

**The Economic, Cultural and Social Importance of the Northfield Library for the City  
Center**

Spring 2010  
SOAN 373B

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**Abstract:**

In this paper we will investigate the economic, cultural, and social importance of the Northfield Public Library ~~on~~for the downtown (City Center) area. We conducted interviews with local business owners, library patrons, and community members to examine how they understand the relationship between the library and downtown area. We found that the library has a perceived positive economic impact on the downtown area and a majority of interviewees' main concern was keeping the library in its current location, as opposed to expansion or moving to a new location. Their justifications included convenience, proximity, the current quality of the library, and the library as a symbol of the community.

**Main Points:**

- The library is already established as an anchor and an integral part of the downtown area; our goal is to give insight into its importance to the downtown community.
- We conducted 323 interviews with business owners, community members, and library patrons in order to gain information about how they viewed the library in relation to downtown Northfield.
- These interviews revealed that the library contributes a great deal to the City Center community by acting as an “anchor” for the downtown area, serving as a meeting place for citizens, and providing a quality space that has a wealth of resources.
- The two main challenges for the library mentioned by interviewees included a lack of adequate parking and the need to keep up with technology.
- Most business owners were very adamant about keeping the library in its existing location for varying reasons, from the aesthetic value of downtown to the potential loss of economic activity and jobs if the library moved.

**Abstract:**

In this paper we will investigate the economic, cultural, and social importance of the Northfield Public Library ~~on~~for the downtown (City Center) area. We conducted interviews with local business owners, library patrons, and community members to examine how they understand the relationship between the library and downtown area. We found that the library has a perceived positive economic impact on the downtown area and a majority of interviewees' main concern was keeping the library in its current location, as opposed to expansion or moving to a new location. Their justifications included convenience, proximity, the current quality of the library, and the library as a symbol of the community.

**Setting**

Northfield, Minnesota is a community of approximately 20,000 citizens. Founded by John North in 1866, it is located on the Cannon River and is known for its natural resources, specifically hydrological power. One of Northfield's claims to fame is the failed James-Younger robbery of Northfield's First National Bank on September 7, 1876. This event is now celebrated every year in September with an outdoor festival, *The Defeat of Jesse James Days*. St. Olaf and Carleton College represent an important part of the make-up of the community. Carleton College was founded in 1866 by the Minnesota Conference of Congregational Churches; today, it is a leading liberal arts institution with 2,000 students from 49 states and 45 countries ("About Carleton" 2009). St. Olaf College was started by Norwegian Lutheran immigrants in 1874 to educate students and preserve their faith and culture. St. Olaf is a nationally-ranked liberal arts college with students who come from diverse backgrounds from all 50 states and 30 countries ("About St. Olaf" 2009). Outside of the colleges, there are other educational institutions that offer a "broad range of educational approaches" ("History of Northfield" 2009), including three elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, a private Catholic school (K-8), a

Montessori school (pre K-K), an area learning center, and community services division. Thus, literacy and education have highly visible and prominent roles in the Northfield community.

According to CityData, the majority of the Northfield population is white or Hispanic, 89% and 5.7%, respectively. The median household income is \$57,740. Approximately 87.4% of residents 25 and over have attained a high school degree or higher, 43% have a bachelor's degree or higher, and 19.1% have a graduate degree or higher. The unemployment rate is 11%, slightly higher than the national average. Major employers in the Northfield area include Malt-O-Meal, St. Olaf College, Carleton College, Northfield Public Schools, and the City of Northfield (“Moving to Northfield” 2009).

The City Center, also known as the downtown area, plays an integral part as the purveyor of the heritage and culture of the Northfield community. The downtown area stretches approximately six blocks and is centered on Division Street, which is home to a myriad of small, locally owned businesses, shops, and restaurants. In addition to the library, a main draw to the City Center for residents on a day-to-day basis is the central location of the post office, banks, and food providers. Including a few restaurants, these “magnets” are what keep people coming back to the Division Street area.

What makes Northfield unique is the close proximity of all these essential resources. On the south end of town on Division Street and 6th Street is the City Center's chain grocery store, EconoFoods, which serves as the community's daily grocer; in addition, the Just Foods Co-Op is located on South Water Street and 6th Street. Situated on Division Street are multiple banks in town, including First National and Premier Bank. The city's historic post office is tucked in on Water Street near 4th Street and Division. On the north end of the City Center sits the Northfield Public Library, which is the main focus for our research. Because of the library's close proximity

to the City Center area, it offers patrons the opportunity to stop for a cup of coffee, grab a bite to eat, or take a walk along the river, in addition to being able to acquire daily necessities.

