



If libraries are so smart, why aren't they rich? Public library advocacy in Canada

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Abstract

Volunteers in the Canadian Library Association created a Canadian version of ALA's Library Advocacy Now! program, adapted to Canadian needs and context, in the mid-1990s. The paper traces the development of the program as a train-the-trainer model. Examples from a large urban public library (Ottawa), a regional library system linking rural and small communities in Alberta (Marigold), and a province-wide approach to public library advocacy with government departments (British Columbia) illustrate the successful application of the program. Recent research on human resources in Canadian libraries confirms an increasing need for librarians with management and leadership potential, including strength in advocacy. To ensure future library professionals have the skills they will need, the University of Toronto has developed an elective course in advocacy in its master's studies program and created a new continuing education course as well.

If libraries are so smart, why aren't they rich? Public library advocacy in Canada

That old line, "If you're so smart, why aren't you rich?" could well be posed to public libraries. No disrespect intended, but isn't this frustrating? Survey after survey attests to the high rate of membership and use, the strikingly deep trust, and yes, even the love that mark Canadians' relationship with their public libraries. For example, in four successive studies of Canadians' response to the services of public and private sector organizations (banks, airlines, municipal governments, department stores, and many more) conducted from 1998 to 2005¹, public libraries ranked highest in public satisfaction of all non-emergency services. (Only local fire departments and ambulance services ranked higher, and these are services that most Canadians rarely, if ever, use.) We see the same high regard for public libraries in many countries, and experience the same disappointments, as well, when public libraries seek financial or policy support from senior decision-makers in government. In the words of the oft-quoted statement, people love their public libraries, but libraries can't live on love. All too often, love alone fails to lift public libraries to the level of political relevance and immediacy that is essential to increased government support. In fact, this venerable institution has been relatively invisible to government. It has been present, but easily overlooked, unless or until a crisis occurs - a public library branch is in danger of closing, or someone objects to a book or an image on a computer screen.

Although crises can serve as "wake-up calls" to library advocates, they are generally too late and too superficial to safeguard the fortunes of libraries and thereby advance the interests of the communities they serve. The energy of protest quickly dissipates, and the public, media, and political imagination are then captured by other causes and stories. In Canada, reductions in public library budgets in the 1990s in Canada, and libraries' inability to recoup these losses, occurred in a climate of serious overall public sector cutbacks, as Canada's federal government attacked its deficits by reducing transfer payments to the provinces, which in turn squeezed the municipalities to which they had been making major transfers of funds as well. The situation was challenging throughout the public sector. Libraries did their best to respond, but, as we know, public library use increases at a time of economic challenge, and there are limits to doing more with less. It was time to change the way in which libraries were making the case for policy and financial support. The mid-1990s were ripe for the entry of *Library Advocacy Now!* into Canada.

The American library community developed *Library Advocacy Now!* in response to its own challenging environment under the leadership of its President, Pat Schuman, in 1991-92. ALA developed workshops to familiarize members with advocacy insights and tools across the USA. When former President of the Canadian Library Association, Pat Cavill, saw the program, she recognized its potential immediately. With typical generosity, the American Library Association made it freely available to be customized for the Canadian library environment. A pre-conference program was arranged for the 1995 Annual Conference of CLA, held in Calgary. Interest in the program was high, and thirteen "advocacy champions" emerged from the session as the "LAN Team", a core

group committed to implementing a Canadian program. Workshops were soon presented in four western provinces.

The premise of *Library Advocacy Now!* was both powerful and simple: that Canadian library advocates would need to demonstrate the clear relevance and value of libraries to the changing priorities of their decision-makers, skillfully making the case that the agendas of governments would be advanced by what libraries had to offer. This distinguished advocacy from the related but distinct (and insufficient) approaches of both promotion and marketing. The cause could succeed only if decision-makers saw libraries as assets in the successful achievement of their priorities, and not just as expenditures. Library advocates would need to make a collective cognitive shift and learn new skills. They would need to parlay the esteem of public library users into concrete and active support from decision-makers. They would have to set clear and measurable objectives for each of their highest-priority issues (taking care to limit the number of issues), identify and rank their decision-makers, do rigorous research to develop strategies, communicate strategically based on this research, and evaluate the results. They would need to engage users and their stories. They would have to identify those who influenced decision-makers and bring them on board as active advocates. They would need to do this in a planned, deliberate, and sustained way; they would need to make it a way of life. This was counter-intuitive to many in a library community accustomed to the assumption that libraries were self-evidently essential. The *Library Advocacy Now!* program showed them how to be disciplined and intentional and to make the greatest headway with the available resources.

