of advocacy and collaboration can kill libraries, too.

Scenario 3: Ad Astra Per Aspera

Yet another librarian's reflections on the March events and what came next.

When the Kansas legislature passed HB 9876 in 2020, completely gutting the infrastructure and funding authority of Kansas libraries, I figured this was it. The Kansas library community has ended as we knew it (Northeast Kansas Library System, 2016). Our advocacy efforts were in vain. The legislature hated libraries, didn't see their value. But Kansas library leaders

didn't give up. They remembered and embraced the state motto of Kansas: Ad Astra Per Aspera, To The Stars Through the Difficulties. And a new, stronger Kansas library community was born.

The transformation took a few years. When HB 9876 passed and went into effect, regional library systems closed, and many local libraries lost a large portion of their local funding, when they lost system grants. Shared catalog systems, managed and mostly paid for by the systems were turned over to the largest library in each shared system. The statewide courier service shut down. Continuing education in Kansas libraries disappeared. More than 100 libraries whose budgets were under \$20,000 closed their doors over the next few years. Many other libraries suffered, Kansas library collaboration ended, and the library community was in disarray.

A summit in 2022 brought together leaders from existing libraries and communities, civic organizers, elected officials, schools, businesses, and anyone else who just loved libraries. People in Kansas still supported libraries, and wanted to re-imagine what library service in a rural state could look like again. And re-imagine they did.

New models of library service were examined. No idea was off-limits. True statewide library funding, modeled after school finance formulas to begin balancing out differences between community budget realities, was passed by the state legislature five years ago. Thanks to the summit, leaders across Kansas were surprised to discover all the different ways Kansas libraries were helping communities grow, and a whole new powerful group of library advocates were created.

It took a few years, but today, in 2030, Kansas libraries are now modeled after the Kansas City, Kansas, Public Library, where the school district board manages and governs the local public library finances; a separately appointed library board decides on library policies. As public library funding structures were decimated, school librarians in Kansas were also being eliminated (Weller, 2017). The summit resulted in new library research being funded and the challenges facing rural libraries in remote parts of Kansas are being addressed. There is talk the regional model might return. The next legislative session in 2031 will be interesting.

Conclusions

Tax and budget policy and political advocacy may not always come immediately to mind with information policy implications, but public libraries depend on these policies for budgets. Additionally, cuts to state and federal library funding can impact libraries of all types, particularly when that money is going toward interlibrary loan platforms, research databases, digital content platforms, broadband infrastructure, and more. The Institute for Museum and Library Services federal funding is threatened under the current administration's budget blueprint and has been on the chopping block in previous congressional budgets. Library and information advocacy in the political world may become more critical in the years to come, if these discussions continue about why there's local, state, and federal money tied up in library services. Future research on additional advocacy campaigns needs to be conducted, particularly more thorough systematic examinations of the messages used during advocacy efforts and particularly a study of what did actually come next after a massive advocacy campaign, instead of the fictionalized but grounded scenarios described in this article.

The scenarios come out of a deep understanding of the Kansas library community, where it came from, where it is today, and where it could go. The scenarios could easily be lengthened to multiple pages. But, more than anything, they should be offered as conversation starters in the library community to begin to think "what if?" Scenario 1 was the easiest to craft because it built on the energy from the initial advocacy efforts. Originally, Scenario 3 was crafted to be the worst-case scenario, but it turned out to be the most creative one. All possibilities and solutions were considered when the whole system fell apart all at once, but people remained committed to supporting libraries, albeit in a very different way. Scenario 2 was another worst case scenario because the structure fell apart gradually and people never felt empowered to react at the scale they had done initially.

The Kansas library community learned numerous valuable lessons in its actual advocacy efforts against HB 2719, as did legislators. Rep. Hineman told librarians after the hearing, "Thank you for your letters. They were not canned. Each was individual. That is very good" (Braun,

2016a, March 14). Rep. Kleeb said, “Thanks for clearing out the cobwebs” (Braum, 2016b, March 14). May other librarians learn similar lessons from this study and consider what comes next after an advocacy campaign.

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