Funded by Andrew Carnegie in 1910, the Northfield Public Library is an essential component of the downtown area's rich history; this year, the library celebrated its centennial on April 25th, with music and presentations. It is no secret that the library is a central, important anchor to the downtown community and provides valuable services and resources that draw people from all over to the downtown area. The library houses over 72,827 books, 3,522 audio materials, 2,290 video materials, and 313 serial subscriptions ("History of Northfield" 2009). It also provides many other services, including home-bound services for patrons unable to get to the library, a literacy program for toddlers and preschoolers, meeting rooms, and notary services.

The library also offers free wireless internet access and multiple computers for Internet use-- which is a heavily utilized service that gives individuals the opportunity to have Internet access without having to pay for a computer or wireless themselves.

However, the library's resources have reached capacity, and in order to offer more of the services and activities that have been effective, a larger facility may be required. Approximately 700 individuals from a variety of social, economic, academic, and age levels visit the library each day (Young 2010). They borrow over 100,000 adult books, 131,000 children and young adult books, in addition to magazines, CDs, and other resources for a total of 394,564 materials borrowed in 2008 ("Library Use Statistics"). In fact, the use of the library is increasing, and this year it had its largest circulation ever, with over 403,000 items in circulation (Young 2010). The Rohlf Report, *Northfield Public Library Preliminary Report on Community Needs Assessment And Space Needs*, was conducted for the library in 2006; it concluded that, according to

estimated population growth, the library will need to double its size to accommodate Northfield residents' demands.

There are various groups and individuals who invest time into determining the infrastructure and maintenance of the library. The Northfield Library Board plays an essential role in determining the future of the library. The Board consists of Lynne Young, the director of the library and ten other community leaders; it meets once a month at the library to discuss current issues facing the library, such as the budget and the proposed expansion. Founded in 1982, Friends of the Northfield Public Library, a local non-profit organization with 275 members, supports the library through monetary assistance, increasing awareness of the services that the library offers, and sponsoring events at the library such as a spelling bee every fall, visits by authors, book deliveries to those who are home-bound, and scholarships for graduating seniors from Northfield High School.

### **Problem**

As part of the civic engagement portion of our ethnographic research methods course, we went into the community to carry out our research on the impact of the Northfield Public Library. The problem we set out to study was whether or not the Northfield Public Library has an economic impact on the City Center area in Northfield. The library is looking to either expand on its current site or build on a new site outside of the downtown area, and the staff was interested to learn more about people's patterns of movement when they go both to the library and downtown. It was important for the library to know how much of an economic impact, if any, it had upon the City Center area. However, as we carried out our research it shifted more towards a focus on how people perceive the relationship of the library and downtown beyond economic

considerations. It expanded to include the cultural and social importance, in addition to economic contributions, of the library to the City Center area because of the emphasis placed on these factors discovered during interviews.

Our group has a personal interest in this subject for various reasons. We had a desire to ~~and~~ become civically engaged in and work with the community. We recalled fond memories of using our hometown libraries as children and the enjoyment we got out of having such viable resources. We each have gained a level of familiarity with Northfield, after spending the past three or four years at St. Olaf, and we recognize the unique and engaged community Northfield has. It therefore came as no surprise to us that the city of Northfield takes the proposed library expansion very seriously because of this engagement by residents. Library Board Chair Margit Johnson and Ms. Young also mentioned that the library is highly respected as an asset to the community, and it strives to offer resources to its patrons with a specific focus on programming and activities for children.

Since the library welcomes an average of 700 people everyday, it has the potential to greatly increase the traffic flow into downtown. This possible influx of hundreds of people each day utilizing the downtown area could have a major effect on businesses near Division Street. As the library considers expansion, we hope that this study will help to inform the ways in which the library executes the expansion, as well as give voice to those who will be most affected by it. Through our interviews, we discovered that reliance upon and personal investment in the Northfield Public Library is common among the residents of Northfield, thus demonstrating the importance of the need for the library's future growth. As our research went on, we found that people responded strongly to the proposition of whether to move the library to another area of the town or to keep it in the City Center. As a result, most of our research findings are concerned

with the location of the library and how it affects those living and working around the downtown area.

