

Survivorship Bias, Or How Outreach Will Help Win the War on Libraries

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CARRIE TURNEY ROSS (she/her/hers) graduated in 2017 with a Master's Degree in Library Science from Texas Woman's University. She began her library career at a small library in Texas as a library associate while attending graduate school. Turney Ross is a born-and-raised Texan, but an Oregonian by choice. She moved to Medford, Oregon to begin a new position as the Adult Services Coordinator at Jackson County Library Services in February 2020 and was promoted to Area Manager, Outreach & Programs in September 2021. She is passionate about library outreach services, community engagement, and selecting the perfect meme or gif for any occasion. When not working, she spends her time playing with her nine-month-old, exploring the southern Oregon wine country with her spouse, and/or reading science fiction or fantasy.

Jordan Ellenberg (2016) explains that during World War II, the US military needed to find a way to reinforce their planes so that more returned than were lost to the Axis forces. The available data revealed that aircraft were coming back with bullet holes in the fuselage. US officers asked Statistical Research Group (SRG) mathematicians to help them determine where to add armor to the warplanes. The challenge was to make them lighter and to use less fuel. The officers assumed the answer would be to add armor plating around the fuselage but wanted the SRG to confirm this. However, mathematician Abraham Wald's response surprised them. Wald did his mathematical magic and determined that to ensure the survival of more planes, they must reinforce the engines instead. That is where the planes that did not return were most likely taking the fatal bullets. The officers, focusing on the surviving planes, exhibited survivorship bias.

Survivorship Bias in Libraries

Encyclopedia Britannica states that "survivorship bias occurs as a kind of cognitive bias in which successes tend to garner more attention than failures" (Eldridge, 2023). In the case of the World War II aircraft, the planes that received damage to the fuselage were the successes—they made it back to base. Evidence of survivorship bias is present in all fields, including librarianship. This is especially true when searching for ways to attract new patrons. Libraries focus on the successes, that is, the patrons who come back. At all levels, from front-line staff to directors to board members, we focus on the current users, thinking that focus will bring new patrons. We want a higher percentage of community members to have library cards, so we look at what the current patrons are doing in our spaces and with the resources they are using. We dedicate our marketing and promotional efforts to programs with the highest attendance. We purchase more materials like the ones with the highest circulation. We look at when patrons will likely be in the building to schedule programs. This makes our current library users happy but misses the mark with our non-users. Outreach services can bridge the gap, though, and help libraries connect better with non-users.

Library outreach serves three primary purposes: 1) to raise awareness of library services in the community; 2) to meet the community where they are—outside of the library—and discover their needs; and 3) to bring targeted library services to the community. Outreach services reinforce the idea that libraries are for everyone and are vital to the community, leading to more direct supporters. In a time when libraries across the country face funding threats and are central to so-called “culture wars” (Fuzy & Kaylor, 2023; Kim, 2023), direct support from all parts of the community is crucial.

Ellenberg suggests that we can overcome survivorship bias by using “an old mathematician’s trick” to “set some variables to zero” (pp 6–7). We can apply this concept to libraries and use it to show how reinforcing outreach can transform non-users to users and supporters. To illustrate setting the variables to zero, let us assume that a particular set of non-users know nothing about the community library. Without the work of an outreach team raising awareness, the probability of this group ever becoming users is zero. Next, without discovering what non-users want or need from the library, the probability of them venturing into the library remains low. Furthermore, without targeted services for underserved communities who traditionally lack access to the library, they probably will not become users or supporters.

How JCLS is Reinforcing Outreach

Jackson County Library Services has a long history of providing targeted outreach services. The Outreach department originally launched the books-by-mail program in 1921. In 1952, it was named “Outreach to Homebound,” emphasizing its purpose of bringing books to patrons who cannot traditionally access materials due to age, illness, or disability. More recently, while retaining the program’s purpose and much of its format, the library rebranded “Outreach to Homebound” to “At Home Services” (AHS) to remove the negative connotation of the term “homebound” and to focus on the inclusiveness at the heart of the service. Then the “Outreach to Child Care” (OCC) program was born in the early 90s to bring books and storytimes to children in daycare. The parents of these kids often work during typical library hours, meaning they may need access to traditional resources in a nontraditional way. These services were largely unchanged throughout their history and, at times, operated with little support or oversight.

Support for these services began to change with the 2016–2021 Strategic Plan. The plan called for growth in library card users, circulation, and community engagement. The library added new services to engage with the community and respond to their needs. A business librarian was hired to connect the economic ecosystem to library resources. The library established the Education Services program to boost education outcomes for students and to provide extra resources to local teachers. OCC added a Spanish bilingual position to reach Spanish-speaking childcare facilities and families. The Digital Services team was created to support computer and technology literacy, enhancing the ability of some patrons to utilize library resources and the wider digital world more fully. In 2021, to round out the Outreach department, JCLS received Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) funds to jumpstart Direct Access to Resources & Technology (DART), a mobile technology van, to bring Wi-Fi and resources to people and locations with limited or no access to the internet.

