**YA Services of the Johnson County Library: A Library Visit and Evaluation**



(Courtesy of the Johnson County Library website)

LI832XI: Information Resources and Services for Young Adults

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**Abstract/Summary**

It is crucial that every library evaluates teen collections and spaces. According to a survey sent out by the Public Library Data Service in 2012, results revealed that

“during fiscal year 2011, together the responding libraries spent $47,453,083 on YA collections, circulated 64,577,181 YA materials, and held 177,413 YA programs attended by 2,896,898 youth” (Agosto, 2013). This clearly shows that more attention and resources are being allotted to YA collections and services across the United States. This paper is an in-depth look at the Johnson County Library and what it provides for the local teens, in light of the increase in YA collections and services. This paper investigates the space, collections, services and programs, online presence, and lastly, provides an evaluation and reflection of these collections and services.

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**Introduction/Demographics**

The classification of Young Adult novels is relatively new in the world of libraries, yet young adult novels and spaces have changed dramatically in a short amount of time. According to a brief history outlined by Wendy Morano, a teen services librarian of Columbus, Ohio, the first YA librarian came about in 1919 in a New York public library (2012). Shortly thereafter, in 1926, was the first separate and dedicated YA room in a library, found in the Cleveland Public Library (Morano, 2012). In less than a century, the change from the first YA librarian to the current state of elaborate and dedicated teen services has been significant. The awareness of young adult literature has expanded exponentially.

The Johnson County Library (also known as the Central Resource Library) sits in Overland Park, Kansas, and is part of a library system that contains fourteen branches. The background of this library is that “Since 1995, it’s seen the creation of an art gallery, a teen services space, and the addition of more than 100 public use PCs” and 2009 reflection of services showed: ("History of the," 2013):

* Visitors: 567,772
* Items circulated: 1,176,759
* Collection total items: 290,655
* Number of programs: 237

As of the U.S. 2010 Census, the population of Overland Park was a little over 173,000 people, making it the second most populous city in the state. A significant portion of the population is under eighteen years of age, at 24.7%. The city of Overland Park is in a particularly wealthy area, with only 5.7% of the population below the poverty level. It is a very stable area, with the census showing that 83.6% of the population has reported living in the same house for at least one year or more. The ethnic demographics show persons of Hispanic or Latino descent at 6.3%, Asian persons at 6.3%, African American persons at 4.3%, and a white majority at 80.8% ("State & county quickfacts," 2010). All of this information shows how the library decides how to dedicate its resources and services. This might explain why one ethnic group might be underrepresented, or why the library focuses on teen services that are technology-driven instead of services that might better fit with a group of teens that might not have as much access to technology in their homes. The fact that almost a quarter of the population is under the age of eighteen shows that the library should allocate a corresponding portion of their resources to youth services.

**Library Facilities:**

The first thing that patrons often notice about a library is the size of the library. Immediately upon entering the library, I compared this library to every other public library I’ve ever been to, and realized quickly that the amount of space in the Johnson County Library far surpasses any other public library I’ve ever seen. The Johnson County library also has a very welcoming feel to it, with many windows that provide natural light, and a lot of chairs and tables that encourage relaxation and thoughtful study. The library has a flexible eating and drinking policy, allowing patrons to enjoy snacks and beverages throughout the library, which is also encouraged by the vending machines by the entrance. These are all reasons that teens would enjoy the library on general principles, which should be solidified further by the teen space farther in the building.

In an article published in American Libraries, it says, “ideally, children's and teen spaces need to reflect the library's philosophy of service and be designed as an integrated entity with a consideration of and an attraction for young patrons” (Feinberg & Keller, 2010). With this in mind, I would say that the teen space was adequately integrated into the rest of the library, but perhaps a little too integrated. It is not as much of “an attraction for young patrons” as suggested by Feinberg and Keller. The physical space of the young adult section of the library is near the entrance of the library, off to the left after the circulation desk. The closest section to the teen section is the children’s, and there is a desk that is shared between the sections for the single librarian that sits behind it.

