

The Effects of the Economic Crisis on the Northfield Library and its Booker Bus Program

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### **Executive Summary**

#### *Abstract*

The current economic crisis and the potential for future economic downturn have forced the Northfield Public Library to reevaluate its budget. The library will most likely need to discontinue a mobile library outreach service called “Booker.” In response to community members’ and library staff’s requests, we set out to determine the changing roles of the library and Booker in the community, the effect of budget cuts on the library and its programs, and the populations most impacted by these cuts. We found that Booker not only provides for the literary needs of daycares and low-income areas, but also functions as a bridge from the community to the library and other services for disadvantaged populations. If Booker must be cut, this study will be useful in establishing a necessity for Booker’s reinstatement after the economy recovers.

#### *Summary*

- The Northfield Public Library is an important place for the Northfield community to obtain free reading and media materials, and since the economic crisis, library traffic has increased significantly.
- The library offers free internet access, which is a big draw to residents who want to search for jobs, apply for unemployment benefits, or keep in touch with friends and family.
- The library operates a bookmobile program, called Booker, which delivers literacy materials to private daycares and low-income areas throughout Northfield, as well as rural stops in Rice County.
- Booker connects people who do not have private transportation or do not understand the library process to the library and other community organizations that can help them.

- Projected budget cuts of 10-15% of the library's total budget have forced library officials to consider cutting Booker, as it is the most expensive library program and serves the smallest population.
- Those who utilize Booker's services throughout Northfield and Rice County, including daycare providers, parents of children in daycares, and individuals in low-income neighborhoods, feel overwhelmingly positive about Booker, and if the program is stopped, serious consequences will be felt throughout the community.

**Abstract**

The current economic crisis and the potential for future economic downturn have forced the Northfield Public Library to reevaluate its budget. The library will most likely need to discontinue a mobile library outreach service called “Booker.” In response to community members’ and library staff’s requests, we set out to determine the changing roles of the library and Booker in the community, the effect of budget cuts on the library and its programs, and the populations most impacted by these cuts. We found that Booker not only provides for the literary needs of daycares and low-income areas, but also functions as a bridge from the community to the library and other services for disadvantaged populations. If Booker must be cut, this study will be useful in establishing a necessity for Booker’s reinstatement after the economy recovers.

**Setting/Community**

Northfield, Minnesota, founded in 1855 by John W. North, was originally an agricultural center built alongside the Cannon River (Northfield, Minnesota). The city of Northfield is part of Dakota and Rice counties, and is found thirty-five miles south of the Twin Cities, featuring a population of 19,331 residents as of 2007 (City Data for Northfield, Minnesota). The city’s claim to fame is the infamous attempted bank robbery by Jesse James and his outlaw gang on September 7, 1876. As a result, the event has become a major tourist attraction to the city and an annual outdoor festival, *The Defeat of Jesse James Days*, is held the weekend after Labor Day every year to commemorate the event (Northfield, Minnesota).

Today, Northfield's motto is the city of "Cows, Colleges, and Contentment" and its main employment is divided between the city's two colleges, Carleton and St. Olaf, and the Malt-O-Meal plant (Northfield, Minnesota). The majority of the Northfield population is white (89%) or Hispanic (5.7%), with a city median estimated household income of \$57,775 as of 2007 (City Data for Northfield, Minnesota). Northfield is home to three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school, along with an area-learning center and a community resource center (Welcome to the Northfield Public Schools Home/News Page). Northfield currently has forty-four licensed home childcare providers, all of whom have met the minimum standards required by Minnesota Rules Chapter 9502 (Social Services: Licensed Child Care Providers/Centers).

One of the main public services in the city of Northfield is the Northfield Public Library. The library's mission statement includes strengthening community, supporting literacy, and providing access to information, while fostering lifelong learning and enrichment. The library values community, service, stewardship, learning, and access. According to the Northfield Finance Director, the library currently accounts for 9.8% of Northfield's general funds (total city budget just under 11 million). The city approved library budget for 2009 is \$1,055,584. The library houses approx. 72,827 books, 3,522 audio materials, 2,290 video materials, and 313 serial subscriptions (City Data for Northfield, Minnesota). With a wide range of programs available for all ages, including Homebound Services and First Steps Literacy Center, the library features a unique program called Booker.

*Northfield's Booker*

As a mobile library, Booker travels through the city of Northfield and selected surrounding communities to deliver reading materials to residents and day care facilities. Booker is a large white bus covered in painted handprints; the handprints were placed on Booker as part of a community-wide event, including 1,000 Northfield residents.

Booker has been in operation since 1999, serving approximately 600 people every month in recent years. Booker operates two and a half days out of the week, visiting each of its stops every two weeks, and making roughly thirty-five stops in a two-week period (Sack 2009:1). Booker has a primary driver, Diana Tallent, a Spanish translator on board for neighborhood stops, and an assistant for out-of-town county stops. Booker has a variety of stops in and outside of Northfield, varying from primarily low-income neighborhoods to private daycares.