It was recognized early on that two training programs were needed: a one-day workshop to train advocates, and a separate one-day program to train trainers to present the workshops. Manuals for this train-the-trainer model were developed and field-tested by members of the core group, assisted by library science students at the University of British Columbia. Revenues from boutiques at library conferences, along with modest grants from CLA and a vendor, helped to fund the initial expenses. However, notwithstanding this initial funding, *Library Advocacy Now!* remains volunteer-led and volunteer-driven to this day, with all the strengths and challenges of volunteer models.

Within a few short years, advocates were trained in all ten provinces of Canada and its three northern territories, chiefly at library conferences. Although all types of libraries were invited to most of the workshops, public library staff and board members comprised the majority of trainers and participants. The program, though well received by those who participated, was often difficult to promote. Some volunteer trainers observed ruefully that many of the people who needed the program – chief librarians and library board members – considered advocacy skills to be optional, or felt that they already had such skills. Given what was happening to budgets, such beliefs were puzzling and discouraging. Fortunately several volunteers persevered, surrounded by the harsh twin realities of library downsizing and increased public library use in the 1990s. Recognizing a need to deliver the program in multiple ways, rather than limit its availability to conferences and customized local and regional workshops, the Canadian Association of Public Libraries (CAPL, a division of CLA) commissioned the creation of a workbook²

for public library advocacy that could be made available freely on the CAPL Web site and used by small groups all over the country. Released in 2002, the Workbook eventually became the basic text for formal *Library Advocacy Now!* workshops as well, as it was easily accessed and printed. In addition to the Workbook, the CAPL Web site listed trainers and offered “quotable quotes”: facts about public libraries, phrased in attention-getting ways, that public library advocates could use as “sound bites” in their own advocacy.

Public library developments of the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century afforded two substantial advantages to the library community’s advocacy to government. One was the exponential growth of partnerships between public libraries and other types of organizations, many of them government agencies. These partnerships involved such major public priorities as early childhood learning, immigrant settlement and integration, support to small and home-based business, job search and job readiness, and literacy. Besides offering additional service to communities, they demonstrated strengths of public libraries that had been less than obvious to senior decision-makers in government: active public library presence in virtually all communities across the country, accountability and stability as public organizations, a huge and loyal membership, neutrality and remarkable public trust, and a deep understanding of human information-seeking behaviour. Public libraries not only understood the potential of new technology and the Internet; they actually had technically-proficient staff who administered technology systems and understood the potential of the Internet. These partnerships also helped other community organizations to understand the strengths of public libraries in new ways; the partners could become powerful and credible advocates for public libraries. Secondly, the federal government’s commitment to make Canada the most connected country in the world resulted in a country-wide program to connect all its schools and libraries to the Internet. By 1999, governments recognized what the public had known: that the public library was the preferred and natural location for public Internet access. The experience of government-funded connectivity helped to make the case for libraries as the key to universal access and the benefits of connectivity. Because public libraries became the means to realize a major government goal for the nation, library advocates now had more frequent communication with senior levels of government. There was clear potential to strengthen their new understanding of the value of public libraries.

How can the impacts of the *Library Advocacy Now!* program on public library advocacy in Canada be measured and assessed? It was really more of a movement than a program, taking root incrementally. Looking back in 2008 on the ten-plus years of the program, there were periods of low visibility, to be sure. However, over a thousand people were trained, and every province and territory of the country had at least a small cadre of library advocates ready and able to make a difference. One Canadian library leader with senior management experience in several provincial governments (which are responsible for public library legislation in Canada) commented recently that the program had brought about a sea change in the way public libraries interacted with government in ten years. The following highly selective potpourri of examples – a large urban public library, a rural library system, and a province - and recent developments in library and information science education illustrate the application of this program in Canada.

Ottawa Public Library is one of Canada's largest public library systems, resulting from an amalgamation of the former City of Ottawa with several suburban and rural communities in 2000. This system was one of the first urban public libraries in Canada to avail itself of advocacy training. With 33 branches and two bookmobiles, it is the largest bilingual English-French public library in North America. Prior to amalgamation, OPL had the interesting distinction of both a Friends of the Library group and an Advocates group, the former concentrating on fund raising, the latter on speaking up for the library publicly. The post-amalgamation group, now known as the Friends of the Ottawa Public Library, assumes the dual roles of fundraising and advocacy. As recently as December 2007, when the library was threatened with serious budget cuts that would close community branches, the Friends group organized SOS Save Our Services – a grassroots advocacy campaign that included Facebook and YouTube as well as the “traditional” local media coverage and citizen contacts with elected representatives. In accordance with advocacy principles, they returned to thank City Council following its decision not to proceed with the budget cuts. Although many protest movements can spring up in response to perceived emergencies, the key to the Ottawa experience was a group of advocates already in place, organized and knowledgeable, so that all available energy could go to the campaign itself, which had to be completed in just 21 days. It is difficult to imagine such a turnaround without strong advocacy.