The Northfield library, ~~and-like~~ most libraries generally, offers a stark contrast to prevalent modes of consumption that have emerged within many communities. The rise of "big box" chain stores like Target, Cub and Menard's, ~~hasve~~ ensured the formation of a specific type of consumption that is individualized, privatized, and based solely upon monetary exchange. It is a type of consumption that cannot be as reflective ~~to-of~~ the needs of a given community; instead, it proffers a given set of options and allows the consumer to choose among these. There is little community fostered by these operations. Predatory consumption, the type in which there is competition for the consumer's attention, ~~take~~s precedence at the expense of all else, ~~emphasiz~~ing rivalry and conflict as an acceptable means of understanding relationships with others.

In contrast, the mode of consumption the Northfield Library represents is communal, public, and free. It is responsive to the community, as it is tailored to the needs of a specific community. It fosters unity, because it is a public entity in which any member of the community of any socioeconomic strata can access a common repository of materials and services. It is individualized to the extent that one chooses what materials to borrow or services to use, but these are not owned or purchased by the individual; they are owned by the community. This consumption is renewable, as resources are utilized to ensure continual usage over a long period of time. Furthermore, the underlying message of this mode of operation is diametrically opposed to that of the "big box" stores; the message is that as a group of individuals, we can work together to ensure all of our needs are met. This mode of operation fosters cooperation, and this,

perhaps, is one of the most important functions of the library: not so much what it has, but what it develops, in both the community and in the individual.

### **Method**

We worked with Lynne Young, the library director, Ross Currier, head of development for the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation, and Margit Johnson, library board chair, to develop the foundations of the project, with the goal of conducting research that would be beneficial for all parties involved in the process. First, we met with Ms. Young, Mr. Currier, Ms. Johnson and Professor Chris Chiappari, the academic advisor for our research, to discuss possible methods for conducting research with the library. They had been looking forward to doing a project that got community members' input on the library for a few years but were unable to afford such an effort. Ms. Young and Mr. Currier suggested we consider the economic impact of the library on the City Center; they hypothesized that since the library is so frequently patronized, nearby businesses were probably visited by some of the library's 700 daily patrons. In fact, they mentioned anecdotal evidence that supported their claim, but they wanted more concrete evidence of people's patterns of consumption. This is the issue that we set out to study in our research.

Our study utilized one-on-one interviews with library patrons, Northfield residents, and business owners in the City Center area to collect data. We developed three sets of interview protocols, one for each of these sub-groups. Each group was asked a set of identical questions, which included prompts about frequency of use of the library, types of materials and programs used, the library expansion plans, the library's strengths and weaknesses, and the relationship

between the library and the community. Questions were intended to gauge the interviewees' relationships with the library, the Division Street area, and the larger community.

In the set of questions specifically for library patrons, interviewees were asked what other stops they made in Northfield when they visited the library, what impacted their decision to stop at other businesses, and whether or not the library should change locations. Business owners were asked about the relationship between the library and the Northfield City Center, the impact of the library's proximity for their business, how many of their customers also visited the library, and whether most of their customers came from the Northfield area. In the interviews conducted around Northfield, participants were asked how often they visited Division Street, what they did when they visited, and how often they made a purchase if they shopped on Division Street.

Overall, we completed 33 interviews: 10 interviews with library patrons, 14 with community members outside the library, and 8 with business owners and an email interview with Ms. Young. Many of the individuals we talked to were extremely proud of Northfield, especially the City Center, and were more than happy to talk with us about information beyond just the library expansion. For example, one business owner gave a history of his business, the City Center, and the changes Northfield has ~~had~~ experienced over the last 30 years. It was also incredibly helpful to have Ms. Young, Ms. Johnson and Mr. Currier available to answer questions for us when they arose.

Our sample of interviewees was selected on a semi-random basis. The sample was based partly on convenience that relied on the types of people who were available at the times that we chose to visit our interview sites. However, we tried to select people from a broad range of ages and genders. The data from interviews with library patrons helped us develop a sense of the library's role in the community, its most popular resources and programs, and how often library

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visits are paired with visits to shops on Division Street. Interviewing Northfield community members outside the library helped us measure attitudes about the library from a population not necessarily affiliated with the library. Our purpose for interviewing business owners in the City Center area was to gauge how business owners understand the relationship between the library and the downtown area. They are important because they have a personal stake in the economics of the downtown community. Their businesses rely on the vitality of the City Center, and so their opinions were very important in determining whether there was a perceived economic impact of the library on the area. We shared these results at the monthly library board meeting on May 12<sup>th</sup>, and they were very receptive to our findings.