Lynne Young, the library director, stated that Booker is one of the most expensive programs the library has to maintain, primarily due to driver salary and vehicle maintenance. Tallent operates Booker approximately 32 hours a week on an hourly salary of \$20.79, with a total yearly sum of \$34,600. Maintenance on Booker is estimated at \$7,500 a year and fuel is estimated at \$4,500 depending on current gas prices. Also included in Booker's budget is professional and supervisory support provided by another library staff member, adding an additional \$3,330 to the total. In addition to supervisory support, clerical support adds \$3,700 annually. Finally, Southeastern Libraries Cooperating (SELCO) fees add \$1,820 along with the wireless internet connection at approximately \$62 per month, \$750 a year. In total, the estimated 2009 budget for Booker is \$56,200.

Booker has a wide selection of reading materials, from children's picture books to magazines, videos, and Spanish reading materials, totaling approximately 4,000 materials. According to checkout summaries from Booker for 2008, the most frequently checked out materials were the following: board books, juvenile fiction and nonfiction books, picture books, and juvenile paperbacks were checked out by the hundreds each month; the highest checkout month was July with 2,231 materials checked out total.

### **Methodology**

To study the effects of the economic crisis on the Northfield library and their programs such as the bookmobile, we used two basic types of methodology: one-on-one interviews and participant observation. A large amount of our data was collected through "ride-alongs" with Booker. Members of our research team visited stops along the Booker route and observed what parts of the community Booker reaches, the actions of participants, and various activities that occur. Due to ethical concerns, our direct interactions with Booker users were limited to individuals over the age of 18 and those under 18 with permission from a parent or guardian.

Along with observations along the route, one-on-one interviews were conducted with daycare providers who utilize the bus, parents of these daycare children, and both adult and children individual users of Booker. Therefore, our sample of participants was determined through the method of convenience sampling. Although the use of a convenience sample affects our ability to generalize our findings to all Booker participants, this method provides access to more frequent users maintaining a larger stake in the survival of the bus. Overall, we completed 8 interviews with daycare

providers and schools on Booker's route, 7 interviews with daycare children and parents, and 15 interviews with individuals.

Questions asked in these interviews aimed to learn about their personal experiences with the library and Booker, and also to discover the significant role these programs play in their lives. Experience questions ranged from: "for what purpose do you utilize Booker?" to "have you used any other library programs beyond Booker?" The importance of library programs to the community was assessed through questions such as "has Booker made you feel more a part of the Northfield community?" and "what would you do if the bus did not run?" The data gathered through these questions helped develop a community voice on topics such as what Booker truly provides to the community and their perceptions of the impact of the economic crisis on their participation with library programs.

Outside the bus route, one-on-one interviews were also conducted with library staff members who are directly involved with Booker's activities. A total of 5 staff interviews were completed from positions of library director, children's librarian, outreach coordinator (Booker driver), reference and children's services manager, and Northfield finance director. The main objective of these interviews was to gather data on the original, current, and anticipated purpose of Booker services provided for the community. Topics discussed in these interviews included: the populations reached by both the library and its outreach programs, transforming roles of such programs, distinctive functions separating Booker from other programs, recently cut programs and consequent effects, projected impact of current financial situation, and a "wish list" for the library's future, among many others.



As with every method, the uses of interviews and participant observations have both strengths and weaknesses. The open-ended nature of the interview method allowed participants' responses to take shape in ways we did not anticipate. Since interviews have a feel of a relaxed conversation, interviews occasionally revealed topics that we did not prepare for or maybe even think to investigate. Interviews also reveal a human aspect of the library's impact on the community, a realm that quantitative research methods have a hard time representing. Qualitative research offers an "insiders viewpoint" that provides an understanding of personal experiences. Observations made in the original setting also present a genuine description of the situation. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to test hypotheses and theories through these methods, consequently reducing our ability to make helpful quantitative interpretations of our collected data.

### **Problem**

The idea to research the impact of the economic crisis on the Northfield Public Library grew out of a request from a member of the Early Childhood Initiative. This member wanted a group to help examine the plight of one of the library's outreach programs—a bookmobile called "Booker." Booker is a large white bus that functions as a mobile library and distributes materials to private daycares and low-income areas through the Northfield community, and to select sites throughout Rice County. Due to recent and expected budget cutbacks, library officials are now forced to consider stopping the Booker outreach program. Thus, our group's initial motivation was to research the impact that Booker has upon the community, including the types of populations it

reached, the kinds of information disseminated by Booker, and the Northfield community's feelings towards Booker and its bus-driver, Mrs. Diana Tallent.

According to the city finance director, the library only experienced a .2% budget cut in 2009. However, she predicted that in 2010, it could receive a cutback totaling 10-15% of the budget, which is currently a little over one million dollars. This expected cutback would deprive the library of over \$100,000. As Booker is one of the most expensive programs for the library to maintain, it will most likely have to be cut. By researching which populations used Booker the most—especially those populations who *only* used Booker and did not have regular access to the library—our group hoped to ascertain who would be most affected if the bookmobile program ended.