The young adult space is its own space, clearly defined by the fact that it is literally in its own room separated from the rest of the library. This can give it a secluded feel as though the teens have their very own space, but it also can be slightly closed off, as the space takes some wandering to find. Once inside the space, there isn’t much wall décor. There are a few pieces of art made by students in the area, and near the entry there are several advertisements on the wall for the summer reading program. The advertisements look quickly-made, and it doesn’t look often tended by the librarians. There are some good things about the space, since there is plenty of seating. A few lounging chairs in the middle of the space with a small table and magazines invite teens to sit around and relax. There are also some booths that very much resemble a 1950s diner, which gives the space a very unique feel. The booths also allow for small group work within a somewhat secluded space.

Reading is encouraged, and the space shows this through the amount of informational displays that are set up in the teen area. Near the entry to the space is a small book display with what seems to be popular or “hot” reads. It doesn’t have any identifier above the book, but it does have several new titles displayed prominently. The *Fallen* series by Lauren Kate, and the *Rise of Nine* by Pittacus Lore are two examples of the books that are on display. Further into the space there was a laminated display that gave suggestions of book titles by types. Examples of these types are “guy reads” and “gentle reads”. Each display has eight titles with brief summaries of the books, so that patrons can get a good idea of what the books are about. There was also a very large display that identified the Manga/Anime section of books, and the display is very colorful and eye-catching.

As is expected in a teen space, there are a decent amount of computers sectioned off for users ages twelve to eighteen exclusively. Elaine Meyers, in an article published about how surveyed teens use the library, states, “Access to technology is one of the main reasons teens come to a public library . . . 75% of teens queried responded that the library needed "more and better computers." (1999). The Johnson County Library has only provided eleven computers in all exclusively for teen use, despite the fact that they have over one hundred computers for general public use in the rest of the library space. Certainly more computers can be allocated for the teen space. During my visit, half the computers were in use, almost exclusively for entertainment and gaming purposes. There were few teens outside of the space in the general library areas. Though the teen space is small in comparison to the rest of the library, it was an adequate space for the physical collection.

**Collection**

For a library as large as this one, I was disappointed by the size of the young adult collection. There was a very small display of DVDs, a limited display of CDs and Audiobooks, and a woefully small physical collection of books. In comparison to most other young adult collections at other public libraries I’ve attended, the collection is about average. They do, however, have an extensive Manga/Anime collection, which I found incredibly impressive. Most libraries seem to only have a few small shelves of these books, but this one had a very large collection. Because this collection is so impressive, I am not surprised that it is the first part of the physical collection that the patrons come in contact with after entering the teen space. Past that, the physical books on the shelves are organized as:

* Non-fiction
* Mystery
* Sci-Fi
* Fiction

The bulk of the collection is simply classified as Fiction without any representation of subgenres on the shelves at all. The redeeming factor of the small physical collection is that the Johnson County Library is part of a large library system, which gives patrons much more access to books that they cannot find at this particular location. However, it might discourage teens from using the library if they can’t find what they want or need immediately even though that access is provided. There are not any displays that showcase award-winning books or even “staff picks”. There are not any sections in the physical teen collection that provide materials for foreign language readers, though I do know that books in Spanish can be found in the general collection.

**Library Services/Programs and Staff**

The Johnson County Library provides a calendar of activities to any patron, and one glance proves that there is an extensive amount of services and programs offered for teens, especially during the summer months when school is out. There are several activities that happen every week, some during all library hours and some at specific timeslots. Some examples of these teen programs are:

* An intro to Cosplay
* Anime Club/Teen Lit Book Club meetings
* Young Adult Advisory Council (teens who make suggestions for library materials and programs)
* Writer’s Workshops for creative writers
* Author Events
* Trivia Nights
* Wizard Rock Concerts

While the physical collection and space may be lacking, the teen programming is far-reaching and frequent. The website also provides a lot of information about the teen programs, breaking each program down by library location and activity times.