The interview methodology contained a number of strengths and weaknesses. Some of the strengths were that the interviews were open-ended and allowed interviewees to talk about a wide range of issues relating to the library. They were conducted in a casual manner, so that subjects might feel more free to speak openly about their experiences with the library without feeling judged or restrained by the questions. This "human" quality of our research provides a depth and level of sincerity that would not be present in a survey or other quantitative methods of research. The interviews included a wide breadth of questions that touched on a variety of topics concerning the library, including its economic impact, its relationship with the community, the library expansion, and its perceived strengths and weaknesses.

However, there are inherent weaknesses to doing a study with qualitative data. One of the biggest ones is the sheer amount of time it takes to collect this type of data. As a result, it is more difficult to get results for a large number of research subjects; this in turn could lead to less accurate results. In a case like this, however, we felt that it was more important to get anecdotal evidence concerning the community's views of the library to fulfill the goals of our course, as

well as gain the benefits, mentioned above, of the structure of open ended questions. Another weakness could be that we relied entirely on the interviewees's memories of how often they frequent the library and other businesses. This could be problematic because individuals might have been inclined to give answers that they perceived to be more socially acceptable; for example, in this case, an individual might say that they patronize the library more often than they actually do. However, although this may be more prominent when interviewees are being asked about behavior instead of simply filling out a survey, we felt that this did not overshadow the benefits of open ended questions. We also were only able to observe those who we interviewed in the library, not those who we talked to at other businesses or on the street. Therefore, we cannot verify the validity of their claims as to their habits of library use. However, this would have limited our study to only library patrons and would not have allowed us to talk to people outside the building.

The results yielded by our interview process may not be generalizable because we conducted only a small number of interviews in specific locations, such as the library and businesses located downtown. If the research project had had a larger budget and more time, and had we been able to include more interviews conducted over a larger range of locations, it may have been possible to generalize our findings to the larger Northfield population.

## **Theory**

The structural functionalist concepts of manifest and latent functions are central to our research on the impact of the library on the community, because the theory allows us to expand on the impact of the library beyond its expressed objectives. Manifest functions are those anticipated consequences of some action or function, while latent functions are those unexpected

consequences that accompany the system (Merton 1957:441). In looking at the impact of the Northfield Public Library, for instance, the manifest functions include the use of the facility as a repository of books, newspapers, periodicals, and technology for community members. The Northfield Library also provides literacy and community programming for children and adults. The reference services provide aid for those looking for certain resources, as well as the ability to contact other libraries if they do not have a certain product. In addition to the in-house resources, the library also provides a host of off-site events. They also offer pre-kindergarten programming, as well as meeting spaces that are available for public use. A notary service is available for no charge, and exam proctoring for students is also offered for a small fee.

The latent function that we examined was the library's impact on the City Center area. Approximately 700 people patronize the library every day, which brings an additional group of people into the downtown area. This provides the potential for them to also utilize the other businesses and services available in the Northfield City Center area. The ability to complete multiple errands in one trip could also help Northfield residents to drive less, walk more, and, in the end, be more environmentally friendly. However, this impact cannot be measured solely based on economics. Many of those interviewed expressed the importance of the library's ability to build community, through services like children's programming; others commented on the aesthetic and historical importance of the library as a part of the City Center area.

A symbolic interactionist perspective could also be useful in our research on the library because patrons' understanding of the library can impact how the library is used and what is expected of it. This perspective of reality assumes that any phenomena, be it material items, social processes, etc., do not have inherent meaning or moral/ethical attributes. This understanding of social reality stresses the meaning humans ascribe to certain objects or

phenomena (Smith 2009). A symbolic interactionist might claim that our entire research is an example of the "interpretive process" concerning a symbol, the symbol in this case being the library. The conversations within the community regarding the library continuously shape how the community conceptualizes the library's purpose, and this, by extension, affects the actuality of the library's role as embodiment of the community. This meaning is maintained but forever shifting because of the large number of people who interact with the library on a day-to-day basis. As patrons interact in various ways with the library, whether through programming, internet use, or other means, people develop their own view of what the library means for themselves and the community. For instance, the basic function of libraries is to provide a resource for [literary-printed and other media material](#) and technology. However, the Northfield library has come to symbolize more for the city's population. Through services like children's programming, the notary service, and the availability of meeting rooms, the library has transformed into a common gathering place, as well as a safe and inviting environment for children. These resources have also caused community members to envision the library as an anchor or magnet for the City Center area.