At the other end of the size spectrum are Canada's rural and remote libraries, serving thinly populated areas of Canada's huge land mass. The Marigold Library System, a cooperative regional network of autonomous public libraries serving 41 municipalities in south-central Alberta, has embraced advocacy as a way of life. Like many other libraries in Alberta, where The Alberta Library has taken a leadership role in advocacy training, Marigold has many of its staff and trustees trained in the LAN program. Marigold has also published an advocacy newsletter, *Advocacy! @ your library*, six times a year since 2005; it is now available on the Library's Web site³. This attractive publication includes a blend of interesting articles on current policy and other developments in Alberta that affect libraries, news of advocacy training opportunities, and practical advice, for example, frequently including model letters, for local advocates to make their efforts more strategic and successful.

As public libraries in Canada are created by provincial (or territorial) level legislation, the provincial front is a vital one for library advocates. It is essential that public libraries demonstrate clear relevance in the advancement of provincial priorities to engage government in policy and funding support. The Public Library Services Branch of the government of British Columbia, Canada's westernmost province, together with the Ministry of Education, the British Columbia Library Trustees Association, and the British Columbia Library Association, organized a comprehensive and strategic province-wide advocacy initiative, its *Symposium: Libraries in Dialogue with Government*, in October 2006⁴. The context was the new strategic plan for BC libraries, created from grassroots input, that would advance such key provincial priorities as literacy. The Symposium brought members of the library community (staff and board members) together with senior staff of many provincial government departments, to initiate a dialogue that would

bridge gaps in understanding between libraries and government, and to establish working relationships between the two communities for enhanced service in the future. In addition to presentations on examples of library-government partnership, the symposium included a customized advocacy training program for representative library participants, followed by a series of targeted meetings of the advocates with government officials. Background materials for the meetings included *Government 101: Mastering the Maze*⁵, which mapped for the library participants the priorities and objectives of each of the government ministries. With this information and their advocacy training, the library participants were equipped to explore the potential for library and government collaboration and initiate the relationship-building with key government officials that would be essential to progress. The government officials were both amazed and delighted that the library people understood their priorities, and much useful dialogue ensued. At the Canadian Library Association Conference in May 2008, the organizers reported on the number of initiatives already under way and the many additional partnerships that were well along in the discussion stage. The assumption of the *Library Advocacy Now!* program – that libraries must strengthen their perceived relevance and usefulness to government if they seek further support for government and that there are learnable and practical steps to achieve this – was clearly validated by this provincial experience.

Nationally, the Canadian Library Association has continued to be a voice for libraries, largely to the federal government, applying the principles of the *Library Advocacy Now!* program. Its own advocacy on behalf of libraries has become more focused in recent years. It has brought more specialized knowledge to bear on its relationship with the federal government, retaining an experienced government relations firm to assist in its efforts and strengthen the skills of government and media relations among its volunteer and staff executives. It has produced advocacy tool kits to assist local CLA members with efficient, knowledgeable grassroots advocacy on such federal issues as the Library Book Rate and infrastructure funding for libraries. These tool kits enable the library cause to benefit from the huge network of librarians and libraries across the country and the relative ease of reaching them for mobilization. CLA has also become more media-savvy in its advocacy; its news conference on copyright (in the face of proposed legislation similar to the American Digital Millennium Copyright Act) in December 2007 was front page news in Canada's leading newspaper.

It has also advocated for the library cause through alliances and consortia. It has had a longstanding partnership with the French-language organization ASTED (Association pour l'avancement des sciences et techniques de la documentation) in its advocacy to the federal government. CLA also took a leadership role in organizing the Copyright Forum, a broad-based group that includes more than a dozen associations in education, archives, and libraries, to advocate in a cohesive and unified approach to digital copyright. The breadth of this alliance, which includes the ministers of education in Canada's provinces and territories, has been a critical counterweight to the well-funded voices of motion picture and other media industries in an environment of continuing contention. The Forum has continually driven home the importance of a fair and balanced approach in the development of knowledge on which our future prosperity in a knowledge-based depends.

The Canadian Association of Public Libraries, one of the five divisions of CLA, has been particularly committed to advocacy education since the development of the Canadian *Library Advocacy Now!* program. It has recently initiated a major upgrade of advocacy resources for public libraries on its Web site. This includes a Wiki of documents and facts that are of particular value to advocates - for example, studies of public perceptions of libraries. Each entry in the Wiki includes a short annotation and significant quotations from the document cited, to be used in advocacy situations, and members can add their own research to the resource. In addition, the *Library Advocacy Now!* Workbook is being revised and updated. As in the past, it will be freely available on the CAPL Web site as a service to public libraries.