Through administrative support and reinforcement, the Outreach department saw growth and found innovative ways to meet the needs of Jackson County residents, even as the COVID pandemic wreaked havoc on lives and communities. At Home Services was the first library service to be reinstated in May 2020, ensuring that some of our most vulnerable patrons could

access library services when many of them could not interact with anyone outside of their homes. Education Services staff focused on resources to support remote learning for students and teachers. DART was created as a direct result of the pandemic’s impact on low-income communities. Mobile Services Specialists began taking the mobile technology van to Housing Authority sites and to communities affected by the 2020 Almeda fire that destroyed over 2,000 structures in Phoenix and Talent while the pandemic raged on.

After the COVID restrictions eased, JCLS increased efforts throughout the county resulting in more interactions within the community than before the pandemic. In addition to targeted outreach, staff now attend more community events and festivals to meet non-users and users alike. Partnering with the library’s Marketing department has increased resources and materials to attract and engage community members. This includes new ways of presenting traditional library services and fun swag like stickers, tote bags, temporary tattoos, and water bottles. Sometimes an exciting sticker and a new tote bag are just as effective in convincing someone to register for a library card as a best-selling book. It is important to note that, while Outreach department staff do targeted outreach daily, everyone who works at JCLS is also empowered to participate in outreach. Library staff from all 15 branches regularly find opportunities to connect with their communities through school visits, tabling events, and more.

The charts in Figure 1 illustrate the trajectory of outreach within Jackson County in both activities and reach from 2018 to 2023. In fiscal year 2019 (July 2018–June 2019), JCLS engaged with 17,903 community members by providing or participating in 1,344 outreach activities including OCC storytimes, business outreach, community events, and school visits. Fiscal year 2020 saw numbers decrease due to the “stay home” order initiated in March throughout the state to flatten the COVID-19 curve. Outreach staff reached more community members in FY 2021 even though the staff participated in slightly fewer activities. By the end of FY 2022 both activities and reach exceeded pre-pandemic levels. From July 2022 to June 2023 (FY 2023), JCLS increased the number of outreach events by 4.61 percent from 2019 numbers. What is most notable is the 67.81 percent increase in community members reached from FY 2019 to FY 2023.

Another tactic for reinforcing outreach was providing more technology that allows staff to provide library services in the field. Outreach staff are now equipped with laptops and hotspots

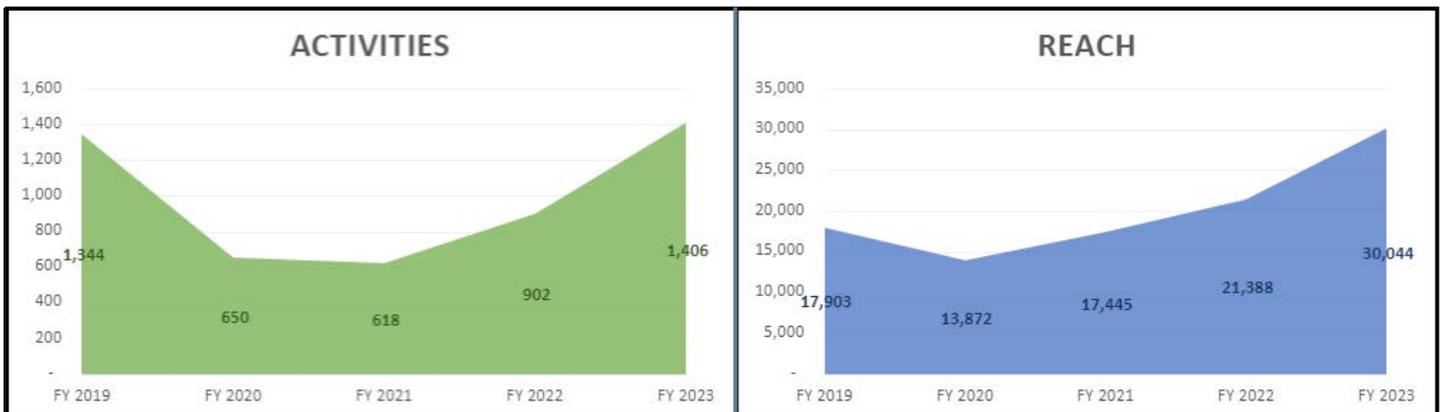


Figure 1
Growth of Jackson County Library Outreach from 2018 to 2023

to register new library card holders during community visits and to demonstrate usage of the JCLS website and e-resources. The DART van is a Wi-Fi hotspot on wheels, providing access up to a 300-foot radius. Patrons can check out laptops for use at a DART stop, charge their devices, or even watch a JCLS-produced short documentary on the television display on the side of the van. New technologies and innovations in outreach services will play a larger role in the new strategic plan which places an even greater emphasis on community engagement.

Conclusion

The war on libraries is real; it plays out daily nationwide and in Jackson County. Books have been removed from the shelves in local school libraries, and there have been complaints about some library services among community members. Libraries throughout the US are facing calls for defunding or, at the very least, for heavily restricting their activities. At JCLS, we are taking our services to the people and showing them that the library has something for everyone. We are adding innovative ways to reach patrons based on community needs. We are dedicating our efforts to win over more residents through outreach services. Outreach is how we turn non-users into users and users into library supporters.

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