The ideas from Pierre Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital are also important to our research, because the library can be a location for the development of cultural capital. The accumulation of cultural capital, in theory, allows one to access opportunities that belong to a higher social class than the one to which the person is currently a member (Ritzer 2008:533). The interesting part about a public library is that it can provide this cultural capital not only for free but also for anyone who wants it. This is an important function of the library, because it evens the playing field between people in different economic groups; no matter what social class one is a part of, they are able to use the library, obtain knowledge, and from this knowledge,

potentially gain cultural capital. Library patronage could raise one's cultural status among groups of people or individuals that value literacy and community, as well as help them acquire educational and intellectual assets. Library patronage may also expand one's social network to include more individuals with higher cultural capital. For example, becoming friends with other library patrons assists in building networks that might not have existed outside of the library; in one instance, several church members solidified their friendship through meetings at the library.

The language of New Urbanism was also present throughout our interview process because of interviewees' insistence upon using the existing library location instead of building a new structure. New Urbanism is an urban development movement which encourages the maintenance of urban places "that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice" ("Charter of the New Urbanism" 2010). The Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) was founded in 1993 by architects and members working to shape public policy, maintain urban centers by renovating buildings, rejuvenating suburbs, and conserving natural resources. According to CNU, "historical patterns, precedents, and boundaries, concentrations of civic, institutional, and commercial activity should be embedded in neighborhoods and districts, not isolated in remote, single-use complexes" ("Charter of the New Urbanism" 2010).

These goals ring-strike a chord with the objectives of many of the library staff and patrons with their collective emphasis on the maintenance of the current library in contrast to ideas for the construction of a new facility on a new parcel of land. Application of a New Urbanist perspective in this instance would stress that not only would there be ecological benefits to maintaining the same facility, but by this act of maintenance, the community would benefit, allowing members to witness the community's past and solidify an identity that includes and builds upon it.

## **Findings**

### **1. The Library's Contributions to the Community**

After conducting 32 interviews with business owners in the City Center area, library patrons, and community members outside of the library, we found a strong consensus for maintaining the current location of the library. There seemed to be a pattern of those who visited the library also frequenting other businesses on the same trip downtown, either before or after stopping at the library. Therefore, we assume that the library does have some economic impact on the downtown area. People were generally aware that the expansion project was taking place and had positive attitudes toward the potential expansion. All but one individual was for the expansion of the library and wanted to see it take place in the library's current location. Many cited a need for an increase in space available to patrons as well as a continuation of programs for children.

However, we found that people were more concerned about keeping the library in the City Center area than the need for the expansion. Through our interviews we found that people feel that the library is a part of a routine and a magnet for the downtown area with good proximity to other establishments. The cultural and social aspects were also important. Interviewees see the library as a symbol of Northfield and part of the tradition that perpetuates community ideals like literacy and the appreciation of the arts. We found that people are looking forward to the expansion and enjoy the quality of the library. We also highlight interviews conducted with local business owners to better understand the economic impact of the library on the City Center.

For many, the library is the center of a common routine. One community resident spoke

of visiting the bank and post office, as well as the library, with his father as part of a series of errands on Saturday mornings. Another resident spoke of patronizing the library in the interim period between dropping off and picking up his daughter from various activities, while yet another person detailed how he frequents the library when he is waiting while his wife attends meetings. One of the building owners said it was very important to her to be able to walk into town and visit the library and other businesses at the same time. She said she goes three to five times per week to the library and checks out 5 to 12 items on average, and the ability to do this, as well as go to the bank and grocery store on the same trip, is important to her. The library's use is also dependent on its convenience for many individuals. For instance, more than one individual spoke of visiting the library as a reward; for many this meant taking their children to the library after shopping or running errands as an incentive for good behavior. The idea of library visits as an ingrained element of daily life speaks strongly about the library's importance to Northfield residents.

In multiple interviews the library was described as a magnet for residents to the City Center. This could be seen as a latent function of the library, because its purpose was not originally to draw people to downtown businesses. One longtime Northfield resident sees the library, along with other establishments and restaurants, as an important factor for attracting people into the downtown area and ensuring their return visits. What is important about the library in this sense is that it draws people on a recurring basis, when they need to return or check out more items, as well as attracts a wide age range of people. One interviewee expressed the importance of keeping the library in the City Center, comparing it to the need to keep the post office or the banks nearby because these facilities are important to have in a central location. This correlates with the New Urbanism principle that advocates the importance of place for city

owned buildings. A distinctive location is important in reinforcing the identity of the community and the emphasis the central placement of the library puts on education, literacy, and community building (“Charter of the New Urbanism” 2010).