Finally, after being limited to workshops and the self-study workbook, the *Library Advocacy Now!* program is now reflected in education for librarianship in Canada. The Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, has an elective course, Advocacy and Library Issues, offered since 2004. It is currently delivered through streaming video to students in Toronto and comparable master's level library science programs in Canada as part of a pan-Canadian exploration of shared courses in library and information science. The course responds to an identified gap in the library work force, noted in *The Future of Human Resources in Canadian Libraries*⁶. This report, popularly referred to as the "8Rs Report", was released in 2005 following three years of research in the library community in Canada. The 8Rs research includes the perspectives of both individuals and employers. Among its findings: as one generation of librarians retires, employers report that management skill and leadership potential are the most needed and most difficult to find of all competencies. So a course in advocacy in the education of Canada's future librarians is a step in the right direction. Advocacy education now has such a strong profile in Canadian librarianship that the Professional Learning Centre of the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, has also developed a continuing education course, to be delivered by distance.

Perhaps the most encouraging and compelling voices for advocacy as an essential skill are those of new librarians who have taken a course in advocacy in their degree programs and discovered many applications for their knowledge in their first jobs. One wrote, "The principles I learned in our advocacy course have proven useful in my . . . public library project. In particular, the awareness of organizational structures and learning how to pitch project information and to whom has come in to play time and again over the last year. The notion of 'pitching' the project in general also reflects some of the networking techniques we learned in advocacy class, e.g. elevator speeches, catch phrases and promotion, but also in how to frame the project in reports, garnering support from partners, and creating compelling planning documents. Having done the advocacy course online, another transferable skill in my project is communicating and networking with a dispersed team." Another recent graduate, reporting that the course had even helped her get her current job, wrote, "the advocacy course has informed my work and life in the past year, since I started my career in libraries. It has been particularly useful to me to bring a unique skill set to the table at job interviews; at attaining a position that required this skill set; and at using the skill set on the job. The advocacy training framed how I

understand the role of libraries and because of this understanding I brought my passion for public service in libraries to each job interview. In particular when asked to do a presentation in a job interview I created a scenario of advocating to a City Council for a new collection on sustainability for the library. This dovetailed with the city's strategic plans and the recent building of a new green library in the district. The feedback I got from this interview was that I had nailed it, that the presentation was exactly what a more senior librarian would have presented to Council and that they were very impressed. I also brought my advocacy training to the forefront when I applied for the position I currently hold at [the library], the Community Relations Librarian. In this role as a liaison between the community and the library I constantly advocate for the central role of the library in the intellectual, cultural and civic life of the city. This position also requires a background in fundraising, which is an important aspect of advocacy. Within my first month of work I wrote two fundraising proposals for brand new projects for the library.”

What’s next? We are on a journey to make advocacy a way of thinking, planning, and leading in our libraries. We must integrate more quickly the tools afforded by social networking software to strengthen the awareness of current and potential advocates of what is at stake and to prompt them to act locally in a concerted, coherent way. One of Canada’s foremost advocates for fair and balanced copyright, Prof. Michael Geist of the University of Ottawa, gathered over 40,000 members to his Facebook group, Fair Copyright for Canadians. It has been a focus of mobilization in the current controversy. The library community must accelerate the deployment of this powerful technology in its cause.

The stakes are high, as concerns and rumours of yet another recession loom in mid-2008. Recessionary times always raise public library use, as people strengthen their job search and job readiness skills, at the same time as governments tighten their belts and tax resistance grows. This may well be a test of the new advocacy skills of Canada’s public libraries: can they, and will they, use all available means to harness the unique public esteem out there to make a positive difference in policy and funding support this time? It promises to be a moment of truth for public library advocacy in Canada.

Footnotes

1. *Citizens First*. See links to these studies, published between 1998 and 2005, with a new study expected in mid-2008, at <http://www.iccs-isac.org/eng/cf-about.htm>
2. *Library Advocacy Now! a training program for public library trustees and staff*. See http://www.cla.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=LAN_Workbook&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=3689
3. Marigold Library System's *Advocacy! @ your library*. See <http://www.marigold.ab.ca/publications.html>
4. *Symposium: Libraries in dialogue with government*. See <http://www.bclibrary.ca/events/dialogue/reports/dialogue-report.pdf>
5. *Government 101: mastering the maze*. See <http://www.bclibrary.ca/events/dialogue/reports/govt-101.pdf>
6. *The future of human resources in Canadian libraries*. See <http://www.ls.ualberta.ca/8rs/8RsFutureofHRLibraries.pdf>
7. For programs of the Professional Learning Centre, see <http://plc.fis.utoronto.ca/>