

From Awareness to Funding: A Study of Library Support in America

By Christina de Castell.

Lynne Jordon kicked off the BCLA's President's Program series by bringing George Needham of OCLC to speak to BCLA members at Vancouver Public Library on September 30th, 2008. Needham presented the results of OCLC's recent study of library funders in the United States, and identified the most relevant findings for Canadian libraries.

What did OCLC learn about our funders?

People who are most likely to support libraries are not our most frequent users, and may not use the library at all. They don't necessarily want the library to change, and they don't know that we need things, because we tend to cover it up.

What do we need to change to reach our funders?

We have separated ourselves from our communities and policy development. We need to become faces on our local political scene. Needham suggested embedded librarians at city council, school board and chamber of commerce meetings, who actively seek out information the participants need and send it to them following the meeting – without being asked. We need to stop being someone they have to come to, and start being someone who is participating.

Needham emphasized that we need to put our energy into turning our probable supporters into definite supporters. We shouldn't waste our time trying to move the non-voters, or trying to move those with barriers because of financial issues or a belief that the web is all they need. We should spend our advocacy time on the educated segments of our population who use libraries for fun, the people using the library as their office, and those who look to librarians for readers advisory and intellectual stimulation.

A comment that elicited laughter among the 31 attendees was Needham's observation that "when something gets popular, we ration it". Instead, we need to meet public demand, giving them the services and resources that they want.

We need to think about people's goals when they ask for information, and help them reach those goals. If someone asks for a resume book, we need to identify that they're looking for a job, and offer to help with that process – not just help them find the book.

What are we doing right?

We are beginning to allow our community into our processes, exploring how our patrons can tag our resources and making efforts to use non-library language for our signage and systems.

We need to continue developing close partnerships with the K-12 education system. We need to emphasize our children's services, and focus on trends in our communities when we plan events.

The OCLC report was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. You can read the full report at <http://www.oclc.org/reports/funding/default.htm>.

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