A younger man who was interviewed described the library as being comparable to Goodbye Blue Monday, a nearby coffee shop, because it is a common meeting point in town that keeps people coming back. According to a building owner, one of the most important parts of the library is that it entices so many different kinds of people to the downtown area, whom she feels would not come if the library [waeres](#) not there. She specifically mentioned the Latino community of Northfield as a group that uses the library frequently and she has noticed that the computers and the preschool are draws for some people in that community. The library's role as a stimulus of downtown visitation exemplifies that its impact extends beyond the goods and services that people directly extract from it; the library also has an important part in encouraging the flow of patrons to nearby establishments.

The essential function of the Northfield Public Library as a meeting place was a prominent topic in our interviews. This is an example of a manifest function of the library because the building houses specified areas intended for people to meet. Interviewees repeatedly stressed the ability of the library to join groups of people, both informally; for groups of friends, or formally; for a business meeting. The comfortable nature of the library attracts many people to the facility; one interviewee emphasized that the library was a neutral place to meet with a non-partisan feel, unlike City Hall, and had a handy, central location in town. An interviewee noted that members of her church often meet at the library, and another stated that "everyone knows everyone else," giving the library a perpetual feel of "homeyness" and hospitality. Another benefit of using the library as a meeting place is that one does not need to purchase or consume

something in order to gather there. Other popular meeting sites in Northfield, such as coffee shops or restaurants, require a purchase in order for one to make use of their space. Therefore, the library's role as a community meeting place is one of its most utilitarian and enduring functions. This utility also allows the library to be understood as a vital community organ which provides a physical space to cultivate, foster, and enable one to experience the Northfield community.

One of the biggest boons for those library patrons living around the downtown area is the library's proximity. Many of those interviewed live within walking or biking distance and take full advantage of its accessibility. One interviewee even described this pedestrian access as an integral part of the "Northfield feel." Maintaining the "walkability" of Northfield increases individuals' access to different resources, such as the library, even for those without a car. She said that the atmosphere of this pedestrian-friendly town is important and cannot be replicated.

An employee at a downtown business also expressed that the library's centralized location makes it easy to stop by quickly and then go on to do other shopping or errands. As a result, she feels the library complements the downtown area well, and it would be a shame for it to move. One library patron, who was reading with her three-year-old daughter in the children's section of the library, talked about how she plans her errands around her ability to walk or ride her bike to the library with her daughter. For example, she appreciates being able to also stop in at Oolala and pick up dish detergent in the same trip that she attends kids' programming at the library with her daughter. Another interviewee, who utilizes the library for newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals, stated that the library's location affects people's decision to patronize the facility; he felt it played a part in whether or not people would "want to come in and see its offerings." As some interviewees expressed, the library's location near a residential

area contributes to the friendly, small-town feel of the community.

In addition, the library was described in multiple interviews as an "anchor" of community for Northfield. Although the library's main function is to provide books, Northfield residents understand the library to be an iconic part of the community. Through the multitude of services it offers and its understood meaning as a meeting place, the library draws hundreds of people into the area every day and has established itself as a strong part of the downtown community that contributes to the sustainability of a vibrant City Center. It represents the value the community puts on education and literacy and emphasizes Northfield's aim to cultivate a safe and friendly environment. One business owner remarked that the library, along with the post office and grocery store, act as anchors that draw people into downtown Northfield and also bring business to her store. These anchors provide traffic patterns that contribute to the vitality and sustainability of the downtown area. "There's a vibe to downtown when you have an anchor like that (the library)," she stated. Others have noted the historic nature of the library building itself and the attractiveness of the architectural style. One interviewee said that as long as its aesthetic was kept, she would support an expansion. The symbolic aspect of the library was also very important. Many interviewees described the library as an iconic image of downtown. One building owner said that when she was looking for a place to buy property, she saw the library sitting on the hill looking over the downtown and thought, "A town that cares that much about their library must care about some of the same things that we do."

Throughout our interviews, when individuals described Northfield, one characteristic that continuously reemerged was the community's "distinctive" qualities. One interviewee stated, "What Northfield has cannot be replicated and should be conserved." The library's location in the City Center represents the values of the community because it shows the focus the town puts

on education and literacy. The City Center draws individuals from surrounding communities for its small shops, eateries, and historic feel. Many interviewees expressed that by shifting the location of the library, the character and unique qualities of Northfield would be jeopardized.

When asked about the strengths of the Northfield Public Library, many interviewees emphasized the exemplary quality of the library, from its resources to its staff. People expressed satisfaction with the range of services and resources the library offers, and special emphasis was placed on the array of books, DVDs, and the availability of the computers and job resources. In fact, some of the computers are specifically set up for job searching. One younger library patron, who stops by the library frequently to use the resource, cited this as a big draw for him. He says that he comes into the library four times a week, for three hours each time, to use the computers to search for jobs and to teach himself about investments and stocks. Also, programs oriented towards children were stressed as a large draw for the community. One community member said that the summer kids' programs bring her to the library almost every week, when her kids are not in school. She said she really enjoys the weekly "Books and Stars" program, which brings the library's services out to different parks around Northfield for events. Interviewees also commended the comfortable layout of the building and its general upkeep, citing it as a clean, organized, and user-friendly facility.