As the project evolved, our research expanded to include the library itself, and its changing role in the community in light of the economic downturn. We wanted to examine how the library's purpose had changed, if at all and how it had adapted to meet that purpose. Part of this question involved looking at the place of technology in the modern public library (in the form of computerized databases and free Internet use, etc.), but more importantly, it involved studying which populations were using the library and the frequency with which they used it. With a 17% increase in traffic in the month of December, a few months after the crisis began, the library has experienced higher numbers than ever and yet, simultaneously, a lower budget. Thus, the aim our research was two-fold: to examine the impact of library programs, especially Booker, in the community as reflected by community feedback, usage, and observation; and the specific consequences of budget cutbacks to the function of the library and the populations who utilized its programs.

### *Theory*

One theory that is pertinent to our research is Merton's theory of structural functionalism. Two of his main focuses in building this theory are what he calls the manifest and latent functions of a system. The manifest functions are the "intended" functions, while the latent functions are those that are "unanticipated," but are still "functional for the designated system" (Ritzer and Goodman 2004:245).

If one examines the system of a public library, the manifest functions deal with the way those who designed and planned the library programs envisioned it would serve the community. For example, one manifest function of a public library is its use as a center for literacy. They often provide books and magazines covering various subjects and targeting various audiences, while at the same time hosting programs, such as summer reading programs for children and youth, all in order that literacy is supported from before an infant can read until one reaches old age.

Another manifest function of libraries is that they serve the informational needs of a community. Modern public libraries often provide free internet in order that patrons can not only gain access to literary materials, but also to meet basic needs, such as searching for required government documents. Many libraries also offer adult education classes that span numerous topics. For instance, one interviewee mentioned that she has used the library to take classes from a master gardener and to learn yoga. Libraries, therefore, are community hubs for promotion of literacy and access to information.

In fulfilling these manifest functions, libraries can also be viewed as providing latent, or unintended, functions that still support the original functions of the library. One

such latent function present in most public libraries is their ability to build community. For example, in libraries in large cities, libraries have served as a location where homeless individuals can escape from the streets for awhile, while at the same time individuals from all social classes in a community are brought to associate with each other in one location (Hodgetts, Stolte, Chamberlain, Radley, Nikora, Nabalarua, and Groot 2008:935).

Libraries also embody another latent function in the social capital they provide those individuals who use the library. The theory of social capital has been popular since the writings of Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman, and it can be defined as follows:

The theory of social capital is, at heart, most straightforward. Its central thesis can be summed up in two words: relationships matter. By making connections with one another and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things they either could not achieve by themselves, or could only achieve with great difficulty. People connect through a series of networks, and they tend to share common values with other members of these networks; to the extent that the networks constitute a resource, they may be seen as forming a kind of capital (Field 2003:2).

Social capital, therefore, can act in lieu of financial capital for individuals and for groups. For example, in Berdahl's (1999) work on an East German village, when resources were slim, those individuals who had the most social contacts were the ones who fared the best, as they were able to get access to scarce items (p. 118).

Proponents of the theory of social capital point to the idea that economic capital is not everything. Social capital allows for a group to work towards a common goal, even groups that do not wield much economic power, such as minority groups or the underprivileged (Field 2003:71). The NAACP offers a source of social capital for African Americans, just as alumni networks can provide crucial contacts and entry-level

jobs for recent college graduates. As Cook (2005) states, “Having individual access to social capital seems to be an important part of our lives for accomplishing many things at the personal or family level” (p. 130).

This statement, however, also demonstrates the “dark side” of the social capital theory, as Field (2003) points out: “Social capital can promote inequality in large part because access to different types of networks is very unequally distributed” (p. 74). Those who are already at the top obviously have more access to resources, and more access to others with resources. Even the process of obtaining social capital requires a sufficient amount of economic capital to begin with, as Cook (2005) states: “All networks depend on social order and technological access to people” (p. 129). Technological access, in the form of the Internet or telephone, costs money, and therefore one cannot remove the necessity of economic capital from the idea of social capital.

Assuming that anyone can utilize social capital to achieve common goals is also an easy way to ignore existing institutional or structural inequalities. There is little impetus to decrease the wealth gap when one holds to the theory that *anyone* can use social capital to further individual and group interests. Not only do many disadvantaged groups have less access to social networks, but also the *quality* of their social connections may be lower (as far as power is concerned). Thus, “while the connection between inequality and connectedness is not a simple one, there is considerable evidence that both the overall level and the more specific nature of people’s social capital can play an important part in determining whether they can access resources” (Field 2003:82).

Social capital should not be considered separate from other forms of capital, especially economic capital. This point is important to be kept in mind when thinking

about the types of social capital provided by libraries. Public libraries do help people make important connections—to information, to community programs, to other people. Most libraries now offer free Internet access; one study showed that libraries offering free public computing had jumped from 28% in 1996 to almost 95% by 2000 (Barber and Wallace 2008:55). The same study showed that people used public computing to access various resources and networks, noting that they could “e-mail friends and family, catch up on the news, look for work, download tax forms, and research personal interests such as genealogy, health and travel” (Barber and Wallace 2008:54). Libraries thus act as a bridge for many people to numerous networks of social capital.

Access to libraries themselves, however, can be difficult for many populations, including recent immigrants unfamiliar with the concept of a public library, non-English speakers, those without regular transportation, and people in rural communities. These groups are at a disadvantage to accessing the pool of social capital offered by a public library. And, conversely, the libraries themselves may have a lack of resources; though most libraries have patrons who function as social capital, this does not always translate into economic capital, which restricts the libraries’ ability to reach disadvantaged groups.