There are a lot of staff members and librarians that can be found throughout the library, but during my visit, I only noticed on librarian behind the desk who was assigned to the teen section. This librarian was also covering the children’s section, but the librarian was very attentive and willing to help and answer questions with a smile. Almost as soon as I passed by the desk, the librarian asked if I needed assistance, which says good things about the staff at this library. She was the second librarian who jumped at the chance to assist me when I looked lost or in need of some help. According to the website, however, there is an assigned Youth Services Manager and a separate Young Adult librarian ("Johnson county library," 2013). When I visited the library it was beyond normal business hours, and so it is likely that the established Young Adult librarian had gone for the day. It is promising that there is a dedicated Young Adult librarian who does not also have to crossover with children’s services.

**Library Promotion, Website, and Online Presence**

The website provides links to homework help, gaming, advisory council, the anime club, and Read- which offers book suggestions for teens along with information about daily and weekly activities. The website also provides better book suggestions, book displays and summaries than the physical space within the library provides. The Johnson County Library also provides a separate site for teens called “The Teen Scene”. This site gives access to:

* a live chat (for general questions and homework help)
* online creative space where teens can submit artwork, poetry and stories
* links to connect teens with health and legal information and tips

This website is a very information-laden resource that allows the library to reach more teen patrons than might actually attend and occupy their physical space. The Johnson County Library has a Facebook page that also gives out information about events happening at the library and at branch libraries. Another social networking tool that the library has is a Twitter account. Even though both the Facebook account and Twitter account are not teen-specific, they are updated frequently and can provide information for teens to use. Teens are much more involved with social networking than they ever have been in the past, and so these tools are definitely an effective way to reach out to a teen patron base in a wealthy community where it is likely that they are connected to online tools frequently.

**Reflection**

When I personally evaluate the Johnson County Library I definitely see things that are positive pieces of their young adult services and things that could use some improvement. While I believe the physical space could use some updating and could definitely be made into a more teen-friendly space, the library does provide an exclusive space for young adults to use. The computers in the space are set aside for teen use only, which is the first time I have ever seen that in a public library before. Since this library is technology-focused, I would expect more computers in the teen section, but it is pleasing that they have their own. More attention could be paid to the displays, even though there are a lot of displays out for teens to look into. I think it would be beneficial to have more actual books out on display than signs or pieces of paper with book suggestions, but there has been some definite thought put into the setup of the teen section.

The physical collection could use a definite revamp, and subgenres and more appropriate labels could be placed on the shelves so patrons can get a better idea of what a book is actually about. A “fiction” label doesn’t really cut it when there are so many subgenres in young adult books. However, the collection provides an adequate amount of books to choose from, and the library can get a book from another branch if it is not currently present within the library.

I was incredibly impressed with the amount of programs and services provided by the library for young adults, and I do believe that whatever the library lacks in a physical collection, it doesn’t lack in services. It wouldn’t surprise me if the library has decided to dedicate a significant portion of money that it might spend on expanding the physical book collection toward programming instead. These programs, especially during the summertime, will be what brings the most teens into the library, not necessarily the physical collection. I can understand sacrificing one for the other.

I was also impressed with the friendliness and assertiveness of the librarians on staff, and their eagerness to help whenever a patron looks as though they need it. While some patrons might find this off-putting, I found it refreshing, as most local libraries haven’t given me the same impression of the librarians or other library staff members.

Lastly, I found the library’s online presence to be incredibly promising. While I would like to see more social networking sites that are targeted toward teens, I really like the “Teen Scene” webpage provided by the library. There are so many resources available on that website that I am truly impressed with what the librarians are providing to their teen patrons through the website. Just about any question that the patrons might have, there is a resource or link or live help option that will meet their need. There are other libraries that could truly benefit from looking into this library webpage and giving teens much more of their own web space. Overall, the Johnson County Library has some excellent resources for their teen patrons, and I am pleased with what I see. Hopefully it can only get better from here.

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