Above all, our subjects applauded the quality of staff, frequently using words like "thoughtful," "resourceful," "friendly," and "knowledgeable" to describe the librarians. The librarians were described as "caretakers" of the library, their patrons, and the community as a whole, working to draw people to the library and ensure patrons' satisfaction with its overall quality. One building owner describes the Northfield Public Library as one of the best-run libraries she's ever seen, with a library director, Ms. Young, who encourages her staff to work on

innovative projects, such as the mural in the teen area of the library, which benefit library patrons in the end.

## **2. Concerns and Limitations of the Library**

Although most individuals supported a library expansion, there were discrepancies between interviewees over what should be included. Some emphasized the need for the library to keep up with technological innovation and have a wider range of services that cater to these newer technologies, such as increased computer availability. During participant observation, we witnessed the high demand for Internet-accessible computers. On the other hand, some individuals were more concerned with maintaining the "traditional" literary functions of the library: providing books. They believed that although some interviewees expressed an increased need for meeting rooms, the library should not try to incorporate a coffee shop or more conference rooms in the expansion, since this would stray from its "traditional" purpose. These individuals did not find that the library needed to add these "meeting-place" features, as there are other spaces downtown that can be used in this way. One patron said sarcastically, "It's not a coffee shop." With the library's limited monetary resources, one patron was concerned that the library would use its funds to finance something that can be found elsewhere instead of expanding the conventional offerings of the library.

One of the building owners mentioned the problems the library is having with needing more shelf space. As a former head of circulation at a library in Illinois, she says the fact that the library has to use the top and bottom shelves to store books shows that there is not enough room. Additionally, she thinks the library is having trouble with archival quality due to the lack of space. Another individual also agreed that the library needs more space. He stated that the

library had "outgrown what they had" because he thought there was too much information coming into the library, in the form of books, periodicals, and other media, that required more space. He went on to say that it would be good to have the extra space in the library in case the facility needs it in the future. Yet many interviewees did not bring up this lack of space, and instead focused on the fact that the resources the library offers save them money. Multiple individuals cited the free access to books and other services as a reason to visit and maintain the facility.

When asked about the problems or limitations of the library, interviewees raised a variety of concerns. Participants expressed a strong desire for the library expansion to include better parking. While many people commented that Northfield is a pedestrian city and that this is one of the most important reasons to keep the library downtown, it was a point of concern for the older population. Some interviewees stop by the library while running other errands outside of the downtown area, like Target, Cub Foods, and Kmart. Those who referred to making these other stops in their cars were concerned about the pressure the library expansion into Third Street would put on parking; Third Street, which intersects with Division Street, offers many parking spaces for individuals visiting the downtown area. Solutions mentioned by patrons included more bike racks and a drive-through book drop, which are both ideas the library has considered. Others have solved the problem by parking elsewhere. Many interviewees commented that they ran other errands when they go downtown to the library, such as stopping at the Post Office, local coffee shops, and the banks in town, as well as visiting other small businesses, like Monkey See Monkey Read, The Glass Bead Garden, and others. They were not as concerned about parking because they were able to park near these businesses and walk to the library.

Many of the concerns interviewees had with the expansion were speculative. A few interviewees raised concerns about technology and the use of the library. On one hand, a young individual thought the expansion was necessary to keep up with technological changes and the use and needs of residents. Another business owner asked how the library's purpose would change with new inventions, such as Kindle and the iPad. Overall, there is concern about what the library will do to stay relevant and useful to the residents of Northfield. However, so far this has not proven to be an issue (Young 2010).

Another business owner expressed displeasure over the idea of an expansion for a number of reasons. This individual thought that the library project was not an appropriate issue for the town to take on at the moment, and that there are more pressing issues and better ways to spend the town's already tight budget. Speaking to this latter point, the individual wondered if it was better to maintain existing services, such as the community center or various senior services, rather than addressing the library expansion: "Would you sooner feed people (a reference to the community food shelf) or have a bigger library?" The answer to this question, the person stated, was an indication of communal values. However, in actuality, the city budget that goes towards the library does not affect the Northfield Community Action Center, and although there are several projects that are scheduled before the library expansion, such as new police and fire stations, it isn't a matter of simply opposing two things.