The social capital provided by libraries, while potentially an unintended consequence, is functional in that it helps individuals contend with what Merton labels as anomie. Anomie is “when there is an acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them” (Ritzer and Goodman 2004:246). In other words, people are unable to achieve what they have been culturally habituated to believe they should, such as attending college, due to the constraints of societal structures, such as poverty.

The social capital that individuals gain from using the library and its outreach services allows them to overcome the societal structures that prevent their success. Disadvantaged populations, who are being suppressed by the previously mentioned societal structures, often lack the ability and/or knowledge to take advantage to services that are freely offered to them. Libraries can serve as entry points for these services, where by coming to the library, one is connected with individuals who have information concerning what programs from which a person can benefit, and thereby connect him or her with others in the official networks of service. By arming individuals with this first contact, or social capital, therefore, they are soon connected with numerous organizations and people that offer assistance.

Before bookmobiles were developed, many individuals were unable to cultivate this social capital, evident in a 1920s study that found that 83% of rural residents in North America did not have access to a library (Hawk 2008:58). The purpose of the earliest bookmobile services was to bring library materials into areas typically lacking library users, predominantly individuals living in rural areas (Monley and Pestell 1996:2). The concept of the bookmobile began in 1893 in New York as a door-to-door “traveling collection” library, sometimes in the form of mail, and organized by community groups such as women’s clubs or farm grange organizations. After gaining attention, the traveling collection library began to accommodate fewer stops at houses, substituted with more stops at schoolhouses. The first official “bookbus” was established in 1918 in Hibbing, Minnesota. This bookmobile was considered revolutionary due to its focus on serving areas where English was not a primary language (Hawk 2008:57-58).

Current bookmobiles strive to provide the same services as earlier bookmobiles, such as distributing information and reading materials to users in remote areas. The Public Library Association continues to support bookmobiles, since “users in suburbs and rural areas are entitled to the same professional service available in the main library branches” (Hawk 2008:73). The importance of bookmobiles can even be stressed as the “ultimate” of library services, given that “mobile libraries do what all public libraries do... but it actually delivers this service directly into the community” (Monley and Pestell 1996:4).

## **Findings**

### *Changes in library's purpose before and after the economic crisis*

The first objective was to research the library's changing purpose in the past few months, especially in light of the recent economic crisis. According to the library's director, Lynne Young, “The basic purpose of the library hasn't changed, but the way we are meeting that purpose *has* changed.” The library's main priority is still to be a resource of information and reading materials to the community. However, the library has had to adapt to changes such as increased traffic, ever-progressing technologies, and new and different populations.

The library children's director, Kathy Ness, indicated that the library was currently experiencing a 7% increase in traffic every month. Young also recently stated that, “people are here at the library and using it as much or more than ever as they cope with the economic pressures.” The library offers free programs and materials that appeal to people who are looking to cut back on personal spending habits, or to those who want to connect with specific networks. Especially after the closing of in-town bookstores like



River City Books and Bookfellows (a used bookstore) in the months during the research study, the library remains one of the few public sources of literature to the Northfield community.

The crisis itself has altered the motivations of patrons of the library, as they are coming in increasing numbers to search for jobs, apply for unemployment benefits, and obtain information about small business enterprises. Young states, “the library will need to focus ever more clearly on priority goals and objectives. These include...providing opportunities for people to apply for jobs and learn new skills for the jobs of the future, and making resources for small business development available.”

Many of these new programs and resources are made available through the advancements of technology in the public library. “People who haven’t used the library in a long time have an idea of the library as a bunch of dusty books,” Young noted, but acknowledged that the library has become increasingly computerized through the use of “websites, blogging, and what we call ‘Library 2.0.’” Her statement exemplifies many of the conclusions proffered by the Barber and Wallace study regarding the impact of technology on public libraries and their patrons.

Access to free wireless Internet can also connect library patrons to the greater Northfield community and networks beyond Northfield, especially those patrons who do not have regular access to computers elsewhere. Two individuals interviewed in a low-income area of Northfield said that when they took their families to the library, they “always used the computers.” For people who already struggle with finances, the recent economic crisis is yet more stimuli for them to utilize the library’s free programs.

Along with increased traffic and new technology, the library is also adapting to a changing demographic of its users. Young said that the library has seen more Latinos coming in, but she felt that even the increase in these numbers did not reflect a large enough percentage in proportion to the total Latino population of Northfield. However, it has been a significant change for the library, and to adapt to this change, the children's librarian, Kathy Ness, added a children's story-time in Spanish. The city's Cultural Diversity Coordinator will assist with this program.

*Changes in Booker's purpose before and after the economic crisis*

The library's bookmobile program was initially started to run solely to private daycares throughout Northfield in order to provide literacy materials and story times, says the library's reference and children's services manager, Leesa Wisdorf. Over the period of ten years, the program expanded to include stops in "high-density, low-income areas" of Northfield and rural sites throughout Rice County. In October 2006, a newer bookmobile was purchased to help alleviate the high maintenance costs of the old bus. The program was also able to expand its hours from a fourteen-hour route to a thirty-two hour route under the supervision of the bookmobile driver, Diana Tallent. Thus, in the years that Booker has been running, it has undergone numerous changes in both the physical make-up of the bus, and in the number and type of stops in its route.

However, in the months following the onset of the economic crisis, some of Booker's out-of-town stops in Rice County have had to be cut due to county funding issues. Booker used to drive to Morristown, Warsaw, Veseli, Lonsdale, and Webster, but has recently stopped going to Morristown, Warsaw, and Veseli due to budget constraints.

Though these sites had the lowest numbers of patrons and were consequently the first stops cut, Tallent indicated that several patrons were very upset that Booker would no longer be coming to them. She mentioned that at her last stop to Warsaw, two children who were normally “overjoyed” to see her were “too upset to talk because Booker wasn’t coming anymore.” The children received materials for their home-school curriculum through the bookmobile. Though Diana acknowledges that, “It breaks my heart to cut out those stops,” it is a necessary byproduct of the economic crisis.

*Specific consequences of budget cutbacks on the library*

With the recent economic crisis, the City of Northfield has experienced cuts to its budget that have drastically affected government programs. According to Kathleen McBride, the city’s finance director, Northfield’s budget for the 2009 fiscal year is \$1,055,584; however this is after absorbing a state aid cut of \$465,134. State aid usually accounts for about one third of the cities budget. In addition, the city is also attempting to cope with a shrinking tax base that also makes the acquisition of sufficient funds difficult.

This shortage has already affected the manner in which the city is allocating money to programs. In order that programs essential to the community, such as police and fire services, are not cut for as long as possible, McBride said that the city is freezing all unessential spending, such as out of state travel, and is practicing “nickel and dime” spending by postponing large purchases, such as a dump truck.

Some cuts, however, were inevitable. For example, McBride said that some “quiet cuts” have already been made. The custodial services of the city were outsourced to save money, and McBride’s office lost one administrative position, or twenty percent

of her office. There has also been a reduction in legal fees. As previously mentioned, some specific funding areas that are not of the utmost importance have been cut. For example, the buildings and recreation portion of the budget was cut 46.3% this year. The budget of the City of Northfield, therefore, has experienced significant changes due to the economic crisis.

The library in specific has also been affected by the current crisis. The Northfield library's current budget is \$1,055,584 or 9.8% of the current budget. From 2008 to 2009, the library lost 0.2% of its total funding, but this resulted in a reduction of 18% of the library materials budget. This loss has erased gains in that area of the budget from the past couple years and also will compromise the library's ability to buy enough copies of new titles and formats, continue to build its Spanish collection, replace older series as needed, and provide access to new electronic resources.

The economic crisis has also decreased the amount of money available to libraries through grants. For instance, Kathy Ness mentioned a grant from the Southern Minnesota Arts Council that is lacking sufficient funds this year due to the fact that its source of support is a one percent cut of the state's gross sales tax. Since the grant helps pay for portions of the Books and Stars summer program, the program will not be able to afford the shows and events it normally provides in the summer.

The economic crisis has also caused cuts at the county level, which have in turn affected cities and their libraries. For example, three or four years ago, county budget cuts prevented the SELCO bookmobile from continuing its county stops, including Webster, Lonsdale, Warsaw, Morristown, and Veseli. Due to the recent economic downturn, the Northfield library, which took on these stops, could not persist in

maintaining them all, so the stops with the fewest patrons had to be cut. These stops were those of Morristown, Warsaw, and Veseli.

As has been said before, Northfield's used book stores have fallen upon hard times. With these two closings, another viable option for cheap books is missing from the city, thereby increasing the importance of the public library to provide literacy services for those members of the community who cannot afford to purchase the books they require.

In the near future, the economic crisis will continue to play a large role in the city's budget. The city is expecting to lose a minimum of \$506,147 from local government aid, and Lynn Young, director of the library, expects this to translate into a 10% to 15% decrease in the library budget. She said that the library will be forced to cut programs in order to meet these budget demands, and to do so, they will have to look at which program's removal will affect the least number of people. The options are currently most likely going to be either cutting the weekend hours at the library or Booker. While Booker reaches a population not normally able to come to the library, it does not serve as many people as the library is able to on the weekends.

#### *The role of Booker in the community*

Returning to Merton's theory of functionalism, Booker was created with a few explicit purposes, or manifest functions, in mind. One of these is to reach areas where socio-economic factors make it difficult to reach the library. For example, one individual who no longer lives in Northfield, but was visiting relatives at one of Booker's stops, said that it can be a "hassle" to get to the library, as some individuals use taxis or a shuttle

bus. The experience of those whose stops were discontinued due to county budget cuts demonstrates the importance of Booker to disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Diana Tallent stated that many families in the county communities that were removed from Booker's route cannot afford a family vehicle. She stated that she did not know how these families would be able to acquire learning materials without Booker. She also discussed an elderly woman that no longer receives Booker's services. The woman used Booker every time it came, but was sometimes so ill she could not walk to the bus. On these days, the woman would leave a bag of books that Diana would pick up, and Diana would leave more books that she thought the woman would enjoy.