Comment [IT1]: What's your source for this?

### 3. Business Owners' Perspectives

The group of business owners interviewed all had operations within the Northfield City Center. Often, the dialogue in these interviews turned to the library's current role and its position in the future. Multiple business owners expressed strong opinions about the idea of moving the

library to another part of the community. One individual asserted that if the library moved, there would be a loss of economic activity and jobs. "It would be insane to move the library away from Division Street," another stated. While another business owner thought that it would probably not greatly affect her store, she said that it would be a huge loss to the community as a whole. "If it [(the library)] moved, it might not personally affect my business drastically, but for downtown's sake it would be a very bad thing; from a community, academic, and historic standpoint," she said.

One owner commented that in terms of environmental sustainability, it would be less "green" to move the facility and erect a new structure for it. Another building owner stressed the aesthetic value of the downtown area and the need to preserve it: "The character of Northfield is an economic driver. It has a certain cache...a feeling of caring about what it is and that's important to people. The library reinforces that." One owner spoke of the library as a quality of life question, stating that a strong library indicates the quality or the strength of a community.

At the same time, however, many business owners spoke of technological advances and the changing role of the library. Multiple individuals asserted that the ease of use and access of the Internet over other media, e.g. books, periodicals, and newspapers, might lead to a decrease in library patronage, although it is important to note that this has not happened yet. One person commented on the inexpensiveness of information available on the Internet; the person also stated that for many younger people, a combination of some of these factors, such as accessibility and cost, may lead them to choose the Internet or other digital media over the printed word, when means are available for this choice. Once again, however, the data from the library instead has shown an increase in circulation over the past year (Young 2010). Another individual speculated as to whether the library's use has decreased over time, since with the

emergence of new technology, individuals might be more willing to stay at home. While these arguments are valid, it assumes that patrons will only access the Internet from their homes, when in fact a number of residents access it only from the library and the concerns are purely speculative as statistics point in the other direction.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Throughout this study, we found that most people understand the library to be a vital community institution that has historical and symbolic value in Northfield. It has been described as an anchor, an indicator of community strength, and an integral part of the downtown area. The overwhelming consensus of those interviewed is that the library should maintain its current location in the City Center. It is important to note that most of the concerns centered around the library's ability to keep up with technology and continue to bring people to the facility. However, based on recent statistics from the library, it appears as though library use is up, thus negating the fears that people would cease to patronize the library.

Our research will be helpful for the Northfield Library and the community to engage in a dialogue in order to reach a consensus about the utility of the library and the services it provides for the public. The research will also be an asset for business owners, as it further indicates the consumption patterns of the patrons of the library in relation to the downtown area. Additionally, it will be helpful to the library in future years as they plan their proposed expansion. While prior to this research the library was aware that it was drawing hundreds of people through its doors everyday, they were not sure about what happened before and after their patrons left the library. However, they knew that many of them must be patronizing businesses in the City Center area.

We hope that this information will be valuable as those involved with the library argue for the expansion.

In the future, it will be advantageous to do a more thorough study using a random sample from a wider segment of Northfield's population. This is important because we did not have the time or funds to complete a large-scale project, but it would have been beneficial for our study to be able to interview more people. Northfield Public Library also draws from a wide geographical area that does not just include those living within the city limits. It would be interesting to examine the role non-Northfield residents play in this relationship between the library and the downtown area. One of the facts that grabbed our attention was that the library had reached its highest circulation ever last year. This could be an important subject for future research as the library continues to move forward on the expansion project. As the library is already at capacity but still is increasing circulation, a solution to this problem of space will need to be found. We were also curious as to why the use of the library was increasing; the answers to this question could also be helpful for the library in making its case for expansion.

As mentioned, it has become evident through this process of researching the library that the institution maintains services for the community and aids in developing and fostering an understanding of Northfield as a community. Based on this understanding of our research, we would like to suggest that the library move ahead with its plans for expanding its current facilities. The library appears to have reached a "ceiling" in terms of capacity; simply put, there is no extra space in the facility to add more resources or services, even at a time when circulation is on the rise.

This is problematic because without the room to accommodate the needs of the community, such as newer forms of technology, more meeting rooms, and additional literacy and

children's programming, the library's position in the community may diminish. Conversely, it must be stressed that despite issues of space or more expansive adaptations to newer technologies, the Northfield Library maintains a high level of popularity and understood importance in the community. It is our supposition that an expansion of the library would only further facilitate the library's use and increase its position of prominence for Northfield residents.

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