Another manifest function of Booker, in the realm of serving communities with need, is its relationship with individuals who are foreign born. As discussed previously, Northfield has a large Latino population, many of whom are not used to certain aspects of American culture and politics. For example, Kathy Ness pointed out the fact that in Mexico individuals must pay to use the library, so many do not come to the library to even learn what it offers due to a lack of information. Diana Tallent said that she often has to tell individuals from other countries that "you can borrow books, and at the library your parents can search for jobs."

In addition, Spanish language books are a major part of Booker's intended purpose as many of Booker's neighborhood stops are in Latino communities. Leesa Wisdorf stated that many Latino parents want their children to be bilingual, so access to books in English is important. However, for those patrons who are not learning English, Spanish books are also a necessity. Booker provides one shelf of Spanish-language

books for patrons who cannot speak English, but will also take requests for books from other libraries. Diana routinely brings along extra materials from inter-library loans.

Booker's services to these communities results in many latent functions as well. Leesa Wisdorf, the staff member who suggested applying for a grant to start the bookmobile program, stated that Booker is useful in that it allows individuals who are unfamiliar with libraries to get a library card on Booker. On days of observation, kids were often excited to acquire their first library card. One boy and his younger sister ran between their home and Booker many times, even following Booker to its next stop on their bikes, in order to finish filling out the library card form.

In addition, Booker is able to acquaint individuals unfamiliar with library policies that most people who have grown up in the U.S. know by nature. For example, the issue of late fees is avoided with Booker. When an individual checks out a book or movie, he or she is given a return date, but there are no late fees if it is not returned by that day. If it is not returned after an extended period of time, a fine will be charged, but if the book or movie turns up the fine will be cancelled. In this way, Booker does not intimidate people from using other library services. Booker helps patrons ease themselves into the process of understanding due dates without penalization.

Booker's main latent function in the neighborhoods it reaches is providing social capital by connecting patrons with individuals or groups in Northfield and offer additional services. For instance, Booker's Spanish translator is also employed at organizations that serve the city's Latino community. By riding on Booker, the translator is able to meet members of the community who may not yet know about these useful organizations, and provide them with contact information. During one observation

period, for example, she described a time when a Latino patron needed help notarizing a document, so they simply agreed to meet at Booker's stop in the neighborhood to complete the task together. Booker, therefore, introduces individuals not only to the library and its services, but also to various other community programs that can help simplify and improve lives.

While these facts demonstrate the basic importance of Booker to the Hispanic community of Northfield, this point is better demonstrated by one of Diana's many stories. During her stop at Viking Terrace one day, two girls who are regular patrons came to Booker, but they had brought two other individuals with them. They turned out to be the girls' father and aunt visiting from Mexico. The father insisted that the relative come visit the bus because it was so important to their life in Northfield.

When Booker was created, another intended purpose was to bring story-time to daycares that often are unable to bring children to the library due to a lack of available vehicle space. For example, one daycare provider has seven children, and cannot fit them all in her car, so she sees "Booker as the perfect solution." Diana usually comes to these daycares, will help the children onto the bus, and then allow them to pull out whatever books they want and check them out to the daycare provider. Then Diana has story time, and will usually sing a story for the children. One day, when Diana was slightly sick, the children decided to sing for "Ms. Diana" instead.

One of the latent functions Booker provides to daycares is an education in socialization. For example, one provider described Booker as useful in preparing children to be flexible in different situations, which she sees as a life skill necessary for all children to learn. Booker, therefore, creates a space where children can prepare for



future social situations, such as elementary school, even though this was not an intended function for Booker.

The presence of Booker at daycares creates an atmosphere that excites children about learning. For instance, one daycare provider said that the children she has “love it when the ‘handprint bus’ shows up at my house.” Many emphasized the variety in books Booker allows them to have due to the fact that it returns to fill up a new bin every two weeks. One provider in particular stated that the children look at the books they are able to pick out themselves much more than the books she chooses for them, once again emphasizing Booker’s ability to encourage literacy.

Another latent function is that daycares that receive Booker’s services are more desirable to patrons. As previously mentioned, Northfield has 44 licensed childcare providers, but of these, Booker only visits 11. Diana said that receiving this free service “makes [these daycares] more competitive in the large sea of daycare providers in Northfield” because parents find the literary services appealing for their children. Booker, therefore, has also unintentionally improved business for a select number of Northfield daycares.

Daycare providers are passionate about the services Booker provides to them. In replying to interview questions, one daycare provider said that she would pay for Booker to keep coming to her home if budget cuts made it otherwise impossible. A quote that best describes what Booker means to these daycare providers is summed up through the words of one particularly impassioned individual who said, “If they cut Booker, I’m going to picket in Bridge Square. I’ll hold a sign that says ‘Honk if you love Booker!’”

*Populations most affected by library budget cutbacks*

“The library? I’m never going back there, I had a fine!” was a response concerning the library we did not anticipate hearing. According to Ness, this overreaction to a late fee is unfortunately fairly common during her interactions with individuals in low-income, densely Hispanic populated communities. Wisdorf realizes that there are often cultural differences, such as a lack of free public libraries in Mexico, which profoundly influence first impressions of American libraries. Although receiving fines on overdue materials may help them understand borrowing time constraints, this first impression often shocks these individuals to the point of avoiding a second visit.

Tallent also emphasized misunderstandings of the library’s services and purposes within these communities. She commented on her contact with immigrants, commonly from Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Costa Rica, who have no idea what a public library even is. The library is a “foreign concept to them,” which they often initially confuse with the idea of buying books at a bookstore. Members of these communities are unlikely to walk into the library on their own. Therefore, these outreach programs serve as a bridge to the library and other services within the community. Wisdorf commented on the many stumbling blocks in understanding the library process, such as having to obtain a card, show ID, and sign papers. As an overwhelming process to the disenfranchised community, Booker serves to help them understand basic information such as how to get a library card and make the process “not so daunting or threatening.”

The expected budget cuts will severely hinder the information channel to the low-income communities regarding concepts such as a free borrowing system, free internet service, availability of new programs including “Spanish story time,” and accessibility to

books in both English and Spanish. We even observed this bridge in action when a Booker patron asked the Spanish translator on board, “Is it true they have computers at the library? Like, the internet? Is it free?” The Spanish translator gladly confirmed these “rumors” with hopes that the news would spread throughout his community.

It is clear that individuals in these low-income communities are often very curious about library and community services but are unsure of how to access information. Booker can be the first place they turn to for both answers and support, which is apparent in a personal story the Spanish translator shared with us about a Latino woman taking care of her sick son and elderly father. The woman needed help finding a way to get her father to the senior center for his programs, and so she came to Booker to receive information on transportation options. A lot of materials regarding these benefits are disseminated through Booker. Even though Tallent recognizes that Booker reaches the fewest people of all the library’s outreach programs, she feels the consequences of cutting this service will be felt throughout the entire community. A schoolteacher in Illinois insisted that “you can not measure the value of the bookmobile in dollars and cents, any more than you can measure the life of a good man or woman” (Hawk 2008:67). Something is overlooked when these cuts are determined on the basis of numbers, since there is an immeasurable relational piece that makes a bigger impact than appears on paper.

This bigger impact is also due to Booker’s presence in the community beyond these low-income communities. In response to what Booker means to them, a daycare provider shared, “[Booker] shows the children that we value their reading and literacy.” This demonstrates that the original motivation for running Booker, to serve children at

daycares in order to stress the importance of reading to young children, is clearly an achievable ambition. Throughout the daycare visits, countless situations were observed where these children have embraced reading as an essential part of their life. One daycare parent commented on how often Booker makes it onto his son's "ups and downs" list for the week; of course, Booker is always a positive highlight of his week. Another terribly sick child at a daycare refused to call home until after Booker had visited. Additionally, one first grade teacher admitted that her children typically get excited every other Tuesday (Booker comes every other week) and she has a hard time cheering up her children when they realize it's the wrong week. Booker is more than just a fun activity scheduled into their day; it has instilled a way of life through reading.

The hectic nature of daycare programs leaves little room for a literacy program outside of Booker. Almost every daycare contacted commented on the impractical option of packing all their children into a car and going to the library. Others stressed their time constraints in picking up books from the library, due to their jobs' demands. Daycare providers without the time or the capability of getting their children to the library have no other option of receiving books.

According to a first grade teacher, Booker generates a certain excitement about reading, a feat that is hard to achieve on her own. She allots time directly following Booker's visit for her children to socialize with each other and show off the books they checked out. During a visit to this stop, a girl was enthusiastically reading riddles to everyone, unable to wait until the bus pulled away! Many times the children enter the bus searching for a specific book, typically one they saw their friend check out the previous visit from Booker. This teacher attributed the success of her children's reading

introduction to the buzz Booker produces, since “they say word of mouth is the best kind of advertisement.” Although these children may have access to library materials outside of school or daycare, the element of contagious enthusiasm offered by Booker and peers helps further engage these children with reading.

However, Booker also serves areas where neither this community atmosphere nor visiting a close library is an option. During a trip about twenty-five minutes away from Northfield, we observed a Booker stop utilized mainly by individuals and families with limited access to other library resources. One elderly woman picks up large print books for her husband with poor eyesight after years of chemotherapy. He does not have to request books, since Tallent knows his preferences (Westerns and absolutely no romance!) and already had a packed bag ready for his wife and him.

Two families who use this stop emphasize the child-friendly quality that Booker offers. A mother of two asserted that her children are exhausted by the time they drive to the “closest” library. Alternatively, with easy access to Booker, her children have more energy to be excited about Booker’s visits and they “love the idea of books on wheels.” The other mother agreed about her child’s interest in such a unique activity. She sometimes even uses Booker as a bribe, proposing incentives such as “if you are good at the grocery store, we can stop at Booker!” In addition, one mother loved the idea of her children being contained in a small area, adding, “you should see how fast they can clear a shelf at the library!”

*Community feelings towards Booker*

Booker has a profound impact on the Northfield community and its residents, as individuals enjoy its “hassle free” quality and the friendly bus driver Diana Tallent. One daycare provider summed it up best when she heard of the city funding cutbacks on the library and the potential loss of Booker for 2010: “If I have to dress up as a giant book and march up and down the streets, I will!...I’ll pay for it myself if I have to, and I know other daycare providers will too!!”

Patrons who utilize Booker neighborhood stops commented on its range of Spanish reading materials, easy “family orientation,” and reserve book delivery option. One patron said she loved the ability to go online and reserve books, and then have Booker bring them to her neighborhood stop where she could pick them up. Another feature of Booker highlighted by several patrons was the rack of flyers about the library and its other programs, written in English and Spanish, helping patrons connect with the library and other organizations in Northfield. Several patrons commented on how friendly Diana was and how she would go out of her way to help them out, whether it be with finding a particular book, giving reading recommendations, or even staying past departure time to help out a late patron. Diana said she will stay late for patrons because she only has a few and she knows they value the service that Booker provides.

Daycare providers on Booker’s route repeatedly stated their love of the positive message Booker represents as it “instills in our kids a love of reading.” Booker provides their daycare kids with a chance to get outside reinforcement of early childhood education and promotes a positive message and excitement in reading development. Diana makes it a priority to know the kids and to help them get excited about reading. They know the driver as “The Book Lady” or “Miss Diana” and she in turn, knows each

one of them by name. Each time she visits a daycare, she asks each kid about their “news” since the last time she saw them and has several books picked for story time, always including a sing-a-long. One daycare parent best described Booker the “smart kid’s ice cream truck.” To show their love of Booker and Diana, kids of daycares on the route have created works of art which now cover the walls of the bus. In fact, there are so many art pieces, Diana does not have space to post them all up at once.

For parents of kids attending daycares on Booker’s route, they expressed their overwhelming enthusiasm for the program, with many of them stating they had bookmobiles in their neighborhoods as kids and said they were the “highlight of adolescence.” One parent described Booker as having an “intangible quality.” Many parents noted that their kids talked often about Booker at home and were most excited to go to daycare on days when Booker was visiting.

#### *Community feelings towards the library*

Community feelings toward the library have also been positive, with multiple individuals expressing their appreciation for its services and several families expressing their reinforcement and promotion of the “message of the library as a comfortable space for children and families.” Some parents of children at daycare facilities where Booker visits have also taken their children to other library programs, including the St. Olaf juggling performance, Toddler Rhyme Time, Books and Stars, and other children’s programs offered in the mornings. One parent said she loved the variety of books for children and the wide selection of media available to checkout. Most parents stated they that they try to visit the library at least once a week with their children.

Many individuals on Booker neighborhood stops said they do not frequent the library, but those who did stated they did so primarily to use free internet services. Several patrons also noted that the library has helped them connect with other organizations and events in town with its flyers and bulletin board postings.

## **Conclusion**

The hard economic times that face the city of Northfield have forced and will continue to force the city council to reexamine its funding priorities. As the city of Northfield looks towards the future, the library is creating a “wish list” of its own. Concerning the library as a whole, Kathy Ness, the children’s librarian, would like to see a larger building for the library, as the current building is not big enough for the comparative size of the town. As the library has acquired more children’s literature throughout the years, the “people space” in that section of the library is considerably less, especially when one adds in the presence of patrons’ strollers and walkers.

Booker also has a wish list for the future. Booker needs a larger garage for storage that would preferably be attached to the library. Currently it parks in a tight space in the city parking warehouse far away from the library in town. If possible, Lynne Young, the library director, also wishes the library could afford a new Booker that would not be as prone to break down as is the present bus and that would be handicapped-accessible, in order to reach more of the elderly population in town. Finally, the library wishes that Booker would be available to the community five days a week instead of its current two and a half day weekly route, so Booker would have the ability to visit more daycares currently on the waiting list, while at the same time being available on a countywide



basis. If those in charge of the library could have everything they wished, the library staff would hope for a \$150,000 donation so that the library could preserve its future budget and programs, such as Booker.

As we reflect back upon our semester of research, many wonderful and inspiring memories come to mind. The opportunity to engage in a community-based research project has thoroughly heightened our awareness of local issues and economic struggles that we would have otherwise been unaware of living on the hill. Our research of the Booker program gave us the opportunity to see the community from a new ethnographic lens and to discover how vital Booker is to the Northfield community at large. We appreciate all the help and support we received from the library staff and the willingness of many daycare providers, parents, and individuals who utilize Booker's services in sharing their stories with us.

We had the fortunate experience of presenting our work and findings to the St. Olaf community, and separately to the library's board, extended staff members, and members of the Friends of the Library. The presentation to the library allowed us to highlight our findings to an audience who can directly use this information as a reference for interested council and community members, to further emphasize the success and important need of Booker to continue to serve the community. We hope that our research will provide the library with a thorough qualitative outlook of Booker's role in the Northfield community.

If we were to do this research project again, we would have wanted a longer time period for observations and interviews, so we would have had the time to go on Booker ride-a-longs more frequently, ultimately spending more time with Diana and Booker's

Northfield patrons. We also would love to do a follow-up next year, analyzing the quantitative aspects of funding and maintaining Booker or have another research group in next year's Ethnographic Research Methods class take on this project. As the biggest city cutbacks are expected to increase significantly in 2010, according to the Northfield Finance Director, this will be the crucial year for the Northfield Library and Booker.

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